



Abel's Island

William Steig

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Abel's place in his familiar, mouse world has always been secure; he had an allowance from his mother, a comfortable home, and a lovely wife, Amanda. But one stormy August day, furious flood water carry him off and dump him on an uninhabited island. Despite his determination and stubborn resourcefulness--he tried crossing the river with boats and ropes and even on stepping-stones--Abel can't find a way to get back home. Days, then weeks and months, pass. Slowly, his soft habits disappear as he forages for food, fashions a warm nest in a hollow log, models clay statues of his family for company, and continues to brood on the problem of how to get across the river--and home. Abel's time on the island brings him a new understanding of the world he's separated from. Faced with the daily adventure of survival in his solitary, somewhat hostile domain, he is moved to reexamine the easy way of life he had always accepted and discovers skills and talents in himself that hold promise of a more meaningful life, if and when he should finally return to Mossville and his dear Amanda again.

Abel's Island Details

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From Reader Review Abel's Island for online ebook

Owen Curtsinger says

just the bee's knees

Elliott says

“How deeply one felt when alone,” wrote William Steig of his protagonist, Abelard Hassam di Chirico Flint, from the Newberry Honors book Abel’s Island. I had grown up loving Steig’s books (everything from Sylvester and the Magic Pebble to Dr. DeSoto to Pete’s A Pizza, this was my older son’s favorite and we had to make him into a pizza just the way Pete’s parents did).

Somehow, despite my admiration and love for his work, I never read Abel’s Island. Since it was a dreary, rainy Sunday afternoon yesterday, I took the book down from the shelf and became lost within its wonderful pages.

Steig’s use of language (I love when children’s authors use words that a child might be unfamiliar with, such as verdure, so that the child can learn and add new words to their vocabularies. It was always one of my favorite ways to learn new words as a kid. I used to write the words down in a notebook and then go and look them up later in a dictionary), along with his glorious illustrations, drew me in to the story in a way that far surpasses his other books I read. It did not take me long to realize this was the perfect tonic to a rainy afternoon. It tells the story of Abel, a mouse who’s lived a safe and secure life. He and his wife Amanda decide to have a picnic when they’re caught in a rain storm and, when he attempts to rescue his wife’s scarf, poor Abel is washed away in flood waters where he ends up on an uninhabited island.

This book is part rodent Robinson Crusoe, as well as being an odyssey no less than Homer’s. As we watch this once pampered mouse learn to adapt and survive on the island, we are also given these wonderfully introspective passages:

“Somewhere out there, in the night sky-and it could only be night-were the glittering stars, and among them his, the one he had always known. This star, his, millions of miles away, was yet closer than Amanda, because if he had the will and the strength to get up, uncover his window, and look out, he could see it. He knew, therefore, that it existed. But as for Amanda, father, mother, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and the rest of society and the animal kingdom, he had to believe they were there, and it was hard to have this faith. As far as he really knew, he himself was the only, lonely, living thing that existed, and in his coma of coldness, he was not so sure of that.”

It’s an absolutely beautiful piece of writing. Like any great writer, Steig does not write down to his reader, even his young readers. He offers them more than just a survival and adventure story, but one that reveals the inner life of this mouse. Anthropomorphism is nothing new to children’s literature (in fact, many of my favorite children’s books such as those by E.B. White, Beatrix Potter, A.A. Milne, and Kenneth Grahame use this technique to give animals human qualities) and Abel is a deeply and wonderfully written example of this at its best. The reader sees him go through a gamut of emotions and feelings: from loneliness to fear to curiosity to pondering about not only his exterior landscape but his interior one as well, often connected.

In one passage, Steig writes:

“Rain caused one to reflect on the shadowed, more poignant parts of life—the inescapable sorrows, the speechless longings, the disappointments, the regrets, the cold miseries. It also allowed one the leisure to ponder questions unasked in the bustle of brighter days; and if one were snug under a sound roof, as Abel was, one felt somehow mothered, though mothers were nowhere around, and absolved of responsibilities.”

What I love about this book is that not only does it offer the reader a character who ponders and wonders, thinks and questions, but it allows the reader to do so as well. Steig invites the reader to do more than simply follow a story from beginning to end, but to meditate on nature and identity. In solitude, this mouse begins to build a new understanding about the world around him and his connection to it. How many children’s books offer up such a reexamination of the meaning of one’s life?

Abel’s Island is a thoughtful, philosophical book as well as an adventure story and it manages to do both well. At one point Abel even finds a copy of the novel Sons and Daughters. His heart races at finding such a discovery because it meant that there were civilized creatures somewhere on the island. Thrilled by this finding, he immediately sets to reading it and discovers that this is an epic tale of bears. After reading a chapter about the war that has broken out between bears, Abel begins to reflect not only on the book but about his own life and his relationship to an owl on the island:

“It made Abel wonder about civilization. But, come to think of it, the owl, who was not civilized, was pretty warlike too. The hero, Captain Burin, was writing home from the battlefield to the one he had waltzed with in the first chapter, the one he loved. It was also winter in the story, and a drunken sergeant was saying things that were foolish and wise and funny – he wished he were hibernating instead of warring.”

William Steig was described as a curious man, who was fascinated by people and how they interacted with each other, with his natural surroundings, and continued to embrace his childhood and a child-like sense of seeing the world. All of this translated into the worlds he created in his books.

When he was once asked what his ideal life would be, he replied, “I often ask myself, ‘What would be an ideal life?’ I think an ideal life would be just drawing.” He paused before adding, “I’m lucky, I’ve been able to do something I loved all my life.”

And we are lucky that William Steig was able to do what he loved to do and we got to benefit from being able to enter the books he created, especially Abel’s Island, which offers us both grit and grace. If you haven’t read this delightful masterpiece, then I highly recommend that you rush out to your local library (especially on a rainy day) and curl up in your favorite chair and cherish the time it takes to read this splendid, slender volume either to yourself or to a child. You won’t regret it.

Steven Peck says

This is my favorite book of all time. Favorite. Number 1. Should be scripture.

Amazon.com Review

One summer day, newlywed mice Abel and Amanda are out for a picnic in the woods when they are caught in a sudden storm--a "full-fledged, screaming hurricane" to be precise. As they take refuge in a cave, a wind scoops up Amanda's scarf, and Abel foolishly lunges from safety to retrieve it. So begins William Steig's

Newbery Honor Book Abel's Island, the ensuing adventures of this rather foppish mouse as he comes head to head with nature. Amazingly, Abel is swept up in a stream, then a river, then eventually marooned on an island (about 12,000 tails long). He is sure that his rescue is imminent: "It's certainly gotten around that Abelard Hassam di Chirico Flint, of the Mossville Flints, is missing," the society mouse speculates. But he is not so lucky. What will this intelligent, imaginative rodent do to get off the island and back to his beloved Amanda? He busies himself with finding ways to get to shore (including bridges, boats, catapults, stepping stones, and gliders); figuring out what he should eat (everything from mulberries to roasted seeds); and investigating where he should take shelter (in a rotten log). As the weeks and months go by, he misses his books, his paintings, his comfortable stuffed chair, his stylish clothes (now damp, torn, and lumpy), but above all his precious wife Amanda, whom he thinks about constantly. As the mouse faces his new life Robinson Crusoe-style, Abel discovers what it's like to be in tune with the natural world as well as his true nature

Carin says

Oh how I loved this book! The surprising thing isn't that it got a Newberry Honor Medal, but that it didn't win! Abel is a charming young mouse, a bit of a fop and a dandy, who is on a picnic with his lovely new wife when a storm kicks up, it becomes more like a hurricane, and Abel is separated from his wife, and eventually blown into a river and carried downstream. He washes up on an island. He has several excellent ideas about how to try to get off the island which he implements immediately, never moping and feeling sorry for himself. They are all unsuccessful. And while he is dealing with his new life, he discovers he is much more handy and resourceful than ever previously thought possible, but also he finds a hidden talent. Back home he was a somewhat useless, wealthy mouse with nothing really to do but dress nicely and fawn over his wife, but he is very happy that he'll be going back with a vocation. The comparisons to Robinson Crusoe for the preteen set are perfect, and I love how William Steig never talks down to children (in fact, uses some 25-cent words from time to time!)

Mali says

I had forgotten this book existed until I stumbled across it at the library (looking for a Rebecca Stead book in Children's instead of Teen/YA). But as soon as I saw the cover, it all came back to me: I loved this story of a mouse lost and stranded on a small island; I loved pouring over the pictures. The cover art showing Abel perched in his birch captures the mood of peace and longing that runs through the book. It's even more magical once you read the book and know that he is talking to his own personal star. Like Steig's *The Magic Pebble*, this is a book about isolation and separation; Abel is stranded for a full year, missing his wife and other family. He makes grand attempts to get back home, but at the same time builds a new home on the island, and that is where the beauty comes from. Abel learns to commune with nature, and he embraces his own nature. He recalls childhood memories, learns his own strengths, and finds the artist buried inside himself.

We don't learn the answers to key questions like what his wife did while he was away, and whether she really felt the mystical messages he sent. But we really don't need to know; we just know he's home. Those unanswered questions bothered me more as an adult than they did when I was young. When I was young, I remember being slightly puzzled that the main character was an adult and married -- maybe that's why questions about the wife didn't bother me -- but the adventures enhanced me all the same. I'm giving the book 5 stars because I know how much I loved it as a child, and it is a wonderful read for an adult, too.

Sharon says

Abel's Island was one of my favorite books as a kid, and one of the few that I actually managed to keep my copy of into adulthood. I just finished reading it with my 7 year old daughter and found it every bit as delightful as I remembered. Abel is charming. His exploits during his year stranded on the island are compelling and serve as good lessons in perserverance, inner strength, and the importance of following your heart. Not to mention, this book is an excellent vocabulary-builder!

Mimi says

“Abel's Island” is a heartwarming, delightful story. Abel is the Robinson Crusoe of the mouse set! This novel is the tale of how Abel is able to survive alone on a deserted island using his wits, his instincts, creative thinking, and information gained from books he's read. What I liked is that no matter what obstacles he faced, Abel never gives up trying to get off the island and to get back to his wife. Mr. Steig's illustrations are an added bonus; they give the reader a clear visualization of Abel's resourceful efforts to return home and also of his day-to-day life on the island.

I've long been a fan of William Steig's stories. Somehow I never got around to this book. Mr. Steig has a way of telling a tale that captures a child's interest and keeps his/her attention. His stories are unique, creative, and mystical. He never talks down to children and always includes words that challenge them. (There were even some words in this book that challenged me, such as “equinoctial rains” and “taboret.”) When my son was younger and not an enthusiastic reader, William Steig's books were always ones he was eager to read.

This story is fun to read and I highly recommend it.

Rebecca says

Remembering how much I adored this book in about the 5th grade.

Phil Jensen says

I was afraid this book would be about a mouse on an island.

I was amazed that this book is about a mouse on an island. And it's great.

Sometimes, a story is so beautiful that it becomes mythic. The Old Man and the Sea is about more than fishing. The Stranger is about more than bad funeral etiquette. And *Abel's Island* is about more than a foppish mouse who gets stuck on an island. It's about inner strength. It's about persistence and determination. It's about finding joy in hard times. Most of all, it's about an enduring love for someone who is absent.

I would also argue that *Abel's Island* is an advertisement for clear, direct prose and a gimmick-free approach to storytelling. Behold:

By the end of the month of August he knew he was an inhabitant of the island, whether he liked it or not. It was where he lived, just as a prison is where a prisoner lives... He thought constantly of Amanda.

Her image was in his mind, as clear as life sometimes, and he smiled with wistful tenderness, remembering her ways. Amanda was dreamy. It often seemed she was dreaming the real world around her, the things that were actually happening...

Wherever he went about the island, he wore Amanda's scarf around his neck, the ends tied in a knot. He would not leave it in the log. (pp. 42-43)

Amanda says

A simple picnic with his wife turns badly when they find themselves caught in a rainstorm! Leaving his wife Amanda to find her scarf Abel is swept away to an island and marooned! Now this socialite mouse must find a way back to the mainland and his beloved Amanda.

First the task of getting through the night! Abel builds shelter, finds food, investigates his surroundings, and tries to find a way to get back.

A simple kids book, this was my favorite story growing up. Follow Abel as he learns to live in his new surroundings.

Reviews:

"With inimitable style, Steig tells the story of a mouse, Abelard Hassam di Chirico Flint, who gets swept away in a driving rainstorm while rescuing his wife's scarf and winds up stranded on a river island for a year. Abel isn't just a mouse. He's a fastidious Edwardian dandy whose inherited wealth ensures the leisurely comforts he takes such pleasure in. But Abel's high-toned life of leisure conceals a soul full of true grit: once faced with the necessity of surviving. Abel rises to the challenge." --Starred, Booklist

"There was no trouble in locating the best book of the year, William Steig's *Abel's Island*...Abelard is...resourceful, despairing, persevering and, eventually, triumphant. And so is Mr. Steig triumphant in the quality of his prose--nor has he stinted on the quality and quantity of his illustrations." --George A. Woods, The New York Times

Amber says

Abel is a happily married mouse. When a Picnic lunch that he and his wife Amanda have become rained out,

they quickly seek for shelter. Before Abel can retrieve his wife's scarf, he is quickly swept away by a raging river which sends him toward an island. Abel is determined to get home and back to his wife but will he succeed? Read and find out for yourself.

This was a pretty good animal fantasy and survival story. I loved the illustrations in this too. If you like these types of stories, then definitely look for this book at your local library and wherever books are sold.

Havebooks Willread says

This adventurous tale of a dandy mouse who was swept off to an island during a big storm is filled with description, delightful vocabulary (somnolent! seriously--what other children's book uses that word?!), and examples of perseverance and diligence. The children loved his many ideas and attempts to escape the island and get back to his beloved wife and I loved his ingenuity and can-do spirit. I also appreciated his resourcefulness in scavenging food sources due to his former reading experiences which helped him identify edible plants (I never miss a plug for lifelong learning and the benefits of reading!)

As he does whatever it takes to survive, escapes predators (by building a spear--how much fun is that?!), and discovers his life's vocation (sculpture), Abel grows in confidence and character. "The Abel who was leaving was in better fettle, in all ways, than the Abel who had arrived in a hurricane, desperately clinging to a nail" (104).

I will mention that there are a couple things I didn't particularly like, but that's the joy of reading aloud--I can skip over those parts. He met a frog who used expressions like "Holy Bloater" and "shucks" that I didn't read. There was also a part when he found the feather of an owl who was trying to eat him and he chanted incantations against the owl with the feather but it provided an opportunity to discuss it. Other than that, this was a delightful story of well-crafted prose to share with our younger children.

I will also insert that the illustrations are quite fun and this book received a Newbery Honor award in 1977.

Missy says

I love William Steig! This book is another good one for reading aloud to kids. Its a chapter book with short chapters and plenty of illustrations. The pages are filled with lots of action to hold interest (it's a story of a mouse who gets marooned on a deserted island), but it's written with excellent language and vocabulary. It was rare that my son didn't ask me to read "JUST ONE MORE CHAPTER!" while we went through this book together.

Abner says

A lovely little book and one I had never read as a kid. Highlights the power of love and family and its ability to drive the will to survive.

Rachel says

My daughter just got done reading this on Monday, and she said, "oh mom, you have to read it!" So last night, I put aside the mountain of books that I am currently trying to read through and dived in. Honestly, I realized I need to do this a lot more often. It is a delight to read through, even as an adult. I loved the pictures- adult books never have pictures. :)

So, fellow adults, let's read some children's books sometimes- just for fun!

Katherine says

This was not a book I was familiar with and strangely enough it came to my attention because a character in a TV series was reading aloud from it. After googling the quote I requested a copy from my library and thoroughly enjoyed this unique story of Abel, a gentleman mouse, who spends a year stranded on an island. Lovely writing and charming illustrations.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

I loved this story. It reminded me of Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child*. When Abel the mouse finds himself washed down the stream from his house and marooned on an island, he is forced to use all his resources to find food and shelter to survive. The isolation also gives him time to reflect upon life, which, for me, was the most interesting part of the book. Like Hoban's book, *Abel's Island* is for thoughtful readers who want more than just an adventure story. Highly recommended!

Celia says

William Steig is a wonderful writer. Really, he's got a way with words. This book was recommended to me by my mom and brother. Who read it together and have continued to read most of Steig's books and altogether fallen in love with his peaceful, clean writing style and lovely stories.

This book follows Abel, a grown mouse who while picnicking with his wife, is attacked by a ferocious storm causing his wife and him to venture into a cave. His wife, who's name is Amanda, accidentally drops her scarf out of the cave and into the storm. Being the kindhearted and brave mouse that he is, Abel goes out to retrieve his wife's scarf. Only to be sucked into the storm once again and further more stranded onto an island with a cherry birch tree.

Abel, who loves the quiet "civilized" life, is quite taken aback at first about his sudden new living style. However over time he learns how to survive and both his skills and him grow. He discovers his talent and mourns the company of his family. He experiments with rafts and surviving the winter and makes a friend at last.

Abel's Island will warm your heart and sweeten you like sugar. A five star book for sure.

Shun-Sho says

How does one honestly review a Newbery Awarded book without feeling pushed into making claims that it's a book that is one of the absolute best? And yet, here is my attempt.

As you can see from my stars, I really liked the book. This Robinson Crusoe-esque mouse tale addresses issues far deeper than most young readers would be able to fully comprehend, although they would understand the general meaning and emotions. In fact, I'm unsure of the interest level a young person would have in reading this book although the question of what will happen to Abel will draw them in again and again. I do think some younger readers would really appreciate this story, especially as a simpler and less perilous precursor to books such as Hatchet or My Side of the Mountain. However, I found it to be even more compelling as an adult reader. I wish I could have the comparison of my young self reading this book to see if I would have caught as much of the depth even then.

But, I found it to be a fascinating discussion of what one will experience and have to do to psychologically survive when faced with absolute solitude, although addressed in a simpler method. And, perhaps (I have Spark Noted this thing), that's the purpose -- to introduce these topics of psychological survival and change in a non-frightening way to youth.

Lorna says

What a lovely read to foster thinking about adversity. Abel, lost in a storm, finds himself far from family and friends on a deserted island with little resources. I continued to admire his positive attitude and perseverance despite the steep odds thrown at him. I think this would make a good read-aloud, but heads up about one scene where Abel gets drunk on wine (!!??) and another where he "defecates". Not a problem in my head, but I'd always like to know those things ahead of time before reading it to my audience be it a classroom full of fourth graders or my seven year old!
