

Episode 64 - Steal This Book by Abbie Hoffman

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Join us as we explore one of the most controversial books by one of the greatest revolutionary writers and entertainers of all time, none other than Abbie Hoffman!

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjC64kMEiE8>

Howard Abbie Hoffman wrote 'Revolution for the hell of it' in a two week period during the aftermath of the 1968 Democratic National Convention protest in Chicago. The title was intended to reflect the flippancy of a brash kid. However, he would later feel that it still embodied the view of the time. Period. End of human nature. The title was also an attempt to shut down and demolish the critics who looked to analyze and find the explanation in an unfulfilled childhood. Negative traumas or repressed libidinal instincts. He did not sign the book with his own name. Team, a fact that his publisher would later tell him, would have most certainly helped him sell more than 50,000 additional copies. Instead, Hoffman scrawled on the cover what he deemed to be the most popular word in the English language. It was the only word including love, charity, equality, peace. Or any ISM he felt was non corruptible. That word was free. His next book, however, which would bear his own name, would become his most controversial.

Welcome to House of words, a podcast about writers, revolutionaries and stealing. I'm your host, Jason Lemour Harden, and on this episode, we explore Abbie Hoffman's legendary novel 'Steal this book'.

"It's embarrassing. You try to overthrow the government and you wind up on the best sellers list."

Ever since Abbie Hoffman had written and distributed the Survival Handbook titled 'Fuck the System', some people had gone out of their way to keep him up to date on the latest rip off scams. Even as a teenager, he was fond of such information and he loved to hear about it as much as he loved to pass it on. Helped the system had essentially been the same thing, only in literary form. I want somewhere at the beach as a teen as he remembered listening attentively to a travelling guru as he demonstrated how you could fashion a clothes hanger into a tool that when pushed correctly into a telephone coin slot. Telephone coin slot a time way before cell phones kids. Anyway, this modified hanger would trigger the phone to release any money deposited, giving one free calls. And when Abbie brought this knowledge back to his local pool hall, someone showed him another trick. Watch this, the individual said as he pulled an oversized thumbtack out of a box he carried in his pocket. Expertly, he pushed the point through the telephone cord and rubbed it against the nearby metal pipe. Like magic, the dial tone signaled that the phone was engaged. Now due to hardware updates by the 60s, all of these techniques were outdated, which motivated Hoffman to update them. His philosophy concerning this was quite simple. Both the bank and the bank robber had to keep up with the times, with the prize going to whoever stayed one step ahead. Morality only seems to enter the picture. Only when individuals interact with each other, Hoffman wrote. He went on. It's universally wrong to steal from your neighbor, but once you get beyond the one to one level and to the individual against the multinational conglomerate, the federal bureaucracy, the modern plantation of Agri business, or the utility company, it becomes strictly a value judgment to decide who exactly is stealing from whom. One person's crime is another person's profit. Capitalism is licensed to steal. The government simply regulates who steals and how much. Ohh. He had always wanted to put together an outlaw handbook that would help raise consciousness on that point, while at the same time doing something about evening the score. Also there was the challenge of testing the limits of free speech.

By chance, Hoffman ran into Jason Epstein on the street. Now, Epstein had been Hoffmann's mentor at Random House during the writing of his most recent work, Woodstock Nation, and Jason asked him if he was working on anything in particular. At the time, a Hoffman told him, Jason, I'm going to write a book. No one will. Publish and Jason Epstein began laughing uncontrollably. Abby, you could ****

on paper. Someone would publish it, Jason said. And when the 1st 100,000 copies went into the stores, the back cover read. Still this book, the book sellers hit the roof. Tell them to steal from the banks, tell them to steal from the phone companies, tell them to steal from anybody, but don't tell them to steal from me the book dealers. Completed well, Random House did decide to remove the troublesome slogan for the second round of printing. Woodstock Nation went through 9 or 10 printings, some with the slogan intact, others without all depending on which side yelled the loudest. Most important, however, was that it wedded Hoffmann's appetite for trouble. Now he wanted the very troublesome slogan to be the title of the book. He reasoned that. No one could censor the book title and began with the title and the challenge in his back pocket. A year of writing lay ahead. He set off on a journey cross country, interviewing doctors fugitive Stoke dealers, draft Dodgers, private detectives, country Communalists veterans organizers and even shoplifters. Every time he met someone living on the margins, he asked about a good rip off or survival scheme. People loved to tell how they screw the establishment and were eager to talk about. Right. One day he met with the New York Media Collective, calling themselves Video Freaks and asked them if it was possible to pirate an image onto network television. Curiosity was sparked thus they bought equipment and began running tests. Then one evening, during broadcasting of the news, a couple engaging in the act of sex appeared on a number of television sets in the Soho. Three of downtown Manhattan. It worked. The media collective were spooked and scrambled. Of course, the technique they used went on to live in the pages of still this book. Then one night, a pale figure appeared and introduced to Abby a 2 inch ivory plastic cube with four prongs sticking out of one side. The mysterious figure told him that when you put the device up to a payphone, you could call for free. It wasn't the most easy device to use, but it worked. Hoffman and his group bought 100 of the devices and distributed them to movement groups around the country. Furthermore, he managed to talk the mystery figure into sharing the wiring diagrams with him. And yes, these he also printed in the book. And despite going into illegal activities, most of the sections of the book dealt with legal ones. These included how to run a cheap farm, how to set up a newspaper, how to organize a demonstration, how to perform, first aid, hitchhike, even, how to equip an apartment with furniture. And he invented many of the survival techniques. Although most were revisions of things he had learned on the street. In part, the book was a tongue in cheek parody of America's love for how to manuals as well as a way to stick it to the system. The work was rule written and edited several times in hopes of making it more simple, easier to understand and in essence making it something that could be understood by someone who had never read books before.

It had taken a lot of trouble and devotion, but after a year the book was finished. Nothing like it had ever been written. Chris Surf was his editor at Random House. But no matter how hard he tried to champion the book, Random House said no. After further consideration, knowing that it would sell. They said they would do the book, but only if Hoffman agreed to several changes. Abby then went to Jason Epstein's office and told him. But Jason, you're censoring me. Book Jason got all red and puffy. Random House does not sense a box he shot back then he said we edit that's it. Random House edits, books and despite all agreeing that the book would without a doubt make money, the publishers were too afraid of the backlash from the phone companies. Or even worse, the government. Next thing you know, 30 publishers rejected the book. Not to say that there weren't offers, it's just that they were all demanding changes. Most demanded changes concerning the title. One offer was for an unsurpassable \$40,000 in advance. If the proper changes. Were made \$40,000, then is approximately \$300,000 today, so quite more than a substantial amount. And one had to be crazy to refuse such an offer. Even Hoffman thought so. Well, lucky for him and curious minds, he was definitely crazy. In December 1970, just before he landed in jail for a few weeks following the chaos in Chicago, he met Rev Thomas King for Cade and Forcade, being the founder of an underground news service, had some minimal experience in publishing. He was interested in the book A Hoffman's two week stay at Chateau. Bill were spent finishing the books introduction while Forcade was to work on the edit. When Hoffman returned to regular society, he found that for Kate had concluded that publishing the book outside of mainstream wasn't something he was willing to do, and he demanded \$8000 from Hoffman for the two weeks he

had spent editing. Hoffman then told him where to stick it for Cade. Threatened to sue and that was that. Next on the list of potential publishers was Grove Press. They told Hoffman that if he could raise money to publish the book himself and bring them 100,000 finished copies and bear all the legal risk, they would serve as distributor. He met their offer by borrowing \$15,000 from friends to found. Pirated. Missions, layouts, designs, more loans, typesetting, pay stubs were arranged, and the ads were composed and sent out. Before long, 100,000 books packed in cartoons labeled steal. This book began making their way around the country as head of the publicity department, Hoffman. Sent copies for review. Everyone declined to review it. As head of public relations, Hoffman sent away 2000 copies to movement groups. Every underground newspaper was sent a signed letter authorizing them to reprint the entire book and sell it locally as a fundraiser. British rights were given away free to an Irish civil rights group, Scotland Yard. Not surprisingly, disapproved of that and banned the book from England. Soon there was a pirated Spanish version as well as a French Canadian edition being distributed. Free. Although the Japanese bought the rights for just \$100, they sold something close to 50,000 copies of the book back in the Good Old USA. However, half of the distributors refused to carry the book. Cartoons of books were shipped back and forth, and as a consequence, many cartoons. Were going missing. A list of bannings refuses to carry confiscations and all sorts of shady methods were used to take down the author and his book. One such instance was the Benjamin News Company in Montreal, which was raided by the Royal Canadian Police with a search and seizure warrant. Consequently, 4000 copies of steal this book. Were confiscated for the first time in history, Canada had banned the importation of a book for other reasons than pornography.

Even college Campus stores, which were a wasteland, all refused to carry the book. And adding insult to injury, even Hoffmann's alma mater, Brandeis, refused. Then came the real chaos libraries across the country banned it. Numerous meetings were held over whether or not. It should be allowed to be loaned from libraries. In Lansing, MI, the police caught two men running from a vacant building just as its doors had been blown off. A copy of the book was found on one of the men and the police in a far reaching move attempted to indict Hoffman on a conspiracy charge. Then in Grenada, a small island in the Caribbean. The Prime Minister arrested opposition leader Maurice Bishop on the charge of illegal possession of ammunition. And when the police kicked in Bishop's door, they found wouldn't be too hard to guess a copy of. Still, this book and the government claimed that this was proof of foreign involvement in a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister. And yet another incident in Oklahoma, a watchdog of the faith, filed a class. Action suit for \$1,000,000 against Hoffman for allegedly corrupting the youth and in your many case, the director of corporate security for AT&T tried to get fraud perpetrators to confess that they had come under the influence of. The book the director blamed Hoffman personally for a \$10 million increase in the number of phony credit card calls. A Hoffman was also accused of contributing to inflation because shoplifting raised prices.

The bad or sad or funny news, depending on how one chooses to view it, continue to roll in as he began receiving letters which began with; "I followed your advice and got busted. Please send me bail money." In regards to the AT&T case, they told the New York Times that a team of lawyers was researching ways to stop the book. Getting any promotion also proved difficult with the exception of a small radio station in Boston. Everyone rejected the radio commercial, which Hoffman had personally put together himself. Furthermore, the San Francisco Chronicle was the sole newspaper to publish an ad on the New York Times acceptability. Department wrote to Hoffman that the Times refused to advertise a book that advocated illegal activity, while the New York Post ironically rejected an ad, even though the book was listed for eight weeks on their paperback Best seller list. Grove Press estimated that half the books were being sold in New York City alone and that half their outlets refused to carry the book in Pittsburgh. No stores carried the book. In Philadelphia, there was only one store, and that one would charge a dollar more than the cover price. When Hoffman took reporters. On a tour there, no copies of the book could be found of the San Francisco Bay area was copied less as. Well, then there was the Doubleday chain, whose entire line of bookstores boycotted the book. No book had been met with such a boycott since Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer, which, by the way, you can learn more about

on episode 52 of House of Words Podcast, then finally. Hoffman and his book got a break when Dotson Reader wrote a glowing review of the book in the New York Times. Writing everyone in publishing and distribution and in the press who had aided and abetted the restriction of Abby Hoffman's freedom to be heard ought to be deeply ashamed. The irony is that those who refuse to publish or advertise or review or sell Hoffman's book in the name of legality are doing more damage to America's freedom. Under the law than Abby Hoffman could do with all his books. Hoffman clicked the review water check and sent it to the times as a new ad and believe it or not, the times actually refused their own review of that same review went on to embarrass a few stores, with some even buckling under the customer pressure. People actually began boycotting stores that refused to carry the book. In the end, as a last attempt to promote it, Hoffman, being head of the promotion department, decided to cross the country, appearing on talk shows, giving interviews. Abby Hoffman's experience with steal this book taught him some remarkable things about the media. He would hire a clipping service to keep track of the publicity campaign and was flabbergasted by the distortions and lies fabricated by the mainstream media in Boston. For example, Hoffman was asked what he would do if someone stole from him. He responded by saying. Well, I certainly couldn't call the local council. Who could I? And that's how it read in the Boston Globe. The Associated Press, however, had quite a different interpretation. I would call a cop, of course, the distorted translation read that translation was a big hit viral in essence, as hundreds of newspapers. Like that interpretation better than the truth, which meant that that was the story they ran with. At the time, Hoffman and his wife were living in a \$135 a month, 2 1/2 room railroad apartment on one of the worst blocks in the Lower East Side. He owned no property, not even a car, never invested a penny, never had more than a few \$1000 in the bank, struggling to support his three children. In the media, however, he was painted as a fashionable millionaire who routinely hung out with celebrities and movie stars in Uptown clubs. He had never been to. Hoffman collected scores of clippings and compiled a newspaper account made completely of lies. He had read about himself in various publications. It was quite difficult to take serious, but probably just as easy for a gullible readers to believe. In addition to all the defamation, there were other, perhaps even more harmful households as well. For example, he was categorically refused any consumer credit, just on general principle. His local supermarket went so far as to assign a special sales clerk to follow him up and down the aisles. Even when traveling, airline officials would place him into a little booth for examination and foolishly, in hindsight, Hoffman regretted having stated in his book that he knew of two foolproof ways to fly for free, but that he couldn't mention the. As a result of this, he apparently received 200 letters that began. You can trust me never to tell anyone, and all he received about 15,000 letters, most of which said that still, this book was their favorite book or asking how they could get a hold of a copy, which may lead one to wonder when. Nor, if the censors and sanction this will ever learn. According to Hoffmann's autobiography, soon to be a major motion picture, the original manuscript of style, this book wound up in the Columbia University Library. However, according to Bernard Crystal, curator of Rare books and manuscripts at Columbia University, not only don't they have the original manuscript. They don't even have a copy of the published edition as usual.

Let's end this episode with a quote from the one man revolution himself; "we were young, we were foolish, we were arrogant, but we were right."

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Steal This Wiki

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