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EVST 395.02: Nature Writing

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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 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).

FIRST PAPER DUE, Thursday, September 28

Popular Nature: The Crusade of the Two Johns

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).

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).

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).
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