

Finding Abbey

The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave

by Sean Prentiss

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Reviewed by Jackie Page

What may have begun for Sean Prentiss as fascination and hero worship for Edward Abbey—renowned American environmentalist and writer, who died in 1989 and was considered by some the Thoreau of the American West—ended with travel and discovery. “Bury me at once. Cover me with plenty of rocks so old Cousin Coyote cannot dig up my body,” Prentiss tells us Abbey repeatedly wrote in his journals. The lore of Edward Abbey and a compulsion to discover his secret burial place lure Prentiss out of a mundane existence as a single, middle-class, mortgaged, nine-to-five teacher in a city, with summers off, and into the writing of *Finding Abbey, The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*, a biography/memoir hybrid.

Prentiss shines a light on the life and times of Abbey by interviewing his closest associates, women and men, including authors Jack Loeffler and David Peterson (who was also Abbey’s editor). These, and others whom Prentiss interviewed, held Abbey in high regard, though never denying his lusty proclivities towards women and booze, or his disregard for convention regarding the law. An evening spent with Ken Sleight and his wife, Jane, takes us into a round of well preserved memories of times as young eco-saboteurs. Ken Sleight was the inspiration for Abbey’s character “Seldom Seen” in his 1971 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a fictionalized account of the “monkey wrench” methods, including the destruction of machinery and trains, which Abbey and his cohorts embraced. Following its publication, Abbey was raised to the level of an underground cult hero. To some this represented a shift away from the pastoral nature of Thoreau’s writings, to an environmental preservation theme.

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Prentiss pursues and discovers the depths of the lore by living and exploring the Southwest at times with his best friend and fellow seeker, Haus, with a research assistant, Katie, and often alone. He brings us into the torn seat next to him in his old pickup and takes us down dusty roads. “If Abbey were sitting in the passenger seat,” he remarks “we could talk into the night about solitude and loneliness and the intersection of the two.” As a sunset turns into a full moon and a night sky, he says, “I am nowhere close to madness, but I’ve been wearing the skin of a misfit for the last few years and living the life of the solitary in a city of multitudes.”

Lonely months and years of Abbey research bedevil Prentiss into delving into his own overarching questions of what, and where, home is. He yearns for something of substance and authenticity in his life, something beyond solipsism. He seems to feel perpetually on the verge of living, yet without a sense of place. He tells us: “In the peacefulness of the breeze, my mind wanders from a dammed river, the Colorado River, to the Delaware River in eastern Pennsylvania. I grew up alongside the Delaware. I have river water in my veins. That river is one of those places that will forever feel of home.” Prentiss’ kin have lived along the Delaware River since 1740. When the government once threatened to dam it, activists reponded. Prentiss views the Delaware River activists as “...people with passion just like Ken and Jack and Ed...”

Over the latter third of his book, Sean Prentiss takes the last steps toward finding Abbey’s burial site with Haus. In preparation, he ventures often and alone, far into the desert, on foot, in the heat of the day, or the cold of the night. Though he imposes no judgment, Prentiss also engages his conflict with Abbey’s politics and social policies. As readers, we are voyeurs inside his mind, as he struggles even with the idea of what to do should he actually find Abbey’s burial site. He questions the wisdom of potentially harming Abbey’s friends and family and violating their rituals of mourning. He fears that revealing such a private place might prove harmful for the actual desert soil, when the curious, following in his footsteps, come to see for themselves.