

# THE NATURE OF NATURE WRITING

**Coordinator:** Mary D. Houts

Some of the most lyrical and powerful non-fiction writing by American authors is found in personal narrative nature essays. The study group readings in this genre are by outstanding 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American writers starting with works of Henry David Thoreau whose writings influenced them all. Each week we compare and contrast how different authors address one of the following themes: the human/nature divide; a sense of place; mysteries of nature; the desert and the sea and nature in danger. We examine the works in the context of the authors' biographies and their historical eras, and we observe how the literary techniques they use contribute to the impact of the writing. As we explore the essays we discuss our own reactions to them.

## **Readings and Other Materials:**

We use a course pack with excerpts from the writings of each author. The readings consist of approximately 30 course-pack pages for each session. Audio-visual materials will be used during selected sessions.

**Mary Houts** was a nature writing enthusiast even before she received an M.S. in the Conservation of Natural Resources. She was a co-coordinator of an IRP Study Group on *Americans and Their Environment*.

\* \* \* \* \* **Syllabus – A Work in Progress** \* \* \* \* \*

## **Assignments for before each session**

### **Questions to think about for each reading**

1. How does each author tie observations of nature into the essay's main theme?
2. What rhetorical devices are used by each author?
3. In what way does the author insert her or himself into the essay?

The week before each session an additional question specific to the content of the upcoming class will be sent to the participants.

### **Reading Aloud**

The readings contain many passages that are enjoyable to hear as well as to read silently. Therefore, each study group member will have the opportunity, at least once a semester, to choose a

paragraph or a section of a few sentences from the week's readings to read aloud and discuss with the class.

### **Week One: Introduction**

Nature Writing in America up to the time of Thoreau; the roots of the personal narrative essay; the essays of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs; the influence of all three authors on future generations of nature writers and on American attitudes towards nature

### **Reading Assignment for Week One**

(32 course pack pages)

1. Frank Stewart– “Prologue” from *The Natural History of Nature Writing*
2. Henry David Thoreau – “Huckleberries” from *Natural History Essays*
  - “Fallen Leaves” from *Autumnal Tints*
  - “Walking” from *Natural History Essays*
  - “Winter Animals” from *Walden*
3. John Muir– “A Wind Storm in the Forest” from *The Mountains of California*
4. John Burroughs – “Nature Near Home” from *Field and Nature*

### **Week Two: The Human/Nature Divide**

The authors describe how experiences in the natural world have led them to become especially aware of the differences and the similarities between human beings and their fellow creatures. This awareness has influenced their attitudes towards the natural world and how they interact with nature.

### **Reading Assignment for Week Two**

( 30 Course pack pages)

1. Loren Eiseley – “The Long Loneliness” from *The Star Thrower*
2. Aldo Leopold – “Thinking Like a Mountain” from *A Sand County Almanac*
3. Henry Beston – Forward to the 1949 edition of *The Outermost* – “Autumn, Ocean and Birds” and “Orion Rises on the Dunes” from *The Outermost House*
4. Annie Dillard – “Fecundity” from *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
5. Edward Abbey – “The Serpents of Paradise” from *Desert Solitaire*

### **Week Three: A Sense of Place**

Experiences with nature at an early age provide the authors with an abiding fascination with the natural world and lead them each, in different ways, to become attached to a particular landscape.

### **Reading Assignment for Week Three**

(26 Course pack pages)

1. Edwin Way Teale –“The Lost Woods” from *The Lost Woods: Adventures of a Naturalist*
2. Linda Hasselstrom –“ Nighthawks Fly in Thunderstorms” – from *Feels Like Far: A Rancher’s Life on the Great Plains*
3. N. Scott Momaday –“The Way to Rainy Mountain” from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*
4. Scott Russell Sanders – “ Buckeye” from *Writing From the Center*
5. Luther Standing Bear – “Nature” from *Land of the Spotted Eagle*
6. Terry Tempest Williams – from *Refuge, an Unnatural History of Family and Place*
7. Wendell Berry– “A Native Hill” from *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

### **Week Four: Nature and Mystery**

Human beings have struggled to understand the world of nature since the earliest days of human culture. Even though scientists have been able to explain many of the ways that nature functions there are still untold mysteries to be solved. One of the most fascinating things about nature is the many mysteries that still surround her.

### **Reading Assignment for Week Four**

(30 Course pack pages)

1. Loren Eiseley –“The Judgement of the Birds” from *The Star Thrower*
2. \_\_\_\_\_ – “The Innocent Fox” from *The Star Thrower*
3. Annie Dillard –“Heaven and Earth in Jest” from *A Pilgrim in Tinker Creek*
4. Barry Lopez –“The Country of the Mind” from *Arctic Dreams*
5. Rachel Carson –“The Enduring Sea” from *The Edge of the Sea*
6. Aldo Leopold –“The Geese Return” from *A Sand County almanac*
7. John Hay –“Living with Trees” from *Words from the Land*
8. Henry Beston –“Night on the great Beach” from *The Outermost House*

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### **Week Five: The Desert and the Sea**

Many nature writers have specialized in writing about one type of natural habitat. Edward Abbey’s and Mary Austin’s desert essays and Rachel Carson’s books of essays on the sea are considered to be some of the best nature writing of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and are still popular today.

## **Reading Assignment for Week Five**

(29 Course pack pages)

1. Edward Abbey –“Water” and “Cliffrose and Bayonet” from *Desert Solitaire*
2. Mary Austin–“The Land of Little Rain” from *The Land of Little Rain*
3. Rachel Carson –“The Marginal World” from *The Edge of the Sea*  
–“The Pattern of the Surface” from *The Sea Around Us*

## **Six: Nature in Danger**

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, nature writing became an important way of alerting the public to the implications of both the old and new types of environmental damage that were taking place in this country.

## **Reading assignment for Week Six**

(25 course pack pages)

1. Rachel Carson –“Preface to” *The Sea Around Us*, 1961 Edition  
–“A Fable for Tomorrow” Chapter 1 & “Earth’s Green Mantle” Chapter 6  
from *Silent Spring*
2. Aldo Leopold –“A Land Ethic” from *A Sand County Almanac*
3. John Hay--“The Dovekie and the Ocean Sunfish” from *In Defense of Nature*
4. Bill McKibben – “The End of Nature” from *The End of Nature*