

Abbey, Edward

(January 29, 1927–March 14, 1989)

Writer

Edward Abbey, wild man of the American West and the author of 22 books, defies literary definitions. He is known for his exquisite descriptions of his beloved Southwestern desert, for his bitter diatribes against those who defile such pristine areas (ranchers, loggers, even dumb tourists), and for the unruly characters—some autobiographical—who people his novels.

Edward Paul Abbey was born on January 29, 1927, in Home, Pennsylvania, a rural Allegheny community. His mother, Mildred, was an activist for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and his father, Paul Revere Abbey, was a Socialist union organizer who earned his livelihood cutting hickory fence posts. As a child Abbey wrote comic books, and he became a journalist while in high school (though he flunked his journalism class). During the summer of his seventeenth year, Abbey hitchhiked and rode buses and trains on an exploratory tour of the West. He fell in love with the deserts and canyons. And at the age of 19, after one year in the Army and another at Indiana State Teachers College, Abbey moved west, where he was to stay except for a few brief periods of his life. Abbey studied philosophy and English at the University of New Mexico, earning his B.A. in 1951 and his M.A. in 1956. His master's degree thesis, entitled "Anarchism and the Morality of Violence," examined political situations in which violence could be justified. His conclusion was that it was most justifiable when used in self-defense.

While working at varied jobs after completing his M.A., including inspecting roads for the U.S. Forest Service and being a ranger for the National Park Service, Abbey wrote several novels. His first widely acclaimed work was *Desert Solitaire* (1968), a compilation of his journals from the time he was working as a seasonal ranger in Arches National Monu-

ment in Utah. Many critics call this book his best. It is a medley of crystalline nature writing and enraged rants against the incursion of civilization into the pristine Southwest deserts. The author's note in *Desert Solitaire* warns the reader:

Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place you can't see *anything* from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not.

The direct action arm of the environmental movement remembers Abbey best for *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), an account of the exploits of a group of iconoclasts who specialized in what was later termed *monkey-wrenching*, the deliberate damaging of equipment used to destroy nature. The Monkey Wrench Gang practiced by pouring sugar and dirt into the gas tanks of bulldozers and tractors at desert construction projects, but their ultimate goal was to blow up the Glen Canyon Dam. True to Abbey's master's thesis conclusions, the Monkey Wrench Gang's violence was undertaken in self-defense, for the gang identified so closely with the desert that the development was an attack on their very beings. This book inspired DAVE FOREMAN, HOWIE WOLKE, and three other friends to found Earth First! in 1979. Their first public action was at a Glen Canyon Dam protest during which Abbey spoke. From that time on, Abbey served as an elder adviser and shaman to the group.

During his lifetime, Abbey wrote 22 books. The literary establishment pegged him as a Western environmentalist writer. Abbey himself said in an interview published in *Resist*

Much, Obey Little (1996) that he was content to remain in that pigeonhole because it assured him easy access to publishers and earned him a comfortable living. However environmentalists who wanted to see him as a spokesman for their causes were often disturbed by some of his assertions. He spouted brash, disturbing opinions in some of his books. He insulted literary critics who did not like his work; called on the U.S. Border Patrol to turn back all Mexican immigrants, hand them guns, and tell them to finish their revolution; and criticized mainstream environmentalist organizations for their compromises.

Abbey's friends and fans admired his dedication to the truth—about the world and his own life—even if his words were sometimes difficult to digest or undiplomatic. Abbey was continually outraged, wrote WENDELL BERRY in his contribution to *Resist Much, Obey Little*, but Abbey's humor made his outrage tolerable to his readers. During his life Abbey married five times and fathered six children.

Abbey died of internal bleeding on March 19, 1989, shortly after being informed that he

had a terminal circulatory disorder. His death and burial have achieved the same mythological status that was given his life while he was alive. Two days before he died, he asked his friends to take him out of the hospital, into the desert where he enjoyed one last campfire circle. He died in a sleeping bag on the floor of his writing cabin, and his friends followed the instructions he had left them to drive his body as far as possible into the desert and bury him under a pile of rocks.

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Ackerman, Diane

(October 7, 1948–)
Poet, Nature Writer

Writer Diane Ackerman is best known for her ability to combine the seemingly disparate disciplines of art and science. Her writing, which includes poetry, nonfiction, stories for children, and plays, is unique in its ambition to use creative expression as she explores and describes the natural world. In 1990, Ackerman's book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, became a national best-seller and inspired a miniseries that aired as part of public television's *Nova* in 1995.

Diane Ackerman was born in Waukegan, Illinois, on October 7, 1948. Eight years later, her family moved to the more rural location of Allentown, Pennsylvania. The change suited the young writer, who remembers herself as an outgoing tomboy who spent most of her time outside. When she was indoors, Ackerman spent her time reading and writing, the latter becoming a major passion that resulted in limericks, stories, and articles for the local newspaper. After spending her freshman year at Boston University, Ackerman transferred

to Pennsylvania State University in 1968. It was there that she met British novelist Paul West, a professor who later became her life companion.

Ackerman graduated in 1970 with a B.A. degree in English. During the same year she began studying for her M.F.A. at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Eight years later, Ackerman had not only completed her intended degree but had also earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English literature. During this period she won two prestigious awards, the Academy of American Poets Prize and the Corson Bishop Prize for Poetry and published her first book of poetry, *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral*, in 1976. Even at this early point in her career, Ackerman showed signs of her future ambition to bring science and poetic writing into the same medium. *The Planets*, written entirely about astronomy, introduced readers to the author's unusual articulation of the natural world, a perception that did not distinguish hard data from passionate observation. This unique blend of disciplines was to be Ackerman's trademark, a result of what she terms her "nomadic curiosity."

Ackerman's fascination with the universe is reflected in the diversity of subjects she investigates in her writing. In 1980, *Twilight of the Tenderfoot*, a book detailing her experiences as a ranch hand in New Mexico, was published to wide acclaim. After earning her pilot's license, she wrote *On Extended Wings* (1985), a book exploring the implications of learning to fly, which was later adapted to the stage. During this time, Ackerman continued to write poetry. *Lady Faustus*, a collection of poems published in 1983, covered such diverse subjects as soccer, flying, and meditations on amphibians. Despite the wide spectrum of subject matter, Ackerman's work remains infused with a central theme. Whether branding cattle or staring at the stars, there is always a fascination and a deep enthusiasm for the natural world. Though this point of view received criticism from those who believed that poetry must be free of science,

Ackerman's approach shows that the two can be combined gracefully.

In 1988, Ackerman published *Reverse Thunder: A Dramatic Poem*, detailing the life and times of Sor Juana de la Cruz, a nun who lived in seventeenth-century Spain. A play written in verse, *Reverse Thunder* is a tribute to a woman Ackerman deeply admires. Despite the restrictions of the times, Sor Juana was both a poet and a scientist, a woman who shared Ackerman's awe at the complexities of creation. Her meditations reveal a creative mind unafraid to combine religion with science or poetry with data, an unpopular concept in her day.

Ackerman's most popular book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, became a bestseller shortly after its publication in 1990. A celebration of the five senses, the book uses essays, vignettes, and observations to investigate the ways in which humans perceive the natural world. The sweeping success of *Senses* was a surprise, as very few scientifically based works become bestsellers. No doubt the success of the book can be attributed to Ackerman's skill as a writer and her ability to mix potentially dry material with humor, myth, and poetic description. In February 1995, the television series *Nova* invited Ackerman to host a five-part miniseries entitled "Mystery of the Senses," which received some of the highest ratings of the season. *Senses* is Ackerman's crowning achievement to date, a work that introduced countless readers to her unique genius.

In 1991, Ackerman returned to poetry with *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems*, which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Another publication, *The Moon by Whale Light: And Other Adventures among Bats, Penguins, Crocodilians, and Whales*, expanded upon a series of articles that had been previously published in the *New Yorker*. In 1994, Ackerman's *A Natural History of Love*, which was modeled upon her earlier book, received mixed reviews from critics who believed that the subject of love, unlike that of our senses, was broader

than could be covered in a single volume. Despite these hesitations, *Love* was widely enjoyed by the public, many of whom savored the beauty of Ackerman's prose in its investigation of the many different concepts of love.

Ackerman's 1995 *The Rarest of the Rare: Vanishing Animals, Timeless Worlds* resulted from a series of pilgrimages to the world's rarest ecosystems, during which she paid homage to rare and unusual species. The book contains chapters on the monk seal, the short-tailed albatross, the golden lion tamarin, and other endangered species. Ackerman mixes descriptions of habitats and animals with biographical data about her human companions, biologists who study and strive to protect their chosen species.

Ackerman's latest non-fiction books include *Deep Play* (1999), which examines the state of mind one enters when focused passionately and entirely on something one loves; *Cultivating Delight* (2001). 52 essays that range from the sensory pleasures of a garden to detailed botanic and zoological description; and *The Zookeeper's Wife* (2007), which tells the story of Antonina Zabinski, the wife of the keeper of the Warsaw Zoo, who after her husband's zoo was pillaged during the

Nazi occupation of Poland, rescued and harbored more than 300 Jews. Another focus of *The Zookeeper's Wife* is a forest in Poland called Bialowieza, home to free-ranging "living fossils," descendants of ancient bison and horses.

Diane Ackerman resides in upstate New York. She has received many awards for her writing, including the Black Warrior Review Poetry Prize in 1981, the Pushcart Prize VIII in 1984, the Lowell Thomas Award from the Society of American Travel Writers in 1990, in 1992 the Wordsmith Award, and the New and Noteworthy Book of the Year for *The Moon by Whale Light* from the *New York Times Book Review*, in 1998 a John Burroughs Nature Award, and most recently, in 2003, a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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Adams, Ansel

(February 20, 1902–April 22, 1984)

Photographer, Preservation Activist

Ansel Adams was a photographer and a preservationist. His pictures played an important role in defining how Americans think about wilderness, and they have been vital in supporting its preservation. Adams served on the board of directors of the Sierra Club for nearly 40 years.

Ansel Easton Adams was born on February 20, 1902, in San Francisco, California, the only child of Charles Hitchcock Adams and Olive

Bray Adams. His father was a businessman whose enterprises included an insurance agency and a chemical plant. Adams grew up among the sand dunes on the westernmost edge of the San Francisco Peninsula, where from his early childhood he was surrounded by natural beauty. His education was erratic and largely self-acquired. He attended both public and private schools, and he also re-

ceived some instruction at home from his father.

A significant event in Adams's early life was a vacation his family took to Yosemite National Park in 1916, when he was 14 years old. He brought along a Kodak Box Brownie camera that he used to take his first photographs. As a result of this experience, Adams persuaded Frank Ditman, the owner of a San Francisco photo finishing plant, to take him on as an apprentice in developing and other techniques in the darkroom. While Adams's enthusiasm for photography was growing, music, at this time, was his main concern. He was receiving four hours of instruction every day from Friedrich Zech, who had studied under Hans von Bulow, one of the great German pianists and conductors of the nineteenth century. By the time he was 18, Adams was convinced that he would be a professional pianist. It was not until 1930 that he decided to abandon his music studies and devote all of his time to photography. The study of technique and the attention to detail he acquired in his musical training, however, never left him. In a 1977 interview he stated that there is a very definite relationship between music and photography, all art being "essentially the same thing," and that he really benefited from two factors, a sense of discipline and a sense of aesthetics.

It was in 1930, two years after he had married Virginia Best, that Adams met Paul Strand, a photographer whom Adams credited with opening his eyes to the artistic possibilities of the stark, crisp photographic image. Most photographers of the time were practicing hand-tinted, soft-focus photography, creating images more like paintings than photographs. Adams helped to found a group called *f/64* (the name *f/64* being a reference to the small lens opening of the camera) in opposition to the general photographic practices of the time. The members of this group sought, through "straight photography," to create images with sharp focus, and great depth of field, to "create photographs which actually looked like photographs."

Adams is best known for his black and white photographs of nature and the American landscape. He pioneered the Zone System, a technique designed to enable the photographer to anticipate and control the tonal range of the print. He believed that a photograph is made, not taken. And in his photographs he sought to capture the spiritual excitement he felt about the subject.

Adams once said that "everybody needs something to believe in. Conservation is my point of focus." His involvement with conservation dates back to his first photographs. He joined the Sierra Club in 1919, and he worked for four summers as caretaker of the club's headquarters in Yosemite Valley. He later sat on the board of directors of the club for nearly 40 years, strongly influencing the club's philosophy and activities and encouraging activism and a national focus, in what until then had been primarily a California-based organization. In 1936, when the Sierra Club was lobbying for the creation of a national park in the King's Canyon area of California, Adams sent copies of his book, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, which contains many pictures of this area, to Pres. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT and to other important political figures. He also made a trip to Washington to personally advocate the designation of this national park.

Adams was also active in protesting the widening of Yosemite's Tioga road as a part of the National Park Service's Mission 66 in 1952. He even went so far as to resign from the board of directors because of the Sierra Club's unwillingness to take a stance on the issue. As a private citizen, he denounced the plan as a violation of the National Park Service Act, bordering on criminal negligence. The Sierra Club board was not willing to accept his resignation, and its members persuaded him to return, stating that his "purist voice was needed to keep the club true to its ideals." Throughout his time on the board of directors, Adams wielded a powerful voice for cooperation and compromise. This would eventually estrange him somewhat, as younger members of the Sierra Club moved