

© 1990 by Robert Eaton  
All rights reserved

For Ed Abbey, *In Memoriam*

Edward Abbey died in Tucson on March 14, 1989. At that time I had just moved to Santa Fe from Phoenix, and, preoccupied with my own life and work, I failed to mark the occasion properly, to pay proper homage to the man. Thus I recently bought and read the last book published while its author was alive, a novel titled *The Fool's Progress*, Abbey's long-awaited, self-proclaimed "fat masterpiece."

\* \* \*

I discovered Abbey by chance, in 1971, when I was a senior at a small high school in Virginia. One afternoon, as I wandered listlessly through the stacks of the school's library, a gaudy mauve-and-ocher-colored book spine caught my eye. The front of the dust jacket featured eerie silhouettes of mesas and buttes, and the book's forceful opening sentences demanded my attention:

This is the most beautiful place on earth.

There are many such places. Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary. . . .

For myself I'll take Moab, Utah. I don't mean the town itself, of course, but the country which surrounds it—the canyonlands. The slickrock desert. The red dust and the burnt cliffs and the lonely sky—all that which lies beyond the end of the roads.

The book was *Desert Solitaire*, its author an obscure novelist and part-time park ranger named Ed Abbey. I checked out that book at least six times that year, reading and rereading it, stirred by the contentious voice of its narrator, enthralled by the austere beauty of its language. I took its message to heart.

“A man wrote a book,” David Quammen wrote in his eulogy of Abbey in the June 1989 issue of *Outside*, “and lives were changed. . . . And so one of the lives changed was my own. I know of others. Perhaps yours, too?”

Yes, mine, too. Now, almost twenty years later, I appreciate the influence that book and its author had on me during the crucial time of my adolescence. Over the next six or eight years my life innocently and shamelessly mimicked Abbey's. In college I majored in philosophy. Afterward I migrated to the Southwest, working as a seasonal park ranger and nurturing my own modest literary aspirations. I corresponded briefly with Abbey and met him once, briefly, in Moab. During those years Ed Abbey was the closest thing I've ever had to a larger-than-life, honest-to-goodness hero.

\* \* \*

Abbey never wrote a line of boring prose, but his later nonfiction books, mostly

collections of magazine articles, lacked the focused vision of *Desert Solitaire*. Only in his essays for the Sierra Club large-format book *Slickrock*, it seemed to me, did he again attain the clarity of expression and intensity of feeling that distinguished *Desert Solitaire*. I also think that Abbey was, forever after its publication in 1968, burdened by the success of his creation. Whether he liked it or not, whether he admitted it or not, *Desert Solitaire* was a great book and the one against which his others would always be measured and, in some way, found lacking.

Abbey's fiction was always more problematic. His early novels were modern Western fables, with strong narrative lines, romanticized characters, and dramatic denouements. In 1975 he broke with that tradition with *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a book Abbey later described as a "comic extravaganza." It was a zany story of four diehard eco-guerrillas, filled with slapstick adventure and outrageous wordplay, and it netted Abbey his largest audience ever. But its cartoon quality was its weakness as well as its strength: As Abbey himself knew, cartoons lack the gravity of literature.

\* \* \*

*The Fool's Progress* tells the life story of Henry Holyoak Lightfoot, a self-styled hillbilly living, when the book opens, in Tucson, Arizona. As promised by the summary and reviewers' excerpts on the cover of my paperback copy, it begins in the tradition of the picaresque novel, with Henry, recently abandoned by his third wife, beginning a three-thousand-mile journey in his 1962 Dodge Carryall to visit his brother at the

family's ancestral home in Stump Creek, West Virginia, accompanied only by his dying dog, Solstice.

The novel owes much to Abbey's life and previous work. Characters reappear in different guises and under different names, scenes are reworked, and sentences resound. Claire in *The Fool's Progress*, for example, seems another incarnation of Sandy in his 1971 novel, *Black Sun*; Claire's death recalls Sandy's mysterious disappearance. And Henry Holyoak Lightfoot is, of course, a skewed version of Abbey himself, who grew up in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania.

One hundred pages into the book, entertained but unsurprised (same old Abbey), I nearly stopped. But I didn't, and the book, as if to spite the blurbs and promotionals, takes an unexpected turn. Its mood darkens as Henry stops in Gallup, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe to say goodbye to old friends; then blackens as he starts across the plains of northeastern New Mexico and the Oklahoma panhandle, slugging down "cheap rotten beer" and listening to Ernest Tubb and the Texas Troubadours; as he travels through the prairies and bottomlands of Kansas and Missouri, sleeping the first night among the tombstones in a country graveyard and the second in the wet, dark woods along the Missouri River; as he pauses in Hannibal, trying to find a "shade of the great old man himself"; as he speeds wearily through the flat farm country and "gloomy green" forests of southern Illinois and Indiana, popping Dilaudid and other pain pills; as he drives dazedly through the foothills and small towns of eastern Kentucky, his body racked by spasms of pain and nausea; as he closes in on home, remembering, all the time remembering, in loving, anguished detail, the personal losses that have marked his life; as

he enters the grim nether world of Appalachia, and the reader learns that Henry, like his dog, is dying.

\* \* \*

I hadn't read much Abbey in the past eight or ten years. It wasn't a deliberate leaving behind, but I suppose I had finally grown up, taken from him what I needed, incorporated it into my life. The last time I wrote him, a petulant fan's letter, I chastised him for publishing articles in glossy popular magazines, a communication he properly ignored.

I didn't expect *The Fool's Progress* to affect me as strongly as it did. And perhaps it wouldn't have, had I not known Abbey as well as I do. Reading it, however, I was overcome by a certain presumption: that this book was written by a man who, like the fictional character he created, knew he was dying; that it is not only the character's, but also the author's, last testament.

*The Fool's Progress* is not Abbey's masterpiece—he wrote that twenty-two years ago—but it contains some of the most vivid, excruciating scenes he ever described, and it smacks of that thing writers are always pursuing—call it the moment, call it beauty, call it truth.

*The Fool's Progress* reminded me that we lost a good man and a great fighter when Ed Abbey died a year and a half ago. The world will miss him, and although I have grown older and warier, harder to surprise and less inclined to see heroes in this

complicated world we inhabit, I will miss him too.

# # #