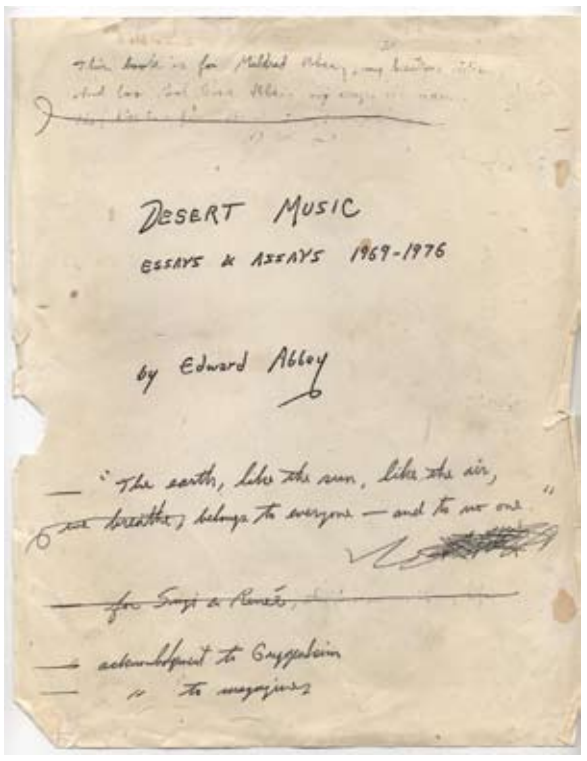


DESERT MUSIC

ESSAYS & ASSAYS 1969-1976

by Edward Abbey

The Evolution of... "A JOURNEY HOME"

EDWARD ABBEY'S collection of essays was originally to be called "Desert Music." Ed was always trying to help out young artists and writers and based on a single cartoon I'd given him the previous winter, he put in a good word for me with his publishers in New York.

E.P Dutton hired me to draw 26 chapter illustrations and the cover and to my surprise, they sent me a frst generation copy of Abbey's manuscript, complete with his edits and margin comments.

Later, he proposed that the book be called "Revelations," but when it fnally went to press in the spring of 1977, Abbey's book had become "The Journey Home."

Abbey
"DESERT MUSIC" (working title)

Author's Introduction

I am not a naturalist. I never was and never will be a naturalist. ~~I don't want to be a naturalist.~~ I'm not even sure what a naturalist is except that I'm not one. I'm not even an amateur naturalist. The only Latin I know is omnia vincit amor--and in vino ~~veritas~~ vanitas. Until recently I thought that cave canum meant "beware the cane." I never studied botany or zoology or ecology or any other branch of natural science. ~~history. True;~~ like most World War II veterans I went to college but only because that seemed easier than working. While in school I majored in philosophy, not biology, and my intellectual heroes were Democritus (who died laughing--laughing at Plato), and Bertrand Russell, who died fighting, and Lao-Tse who wrote one small bestselling book, and Beethoven, who will never die. The subject of my Master's thesis was politics--the morality of violence. The only things I studied with concentrated intensity were my professors and the cheerleaders. I failed journalism, not once but twice. During my long but erratic seasonal career with the National Park Service I was employed not as a naturalist but as a ranger and sometimes as a fire lookout; the latter

abbey desert music 2

occupation is an ideal one for the amateur philosopher. I am a failed poet and take pride in that. I consider myself a working novelist (the only one in America who works for a living) and my highest ambition is to compose one good very long novel ~~that I intend~~ The Fat Masterpiece. That accomplished, I shall retire to the heart of the wilderness and spend the remainder of my days in meditation, contemplating my novel. I hope to become a rock. I plan to return, in ~~future incarnations~~ and future incarnations, as a large lazy soaring bird.

The aim of this preamble is not to indulge a foolish vanity, as it might appear, but to assist those reviewers and critics who persist in attempting to read my books as misunderstanding studies in natural history. Led wildly astray by this ~~presumption,~~ they are puzzled and exasperated by such books as Black Sun and The Monkey Wrench Gang, the one a romance and the other a sort of comic extravaganza, which quite fail to meet their predetermined specifications. Unless revised, their expectations will likewise be disappointed by this book.

Much as I might admire the work of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Krutch, Eiseley, Beston and others, I have not tried to write in their tradition. I don't know how. I've done plenty of plain living, out of necessity, but don't know how to maintain a constant level of high thinking. It's beyond me: some scabrous itch between the legs is always dragging me back to mundane earth. Down to my own level, among all you

other common denominators out there. My ~~own~~ literary idols anyway have always been Rabelais, Knut Hamsun, B. Traven and Theodore Dresier.

Several years ago I published a book called Desert Solitaire, followed closely by Slickrock, Cactus Country, and Appalachia. These are classified by librarians as "nature books" but in reality belong to the category of ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ personal history rather than natural history. Since they deal ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ ostensibly with actual places they do contain some ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ description of flora and fauna, bushes and bugs, snakes and rocks and the weather. All technical information was stolen from reliable sources and I am happy to stand behind it. But as those who may have read them should know, those four books ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ are in the main simple narrative accounts of travel and adventure with philosophical commentary added, here and there, to give the prose ~~xxxx~~ a high-toned ~~xxxxx~~ surface gleam. They have nothing ~~little~~ to do with biological science.

For I am not a naturalist! ~~I don't even want to ever be a naturalist. Forget it.~~ ~~The pay is poor, the hours long.~~ Although I bagged my first robin at the age of seven, with a B.B. gun back on the farm in Home, Pennsylvania, I still have difficulty distinguishing a redbreasted robin from a flea-~~xxxxx~~ bitten meadowlark. The only birds I can recognize without hesitation are the turkey vulture, the ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~ yellow-bellied sapsucker, the fried ~~xxx~~ chicken, and the rosy-bottomed skinnydipper. My favorite animal is the crocodile. As for Flora she don't even speak to me anymore. So I'll never make it as a naturalist. ~~Forget it.~~ If labeling is required, say that I am one who loves unfenced country, the open range. Call me a ranger. Though I've hardly earned the title, I claim

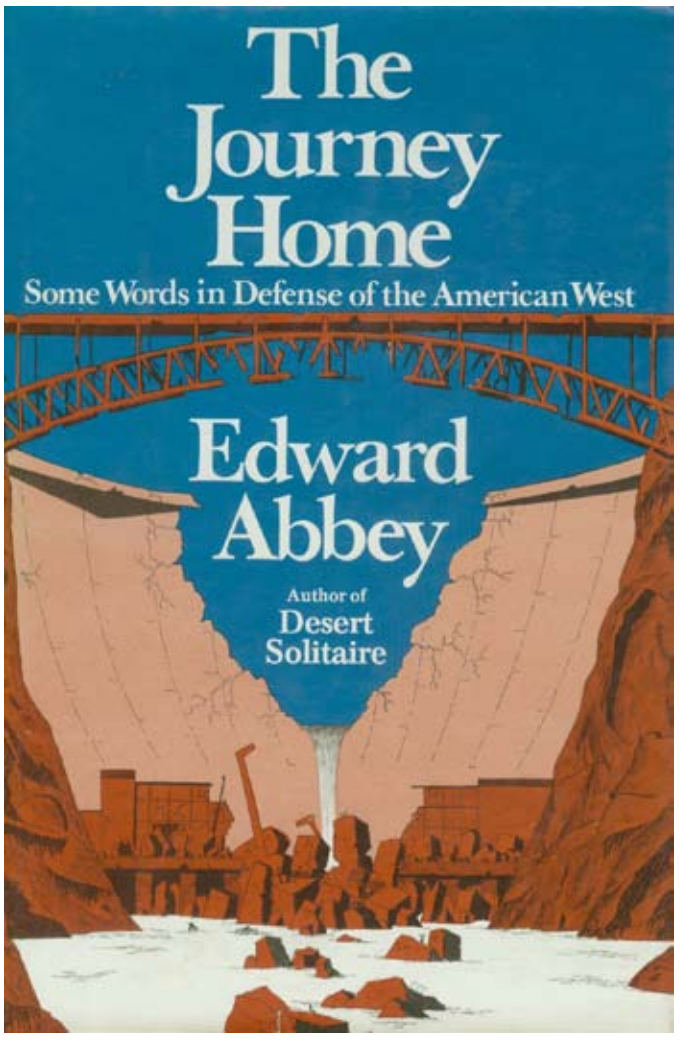
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

it anyway. The only higher honor that I've ever heard of is to be called a man.

So much for the mantle and britches of Thoreau and Muir. Let Annie Dillard wear them now. As I see it my only problem here is to explain what this book is about. Not to classify it, which is the librarian's and the critic's job, but to introduce it. This is the kind of book which probably needs an introduction and as you see I can't trust anybody else to do that right.

[Desert Music] like its predecessors Desert Solitaire ~~xx~~ and the others is primarily a book of personal history, one man's odyssey in search of home. Like so many others in this century I ~~xxxx~~ found myself a displaced person shortly after birth and have been looking half my life (the other half is still to come) for a place to take my stand. Now that I think I've found ~~my~~ it ~~home~~ I must defend it. Most of this book was written during the past five years in the form of adversary essays and assays, polemics, visions and hallucinations, and published piece by piece in various odd periodicals all the way from The Atlantic and The New York Times to Life, Audubon, Playboy, Mountain Gazette, The Vulgarian Digest, The American West, and the annual Sierra Club Calendar. ~~Two of the pieces were meant as introductions to books by other writers and one composed as a speech for a gathering of conservationists.~~ Most ~~xxx~~ have been revised and some expanded for the purposes of book publication. ~~All~~ share a common theme--the need to

make sense of private experience by exploring the connections and contradictions between wildness, wilderness and ~~xxxxx~~ human community, between civilization and human freedom.

If certain ideas and emotions are expressed herein with what seems like an extreme intransigence, it is not merely because I love an argument ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ and wish to provoke (though I do), but because I am really am an extremist, one who lives and loves by choice far out on the very verge of things, ~~xxxxx~~ on the edge of the abyss, where one world falls off into the depths of another. That's the way I like it.

E.A.
Wolf Hole, Arizona
1976