

English and American Nature Writers

(an incomplete listing in somewhat chronological order...)

Gilbert White 1720-1793

father of nature writing? English naturalist, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*

John James Audubon 1785-1851

birds, Ornithological Biography (5 vols.)

Charles Waterton 1782-1865

English naturalist and explorer, *Wanderings in South America*

Ralph Waldo Emerson 1808-1882

father of American nature writing? US East Coast, *Nature, Journals*

Henry David Thoreau 1817-1862

teacher, botanist, philosopher, New England, *Walden, The Maine Woods, Journals*

Walt Whitman 1819-1892

American poet, *Specimen Days, Leaves of Grass*

John Wesley Powell 1834-1902

explorer, Colorado River, Grand Canyon, *Explorations of the Colorado River of the West and its Tributaries*

Charles Darwin

English naturalist, South America, *Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle, Origin of Species*

Herman Melville 1819-1891

Moby Dick

Alfred Russel Wallace 1823-1913

naturalist, South America, *Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro, The Malay Archipelago*

Joseph Ward Krutch 1893-1970

NY drama critic and professor of literature, urban, *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession, Love in the Desert*

Isak Dinesen 1883-1962

Danish writer, colonial Kenya, *Out of Africa*

John Muir 1838-1914

explorer, environmental activist, Wisconsin, *Yosemite, A Wind Storm in the Forests, Gentle Wilderness, Mountains of California*

Aldo Leopold 1888-1948

professional conservationist, land ethics, Wisconsin, *A Sand County Almanac*

Rene Dubos 1901-1982

microbiologist, environmentalist, *The Wooing of Earth*

Rachel Carson 1907-1964

marine biologist, environmentalist, *The Sea Around Us, The Edge of the Sea, Silent Spring*

Loren Eiseley 1907-1977

The Judgment of Birds, The Star Thrower

Wallace Stegner b. 1909

novelist, short story writer, inter-mountain American west, *The Sound of Mountain Water*

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Edward Abbey 1927-1989

park ranger, environmentalist, American Southwest, *Desert Solitaire*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*

Peter Matthiessen b. 1927

global explorer, writer, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *The Tree Man was Born*, *The Wind Birds*, *The Snow Leopard*

John McPhee b. 1931

essayist, US focus, *Coming Into the Country*, *The Pine Barrens*, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, *The Control of Nature*

Wendell Berry b. 1934

essayist, poet, agriculture and farming, Kentucky, *The Unsettling of America*, *The Men of Old Jack*, *Farming: A Handbook*, *Clearing*

N. Scott Momaday b.1934

Kiowa heritage, *The Way to Rain Mountain*, *House Made of Dawn*, *The Gourd Dancer*

Annie Dillard b.1945

writer on "what it feels like to be alive," *Blue Ridge Mountains*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Rick Bass b. 1958

contemporary, petroleum geologist turned writer, Texas, Montana, *Oil Notes*, *Deer Pasture*, *Winter*, *Ninemile Wolves*

Norman Maclean b.1902

English professor, fishing, Idaho, Montana, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*

John Hay b.1915

writer, outer environment and inner lives, *The Run*, *In Defense of Nature*

John Graves b.1920

Texas writer, *Good-bye to a River*, *Notes from a Limestone Ledge*, *Hard Scrabble*

Leslie Mormon Silko b.1948

writer, poet, ritual and myth in life, *Ceremony*, *Laguna Women*, *Storyteller*

Robert Finch b. 1943

essayist, Cape Cod, *The Cape Itself*

David Ehrenfeld contemporary

ecologist, *The Arrogance of Humanism*

Brenda Peterson b. 1950

essayist, *Nature and other Mothers: Reflection on the Feminism in Everyday Life*, *Living by Water: Essays on Life, Land and Spirit*

John R. Stilgoe b. 1949

history of landscape, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene*

J Ronald Engel contemporary

professor of social ethics, *Ethics of Environment and Development*, *Sacred Sands*

Barry Lopez b. 1945

essayist, short story writer, US, *Arctic Dreams*, *Of Wolves and Men*, *Crossing Open Ground*

Darrell Addison Posey b. 1947

ethnobiologist, Kayapo Indians of Brazil, *The Science of Mebengkre*

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John Elder b. 1947

English professor, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*

Susan Power Bratton b. 1951

ecologist, parks and wilderness protection, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*

David Abram b. 1957

ecologist, magician, essays appear in *The Ecologist* and *Environmental Ethics*

Terry Tempest Williams b. 1955

naturalist, Utah, *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland, Coyote's Canyon*

Scott Russell Sanders b. 1945

English professor, *Secrets of the Universe: Scenes from the Journey Home, The Paradise of Bombs*

Starhawk contemporary

writer, ecofeminist, spirituality, witch by self-description, *The Fifth Sacred Thing, Walking to Mercury*

Gary Nabhan b. 1952

ethnobiologist, American Southwest, Papago Indians, *The Desert Smells Like Rain*

Ann Zwinger b. 1925

art and art history, Colorado Rockies, American West, Baja peninsula, *Beyond the Aspen Grove, Mysterious Lands*

Jim Nollman contemporary

interspecies communication, *Dolphin Dreamtime, Spiritual Ecology, Animal Dreaming*

Charles Bergman contemporary

English professor, absence or loss of nature, *Wild Echos: Encounters with the Most Endangered Animals in North America*

Finding Home: The Role of Nature Writing*

In his introduction to *Finding Home*, Peter Sauer asserts that “nature -- the way we understand the natural world -- is changing, and this transformation carries with it all the makings of a cultural revolution . . . A society’s conceptual relationship to nature,” he continues, “is at the core of its culture: it is a relationship that underlies what we believe and how we live.” Evidence of such a relationship may be found in English Language nature writing over the last two hundred years. Perhaps all nature writers are children of Linnaeus, who in the mid-eighteenth century, introduced a framework within which all living things could be classified and identified. Parsons, poets, ladies and gentleman of leisure in England, explorers and collectors in the wilds of America, all carried their copies of Linnaeus.

In America, the early prominence of nature writing is associated with the exploration of an abundant continent. Naturalists were commissioned, first by amateurs and institutions in Britain and then by the fledgling American government, to travel, draw maps, keep lists, and ship specimens. Both the cultural climate and the natural environment fostered a genre of nature writing in English. In this genre, the personal element -- the filtering of experience through the individual’s sensibility -- is central to the nature writing tradition. Nature writers take excursions away from dominant literary and scientific models, returning with their testimony about how human beings respond to what is non-human and how individuals and societies may achieve more significant and rewarding integration with the earth that sustains them. Often the accounts convey a proprietary tone that colors nature writers’ descriptions of their chosen or ultimate landscapes -- from Henry David Thoreau’s Concord to John Muir’s Sierra to Edward Abbey’s Arches National Monument.

Today, nature writing in America is flourishing. John Elder and Robert Finch, both nature writers in their own right, assert in the introduction to *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, that “nonfiction may well be the most vital form of current American literature, and a notable proportion of the best writers of nonfiction practice nature writing.” Nature writing has attracted poets such as John Hay and Wendell Berry and novelists and essayists like Peter Mathhiessen, Annie Dillard, John McPhee, Barry Lopez, and Leslie Mormon Silko. In addition, writers like Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, and Ann Zwinger have, in their literary essays, imbued their respective fields of marine biology, anthropology, and art with humanistic concerns.

All these writers contribute to the way we, as a culture, understand the natural world. How we understand the world around us, influences how we will respond to changes within it. At a time when there is growing consensus that nature is changing and that the natural world has been fundamentally altered by humankind, nature writing might provide invaluable insight into the human impacts of and responses to environmental change. Such insights might lead to a better understanding of our behavior toward the environment and might allow for a more perfect union with nature.

* Adapted from: Peter Sauer, ed. 1992. *Finding home*. Boston: Beacon Press; and Robert Finch and John Elder, eds. 1990. *The Norton book of nature writing*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.