

The Gift of Silence

Ann LaBastille

When I contemplate what will change the most in the Adirondack Park as we enter the 21st century, it is silence.

Silence is the invisible, intangible, exquisitely fragile natural resource that no one thinks about. No one makes an effort to save it and no one donates to preserve it. There are no Citizens Group to Save Silence, no Washington lobbies to fight for silence, no Coalitions to Reduce Loud Manmade Sounds in the Environment.

Silence is an integral part of every climbing, camping or canoeing trip. It is heart and soul of the wilderness experience. It is the perfect prescription for a good night's sleep, and the oldest Rx for stress. It may also be a partial cure for workers subjected to high noise levels in factories. They are prone to increased heart disease and nervous disorders due to continuous loud sounds.

Once, silence stretched over the Adirondacks from shore to shore, peak to peak, like a velvet mantle. It was broken by wind sighing through great white pines, by August thunderstorms and February blizzards. It was disrupted by trout splashing, deer snorting, owls hooting and coyotes yipping. These sounds melded and molded with silence and have been here for 10,000 years and more.

With the discovery of gun powder, steam and electric engines, and gasoline motors, the erosion of silence began. This erosion has accelerated dramatically in the last 10 to 20 years.

On a typical Adirondack summer day, a Park inhabitant may hear the following: around 7 a.m., sounds of vehicular traffic increase as workers and tourists take to the roads. Then, outboard and inboard motor boats start cruising the lakes. From 9 to 10, mail trucks and mail boats cover their routes. Sea-planes fly over, carrying fishermen or sightseers. Or an F-16 makes a sonic boom while A-10's roar above the treetops on military training flights. Camp owners engaged in repairs work with

electric skill saws, drills and wrenches. At intervals, commercial jetliners pass overhead. As the day warms, waterskiers and jet skiers start streaking up and

down the lakes. (In winter, it's snowmobilers.) In the afternoon, chainsaws rev up as people cut firewood. By twilight, most manmade noises diminish. A few late cars and boats go by. Finally, night's noises can preside. Except for those infernal bug whackers!

Who among us today can say that they have spent a day totally free of sounds generated by motors, engines and guns? Only the deaf, those in solitary confinement, and the dedicated wilderness camper can claim this. The disappearance of silence in the Adirondacks, in America, and in every other First World country has been gradual, invasive and continual. It will get worse as our materialistic society produces more and more mechanized products and gadgets.

The Adirondack Park can still offer substantial time blocks of silence. With it come those blessed feelings of solitude, contemplation and creativity. Silence in the natural world has inspired humans as diverse as the Biblical prophets, famous poets and musicians, and great conservationists such as John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, Sigurd Olson, and Aldo Leopold.

We need silence. We need it to be reminded of the vastness of the stars and space that surround our tiny planet. Of the awesome beauty of wilderness. Of the implacability of Nature's laws. In short, silence helps put us in our place. It makes humans humble and reverent.

Here and now—in 1990—I consider it a gift to spend a summer's night with only the sound of a loon's tremulo on a silent lake. And to walk through an autumn wood where the honk of Canada geese is all that filters down through the flaming leaves. And to lie for a moment at midnight on an ice-bound lake wondering at the aurora borealis and hear nothing but trees cracking in the cold.

I fear the gift of silence will become precious and rare as we enter the 21st century in the Adirondacks. ★
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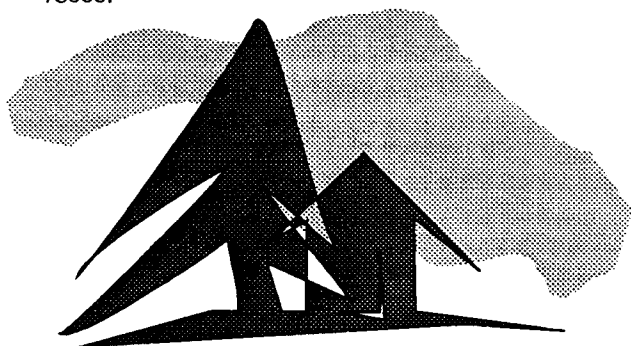
"Silence in the natural world has inspired humans as diverse as the Biblical prophets, famous poets and musicians, and great conservationists such as John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, Sigurd Olson, and Aldo Leopold."

From the Editors

Thanks to all of you who responded to our call for funds. We have put some of the money towards improving our software, and this will get us back on a regular schedule again.

Beginning with the Fall issue, which is to be devoted to regional literature on nature and the environment, Scott Slovic will assume editorship of the Newsletter, while Alicia Nitecki will continue as Managing Editor.

As usual, we welcome your contributions. Please forward them to Scott Slovic, Department of English, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666.



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The *American Nature Writing Newsletter* is published twice a year and contains brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes and information about activities relating to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Items of interest, including news about conferences, forthcoming publications and work in progress are welcome.

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Book Reviews

Nature Writing and America: Essays upon a Cultural Type. By Peter A. Fritzell. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1990.

"Witting or unwitting, paradoxes are the essence of American nature writing," argues Peter Fritzell, "paradoxes of the kinds produced when the needs of an individual human animal meet the needs of lands which he or she conceives alternately as redeeming (or liberating) and encumbering; paradoxes of the kinds produced when the rhetoric of systematic science meet the rhetoric of spiritual autobiography and personal narrative; paradoxes of the kinds that result when metamorphic and metaphoric are so closely intertwined that each takes on aspects of the other; paradoxes, in short, of the kinds that typify *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*." With this cascading series of elaborations upon the basic theme of paradox, a series (much like the book as a whole) beginning in absolute abstraction and working its way gradually toward a concrete list of actual texts, Fritzell opens the Epilogue to his recent study of American nature writing. The study itself is as "paradoxical" and richly difficult as its subject matter.

Nature Writing and America is a book at once encyclopedic and sketchy, elegantly crafted and meandering. On the first page of the book we recognize the author's aim to be encompassing and definitive, to account for the unique Americanness of nature writing on this continent by tracing its tensions back to "the traditions and forms of Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* (...) and Saint Augustine's *Confessions*"; and yet thirty-two pages into the second chapter ("The History and Criticism of Nature Writing"), he pauses to lament the incompleteness of his essays which "are but the slightest and most suggestive beginnings to the history and critical appreciation" of the genre. On the one hand, the book provides exceptionally thorough and astute analysis of nature writing scholarship (primarily Joseph Wood Krutch's Prologue to the 1950 collection *Great American Nature Writing*, which Fritzell adopts as the limited but still useful model for his own approach), of certain philosophical problems in the outlook of "geobiotic" science, and of several specific examples of American nature writing (including the three mentioned above in the quotation from the Epilogue). On the other hand,

the book suffers from opacity and excessively apologetic sketchiness, as in the repeated references to "what the Abbeys and the Dillards and the Thoreaus do," unnecessary reminders to the reader that Fritzell has chosen to exemplify general patterns by examining in detail only a few important texts.

As readers will quickly discover, Fritzell's own prose style is uneven—or rather, extravagantly incongruous. His individual paragraphs are often marvels of construction, sometimes consisting of thirty-line sentences worthy of Thoreau himself or perhaps even Richard Hooker (Fritzell's consciousness of the latter is suggested by his use at one point of Hooker's distinctive phrase "ecclesiastical polity" and by his acknowledgment of support from the Renaissance scholar Lawrence V. Ryan, with whom I too once studied the densely ornate prose in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*). I emphasize the difficulty of Fritzell's language not only because it is likely to cause his readers (even readers as "obsessed with nature writing" as Fritzell himself) some frustration, but because it illustrates the curious, even beautiful, mimetic layering of the book, the scheme by which this scholarly study mirrors earlier scholarship (not just Krutch's, but that of Wayne Franklin, Leo Marx, and others), which mirrors the tensions of its subject matter (nature writing), which in turn mirrors the paradoxical natural environment in America, its wonders and its horrors. Concerning Thoreau's *Walden*, Fritzell states, "The book he writes is structurally and logically complex, convoluted and uneconomical"—much the same can be said about *Nature Writing and America*. The general structure of the book is clearly a gradual movement from the abstractions of such chapters as "Preliminary Concerns," "The History and Criticism of Nature Writing," and "Science and Our Declarations of Dependence: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Nature Writing" to the more concrete chapters on specific authors and texts, and yet the argumentative patterns within each chapter tend to be alternately convoluted, diffuse, and repetitive.

However, for all of the effort required in reading *Nature Writing and America*, there are definite rewards. Fritzell's fundamental conceit in this book, the distinction between inferior nature writing and what he repeatedly calls "the best American nature writing," is that the latter is particularly self-conscious and open to mystery, to paradox. While such writers as Thoreau, Leopold, and Dillard (even Columbus, Bartram, and Hawthorne, as Fritzell suggests in his excellent chapter "The Musquito in My Garden: Early American Selves and Their Nonhuman Environment") wrestle profoundly and self-consciously with the conflict between their dreams of America and the reality of the place, with their mixed desires both to settle the frontier and to keep it wild. "Most have been far less knowingly(...)caught between their needs to place themselves and their needs to sustain ancestral dreams of unfettered placelessness." This criterion of "self-conscious paradoxism" seems to underlie (often without explicit recognition) the assumptions many other scholars make about American nature writing. These critics, too, ought to be conscious of their approaches, their own paradoxical relationships with texts and the natural environment, Fritzell suggests. In his discussion of Krutch's Prologue, at once sympathetic and critical, Fritzell finds a serious conflict between the critic as "moralist" who wishes to reinforce a "sense of kinship" with the natural world and the critic as "student of literary and cultural forms" who perceives this idea of kinship as a distinguishing trait of nature writing. Fritzell thus argues that Krutch's Prologue shares "the underlying concerns of its subject—but it does so unknowingly"; it seems largely for this reason (his own self-consciousness versus Krutch's relative lack thereof) that Fritzell claims, "I, however sympathetically, am trying to stand superior to Krutch (among many others)." Despite the personal invest-

Journal Notes



The next issue of *The John Burroughs Review* contains a comprehensive index of essays in the 23 volumes of collected works. Using the Riverside Edition as key reference, the index is composed of seven separate sub-indexes, each designed to help a reader find the location of a particular essay within the 23 volumes and to add, along the way, a little bit of interesting information about the essay and its history. Contact: Ms. Lisa Breslof, Secretary, The John Burroughs Association, 15 West 77th Street, New York, NY 10024

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ment, the conflict of interest risked in critiquing the very practice in which he himself is engaged, Fritzell's analysis of nature writing scholarship is valuable and provocative. It raises the issue many of us need to keep in mind as we comment on writers whose worldviews we support: are we advocates or analysts, partisans or impartial scholars? Fritzell suggests that the two mindsets can't be separated, and that they needn't be. What is important, though, is that the scholar, like the nature writer, be conscious of this tension.

The first three theoretical and historical chapters of *Nature Writing and America*, despite their density and (I think) excessive complexity, raise essential questions about the companion enterprises of nature writing and scholarship about nature writing. But the best part of the book—at least the most readable and engaging part—begins with Chapter Four on the early manifestations of paradox and self-consciousness in American writing about nature. In fact, I would recommend that readers who balk at the opening chapters of the book skip ahead to Chapter Four and return to the theory only after grounding themselves in Fritzell's careful readings of specific texts. "At [nature writing's] most characteristically American," he notes in "Nature Writing and America" (Chapter Five), "it captures and reflects the peculiarly deep and detailed, if often troublesome, relationship between ego and ecos, or psyche and bios, in American culture." It is this notion which leads Fritzell boldly to associate "the best American nature writers" with novelists like Faulkner rather than with rural essayists, British or American. Chapters Seven and Eight provide suggestive close readings of *Walden* and *A Sand County Almanac*, respectively, though these readings tend to be more useful as descriptions of the forms of paradox in each book than explanatory of why such paradoxes occur or what they imply about the writers and their culture. The chapters on Thoreau (fourteen pages) and Leopold (twenty-four pages) actually seem disproportionately slender and perfunctory next to the vast, chapter-by-chapter study of Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (sixty-six pages) which leads up to the Epilogue. The chapter on Dillard is full of wonderful insights (for instance, the suggestion that the difference between Dillard and Thoreau as reporters of personal and scientific facts is "less a matter of degree than it is of duration"), but it is so extravagantly detailed that one sometimes loses Fritzell's larger argument.

Nature Writing and America is an important book, a comprehensive contextualizing study of what Fritzell persuasively shows to be the distinctively American tradition of nature writing. Much of the book, as is particularly clear in the Epilogue, is deeply appreciative of the complexity and the magnificence of this tradition. Unfortunately, Fritzell's overwrought prose sometimes interferes with the reader's appreciation of his insights. Still, this is a book for all serious students of the genre to read, learn from, and argue with. ★

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Ecofeminism and the Culture of Agriculture:

Ecological Revolutions. By Carolyn Merchant. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Staying Alive: women, ecology and survival in India. By Vandana Shiva. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988.

Two recent books, *Ecological Revolutions* by Carolyn Merchant and *Staying Alive* by Vandana Shiva, complement each other in deepening our understanding of current ecological distortions. Unlike most works by ecologists, both writers focus on connecting ways of knowing, gender roles and agricultural practice. Both recognize the importance of understanding society as a mutually supportive structure of dynamically interacting parts. However, Merchant writes from the perspective of an environmental historian consciously utilizing an ecological approach to illustrate the sequence of paradigm shifts that organized the interactions between ecological processes and a society's patterns of production, reproduction and consciousness. Shiva, by contrast, writes as a scientist who is also an activist deeply involved with the struggle of rural Indian women to protect and conserve their native forests, land and water against the development mentality which superimposes scientific and economic paradigms created by western, gender-based ideology on communities in other cultures.

Both writers find hope in the transformative rehabilitative potential of ecofeminism to promote a new paradigm. However, their different descriptions of this alternative paradigm offer an explicit example of the ways in which they are both distinct and complementary. Thus, Shiva describes her vision of ecofeminist paradigm as personified by the worldview of Chipko women, for whom "nature is Prakriti, the creator and source of wealth, and rural women, peasants and tribals who live in and derive sustenance from nature have a systematic and deep knowledge of nature's processes of reproducing wealth." (219) By contrast, Merchant describes the ecofeminist paradigm she draws upon as resting on five acknowledgements.

1. Everything is connected to everything else in an integrated web;
2. the whole is greater than the sum of the parts;
3. non-human nature is dynamic and responsive to human actions;
4. process, not parts, is primary; and
5. people and nature are a unified whole.

Whereas Shiva seems almost to suggest that a restoration of respect for traditional tribal wisdoms provides the necessary standpoint for repairing current ecological distortions, the historical insights of Merchant's work stand as an appropriate corrective. For Merchant

explicates in enormously compelling detail the processes through which societies change their relationship to nature as a result of tensions between production and ecology and between production and reproduction. "The results are new construction of nature, both materially and in human consciousness." If Merchant is right, we cannot go back, but we can and we must conscientiously work towards a new, respectful paradigm of understanding in which "humans are neither helpless victims nor arrogant dominators of nature, but active participants in the destiny of the webs of which they are a part" (270).

What makes Merchant's work compelling is her coherent organization of a mass of detail. Examining how different human cultures, native American and Eur-american, occupied the same geographic space with differing effects on the environment, Merchant correlates detailed historical records on food resources, gender roles and extractive technology. She reproduces tables detailing the number and type of pelts exported by one John Pyncheon between the years 1653 and 1663. She profiles fifteen inland Massachusetts towns in terms of population growth and land use between 1771 and 1850. She thus traces in convincing and enriching detail how a cumulative pattern of changes incorporating a European ecological complex of animals, plants, pathogens and people results in the collapse of indigenous Indian ecologies, how the original colonial paradigm was itself replaced by the scientific-industrial paradigm which is, in its turn, so badly in need of replacement by an ecofeminist paradigm.

Who, besides Merchant, would have recognized survey maps as the vanguard of a perspective shift, changing space from a fusion of spiritual vitality and multileveled meanings to one in which land is seen as a bounded object susceptible to objective management and control? But Merchant does this and more. She provides a sensitive and respectful understanding of the ways in which "the shrewd Abenaki," prudently trading only off treacherous coastal rocks, began a process of adaptation that inexorably drew them into a system of worldwide mercantile exchange, so that they traded furs and fish for durable tools they could use to further unbalance their native ecology. She describes the force of accidentally introduced European diseases that unbalanced the Abenaki's reproductive dynamic, killing off more than 2/3 of the tribal population, resulting in abandonment of villages and undercutting of organizational institutions of village life, as incidentally affording further opportunities for colonial expansion both into these lands, and in converting the remaining Abenaki from their animistic ethic, in which humans and animals were reciprocally bound, to an ethic of moral obligation between humans and a transcendent God.

Merchant traces, in similar detail, the colonial perspectives by which the continuum of nature was culturally dichotomized into the wild and the cultivated,

with the farmer occupying a macrocosmic role of aiding nature in ways congruent with a worldview in which Nature was an animate mother, fully subservient to the transcendent God, yet a powerful actress in the mundane world. The farmer acted by imitating natural processes, adding fertilizer to speed her recovery, hoping to appropriate her powers through manipulating her processes.

In the third historical revolution, Merchant describes the elevation of analysis over imitation, and an elevation of numeracy as dominant over literacy. As nature became an object of dominance and exploitation, women's roles too shifted. Production and reproduction were split into separate spheres.

Yet it is one thing to be the locus of exploitation; it is another to be the region where those with privileged access to the global ecological network reside. Focusing on Twentieth-century New England, Merchant describes several ways portions of the New England environment benefit from economic forces that have moved some forms of environmental degradation to regions beyond New England's boundaries. Thus, she notes that reliance on imported oil and foodstuffs combine to promote regrowth of forest. "Eighty percent of the land is once again forested, close enough to the 95% on the eve of colonization." Yet New England is not thus restored to a previous state. The regenerate forest system suffers degradation from industrial pollutants such as acid rain.

Merchant also notes ways in which advances in computer and other high technologies promote a wholly mechanized paradigm of nature. In the words of a recent nobel laureate, such a world can "in effect, get along without natural resources," but as Shiva rightly reminds us, that is also a world in which the costs of modernization are distributed among indigenous peoples, and are especially costly to women, in ways that never enter the accounting system of the World Bank.

Using Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution and Marx's theory of social revolution to explore ecology as a twentieth century construction of nature, Merchant writes from the perspective of an environmental historian consciously utilizing an ecological approach. She sees nature as an historical actor, an active counterpart to production in human systems. She shows us the way interactions between ecological processes of depletion, pollution, plant succession and species reproduction and a society's patterns of production, reproduction and consciousness help to explain the magnitude and direction of historical change.

Vandana Shiva's contribution may be seen as the complement to Merchant's work, for *Staying Alive* focuses upon the unique place of women in the environment of countries which are regularly described in terms of their lesser development. Distinguishing maldevelopment (the worldview of mechanistic exploitation which Merchant discussed as typical of capitalis-

tic ecology) as a constellation in which science, technology and politics guide every area of human activity in ways that marginalise and burden women and nature, Shiva argues that women in ecology movements are creating new categories of challenge capable of constituting a non-violent, humanly inclusive alternative development paradigm. Shiva herself represents the scientifically trained (physicist) who has come through a feminist transformation of consciousness to respect the authority of non-literate indigenous women of India.

I suggest that we should read these two books together. They form a complementary pair. We need the historical grounding Merchant provides, and the way it reminds us that nature as a concept is part of a socially constructed theory, and thus has no greater or lesser claim to ultimate truth status than do other scientific paradigms. For me, Merchant's focus on scholarly connections and illuminations illustrates the analytic value of discovering paradigms and recognizing their revolutionary potential. However, I think we stand equally in need of the perspective Shiva details for us as she begins with the marginalisation and impoverishment

of women particularly, and reveals the ways in which Indian women at the margin retain an alternative vision rooted in traditions and non-literate expertise.

In Staying Alive: women, ecology and survival in India, Vandana Shiva documents the response that marginalised Indian women have begun to make to the dominant forms of ecological destruction and impoverishment of women in India. "Women... have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life." Her book attempts to capture insights and visions that Indian women have discovered in their struggles for survival. Shiva finds within these new practices oppositional categories that are simultaneously ecological and feminist, exposing the parochial basis of science and development by showing that ecological destruction and the marginalisation of women are not inevitable, economically or scientifically. ★

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The Quest of the Woman Nature Writer

Betsy Hilbert

"There are four ways to write a woman's life," reports Carolyn Heilbrun.

The woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process.

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Heilbrun deliberately refrained from analyzing women's fiction, but she also failed to mention a fifth way in which women write their lives: in nonfiction, within their choices of subject matter and style, in the ways they approach the world to report it and in the attitudes they bring to the material. Certainly a woman essayist or news reporter, a woman historian or critic or educational theorist, writes herself as distinctly—though in a different manner—as any poet or novelist. A book of essays, sermons, arguments, criticism, or commentary is always, also, a kind of autobiography; each is a document in the progress of the mind creating itself, a herstory of intellectual life.

The nonfiction writer, like the fiction-maker or autobiographer, writes her life through her subject material, though paradoxically the created author-as-character is harder to envision in a book of essays than in a novel. We are not out of practice, in the modern world, at seeing the intellect that works its way through an argument. (Plato developed a method of doing that, but he has not been read much lately, most of us being too involved with *L. A. Law*.) Can we, for example, reach through *Writing a Woman's Life* to seeing Heilbrun's expansive feminist approach as happily as we reach through Amanda Cross' mysteries to imagining Kate Fansler? Are we prepared to understand that Heilbrun's life is written as much in her scholarship as in her mysteries? The clarity and intellectual courage of the mind which (ought I say who?) created *Writing a Woman's Life* is as interesting as any Heilbrun/Cross' fiction, though Heilbrun the scholar is paradoxically less visible as a person through her work.

Toward the end of *Writing a Woman's Life*, Heilbrun considers Virginia Woolf, for whom "the story of woman's destiny, the old marriage plot, would give way to another story for women, a quest plot" (121). Where is the quest plot to be found? Heilbrun looks for it in fiction and autobiography, but there is another important trail to be followed: the quest story, one that opens to journey in which a hero faces danger bravely in search of her own grail, is nowhere better told than in the body

of literature created by a long line of American women nature writers.

Consider a classic quest story: A child is born unloved and psychologically abandoned after a difficult birth both disfigures the little girl and cracks her mother's frail sanity. Recovered from her birth injuries, but still subject to the effects of her mother's deadly internal conflicts, the young girl grows up in an atmosphere of endless, horrific psychic abuse. (In one scene, for example, the mother walks into a bedroom where the girl is enduring a persistently-recurring illness and presents her daughter with a carefully-kept accounting of every penny the parents have ever spent on the child, beginning with the obstetrician's bill. "If I had an undiagnosed illness and I knew that I was nothing but a burden and an expense," announces the mother, "I would kill myself." Then she leaves the room.) Fragile of health and spirit, but aided by a series of kindly surrogate parents and animal friends, the young woman survives her mother's household and leaves for college, is forced to return home with another mysterious illness, then leaves again for Los Angeles and a series of jobs in the film industry. At last she finds herself in San Francisco, learning her craft as a professional writer. There she enters into a truly dark and dangerous world, the labyrinth of the minotaur, the descent into hell: a deep suicidal depression—but there also she meets the Mentor-figure of psychotherapist Carl Renz, who leads her deeper into the Inferno, down the concentric circles of the unconscious, and helps her, finally, to find her own way out. Only then can she find the individual pathway she was meant for—away from civilization, finally free from the rigid, compressing world she once endured: out to the Sierra Nevada, to Alaska, Wyoming, the Arctic Circle, to psychic and physical freedom at last in finding her life work as a nature writer.

The story of Sally Carrighar, summarized above from her autobiography *Home to the Wilderness*, retells the quest plot that Heilbrun invites, the quintessential monomyth, the archetypal hero's journey self-written in a woman's terms. But what of the quest plot within Carrighar's work? How does the nature writer portray the search that is the essential element in every quest? The literature of nature, we remember, has deep roots in the literature of travel and exploration. In Carrighar's works, the search becomes a transformation of consciousness for the reader, who enters the minds and sensory patterns of the animals portrayed. (Too much of that kind of speaking for animals can, of course, lead to sentimental bathos, but Carrighar was saved from galloping anthropomorphism by the lightness of her method and the concentration on and accuracy of her observations of animals. Nothing was ever imputed to an animal in one of her books that its actions, its observed behavior, could not thoroughly substantiate.) Field work, in Carrighar's case, becomes a synonym for empathetic and psychic exploration.

Carrighar's composites, derived from careful observation over long periods of time and personalized in her animal (and human) characters, slide to the outer boundaries of the divisions between nonfiction and fiction. She prefigured the contemporary nonfiction novel, in which a writer captures the sense of a scene as it might have happened; like the earlier American luminist landscape painters, her work is a combination of accurate detail in minute points, presented in a carefully assembled collage of incidents. Nature offered Carrighar a world of rich, sensuous experiences, primary among which was sound; trained early as a musician, she was particularly alert to notes she heard. (The epiphany that helped her become a nature writer, described in her autobiography, was brought on by hearing a singing mouse.) She structured her scenes rhythmically, like a composer or a film director, for she had had a lot of experience in Hollywood in the film industry, and later *One Day on Beebe Rock* would become a Walt Disney movie.

If every quest is essentially a probe, every quest plot is a story about changing perceptions, about observing carefully and responding appropriately, with energy and love, to what the world has to teach. The quest itself is always about seeing and learning. And when the heroine of the great myth returns—Rachel Carson, Joan of Arc, Dorothy of Oz—she bears a vision that is meant to set the world back on its course. ★

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Heilbrun, Carolyn. *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.

"Nature writing chronicles the marriage of naturalist and nature. In these pages, the betrothed naturalist gives an account of his growing intimacy with the natural world. Just as one might write home to one's family about a new lover, the naturalist narrator shares with the armchair reader details which convey the character of his beloved Nature. Intertwined with appreciative descriptions of Nature, the narrator confesses how his deepening knowledge of her has caused him to grow both personally and spiritually."

Nature in Women's Writing: Whose Footsteps to Follow?

Cheryll Burgess

The above paragraph (whose origins are a mystery) on naturewriting implies that nature writers are men, that nature is female, and that the marriage-like bond between them takes the place of a conventional marriage. Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* and Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* argue that a similar pattern—male bachelor spurning flesh-and-blood woman for the embraces of a feminized nature—can be traced throughout male-authored American fiction. For the most part, the women of these tales are versions of Aunt Sally in *Huckleberry Finn*: they are indoors being domestic, custodians of the very "civilization" that the bachelor heroes take to the woods to escape.

While Betsy Hilbert in this issue veers off of the male-authored paper trail to discuss women nature writers, I would like to turn from women's nature writing to women's fiction and summarize a longer study I did recently on representations of nature in fiction by American women. (For a good collection of women's prose and poetry about nature, see Anderson.) Among other things, I asked whether the female protagonists of these stories enjoy an intimate relationship with a masculine nature that substitutes for conjugal relations with a man. In a few cases, the answer is a tentative yes. Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" depicts a young girl whose loyalty to a heron dooms her new friendship with a young hunter. In Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* Alexandra Bergson's primary bond remains steadfastly with the land, and she marries Carl Linstrum only late in life, and with the condition that she remain on the

land. For the most part, however, the female protagonists of women's fiction have "real men" in their lives, and nature itself is ungendered—neither virgin nor virile, feminine nor phallic.

In these stories, a woman's relationship to a man almost always has a bearing on her experience of nature. She may go to nature to think about a man, to seek a man, or to escape from a man for awhile. A variety of male figures appear in the natural settings of these women's work, from loggers to missionaries, pioneers to professors. With notable exceptions, men are depicted as having greater physical strength and better wilderness skills than women; consequently, men are more confident and comfortable than women in wild

places, such as limitless forests and flooding rivers. Women prefer well-known, tamed nature, close to home—the garden is a favorite motif. Male characters are typically more aggressive than female ones, and male aggression may be directed at either

nature, as in hunting or logging, or at women, as in rape or abduction scenes, which often take place in dark forest settings.

Indoor settings almost always figure importantly in women's fiction, often in opposition to outdoor ones. The range of associations attaching to houses and nature is impressively large and multifarious, including contrasts like civilization versus wilderness, society versus solitude, safety versus danger, shelter versus exposure, intimacy versus immensity, confinement versus freedom, stagnation versus growth, the known versus the unknown, order versus disorder, and so on. Almost always, the significance of an outdoor setting depends upon the way in which it is juxtaposed with an indoor one. When houses are represented negatively, it is usually because they seem constricting, limiting a woman's range of movement and forcing her into a prescribed domestic role; nature, in contrast, is liberating, giving her space to move and allowing her to chart her own future course. When houses are represented positively, it is usually because they stand for culture and safety, in contrast to the rawness and danger of the wilderness. Frequently both house and nature are represented positively, and a happy life is one that alternates between the two. In the best cases, house and nature, indoors and out, are represented as being continuous, as when the smell of garden herbs wafts through Mrs. Todd's house in Jewett's "The Country of the Pointed Firs", or when sunlight warms the Indian rugs of Thea's cliff dwelling in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*.

Although I have attempted to do so, it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about nature *per se* in

women's fiction, because quite different associations attach to different motifs, such as forests, open spaces, rivers, and gardens. (Mountains do not figure as prominently as these other motifs.) Nevertheless, I think it would be fruitful to compare the nature that appears in women's fiction—a nature which is often symbolic, usually contrasted with an indoor setting, and frequently associated with a man—with the nature of women's nature writing. Do women nature writers more closely follow the footsteps of their male nature writing brothers than of their sisters writing fiction? I suspect the answer may be yes, which raises a whole new slate of questions. . . ★

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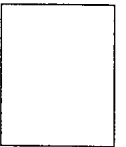
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