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## My Travels Down Two Abbie Roads

**Jonah Raskin. *For the Hell of It: The Life and Times of Abbie Hoffman*.  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996**

**Larry Sloman. *Steal This Dream: Abbie Hoffman and the Countercultural Revolution*.  
New York: Doubleday, 1998**

by  
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Between Marty Jezer's *Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel* (1992), Jack Hoffman's *Run Run Run: The Lives of Abbie Hoffman* (1996), Jonah Raskin's *For the Hell of It: The Life and Times of Abbie Hoffman* (1996) and Larry Sloman's *Steal This Dream: Abbie Hoffman and the Countercultural Revolution* (1998), one would think Abbie Hoffman was the iconic figure of the 1990s instead of, as Jezer's cover jacket calls him, "a symbol of the activist sixties." Yet at the dawn of the new millennium it would seem that Abbie Hoffman still fascinates us to no end, although he left us ten years ago.

With an ample selection of texts to choose from, it seemed that Raskin's and Sloman's texts offered the best possibility for an interesting comparison. Raskin's text is the "scholarly" Abbie Hoffman biography. Raskin, the Chair of Communications Studies at Sonoma State University, had his text published by an academic press (University of California) and commissioned a foreword by eminent historian Eric Foner. Sloman, on the other hand, is not an academic. The former Executive Editor-in-Chief of *National Lampoon* and *High Times* had his Hoffman biography published through a mainstream, commercial publishing house (Doubleday), and the foreword to his text was written by eminent radio "shock-jock" Howard Stern.

Yet while these authors appear to be diametric opposites on the surface, further investigation reveals that they have more in common than simply being Abbie Hoffman's biographers. Both Raskin and Sloman were children of the 1960s, running in the same circles as Hoffman and close enough to the Yippie leader to call him a friend. These two denizens of New York's Lower East Side both saw Abbie for the first time in 1967 and both include personal reminiscences which add a great deal to their respective texts. In

examining the two books, it can be argued that one is simply the "path not taken" version of the other.

Raskin and Sloman tell the same "story," as it were. They recount the same events in the life of the same man. They both interviewed over two hundred individuals, many of them being the same people, in creating their respective texts (including Raskin's interview of Sloman for *For the Hell of It*). What separates the texts, then, is not radical differences in the background of the authors, the subject matter, the sources, or the fact that Sloman's biography is nearly 200 pages longer than Raskin's; rather, the variance comes down to a question of style, which, in fact, makes all the difference in the world.

Raskin's text lives up to its billing. It provides an extremely detailed biography of Abbie Hoffman, beginning with the Yippie leader's birth in 1936 and following him to his death in his turkey coop-turned-home in 1989. Along the way, Raskin's tireless research efforts reveal themselves as he reconstructs Abbie's proto-deviant behavior as a youth in Worcester, Massachusetts, his school-age hijinks, sexual antics, and squabbles with his father. He provides vivid images of Abbie as a college student and athlete at Brandeis University and recounts Hoffman's introduction to the protest scene as a graduate student at the University of California-Berkeley. As he tracks Hoffman's rise to countercultural hero, burning money in New York, attempting to levitate the Pentagon, and being indicted in Chicago (to name a few iconic moments), Raskin weaves a compelling historical account of the era, writ large, as well as a first rate biography. Skillfully placing Abbie within events, instead of a vacuum, allows for a contextualized offering which in many respects captures the tenor of the times. Yet while he writes an admirable biographical history of Abbie Hoffman that brings forth the essence of the Vietnam era, Raskin fails to capture fully the spirit of Abbie himself.

Raskin consciously notes that he was daunted by the task of writing a biography, especially that of Abbie Hoffman. He relates his troubling task of sorting through the reminiscences of "more than 250 people," some of whom "made up tales... offered accounts of Abbie [he] was unable to verify... [and were sometimes given by individuals with] axes to grind" (260). Moreover, Raskin warns against taking Abbie's own autobiography, *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, too seriously, calling the text "the most misleading of all his books" (265). Raskin reveals himself to be the consummate historian, tirelessly researching the truth, sifting through conflicting reports, in an effort to write a definitive biographical piece. While this might be the historically-correct way of chronicling the history of Abbot Howard Hoffman, it is not necessarily the manner which best suits the man who stated "I've created myself out of left-wing literature, sperm, licorice and a little chicken fat" (259).

Larry "Ratso" Sloman's text is more along the lines of the biography Abbie would have wanted. While no one can definitively speak for the deceased Hoffman, *Steal This Dream* is crafted in a much more of a "for the hell of it" style than Raskin's text. Bucking the standard literary format, Sloman's account of the life of Abbie Hoffman is written in the style of an oral biography. Over four hundred pages, Sloman tells Hoffman's story through short interviews with "Abbie's friends, Abbie's enemies, and people who fell into both these categories" (6). These short vignettes are tied together only by timelines which affirm the continuity of the tale, and a few interspersed literary accounts and well-placed documents. In short, Sloman offers a mosaic-style history of the Yippie-hero, pieced together with a piece of Jerry Rubin here, a sliver of Timothy Leary there, a colorful bit of Anita Hoffman, and a fragment of Grace Slick. This method makes for a refreshingly different and decidedly engaging biography which, like Abbie himself, bucks convention to forge a new trail to truth.

While the literary style of *Steal This Dream* may sound like a favorite 1990s whipping-boy, the "sound bite," it does justice to the 1960s whipping-boy and television sound bite pioneer that Hoffman was. While chronological and factual, Sloman's book begs the question, "which facts are true?" *Steal This Dream* constantly forces the reader to consider how much we can really know—not only about the life and times of Abbie Hoffman, but about history, writ large. The problem arises again and again in sequences such as the following recollections of the interaction between Abbie and his son America in the summer of 1977:

Stew Albert: *He didn't hit the kid or anything like that, but he certainly didn't make [a]merica seem like a welcome guest in his house.*

Mayer Vishner: *[Abbie] loved the kid [america]... [h]e really taught him he could do anything. ... [I]t was terrific, the way they were together.*

America Hoffman: *Of course my dad would abuse me... He would try to teach me ball and he'd throw the ball at me really hard. ... It would hit me in the head and I'd go "Owww, I don't want to do no more anymore." Then when he'd get real mad he'd say, "...You've been lazy pretending you were sick... you never play with the other kids. ...And he'd drag me to play with all these older kids... they'd just kick me around the field. I'd think maybe I could get some protection from him... but then he'd be out there watching like "Good game" (345).*

Sloman's interviews make us painfully aware of how little we can know about history when we cannot even get a straight story about a well-documented media figure of the very recent past, who left behind so many witnesses. Sloman asks us: who do we believe? Surely America would know best; except his statements often seem to be accompanied by the harsh sounds of a grinding ax. But does that make them untrue? Could Vishner really know better? Maybe. And what of Albert? Thus, *Steal This Dream* becomes a compilation of over 200 biographies of Abbie Hoffman—a fact which might cause Raskin to re-evaluate Abbie's autobiography and just what it means to be misleading.

While Raskin may be criticized for taking the staid, professional historian's approach to Hoffman's biography, his academically-inclined style does produce two important textual elements that are entirely lacking in Sloman's biography: a bibliography and bibliographic essay. While insightful and helpful to the Vietnam-era scholar, Raskin's well-written bibliographic essay, which addresses many of the tribulations inherent to producing a biography, is overshadowed by his exhaustive and penetrating bibliography. While Sloman's text is interview-driven, and aimed at a more popular market than Raskin's, the utter lack of a bibliography is troubling to the scholar and leaves nagging questions as to further reading.

Another supporting literary component, but one that appears in both texts, is the list of interviewees. While Raskin's list is slightly more lengthy, Sloman's form again triumphs over Raskin's function. While Raskin opts for an alphabetical listing of persons interviewed, Sloman constructs a "list [of] everyone who was interviewed... placed at the place or event at which he or she met Abbie Hoffman." Whereas Raskin's listing is likely to be skipped or, at best, skimmed, Sloman's time-line listing cannot be overlooked, lest one miss gems such as:

*In Worcester, he did drugs with: Marty Carey*

*Susan Carey*

*And divorce proceedings in Worcester were handled by: Bob Weihrauch*

*Seymour Weinstein*

*and in Paris with Anita conceived: america Hoffman (xii, xvi).*

While one may conclude that Sloman's *Steal This Dream* stole this review, this is not totally the case. Sloman's text, interesting as it may be, is more suited for the Abbie-phile than the Hoffman beginner. Sloman takes for granted a great deal of background information and knowledge of countercultural players and events, whereas Raskin explains a great deal more. Newcomers to Hoffman would benefit from reading Raskin's methodical history before Sloman's revolutionary biography. For those well-acquainted with the Yippie figure, as well as those interested in exploring oral history and alternative biographical styles, Sloman's text will offer more to the reader and embrace a bit of Hoffman's rebellious style.