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The  
**AMERICAN NATURE WRITING NEWSLETTER**  
A Biannual Publication Devoted to the Study of Writing on Nature  
Spring 1993~~~~~ Vol 5, No. 1  
\$2.50

## The Accidental Naturalist

Susan Zwinger

I do not believe that one sets out to become a nature writer, although every child is a fine naturalist. Not enough glory. I set out to be an artist, then to be a humanities scholar, then dropped out to be an artist again, then a museum curator of contemporary art, then the town art critic. Meanwhile I was also trying to be a house painter, a maid, an art packer, a sales person, a tile layer, a furniture finisher, and a Deli counter-slopper. I moved from Santa Fe to Seattle and wrote my Angry-Young-Woman novel, a curdling satire set in the Southwest. For a brief, very brief, period of time, I was the Great American Novelist.

Finding myself In-Between times again, I bought a large black notebook (still intended to be an artist via botanical illustration, since I failed miserably as a Neo-Regurgitationist) and a black pickup truck and headed north to Alaska. I intended to heal myself with the black notebook and a hand lens and a stack of guidebooks. I swear, I never intended to be a Nature Writer. I just wanted some cheap, cost-effective therapy.

However, after the first ten days of wallowing in sorrow and projecting Lost Self upon the unwary environment with Wordsworthian Vacant-and-Pensive moodiness, there flashed upon that inward eye something amazing. Tundra! Layers upon layers of lichens, liverworts, and mosses so outrageous in form as to give me drug-free hallucinations. Through these exquisite organisms, a startling new idea dawned: these beings and the entire natural world *exist outside of me*.

I then pulled out my skills from my adolescent through 23-year-old days, in which I intended to be a Deep Dark Poet. At Iowa's Writers' Workshop I had gained some literary skills perfect for describing what was *outside* of me. Before I knew it, questions came. Loads of questions about relationships, about How-this-got-to-be-this-form, questions of evolution and the beginning of life. I was up to my elbows in guidebooks, spending hours and hours in the back of the pickup, cross-legged, heating up Knorr soup, mushrooms, pen and ink and guidebooks spread all over.

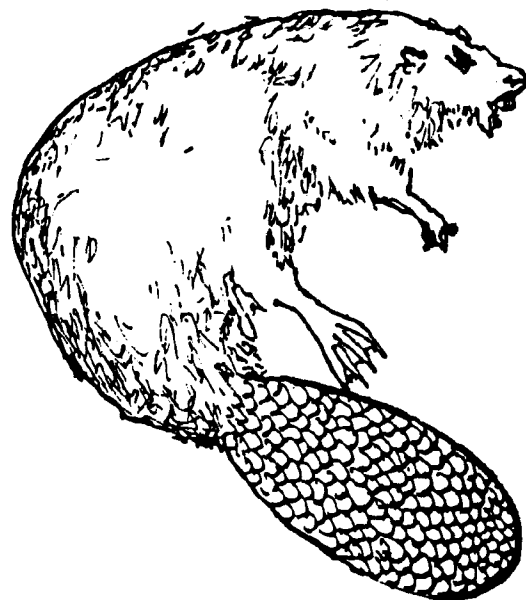
Somewhere near the Chena River, watching salmon die after spawning, contemplating the great rhythms of life, I totally forgot to savor that exquisite melancholy, the loss of a special male friend. That was half-way up Alaska, so all

there was to do was to continue on up the Haul Road where it was illegal to drive, and sit in the high tundra waiting for the grizzly to come, watching for caribou, being aesthetically grossed-out by the pipeline.

Instead the grizzlies minded their own business, went after Dall sheep not me, the pipeline was fascinating, and the great rhythms of life in a very harsh environment totally entranced me. Instead of being a part of *my* insides, I was inside It!

For two years I transcribed 200 pages of notebooks to bring back the experience with vivid thereness. Should I be a scientist?, I wondered. Should I transcendentalize, philosophize, teleologize, textualize, or just have a good time? I opted for the latter, and some of the former snuck in without my permission. Even research in the Seattle Public Library turned out to be totally absorbing. Through rewriting and rewriting and rewriting, pages began to stack up. I added drawings and photographs. It looked suspiciously like a manuscript. It was published, and now I am called a nature writer. I swear, I never intended to be. Yet, I am glad for this accidental path, naturalism in the third degree: in these decades of environmental/economic crises, such writing could help us understand our real place in It, and what we've got to do or perish.

Seattle, Washington



## From the Editors

The focus of this issue of the newsletter is "new nature writing," and we are pleased to present essays on "becoming a nature writer" by three of the most impressive "new" nature writers in the country: Susan Zwinger, John Daniel, and Rick Bass. Terrell Dixon has also reviewed these authors' recent books for the issue. John Cooley, a new nature writer himself, has contributed a response to Anne LaBastille's piece called "A Gift of Silence" that appeared in last spring's issue of the newsletter. There are, of course, many, many new nature writers whose work deserves to be represented in this issue; Dan Philippon's review of three new anthologies of nature writing helps to publicize the important work of some of these writers. We are grateful to Susan Zwinger, who has allowed us to use her field drawings to illustrate the newsletter. This issue of the newsletter is dedicated to Wallace Stegner, who died at the age of 84 in April 1993 and whom all lovers of literature and wilderness and the American West will sorely miss.

During the 1993-94 academic year, Scott Slovic will take a leave of absence from his position as editor of the newsletter in order to teach American nature writing at several universities in Japan. Cheryll Glotfelty will supervise the preparation of the Fall 1993 and Spring 1994 issues of the newsletter; please direct any inquiries to her at the Department of English, University of Nevada-Reno, Reno, NV 89557. The fall issue, guest edited by Chris Cokinos of Kansas State University, will be devoted to American Nature Poetry. The spring issue will focus on Nature Writing and the Gaia Hypothesis, and Louise Westling of the University of Oregon will serve as guest editor.

As mentioned in the Fall 1992 issue of the newsletter, this publication is now affiliated with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). The organization, which was founded last October at the Western Literature Association Conference, has been growing rapidly, partly as the result of a mailing to 500 English department chairs. To join ASLE, simply fill out the membership form on the last page of the newsletter and send it to Mike Branch at the University of Virginia. For information about the association, contact Mike Branch, Cheryll Glotfelty, or Scott Slovic.

We apologize for the lateness of recent issues of the newsletter. We continue to streamline our production process and hope with this current issue to establish a new tradition of punctuality.

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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Susan Zwinger, Seattle, Washington

# Writing Nature

John Daniel

I take comfort in something Jeffers said, which I can't find and remember imperfectly: "Some writers have done their best work before they were thirty. I wasn't born yet." When I was thirty I moved to an eastern Oregon ranch to see if I could write. I was trying my hand at short stories—Hemingway sorts of things about fathers and sons, coming of age, sitting in bars—but I began to notice that many of the most passionate passages in my fiction had less to do with human beings and more to do with landscape. Some were remembered scenes in northern Virginia, where my family had an old cabin; some were from my logging days in the southern Washington Cascades. And increasingly I found myself writing about the country I was living in, the sage and juniper steppeland that had seemed bleak when I first moved to the Klamath Basin but came to be the country where my spirit opened and I was born as a writer. It was the first landscape I stayed in long enough to get to know a little, not just as a playground or a visual pleasure but as a place where I might somehow belong.

I liked telling stories, but I found it hard to construct plots and to create characters who weren't me in thin disguise. I wasn't really interested, I can see now, in building human worlds out of words. What I really wanted to do was to touch with words the mysteries of the non-human world around me, and so my fiction died and poems grew out of it. Most of them began as vague seeings which I tried to write into focus. Writing poems is like tending a garden you didn't plant—you notice these various shoots coming up, you try to help them along, you're curious what each one will be.

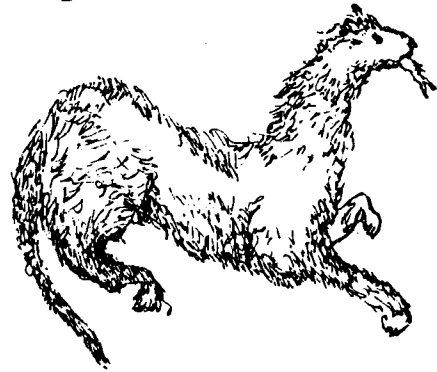
After a while, though, the shoots start looking as alike as they are different. Like most contemporary poets, I got stuck in the short lyric, the one-page Moment. It's too bad that poetry has given up so much to prose, so much of narrative and argument and lengthy meditation. There are poets trying to reclaim those territories, and I cheer them on, but my own reclamation work has led me into prose nonfiction. I like the elbow room, the flexibility and capaciousness. I like cooking up a broth of personal experience and stirring in some history, some science, some literature, whatever I think will help. I enjoy my freedom to narrate, orate, meditate, celebrate, and castigate. And I like, I'll confess, the bigger readership that comes with writing prose.

Why am I mainly a nature writer and nature poet? It's odd how some of us are passionately interested in the natural world and some are scarcely aware it exists. Even as a kid in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., I looked outward from the human realm. I was always moved by stars and streams and forest silences. Nature is the matrix, the foundation, the big story. It gives us birth and demands our deaths. It's peaceful, violent, lovely, horrific—sanctuary and jailhouse. Simplify it to stars and darkness and it's stranger

and more elusive yet. "Talk of mysteries!" What work of words could be more exciting?

I still write poems, but fewer. I want them to deal with the most enduring things, as Jeffers' did, and I want them to discover things prose can't, if there are such things—to enact their own necessity as poetry. My prose, meanwhile, is shifting to embrace the human again. The little streams of personal history in my essays are rising and joining in a book-length memoir called Toward Oregon. It's about growing up in the East, coming of age in the West during the sixties, and stumbling toward a sense of myself and a sense of home these last 25 years. I see it as a kind of natural history. Human nature writing. And, since memory is a fabricator, a kind of fiction after all.

Portland, Oregon



20515 House  
20510 Senate

Rick Bass

Around and around I go with the question: am I a nature writer, or a "real" writer? Are the two separate? Some days I think yes, other days I think no, and no matter. Usually I just give up on the thought and go back to work, and let whatever happens happen. But still, the question sneaks back: why do so many writers turn to the natural world for the conduit of their art these days? Part of it I think is that artists love the complexities, the woven intricacies of a created whole. Humanity's systems these days have split off and away from the systems of nature; man's systems have become too random, and are all too often lacking logic.

Art is the act of making order out of chaos, and no system known to man does this better than nature. And in a time of great chaos, nature can offer the human mind great solace—can remind us that this pattern, the archetype of logic, the blueprint for art, still exists.

I love both the chaos and the order of nature. The wild mixes with the gentle. There is wildness amongst humanity, it is true, but it no longer seems a logical wildness. All too often it seems to be the wildness of the victim: someone to whom something has happened. A man has a

troubled youth amongst an impersonal society, climbs a tower, begins shooting at everyone in sight: this is obviously an artificial fractured wildness, rather than the beautiful trembling *woven* wildness of a deer standing in midstream, testing the air and feeling all of her senses. The wildness of man these days is the wildness of the passive victim, rather than the active participant.

I think it is for this same notion of weave and logic that I find myself watching football games with more gusto each year. Elements of chaos—twenty-two men scrambling around down on the field—combine to form a direction, a purpose, a whole.

But why don't I write about football?

I think it comes back to the question of participation; of activity, rather than passivity. One needs merely to draw a breath of air to be active in nature, and every writer knows the characters in one's writing must be active rather than passive. In nature's chaos and order, the artist can still engage him- or herself in the system. There's much talk of "virtual reality" these days, and for an artist, that's what nature is. You can step into your art even as you're creating it.

And—unlike modern culture, modern civilization—there is still in nature the sweet underpinning of logic. I believe that passion is the fuel that drives a work of art, but the invisible presence of logic is what holds it together and allows the artist to approach an understanding of order within his or her subject: the notion of a whole thing that has been created out of its parts.

#

Every day I grapple with the question of art: of literature versus politics. I used to scorn "political" writers; I was a snob for art. I had memorized all the artist's snappy sayings that paid homage to Art's holy Pureness. ("Be dull and routine in your ordinary life so that you may be violent and original in your art," etc. etc.)

Then I moved back west. I started a small family, and hooked up with a larger family of friends.

Suppose you are given a bucket of water. You're standing there holding it. Your home's on fire. Will you pour the cool water over the flames or will you sit there and write a poem about it?

The paradox, of course, is that the poems—James Dickey's "For the Last Wolverine," Pattiann Rogers' "The Hummingbird: A Seduction," and W.S. Merwin's "The Forgotten Language"—are what can make the difference. Art such as these poems illuminates hearts, and re-opens the sleepy eyes of the blind and the dead. Stories can do this too, such as Jim Harrison's *Legends of the Fall* and A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky*.

And yet, around and around I go, trying to decide: do I choose art today, or do I choose politics? The earth is burning, as Doug Peacock cries. Crises of the natural world tend to be more immediate than those of the spirit. Grief, love, sorrow, or a quest for a developing spirituality—these

are the field of art and literature, of poems and stories, and it can take a decade, or a generation, or a century, to produce enough works to change a culture's consciousness—to change a culture.

But to raise letters to Congress to preserve a wild piece of land, or to stop the shooting of wolves from airplanes—these things require the immediacy of fact, of nonfiction—and often political nonfiction—rather than the more leisurely pace of the imagination.

So I try and do both.

Like a football team playing defense—backpedaling, being pushed down the field, trying to put up a line of resistance, trying to place obstructions in Progress's way, and waiting, hoping for reinforcements, the political writer writes...

And then going on offense, when there's a chance for the defense to breathe, and trying to *create* a thing, a leisurely thing (ball control!): the artist weaves a path back up the field, play after play, moving the ball forward until the story is finished, or until there is some fracture within the system—an interception, a fumble—that requires the defensive team (who may not yet have gotten their breath back from the last series) to trot back onto the field, and all too often deep in their own territory.

Ah, shit, I'm talking like a madman. I just like the game. The game of being alive. I like to participate in it. Writing's the way I do that.

And shit, I forgot what I meant to say all along.

I've been talking in abstractions in this essay. Let me shift to the specific. There is a wild valley in northwest Montana, the Yaak Valley, which is home to wolverines, grizzlies, wolves, lions, woodland caribou, great gray owls, and many other threatened and endangered species. Yaak Valley is wet and thickly forested, not a backpacker's country at all—dense cedar jungles—but it is a sanctuary, a harbor, for wild things, and for diversity.

Yaak Valley has been hit hard by the local timber industry for many generations. Many of the endangered species in the valley are down to single-digit populations: nine grizzlies, five wolves, one caribou...

Despite the valley's biological diversity, there's not *one acre* of designated wilderness in this quarter-million acre valley, the wildest valley in the Lower Forty-Eight. At this moment a Montana Wilderness Bill is being drafted, and it's a chance where letter writers—not artists—can make a difference, can flood Congress with cards and letters demanding that the federal wildlands of Yaak Valley (Roderick Mountain, Grizzly Peak, and Mt. Henry) be protected. Not for backpackers, because it's not that kind of country. But for true wilderness—for the many wild things holed up in this last sanctuary, where the northern Rockies crash into the Pacific Northwest.

Art or literature? You can spend ten years on a novel—or you can write a letter to Pat Williams in the House (U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515), to Max Baucus and Conrad Burns in the Senate (U.S. Senate, Washington, DC 20510), and to your own representatives

and senators, asking that the federal wildlands in Yaak Valley be protected, finally. And through the muscular imposition of your will, your passion, you can protect a couple of small 20,000-acre harbors for all eternity.

Now tell me: which is the work of art? And which lasts longer? Which has more heart beneath it, and more order-made-of-chaos?

If you need more information, you can write me at 472 Upper Ford Rd., Troy, MT 59935. I will fool with art later this year, perhaps. Right now we are trying hard to save a mountain, and the forest may not be here next year if we don't do this now. Wolverines! Grizzlies! If this is not art, I don't want to hear about it. I will write about the fairy slipper, the Calypso orchid, later. First we must save them.

Yaak Valley, Montana



## Sound and Light: A Response to Anne LaBastille

John Cooley

Anne LaBastille argues, in her essay "A Gift of Silence" (reprinted in the Spring 1992 issue of the *Newsletter*), that silence is an "exquisitely fragile natural resource that no one thinks about." What reader of this *Newsletter*, recalling LaBastille's impassioned plea for silence in wild and wilderness country such as the Adirondacks of New York, would disagree? Certainly not I, but I want to quarrel briefly with her plea for silence, and to add a concern of my own.

When LaBastille says, "once silence stretched over the Adirondacks from shore to shore, peak to peak..." and "silence is an integral part of every climbing, camping, or canoeing trip," she describes natural conditions both unknown and almost inconceivable to me. Silence, the complete absence of sound, is a rarity in the natural world as well as in the human world. Absolute silence is so stark, so shocking a condition, one almost always notes its absent presence. We are all too busy chattering, squawking, howling, nibbling, buzzing, and crying to allow for much true silence.

During the twenty-five summers I have spent in back country of the Adirondack-Lake Champlain bioregion, I can vividly recall two or three experiences of absolute silence. By contrast, my backcountry experiences have been filled with sounds: the rock-clattering reverberation of waters rushing toward the lowlands, the soft scrape of hiking boots over roots, the sough of wind through ridge-top spruce and balsam fir. Just as silence casts an invisible blanket, a hermit thrush whistles its fluted notes, or a pair of white-throated sparrows converse from neighboring ridges. In fact, the condition we all fear most in the Adirondacks is the descent of silence, a silence caused by high-altitude biological devastation from acid deposition.

I suspect Anne LaBastille is really disturbed about human sounds—not the sounds of hiking boots on Adirondack trails, the click of camera shutters, the crackle of brisk campfires at hundreds of Adirondack backcountry camp sites, but those louder decibels of human-generated sounds mostly caused by gasoline-fueled internal combustion engines. Since LaBastille describes her Adirondack life in several autobiographical books, one can readily observe that she, too, shares in producing the noise she decries by using an outboard motor, chainsaws, a truck, and firearms. Some years ago on Beebe Pond in Vermont, my neighbors and I petitioned the state legislature for an environment free from outboard motors. The result was a remarkably quiet, safe, and clean body of water, a pond restored to herons and gulls, swimmers, and sail boats. In addition to such minor evidence of ordinances to muffle our noisiest human activities, our engines are quieter than ever before. We are being encouraged to wear ear protection and watch our decibels, but to what extent would we be willing to curb our dependence on the internal combustion engine and restore to our ears the quieter sounds of the natural world?

The problem of noise pollution also plagued Thoreau; his chapter on "Sounds" in *Walden* reminds us that the chief violation of life in the Concord woods was the sound of the Fitchburg Railroad ("the whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter..."). Thoreau also enunciates a second major invasion of country life by the industrial age when he comments, "far through unfrequented woods ... in the darkest night dart these bright saloons ... scaring the owl and fox." The violation of night by our proliferation of light is the other half of this invasive pair. The several nature preserves within the city limits of Kalamazoo, Michigan, where I live, are so well lighted by the bounce effect of metropolitan lighting that I can see well enough to ski or read the paper even on moonless winter nights. The growing demand for outdoor security lighting sadly signals that all over the land we are "retaking the night" with fossil-fueled daylight. Absolute darkness may soon be a phenom-

enon of wilderness valleys and the photographic darkroom. By contrast, I lived in a small English village a few years ago, where, as is the custom in Devon, the lights are turned off at 11 each evening. On numerous occasions I walked home from the Half Moon Pub in darkness as complete as I have known in Adirondack campsites. From the desperate city to the desperate country, as Thoreau would express it, we are presently too worried about personal security to change the way we live in America. Yet we need to find ways to turn off the lights along with the engines, or we will miss altogether the silent dance of the fire flies.

#### Western Michigan University

### Journal Notes

The Spring 1993 issue of *The Georgia Review* focuses on nature writing. Contents include six essays (one by Barry Lopez, another by Louise Erdrich), two short stories, work by fourteen poets, and numerous reviews.

The Volume Four 1993 issue of *PRAXIS: Graduate Criticism and Theory* is devoted to "Denatured Environments." Copies are available for \$5 from PRAXIS, Murray Hall, CAC, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903.

The Winter 1993 issue of *Ohio Review* is devoted to "Art and Nature: Essays by Contemporary Writers." Gillian Conoley, John Haines, Reg Saner, Jane Miller, Scott Russell Sanders, Charles Simic, and a number of other writers contributed essays.

The Winter 1993 issue of *The CEA Critic* includes several interesting essays pertaining to environmental literature: Richard Sanzenbacher on nature poetry, Paul Delaney on D.H. Lawrence and Deep Ecology, Ian Marshall on Robinson Jeffers, Robanna Sumrell Knott on *Walden*, and Ralph Black on John Burroughs.

The Fall 1992 issue of *Manoa* features a special nature-writing symposium organized by John A. Murray. Contributors to the symposium include Rick Bass, John Daniel, Edward Hoagland, Linda Hasselstrom, William Kittredge, Barry Lopez, Peter Wild, and eight other important nature writers.

*Weber Studies* invites submissions—essays, fiction, and poetry—pertaining to the concept and/or experience of "wilderness" for the Fall 1994 issue. For information, write: Scott Slovic, Guest Co-editor, *Weber Studies* Wilderness Issue, Department of English, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666. After August 31, 1993, contact: Neila C. Seshachari, Editor, *Weber Studies*, Department of English, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408. Submission deadline: December 31, 1993.

### Conference Notes

Squaw Valley, California—"Art of the Wild: Writing with the Natural World," July 17-24, 1993. Presented by the University of California, Davis, and the Twenty-fourth Annual Squaw Valley Community of Writers. Faculty include John Daniel, Edward Hoagland, Sandra McPherson, Gary Nabhan, Pattiann Rogers, Jack Shoemaker, and Gary Snyder. Tuition: \$485.00. UC-Davis academic credit available. For information, contact Jack Hicks, Director, The Art of the Wild, Department of English, UC-Davis, Davis, CA 95616. Or phone: (916) 752-1658. Application deadline: June 11, 1993.

Boulder, Colorado—"Summer Institute: Applied Deep Ecology," August 1-14, 1993. Presented by the Institute for Deep Ecology Education, the program will offer "skill building in eco-psychology, restoration ecology, community intervention, and new educational techniques for transforming environmental values and behavior." For information, write: The Institute for Deep Ecology Education, Box 2290, Boulder, CO 80306. Or phone: (303) 939-8398.

Wichita, Kansas—"Reimagining the West," Western Literature Association Conference, October 7-9, 1993. Proposals by June 15 to Diane Quantic, Department of English, The Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67269-0014. The second annual ASLE meeting will take place in conjunction with WLA.

Palo Alto, California—"Remapping Cultural Space: The New Geographies," The Western Humanities Conference, October 14-16, 1993. Focus on "the special production and articulation of space, and the cultural and imaginative construction of place." For information, contact Charles Junkerman, Stanford Humanities Center, Mariposa House, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-8603.

Davis, California—"Recovering the Wild," October 22-24, 1993. The conclusion of a series of conferences sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Center over the last year and a half. The conferences are "designed to bring together humanists, artists, social scientists, and natural scientists to assist in the task of articulating an environmentalism that will be appropriate for the twenty-first century. For information, contact: David Robertson, Department of English, UC-Davis, Davis, CA 95616.

Ogden, Utah—"The North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference," November 11-13, 1993. A conference addressing the wilderness from an interdisciplinary perspective. For information, write: Mike Vause, Department of English, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408-1201. Submission deadline for papers/panels: August 16, 1993.

## Three Examples of New Nature Writing

*The Ninemile Wolves.* By Rick Bass. (Livingston, MT: Clark City Press, 1992. 165 pages, \$22.95 hardcover.)

*The Trail Home: Essays.* By John Daniel. (New York: Pantheon, 1992. 223 pages, \$21.00 hardcover.)

*Stalking the Ice Dragon: An Alaskan Journey.* By Susan Zwinger. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991. 219 pages, \$24.95.)

These three recent books, all by a new generation of writers, exemplify the vitality, quality, and diversity of contemporary American nature writing. Though the three authors have well-known names—Rick Bass has published five earlier books of fiction and literary nonfiction, John Daniel is the poetry editor of *Wilderness* magazine and the author of a book of poetry, and Susan Zwinger is the second generation of her family to write about the American land—they do represent a younger generation of writers. Each has given us at least one remarkably strong book, but each of them is also early in the process of shaping what promises to be a long and interesting career. Talented writers like these support John A. Murray's recent claim that nature writing is becoming "arguably the major genre in American literature" and suggest that this movement, which some critics are beginning to call "a new American Renaissance," will continue to prosper.

Rick Bass's new book, *The Ninemile Wolves*, differs substantially from his earlier work. As a chronicle of our relationship to a species that we fear and have sought to destroy, its subject matter is roughly similar to his earlier essay, "The Grizzly Cowboys" (*Wild to the Heart*, 1987). That search for the six grizzlies remaining in an Idaho wilderness area was, however, characterized by a philosophical detachment, not the passionate intensity that marks this history of the Ninemile wolves and their precarious battle for survival. As other readers of his work have observed, this involvement leads to Bass's most critical book to date.

Bass's day-to-day reporting tracks the movements and the trials of the wolves who appear in the Ninemile Valley of Montana and records how they are helped by two ranchers, the Thisted brothers, and especially by the extraordinary personal concern and unrelenting work of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist named Mike Jimenez. Along the way, however, Bass provides a brief but telling history of how our culture has worked to do away with the wolf (700,000 wolves were killed in Montana between 1870 and 1877, for example). While we can argue that our current age is

slowly adopting more enlightened attitudes, he shows how the attempts to translate this growing goodwill into actual practice are falling short, how the country's increasing interest in protecting and restoring the wolves dissipates in political and bureaucratic infighting. It is, in fact, this necessary emphasis on the destructive interplay of state and federal policies that makes this Bass's bleakest book to date, and causes it, in a thirty-page appendix entitled "Wise Blood," to become even darker. Here we learn the Mike Jimenez has been re-assigned away from the Ninemile Valley and that his efforts are to be spread over a much wider area.

The book is not entirely hopeless, though. Bass's passionate prose inspires us to share his admiration for the wolves and their fierce will to live. It also successfully conveys the important lesson that he feels must be learned from the story of the Ninemile pack. For him, it is the power of enacted individual concern which will help the wolves survive, not the attempted objectivity which he attributes to most biologists or to the inefficient maneuverings of the various governmental agencies. This belief has been vindicated by some recent events in Alaska, where the power of personal commitment was demonstrated in the public response to Governor Wally Hickel's plan for killing many of the wolves there. In the governor's mind, fewer wolves meant more caribou, and this, in turn, translated into more tourists and therefore more dollars. However, so many individuals threatened to boycott Alaskan travel that the governor was forced to cancel his plans. Unfortunately, this good news is balanced by a sad coda to Bass's epilogue. The *High Country News* recently reported that Mike Jimenez and other biologists employed by the state of Montana have lost their jobs. Jimenez himself remarked to an interviewer that "I am a dinosaur," thus emphasizing the survival issues at stake here and underlining the need for books like Rick Bass's timely and powerfully written plea for the wolf.

John Daniel's first book of essays, *The Trail Home*, calls on us to be saner and wiser in our use of water, our relationship with animals, our ways of seeing and relating to all our landscapes from the desert to the old-growth forests, and our political approaches to environmental issues. These diverse essays also have a common, underlying theme: each seeks to illuminate "the trail home," to find, despite and within the nomadic shifts that make up much of contemporary American life, viable ways to reconnect to the earth. "In the Navajo language," writes Daniel, "there is no word for changing homes: to relocate is to wither and blow away. For my wife and me uprooting and re-planting ourselves without their five-hundred-year marriage to a region, changing homes must have a meaning if we are to live and not wither. Home for us is not the place we were born, or that perfect some-

where else we used to dream of, but the place where we are—the place we stay long enough to begin to see. It is not a matter of owning the land, or working the land, but learning to hold the land in mind, to begin gropingly—blind on a dark hillside—to imagine ourselves as part of it” (213). Daniel’s achievement is such that some of these essays already have the heft and feel of classic essays about our right relationship to the natural world. “The Impoverishment of Sightseeing,” for example, is one of the few essays on the subject that can confidently be placed beside the relevant chapters of *Desert Solitaire* on a course reading list. This is not to say that Daniel’s own prose style is like Abbey’s (it is, as the passage above indicates, markedly different), but instead to emphasize that Daniel’s own blend of lucid, graceful prose and important insights enables these essays to hold their own with the best that we have.

While I suspect that each reader will come away from this collection with his or her own favorites, I want to mention briefly two other essays, “Among Animals” and “The Long Dance of the Trees.” “We have been leaving the family of animals for a long time,” Daniel announces in “Among Animals.” He then describes both the loneliness he feels in our attempts to stand apart from animal nature, to place ourselves complacently on the “lofty peak of our human achievement,” and the consolation he feels we can have in remembering that we “are animals too, born into a world of animals.” In “The Long Dance of the Trees,” Daniel takes on the subject of the Northwest’s old-growth timber. He approaches it by meditating on John Muir’s statement that “We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men” and setting this beside his own earlier experience as a choker-setter for the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company. He speculates, with scrupulous fairness, on how a career “wood-products man” and his opposite, an ecologist/writer who is very aware that the paper used to print his work comes from harvested trees, would view “the slow exuberant dance the forest does through time.” These diverse elements are woven carefully into an essay that is both compelling and informative, one which provides important observations on how we could best serve the ecology and the economy of the Pacific Northwest. As these summaries suggest, *The Trail Home* is a remarkably successful book, one which works equally well as discrete essays on a wide variety of environmental topics and as a book unified by Daniel’s eloquent celebration of “the endless poem of being.”

Those who come to Susan Zwinger’s *Stalking the Ice Dragon* expecting a viewpoint and style reminiscent of Ann Zwinger’s work will be surprised. As she stated in a mother and daughter question-and-answer session at the 1992 meeting of the Western Literature Association, Susan Zwinger sees her own

writing as more directly political than her mother’s. She dedicates this book, for example, to Edward Abbey and Rachel Carson as well as to Ann Zwinger, and her prose also brings personal and gender issues more prominently into play. If her mother’s characteristic stance can be seen as deliberately impersonal, carefully distanced from statements about herself and her political concerns, Susan Zwinger’s prose often aligns her more closely with those women writers who would designate themselves as “ecofeminists”: “Woman-Travels-Alone up here is a non sequitur. When I enter a restaurant early in the morning, men gawk at me like deformed game. As in Mexico, I do not look into eyes. They are speaking passionately about something when I walk in, but forks pause in midstroke, mouths remain open, and only slowly is the silence again broken. I walk through their cat’s cradle of stares, a cat through a sprinkler system, and sit down to face the immense Klastine Plateau rising up at the door. I listen. They talk number of prongs, sizes and inches, and I slowly learn that it is a large stone sheep they speak of, now fettered, still warm, to a truck rack. It is only the first of many whole animals that will stare blankly at me, twitching in a auto-neuro movement” (7). Susan Zwinger’s narrative does share with her mother’s writing a detailed attention to natural history, a commitment to describing carefully and fully the landscapes, the plants, and the animal life she observes. And, at times, her approach to such description is very familiar. The following meditation on the tundra colors, with its close, painterly attention to variations of color, certainly reminds us of Ann Zwinger: “The outer margins of life, like the Southwestern deserts, and the northern tundras, where the greens are never crude and robust, draw me: the subtle ranges of grays, lavenders, oranges like flute scales in Oriental quarter tones, where one sits through long, quiet observations.” But where her mother’s prose is usually meticulously straightforward, Susan Zwinger’s observations are more characteristically refracted through a richly metaphoric sensibility. The book begins, for example with a description of the Athabaskan languages and their close ties to the landscape as “Earth-Sprung Tongues.” Other sections bear such names as “Frozen Desert/Burning Seas” and “An Oceanic Ending/Beginning.” Because she often builds her narrative with imaginative leaps and poetic compression, we can seldom read her prose with less than our full attention. Fortunately, she, like all good nature writers, rewards our reading by helping us see the landscape anew.

Some readers will have an initial skepticism toward this book, a reluctance to give themselves over completely to an Alaskan narrative which is written by an outsider and in which the travel is mostly by automobile. There are also unfortunate errors in this book: the village of Bettles comes out as Bettle; the Porcupine caribou herd (so-called because of its proximity



during much of the year to the Porcupine River in Canada) becomes a strange hybrid—the porcupine caribou; and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act becomes here the American Native Claims Settlement Act, etc. But the virtues of the narrative more than make up for such annoyances. The originality of her vision, the power of her language, and the effectiveness of her environmental observations will, however, win over most readers. Susan Zwinger's first book, like the recent books by John Daniel and Rick Bass, argues not only that we are in an exceptionally rich time for American nature writing, but that this richness will continue to grow. These three writers give us much to enjoy, and much, as well, to anticipate.

Terrell F. Dixon, University of Houston



## New Nature Writing: Rethinking "Nature and Culture"

One of the great dreams of man must be to find some place between the extremes of nature and civilization where it is possible to live without regret.

—Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (1988)

*Finding Home: Writing on Nature and Culture from Orion Magazine.* Ed. Peter Sauer. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. 293 pages, \$15.00.)

*Nature's New Voices.* Ed. John A. Murray. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992. 242 pages, \$15.95.)

*On Nature's Terms: Contemporary Voices.* Ed. Thomas J. Lyon and Peter Stine. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992. 212 pages, \$14.95.)

It is instructive to note, first of all, that in order to find these three outstanding collections of new nature writing in your local library, you had better bring your hiking boots. According to the Library of Congress, *Finding Home* should be shelved under GF75 (Man—Influence on Nature), *Nature's New Voices* under QH104 (Natural History—United States), and *On Nature's Terms* under PS509 (Nature—Literary Collections). This, even though four of the nature writers featured share space in two of the collections, and one (Terry Tempest Williams) has garnered a place in all three.

Part of this discrepancy may be traced to the different ways each editor attempts to characterize what is essentially the same material—that is, how each editor defines "nature writing." *Finding Home*, an anthology of writing from *Orion* magazine, is the most exploratory of the collections, attempting to make sense of what editor Peter Sauer calls "new nature," or our changing conception of what "nature" really is. "Scarcely a decade ago," he writes in the introduction, "Americans believed nature flowed toward a balanced state with the inevitability of a great river. We might disturb the flow, but in the end nature would 'heal itself' and run to wilderness.... Now it seems that things are not as we thought. Nature is not permanent, not separate. The sanctuaries we set aside for nature are not large enough, and no distance is far enough for coexistence." As our ideas about "nature" change, so too must our definition of "nature writing." The nature writing in *Finding Home*, Sauer says, is "an exploration of a changing culture's way of living with a changing nature"; it is "a reflection of our own bewilderment, and of the effort each of us must make to reforge our bonds to nature."

John Murray offers a more literary-historical approach to the genre in the introduction to *Nature's New Voices*, locating the origin of the modern nature essay in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and particularly in *Walden*

(1854). According to Murray, the three major themes of *Walden*—communion, renewal, and liberation—can also be found in the seventeen essays he reprints, all by younger nature writers. But *Walden* was not the “great American nature book,” as Murray has stated elsewhere (*Manoa*, Fall 1992), and the genre, he says, is only “approaching its maturity”: “No evidence of senescence is yet manifest—it has not exhausted the idiom, become institutionalized, slipped into satiric self-parody, fallen into the hands of unskilled practitioners, been rejected by a younger generation of writers or lost its readership and hence the capital that supports it in the publishing world.” If his introduction too quickly assumes a consensus about the definition of nature writing, however, Murray’s preface challenges that consensus by stating that good writers “take literature where it has not been before” and “[push] language over the boundary.” “These writers pioneer the trails that later become highways,” he says, “and their books are the maps we use to explore both human nature and wild nature.”

*On Nature’s Terms* takes a similar approach to that of *Finding Home*, though one less explicitly stated. Thomas Lyon, of course, has addressed the issue of nature writing in detail in his thorough introduction to *This Incomparable Lande* (1989) as well as in his contributions to *A Literary History of the American West* (1987). In the introduction to *On Nature’s Terms*, he offers a modest reassessment of the genre in light of the widespread “sense of terminus” about our time, as reflected in titles such as *The Death of Nature* (1980) by Carolyn Merchant and *The End of Nature* (1989) by Bill McKibben. “I think it is not an overstatement, under the conditions,” writes Lyon, “to hold that our most basic attitudes toward the world—our whole sense of ‘man and nature,’ as the phrase has it—need to be revolutionized.” Nature writing, Lyon says, helps bring about this revolution by getting us “out from under the dome,” out from the indoor ideology of comfort and control, out into contact with the earth. Yet Lyon also recognizes the complexity of categorization, noting that “the genre is far from formulaic” and that “[a] nature essay can be about anything—or the loss of anything—in what e.e. cummings called the ‘world of born,’ including of course human nature.”

Another reason the Library of Congress may have categorized these volumes under the separate headings of human-nature relations, natural history, and literature may be their internal organization. *Finding Home* is divided into five sections which address the impact of our changing relationship with “nature” on our local knowledge of a place, on geographies near and distant, on childhood, and on our methods of perception. *Nature’s New Voices*, in contrast, arranges its essays geographically around the continental divide and includes the state in which the events of each essay take place in its table of contents. *On Nature’s Terms* appears not to have imposed a similar kind of structure upon its essays, but the book’s categorization as “literature” may derive from its roots in a special issue of the journal *Witness* (1989) devoted to “New Nature Writing,” in which thirteen of these pieces were originally published. (*On Nature’s*

*Terms* reprints three additional essays and includes four original pieces. Terry Tempest Williams’s famous “Clan of One-Breasted Women” [from *Refuge* (1991) is the only essay dropped from the *Witness* issue—in favor of “Undressing the Bear,” a new piece she has written—but I do miss the line drawings and photographs [especially of Stephen Trimble’s dog Carlos] that were also dropped from the journal version.)

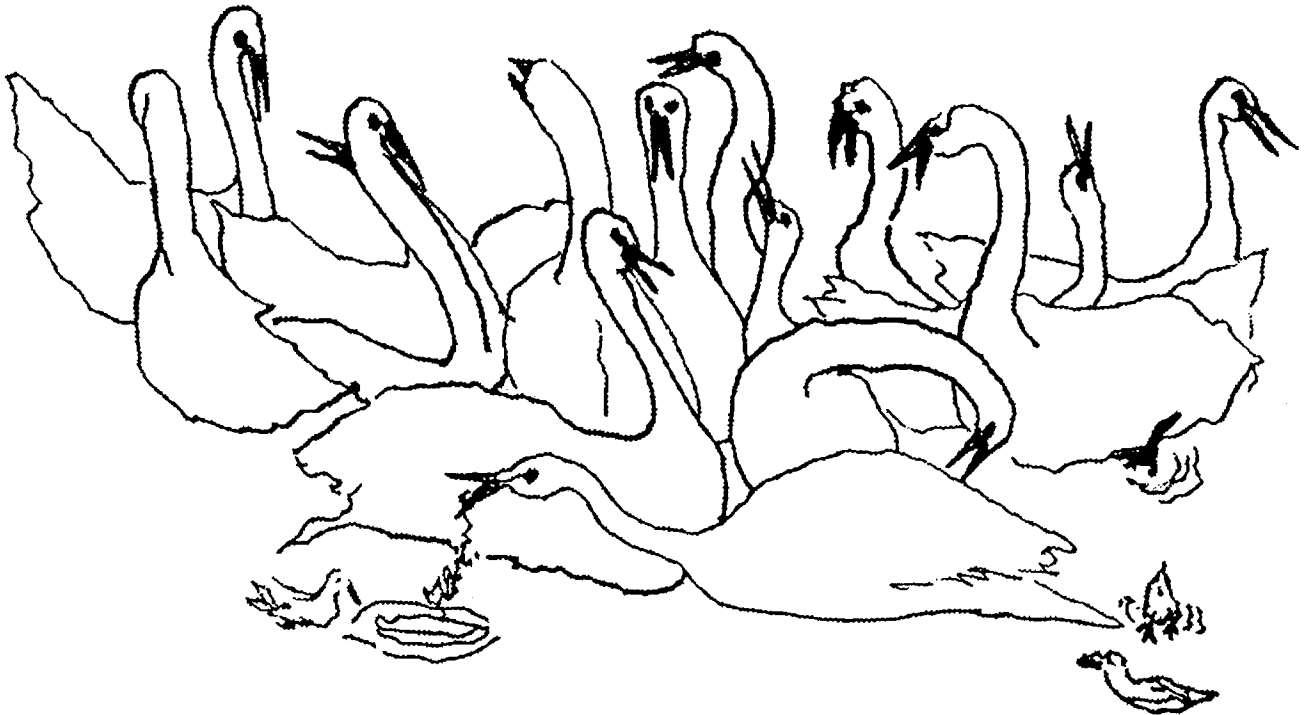
Ultimately, however, this confusion in cataloging is probably due to the composite subject matter of these essays, which are no more about culture than they are about nature. Rather, they are about the very activity of cataloging, about our propensity to separate rather than connect, to recognize difference instead of similarity. (Where do you put such a book?) It may, therefore, be best to define contemporary “nature writing” not as a fixed sphere of aesthetic activity but as a contested space in which various discourses about the meaning of “nature and culture” interact, a space in which generic change plays as important a role as generic continuity. As Ralph Cohen writes in “Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change” (1991), “Call a genre a family of texts, a communal group of texts, a consortium of texts. Whatever they are called, such texts are dynamic. Their semantic elements are both *intra*-active within the genre and *interactive* with members of other genres.” The writers in these collections, then, are aware not only of their participation in a tradition of writing, but also of their *transformation* of that tradition with respect to other genres. In fact, some of my favorite essays from these books are the ones least likely to be read strictly as “nature writing,” such as Wallace Kaufman’s “Confessions of a Developer” from *Finding Home*, John Daniel’s “The Impoverishment of Sightseeing” from *Nature’s New Voices*, and Rick Bass’s extraordinary story, “The Afterlife,” from *On Nature’s Terms*.

Although each of these pieces weaves a web of thematic intricacy that refuses to be picked apart without collapsing, it is nevertheless possible to identify some of the strands which most of these selections have in common. Almost all of the essays, for example, stress the distinctiveness of particular places (especially areas of wilderness) over the homogenized landscape common to our cultural perception. They also offer various ways of understanding these places, whether in solitude or in community, up close or from a distance, through the experience of travel or by remaining at home. In addition, they concern themselves with the role of animals in the landscape—both human and non-human, hunter and hunted, friend and enemy, male and female. And, finally, they stress the importance of time in nature writing—whether geological, mythic, or remembered time—a point Paul Bryant also makes in his recent essay on that topic (*North Dakota Quarterly*, Spring 1991).

I would be remiss if I did not address some of the problems with these collections, though I admit they are few and far between. Rarely did I stop to note a fault; more often, I stopped to catch my breath. Still, a few of the essays suffer from overindulgence in detail, as if meaning could be

derived from the simple compilation of facts. A few seem a bit *too* self-conscious, dropping names of authors, reflecting on their reflections. And a few lack the subtlety of tone and complexity of vision that the best nature writers—such as Barry Lopez and Ann Zwinger—bring to their craft. But, after all, not everyone can write like this: "The appearance of the lily on the page is the future, but I've already seen it in my mind's eye, turned it in my hand, seen all lilies in this lily, known dryness in my roots, spreading in my leaves, sunshine polishing my stalk. Because of this lily, which I never saw until a few ays ago, I know all about waiting for enough warmth, all about cool dawns and wilting noons. Because of this lily I know about desert heat and winter sleep and what the desert demands" (Zwinger, "Drawing on Experience," *Finding Home*). These points aside, however, reading these essays is like bring caught napping. Some shake you gently, others dowse you with water, but either way—as biologist Harley Shaw puts it in Charles Bowden's "Love Among the Lion Killers" (*On Nature's Terms*)—"You will be forced to reexamine your beliefs."

Daniel J. Philippon, University of Virginia





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