

# *Finding Abbey*, by Sean Prentiss

## an excerpt

### An Excerpt from *Finding Abbey*

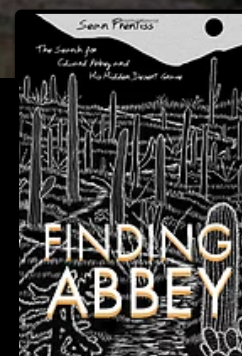
#### In the Desert with Doug Peacock

*I was paralyzed for weeks [after Abbey's death]. Ed would have disapproved. He would have said, 'Douglas, why all this moping around. Go do something.'* —Doug Peacock

#### October 15 Ajo, Arizona

With the hot Arizona sun overhead, I drive over to Doug Peacock's seasonal home. After over a year of trying to wrangle Doug into an interview, he finally stands in his front yard, waiting to welcome me. Until I see him in tan khaki pants, hiking boots, and a black Elk River Books tee shirt, I worry that he will cancel or, worse, just never show. Chasing him down might be almost as hard as trying to locate Abbey's grave.

As Doug walks toward me, I notice a powerful gait and the gentle upturn of a smile. He is stout, rugged, sinewy, partially wild, and wide-shouldered with a sun-scarred head covered with short-cropped gray hair. A trim, thin beard of gray stubble covers his wide and round face. He puts out his hand for me to shake.



To read our review of *Finding Abbey* go to the [Book Review](#) page.



Doug and I load up into his old maroon and tan GMC extended cab pickup and drive to Ajo's grocery store to buy two bottles of wine and a six pack of Miller Light. Back in the truck, Doug turns off Ajo's paved road, and soon we jostle along a dirt road. Once our wheels hit dirt, Doug says, "Pass me a beer, will you?" I hand him a Miller Light and crack one open for myself. "I never drive anywhere of consequence without a beer between my knees," Doug says.

Doug meanders desert dirt roads until he finds an isolated turnaround that allows us to gaze back toward the outer edges of Ajo across a stunning Sonoran desert. We pull two camp chairs from the bed of the GMC and place them in the shade of the truck. Between the chairs, Doug sets down a small, black daypack. He unzips it and pulls out a high-powered binocular, which he places beside him so he can search for birds and keep an eye on his surroundings. Next, he rifles around until he pulls out a .357 Magnum, which he rests on the edge of the backpack.

"When I first heard about your project," Doug says in an incredulous voice, "I thought, 'This guy's going to write a guidebook about finding Ed's grave.' You're going to place all these cairns with numbers on them right to Ed's grave. A friend of mine said, 'Well, Doug, why don't you just go out there and wait for this writer guy and bury him there?' But I told my friend, 'I wouldn't bury him in Abbey's grave. He'd get strung up for the vultures.'

"But," Doug says, his voice softening, "then I thought, 'Well, you can't just kill a guy just because he found Abbey's grave. It wouldn't be quite fair.'" Doug looks at me and smiles as he says, "I only shoot really bad people, okay?," which might be his way of saying, You've passed some sort of test or I'm not that crazy. Doug continues, "I mean, in principle I've got nothing against shooting someone, but they've got to be really bad. Plus, the first shot in this gun is just a shot shell."

"Just a warning?" I ask, happy to know I have at least one free round in the chamber if this interview goes poorly.

"Yeah, I can shoot somebody in the face, and if that doesn't scare them off, the next one's for real."

And with a .357 Magnum resting between us, Doug has welcomed me to this interview, to his Sonoran Desert, into his way of thinking. And I do feel welcomed rather than intimidated. Doug could have threatened me and then called off the interview. Instead, he smiles and waits for my first question.

Sean Prentiss is the author of the memoir, *Finding Abbey: a Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*. Sean is also the co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*, a creative nonfiction craft anthology, as well as the co-author of the forthcoming environmental writing textbook, *Environmental and Nature Writing: A Craft Guide and Anthology*. Sean lives with his wife on a small lake in northern Vermont and serves as an assistant professor at Norwich University.

