

📖 Topic Page: [Abbey, Edward, 1927-1989](#)

Definition: **Abbey, Edward** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US author and conservationist. His novels include *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1976), about a gang of ecological saboteurs. This was a best-seller, making Abbey a cult hero.

Although Abbey disapproved of ecological extremists, his writings and public statements were characteristically quirky. He published his first book, *Jonathan Troy*, in 1954. In *Desert Solitaire* (1968) – an account of his years as a part-time ranger in the Arches National Monument, Utah – he called for a ban on motor vehicles in wilderness preserves.



Image from: [An Earth First march in Yellowstone in 1989... in Encyclopedia of Environment and Society](#)

Summary Article: **Abbey, Edward (1927-1989)**

From *Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*

Author of 25 books of fiction and non-fiction mostly about the desert Southwest, Edward Abbey is best known as the author of *DESERT SOLITAIRE* (1968), alternately compared to *WALDEN* by Henry David Thoreau and *A Sand County Almanac* by ALDO LEOPOLD. Abbey saw his second book *The Brave Cowboy* (1956) made into a movie in which he played a bit part as a Sheriff's deputy, and earned both fame and infamy as the author of *THE MONKEY WRENCH GANG* (1975).

Edward Abbey was born to Paul and Mildred Abbey in Indiana, Pennsylvania, but grew up on what Abbey called a “sub-marginal farm” in Home, Pennsylvania. He first encountered the Southwest hitchhiking from coast to coast before being drafted into the Army near the end of World War II. Spared combat, he served in post-war Italy and patrolled the streets on a motorcycle named “Crash.” After returning to the United States, he intermittently studied at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and eventually earned a Master's degree in Philosophy. His thesis, “Anarchy and the Morality of Violence,” was a harbinger of the themes that would pervade much of his work and philosophy: resisting the powerful, the greedy, and the forces of uncontrolled technology and consumerism that were, in his eyes, equally endangering the country, freedom, and the wilderness. By the time he graduated from the University of New Mexico he had published his first novel, the largely autobiographical *Jonathon Troy* (1954), and was at work on *The Brave Cowboy*. He attended graduate school at Yale University, but left after only one term, homesick for the Southwest.

Edward Abbey's landmark work is *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968). Written over three seasons as a ranger in then Arches National Monument (now National Park), the work is a polemical memoir of a solitary ranger in an undeveloped park in Southwest Utah in the late 1950's, and intertwines fiction, non-fiction, philosophy and natural history in a passionate plea for the protection of the wilderness from developers, the government, and what he calls “industrial tourism.” Abbey claims that people should enjoy wild places without the aid of cars and motorboats; visitors to the wilderness should walk or boat in ways that place them in direct contact with the natural world and all of the beauty and terror therein. Just a few years before *Desert Solitaire* was published, the Wilderness Act was signed into law, and protected vast tracts of wilderness from development. Although Abbey may have

protested federal management of wilderness areas, the philosophy behind the Wilderness Act changed the way people viewed barren or unusable land. *Desert Solitaire* likewise changed the way people viewed the desert, and contains some of the most eloquent language ever written about the area that is now Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. It is also an impassioned plea for humans to reshape their relationship to the land and all of its inhabitants, in the spirit of *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac*.

Abbey intensely disliked the anthropocentric attitudes prevalent in modern society, which viewed wilderness and wild creatures as intrinsically worthless or subservient, and he was one of the first to encourage direct action to defend them. In 1975 he published *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a story about four friends who carry out a surreptitious campaign of “eco-sabotage” around the desert Southwest, disabling construction and logging machinery and damaging bridges. The novel popularized the idea of direct action to save wild places from development and destruction, and to protest the unchecked growth and power of giant corporations and bureaucracies. Partly in response to Abbey's work, groups such as EarthFirst! and the Earth Liberation Front emerged (The Conservation Movement), and carried out acts of industrial sabotage in direct defense of wild places in danger of development, logging, or mining. The book and its depicted acts of intentionally disabling equipment spawned the word “monkey-wrenching,” and Abbey himself was known to occasionally engage in his own acts of monkey-wrenching, cutting down billboards and removing road surveying tape with friends.

Irrascible, eloquent, uncompromising, and contradictory, Abbey was nonetheless so able and committed that “even when he was wrong he was almost right,” as the poet GARY SNYDER once put it. Abbey disliked being called an environmentalist, a nature writer, or even a professional writer, insisting that he merely lived a life centered on writing and freedom. Over the course of his very active life, he embraced many issues that seemed to put him at odds with his environmentally conscious audience, harshly criticizing environmental groups, liberal movements, and tourism, while supporting gun rights, hunting, and restricted immigration. Still others took issue with his tendency to litter the roadside with beer cans, and Abbey defended this practice by stating that the road was more of a nuisance than beer cans. His work is easily misunderstood, with its often-sardonic tone, its tendency to embrace conflicting subjects, and its deft and often perplexing mixture of fact and fiction. But viewed as a whole, it may be seen as arguing, ultimately, for one simple and consistent claim: that anything which separates or distances us from the basic freedoms of life, as they play out in the wild world, deserves scorn and ridicule.

Most of his finest work may be found in his collections of literary non-fiction, *Abbey's Road* (1979), *Down the River* (1982), *Beyond the Wall* (1984), and *One Life at a Time, Please* (1988), which established Abbey as a major essayist and allowed him to collaborate with some of the finest nature photographers and environmental philosophers working in the field. Despite his notoriety, Abbey always held to his core beliefs, and in the background of even his finest, most unpolemical nature writing, lies an insistence on the active preservation of wild places as sites for rejuvenation and renewal in the face of an indifferent government and society.

To the end of his life, Edward Abbey maintained his stand to live and die as he wished, free from the intrusions of technology and bureaucracy. Suffering from an uncontrollable bleeding disorder, he had himself removed from the hospital and taken to the desert by his friends and family to die beside a campfire. Not passing in the night, he was moved to the writing cabin behind his house, where he died on March 14, 1989. After his death, he was placed in his sleeping bag and carried by friends and family

many miles, over rugged terrain, to his final resting place hidden deep in the Sonoran Desert of Southern Arizona.

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Sims, Michael. "Abbey, Edward (1927-1989)." *Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*, Geoff Hamilton, and Brian Jones, McFarland, 1st edition, 2013. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/abbey_edward. Accessed 18 Nov. 2019.