

Reading Guide for *ABBEVILLE* by Jack Fuller

About the Book

“Abbeville tells the story of a man riding the crests and chasms of the 20th Century on the flat plains of America’s center, struggling through personal grief, war, and material failure to find a place where the spirit may repose” -- Jack Fuller

When the “Dot-Com Bubble” bursts in 2001, George Bailey finds himself in a dilemma much like that of his namesake from *It’s a Wonderful Life*. He is a venture capitalist who is losing everything, and his already troubled sixteen year old son is showing signs of serious emotional disturbance. So George returns to the small Illinois farm town of Abbeville, where he’d spent some of his happiest childhood summers, to seek out the ghost of his grandfather, Karl Schumpeter, to find out why he had been among the happiest of men, revered in his community, despite having risen by hard work, a head for business, and a measure of risk taking to substantial wealth, only to lose it all in the Great Depression of the 1930’s, even serving two years in state prison for banking irregularities incurred primarily – as George learns from court records -- to bail his younger brother Fritz out of his foolish mistakes and misdeeds.

Written in the elegant plain style of fellow Illinoisan William Maxwell and Saskatchewan prairie son Wallace Stegner, *Abbeville* sweeps across time from the late 19th century through the 20th, encompassing the rape of the North Woods by the logging industry; the agriculture booms and busts of the Chicago Trade Center and the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893; World War I and the Battle of Verdun; the devastation of the Great Depression and, finally, the nightmares of the 21st. At the same time, it explores the evolution of Midwestern family and community farm life, now faded in the harsh sun of agribusiness.

Abbeville is a multi-generational novel, featuring George’s upbringing, work and family life and that of his parents, especially his mother Betty, Karl and Cristina’s only surviving child. But the story is ultimately Karl’s and focuses on his influence upon those around him, seen through the lens of George Bailey. Karl is the oldest of two brothers, with a very difficult and demanding father – a German immigrant farmer. One of the novel’s central ironies and complexities involves Karl’s unconditional love and support on behalf of his younger brother Fritz, toward whom he is overly protective and indulgent. Along with Karl’s own risk taking and insistence upon trying to maintain his prosperous life style well past the time when he should have been doing so, this dynamic is arguably the source of Karl’s downfall. But Karl also – from childhood -- has a nemesis. Harley Ansel blames Karl for winning the hand of Christina Vogel over his, and carries an irrational desire for vengeance with Javere like persistence into his career as county prosecuting attorney, along with a self-righteousness which is hiding his own misdeeds, both public and private.

Alongside Karl’s wife Christina, his brother Fritz and his daughter Betty, *Abbeville* is peopled by a strong cast of other supporting characters, among them his Uncle John, who schools Karl the ways of the world of rampant capitalism first by teaching him the intricacies of double entry accounting and what they tell you about profit and loss at his North Woods logging camp, and then by sending him to the floor of the Board of Trade in Chicago to learn grain futures trading. He brings what he has learned along with his bride Christina and his personal ambition back to Abbeville to build a life and prosper, improving the fortunes of his community along with his own. It is in Chicago in his uncle’s office that Karl meets Luella Grundy, another of the more interesting characters in *Abbeville*. An ardent radical, she is a strikingly beautiful redhead who has had to live by her wits and learned skills, on her own since the age of fifteen. After a brief fling, she disappears from Karl’s life only to reemerge later as a lifelong friend and support for him when he is in prison. It is through Luella that we get a sense of the radicalism of the time that thrived alongside Illinois’s downstate Republicanism.

Abbeville's structure is designed to suggest the rising and falling of fortunes, both personal and cultural, and the other great cycles of war and peace, feast and famine, life and death, and their inherent inevitability over the course of time. The language of the novel is also full of water imagery, suggestive of the ebb and flow of natural and human process, and the art of fly casting in particular rises to the level of metaphor central to the novel's suggestion that one finds peace in this world only through accepting in the profoundest sense of the word the great truth that life and death, light and dark, exist only in terms of one another.

About the Author

Abbeville is Jack Fuller's seventh critically acclaimed novel. He grew up in the Chicago suburbs and took his journalism degree from Northwestern University in 1968. Having decided it would make him a better journalist, he graduated from Yale Law School in 1973, and he did leave journalism briefly during the Ford administration when U. S. Attorney General Edward Levi asked him to serve as his special assistant in the Department of Justice to help clean things up in the wake of the Watergate scandals. But while writing his novels as time allowed, Fuller made his living as a journalist and newspaperman. He started as a copy boy for the Chicago Tribune when he was 16. When he retired in 2005 to concentrate on his fiction writing, he was president of the Tribune Publishing Company. He also worked for the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Daily News*, City News Bureau of Chicago, and *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. He has been a legal affairs writer, a war correspondent in Vietnam, a Washington correspondent, and won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing, in 1986. Among his many other honors and awards, he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a recipient of the Doctor of Humane Letters from Northwestern University, and serves on the Boards of Directors for the MacArthur Foundation and the University of Chicago. He is also a past president of the Inter American Press Association.

He lives in Chicago with his wife Debra Moskovits. He has two children, Tim and Kate.

Interview with the Author

Who is Will Tegge, to whom you dedicate *Abbeville*?

Will Tegge is in fact my grandfather, and this novel is very loosely based on his story. He had a total reversal of fortune, like the Karl Schumpeter of my novel, and like George, Karl's grandson, I never as a boy questioned why he was so revered in his town, well above his financial station at the time of my childhood. Like Karl, my grandfather did own a bank, a grain elevator and an implement lot. He also owned farm property all around, went to the Republican convention as a delegate once, and even served as sheriff for a time. He was just a central citizen of this small place, a hero to the town. I did know that he'd had a total reversal of fortune during the Depression but only later, after his death, did my mother tell me that he'd used some of the money from the bank improperly, and actually gone to prison for two years. But while the central elements of the novel are drawn from his life, everything else in the novel I had to make up. Just as I was never a venture capitalist like George, my grandmother was nothing like his grandmother, Christina Vogel, for instance. Nor is the Karl Schumpeter of ***Abbeville*** my grandfather.

Was learning about your grandfather's having lost everything and serving time in prison the inspiration for this novel?

Not exactly. Once I learned what had happened I found that story fascinating, and mysterious in certain ways. But I think what started this novel was the combination of a story I grew up with and this impulse I have to come to understand what it is that allows some people to deal with the enormous wave of change that burst on human life – the great cycles of the economy, nature, war and peace -- with equanimity,

somehow; while others are totally crushed by them. That's always been something that fascinated me. It fascinated me when I was a GI reporter for *Stars and Stripes* in Vietnam. I was amazed, intrigued, and saddened by how people with very similar experiences came out of them so differently. Some came home from that experience and never got past it, while others came home, managed to get their lives on track, and made something of themselves. Those things are absolutely fascinating to me, I didn't understand them, and novels are one way to deeply examine such things in a human context. So all that came together to inspire this book. I did give Karl one experience that my grandfather never had – World War I (Karl volunteered for the ambulance corps at the Battle of Verdun), because it is the combination of those kinds of extreme circumstances, war, economic depression, and so forth, that test people in the most profound way.

And in George Bailey's financial wars, the Dot-Com crash, did you see people that were affected by that?

Sure. At the time I was President of the Tribune Publishing Company, which publishes the Chicago Tribune along with some other newspapers, and we were deeply involved in trying to be part of the Internet world, for our own commercial purposes. As a consequence, we were in contact with a lot of these people who were starting these businesses, and financing these businesses. So I saw a lot of people rise awfully high, awfully fast, and then crash in the Dot-Com bubble bursting.

Did that have anything to do with finding the character of George?

No. I didn't start the novel until three years after the bubble burst. It just happened, the way most things work with my novels. They just emerge from the imagination, not because I've planned it all, but because the stories find me, and that part of the story found me. I almost always start with something that is confusing, and personally troubling in one way or another to me, something that I need to understand; and I write stories out of that sense of disquiet. And the writing of these novels tells me about the world and teaches me about the questions I am asking or at least points me in the right direction toward understanding, more than any other technique that I might apply would do. And I hope for readers that the same kind of process occurs.

You have had an astounding career in journalism and the newspaper business, winning a Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Writing in 1986. Was that for any particular series of editorials?

It was for editorials written because something had just happened. Mostly they involved questions of constitutional law. One that would be of interest here was different. It was written on the anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. I had written a novel, *Mass*, trying to examine the moral and psychological and emotional consequences of people growing up in an era of nuclear standoff, and the things I learned from writing that book helped me to write that editorial.

What has been the relationship between your journalism and your fiction?

There are a number of ways to answer that question. One of them is that journalism has provided me with a wealth of experience to feed my fiction. I've had more than my share of witnessing people under intense pressure in difficult situations. Journalism put me in the middle of the battle of Michigan Avenue during the National Democratic Convention in 1968; the race riots in Chicago put me in intimate contact with police work; with war; with the operation of the US Senate and with the US Supreme Court. Another way to answer the question is that journalism took up a lot of the time I could have been writing fiction. Only recently have I had the pleasure of being able to work on my fiction full time, something I have always, always wanted to do. Journalism was and is an important part of my life. It was the public, the socially engaged part of my life. The fiction is closer to the heart, much more personal, profoundly important to me. I've had bosses tell me that perhaps I shouldn't be writing novels while doing journalism, that it's an odd thing to be doing, especially when one is writing sometimes "dangerous" novels. I've always told such bosses that it's all part of the package, that you can't remove fiction from me! (laughs). So I guess you'd have to say the relationship has been complex and symbiotic.

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What about the style of *Abbeville*? If someone were to tell you that this novel is reminiscent in some ways of William Maxwell's *So Long*, *See You Tomorrow*, for instance, what would be your reaction?

I'd be profoundly flattered. I was trying to write this novel in a very direct, plain style way. Every book that I've written has its own style which is related to what it's attempting to do. On this one, because of what it was about, I was drawing from some of the great plain style writers, like Maxwell. I was also drawing somewhat from some of the earlier Midwestern based writers like Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser. I didn't bother to reread Dreiser, but I did reread Norris' *The Pit* to get a sense of what the floor of the grain futures exchange at the Chicago Board of Trade was like back then, how it worked, and did find some imagery I could use. The times those writers were writing about were substantially close to what I was writing about, and with Maxwell, both the time and certainly the place was the same. I did not go looking for a style. I just knew that this novel demanded plain style.

This is an intergenerational novel, dealing with four generations, all told, counting George's son. Ultimately, whose story is this?

It's Karl Schumpeter's story. It's the story not just of Karl, but of his impact on his grandson and, indirectly, on his great grandson. It's told through the lens of George, but it's Karl's story.

What can you tell us about the river up in the North Woods that is so important in the novel? It has no name. Is it a real or a mythical river?

Well, it is a real river, the Pere Marquette, where I have a fishing cabin. However, I couldn't use it by name in the novel because it would have been anachronistic. The period of logging there doesn't historically match that of the novel.

You also don't use very many dates in this novel, and you have to infer the time periods from the context of the narrative. Was that intentional?

Yes. I know when things are taking place, but I didn't date them, because when you are living experiences, you don't date them. And because there is a periodicity to the stories. Elements repeat themselves. The thing I was trying to do, structurally, was to make the story have a kind of rhythm, rather than having years, which would have gotten in the way of people's appreciating the rhythms of repetition.

And the natural cycles of rising and falling, catching and releasing, of attempting to catch and being rescued from losing the catch – all kinds of fishing language and imagery throughout. I'm thinking, too, of how you use that when young Karl is on the grain futures floor. Are you a fly fisherman yourself, and were you conscious of that?

Yes, and yes. And the grain flowing through this place like water. All of that. When I said I found some interesting imagery in Frank Norris' *The Pit*, it was that. He uses water imagery to describe some aspects of what happens at the Board of Trade, and since water imagery was playing a very big part of what I was writing, it was delightful to find something to which I could allude that had a resonance, and fit the pattern of my novel.

I was very struck by the mystical and metaphorical power of the language and imagery of fly casting and the way you use it in this novel.

Well, it's a very meditative experience, very close to nature. You're immersed in the water and feeling the force of the water while you're trying to imitate something from nature, and it's a very difficult thing to do

so it requires total concentration. I guess to someone who doesn't fly fish this might sound like bunkum, but it isn't. It puts one into a meditative frame of mind, trying to cast a fly upon the waters.

Well, it's in the water that Karl Schumpeter first feels "the dark center of things," and then recognizes it again at Verdun, in prison, and finally with what happens with his brother Fritz. It is a Zen-like recognition that is one of the sources of his great happiness – a recognition that dark and light, death and life, are intertwined, that each of them exists in terms of the other, and are part of the ongoing natural process of things.

Yes, Karl learns, among other things, to take pleasure in the ordinary, and he accepts the great cycles that he can't control, and in the acceptance, he finds a path through which he can be happy. He goes up to the town cemetery before sunrise and sunset on occasion and marks the days and times that the sun's rays cross over certain tombstones. It is his personal Stonehenge. He accepts it all in the profoundest way, not as a stoic would, not through the denial of the darkness, or the denial that it affects him. He just accepts that it is an inherent part of life, and recognizes that these cycles are going to happen, that they are larger than him, and he accepts that, too.

Speaking of darkness of another kind, where did you get the character of Harley Ansel, Karl's nemesis? He is surely one of the best rendered villains I have encountered in a novel in a long time!

Well, that's a good question. Of course there was a person who prosecuted my grandfather, and my mother certainly saw him as a great villain. I didn't however have any evidence that he was a villain, at all. But as the character developed, I felt that this person ought to have a personal animus that drives him. In other words, why is it that everyone else in town admires Karl for what he's done [to try and save their deposits in his bank], but this one man insists on putting him in jail? I asked myself this question, and a character emerged as I was working on it, a person who had a personal reason to hate Karl, because Karl had taken the person he wanted to be his wife. Even though she was never his to have. And when that hatred is combined with Karl's misconduct, it gave him the opening to wreak his vengeance upon him and prosecute him.

Which was nothing compared to the misdeeds that were going on in Ansel's life, as it turns out.

And that often happens, doesn't it, with profoundly vengeful and self-righteous people? That they are attacking behavior that they find in themselves?

There are also several very strong women characters in this novel. Where did they come from and how did you perceive their place in the novel as you were telling the story?

All of them just presented themselves, and Christina was a particular surprise to me. She emerged as a character that I very much didn't know from life. But she was just a force almost as soon as I introduced her, and she just got more and more interesting, complicated and intriguing to me as the story went on. Where Luella came from I'm not sure, either. I wanted to have at least a few grace notes of the radicalism of the time and so initially she took the direction she did because of that, but in the course of the writing she became much more than part of a grace note on the story. I really like the character of Luella. A very earthy, very solid person.

Could we talk about Karl's relationship with his younger brother Fritz, his unconditional acceptance of him, who is not worthy of that kind of acceptance?

He feels protective of his brother. The two of them grew up in a household dominated by a very difficult father, and he is just inured to this role of the protective big brother. And it just doesn't stop. Also, remember that family relationships are very important to Karl in every respect, they're of the essence, and one of the sources of his happiness. But the other side of that is that his relationship with his brother helped destroy him.

Well, I was puzzled by the incident in which Karl and Christina go up into the cemetery at night, late in the novel, and Karl tells her that he is asking Fritz for forgiveness. Do you think that he has come to realize that because of his over-protectiveness and failure to make Fritz take responsibility for his actions, he was at least partly responsible for the kind of weak and fatally flawed man Fritz had become?

Of course. He becomes a wise man over time. When you write a story like this, you hope that people will get pleasure out of trying to interpret some of the complexities of human life and human motivation as they play out in a story. I think the difference between a great piece of fiction and a mediocre piece is how many prismatic refractions does the behavior of the character produce. How many ways can you understand it? How much does it reveal to you? Just one simple thing? Or does it reveal the extraordinary, rich ambiguity of human life where things mean a number of things at once, and refute the very things that they mean at the same time? So I'm delighted to hear you interpreting that moment, which I think is a critical one in the book, and it's one of those places where the depths of Karl's character presents itself.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

-- Listen to the podcast of Jack Fuller on www.unbridledbooks.com

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel? What did you have problems with, if anything? Why?
2. How would you describe the tone of the novel?
3. How many subjects and/or themes can you identify in this novel? What do they seem to have in common with each other, in your opinion?
4. Think about the settings of the novel. In what ways did you find them appropriate for illuminating, or revealing the themes of the novel, or not, and why?
5. How would you describe the characters in the novel? What roles do each of them play in developing the characters of the other characters in the novel? In developing the plot of the novel?
6. What are some of the central conflicts, or tensions in the novel? How do they support or illuminate the themes of the novel?
7. What kinds or patterns of imagery can you find in the novel? How do they move the plot and illuminate the themes of the novel? How do they rise to the level of metaphor and what in life or about the world are they metaphors for?
8. The author describes his own grandfather and, by extension, Karl, as heroes to the people of the town. We are accustomed to finding flaws in heroes – as in the tragic heroes of Shakespeare. What flaws do you find in Karl and how do they contribute to some of the troubles that befall him?
9. How would you analyze Harley Ansel? Does he remind you of anyone you know personally, or publicly? Do you find him to be a fully realized character, as opposed to a stereotype? If so, how does the author accomplish that in developing him and the story of which he is a part?

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10. Is this historical fiction?

11. How does this novel reflect current economic and other news? Does the timeliness of the novel add to its power for you as a reader?

12. How important are women characters to the unfolding of this tale?

Recommended Reading

A Season of Fire and Ice, by Lloyd Zimpel.

In the Skin of a Lion, by Michael Ondaatje.

Wolf Willow, by Wallace Stegner.

Angle of Repose, by Wallace Stegner.

So Long, See You Tomorrow, by William Maxwell.

The Pit, by Frank Norris.

An American Tragedy, by Theodore Dreiser.

A River Runs Through It, by Norman Maclean.

Fragments, by Jack Fuller.