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Works Cited: *An Alphabetical  
Odyssey of Mayhem and Misbehavior*

BRANDON R. SCHRAND

*University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London*

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Set in ITC New Baskerville by Laura Wellington. Designed by A. Shahan.

For Kelli, the strongest person I know.

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“In the days of my youth, I was told what it means to be a man.”—LED ZEPPELIN, “Good Times, Bad Times”

“A book can be like the voice of God, telling us what to think of ourselves.”—GEORGE SAUNDERS

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## Not Your Usual List of Acknowledgments

How does one come out on the other end intact? How does one survive the trappings of his own design? How does one, for instance, right such a foolish course that leads to—among other unseemly outcomes—jail (see pages 1, 52, 120 [a near miss], and 155), the wasteland of academic (college/high school) flunkydome (4, 26, 47, 69, etc.), the trough of too much drink (16, 22, 87, 88, 91, 97, 101, 119–22, 139–42, 151, etc.), the basement worlds of frat-boy sexual exploits and failed relationships (50, 51, 73–75, 89–95, 202–7, etc.), bar-crawling, deadbeat husbanddom (100–110, 119–23, 155, etc)? And when he does finally emerge as a man and not a boy, as a husband and not a lover, as a father and not a son of misbehavior, what must he acknowledge for his implausible fortune?

A lot, as it turns out, and though I won't get into all of what needs acknowledging here, I will own up to the following:

I acknowledge, for instance, that I was too much boy for too long, too easily swayed by the books that I read. Books that say you can do anything you want, consequences be damned. Just follow the stories. Stories that say you can be anyone—and that it's fine, necessary even, to live out a fiction. Stories that say you can coast all your life on charm and apology. Stories that say you will live forever.

I acknowledge, too, that the boy within isn't entirely gone, that he swims up on a daily basis asking for one more martini, a cigarette, or to gaze a moment too long on a beautiful woman. But I also have to acknowledge that in

the ongoing war of man vs. boy, the man wins. Usually. Or at the very least, the man has come to terms with the boy, his symbiote.

Finally, I acknowledge that books themselves cannot save your life. Not in any literal sense. But if I misread my ways into mayhem and misbehavior for so many years, I was able, finally, to read my way to some kind of safety. That journey is this story.

**YOUR USUAL MEMOIR/NONFICTION DISCLAIMER:** While this book is a work of nonfiction, the names and certain identifiable characteristics of people mentioned here have been changed. Some haven't been named at all, especially those who have been on the other side of the law.

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine, 1971.

Sometimes I imagine the scene from above, as if camera-shot from a helicopter. The great wash of Arizona desert, that thread of leaden highway, blots of creosote and greasewood, an arroyo, and there, near the road, the flashing lights, blues and reds, the squad cars. Zoom in and you can see three young men, boys really, handcuffed. Zoom in closer to see their faces. The one in the middle, the thin one: that's me. It's April 1992 and I'm a nineteen-year-old kid who, along with his two fraternity brothers, have just been popped for a quarter-ounce of weed. It's not that big of a deal. It's not like we were these badass drug runners or anything. We were just three fraternity boys who wanted to go for a drive and smoke a little pot and listen to The Doors, and who happened to be speeding in the wrong place at the wrong time. We had fallen into a dragnet, a nine-car police roadblock, a random screen they throw down because, evidently, there is the occasional drug-thug who runs his junk up and down those ghosted desert roads. So our bust was small time. No big whoop. Unless, of course, you happen to be just inside the Arizona state line, as we were, and learn that possession of marijuana is a felony offense. Then it's kind of a big whoop.

As I stand there in the feet-spread-out, hands up, you're-so-going-to-prison pose, hindsight storms my mind. Had I not agreed to join the joyride excursion from our small college in the red-rock desert of southern Utah to Pipe

Spring National Monument; had I not blown off my classes (as I always did) along with the assigned reading in my creative writing class—in this case, Ed Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*—I wouldn’t be here.

But I am, and there is nothing I can do to change it. So I stay quiet—too freaked out to say anything. But my friend, the one who was driving, is running his mouth: “You probably really get off busting people, don’t you?” he says to the cop cuffing him.

“Only when I bust people like you,” he says.

One of the police radios squawks. A desert gust lifts some dust and blows it into the road. A car passes and a little girl stares at me. We make eye contact. Her face a grainy, haunting film still. She’s maybe five and I can only imagine what she must be thinking.

She’s thinking: *bad guy*.

Soon, we’re in the car. They’re taking us in. The entire episode is surreal, and I can’t quite process it because (1) I’m stoned and (2) I’m a scared-shitless boy flung into the sudden country of men and consequence. Things become more surreal as the squad car rolls into a sandy parking lot outside of a courthouse-cum-mobile home in Moccasin, Arizona. Inside, we are handcuffed to metal folding chairs in the living room. Cheap cream draperies hang down to the gray shag carpet, and the wood paneling darkens the room. The judge, who, evidently, is also a farmer, stomps in through the kitchen, removes his rubber irrigation boots, and sits before us at a card table in his tube socks. He’s a paunchy man with thinning gray hair. An American flag and an Arizona state flag flank the rickety table. He shoves his glasses up the bridge of his nose and picks through some papers on the table before him. “Where’d you boys drive from?” he asks without looking up from the documents before him.

“Cedar City,” my friend says miserably.

“We’re students, there,” I say, “at SUU.” This detail seems important to me, a detail that might suggest a different story. And yet, once I start speaking, my voice wanders apologetically.

“My grandson goes there,” he says and looks up. He tells us his grandson’s name and we’re shocked and relieved because we actually know him, because we are in the same fraternity. It’s a small and occasionally coincidental world, and we feel the weight lift a little.

“Possession of marijuana in the state of Arizona is a felony offense.” He looks at us. It’s unclear if it’s a statement or a question, and because we’re stoned and under arrest, we look at him blank faced, and nod.

He takes his glasses off, pockets them, and says, “Listen: in your case, I’m willing to drop it to a class-B misdemeanor.” Then he adds some stiff lines about how if he ever sees us again, he will throw the book at us, and all the rest. And because we’re boys, scared and stoned, we spew forth with all kinds of bobble-headed assurances, the whole, *We-sure-have-learned-our-lesson!* spiel.

In the end, we are fined four hundred dollars apiece and released on our own recognizance. The drive home is a long and sobering ride. We speak very little save some urgent promises that we will *never*—under *any fucking circumstances*—tell *anyone* (and that includes girlfriends, yo!) what had happened.

What happened in Moccasin stays the fuck in Moccasin.  
Word.

That previous fall, I had fled my hometown of Soda Springs, Idaho, for Southern Utah University. It’s beautiful country, and its beauty made attending class difficult. Plunk down the sagebrush-born, cow-shit-on-his-shoes, first-generation college kid in beautiful scenery inhabited by beautiful girls and be amazed that he ditches his classes. He doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the sky because he is a nineteen-year-old boy who has confused the wondrous burdens of independence for manhood, or something like it.

He hasn’t read *Desert Solitaire* and as a partial result, he’ll fail the class. But instead of selling the book back like his classmates, he keeps it. Keeps it because he thinks he’ll read it one day (and

he will). He hangs onto it, too, because verdicts are falling like hammers from a dark sky. Academic transcript as verdict. Criminal record as verdict. Each of them adding up to the story of man he never dreamed of becoming. Keep the books. Hold on to the good stories.

It is easy now to see how frantic my desert isolations were, and how the dope and the booze and the girls helped to assuage the pains of the boy who wasn't yet man enough to name them.

Brinley, Bertrand R. *The Mad Scientists' Club*.  
New York: Scholastic, 1965.

When I was eleven and in that sunset year of childhood when it took actual concentration to discern the diaphanous line between daydreams and reality, when the stories I read so fully colored my day-to-day loafing in rural Idaho that I seldom knew where the page ended and the world began, I picked up a particular book about a gang of goofy kids whose lives I wanted to be my own so badly that it left me aching in the joyous way books often leave us: high, yet abandoned somehow. The feeling, when you have it, is tactile and intoxicating. It is like love or victory or surrender.

Set in the nostalgic and quaint town of Mammoth Falls, *The Mad Scientists' Club* centers on a group of boy-geniuses whose singular occupation was to hatch harebrained schemes to save their town (or themselves) from one kind of danger or another. Led by Jeff Crocker and the bespectacled Henry Mulligan (the main brain), the club met daily in their headquarters, which was outfitted in the loft of Jeff Crocker's barn. They had an in-house laboratory complete with microscopes and vials of solutions and compounds. They had telescopes. Transmitters. Tool boxes. Plenty of books. And endless days to fill. It was a world that to me felt actual, a realm whose cinematic stories stamped my imagination, and I never wanted it to end.

So I formed my own Mad Scientists' Club. I enlisted five of the smartest kids in my school. I secured a workspace

in the basement of the old hotel and café my family owned (plus I had claimed a stone clubhouse whose former life had been an aboveground root cellar). I bought a telescope (rather, I deemed a shoebox filled with hundreds of my grandmother's cigarette coupons, which were enough to get the telescope from the Raleigh-Bel-Air merchandise catalog). I gathered tools, rope, pocket knives, drafting paper, pencils, protractors, a Commodore VIC-20, walkie-talkies, everything. We were in business. I called the meeting to order in the dank recesses of our basement, explained my intentions, my conception of what would surely be summer after summer of endless adventure. But the first meeting seemed forced and stilted.

"Like, what do you want to do?" a shaggy-haired kid asked.

"I'm bored," said another.

And another, who wrinkled his nose and waved his hand through the air, said, "Who beefed?"

In seconds, we all bolted from the table, toppling our chairs in the escape.

The attentions of eleven-year-old boys are often upended by that which is either sacred or profane, by either boobs or farts, or candy and cigarettes.

Ultimately, few if any of the ideas had legs, but the short list of agreed-upon projects looked something like this:

**Build a small, unmanned rocket.** We had started with some basic blueprints that involved an old water heater I salvaged from our basement, an oxygen tank my grandfather used on account of his emphysema, a sledgehammer, and a football helmet (for safety). The project, though, never got off the ground, so to speak.

**Hack into the NORAD defense system mainframe using the Commodore VIC-20.** We spent hours in front of the "computer"—a keyboard hooked into a television set—running any number of commands that would, we were sure, destabilize global defense centers everywhere. We typed

words like NORAD and *missile* and *defense* and *top secret*, and for each entry we jabbed into the keyboard, the television screen spat back its unwavering response: SYNTAX ERROR.

**Build a satellite that will intercept alien communications.** I remember monkeying around with a coffee can, some parts from my Erector Set, and some speaker wire, but the project never lived past a crude prototype, and we never intercepted anything but an all-Spanish radio station (which was cool) and dust motes.

I was so taken with the club and its promising future that I bought T-shirts and had Mrs. Jensen at Keith's department store affix three felt iron-on letters—"M.S.C."—on each shirt. "They're for my club," I told her. "We're scientists," I said working my bubble gum. She smiled, nodded, rang up my order, and bagged my shirts. I unwadded some bills, got my receipt, and pumped my bike home through the summer air.

But nothing—not monogrammed T-shirts, not cloud-high ideas, or the books that inspired them—could prolong that age and that time, and soon the inevitability of girls or other tinsel distractions had eclipsed the Mad Scientists' Club, and that line between daydreaming and the actual world widened in a way that was both liberating and cruel.