

Steal This Book [New York Times Review from 1971]

Dotson Rader

The New York Times Book Review



By DOTSON RADER

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By Abbie Hoffman.
Co-conspirator: Izack Haber.
Accessories After the Fact: Tom Forcade and Bert Cohen.
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Hoffman has written a hip Boy Scout Handbook, a manual for survival in the counter culture.

It tells you how to get the necessary stuff for free: food, clothes, housing, transportation, medical care, even money and dope. It tells you vital things, like what not to bring to demonstration (contact lenses, ties, grass) and what to do if you are gassed, beaten up and arrested. It explains how to start an underground press, how to get in the newspapers, how to make stink bombs, procure false identification, cook Street Salad, Hog Farm Granola Breakfast, Weatherbeans and Yippie Yogurt; what towns are bad news for hitchhikers (Flagstaff, Ariz.); what boxcars to hop (ones with hydro-cushion suspension systems); how to employ the infamous "hopper-bopper method" to get a cheap ride on a Greyhound bus; and how to sell your hungry body to several universities at the same time.

In the book you also learn that you can get your very own free elk or American buffalo from the Department of the Interior, and that you can acquire cheap guns and ammunition by starting a National Rifle Association Gun Club in your parents' basement.

"Steal This Book" covers the turf from venereal disease and free movies—(did you know that you can have, just by writing a post card, a free copy of the movie, "More Fun With Parakeets"? Wow!)—to the newest techniques in the art of shoplifting, or "inventory shrink."

Dotson Rader is the author of "Government Inspected Meat" (a novel) and "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore." He is a contributing editor to *Evergreen Review* and editor of *Defiance: A Radical Review*, as it is referred to in the trade. Do you want to drive the telephone company insane or give the president of Con Edison cardiac arrest? Do you want to unravel the credit bureaus' computer tape, and take the profitability out of pay toilets? Well, "Steal This Book" tells you how.

It also tells you something remarkable about Abbie Hoffman, something about the gentleness and affection for his people that lies hidden under his public rage. It reads as if Hoffman decided it was time to sit down and advise his children on what to avoid and what was worth having in America. He says that if you want to be free, then America might kill you. You must know certain things if you are to survive. He warns of the baddies and 'meanies, the corrupt cops and lousy pushers and cheating landlords and shopkeepers and, more importantly, he warns about the crazy, sad, bent kids who will lay awful trips and deadly vibes on you, who will do you irrevocable damage. So you must be prepared. You must be on your guard. "Steal This Book" is necessary to this age. It is a book of warning and practical knowledge. It should be read by the young, for it will help them to make it through life in hip America with their mind.

Because "Steal This Book" tells you little more than the underground press has been reporting for years, because it hits hard against needle drugs and stupid violence, because it possesses its own peculiarly righteous morality, because it is not as subversive as many other books, nor as violent, say, as the speeches of Eldridge Cleaver or Senator Thurmond on the war, the attempt now being made to suppress it is all the more remarkable.

"Steal This Book" was rejected by 30 publishers. A senior editor at Random House, the first to reject the book, explained their action by saying, "How could we print a book that I wouldn't allow my 14-year-old child to read?" Other editors claimed more substantial reasons for rejection. Some stated they could not publish books that advocated illegal acts. By that logic books by Tom Paine, Karl Marx and others could not be published. Others were worried about possible Government reaction in the form of an I.R.S. inquiry. Still others took into account the probable response of booksellers plagued with rising "inventory shrinkage." Abbie Hoffman finally had to publish the book himself, through his own company, Pirate Editions (its logo shows a long-haired youth blowing up the Random House cottage). Grove Press agreed to distribute the book. Though it has sold 100,000 copies to date, the book has been subjected to various kinds of boycott since its publication April 15.

"Steal This Book" has yet to receive a single review—certainly an extraordinary reception, or rather lack of reception, for a work by major national figure. Every "straight" newspaper in the country, with

the exception of the San Francisco Chronicle, has refused to carry any advertising for the book. Gustin Reichback of the Law Commune, which represents Mr. Hoffman, stated that The New York Times Advertising Acceptability Department informed him that The Times does not take advertising for books advocating illegal acts. The reason given by FM radio stations WNEW and WCBS was that F.C.C. regulations prohibit their advertising the Hoffman book. Not one radio station in the United States has been willing to run advertising for "Steal This Book." In Canada it is even worse: the Government has banned it, released it, and banned it.

This pattern of suppression is evident in the inability of Grove Press to convince regional distributors and booksellers to handle the book. Grove reports that over two-thirds of the stores that normally handle its trade list have refused to carry "Steal This Book." In the Boston area bookstores organized a boycott against it, and in New York the Doubleday bookstore chain, among others, has declined to stock the book.

The argument can be made that the publishing, distribution and advertising history of the Hoffman book gives credence to the radical notion of repressive tolerance in the United States. What meaning do First Amendment guarantees have if the work of even major figures cannot gain access to corporate publishing, advertising and distribution networks? As Hoffman remarks in his introduction, "To talk of freedom of the press, we must talk of the availability of the channels of communication that are designed to reach the entire population... wide-spread dissemination of information is the crux of the matter. To make the claim that the right to print your own book means freedom of the press is to completely misunderstand the nature of mass society. It is like making the claim that anyone with a pushcart can challenge Safeway supermarkets, or that any child can grow up to be.

It is clear that without access to mass distribution networks, without the right to advertise, without reviews, freedom of speech and press becomes a vicious hoax. The right of freedom of press implies the right of fair and equal access to the machinery that disseminates ideas in mass society. And that right has been denied, either through cowardice or design, to Abbie Hoffman.

Speaking as an American writer, am frightened by the treatment accorded the Hoffman book by the publishing industry and the press. Everyone in publishing and distribution and in the press who has aided and abetted the restriction of Abbie Hoffman's freedom to be heard ought to be deeply ashamed. They are, as Lenin remarked in a different context, manufacturing the rope that will hang all of us. 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 American freedom under law than Abbie Hoffman could do with all his books. A kind of fearsome censorship by tacit understanding within allied industries has been established. And everyone's freedom has been lessened because of it.

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