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## Nature Writing, American Literature, and the Idea of Community: A Conversation with Barry Lopez

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**David Thomas Sumner**

## **Nature Writing, American Literature, and the Idea of Community—A Conversation with Barry Lopez**



*Widely respected as a naturalist and writer, Barry Lopez is a major voice in American letters. He is the author of several volumes of fiction and nonfiction including River Notes, Desert Notes, Lessons from the Wolverine, Of Wolves and Men, Arctic Dreams, and most recently Light Action in the Caribbean. Lopez has received the prestigious John Burroughs Medal for distinguished natural history writing and the Christopher Medal for humanitarian writing. He also received the National Book Award in 1987 for Arctic Dreams. Lopez currently lives and writes in the McKenzie River drainage of the Oregon Cascades. Lopez and Sumner had the following conversation in June of 1999. Reference to Stephen Trimble and Terry Tempest Williams' influential compilation Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness (Lopez himself being a contributor) offered the conversation a common and convenient point of departure.*



*David Thomas Sumner (Ph.D., University of Oregon) teaches in the English Department at Weber State University. His essays have appeared in Ecocomposition (SUNY Press, 2001) and In Our Own Voice (Allyn & Bacon, 1999). He is also contributing editor for The Shape of Reason (Allyn & Bacon, 2000). Sumner is currently working on a rhetorical study of American nature writing and its connection to environmental ethics.*

*This interview is part of a series of conversations with contemporary western writers about the ethical and cultural implications of nature writing. Other interviews by David Sumner include:*

[Conversation with David Quammen](#)

[Conversation with David James Duncan](#)

[Conversation with Stephen Trimble](#)

[Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams](#)

*Sumner: The impact of Testimony—in a rather unpredictable way—was quite extraordinary, wasn't it?*

**Lopez: I am really gratified to see that this idea of Terry's and Steve's has borne such fruit. And I'm intrigued with your idea that—nature writing you know is a peculiar animal. It has complicated connotations, depending on where you are, in academe or in commercial publishing. So, one interesting way to approach it is to say that, historically, literature poses the big questions for a reader in quest of meaning, for his or her own life and for the life of a society.**

(Interruption to order food. Lopez orders a cheeseburger.)

**I don't want to make this too complicated, and it's obviously my idiosyncratic take, but.... You have this really terrific, terrifically powerful and difficult question coming into focus with the Copernican revolution and reaching its apotheosis in the Enlightenment. What is the position of the individual within the community and how do the individual view and the community view play against each other? In late twentieth century biological terms, you're trying to understand ecosystems by taking pieces out of them and then, too, trying to objectify the whole ecosystem.**

**A prime example of what I mean in the history of Western thought is the disembowelment of the continuum of space and time into two components, the spatial and the temporal. It's only with that kind of break that you can develop what is popularly known as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. These are some of the big questions in literature: what is the relationship of the individual to God? What is the relationship of the individual to society? What is the relationship of the individual to the state? Those questions, I think, began to disappear from mainstream American literature after the Second World War. We developed a more hermetic or solipsistic literature. The writer, in general terms, ceased to be a companion of the reader and a member of the community and became an authority—a figure removed, who importuned or cajoled or indicted or led the reader by the nose.**

**So for me, the central question in nature writing today—in a lot of writing—is the issue of commun-ity. How is it composed and how is it going to maintain its integrity in the face of capitalism, say? You know, you can go all over the map with capitalism, but one of the things that it does is destroy community. You cannot have sharing and capitalism, and sharing is what communities are all about.**

*What do you think caused this rupture?*

**Put yourself in some New York living room in the late fifties—with all of us students at Columbia or NYU or wherever, and all imbued with, say, the work of Sartre. What's happening in that room is the playing out of the Copernican revolution, the first really pervasive statement in the West about the destruction of human centrality—it's not everything revolving around the earth, but the earth revolving around the sun. So the center we learn does not lie here with us but elsewhere.**

**When Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*, he further destabilizes the notion of the centrality or the sacredness of human life by saying, "Look, there is no goal here. We are not talking about the apex of a system of creation that puts human beings at the top. We're an accident. And if you remove the refinements of culture, we are all the same—so terrifyingly the same." You gather that, I think, in his *Beagle* correspondence with his family and with his friends. Particularly after he meets Yaghan and Ona people in theory is the refinement of a notion central to logic: what is a trustworthy pattern?**

**But I think, again, this all has to do with nature writing. One of the reasons I believe nature writing has come to the fore is not because it's about the remnants of a dying planet, in some ways under the press of capitalist exploitation; it's because it's part of a continuous inquiry in literature and that is: What is the nature of the Divine, and what is the relationship of the individual to society? And why nature writing resonates so much today is that now, as was the case in the fifties, there is again a powerful, central metaphorical idea that elucidates these sometimes arcane issues, and that's ecology.**

**Ecology is the study of coherence in a community. In ecological studies, you can say, "Well, here's a predator-prey relationship," or, "Here's something to do with the oxygen or nitrogen cycle," or something like that. You can be very precise. But why the bear killed that deer, nobody knows—not even the bear. So the elusiveness of life, a revolt, if you will, against the rational, is central to a clear understanding of what ecological principles are all about.**

**So, when I look at nature writing, the first thing I think of is: "What are these people saying about community?" This is a social, political, and philosophical**

question. For me, as opposed to a lot of people in English departments, the issue is not biodiversity or backpacking or exploring the Arctic, but the failure of a social and political system to maintain the integrity of communal organizations. And to induce, thereby, a Tierra del Fuego—1832, I guess. Then, if you come up another thirty years to Freud, you have, once more, someone destroying the notion of the human being at the center of everything. Not only are we not at the center of anything, and not the goal of biological evolution, but we don't even know who we are or what we want to do. We are driven by impulses that are not apparent.

So, all of those things, in concert with capitalism, play into a system in which the center really collapses. The society doesn't know how it's organized or what its relationship to the Divine is. It's in an environment like that that that existential philosophy comes to the fore and a play like *No Exit* is written.

So we're sitting in that room talking, a bunch of us some afternoon, and one of the things that we would have talked about—if somebody brought up Sartre or Jackson Pollock, or why Joyce wrote that way—is particle physics. Particle physics was an intellectual event as much as a so-called scientific advance. It immediately became a pervasive metaphor because everything it said about reality seemed to fit perfectly with something like Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." So we're all nodding assent, saying, "particle physics, yeah, quantum theory." This is how we are talking, you know, our philosophy illuminated by quantum theory. That still goes on, with chaos theory now added to the discussion. But chaos theory is not science; it is a refinement in logic. You know, in Western terms if you divide things into epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and logic, chaos, state of bad health—bad mental health, bad physical health, bad spiritual health.

I know this will drive people right up the wall, but to me the best so-called nature writing has picked up the questions that American literature set aside after the Second World War in order to concentrate more on notions of the self. When you look at the rise of somebody like Peter Matthiessen, what you see is a conscience driven by issues of social justice. It's probably more obscure in the work of somebody like me because I don't publicly—I'm not a recluse but—I'm profoundly, and that's the right word, interested in the fate of human beings. A book like *Of Wolves and Men* is a long look at the nature of tolerance. It begins respectfully with an elucidation of the wolf according to a scientific tradition. Then it introduces, or I try to introduce at the same level, what the wolf might be if your approach were Navajo, or grasped through Nunamiut epistemology or Nunamiut science.

**And then I look at economic questions and then, in the last part of the book, I'm trying to say, "Look, Romulus and Remus isn't a children's story. We make these stories up because they fit our imagination." The real question is what are those stories all about? How is the imperial notion of the Roman empire fed by the idea of a wolf suckling two twins, two boys? How does that play into it? Not just into the mind of the intellectuals, but into the mind, if you will, of the PFC, the Private First Class.**

*Does it work mythically?*

**Yes, so much so that it's easily graspable by the man in the street.**

**So it's very gratifying to me that you would say: "What are some of the political and social currents—particularly about justice—of which these books [modeled after *Testimony*] are a manifestation." I wish more people in academic environments were willing to do that. But there is still that kind of prejudice, you know, that people who are so-called nature writers are following in the footsteps of biologists or ornithologists, or something. That's not the connection. If there is a connection in American literature, it's with why Melville makes that drama unfold on the landscape he does in *Moby Dick*. Or with what Stephen Crane is up to in a story like "The Open Boat." Or with what Willa Cather is doing out there in Nebraska, with the characters set in the landscape where she put them. And what is John Steinbeck up to? You could read *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez,"* which came out in 1941, and think it was published last year because his indictment of Japanese trawlers and bottom fishing is as meaningful today as it was when he wrote it.**

*It is interesting that you bring up that specific passage from the Sea of Cortez, because in part of my current book I am looking at how Steinbeck has this great ecological insight with the Japanese trawlers and how the Mexican government is selling off its future, but on the very next page they are spearing manta rays with twelve-foot wing spans just for the hell of it. It is more a sign of the time it was written than anything, but there is this insight with a failure to completely connect.*

**Exactly. And an analog for that is that Thoreau in some way does not know what he is up to. Thoreau's fundamental objection is to capitalism. What Thoreau saw, I think I got this from Dan Peck. We were having lunch once and talking about Thoreau, and what emerged—part of it was Dan and part of it was me—was an agreement that Thoreau intuited the failure of the foundation mythology of the United States. What he was looking for was another foundation mythology. And the foundation mythology he was after was one that integrated place and society—that saw the danger of taking those two things apart. And his model for it were Native American cultures living with minimal disturbance on the land.**

**Emerson said once about Thoreau, "He wants to live among us as an Indian." What he meant, I think, was that Thoreau saw that when a society is well integrated with place, it can sustain itself for thousands upon thousands of years. When a society exploits place, solely for economic gain, then, living in a finite universe, the society will falter.**

**So, the reason I think of this in regard to how Steinbeck seems to contradict himself by fishing for manta rays is that Thoreau intuited something that wasn't complete. He was grasping for something. And that's why there is more than one writer.**

*It's, of course, a complex question. It's not like one voice or one tack at it can solve our problems.*

**No. And I think, really, that the people to pay the closest attention to now are those who are stumbling around with this material, rather than sitting back in a zone where a lot of things have been figured out. In other words, people who are saying: "Nature writing is about community." I couldn't hold my own—maybe I could, but I don't think I could—in a room full of graduate students in literature, because that material has gone fuzzy for me, British and American literature or world literature. But literature is so much a part of my life, I believe these feelings that grow out of it have a solid foundation.**

**If I write a book and go on a book tour, I often have to answer questions that are not interesting to me, about why do you go to the Arctic or why do you do what you do? Well I don't know. I do it because I am driven, and what is driving me I don't really want to try to articulate. I don't want to be able to frame an answer about why this short story opens like this and closes like that; that's what it's**

doing. The more analytic I become about it, the more I enter the landscape of thinking, and when you're thinking you're not writing, at least I'm not.

If you take that issue of Steinbeck and ask what was going on here in the Sea of Cortez in 1940 and what was his objection to injustice in California, you see not only how Matthiessen is in some way the successor to Steinbeck, but that Rachel Carson brings forcefully into nature writing an element that we hadn't had before.

When I was a freshman in high school, you could have entered college without having taken any courses in science. The reason that changed is the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in October of '57. The emphasis in secondary education in the United States changed under the press of cold war ideology. Everybody had to take science courses. Five years later, when Rachel Carson publishes *Silent Spring*, a whole group of people my age who pick it up and read it are not science majors but English majors or humanities majors. So the materials and metaphors of science begin flooding literature. If you look at my generation, at people like Toby Wolf and Annie Dillard, who are exactly my age—you see that.

So you get this situation where Steinbeck gives way to Matthiessen—the questions of social justice carry straight through, the questions about landscape and its relationship to society, agrarian or whatever it happens to be. All that stuff carries through. A new element, though, is introduced by Peter, which is anthropology. You see that component today in Richard Nelson and Gary Nabhan. And then you see in Rachel Carson the infusion of biology, which falls within the purview of the literary writer from that point out and is not just for the guy watching birds.

*I look at the people that I like to read, and they've got this relationship to science, which is a respectful one. But, it seems to me, these writers also have this other focus that says, "OK, we see those things we've learned, but we want to press further and ask, 'What is the meaning of this in our life? How does this affect the way I live? How does this affect the way I relate to my neighbor, to the place I live in, to the universe?'" I look at Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, for example, which explores the grotesque but comes back at the end and says, "This is what we have, and we have got to decide how we are going to relate to it. We've got to see the grotesque in the context of these bigger philosophical questions." So what you say really interests me.*



**I think a lot of writers object to being called nature writers because the issues they are trying to address are not ordinarily thought of as the issues nature writers focus on. But once you understand, if you agree "nature writing" is a poor term for this strain of American literature clearly coming to the fore in a very powerful way, then you see it's just a bad term for something huge—it's not a ghetto.**

*Right. That's why Ed Abbey is more interesting to me than John Burroughs. It's not that Burroughs doesn't have important things to say. It's not to dismiss Burroughs, but it is to say that twentieth century nature writing is coming from Thoreau, not from Burroughs. I don't see Burroughs's relationship to Thoreau in the same way as I see your work or Abbey's work or Dillard's work.*

**I know what you mean. I also think that *Cold Mountain* is—I don't want to take a wonderful novel and put it in a box—but I think part of what Frazier is doing, or part of what makes that book so powerful, is that the drama, the human drama, is so thoroughly integrated into the place—as is true of a lot of what Cormac McCarthy writes. But nobody would readily say that Chuck Frazier is a nature writer.**

*Right. But look at something like your short stories in *Field Notes*. Here we have fiction, which is a different animal than, say, *Arctic Dreams*. But you're addressing some of the same issues. What I mean is—you take *Arctic Dreams* and this is the angle you're taking, and then you take *Field Notes* and you say, "OK, I'm going to come at some of these same questions but from a different angle to elucidate them differently."*

**You don't know that, though, an angle. Not as a writer. Hardly anybody talks about the number of poets, like John Haines, or Merwin or Pattiann Rogers, poets and fiction writers who don't often enter the world of the essay or the nonfiction book but who are taking up some of these same questions. Merwin says that for him the essay is more intentional than the poem. As soon as I heard that, I thought, "As is nonfiction more intentional for me than fiction."**

**You know in *Field Notes*, there's a story called "The Negro in the Kitchen." For years when I would come down to the kitchen in the morning at dawn, I had this image of this large black man standing there wanting to know if I would fix him breakfast. I had no idea what it was about, but it was there. For fifteen years I saw that image. And then one day I thought: this is the beginning of a story. And I sat down and started to write. *Arctic Dreams* doesn't work like that. I might have an *idea* that I turn over, but not so often an *image*. And it's the image that turns over for me in a piece of short fiction. There is another story in *Field Notes* called "The Entreaty of the Wiideema," and I have gone back to that story recently because of the question that the narrator ends with: "Having sojourned with the Wiideema I want to understand what it means to provide." And that's very much on my mind now, where the writer fits in society. How does the writer provide? How does each of us provide? Clearly it's not through our careers but through something else. And those questions go to the heart of the disintegration of community. If we are only providing for ourselves, then the community continues to disintegrate around us.**

*Right. You talk about this difference between fiction and nonfiction. When fiction becomes as purposeful as nonfiction, it becomes less satisfying. I look at the difference between Ecotopia, for example, which I can barely get through, and McCarthy's *The Crossing*, which has much to say about the environment but is also much more complicated.*

**Sure, just turn over the idea of domestication. What does that mean in *The Crossing*? You know, the difference between wolves and dogs, for example. Back in '92, I went to work with the Nature Conservancy on a collection of essays that were to be inspired by the visits of a group of writers to various preserves that were set aside and protected by the Nature Conservancy. I wrote an introduction for the book; it's a wonderful collection of pieces. And when I finished, I said to the Nature Conservancy, "You know, many people don't find their way into landscape through science; their point of entry is aesthetic. It's not that they don't know what biodiversity is, but it doesn't have the pull that an artistic issue would have." And I said, "I think you are unnecessarily closing yourself off from a very large audience, and that's a group of people who are well educated but not driven by questions of science. The door for them lies elsewhere. So what we should do is have a collection of fiction inspired by visiting these places." So we developed the idea a little bit, and then I backed out because I thought it was**

illegitimate. I said, "I cannot imagine myself going to a landscape with the intention of writing a piece of fiction. I would already be beginning to think that this is something that is going to have a point and so we are off on the wrong foot to begin with." But a lot of people, myself included, wrote for the collection.

What happened to me is that I was out one day with John Fowles in the Columbia Gorge. We were looking for an orchid that was very important to John, and two or three weeks later this story started growing up out of the experience. Not about John, or even anything that we talked about; it got triggered by the place that we were in and the quality of light and wind and looking off about 50 feet and seeing John there with his head like this against the wind in the Gorge. So the story happened and I thought, "Oh, my God, this is it," because where we were was a Nature Conservancy preserve. So I wrote to the people at the Nature Conservancy and said, "Well, you can't *make* it work like this, but this is how a collection of fiction *should* work, without intention." It happens that the place that triggers the piece of fiction is a Nature Conservancy preserve.

I worry that people will become too analytic about fiction and begin to see it as another form of plea. So much of what is going on in nature writing is a plea. It's a plea for justice or a plea for ethics in human dealings, and that's not what's going on in fiction. Something else, if you will, larger, more archetypal is going on there. And I think it's more individual. I can go back in my work thirty years and find—there is a story in *Field Notes*, about a character of monk-like dimensions who has turned up in my work for many years. I know in some ways he is connected to me—you know, I went to Gethsemane in Kentucky right after I graduated; I thought that's where I should stay, that's where I should be. Thirty years later I am writing this story called "Teal Creek" about this guy named James Teal. Teal is still working out for me, an enigmatic, monk-like presence who turns up in another way in a story called "The Orrery" in *Winter Count*—a guy living out in the desert. So those issues are probably more personal with the writer, and not issues really but what is driving this individual man or woman as a writer.

*Right.*

But I wouldn't argue with you that *Arctic Dreams* and a book like *Field Notes* are coming at something from different angles. I think most writers have only a

handful of questions, and you come at them again and again. Look at a story like *Crow and Weasel*. One of the amazing things about that book to me is that when I began work on it, I didn't know enough to write it. I began in 1980, and Tom Pohrt took nine years to do those drawings. I couldn't write the story until he finished the drawings because we had to lay the art out over 64 pages and the rhythm of the story couldn't get ahead of the drawings—I mean we just went about it in our own way.

But when I sat down in '89 with the same seven page narrative summary of the book, I had not only traveled a lot more with indigenous people, but I had, in that intervening time, been to Japan, to Africa, to Australia, to Antarctica, had been to all of these distant places. I was much more informed viscerally about how to tell that story. And of course it is shot through not only with what I was taught, but with what I had read in anthropological literature about the relationship of society to place. You know, in a question-and-answer after a reading, people would say: "Did you make this story up or is this story from a traditional source?" And the way I came to answer it was to say: "I made this story up, but everything in it is something I was taught." Because it seems to me you have to take credit for having made up the story or it's false humility. At the same time you have to say: "The story grows out of social interaction with community." Which brings us a long way around to this issue of the individual point of view—you know, this famous moment in Florence in 1425, the door panels in the baptismal font in the church in Florence, which is the first modern work we know to utilize mathematical perspective. (There's mathematical perspective in cave drawings, so it's the reinvention rather than the invention of mathematical perspective.) But what is striking about Florence is that's the moment at which the point of view of the community, rather than the point of view of the individual, comes to be called primitive art.

Go to Haiti today and buy a painting that has no perspective in it, it's called primitive art. But if you look at it for a moment you realize that it is drawn from the point of view of the community rather than the individual. So it puts the painter, as well as the viewer, in a different context. And as soon as you see that, you begin to see the investment Western civilization has in hierarchy.

*Science is a huge thing in your work. You do your homework when you write something like Arctic Dreams. What do you see the relationship to be between science and nature writing. In other words, there is this empirical part of nature writing; nature writing depends on science in some way. How do you see that relationship working itself out?*

Well, in the nineteenth century, science is the reminder to be empirical. And the nineteenth century is a great century of scientific exploration, of field notes of various sorts, of people like Humbolt and Darwin and Wallace. And in the United States, people like Say and all these guys that went on the journeys of Western exploration, railroad surveys and things like that. And then in the twentieth century, you have this phenomenon of quantum mechanics and things start to shift. And the question for me in science now is: "What has happened to empiricism?" People are so enamored now of computer modeling, which is to me the logical outgrowth of an obsession with the authority of a solipsistic point of view. You could not find two things more wedded than molecular, that is laboratory, biology and computer modeling.

University departments of biology dominated by field work of one sort or another—verifying the theoretical projection by making sure it is connected to something in the real world—have largely been replaced by molecular biology. Molecular biology is not a biology of the field. And one of the reasons that landscape is imperiled is because scientists are working in laboratories and not in landscapes. The shift is profound and extraordinary, and the danger of it is that computer modeling can become so self-referential it sidesteps reality. What stream flows actually are doesn't matter.

I was in Antarctica over November, December, January. There were six of us in the Transantarctic mountains looking for meteorites. One of the constructs in my mind all the time was this notion of the nature of empiricism at the close of the twentieth century. If we brought back 190 meteorites, and laid them out on a table, then every cosmologist who had developed a computer model for the evolution of the solar system—particularly its mineral and chemical history—everybody who had created a model for that, no matter how elaborate the model, no matter how mathematically beautiful and perfect, would risk having it destroyed by dropping one rock on the table, like a kid.

That's what empiricism is. It says, no matter how grand your thought, if it is not congruent with the mineralogy, the chemistry, of this rock, with the crystalline structures, the theory is wrong. The rock is right. But what computer-modeled molecular biology tends to do is reverse the position of authority. The computer model assumes authority, and we look at nature as if it were misbehaving or somehow had to be adjusted. Well, if you are a political tyrant, that's music to your ears. That's the Beethoven Ninth, if you're a political tyrant, to hear that reality must conform to the theory.

*Would you say that one thing nature writing is doing is taking these philosophical questions out to the landscape and verifying them in the same way?*

**Oh, yes. Look at somebody like me. I grew up in a way that almost predicted this kind of work. I grew up fooling around with animals and hiking in the deserts in California and the Grand Canyon, and then I go to New York and I get a very good education in a Jesuit prep school. By the time I graduate, I know more than many people, at that time, in graduate school. With the Jesuits, you didn't have free periods. You either studied or you went home, you know. So you are there as a fourteen-year-old kid struggling with Latin and French and history. I mean, we all complained then, but I know the benefit of what I got. And because it was in New York, I could walk down the street to the print collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or walk into the Frick Collection or into open stacks at the Main Library or go to any number of openings of different kinds or shows at the American Museum of Natural History. I had all this stuff right in front of me. I had this incredible combination of things when I was a child, to be grounded early in a physical landscape and then to be so thoroughly exposed to the history of Western ideas. When I left the university, what I did in essence was put those two things together.**

**People sometimes ask: "Does your allegiance lie ultimately with Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey* or with the fate of the polar bear?" For me they're inseparable. An allegiance to the combination of those two things, it seems to me, even if it is a conceit, is a good way to live. I want to be attentive to Homer. I want to be attentive to the bear.**

**The dark side of the Enlightenment is in part the belief that only science possesses the truth. You had at that time an intellectual movement willing to throw out metaphorical inquiry into the nature of reality and replace it with the empirical quest of science. It doesn't work. I mean, any man or woman who is a painter or a sculptor or a dancer or a photographer may not be able to articulate it, but they do know in their bones and flesh that they are in pursuit of truth, the same kind of truth that the scientist is after, but they do not make a claim to being definitive, like science does.**

*And the method is not nearly as clear.*

**No, nor as comprehensive. And nobody says that someone else has to paint the same painting again to make the first painting valid.**

**My thought here is obviously that I believe in what I am. I see the world in a certain way. If I didn't believe it was a good way to see, I hope that I wouldn't be doing it. But I think at the opening of the twenty-first century this is a good place to be. What has happened to empiricism, to the authority of the earth, and where are the questions of social justice in American literature? Increasingly, they are in what we tend to call nature writing.**

*You don't see The Grapes of Wrath being written right now.*

**Yes, actually I do.**

*I just taught that book last quarter, and my students ate it up. They couldn't get enough.*

**Steinbeck had a tremendous influence on me when I was a boy, partly because he was from California and I had that identity. There are parts of Steinbeck, though, that don't hold up for me—that I find myself rebelling against, dimensions of his sentimentality, I guess. But that's an issue, probably, of age. I am not a cynical person, so I don't think it's a matter of temperament. Probably I am more cynical now than I was when I was 15, you know, when I first started reading him. But he was after something; and like every one of us, he was flawed in the sense that he didn't get where he wanted to go—good for him.**

**I find myself more and more impatient with this notion of the genius—that there is one man or one woman who is going to tell us what we need to know. This is the setting in which someone like Bill Gates can thrive because he's the guy that's going to give us the answer. Well, no, I mean Bill Gates is just another P.T. Barnum. This system that he's created of processing information is utterly isolated within itself, and it's driven by a terrifying level of economic power. The**

**economic power behind the notion that you have to have this and you have to have that in the next instant and you must "upgrade" all the time is very dangerous. Many people at those screens have lost contact with what's going on out here. Freshwater, ground water, is disappearing. Pacific fisheries are collapsing. The green revolution was eclipsed by desertification, by soil laterization. Being born in sub-Saharan Africa today is like being handed a death sentence. Globalization, the aggressive adolescent enterprise of achieving material wealth for "everyone," is killing us. Most of us imagine somebody else will take care of it. But that's not what's going to happen.**

**You know, Ed Abbey told me once—we were talking about lying down in front of the bulldozers and he said: "I wouldn't have the guts to do it." He said, "I admire these kids because they will do it. I couldn't do it." And I said to myself, "I couldn't either." For all the supposed inability of many of those people to articulate the philosophical principles that are driving them, their testimony is eloquent. They're here now, on this road, in front of this bulldozer. There's real courage there.**

*Do you know Jack Turner's book The Abstract Wild?*

**I know the book but I haven't read it.**

*The title essay addresses that very issue in really interesting ways. Turner talks about how we need to revive the idea of the sacred. He says there is more of the sacred in an old woman protesting at an abortion clinic or in a terrorist getting on a bus with a dynamite vest in Tel Aviv than there is in our fervor to save the environment. He is not necessarily saying, "Go out and get on the bus," but it's a really interesting piece. He calls it a rant, and it is a rant, but it is for a certain purpose. There is this element of this loss of sacredness and this asking of when action needs to be taken. And I agree. I'm an academic; I have a tendency to step back and think about it rather than step forward.*

**Well, there are academics and there are academics. The only time I ever taught was in the American Studies department at Notre Dame in 1989. I wanted to go**



there because of what I got, to go back and give. And the word that—this is irreverent—kept occurring to me while I was there was that many of my colleagues were pudgy. They were deeply out of touch with the day-to-day reality of most American people—trying to make a living, trying not to be harmed on the street, single motherhood, temporary employment. That was not part of what they were thinking about. Many of them had a sort of intellectual arrogance, a self-satisfied superiority, that I found ignorant and risible. What I longed for was somebody with intellectual fervor and richness of mind who also was fully engaged in the real world. And, on another level, somebody who occupied both their head and their body at the same time. That question is big for me now.

There is a painter out on the [Oregon] coast—an extraordinary man—a Yurok named Rick Bartow. I guess I first met him about ten years ago. I wasn't familiar at all with his painting and we corresponded a little bit. We have friends in common and every couple of years we see each other. So I got this note card in the mail from him. It's a painting of his called "Bear and Two Crosses." I was knocked over by it. It's not just the human form emerging in the Bear's head but the animal's effort to fill out its own body from the position of its head. This is so emblematic of that problem in academe of living entirely in the head and having no sense of the body.

*You would like a group of graduate students at the University of Oregon who call themselves Mesa Verde. Together with some faculty support, they have spearheaded this group. We meet a couple of times a month to talk about literature, environment, issues. It's been a really good intellectual place, but it has also been a good place for contact. It's a bunch of smart, young, bright people who are trying to connect their academic work in a real-world way. I think you would be impressed by the members who are trying to do some of the same things you are trying to do, which isn't always easy and is sometimes looked down upon by the academy.*

I was a graduate student at the University in `68 and the first two quarters of `69. The teacher that made the biggest impression on me there said, "Get out of here. Get out of here and write." I was in love with graduate school. I loved all the ideas and going up into the mountains on the weekend and coming back for deep discussion and what not. But he was right about me. I had to go, to get out.

*You have to find a way to connect.*

**Not only connect but to begin an ongoing reciprocity with the world.**

*Let me shift gears for a moment and draw your attention to Testimony. How did you get involved?*

**Terry just called me.**

*And what's your connection to Utah? You wrote the introduction to Trimble's Sage Brush Ocean, for example.*

**My first connection was probably in `65. My girlfriend for two years lived in Salt Lake so I was in Salt Lake to see her all the time in `65-66. Then I would just come back for various reasons, most recently to work on a play at Sundance. And to see Terry, whom I've known now for twenty years. Those are the loose connections. My social security card—you can tell from the first few numbers where it was issued—my social security card is from Salt Lake. So the connections there are emotional for me. It was a landscape of exploration when I was a teenager. I drove through there the first time in `64, and then was back and forth all the time to see this woman in Salt Lake. Up to Bear Lake all the time, you know, out to the Uintas, down to Moab, there were places there to haunt. The response now is mostly to Terry.**

*The preface to Testimony talks about it being an act of hope. After all the things we've talked about, are you hopeful?*

**Yes. I'm not optimistic but I'm hopeful. What makes me hopeful is the fact that two guys can meet over the phone and sit down and have a talk like this and bring a certain amount of energy to it. If we're doing this, I'm hopeful.**

*What role does something like Testimony play in that hope.*

**A catalyst. It makes everybody who wrote for it aware of the other people. And it also makes a gathering place for the emotions of readers. It's something physical that you can pick up and hand to another person and say, as Bill Bradley did, this is the real stuff. So I think that it's a reification. It makes concrete what many people are trying to say now. And I would guess you could say the same of those other books.**

*I know that you have an intimate relationship with Wallace Stegner's work and that you knew him. When Stegner engaged in his conservation writing, he saw it as different than his other work. Do you differentiate your work also?*

**I would say there are different types of writing, they draw on different parts of your imagination, but I see most of my work as of a piece. I think I just approach the questions, as you say, from different angles. The issue of scale is a big one with me. I mean, the scale of *Arctic Dreams* is huge. The scale of an essay in *About this Life* is smaller. And fiction is different from nonfiction. I have respect for the different forms and scales and I work in the different forms, but I begin each time just with the impulse to write and with a sense of scale usually and with a clear idea about whether it's fiction or nonfiction. I might say after I finish a piece that this fits better as an op-ed piece because it happens to have a certain tone. I wrote a piece a few days ago that I thought was going to be an op-ed piece, but it insisted on a kind of abstraction that killed it as an op-ed piece, although it ended up being about 900 words.**

**So I can't force something to be what I want it to be—or I don't. I think, if you can get away with it, it is generally not a good idea to work on assignment. I have never liked working on assignment. It's flattering to be asked to do something**

**intended to fit in a particular place, but I would much rather do it and then later find out where it fits.**

*One of the things that nature writing does is set up a somewhat different contract with the reader than, say, fiction. And what I mean by contract with the reader is that you go into something like Arctic Dreams or Desert Solitaire, that's claiming to be nonfiction, and you realize there is art here. You realize that there is going to be some kind of manipulation, but you also have confidence that the thing has happened—that it is relating reality in some way. What do you see as your obligation to the reader when you are doing that kind of nonfiction work? And how much room do you have to form it and to add an artistic, aesthetic quality to it?*

**I couldn't eliminate the artistic or aesthetic quality. What I think of is, you can't make it up. If you didn't see it, you don't say it. If you weren't there, you don't say you were there. I'm not one that believes you borrow someone else's experiences and make them your own, although probably I've done something like that without thinking, where it simply takes too long to make the distinction and still reach the thing you are trying to get to. I think all writers do that. I don't think you can eliminate that in your work, anymore than I can, say, erase Gerard Manley Hopkins' meter from some of my prose. Asking somebody to work entirely out of their own experiences is unrealistic. We are social animals; we don't have solely our own experiences. Often our experiences are shared with other people or beings. Where I object to manipulation of the reader is when the writer starts thinking about the point he wants to make and changes what is there in front of him in order to make the point.**

**Galen Rowell spoke to this issue once about the manipulation of images in photographs. He said if you are photographing El Capitán, say, and you deepen the blue of the sky above with a filter, that's no big deal. But if you take the image back to your lab and add the Alps in behind El Capitán, that's a problem.**

**It's impossible to draw a sharp line there, but my feeling is exactly the same. I think what happens in a nonfiction work like *Arctic Dreams* is that in the first ten or fifteen pages you make a decision: "I trust this guy or I don't trust this guy." If 300 pages into it you find a mistake because you happen to know something and the writer got it wrong, the tendency is to shrug your shoulders, because we all get things wrong. But if the writer starts out telling you he has all the answers**

and he's the authority, and then he gets things wrong—well, then you back away. That's a matter of the writer being unwilling to throw his lot in with the reader.

The contract for me is built around mutual regard and expectation. I expect the reader to pay attention. If you drift through *Arctic Dreams*, you don't understand part of what is getting triggered as those chapters build. So I want that from the reader. But in order to get that I have to show some level of attentiveness by using a language that is, I hope, elegant and provocative. And to strive for a kind of concision and not just let words flow around on the page going nowhere. The contract in fiction and nonfiction is always about truth. The reader wanting the truth and you giving the truth. In fiction the central truth is built around issues of emotion rather than fact, and in nonfiction it's built around issues of fact. You've got to be able to take a book like *Arctic Dreams* to the library and verify what's in it. You've got to be able to pick up a work of fiction and say, "I know this stuff because of my wife or my feelings for my children or what I went through with my father. I know this stuff. This stuff is true."

I think for some people writing is a kind of game—a literary game—where you do whatever you want to enhance your reputation. The reader comes second. I think that is part of what happened in American literature after the Second World War. We began getting personalities acutely aware of the fact that they were personalities. Like Mailer calling himself Aquarius—it was a fashion. I don't see that it is all that useful now. What we need are men and women who speak out of singular artistic visions but with an awareness of the community. Again, that's in the paradigm of ecology.

*Do you, then, think ecology is arising as a new foundation—a new way to gain a foundation?*

Yes. And I think it's what Thoreau was striving for. I think if Thoreau had the genetic information that Mendel developed after he wrote, and had a deeper knowledge of the layering of predator-prey relationships, for example, that he would have gotten on to this quickly. I think Thoreau would be thrilled by the idea of ecosystem, as thrilled by how it functions as he would be by the mutability and invisibility of its boundaries. That's a great thing for me about ecosystems—where do you draw the line? Ecosystems can incorporate aesthetic as well as scientific information. My experience with wild animals is that they

respond as much to the aesthetic dimension of landscape as they do to its botanical or biological dimensions.

We have a tendency, for example, to say wolves went up this valley because the hunting was better up there. We are reluctant to say they went up this valley because they liked it. They liked it. And I think that happens; I wouldn't want to go too far in this direction, but I'd say it's in our genes, if you will, to fool around with everything, to abrogate our agreement with the rational mind. One of the things that fascinated me about polar bears was that they employed all these different ways of feeding themselves. They are constantly trying new things out as individuals which may or may not get incorporated into the way all bears behave. I'm very sanguine about how ecology will revitalize our intellects, that we will begin to think, "*Oh*, literature, water, fate, these are community issues."

Three years ago I was sitting around with a group of writers in Adelaide, South Australia. We were a very diverse group of people: John Coetzee, the great South African novelist, who wrote *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Annie Proulx. There was a guy named Vikram Chandra from India; David Malouf, an Australian writer—probably the Australian that could be nominated for the Nobel now; Susan Swan, a Canadian novelist. So there's this whole bunch of us sitting around this table. We are all different—the genders, the nationalities. What we share is English. We're saying, "What do we have in common?" and, like that (snapping his fingers), everyone said the same thing: Our subject is community. Even if we're writing about the Arctic, or whatever it is, our subject is the nature of community; how has it fallen apart, and how are we going to put it back together. It's a moment like that that makes me think American nature writing is not about nature. Its inquiries are the real questions in literature.

I'm hopeful somebody in the conservative structure of an English department is going to say: "You know, we should be paying a lot more attention to this material, because it is not about endangered species and wilderness areas. This is about the fate of human life." And if literature is where we explore the fate of humanity, where is it more central than in nature writing?

*So, in other words, it's not about nature, it's about community, which has to be about nature. It's the dividing off of nature that's the problem in the first place.*

**Right, and ecology is the thing that will pull them together, in the sense that humanists will take an idea developed by science and employ it in intellectual expression at the close of the twentieth century.**

**I mean, look at Peter Brook's work in the theater, asking questions about the relationship of the audience to the performer. In traditional societies, that line is much more permeable than it is in the formalized theater of Western culture—the proscenium arch, the rows, everybody sitting there watching it take place as if it's behind glass. What Brook was saying is, how is it that the performers participate in the audience and the audience participates in the play. And those kinds of questions freaked audiences out, to use the vernacular of the time, because they didn't want to be involved with the actors. They didn't want these people in *Hair* directly addressing them. They wanted it safely over *there*, like an orchestra. You guys stay over there in the pit and we'll be out here in the seats.**

**I remember when we were doing *Crow and Weasel* as a play at the Children's Theater in Minneapolis. I told the actors one day: "The way to imagine your integration with place, which has to be part of what's going on on this stage, is to think in terms of the loss of the director." What's happened in the Western tradition is that we've gotten off the stage, out into the audience; we want to direct the play. And what goes on in traditional cultures is they just continue on in the play; they don't have a director. We always want to be the director because we think we know better. We'll go to Vietnam and show you how to live.**

*It's a form of focusing on the individual again, rather than the community.*

**I think that's right. Then the question becomes, for probably the most profoundly lonely civilization in the world, how do you get back in? That's a big question for us. How do we get back in to what we got out of? Because we now see the price of our loneliness. We're not only lonely but we're living as unprotected targets in a capitalistic system that exploits our emotions for its own ends—a system for whom we are all consumers instead of human beings.**

*What do you think about the work of somebody like Wendell Berry, who is addressing these same questions in a very conservative way—conservative in the sense of nineteenth century economy rather than in the sense of twentieth century politics?*

**Wendell is very effective; he's a gem. He has an ability to take his chosen metaphors and make them ring large truths and he's been doing it for forty years or more. He's a major figure, like Snyder. Gary's intelligence is grounded in a parallel epistemology in terms of Asian thought. He has been able to come back home like a salmon and give us the benefit of that protein.**

*Berry seems like he is trying to revitalize Christianity. In my judgement, we may be faced with two choices: to revitalize the myths we presently have, or to find new myths. Do you think that his approach to rereading Christianity is one of the approaches we need?*

**Yeah, I do. Two years ago, in a monastery in Santa Barbara, I spent three days with a group of people talking about the difference between a theology of creation and a theology of redemption. Christianity is a theology of redemption. "I did something wrong, now, how do I get to heaven?" A theology of creation says, "I participate already in that which is heaven." This last March when I was down there, the rubric for the gathering was "An Aptitude for Beauty." What I wanted to do was get at the notion of beauty and how we participate in it and how you develop an aptitude for it, which is in some ways like saying developing an aptitude for God. For a while now, I've known a religion scholar named Douglas Burton-Christie who teaches at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles. We're going to work together next March at this monastery—it's an Episcopal monastery—and address the issue of the sacred and the profane, try to focus on bringing the notion of the sacred within the mundane—to make that the central focus of what we talk about. How can we regain a sacred sense of the mundane?**

*And it seems Berry is about that in many ways.*

**Right. My heritage, that skeptical Jesuit training, imbued me with a sense of the symbology and history of theological thought in Western religion. I didn't rebel against it later, I just backed away. And then I spent a lot of time with people**



whose background was not Christian, not even Western, and now I'm back to my old bailiwick, I guess informed in a different way.

You know, I read Elaine Pagels about the Gnostic gospels and Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*—a tremendously powerful book for me. So I can't see throwing my heritage away for a new mythology. What I want is a reinterpretation of the mythology that is already there, which means: find out what Mary Magdalen's gospel is like, instead of reading just Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. About a year and a half ago, a story of mine came out in the *Georgia Review*, called "The Letters of Heaven." I was dealing with the mythology of my Roman Catholicism, but pushing at it to demonstrate that these two saints were not confined by their religion and the Church. They were essentially spiritual beings, who rose up within the tradition of Roman Catholicism.

I admire Terry Tempest Williams because of her insistence on the importance of her religious tradition. She says something every once in a while that has always flattered me. In '79, I was invited to do a reading at the University of Utah. Ed Abbey sent me a note and said, "I'm going to be there the same few weeks. Do you want to do a fund-raising reading together?" We had dinner before that and that's when I first met Terry. She asked, "Do you remember what you told me that time," and I said "No." And she said, "You told me to not abandon my tradition, to write out of my tradition and to use it to explore the big questions."

If you abandon your tradition, then anyone who's firmly anchored in, say, the sense of family that informs Mormonism feels abandoned. That *they* somehow are going to be marginalized because they chose to stay in that religious tradition. One of the reasons that I want to work with Doug Christie and one of the reasons that I like working at this monastery is that, when I walk in that monastery, issues of community and sacredness don't have to be reiterated. I can stand with a group of men and women—you know, 30 people who are between 30 and 60—and I don't have to hammer away at the reasons for holding community together. At noon every day most of us are participating in the Eucharist; the sense that the sacred informs everything that we do is inescapable. Then you can get to these other things. You don't have to ask, "What is the meaning of beauty within a context of community and the sacred?" You can say, "What is beauty?" and those things are already there. That's one good reason for me not to abandon Catholicism.

At Notre Dame, where I went to graduate school and undergraduate school, all my friends were intellectuals and liberals. We were all kids with long hair at a very conservative school in the 60's. Most of my friends rebelled strongly against

**Roman Catholicism and condemn it to this day. My attitude toward it has been, "Well, you know, Thomas Merton died in a hotel room in Bangkok checking in to all this Asian thought." That's what I want to do. Merton fell in love in the last two years of his life and dealt with it. He had to deal with it. And he says somewhere in his journals, "When I saw this happening, I said 'I've got to walk away' and then I thought 'how can I do that.' I can't say I love God if I cannot see how to love this woman."**

**A tremendous act of bravery, you know. And I say to myself, "That's a guy in my tradition"—the Catholic tradition—and then there is Episcopal tradition or Mormon tradition. I don't see the wisdom of throwing this away.**

**If nothing else, religious tradition can sometimes save you from terminal cynicism. I think all the time, when I'm traveling, about the nature of the Divine. One of the most astute reviews of *About this Life* appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*. Toward the end of this very flattering piece the reviewer said that what is restricted in my work is, "If this man goes into the woods, you know that he will find the Divine." He said, "That makes for a tonal quality in the prose that is always there, and so it is in some sense monotonic, or monotonous." Now, from a lesser mind than that I would have felt that was an insult. He specifically excluded my fiction but I think that he's right in that I do expect to find the Divine. What I am after now, I think, is how to make the darkness seem more Divine.**

*How to make darkness seem more Divine?*

**Yeah, to be more inclusive of the full range of human experience as an expression of the Divine rather than the archangel Gabriel on the one hand and then Lucifer on the other. And I think that's probably been part of my struggle as a writer from the beginning—in some ways to lean further into the dark before choosing to come back into the world. And I know that's what I'm going to do. Some of the stories I'm writing now are about that. Recently, after a reading with Terry in Las Cruces, we went back to the hotel together and she said, "You know, if anybody asked me what was going on in the American West today I would tell them to read those two stories you read tonight."**

**One of them, "The Deaf Girl," is narrated by a man who ends up in a small town in Montana, lost on the back roads, and he has an encounter with a girl**

who is deaf. In the very last sentence of the story you realize that it is about the girl talking to him, not him talking to the girl. This wounded girl who has been brutalized and shot in the head is going to get through to him—it's not the other way around. The story is about violence and its aftermath.

The other story is called "Stolen Horses." It's about a guy just looking for something to do between high school and college, who gets involved with two high school friends and they steal some horses and things go real bad for them. I haven't written stories like that before. It's not, "I want to do something new" (tapping the table). It's just that something is turning over in me now about violence. I drafted a story about six months ago that is full of violence. I don't know why it's there, you know. Well, I think I do know why. It is an act of exploration, about how often a Kip Kinkle or a Littleton, Colorado, is turning up in our day-to-day lives. I don't want to write a prose that ignores the presence of those conundrums.

*It's interesting that you are dealing with that.*

Well, it's interesting to me. I don't think of myself as a writer who's up to something, but I'm working through a short story collection now and what I see happening is that these stories, which are a little bit like "Empira's Tapestry" or "Teal Creak" or something like that out of *Field Notes* at the start of the collection, are pushing toward this story about the deaf girl and "Stolen Horses." I want to try and finish the book by the end of summer. I know it's new territory for me and that by itself is—you hold on to so many things when you write.

You know, someone reminded me the other day that Bill Stafford was once asked why he started writing, and Stafford said, "Well, isn't the question why others stopped?" Isn't that the real question? I think all writers look for their rationale. Part of what keeps you going is the belief that you are not doing the same thing over and over again. It is often the same questions, but the approaches are different. And it is not a game. It is not, "Oh no, now I need to do something different." They grow from the interior. And I think the reader senses that. I think the reader knows very quickly, "This is a writer with one eye on what's fashionable in writing," instead of, "You know, this stuff is coming right out of the writer's uncalculating instinct."

*That's why Steinbeck still resonates for me. He seems to be concerned with the questions he is interested in and not with form, which was a major concern of his time. Not that you necessarily have to buck the trend, but you do have to be connected in some interior way to what you are doing.*

**Right. And that's another reason that I think readers remain hopeful, because they can still find writers whose relationship to the material they are working with is genuine. The writer is saying, "My relationship with you is genuine. There's no hidden agenda. This is the ongoing exploration of our predicament."**

*Even though you don't do something different merely for the sake of it being different, would you say that your perspective at 53 is different than it was at 25 and 35? Not necessarily radically, but different.*

**Yeah, I think you sort better as you get older. Or at least that's what I feel about myself. I've got a better sense of how the foreground is not the background now than I did when I was 35. When I was 35, what I saw in the foreground was so dark, the background too. Now though the foreground remains dark, I don't see that on the horizon. The utility of that for me is that I might be able to report clear skies on the horizon, while the proximate storm seems like something that will never blow itself out. And I want to do that. If I can do anything as a writer it would be to tell people caught in the storm that I see the clouds pulling away from the horizon. But I can't do that unless I believe it or see it. And that's where that problem comes up where you pretend you see something you don't. You've got to write out of your own—writing has got to be a moral act.**

**Native American writers accept this unconsciously, I think, and reiterate it for those of us who don't grow up in a tradition like that. But I think Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, Linda Hogan, Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich—all of the people you would think of right away—would say that was the case. The engagement with the reader is a moral act, that you enter into a moral relationship with the reader.**

*In "Landscape and Narrative," you talk about the difference between systems that become dogmatic, fascist, and systems that still have wisdom and morality, but are able to dance away from that dogmatism. And it seems to be rooted in the Cree response to the wolverine story...*

**That could happen.**

*Right. I am using it as a theoretical basis for the book I'm working on. I am saying that we must—to steal Wayne Booth's term—adopt a rhetoric of assent. That for nature writing we must first say, "That could happen," and try it on, and after we have read it, evaluate it; but not until we have adopted this attitude.*

**That's very good. That's very good. Yeah, I was caught by that right away. Do you know Howard Norman? Do you know his work at all?**

*No.*

**It was Howard who was working with the Cree people, and Howard said to me, "You know, the guy said to me, 'Well that could happen.'"**

*Right. Whereas if the wolverine knocked the guy off of the snowmobile and then the guy picked up his rifle and shot it, they wouldn't have responded that way. In other words, there is this idea that not anything could happen.*

**No, exactly. It has to be empirically grounded in order to say that. They have to say, "I've watched wolverine and I am aware of the potential. And given the potential, that could happen."**

**You know, I remember a tremendous conference at Port Townsend called "The Power of Animals"—Snyder, Howard Norman, myself and Paul Shepard. Howard and I were wet-behind-the-ears kids. Gary and Paul were the senior men. There are many memorable things that happened at that conference. One was that Sam Hamill stood up and said to an audience of two or three hundred people, "I wonder if I can see by a show of hands how many of you are vegetarians." So, probably ninety percent of the room raises their hand in a kind of righteous way. And then Sam says, "And I'm wondering if I can see by a show of hands how many of you are hunters." Well, maybe three people out of 300 cautiously raise their hands. And then Sam says, "You know, the four people up here are all meat eaters and hunters, and I'm thinking we are going to have an interesting conference."**

**A guy at that conference, in the audience, told some kind of story about grizzly bears, and when he was finished he posed a question to Gary, and Gary said, "Sounds like a question from someone who's been *reading* a lot about grizzly bears." Meaning, "What you describe, I doubt could happen." Meaning, "I will not give you the benefit of the doubt with regard to this story. I know what you're telling me is not something that grizzly bears would do." Meaning, "Why are you telling us this story?"**

**I remember Doug Peacock sitting next to me at a bear conference in Tusayan on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, in probably '81 or something like that. We were watching a film of a sow grizzly on a gravel bar with two cubs, little guys—you know, spaniel size—and one of these bear cubs suddenly went straight up in the air, spun around a few times and swatted at a bunch of things, ran off, threw himself sideways and then kind of jumped up and settled right back into it. He just went completely crazy for about 25 seconds, or something. And Doug leans over to me and he says, "You won't learn that shit from scat analysis" (Laughter). He was saying that that's the limitation of science. We cannot explain what this little bear cub is going through. And yet, what it's going through is as valid, as true to the world, as what you learn about nutrition by doing scat analysis.**

*Interesting.*