

The Great Divide

There is one way that journalists dealing with the environment can start working on building reflexes that improve that balance of heat and light, boost the ability to convey the complex without putting readers (or editors) to sleep, and otherwise attempt to break the barriers to effective communication with the public.

This is to communicate more with scientists. By getting a better feel for the breakthrough-setback rhythms of research, a reporter is less likely to forget that the state of knowledge about endocrine disruptors or PCBs or climate is in flux. This requires using those rare quiet moments between breaking-news days—sure, there aren't many—to talk to ecologists or toxicologists who aren't on the spot because their university has just issued a press release.

The more scientists and journalists talk outside the pressures of a daily news deadline, the more likely it is that the public—through the media—will appreciate what science can and cannot offer to the debate over difficult questions about how to invest scarce resources or change personal behaviors.

There is another reason to do this. Just as the public has become cynical about the value of news, many scientists have become cynical, and fearful, about journalism. Some of this is their fault, too. I was at a meeting in Irvine, California, on building better bridges between science and the public, and one researcher stood up to recount her personal “horror story” about how a reporter totally misrepresented her statements and got everything wrong. I asked her if she had called the reporter or newspaper to begin a dialogue not only on fixing those errors, but preventing future ones.

She had not. She had never even considered it.

Until the atmosphere has changed to the point where that scientist can make that call, and the reporter respond to it, everyone has a lot of work to do.

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Nature

MCKAY JENKINS

McKay Jenkins holds degrees from Amherst, Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, and Princeton, where he received a Ph.D. in English. A former staff writer for the *Atlanta Constitution*, he has also written for *Outside*, *Orion*, and many other publications. He is the author of *The Last Ridge: The Epic Story of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division and the Assault on Hitler's Europe* (2003), *The White Death: Tragedy and Heroism in an Avalanche Zone* (2000), and *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s* (1999) and the editor of *The Peter Matthiessen Reader* (2000). His latest book is *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine: Madness, Murder, and the Collision of Cultures in the Arctic, 1913* (2005). McKay is the Cornelius A. Tilghman Professor of English and a member of the Program in Journalism at the University of Delaware. He lives in Baltimore with his family.

Not long ago, at the beginning of a course I was teaching on “The Literature of the Land,” I asked my undergraduate journalism students why they were having such a hard time thinking of things to write about. What, I wondered, was so hard about nature writing?

A sophomore raised his hand. As often happens, the answer came back more succinct than I could have hoped. “It's hard writing about nature in Delaware,” he said, “because there is no nature in Delaware.”

There was something emblematic in this comment, something that revealed the difficulty, at first blush, that young writers have in conjuring exactly what

“nature writing” means, My first impulse was to list all the nearby “nature” out there that the student hadn’t bothered to recognize: the Atlantic seashore, the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, the Appalachian Mountains on one hand; and DuPont chemical factories, massive landfills, and rampant suburban sprawl on the other. But instead I paused, and let the comment hang in the air for a moment. What, exactly, were we talking about?

For the nonspecialist, “nature writing” can seem especially intimidating, since it seems, at first glance, to be a subject without human drama, without a narrative trajectory, without a beginning, a middle, and an end—as opposed to, say, writing about cops, or courts, or politics, or sports. It can seem overly technical, or ponderous, or misanthropic. It can seem abstract, even irrelevant, especially to urban audiences who think of “nature” as something they encounter on boutique holidays out west. Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, according to legend, was rejected by a New York publisher because “it had too many trees in it.”

But it isn’t “nature” that is lacking, in Delaware or anywhere else. It is imagination, or perspective, or a “way of seeing.” Granted, a place like Delaware is notably lacking in the 14,000-foot mountains, Arctic fjords, and equatorial rainforests that have come to represent “nature” for suburban Americans. But this is precisely why a place like Delaware turns out to be such a useful place to talk about nature writing. The trick is to see the subtleties and the synecdoches, to examine the space between what we can see and what we can imagine, to ponder the “shadow” that T. S. Eliot writes falls “between the idea/And the reality.” Nature writing is more about the sharpness of the eye and the clarity of the mind than it is about the majesty of the landscape.

I say this only to separate nature writing from “environmental reporting,” which tends at once to be less preoccupied with metaphysics and more with chronicling the endless tug of war in politics, economics, and environmental advocacy. The fields overlap; they both, for example, rely substantially on field research. But where environmental reporters might use this research to bolster a particular argument, a nature writer might use it as a prompt for meditation. The prospect of a manned mission to Mars provides ample opportunities for both. So does an ocean made barren by overfishing, or a plan to reintroduce the wolf. Science, in other words, can be used as an end, as an advance in an ongoing story, or it can be used as a means, to open our eyes to see larger and larger contexts.

Since so much of nature writing concerns itself with the nonhuman world, one of the struggles is to figure out how to describe and muse about things to which humans have limited access. To my mind, a nature writer has the challenge of the poet: With lofty, often abstract imaginative aspirations, he or she must find the most vivid details with which to express them. Aldo Leopold, watching the “fierce green fire” drain from the eyes of a wolf he has just killed,

realizes he must stop thinking like a man and start thinking like a mountain. Rachel Carson, remembering trucks driving through mid-century suburban neighborhoods spraying lawns with DDT, makes us see not just the hazards of pesticides but the hubris of technology itself. DDT is a subject for environmental reporting. Hubris is a subject for nature writing.

Teaching this idea to my students, I often draw a diagram of a small circle with an arrow pointing to a large circle. The larger circle is the abstract idea: species extinction, global warming, the biology of death, the mind of a wolf. The smaller circle is the detail, the observation, the interview, the expedition, that gives the reader access to the larger idea. In some ways, filling the smaller circle is as hard as filling the first. Given an impulse to explore abstract ideas, how do we devise a narrative strategy to get the ideas across? How can we concoct the teaspoon of sugar to help the medicine go down? Bookshelves are full of excellent examples, any one of which can be read as models of structure and tone. The one thing most have in common, like any good piece of nonfiction writing, is a narrative arc: tales of expeditions, natural disaster, spiritual pilgrimage, ethnography, or scientific exploration that serve as a frame on which to stretch larger philosophical questions.

David Quammen says this nicely in his essay “Synecdoche and the Trout” in *Wild Thoughts from Wild Places* (1998): A trout is both a fish and an idea, a representation of something larger, in this case an entire ecosystem. The trick for the nature writer is to remember both the trout and the watershed. Write statistically about the numbers of trout living in a single stream and you miss both larger ecological implications and the metaphysics of a creature whose essence you can only approximate. Write abstractly about the health of the northern Rockies and you miss the poetic specificity of the fish. Good writing needs both.

In my own book *The White Death*, I tried, in effect, to stitch two threads together: a human narrative, about five boys killed in a mountaineering disaster in Montana’s Glacier National Park; and the natural history of snow and avalanches themselves. The book moves back and forth between, on one hand, an attempt at an historic climb, a catastrophic accident, and an unprecedented search-and-rescue; and on the other, a chronicle of the deep history, science, and folklore of one of nature’s most mysterious and ominous forces. In a few places in the book, I tried to combine the two, to describe an avalanche-prone mountain as a kind of stage on which human dramas have often played out. Since not all readers have been in avalanche country, I decided to use a more universal source of anxiety.

Hiking or skiing in avalanche country is like walking around in a valley you know to be inhabited by grizzly bears.

Your senses become more alert. You become aware of tiny sounds—every creak of a tree limb, every snap of a twig. In bear country, you become aware, perhaps for the first time in your life, that you are not at the top of the food chain. For once, nothing is so important as the direction of the wind; there is something out there that, with a mix of your own ignorance and bad luck, could finish you off. The same is true in the winter backcountry. When every footstep, on a steep slope, is potentially your last, you tend to pay attention to where you put your feet. The beauty of this arrangement is that this vibrancy, this forced concentration, makes the whole picture sharper. Time slows down. Your actions matter.

I had a different challenge in the book that followed, *The Last Ridge*. To begin with, I was drawn to the story not because I had an interest in military history but because I was interested in the veterans who returned from the war to become the country's most important mountaineers, skiers, and conservationists. As a writer who believes firmly in the balance between fieldwork and archival research—especially for a book that relied on thousands of pages of letters and military documents—I felt it was critical to see the division's training grounds and battlefields firsthand. Since this required me to travel to Colorado and Italy, this was not an onerous task. But there were a number of important aesthetic reasons for tromping around these places. Many of the young men who signed up for this experimental division had been born and raised in New England and had never been west before they arrived to train at Camp Hale, 9,200 feet up in the Colorado Rockies. As their training went on, they would spend weeks at a time living outside at 13,000 feet, even in winter. Given this, I wanted to see the place as they had, with only New England mountains in their collective mountaineering experience. To my mind, the moments of physical description would also allow the reader to breathe a bit between what are often torturous scenes of physical hardship and violence.

When it finally arrived, spring weather also meant an explosion of color in the mountains, where wildflowers bloomed in the alpine meadows. Waterfalls poured over cliffs lining the eastern edge of camp, along the trail leading to Kokomo Pass. The air suddenly took on a hint of sage and buzzed with the dry rattle of grasshoppers. Mountain jays flitted from lightning-blackened tree snags to scraggly dead sage bushes sitting like elk antlers against the rocky peaks. In warm weather, the men could fish and play football in the mead-

ows. But even in spring, daylight in the valley was in short supply. With so many high peaks around, the horizon was 4,000 feet higher than the men's barracks. As the aspens leafed out, their bark a waxy skin of white suede, they reminded the New Englanders of the paper birches back home. The mountains themselves, their slopes scarred by rock slides, seemed a cross between the jagged White Mountains of New Hampshire and the rounded Green Mountains of Vermont; swelling up to the east of Cooper Hill, the smooth sides of Chicago Ridge looked like a chunk of Vermont dropped from the moon.

Annie Dillard's writing is remarkable both for the vividness of the descriptions and for the arching wonder of the mysteries they evoke. Witnessing a total solar eclipse, which washed all the color out of the central Washington State hills on which she stood, she experienced a transcendent fear:

The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world. We were the world's dead people rotating and orbiting around and around, embedded in the earth's crust, while the earth rolled down. . . . The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself. *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982)

A news story about an eclipse is environmental reporting. Describing a glimpse of the end of the world is nature writing.

Bill McKibben, in *The End of Nature* (1989), writes that our addiction to fossil fuels has so damaged Earth's atmosphere that human beings have become something more than biological creatures. We have become a force of nature, like the Sun, or gravity, and McKibben does not seem confident in our ability to wield such power wisely. Barry Lopez, in *Arctic Dreams*, notes that the Inuit call Europeans "the people who change nature." Transmitting the latest research about global warming is environmental reporting. Musing on our ability to wield powers once limited to Greek gods is nature writing.

Peter Matthiessen, in his first published piece of nonfiction, imagined the moment when two fishermen smashed the last Great Auk egg ever seen by man. Another species gone for good. "Man, striving to imagine what might lie beyond the long light years of stars, beyond the universe, beyond the void, feels lost in space; confronted with the death of species, enacted on earth so many

times before he came, and certain to continue when his own breed is gone, he is forced to face another void, and feels alone in time." Since Matthiessen wrote those lines, in 1959, things have gotten considerably worse. Humanity has stomped its boot heel on the world's ecology, causing rates of extinction not seen since Earth was hit by a giant meteor. We are being compared to other "weed species," except that unlike rats, crows, and cockroaches, we are actually responsible for turning lush ecosystems into wastelands. The "good news" is that Earth might recover its ecological richness 10 million years after humans themselves become extinct. This is not far from the moment in the film *The Matrix*, when the snarling Agent Smith barely has to think to come up with a creature most resembling human beings: the virus. In *The Hot Zone* (1994) Richard Preston goes a step further. To an Ebola virus, hidden inside a human host about to land at a New York airport, Manhattan looks like a meat locker. Human beings are not at the top of the food chain after all. Nature writing.

Granted, these are not comfortable thoughts. Yet even an incurable misanthrope like Edward Abbey concedes that it was a man who composed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. What is so strange is that we are capable, like Shiva, of both magnificent creation and eye-popping destruction. Both excellent subjects for nature writing. "We are just like squirrels, really, or, well, more like gibbons, but we happen to use tools, speak, and write," Annie Dillard writes in *For the Time Being* (2000). "We blundered into art and science. We are one of those animals, the ones whose neocortexes swelled, who just happen to write encyclopedias and fly to the moon. Can anyone believe this?"

Indeed, beyond offering the opportunity to write "natural history," that is, the story of a species, or a landscape, or an ecosystem, "nature writing" also offers one of a nonfiction writer's best chances to explore the ephemeral, the unseen, the mysterious. How does one write about the emotional life of animals, or the mysterious qualities of snow, or the ability of Inuit shamans to transform themselves into polar bears? How do we write about birth and death? Indeed, what is it, exactly, that we know about nature, about life, about our position in the world? By the time a man has lived 60 years, he has spent fully 20 years asleep. What went on all that time? We are all Rip Van Winkles. Given that the very mitochondria in our cells have DNA and RNA different from our own, writes Lewis Thomas in *The Lives of a Cell* (1974), how can we be so sure of ourselves? "A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities," Thomas writes. "We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be separate little creatures. Without them, we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought." The borders we think sep-

arate us from other beings are illusory, the Buddhist monk tells us. It's all about context, relationships, interdependence. The ecologist agrees.

Indeed, in some fields, even scientists are becoming more comfortable with acknowledging the gaps in what it is possible for us to know. Chaos theory and quantum physics are just the latest examples of fields that have come to confess that the best we can do is approximate what we can know of nature's mysteries. The table on which I write this essay is made of wood, but a physicist and a Taoist master would agree that there is more empty space in the wood than there is wood. How can this be? To this and to all such questions, the Zen master Seung Sahn has an answer: "Don't know." Ask some Canadian Inuit about where their dead go after they leave Earth, and you'll get the same response. Don't know. The humility of the response is the humility with which so much good nature writing is filled. In the space between the atoms of wood lies the mystery. The best nature writing will always occupy the invigorating place between hard science and artistic abstraction. "The tolerance for mystery invigorates the imagination," Barry Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams*, "and it is the imagination that gives shape to the universe."