

Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey

In some ways it is regrettable that most readers will begin this book with Edward Abbey's brief introduction instead of with the simple and somehow poignant opening sentence of the text proper: "This is the most beautiful place on earth." By this he means the canyon-lands near Moab, Utah, where he worked as a seasonal park ranger for a couple of years in the late 1950s. Similar to most of the naturalists whose writing we meet in this series, Abbey celebrates the flora and fauna he encounters in the desert, but he is probably the most openly political in his message, lashing out in a chapter he calls a "polemic" against the dangers of Industrial Tourism and the "earnest engineers" who support construction and development as "intrinsic goods," even in national parks. "No more new roads in national parks," Abbey bluntly asserts. He comments on the uranium boom, on "cowboys and Indians," and in the chapter entitled "Water" he reminds us of Wallace Stegner's frequently quote remark that "Aridity, more than anything else, gives the western landscape its character." The city, Abbey warns, "can be made to function as a concentration camp. At times angry and at times passionate, Abbey dashes back and forth between diatribe and poetry. Wilderness, he insists, "is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread" (169). In the longest chapter Abbey joins a friend in an excursion down the Colorado River, a place he senses is "doomed." Accused by one visitor of being opposed to civilization and humanity, Abbey writes, "Naturally I was flattered." Renowned naturalist Edwin Way Teale, in a review for the *New York Times*, admired the philosophy and humor of the book, which he described as "passionately felt" and "deeply poetic."

Author Information

Probably the most widely recognized maverick among America's environmental activist writers, Edward Abbey was born in Indiana, Pennsylvania, in 1927. At age seventeen he hitchhiked across the country and fell in love with to the Four Corners area (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico). After serving in the army (1945-47) he attended college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and at the University of New Mexico, where he received his master's degree in philosophy. The title of his thesis, "Anarchism and the Morality of Violence," gives some indication of the direction his life and writing could take. For some fifteen years he worked part-time as a ranger and fire lookout in various national parks, but the two summers he spent at Arches National Monument, which gave rise to his first book of nonfiction, *Desert Solitaire*, in 1968 were momentous. By that time Abbey had already written three novels, one of which, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), was filmed starring Kirk Douglas in 1962. A made-for-television movie of his third novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1962), was shot in 1981 starring Buddy Ebsen and Ron Howard. His most widely read novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), is said to have given rise to the Earth First! organization, which has been connected

with various types of eco-sabotage inspired by that book. In addition to authoring eight novels, Abbey turned out more than a dozen books of nonfiction and a collection of poems. Always a controversial figure who could make even some committed environmentalists wince, Abbey was married and divorced four times and the father of two daughters and three sons. He died in 1989 at age 62 in his home at Oracle, Arizona.

Discussion Questions

1. Edward Abbey has been connected at times with the un-humanist poet Robinson Jeffers, who declared in one poem that except for the penalties, he'd sooner kill a man than hurt a hawk. Do you see serious evidence of misanthropy in *Desert Solitaire*? Do you think Abbey presents himself favorably, or as a cranky and eccentric malcontent?
2. In the chapter entitled "Episodes and Visions" (and elsewhere in the book) Abbey lashes out at what he calls "civilization." Do you think his charges are just? Could it be that he is exaggerating his outrage for effect? Where does his argument with civilization seem most explicit and perhaps most valid?
3. With any social critic we always inquire, sooner or later, whether he or she offers solutions. Do you think Abbey directly or indirectly includes solutions in his agenda, and if so, what are their nature? If you detect no workable solutions, directly stated or implied, does that compromise the strength of the book, so far as you're concerned?
4. Abbey appears to be aware that readers might find his attraction to the desert to be esthetic and passionate, but perhaps not "religious," for he says perhaps rather defensively in "Down the River," "I am not an atheist but an earthiest" (184). What do you take to be his point here? Do you find his attitudes toward organized religion, and particularly toward Mormons, to be problematic?
5. Although *Desert Solitaire* is constructed in chapters, each one might be considered as an independent, stand-alone essay. It would not be necessary to read all of the chapters to see where he is coming from, and you might prefer to pick and choose. Which chapters do you most enjoy? Are you most satisfied when Abbey presents himself at ease in the natural world, or when he seems mostly intent on telling a story, or when he lashes out against the "outside" world?
6. Two aspects of Abbey's book that sometimes get overlooked are his occasionally vividly descriptive or lyrical ("poetic") prose and his comic sensibility. Where do you find evidence of these two important features of his writing?