

Birds and Bees 101: Finding Nature in Literature

By Steve Grant

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While a graduate student in English at a Midwestern university, Laird E. Christensen wanted to focus on literature with environmental themes.

His faculty adviser practically sneered.

"My adviser said, 'Spike trees on your own time. You're here to study literature,'" Christensen said.

That was 1992, and much has changed. Laird is completing work on a doctorate in literature in the environment -- at the University of Oregon, where he has been free to study literary works with nature themes.

"When I came here five years ago, it was the only place you could do Ph.D. work in this field, and now it is becoming quite common," he said.

Undergraduate and graduate courses in nature writing, or literature and the environment, as they often are called, have exploded in recent years.

'It's booming," said Sam Pickering, a nature writer and professor of English who teaches a nature-writing course at the University of Connecticut along with John J. Gatta, another English professor. Whenever the course is offered, it quickly fills up.

"I have not heard of a single case anywhere where there was not overwhelming student interest," said Cheryll Glotfelty of the University of Nevada-Reno, who is thought to be the first U.S. scholar to hold the title professor of literature and environment.

Twenty years ago, only a handful of such courses were offered at American colleges and universities, but the number has grown dramatically, especially in the past five years.

To help instructors planning courses in the field, Christensen just completed a survey of American colleges to determine which were offering courses and what they were teaching. He received more than 200 course outlines, many of which will be published in a guide for instructors.

"I think they are growing in popularity, and in variety -- ranging from the very disciplinary and literary to the very interdisciplinary and environmental," said Ann Woodlief, associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

Literature and environment courses are often offered through English departments but also are offered as part of environmental-studies programs.

At Yale, for example, freshmen in recent years have been able to take a seminar in nature writing. Added to the introductory course in the undergraduate environmental-studies program this year is a unit on literature and nature.

Linda H. Peterson, professor of English and chairwoman of the English department at Yale, said students have shown increasing interest in the field, and graduate students have begun to submit doctoral dissertations looking at aspects of nature and literature.

At Trinity College, a number of courses over the years have explored nature and literature topics, and next semester the school will offer a course in the field called "The Enchanted Eye: Seeing the World through Poetry and Science," said Ronald R. Thomas, a professor of English.

The range of authors used is wide, and the texts taught include both fiction and non-fiction. But a few authors appear over and over in the course outlines, among them Henry David Thoreau, author of the classic "Walden"; Aldo Leopold, author of "A Sand County Almanac"; and Annie Dillard, a Wesleyan University faculty member who wrote "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek."

The poet Robert Frost, whose literature is grounded in the New England landscape, is often assigned, as is Rachel Carson, whose book "The Sea Around Us" was a gracefully written exposition of all that was known about the ocean environment in her time.

However, "I think everybody would agree that Henry Thoreau's 'Walden' is the text you have to read," Glotfelty said.

There are a number of theories why the subject is booming.

John Elder, professor of English and environmental studies at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vt., one of the first scholars in the field and a major figure in its development, said one reason is that the writing is often a joy to read. From Thoreau's time in the 19th century through today, a series of writers established what is considered the American nature-writing tradition.

"That tradition of literature is very strong-voiced and gripping," Elder said. "People love it."

While "Walden" may not be an exciting book for some college-age readers, many of the other texts used are, including several titles by Edward Abbey, who wrote of western U. S. environmental issues with passion and style.

The field also lets students bridge science and the humanities, which Elder believes is part of the attraction. "You can feel the wholeness of your education and your culture. Students are hungry for that. We want something that ties together our whole experience."

Another element of the popularity, Elder believes, is that many students are simply concerned about environmental issues and interested in reading literature that addresses the workings of the natural world.

"I think it is part of a larger social trend," Christensen said, "as we recognize that how we have been doing things is not sustainable."

Said Woodlief, "A lot of students feel very disconnected from nature, and they are not happy about that."

Adam B. Silverman, a junior creative-writing major at UConn, found himself attracted to UConn's nature and literature course in part because he enjoys the outdoors and wanted to read more of the nature writers, whom he discovered at the suggestion of a graduate student.

"It is definitely an exciting course to take," he said. "All of it is good."

"You get into ideas most people have never considered except maybe in fleeting ways if they have been out in a canoe or seen a mountain from a car," said Kurt Heidinger, who is working on a Ph.D. in the subject at UConn.

Trinity's Thomas sees the interest in the literature of nature as part of a larger pattern. Essayists, poets and novelists at the end of recent centuries have expressed anxieties about environmental conditions, he said. And students are receptive.

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