



## Finding Abbey

Sean Prentiss

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Reviewed by Jamie Houghton

*"Through naming comes knowing; we grasp an object, mentally, by giving it a name - hension, prehension, apprehension. And thus through language create a whole world, corresponding to the other world out there. Or we trust that it corresponds. Or perhaps, like a German poet (Rilke), we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than with the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter. And so in the end the world is lost again. No, the world remains - those unique, particular, incorrigibly individual junipers and sandstone monoliths - and it is we who are lost. Again. Round and round, through the endless labyrinth of thought - the maze." Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire*

In *Finding Abbey*, environmental writer Sean Prentiss documents his search for the hidden grave of one of the great minds of West and invites you into his own labyrinth of ideals, archetypes and search for the meaning of home. Edward Abbey was an environmental writer, activist and author of the iconic *Monkey Wrench Gang*, one of the novels credited for launching eco-terrorism and organizations such as Earth First! When he died of internal bleeding at the age of sixty-two, four friends transported his body to the desert and following Abbey's wishes, illegally buried him in a secret grave in a National Park with a hand-chiseled tombstone reading: "Edward Abbey. 1927-1989. No Comment."

*Finding Abbey* takes readers across the country as Prentiss gathers clues, follows in Abbey's footsteps and interviews Abbey's closest friends; Jack Loeffler, Ken "Seldom Seen" Sleight, David Petersen, and Doug Peacock. Prentiss turns what could be just an homage to one of his personal heroes into a lively portrait of an imperfect man- he neither condones nor condemns some of the more controversial choices that Abbey made but instead remains fluid in his dogged pursuit of the truth, as Abbey said, "no matter where it may lead."

Prentiss is an environmental writer, professor and co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*, an anthology on the craft of creative nonfiction. In *Finding Abbey* he tackles a legend, one full of controversy not least because Abbey himself didn't wish for the grave to be found. Prentiss wrestles expertly with this controversy and his own motives for unraveling this particular mystery: "I refuse to consider what will happen if I locate Abbey's grave.....if I find it and if I write about it I'll be reducing one more mystery in this world." Embedded in his search for Abbey's final resting place is Prentiss' own search for why mystery and wildness is so vital to the human heart. He says, "I want no part in killing our monsters or our mysteries."

Prentiss pairs his own meditative essay-style chapters on the desert, Abbey and his connection to both with interviews and biographical information about Abbey. He is a talented interviewer and his conversations with Abbey's friends draw the reader into his search. He pulls stories out of sometimes reticent men and highlights the importance of what they have to say: about truth, about the West, about where we went wrong with the environmental movement, about where we are still going wrong.

Prentiss celebrates his interview subjects as contributors to the West in their own right; as elders to be learned from whose words are not just a map to a hidden grave but perhaps a map to a better future. On contemplating if it even matters, if he really even wants to find the grave Prentiss reflects, "what matters is I listened to Abbey's friends. It's about seeing the desert through their eyes... Revitalizing my political self through his books and his friends' words."

As Prentiss enters deeper into the maze of his search he gets to the heart of why the concept of the American West is here to stay. He quotes Abbey from his speech at the 1976 Vail Symposium:

"We must not plan for growth but for war- war against the strip miners, against the dam builders, against the power plant builders, against the pipeline layers. (A war against) a whole array of arrogant and greedy swine who, if we let them, will obliterate every mountain, dam every river, clear-cut every forrest and obliterate every farm and ranch and small town in the American West."

Prentiss echoes Abbey's fervor in a passage in Finding Abbey where Prentiss becomes the interviewee, as his best friend Haus questions why his obsession with the West in particular. Haus asks, "Why can't Grand Rapidians be your people?" Prentiss replies "here, out West, people are still fighting ideological wars." He goes on to say:

"And the people with views similar to ours, yours and mine, might lose the war but they are fighting to stop Tucson and Phoenix from cancering into this landscape. They're trying to stop growth in Durango and Denver. They're trying to stop mining on Mount Emmons in Crested Butte. And there is a chance that our side will win. Probably not, but look at all this space. There's hope here."

Finding Abbey is about hope that the West was never won, that wildness on this planet will in actuality never be tamed because humanity is still but a mote in its eye. It's about the West as a place where an individual's ideals can still have an impact.

There is something about the idea of earth after man is gone that seems to sooth Prentiss; he says: "I look up at the sky that O'Keefe calls "that Blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished." It is about have an effect and also being of no effect; Finding Abbey is a study in contradictions, just like Abbey; just like the search for the grave.

The last interview is close to the end of the search, Chapter 22; In the Desert With Doug Peacock. Prentiss' description of Peacock, the legendary inspiration for wildcard George Washington Hayduke in The Monkey Wrench Gang does not disappoint. Peacock drives Prentiss out to the desert with beers, a .357 Magnum and a half-joking promise to string up for the vultures any author who might lead the way to Abbey's grave. Prentiss' flair for interviewing and his narrative style of relating the interviews depicts a complicated, compelling man: "Doug seems to have so many types of laughter inside of him. More than I expected. I've read about him being cantankerous, even violent. But today I see him a introspective, brilliant, a dreamer, melancholic, and even gentle, with Abbey's memory and with me."

Finding Abbey is not a map, it is a log-book of a journey through the maze; Prentiss' mind, Abbey's mind, Peacock and the rest of the gang, of minor characters encountered along the way. At the end of the book Prentiss realizes that "I must allow it (my mind) to remember what true home feels like out in the self-willed lands." He suggests that we don't have to be physically West to connect with wildness, with mystery, with self-will. He suggests there are endless mysteries that can be found without being attached to one place in particular. Perhaps, Prentiss suggests, the West is a state of mind.





