



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR DESERT SOLITAIRE BY EDWARD ABBEY

1. Edward Abbey has been connected at times with the un-humanist poet Robinson Jeffers, who declared in one poem that except for the penalties, he'd sooner kill a man than hurt a hawk. Do you see serious evidence of misanthropy in *Desert Solitaire*? Do you think Abbey presents himself favorably, or as a cranky and eccentric malcontent?
2. In the chapter entitled "Episodes and Visions" (and elsewhere in the book) Abbey lashes out at what he calls "civilization." Do you think his charges are just? Could it be that he is exaggerating his outrage for effect? Where does his argument with civilization seem most explicit and perhaps most valid?
3. With any social critic we always inquire, sooner or later, whether he or she offers solutions. Do you think Abbey directly or indirectly includes solutions in his agenda, and if so, what are their nature? If you detect no workable solutions, directly stated or implied, does that compromise the strength of the book, so far as you're concerned?
4. Abbey appears to be aware that readers might find his attraction to the desert to be aesthetic and passionate, but perhaps not "religious," for he says perhaps rather defensively in "Down the River," "I am not an atheist but an earthiest" (184). What do you take to be his point here? Do you find his attitudes toward organized religion, and particularly toward Mormons, to be problematic?
5. Although *Desert Solitaire* is constructed in chapters, each one might be considered as an independent, stand-alone essay. It would not be necessary to read all of the chapters to see where he is coming from, and you might prefer to pick and choose. Which chapters do you most enjoy? Are you most satisfied when Abbey presents himself at ease in the natural world, or when he seems mostly intent on telling a story, or when he lashes out against the "outside" world?
6. Two aspects of Abbey's book that sometimes get overlooked are his occasionally vividly descriptive or lyrical ("poetic") prose and his comic sensibility. Where do you find evidence of these two important features of his writing?

Discussion questions provided by the Idaho Commission for Libraries.



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