

## Wild Things

### ***Forget deconstruction--today's hippest literary critics have gone green***

By Gregory McNamee

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For many years, college English departments have harbored a familiar type: a '60s survivor who, having transferred his or her idealism from politics to the realm of nature, has been teaching Thoreau's *Walden*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and perhaps Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to like-minded undergraduates. These proselytes of nature writing "saw in the wilderness, with its healthy and interdependent communities, a model for just and sustainable human societies," writes John Tallmadge in his memoir *Meeting the Tree of Life* (University of Utah Press, 1997). Armed with that vision, they have carved a niche for ecologically based literature in the English curriculum, territory once hotly contested by devotees of deconstructionism, postmodernism, feminism, structuralism, and psychoanalytical criticism.

The heyday of most of those critical schools is past, but the English curriculum is becoming ever greener, and young scholars are turning to the study of nature writing in ever greater numbers. Thoreau, Carson, and Dillard are enshrined in the evolving roster of key texts; seminars and survey courses on environmental literature and nature writing are regularly offered at colleges and universities large and small; and "ecocriticism" has become something of an academic growth industry.

The new ecocritics are primarily engaged in naming the most important works in the field and elaborating the reasons why they matter more than others. A recent survey conducted by the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) names among them Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, which appears on more nature-writing syllabi than any other title, followed closely by Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain*, and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. (Stalwarts like Thoreau, Carson, and Dillard figure farther down the list.) The search for a canon has also yielded several anthologies of primary sources, the best known of which is Thomas Lyon's popular collection *This Incomperable Lande* (Penguin, 1994), which moves from the Puritans to naturalist-explorers like William Bartram, John James Audubon, and Thomas Nuttall and ends with modern giants like Leopold and Abbey.

With this canon-building has come a flurry of critical writing devoted to nature's aesthetic and symbolic values, a subject that Stephen Kellert takes on at length in *The Value of Life* (Island Press, 1997). And the new field has spawned an anthology of its own, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader* (University of Georgia Press, 1996). Following the late novelist Wallace Stegner's notion that environmentally based literary criticism should be "large and loose and suggestive and open," it includes works ranging from historian Lynn White's landmark 1962 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," to literary scholar Michael McDowell's recent article titled "The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight." A second volume may be warranted, since many relevant titles have appeared in the last year or two. For

instance, Bonnie Marranca's *Ecologies of Theater* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) heralds "the ecstatic union of art and science and spirit" that yields "a new vision of art, which is always a new ecology." And ecofeminist critic Susan Griffin observes in *The Eros of Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1995) that "the alienation of human society from nature has led to many different kinds of destruction, not the least of which has been the fragmentation of consciousness."

That fragmentation also concerns Jack Turner, a tenured professor of philosophy who gave up his job to climb the Tetons and Himalayas. His provocative treatise titled *The Abstract Wild* (University of Arizona Press, 1996) dissects the abstractions that divorce us from the natural world. Inasmuch as literary criticism is an abstraction-laden enterprise, Turner's work may be the object of some ecocriticism of its own; reviews are just beginning to appear in the professional literature. Still, environmental literature, as Frank Stewart observes in *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (Island Press, 1995), has always been "broad and inclusive, wide enough to contain the writing of botanists and entomologists, bee farmers and beef ranchers, explorers and novelists."

To that list, it appears, we should now add college professors and academic critics.

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