



**Yahgulanaas, Michael Nicoll. *Flight of the Hummingbird*. Greystone Books. 2008.**

Despite its age, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas' 2008 volume *Flight of the Hummingbird* sounds a strident refrain for the contemporary state of Ecocriticism as it approaches full incorporation into the academy. Even at a leisurely pace the volume demands less than half an hour per reading, and this compact nature immediately emerges as an interest of the text. The parable itself—which conveys the untiring efforts of a hummingbird to extinguish an entire forest fire in a slim fifteen illustrated pages—quickly begins reflecting on the volume containing it. This happens largely through the parable itself. Like the slender binding of Yahgulanaas' volume, the smallness of its eponymous hummingbird becomes a central rhetorical figure with the hummingbird's assumption of its monumental, forest-sized task. This leads to views of both the hummingbird character and text as insisting on "doing what [they] can" to save an environment from what the Dalai Lama, in his afterward, terms the "the destruction of nature and Earth's natural resources" (40). By extension, this means that one can see Yahgulanaas' entire volume as doing what it can to ensure that Ecocriticism maintains his hummingbird's activist ethic throughout its forthcoming growth.

With February's Berkeley Conference on Eco-poetics on the horizon, *Hummingbird's* virtue becomes especially resonant. In many ways the conference is heeding Yahgulanaas' message, offering rare opportunities for direct environmental work alongside academic panels and seminars. The program, however, alludes to a larger shift towards aesthetics within the field. The Berkeley conference, again, is doing the rare job of keeping Ecocriticism's scientific and activist roots in tact. It includes panels on each specific mode of approach within the discipline and has accrued a strong list of interdisciplinary works that draw upon them. Yet literary aesthetics promise to steal the show, and this is largely because critics like myself find Ecocriticism such a fascinating mode for approaching texts.

As if forming a rejoinder to this aesthetic approach, *Hummingbird* asserts an activist Ecocriticism into the central location that it once occupied. The volume erects a sophisticated set of formal devices that unite the reader's interpretative faculties with an activist compulsion. First is the now familiar move of recycled material. Yahgulanaas only contributes original drawings to his volume. Outside the Quechuan parable of the hummingbird, he fills his codex with brief supplementary materials from two Nobel Peace Laureates—Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai and the Dalai Lama—and biographical notes lending any previously lacking ethos to their separate calls to action. Yahgulanaas' images themselves, however, also evoke a similar activist principle. The basic comics theory of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* tells us that the less detailed an image's presentation, the more interpretative work it requires (46). *Hummingbirds'* illustrations certainly fit these characteristics; their abstractions border between the comic and geometric in a way that requires reader participation in order to activate the visual narrative. For the reader, this means that *Hummingbird* evokes a thoroughly active textual experience. Moreover, this activity—in its novel existence rising out of the text—bears a real chance of surviving into the larger world we all share. I certainly found myself considering conservation with renewed vigor following both initial and subsequent readings.

This experience with *Hummingbird* recalls my introduction to the larger field of Ecocriticism through an undergraduate Eco-poetics seminar. I remember a retrospective conversation with my instructor where we discussed our shared revisionist's desire to have started the course with Charles Olson's *Maximus* poems instead of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the tract largely credited with removing the toxin DDT from our soil, food and waterways. Both my instructor and I are poets primarily interested in poetics, so our reasons were sound and clear. Yahgulanaas, however, inserts a proper alternative to our discourse. In *Hummingbird*, he again frames Ecocriticism with the thoroughly activist principles out of which our shared pursuits initially grew.

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## **Works Cited**

- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993. Print.
- Yahgulanaas, Michael Nicoll. *Flight of the Hummingbird: A Parable for the Environment*. Vancouver: Greystone, 2008. Print.