



*Writer and activist Edward Abbey.  
Isla Angel de la Guarda, Mexico, 1976*

# edward ABBNEY

SALUTING THE LATE, GREAT AUTHOR OF THE AMERICAN

CULT CLASSIC *DESERT SOLITAIRE*

Edward Abbey grew up poor in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. He read books and loafed, hunted and hiked, and developed a good deal of the educated-barbarian persona that would fuel so much of his later work—writings that celebrate the wilderness, individualism, and a way of living rooted in simple pleasures: “Sex, the resistance of rock, the taste and touch of snow, the feel of sun, good wine and rare beefsteak and the company of friends around a fire with a guitar and lousy old cowboy songs,” as he once put it.

It was in the American West, of course, that he pushed against those rocks and heard those songs. Abbey left home when he was seventeen carrying little more than a rolled-up blanket and a canvas satchel. He hopped freight trains, made money canning peaches, and spent a night in jail for vagrancy. A drifter he met in the Pacific Northwest gave Abbey his first slug of hard liquor and taught him how to siphon gas—and then, perhaps the ultimate lesson, robbed him and disappeared.

In Arizona, on his way back East, Abbey hitched a ride to the Grand Canyon. He possessed the sense to have the driver let him out a mile before the South Rim. It seemed “somehow disrespectful, even blasphemous,” he later wrote, to arrive at such a place in something as monstrous as a motor vehicle. Upon arriving at the Canyon, the first thing Abbey did was take a leak over the side of it.

And there you have, in an anecdote, the complicated man who would come to be called Cactus Ed. Nowhere does his thorny combination of reverence, swagger, insolence, and introspection unspool as beautifully as in *Desert Solitaire*, his account of the three seasons he spent as a ranger in Utah’s Arches National Park.

*All the Wild That Remains*, David Gessner’s recent study of Abbey, sums it up nicely, calling *Desert Solitaire* “a book about paradise found and paradise threatened ... about wedging downward through the bullshit of modern industrial life in an attempt to find the hard rock of reality.”

Released in 1968, *Desert Solitaire* excavated something buried deep in the American consciousness. It inspired Organization men to go places where they could breathe better air but also take a dump in a hole; to trade in their dress shoes for hiking boots, to care about the wilderness, and to fight against those despoiling it in the name of prosperity and

progress. The book was hailed as a modern *Walden*; Abbey was dubbed the Mark Twain of the American desert. It remains required reading for any young person heading West.

If *Desert Solitaire* helped kindle the fire of early-70s environmentalism, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* added gunpowder. Published in 1975, it is that rare work of fiction—comic fiction, no less—that actually launched a movement. That movement is sometimes referred to as *ecoterrorism*, and it involves spiking trees and sabotaging bulldozers, among other, less savory measures in defense of mother earth.

Abbey’s notoriety made him uneasy, to say the least. He fended off starry-eyed fans and resented being pigeonholed as a “nature writer.” He was more vociferous on the page than he was in person, although by no accounts was he particularly easy to get along with. He had five children by five women—ironic, considering his frequent tirades against overpopulation. And his conservation-minded heirs find it hard to square his love of taking long desert drives in his pickup with his habit of tossing empty beer cans out the window as he went.

But Abbey would have been the first to admit he was a man of many flaws and contradictions. Not that it gave him pause. Knocking over sacred cows was his specialty. (Cowboys, too: Abbey detested ranchers and gleefully laid into them.) He believed that any self-respecting writer “should be and must be a critic of the society in which he lives.”

His broadsides against his literary contemporaries are still fun to read. Unsurprisingly, Abbey had no patience for the suburban dramas of Updike and Cheever, or the urbane stylings of Tom Wolfe. But he also trashed Jack Kerouac, a poetic wanderer with whom you might think he’d have found some common ground, as a “creepy adolescent bisexual who dabbled in Orientalism and all the other fads of his time, wrote stacks of complacently self-indulgent, onanistic books and then drank himself to death while sitting on his mother’s lap down in Florida.”

Abbey died at home in Arizona in 1989, at age sixty-two. The cause was esophageal bleeding; it would be an understatement to say his own drinking didn’t help. Friends wrapped his body in his old blue sleeping bag and buried him—illegally, of course—in the desert.

The location is still a secret.

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