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EVST 395.02: Nature Writing

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EVST 395 (Section 2)
NATURE WRITING
Fall Semester 2000

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND REQUIREMENTS

Beginning with Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789), nature-writing has been a revered tradition in English and American literature. Today's nature writers are part of that long tradition, but in recent years, the nature-writing of old has broadened and diversified into what may be more accurately termed "environmental writing." Authors such as Barry Lopez, William Warner, Terry Tempest Williams often write of an imperiled nature. Important considerations of environmental ethics and the politics of ecology lie just beneath the surface of many contemporary nature-writers. Yet old-fashioned literary natural history still survives: readers and writers still take pleasure in accurate, well-crafted descriptions of biota, geology, habitat, and landscape.

In this course, we shall examine and participate in the tradition of nature-writing and literary natural history. We'll read from some of the classic writers in the field (Gilbert White, Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Rachel Carson), along with a few of the best contemporary nature-writers (Terry Tempest Williams, Ed Abbey, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, Richard Nelson, David Quammen). We'll also resurrect some of the stars of the recent past – writers who were revered a generation ago and still deserve to be read (Loren Eiseley, Joseph Wood Krutch, Mary Hunter Austin). We'll discuss how nature-writing has mirrored the evolution of social and cultural visions of nature, and how literary works about the natural environment have helped shape the way we try to live within instead of apart from nature.

Though we'll spend much of our time discussing the readings, student writing will be a key and equally important component of this course. Students will be given a menu of writing options (from journals in the nature-writing tradition, to personal essays, to critical papers addressing one or more of the writers we'll read). Each student will write two short finished pieces in a form of his or her choice. In addition, there will be two exams.

Reading: The only required text for the course is *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. Most of our readings will be taken from this text, but there will also be occasional handouts.

The small size of this class will allow us to conduct the course as a seminar. Students are expected to have read each assignment ahead of class and to come prepared to discuss the reading.

Twenty percent of your grade will be based on class discussions.

Writing: Using our readings as triggers and models, each student will write two pieces of moderate length (5 to 10 pages) exploring his or her engagements in various aspects of nature. As our readings will

illustrate, nature-writing spans a great range of literary approaches – from factual descriptions of natural subjects (literary natural history) to explorations of self and place, to philosophical discussions of the proper relationship between humans and the natural world, to the “ramble” essay of a writer afield, to artful statements about environmental issues. Students will choose their own topics, in consultation with the instructor. We will not use structured writing assignments (though I will give you a list of ideas for writing various kinds of essays and stories), nor will we use class time for writing your two papers.

We will try to write the finest finished pieces we can, taking our original drafts through revision based on review and commentary. Depending on time constraints and the quality of work submitted, the instructor will select student essays to examine in class. It will be those students' responsibilities to reproduce one draft of the discussion essay for distribution to the class, one week in advance of discussion. We will create a timeline at the appropriate moment. The emphasis in the writing will be on quality, not quantity. Each student essay will receive commentary from the instructor, regardless of whether his/her essay is discussed in class. In some cases, one-on-one consultations may be required.

Each of your papers will contribute 25 percent of your grade.

Examinations: There will be two exams, a midterm and a final. These will be essay tests taken in class. Essay questions will be based on the readings.

Each exam will contribute 15 percent of your grade.

A Word About Grading:

I grade each paper on a combination of content and form. Content is related to substance: Is the essay complete? Does it have a beginning, middle and end? Does it make use of the stylistic elements we've been discussing in class? Is it truly reflective or just a shallow recitation of prejudices, unsupported opinions, half-baked ideas, vague scenes? Form means grammar, punctuation, syntax, organization, sentence structure and variety, physical presentation, etc.

Presentation matters. Please prepare each paper in standard format: double-spaced computer- or typewriter-printed with proper margins, each page numbered, title placed at the head of page one, a third of the way down the page. I expect you to proofread carefully and make all corrections in spelling, punctuation, grammar and typography prior to submission.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

(Unless otherwise indicated, the readings below are all from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder.)

I. Getting Started

Models for Writers: Six Kinds of Nature Writing

Weeks 1-2 (September 5-14) The Naturalist Afield (the excursion): Terry Tempest Williams, “In the Country of Grasses” (pages 903-908).

The Ramble: Wendell Berry, "An Entrance into the Woods" (pages 763-773).

The Natural History Essay: William Warner, "Beautiful Swimmer" (pages 613-621). "Field Note" (handout).

The Essay of Place: Gretel Ehrlich, from *The Solace of Open Spaces*, (pages 863-868).

The Trigger: Kathleen Dean Moore, "The Metolius" (handout).

The Issue: David Quammen, "Animal Rights and Beyond" (pages 877-882).

II. A Brief History of Nature Writing

The Origins of Literary Natural History

Week 3 (September 19, 21) Gilbert White, from *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (pages 31-53).

The Scientist and the Philosopher

Week 4 (September 26, 28) Charles Darwin, from *Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle, On the Origin of Species*, and *The Descent of Man* (pages 158-169).
Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*, "Walking," *The Maine Woods*, and the *Journals* (pages 173-207).

FIRST PAPER DUE, Thursday, September 28

Popular Nature: The Crusade of the Two Johns

Week 5 (October 3, 5) John Burroughs, "The Gospel of Nature" (pages 273-279)
John Muir, "A Wind-Storm in the Forest" and "The Water-Ouzel" (pages 279-298).

Land Conservation and the Wilderness Idea

Week 6 (October 10, 12) Aldo Leopold, from *A Sand County Almanac* (pages 400-421).
Wallace Stegner, "Glen Canyon Submersis" and "Coda: Wilderness Letter" (pages 554-569).

A Confluence of Literature and Science

Week 7 (October 17, 19) Rachel Carson, from *The Edge of the Sea* (pages 519-524).
Lewis Thomas, "Antaeus in Manhattan," "The World's Biggest Membrane," and "The Tucson Zoo" (pages 575-578, 581-586).

MIDTERM EXAM, Thursday, October 19

III. Major Themes and Ideas

The Green Man

Week 8 (October 24, 26)

John Fowles, from *The Tree* (pages 657-670).
Loren Eiseley, "The Judgment of the Birds" and "The Star-Thrower"
(pages 524-547).

Glimpses into the Indigenous Mind

Weeks 9-10 (10/31 - 11/ 9)

Leslie Marmon Silko, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination"
(pages 882-894).
N. Scott Momaday, from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (pages 774-780).
Richard K. Nelson, "The Gifts" (pages 792-806).
Barry Lopez, from *Arctic Dreams* (pages 840-856).

The Metaphysics of the Ordinary

Week 11 (November 14, 16)

Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and "Total Eclipse" (pages
816-839).
Robert Michael Pyle, from *Wintergreen* (pages 869-877).

The Strange Lure of the Desert

Weeks 12-13 (11/21, 28, 30)

Mary Hunter Austin, from *The Land of Little Rain* (pages 350-356).
Edward Abbey, from *Desert Solitaire* and "The Great American Desert"
(pages 679-692).
Joseph Wood Krutch, "Love in the Desert" (pages 429-442).
Gary Paul Nabhan, from *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (pages 898-903).

SECOND PAPER DUE, Thursday, November 30.

Animals and Morals

Week 14 (November 5, 7)

Jean Henri Fabre, from *The Life of the Grasshopper* (pages 247-252).
John G. Mitchell, from *The Hunt* (pages 735-744).
Sue Hubbell, from *A Country Year* (pages 780-787).

IV. Student Writing

Reading and Discussion of Student Works

Week 15 (November 12, 14)

To be announced.

Final Exam

Week 16 (Date to be announced)

FINAL EXAM