

Nature Writing in American Literature: Seminal Books of Fiction:

An Annotated Bibliography

By Maria Kochis

The bibliography is organized chronologically by first editions or early printings to help readers understand the progression of the genre. Later editions were inserted below the initial entry if that was the edition read for the purpose of annotating the bibliography. Exceptions have been made for short story collections. The dates of publication for the collection determined their placement in the bibliography, even though individual short stories were often published earlier in periodicals or anthologies.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick; Or, The Whale*. New York: Harper, 1851. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick; Or, The Whale*. New York: Heritage P, 1943. Print.

Ishmael, the narrator of Melville's epic novel, explains in the very first chapter why he takes to the sea: to see wonders. His curiosity, not just about Moby Dick, but for whales in general, and many other creatures, is evidenced throughout the book. He delves into the natural history of whales and explores their psychological effects on humans. Although Ahab's desire to exact revenge on Moby Dick drives the main plot, it is Ishmael's ruminations and observations that bestow it with meaning. In one respect, Ishmael, with his wide-ranging curiosity, could be seen as the counterpoint of Ahab, gripped by his single dominant

thought; on both characters, nature exerts an irresistible pull. In *Moby Dick*, Melville shows himself to be a master of subtle irony; complicated passages yield shrewd insights about some of man's strangest and most vile prejudices, many of them against nature. A strong argument can be made that, without losing any of its greatness, the entire book can be read as an indictment against whaling.

Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of Pointed Firs*. Boston: Houghton, 1896. Print.

Jewett, Sarah Orne. "A Dunnet Shepherdess." *The Queen's Twin and Other Stories*. Boston: Houghton, 1899. Print.

Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of Pointed Firs and Other Stories*. Lebanon: UP of New England, 1997. Print.

Jewett has only recently received recognition as a nineteenth century writer of significance. In her most popular book, *The Country of Pointed Firs*, she portrays a tiny Maine fishing through the eyes of a visiting writer. While the writer views nature as an array of beautiful curiosities, the town's inhabitants see it in more practical ways: the provisions of their survival. In her short story, *A Dunnett Shepherdess*, Jewett shows how living and working in close proximity to nature can affect the human spirit. The same visiting writer makes the acquaintance of Esther, a local shepherdess. Esther has given up her school teaching job – and, one infers, the possibility of being a wife – to shepherd her flocks full-time and thus make a living for both her mother and herself. At the end of the story, the

writer realizes that rather than coarsening Esther, nature has refined her and is in some way responsible for her deep abiding peace.

London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*. New York: Macmillan, 1903. Print.

London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild and White Fang*. New York: Random, 2014. Print.

At the beginning of *The Call of the Wild*, when Buck is still living a life of ease in the Santa Clara Valley, London portrays him in very human terms: self-aware, dignified, and intelligent – as civilized as the family which owns him. His kidnappers, and the harsh conditions of his new life in the Alaskan wilderness, strip his dignity away; it is replaced by pride and rage. His intelligence, if anything, becomes sharper, cannier, augmented by his instincts. For the first time, he can tap into ancestral memories – a suprahuman power. Indeed, it can be argued that in his new existence, Buck transcends not only his old self, but the humans who exert their mastery over him (usually, by wielding a club). Throughout his remarkable book, London challenges our assumptions about primitive and civilized behavior, wild and domesticated life, and the superiority of humans over all other animal kind. It remains a classic of modern American literature.

London, Jack. *White Fang*. New York: Macmillian, 1906. Print.

London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild and White Fang*. New York: Random, 2014.

Print.

On the surface, the plot of *White Fang* is the reverse of *The Call of the Wild*. While still a pup, White Fang and his mother, Kiche, are captured by Native Americans deep in the Alaskan wilderness. White Fang initially resists captivity, but eventually trades freedom for food, fire, the proximity of human power, and the brutal companionship of the tribe. His first man-god, “Gray Beaver,” trades him to an even worse tyrant, Beauty Smith, who forces him to fight dogs for money. Weenan Scott rescues White Fang from the death grip of a bull dog and brings him back to California; the love of his final master and ease of his new life civilize him by degrees. Like Buck, the wolf’s amazing ability to adapt to new circumstances even as a mature animal is his best survival tool – evidence of his keen intelligence. Throughout the story, London shows how environment vies with heredity in molding personality, a nod to the power of nature; he also illustrates how canines, like man himself, possess free will, which enables them to fly in the face of both.

Cather, Will. *O Pioneers!* Boston: Houghton, 1913. Print.

Cather, Will. *O Pioneers!* New York: Quality Paperback, 1913. Print.

*O Pioneers!* is one of the best examples of nature writing in which the prose so perfectly matches the land it describes: spacious, spare, and forthright – the ultimate prose of the prairie. Cather’s characters seem easily affected by the condition and contours of the land, as well as by the weather and the seasons; an

argument could be made that this, too, is a natural characteristic of prairie-writing. With so little in the ways of trees or mountains to shelter its inhabitants, the land and the elements bear down on them more heavily. It could also explain why the protagonist, Alexandra, is so strong, raising her siblings and running the family farm as a young single woman when her parents die. Cather's books are particularly valuable because so few of her contemporaries focused on the prairie as the subject or setting of their work, living in and writing about more mountainous or coastal regions. As an interesting aside – *O Pioneers!* is dedicated to the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett (see annotation above).

Austin, Mary. *The Ford*. Boston: Houghton, 1917. Print.

Austin, Mary. *The Ford*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print

In *The Ford*, Austin tackles one of the most important subjects in California history: water rights. The book describes the struggle between urban speculators and local farmers over land and water in the fictional Tierra Longa Valley (approximately located in Kern and Inyo Counties). The book is based on the actual water wars which began during the early part of the twentieth century between Los Angeles speculators and Owens Valley farmers – and, in some measure, continue to this day. Austin lived in Inyo County and witnessed this struggle firsthand. Her passion for the region and sense of outrage at the exploitation which occurred there burns bright in her novel. Austin is a classic western writer; her books have been studied intently in recent decades by feminist

and ecofeminist critics. It wouldn't at all be surprising if *The Ford*, in particular, receives another wave of attention as a result of the recent drought and the future uncertainty of the state's water supply.

Faulkner, William. *Big Woods; The Hunting Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Random, 1955. Print

Nature penetrates the four stories of this haunting collection in profound ways. In *The Bear*, Faulkner introduces us to “the boy,” who, under the tutelage of Chickasaw-blooded Sam Fathers, becomes a woodsman before he reaches adolescence, stalking game and route-finding in the ancient remnant forests of the lower Mississippi – otherwise known as the Big Bottom. In *The Old Ones*, the boy graduates to manhood when he brings down his first buck; his reward is the gift of vision: he sees, in the form of an even greater buck, one of Fathers' noble ancestors. Throughout the collection, Faulkner shows how wilderness fulfills man as nothing else can, addressing his need for physical challenge, risk, and exploration; solitude and beauty; above all perhaps, his deep need for the mystery of otherness. While quite a few American authors wrote about the inherent value of wilderness to man – most notably, Thoreau and Muir – they did so through essays, diaries, and other first person accounts; Faulkner might be the first significant author to do so in fiction.

Hurston, Zola Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1937.

Print.

Hurston, Zola Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper, 1998. Print.

For three days, sixteen year old Janie Crawford answers the call of the blossoming pear tree in her yard by soaking in its sights and scents. The pear tree, more than her grandmother, more than her first or second husbands, teaches her about the bliss of communion. Repeatedly, over the next twenty five years, she returns to the vision of that blooming tree to measure her happiness, hopes, and relationships. Hurston's prose, when she describes how nature affects Janie, is high poetry – some of the most gorgeous passages in American literature. When Janie finally finds a man worthy of her dreams, they head down to the Everglades, where their love runs big and wild. At the end of the book, nature takes possession of the story again, wrenching Janie's life, and love, out of her control. Many African-American writers cite Hurston – and this particular work – among their greatest influences.

Guthrie, A.B. Jr. *The Big Sky*. New York: Time, 1947. Print.

*The Big Sky* describes the mountain west from the perspective of the mountain men – men who lived by themselves, or in small groups, and trapped for a living. The three men central to the story don't trap for profit, but rather, for the experience of living in the wilderness and reveling in the present. The book takes place between 1830 and 1843, but within this short span of years, trapping, as a lifestyle, began to be obsolete. Settlements expanded, which meant more

competition for game; the numbers of beavers dropped off sharply, and buffalo were expected to follow. Old game trails were turned into trails for western convoys. By the end of the book, one feels a strong sense of loss – not simply for the diminished land, or the three main characters, but for all the succeeding generations of men, who will never know such bounty, or wildness, or have the same scope of freedom. Guthrie is considered one of the great western writers. He is also one of the earliest authors to write so directly about the plunder of the mountain west. In fact, *Big Sky* was published two years before Aldo Leopold's seminal work, *The Sand County Almanac* – often credited with engendering the modern discourse about land ethics and conservation.

Guthrie, A.B. Jr. *The Way West*. New York: Sloane, 1949. Print.

Guthrie, A.B. Jr. *The Way West*. New York: Houghton, 2002. Print.

*The Way West*, second in Guthrie's trilogy, picks up the storyline from the *Big Sky*. Dick Summers – one of the central characters in the first novel – uses his knowledge of the intermountain west to lead a pioneer train from Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia River. Guthrie excels at communicating both the daily grind of the overland voyage and the sharp bite of the unexpected. He also illustrates the less visceral impacts of the trail: wide open vistas cause some spirits to expand, for instance, others to shrink. Although one senses that the author sides with Summers' views on nature, man, and what constitutes a good life, the pioneers are sympathetically rendered. They are allowed to have their prosaic



dreams, and be motivated by them, and in following their dreams – illusory though they may be – change for the good. *The Way West* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1950.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner, 1952. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.

Nature comes alive in Hemingway's sympathetic portraits, seen through the eyes of the solitary old fisherman. Alone on the sea, the old man finds fellowship with the flying fish, feels pity for the dark delicate terns. Nature haunts his memories and dreams. When he catches the huge purple marlin and is pulled out to sea – and, it seems, certain death – his sympathies turn to the marlin. He begins to think of it as his equal, a worthy opponent, and, ultimately, as his friend and brother. By the time sharks appear, he mourns catching it at all. It is the man's change of heart that seems to communicate that anything is possible – much more so than his good luck in catching the huge fish in the first place. In spare, honest prose, Hemingway looks to enlarge our sympathies as well; we are asked to sympathize with a sympathetic hunter, as well as with a beautiful, noble, dying prey; the degree that we do so is a tribute to his mastery. *The Old Man and the Sea* won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Wizard of Earthsea*. New York: Houghton, 1968. Print.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Wizard of Earthsea*. New York: Houghton, 2012. Print.

In many of her books, including her Earthsea novels, LeGuin frequently raises questions about the appropriate treatment of nature. In *The Wizard of Earthsea*, apprentice wizards are taught to respect life – animals, plants, and birds – for their innate being, rather than for their use. They are also directed to be cautious when summoning natural forces – such as wind and waves – because such spells have ripple effects that extend to the most remote reaches of the realm. This idea of global ripple effects has become more apparent in recent times – an obvious ecological truth. Although LeGuin’s classic novels are often categorized as fantasy, an argument can be made that they are so well-written and insightful they defy the limitations of that genre. Excerpts from LeGuin’s books are frequently included in anthologies of nature writing.

Momaday, M. Scott, *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper, 1966. Print.

Momaday, M. Scott, *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper, 1999. Print.

In *House Made of Dawn*, the land is observed acutely, in such rich, composite detail birds are called to mind – namely eagles. Certainly, Momaday’s ability to see and attentively record such details exceeds the abilities of most writers; he does so in mind-bending flights of prose, capable of carrying the reader all the way to a Native American reservation, deep in the southwest, in 1945. The world is perceived through the eyes of Abel, recently returned from fighting in the Second World War, and his traditionally-minded grandfather, Francisco, who

raised him. Abel's clear sight, tides of emotion, and sense of deep belonging seem bound to the land; away from them – on an overseas battlefield or in Los Angeles, where he ends up after spending years in jail – the world is a dark painful puzzle. *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969; its blatant criticisms of the industrialization of war and the push for urbanization still ring true today.

Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. New York: Doubleday, 1971. Print.

Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. New York: Penguin, 2000. Print.

*Angle of Repose* has a complicated structure. Lyman Ward, a retired history professor, is engaged in the project of discovering his grandmother's identity by reading her old letters and imagining her life. His grandfather made his career as a mining engineer; his new bride and family followed him to locations across The West, and even to the remote location of Michoacan, Mexico, before ultimately settling in Grass Valley, California. Their homes were temporary; the settlements, where they lived, dashed together out of necessity; the culture his grandmother craved was practically non-existent. With so little standing between them and nature, their identities and the evolution of their marriage became shaped, in large part, by their responses to the landscape. The novel succeeds brilliantly as a work of historical fiction, completely lacking in the stereotypes and caricatures that characterize so many westerns. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972.

Abbey, Edward. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. New York: Lippincott, 1975. Print.

Abbey, Edward. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. New York: Harper, 2000. Print.

*The Monkey Wrench Gang*: what a fun and twisted romp. Its disparate characters, bonded during a float trip on the Colorado, burn with life. You, the reader, quickly become one of the gang, experiencing right there with them the white knuckle bravery of their sabotage, as well as their boredom, their constant breakdowns of communication and tight feelings of fellowship. You see the purity of desert wilderness – the tumbled canyons and lost rivers – with the same sunrise passion as they do; what wouldn't you do to protect and reclaim it? And though, when you arrive at the mazy end of the book, you may break from the spell Abbey's cast over you, it's no surprise to find out that not everyone does. The publication of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* launched a new environmental movement in America which focuses on non-violent sabotage.

Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976. Print.

Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989. Print.

A more truthful title couldn't have been chosen. The Big Blackfoot river, with all its past associations and future promises, cuts through the heart of this novella about brothers, saturating the story with its beauty and force. Fishing – meaning

fly fishing – was not simply a type of recreation in their Scottish American family, but a spiritual activity – a means of glorifying God. In passage upon passage of stunning prose, MacClean shows how Paul, the central character, elevated fishing to an art form. In fact, one of the greatest accomplishments of the novel is how expansive it feels in such limited settings; when the men aren't fishing, they're recovering from fishing, or traveling to and from local rivers (the one major exception being when Norman retrieves Paul and his girlfriend from jail). Reviewers describe the book as semi-autobiographical; however, since it is usually referred to as a story or a novella, rather than a memoir, I have chosen to include it in my bibliography of fiction.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin, 1977. Print.

In *Ceremony*, Tayo, a Native American, returns home to the Laguna Pueblo reservation after being held as a Japanese prisoner of war. Traumatized by the experience of killing, he feels alienated from his culture – similar to Abel in *House of Dawn*. In an attempt to heal the rift inside him, he relearns the ancient stories of his people and walks the boundaries of the land they call home. The stories inform his understanding of the land and illustrate the inseparable connections between the earth and his tribe. They also explore the nature and necessity of evil and put his experience as a soldier in a larger context. Eventually, a ceremony, with the potential to return him to a greater condition of

health, reveals itself to Tayo. Silko's book received wide critical acclaim when it was published and is considered a classic of Native American literature.

Kincaid, Jamaica. *At the Bottom of the River*. New York: Plume, 1978. Print.

Kincaid, Jamaica. *At the Bottom of the River*. New York: Farrar, 2000. Print.

In Kincaid's first book – a surreal blend of memories, fantasies, and flights of nightmare – nature is everywhere: in the dreamscape the narrator flees to for refuge, the superstitions that caution her, the metaphors which act as her measure. In the first chapter, these dreamscapes assume the vivid hues and lushness of the Caribbean, where Kincaid was raised. Her familiarity and trust with the nature of her homeland, and the dreamscapes it inspires, allow her to lead an experimental, exploratory existence. When she moves north – one assumes, to the States – nature is depicted as cold, dark, and limiting; she has to transform herself, radically, just to survive. Kincaid is a master at deconstructing the moment: in a style all her own, she does so with all the freshness and simplicity of truth.

Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1984. Print.

In *White Noise*, Delillo portrays a Middle American family, the Gladneys, separated from the raw stuff of life by the technology they've come to rely on: microwaves, televisions, radios, pharmaceuticals. Even some of their clothing (Gore-tex) is a strange new technology. Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler studies

at the local college, is able to suppress the brooding unease at all the “white noise” in their life by focusing on his big flock of children and his solid, sensual wife until a cloud of airborne toxin, released during an industrial accident, soaks their immediate environment and forces the family, and much of their community, to take refuge in a shelter. After nine days they’re released, but Jack can’t return to the same passive stance he held before; when he finds a strange pharmaceutical prescribed to his wife that she’s hidden under the sink, he’s motivated to investigate. This book is an unusual choice for a bibliography of nature writing, as much of it takes place in the home, but it was a significant book in American literature, provoking conversations in new circles about the impacts of pollution to the environment and human health – the fictional equivalent of “Silent Spring.” It won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1985.

Doig, Ivan. *English Creek*. New York: Atheneum, 1984. Print.

Doig, Ivan. *English Creek*. New York: Penguin, 1985. Print.

What makes *English Creek* such an outstanding coming-of-age story is that it’s so unique to a particular time and place – northern Montana, in the prewar year of 1939. Fourteen year old Jick McCaskill, protagonist and narrator, begins the stretch towards manhood in unusual ways. Rather than rebelling (an activity left up to his older brother Alec), he assumes more adult responsibilities, even though some of them aren’t particularly welcome. Much of what he learns, he learns on horseback, following his father, a ranger, into the Two Medicine National Forest

on patrol or helping him fight fires. The landscape Doig describes through Jick seems so rock-solid, it's a shock to read, in the acknowledgments, that many places referenced in the book exists only in the author's imagination (and now in his readers' imaginations as well). It's also a powerful agent in the novel, shaping fates and swerving lives. *English Creek* is the second novel in the author's well-acclaimed McCaskill trilogy.

Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. New York: Holt, 1988. Print.

In this grim novel of early twentieth century Indian life, Erdrich describes in searing detail the pain, honesty, and magic of living a subsistence lifestyle. The reservation of the Anishinaabe has been whittled down by greedy Indian agents and local lumber companies; game has become scarce. Food, during the brutal winters, trumps everything else in importance. Successful hunts are accomplished not only by paying close attention to the environment and directing one's mind to think like an animal, but through ceremony and dreams. Fleur, the powerful protagonist of the novel, lives close to the lake, Machimanito, on the relatively rich hunting grounds of her ancestors. Her fate is inextricably linked to the lake and surrounding woods; when the land is stolen from her family, and given to a local timber company, she deploys her power in a gesture of great sacrifice.

Dillard, Annie. *The Living*. New York: Harper, 1992. Print.



Nature is exquisite, deadly, and ubiquitous in Dillard's riveting novel; the lush primeval forests of Northwest Washington press in on one's consciousness throughout the narrative just as the limited blue horizons of the Puget Sound offer the constant appearance of escape. Early encounters with nature, more often than not, are violent, shocking, and transformative; log jams, fires, disease, and drowning all claim their share of bodies, while river trips and mountain walks mark forever the minds of the living. Dillard's novel spans the last fifty years of the nineteenth century and tells the story of how early pioneers and their descendants established themselves in this far flung frontier. Her precise descriptions of nature and town life, as well as her commitment to describing the hardships and horrors of the times, succeed at transporting the reader to a bygone era and specific place. Dillard has a long history of nature writing; her book of personal essays, *Pilgrim on Tinker Creek*, won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1975.

Houston, Pam. *Cowboys Are My Weakness*. New York: Norton, 1992. Print.

Many of the stories in this collection explore beliefs, feelings, and practices involving the treatment of animals. While the men in Houston's stories often have elaborate justifications for hunting, or working as hunting guides, the feelings which rise up and flood the women, upon witnessing a hunt or its spoils, call the morality of these justifications into questions. Often these men seem

emotionally isolate, illustrating another of Houston's themes – that one's engagement with nature has direct bearing on a person's body, personality, and soul. Many of the female characters in this collection take on, and are changed by, backcountry adventures: white water rafting, winter camping, backpacking. While other authors have written essays and memoirs about their own wilderness explorations and connections to wildlife, Houston is the first significant author to explore this subject in fiction from a female point of view.

McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Horses are many things in this novel. They give freedom, provide work, lead John Grady Cole, the protagonist, to love; they are also the stuff of his dreams, his hope for understanding – even communion – between creatures, and the daily measure of his humanity – more constant, even than his good friend Rawlins. Most books which are considered nature writing show the interplay and interconnectedness of species and rarely have such a singular focus. However, Cole is young, not yet eighteen (the book, in this respect, is a very original coming of age story), an age when such a singular focus makes sense. Also, Cole sees the horses of his dreams running free, untamed, in wide open spaces, so that untrammelled land also becomes integral to the story. *All the Pretty Horses* is distinguished by its clean, spare, truthful prose, its moments of high-pitched poignancy and complete lack of sentimentalism, and its unusual story. It won the

National Book Award for fiction in 1992 and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.

Early in *The Crossing*, the protagonist, young Billy Parham, traps the she-wolf that's been haunting the ranch his father manages. Unable to shoot it, Parham ultimately decides to take the wolf to Mexico, where she came from, and release it back to the mountains. In transcendent prose, McCarthy portrays the wolf as being extremely intelligent, empathetic, deeply faithful, keen to survive, and vulnerable – she's pregnant as well as starving when Parham finds her. She's also shown, in her inherent wildness, to be essential to the world. *The Crossing* is a much more pitiless book than *All The Pretty Horses*: its violence takes place in front of the readers, rather than off in the shadows; loneliness and alienation are a much larger part of the story. In such a harsh world, the inherent beauty of the land takes on added meaning as a refuge.

Bass, Rick. *In the Loyal Mountains*. New York: Houghton, 1995. Print.

The sense of place, throughout this collection, is very strong; several stories are set in a remote valley near the Canadian Border; others play out in the Deep South. Characters seem shaped as much by the landscape, and its rigorous demands, as by family or circumstance. One question, raised repeatedly

throughout the collection, is how to draw the line between appreciation and exploitation of wilderness. Other questions Bass poses: what are the roles we assign to nature, to what purpose, and can we, as humans, step into those roles ourselves? Metaphors referencing nature are trustworthy in their specificity; not just owls, but a particular type of owl appears in one narrative – and appears where it belongs, in its appropriate ecological context. The owl's innate right to be there, behaving as that owl should, forestalls readers from seeing it in a functional light – there to serve the needs of the story.

Bass, Rick. *The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness: Novellas*. New York: Houghton, 1997. Print.

In Bass's third novella of the collection, *The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness*, an older woman reminisces about her childhood on a ranch in Real County, Texas. Nature is deeply rooted in all her memories. Her mother, who died when she was a girl, became subsumed by nature, her spirit manifesting in the river and the wild things – to her young self, a strange and welcome possession. Although nature is initially felt as a spiritual force, it is later perceived in its measure and matter, framed and understood through the lens of science. In fact, one of the great accomplishments of the book is how well the science – in this case, the science of aquifers – seems to belong. Often, the underpinnings of stories, in the genre of what is often termed ecofiction, are too weak to hold up the science they try to communicate – let alone any political message the science may point to – but in

this case, the characters are fully developed, the context richly created, the story well on its way, when the science comes along, so that it seems an authentic part of the story. Central to *The Myth of Bears* is the idea that one's treatment of the environment affects both mind and body – warping and weakening, to the point of deformity, the callous trapper, inflaming and strengthening his wife. *The Myth of Bears* calls to mind McCarthy's *The Crossing* in the way it reveals, without softening, the brutish behavior of the trapper, but allows his wife, Judith, to stretch the bounds of reality to relieve her pain. In Bass's story, however, fantasy is not set apart from the story – a visionary digression – but well-integrated, so that the plot does not slow down or go to sleep when reality is breached. Rather, the story of Judith's flight from her husband – rendered in stark, glittering prose – remains gripping to the end.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: Harper, 1998. Print

In the first sentence of her epic novel, Kingsolver invites us to imagine the forest of The Congo. The picture she paints takes up the readers' entire field of vision: blindingly verdant, wholly exotic – every particle of air taken up with life. Cleverly, she has planted her readers in the trees, so that when their gaze is finally directed to the ground below, the mother and four daughters wending their way on the path appear small and vulnerable. As the novel progresses, the firm command Kingsolver exerts over her readers' perceptions starts to make sense; one can almost thank her for it; the Congo is a foreign world to those who haven't

been raised there, and you wouldn't want to make the same mistakes her characters do – a missionary family from the States – thinking you understand it. As she does in many of her books, Kingsolver brings her education and knowledge of biology to bear on this novel: species are singled out and examined, the beauty of their particular existence acknowledged.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Prodigal Summer*. New York: Harper, 2000. Print.

Like Boyle's *When the Killing's Done*, science is packed into this novel of clashing perspectives. Deanna, wildlife manager/ranger of a protected area of Appalachian forest, debates her lover, a mercenary hunter, about the inherent value of coyotes; Garnett, who has dedicated his retirement to cultivating a blight-free American chestnut, haggles with his neighbor over the risks of organic gardening; while Lusa, a newly widowed entomologist-turned-farmer, chooses to raise free-range goats in defiance of her family's long held tradition of growing tobacco. *Prodigal Summer* works as a novel of nature writing because the main characters are passionate about their projects: untended, their thoughts about nature leap beyond reasons and principals into the realms of insight and poetry. The emotional closure its main characters all seem to achieve at the end of the book is somewhat disappointing: one wishes for more ambiguity and open-endedness, and also, perhaps, for shades of perspectives rather than such stark dichotomies.

Berry, Wendell. *That Distant Land; The Collected Stories*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004. Print.

In *The Distant Land*, Berry traces the development of Port William – a fictional river town in America’s heartland – over the course of a century, beginning in the late 1880’s. Berry’s early stories are thick with country life: family feasts and church picnics; watchful, caring neighbors and rooster-tailed boys running wild. By the end of the book, the bustling farming community in and around Port William has weakened and thinned, leaving forests to creep back over farmland, weeds to thatch over fields, and old barns to rot and fall. But underlying the honeyed version of the past which the old-timers – the storytellers – choose to remember is an alterative past, a past of lost possibility, in which the natural abundance and beauty of the land was recognized and truly honored by settlers. This vision of an alternative past enables readers to see the return of those forests as a sign of hope – the foundation of prosperity for a future Port William, one which is more sustaining.

Bass, Rick. *The Lives of Rocks*. New York: Houghton, 2006. Print.

*The Lives of Rocks* shades much darker than Bass’s earlier collections, with stories about cancer and loneliness, environmental degradation, and sundered relationships. Nature is portrayed as depleted, poisoned, and exploited. Still, there is beauty in the bleakness, and bravery in the fact that Bass neither apologizes to his readers nor tries to soften these stories. Two of the bleakest and most

beautiful are *Fiber* and *The Lives of Rocks*. *Fiber* seems particularly autobiographical. A writer reflects on not being able to write anymore, or engage in collective activism; instead, he hauls deadfall out of local forests devastated by the timber industry. In *The Lives of Rocks*, a woman, isolated by her mountain home, cancer, and the rigors of chemotherapy reaches out to her neighbors, the next valley over, by carving tiny wooden boats, loading them with gem stones, and sailing them down her creek. The stories in this collection, as with others, are enriched by Bass's background in geology; their settings vacillate between The Deep South and the far north.

Matthiessen, Peter. *Shadow Country*. New York: Modern Library, 2008. Print.

Much of *Shadow Country* is set in the Everglade swamps and the ten thousand islands of southern Florida at the turn of the twentieth century. The central character is E.J. Watson, a sugar planter and outlaw, also known as Bloody Watson for the hired help he was rumored to have murdered. In *Shadow Country*, Matthiessen tries to determine the truth of Watson's life (Watson was an actual person). The novel makes it seem inevitable that he ends up where he did, at the wild southern frontier, where hiding came easy, at a time when life was abundant and held very cheaply – alligators slaughtered en masse for their skins and water birds killed for their plumes. It begs the question of whether such wholesale violence against nature, deeply embedded in the culture, created Bloody Watson as much as the hardships he encountered as a child. Originally, Matthiessen



wanted to tell the story of Watson in one epic saga. *Shadow Country* is that saga, created from three of his former novels. It won the National Book Award in 2008.

Boyle, T.C. *When the Killing's Done*. New York: Penguin, 2011. Print.

A major achievement of this novel is how well the plot – a very suspenseful plot – hangs together, hinging as it does on intricate environmental issues. Alma, in charge of public relations for the National Park Service, Channel Islands, is part of an effort to remove an invasive species of pig from the island of Santa Cruz by killing the animals. Dave LaJoy, a local PETA activist, is bent on sabotaging this effort. At complete odds with each other, their passions for nature burn equally bright. Boyle explores the slippery ground between passionate principals and fundamentalist thinking using both irony and humor, making *When the Killing's Done* a really fun read. Another major accomplishment of the novel is how all the factual, scientific information increases the ambient tension and adds to our understanding of the main characters without overloading the story. In a deft twist at the end, nature – a free agent – trumps both characters.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior*. New York: Harper, 2012. Print.

What sets *Flight Behavior* apart from its peers is the type and scope of the transformation the protagonist undergoes. Dellarobia is a poor, southern mom,

with little formal science education; she never went to college and her high-school neglected to offer any real courses in science. When migrating monarchs land in a valley her family owns, she thinks the fiery spectacle in the trees is some type of prophetic vision; her family and church believes she has been chosen by God to communicate this vision to the world. By talking with and eventually working for the biologists who come to the study these butterflies, Dellarobia learns about the life cycles of monarchs, climate change, and basic scientific methodology. She also learns how to view the world from a new perspective – one that isn't so anthropocentric. In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver succeeds at depicting a character that becomes more focused, self-confident, curious, and open-minded. A major flaw of the book – one which stretches the bounds of credulity – is the ease with which Dellarobia handles complex scientific concepts.

Lopez, Barry. *Outside*. Santa Rosa: Nawakum P, 2013. Print.

Lopez's latest collection of stories is experimental, bridging the literal and the fantastic, the fantastic and the symbolic. Throughout the book, questions of empathy are raised. For example, can a man truly imagine another kind of life, if that life is of a different species? Can he dream their dreams, feel their skin? Can such deep empathy further man's survival, or does it make him more prone to despair? In Lopez's stories, nature is portrayed as the beautiful enigma that draws his characters out of the city and into the desert, or the jade green river. Nature, however, is slow to give up its riddles; his characters, impatient and curious, make

up stories to fill in the gaps. Somehow these stories, fantastic as they are, clarify the observed world, shade it with truth. Lopez is an acclaimed nature writer, one of the best of his generation; his book, *Arctic Dreams*, won the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1986.