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Nature Writing: The Creation of a Bibliography of Seminal Books

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I first became interested in the subject of nature writing after teaching the library portion of a senior seminar class, which dealt with nature writing and ecocriticism (Antalocy, 2010). Although our university library had several critical anthologies of nature writing in its collection, I did not feel as if any of them did a good job of identifying seminal texts. Some were too broad, including every popular nature writer in the English language; others too focused on a particular aspect of nature writing. As the university's English language and literature librarian, I decided I should create an annotated bibliography of seminal works to fill this niche. Immediately, I got caught up in questions of scope. Does nature writing include fiction? Poetry? Natural history or field guides? How does one draw the line between nature and science writing, if there is such a line? If I was entertaining such questions, I thought it likely that students were considering them too.

One of the first decisions I made was to focus on whole books. Critical anthologies of nature writing tend to focus on significant authors, offering shorter pieces – essays, articles, or excerpts – as representations of their work. An annotated bibliography describing monographs of nature writing would complement these anthologies. Another early decision, but a much more complicated one, was to only include books of nonfiction in my bibliography. It is too much a generalization to say that there is more truth in nonfiction than in fiction — memoirists, we've come to understand, take considerable liberties with the truth. We are also more aware that history and science texts are limited by the truth of their times and include both cultural biases and incomplete information. Possibly, we read nonfiction with more skepticism than we did several decades ago. In terms of nature writing, however, I think the old contract between readers and writers of nonfiction still holds. Readers expect to find literal truth recorded there, and writers try and deliver it. This can be somewhat explained by the fact that most nonfictional nature writing is based on the author's own observations and impressions of nature. Thus, if an author sees and describes a flower, we do not question that that flower is blood red, feels like silk, smells like saffron, or reminds her of her honeymoon suite. Nature writing becomes more vulnerable to questions of truth, at least in absolute terms, when the author tries to offer scientific explanations for natural phenomena, since such theories can later be disproved or overturned.

While some fiction writers represent nature in fairly literal ways, others do not. In fact, several novelists known for their sensitive and compassionate treatment of nature and the deep ecological truths which permeate their books – writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood – depict worlds which are either based on a futuristic earth or wholly imagined. While I believe these texts deserve consideration as works of nature writing, I didn't want to group them with works of nonfiction, primarily because I didn't want to disrupt or weaken the belief many readers seem to share in traditional pieces of nature writing, that such books can teach them something – or quite a lot – about the actual, natural world. For the rest of this article, when I refer to nature writing, I am specifically talking about nonfictional nature writing.

The anthology I consulted the most for my bibliography was Finch and Elder's (2002) *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*, the revised edition of Finch and Elder's groundbreaking work, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, published in 1990. Like other anthologies, *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English* is inclusive of all nature writing that has originated in the English language and been maintained as part of its literature. The national affinities of its authors span the globe. Many of the landscapes described are situated in what is now the United States, but others are far flung: the Antilles, the Galapagos, Kenya, and Arctic Canada. Although, I appreciated the breadth of this anthology, I decided to limit my bibliography to American literature — specifically, literature published by American authors or about places in the United States. Lessening the scope of my project would allow me to go deeper, providing a more focused and concentrated lens into the genre.

I decided to begin my reading with classic books of nature writing. These included *Nature* (Emerson, 1836), *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (Thoreau & Carew, 1854), *The Land of Little Rain* (Austin, 1903), *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Muir, 1911), *The Outermost House* (Beston, 1928), *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949), *Desert Solitaire* (Abbey, 1968), *Pilgrim on Tinker Creek* (Dillard, 1974), and *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Williams, 1991). In all of these works, the author engages directly with some aspect or question of nature; in fact, an easy case can be made that this engagement is the main relationship, or occupation, of the book. In respect for these time-honored texts, and to honor the tradition they started, I decided I would only consider those books with a similar focus.

These texts shared other characteristics. Two are of particular importance and can be used both to describe and define the genre and also to

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help distinguish nature writing from science writing. The first, and most significant, has to do with the type and quality of the authorial response. Science writing often strives for objectivity. The scientist, writing, tries to remain emotionally detached from their subject. Nature writers, on the other hand, respond in a personal and often intimate way to the experience of nature. In her groundbreaking book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Ackerman (1990) explores her own sensuous responses to nature: "In the Amazon I brewed a pot of *casca preciosa*, a fragrant relative of the sassafras, whose steeped bark soon scented my face, my hair, my clothes, my room, and my psyche with hot violets of exquisite subtlety" (p. 10).

Muir's (1911) response to the mountain country of Yosemite is sensual, but also spiritual, transcendent: "Drinking this champagne water is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the camp-fire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable" (p. 174–175). Or, as in Austin's (1903) case, it may be the passionate curiosity of the mind that's aroused: "I have trailed a coyote often, going across country, perhaps to where some slant-winged scavenger hanging in the air signaled prospect of a dinner, and found his track such as a man, a very intelligent man accustomed to a hill country, and a little cautious, would make to the same point" (p. 31).

The second significant characteristic of nature writing lies in the literary qualities of the writing itself. When nonfiction writers use tropes of fiction to express themselves, the result is called creative or literary nonfiction. Such literary elements or techniques include a strong singular voice; symbolism, metaphor, analogy, and imagery; narrative arcs, flashbacks and foreshadowing. Nature writers commonly express themselves in these ways. Their prose is creative and highly descriptive. Science writing, on the other hand, is much plainer, without such literary flourishes. Much of it can be characterized as technical.

The more I read, the more I realized how many books of nature writing had actually been published. Critical works and anthologies which focus on earlier time periods, or on women writers, introduced me to more authors. *This Incomparable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing* by Lyon (1989) provides a wonderful overview on the origins of nature writing in America, dating back to precolonial times, while Anderson's (1991) *Sisters of the Earth* introduces a host of female authors who wrote in different genres of nature writing. I also learned about new writers from primary texts. Nature writers often pay tribute to and discuss the authors and naturalists who influenced them. With so many books to choose from, I decided to create two bibliographies. The annotated bibliography would focus on seminal books of nature writing in American Literature in the genre of nonfiction; the second bibliography, with the same scope and focus, would present a list of noteworthy books.

To be considered seminal, a book had to reconceptualize society's view of nature and influence the development and direction of the genre. For example, *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949) is credited with being the first book of nature writing with such a passionate focus on conservation, forging a path for later books: *The Unsettling of America* (Berry, 1977), and *The End of Nature* (McKibben, 1989). In *Rural Hours*, Cooper (1850) pays close attention to the way seasons affect the country-side, chronicling a full calendar year in diary fashion and bringing nature into the provenance of day to day life, as Thoreau did in *Walden* four years later. In *Nature*, Emerson (1836) eloquently argues that through nature, humans lose their ego, and experience the divine. One sees his ideas come to life in *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Muir, 1911) as well as in *Pilgrim on Tinker Creek* (Dillard, 1974), but while Muir, in *My First Summer*, celebrates wilderness on a grand scale, Dillard, in *Pilgrim*, loses herself – becomes rapt with attention – in the minute details of nature, the wildness of her own neighborhood.

Seminal books also had to have high literary merit. Many of the books in my bibliography have won, or been nominated for, literary awards. Passages of *The Land of Little Rain* (Austin, 1903) and *The Solace of Open Spaces* (Ehrlich, 1985) are so fluid and stunning, they read like prose poetry. The essays in *The Lives of a Cell* (Thomas, 1974) are elegant in their logic, and *The Exploration of the Colorado* River of the West and its Tributaries (Powell, 1875) grips the reader like a good adventure novel. Some books, like *Refuge* (Williams, 1991), *Arctic Dreams* (Lopez, 1986), and *Pilgrim on Tinker Creek* (Dillard, 1974), created new literary structures and forms. Despite their different strengths and styles, each of these, I believe, can stand on their own as literary achievements in broader fields of literature than nature writing.

Certain books in my bibliography caused me more deliberation than others. I won't discuss all of them – I don't really have space – but I think it's worthwhile to discuss a few. Two that I struggled over the most were Weiner's (1994) *The Beak of the Finch: a Story of Evolution in Our Time* and McPhee's (1998) *Annals of the Former World*. Both books can best be described by the category literary journalism. In *The Beak of The Finch*, Weiner describes how a team of scientists, led by two married researchers, discovered that Darwin's theory of evolution can be proven in real time by measuring the beaks of finches on certain islands in the Galapagos. In *Annals of the Former World*, McPhee tells an epic tale: the deep history of the American continent, revealed through the road cuts of Interstate 80.

On the surface, the style and prose of both books seem to mimic scientific or technical writing. For example, both stories are told, in large part, through statements of fact. Scientific theories are explored in depth and personal responses to nature are less frequent than in other works of nature writing. But after more deep reading, I began to see that literary techniques *are* used — that, in fact, their very subtlety is part of their art. Weiner (1994), for example, writes nature in the flat tones of a scientist, but then uses the evocative landscape around him as a springboard, or justification, for his speculations and insights. "The limits of the island make it almost like the frame of a work of tragic art in which someone has tried to put everything of life and death in a single place, in a single piece, in a single play. The place speaks of bare necessities, these white rocks and pale rocks and streaked lava rocks all in a pile beneath a dark gray sky and climbing out from the dark blue sea, with the long scar of the trail to the crater rim. It is an island's island, with just one half-safe place to land, one dented place to camp" (p. 14).

The geologists McPhee (1998) travels with are some of the best in the field, scientists whose theories and discoveries had a big impact on the development of the discipline. McPhee gives us their backgrounds, their educational and professional history, but also sketches their childhood, the histories of their parents and grandparents. He teases out family dynamics in a way that seems reminiscent of Faulkner and Stegner. In a tome-length book that pulls back the curtain on deep time, this type of historical grounding seems natural. But McPhee is not simply mentioning random details; he is telling the story of the scientists, revealing those contexts, events, and choices which not only put them on the path to geology, but even determined the focus of their research. In this way, too, he mirrors science writing, where the strong relationship between cause and effect is both implicit and well-documented.

McPhee (1998) takes other creative liberties. His first table of contents is a *narrative* table of contents: personal, meandering, digressive. His second table of contents is organized by chapters. Although it provides page numbers, it does not do so in a strictly sequential way; many pages are omitted from this table of contents; others included twice. For example, the chapter on The Appalachians and Plate Tectonics (209–44) is followed by The Theory of Continental Glaciation (254–75) which is followed by the Origins of Coal (245–48). My favorite literary technique of McPhee's is his precise and elegant use of metaphor and analogy to explain truth, although he gives some of the credit to the discipline itself. "I used to sit in class and listen to the terms come floating down the room like paper airplanes. Geology was called a descriptive science, and with its pitted outwash plains and drowned rivers, its