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Outdoor

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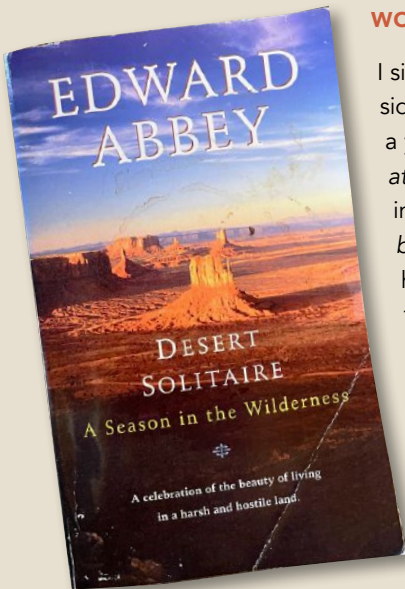
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TREADMARKS

Blinded by the Noise

WORDS - BILL DRAGOO | PHOTOS - SUSAN DRAGOO



I sit looking at my bookshelf, considering the ones which influenced a younger me. Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* fueled an initial desire for flight and *Nothing by Chance*, the story of a summer he spent barnstorming across the country in an old biplane, set me on a path of flying my own antique airplane into a life of adventure amongst the clouds. Louis L'Amour's knuckle and skull heroes made me want to be one as I sat waiting for my charter passengers in pilot's lounges across the country,

hanging on his every word. Suddenly, Ed Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* catches my eye. A worn-out copy was first loaned to me by a friend. Norm had disappeared shortly after high school, somewhere out west, returning months later as mysteriously as he had left. Showing up on my doorstep one day he simply said, "Hi," and acted like he'd only been gone a day

or two. He presented the book without fanfare. The cover was ripped off and the pages were limp and torn from rough travel. The author was an environmental activist and a lover of the deserts of the Great Southwest. He was also a ranger in Arches National Monument (now National Park) in the late '50s. Abbey lamented the changes which would bring hordes to Arches National Park and many other wonders of the desert. Paved roads were being built where a four-wheel drive truck or strong legs were then required to approach these precious natural formations.

I pull the book from the shelf and begin to read. Even after a half century, several excerpts still wield power. In the introduction Abbey tells us, "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 (expletive) 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. In the second place, most of what I write is already gone or going under fast. This is not a

travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot--- throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose?"

In his later book, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey goes on an all-out rampage of sabotage, protesting construction of a highway through the desert. Most responsible citizens would not advocate destruction of property, even to prevent what they see as destruction of nature, but those who have witnessed the damage mindless tourists and government entities bent on maximizing effortless access have caused might share some of his frustration.

Add modern vehicles which easily carry us virtually anywhere with a chest of beer in back, flashing lights and 10,000-watt stereo amplifiers, and the obliteration of desert solitude is nearly complete.

But all is not lost. Even with our fabulous machines and groomed roads, there are still plenty of places and ways to find peace among the cactus and sage. As advocates for thoughtful and ongoing public land use, we can be the catalyst for others to behave as they should. Certainly, the prize that awaits us is worth the effort. Abbey talks about one of them, his campfire. "The odor of burning juniper is the sweetest fragrance on the face of the earth, in my honest judgment. I doubt if all the smoking censers of Dante's paradise could equal it. One breath of juniper smoke, like the perfume of sagebrush after rain, evokes in magical catalysis, like certain music, the space and light and clarity and piercing strangeness of the American West. Long may it burn."

Leaving his campfire, he makes his way back to his little aluminum trailer parked miles from any other human being. He chooses not to light his "electrical torch," but instead to let his eyes adjust to the ambient light produced by the heavens. "Like many other mechanical gadgets it (his flashlight) tends to separate a man from the world around him. If I switch it on, my eyes adapt to it and I can only see the small pool of light which it makes in front of me; I am isolated."

Once back in his trailer, he decides to write himself a letter. He must go outside again and, using a hand crank, start up the four-cylinder gasoline generator. "The engine sputters, gasps, catches fire, gains momentum, winds up into a roar, valves popping, rockers thumping, pistons hissing up and down inside their oiled jackets. Power surges into the wiring, the light bulbs inside the trailer begin to glow, brighten, becoming incandescent. The lights are so bright I can't see a thing...nor can I hear anything but the clatter of the generator. I am shut off from the natural world and sealed up, encapsulated, in a box of artificial light and tyrannical noise."

I believe that as human beings, caught up in the noise of everyday life, we become blinded to what lies just beyond the

shadow line, voluntary prisoners, seeking silence and solace, and then we insulate ourselves from it with a barrier of comfort and convenience.

Abbey continues, "Finishing the letter, I go outside to close the switch on the generator. The light bulbs dim and disappear, the furious gnashing of pistons whimpers to a halt. Standing by the inert and helpless engine, I hear its last vibrations die like ripples on a pool somewhere beyond Delicate Arch, beyond the Yellow Cat badlands, beyond the shadow line. I wait. Now the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me; I can see the stars again and the world of starlight. I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human, but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and a quiet exultation."

We are separated by our conveniences from the very reason we choose to go overlanding, but it is within our power to regain our solitude. Using our machines to bring us within striking distance of the wonders of the American West, we can drive and act responsibly, sticking to established trails and keeping our rigs quiet. Once there, we can turn them off, douse the lights and listen, perhaps even go for a walk. The night will flow back again and with it, the solitude that saves us. ✕



ABOUT BILL DRAGOO

Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill's not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he's busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the "GS of Trucks."

Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and BMW Motorrad Certified Off Road Instructor, and owns/operates the DART (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) school near the Dragoos' hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa.

You can join Bill for one of his training classes by visiting www.billdragoo.com.