

Nature Writing in American Literature: Seminal Books of Nonfiction:

An Annotated Bibliography

By Maria Kochis

This 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.

Bartram, William. *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West*

Florida, the Cherokee country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of those Regions, Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians. Philadelphia: James, 1791. Print.

Bartram's absolute fascination with nature, in the diverse regions he passes through, communicates itself through vibrant prose. Animals, plants, insects, reptiles, and birds lavishly described in meandering sentences – the title hints at such – portray an America teeming with life; this is in direct contrast with Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, where species are often elusive and appear rare. Forty years lie between the publication of both works, calling the question of whether Bartram's abundance reflects an ecological reality, as well as a stylistic choice or manner of seeing. Bartram describes the surface topography in an impressionistic fashion - angles and distances, textures and colors – creating an experience of immersion. Geographical landmarks, or mentions of place

names, aren't as common, leaving the reader disoriented, unable to fix herself on a map – although this also may be a reflection of the times. Bartram's inclusivity of many species foreshadows the approach later naturalists take, for example, Muir and Burroughs. His accounts of encounters with various Native American tribes of the south are some of the most detailed in the genre.

Audubon, John James, and William MacGillivray. *Ornithological Biography: or an Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America; Accompanied by Descriptions of the Objects Represented in the Work Entitled The Birds of America, and Interspersed with Delineations of American Scenery and Manners*. 5 vols. Edinburgh: Black, 1831. Print.

In this unique biography, the personalities of different birds emerge from sketches of their behavior, a textual counterpoint to Audubon's *Birds of America*. The text gathers the most energy where a bird's story is told from the point of the observer; live portraits, perceived from the shrubbery. His sketches are some of the most detailed and precise found in nature writing, and the images he creates – the colors and patterns of a clutch of eggs, for example, or the changing movements of a bird in flight – are so complicated and clear, they read like poetry. Because birds are placed in their habitat, a portrait of the country also emerges from these volumes. Audubon's America is primitive, mythical, huge...and dark. There is a disturbing contrast in the way Audubon assigns many positive human emotions to birds, such as extreme compassion, at the same time that he shoots gross numbers of them, mothers and juveniles alike, exhibiting and

acknowledging, without seeming to atone for, the greed of the collector. Interspersed throughout the book are separate tales of human encounters with nature: “The Lost One,” “Death of a Pirate,” “The Runaway”...etc. These seem altogether more fabulous, sentimental and romanticized, so that the book can be appreciated for stylistic changes as well.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. Boston: Munroe, 1836. Print.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. 2003 ed. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.

In his famous book-length essay, Emerson explores the different meanings and interpretations of nature. Initially, he does this in an overt way, providing expansive definitions of the concept: philosophical and abstract, common and applied. His relationship with nature in the common sense – the natural and perceived world – is a personal one. He describes in narrative style what he sees and feels, walking through fields and woods. His prose in this section, also called *Nature*, is pure poetry; original, intense, and raw – the revelatory visions of a mystic. Nature is regarded as sublime and inspirational, the one true medium for communion with God or the Universal Being. Emerson also implies that nature possesses both cognizance and agency. These ideas are revolutionary for his time. In “Commodity,” nature is seen in a more functional, and subordinate, light, while “Beauty” expresses many traditional Romantic ideas about nature. Not all nature writers try to define or interpret their subject in such direct ways, or show such different understandings of it. Books where this is done extensively could possibly constitute a sub-genre of nature writing.

Cooper, Susan Fenimore. *Rural Hours*. New York: Putnam, 1850. Print.

Cooper, Susan Fenimore. *Rural Hours*. [S.l.]: Dodo P Rev. ed., 2010. Print.

Rural Hours, published four years before *Walden*, is a narrative of the changes wrought in the span of a year around Cooper's home in Cooperstown, New York. The book is structured as a diary; entries are dated and written almost daily. No matter how prosaic, each entry has a flashpoint, a glittering image or natural unfolding drama: trees blown down, the break-up of ice, chatter of a panther sighting. Unlike *Walden*, which it is often compared to, *Rural Hours* is not a book of great ideas, or, for that matter, original prose. The worth of the book is in the details, the composite picture. Although some critics claim the dramas of the book are too quiet, the images too common, others appreciate how grounded the book is in personal observation – the mark of a true naturalist. There has been a resurgence of interest in *Rural Hours* since the unabridged edition was published by Dodo Press in 2008; Cooper, daughter of James Fenimore Cooper, is currently regarded as one of the most influential female nature writers of the nineteenth century.

Thoreau, Henry David and Thomas Carew. *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. Boston: Ticknor, 1854. Print.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1996. Print.

Thoreau's treasured book describes the two years and several months he spent in the woods near Walden Pond. To have such a cultured, educated man leave the civilized town (Concord, in his case) and move in solitude to the woods for such an extended period was an uncommon and eccentric act. Curiosity about his motives and means of living might have initially attracted interest in *Walden*, but it's the book's unparalleled prose, its insights – so keen, edgy, and true they seem to emanate from a contemporary mind – that maintain it as a classic of American Literature. As one of the best known examples of nature writing, it's surprising that so many of the early chapters center on Thoreau's opinions of human society, personal behavior, and intellectual development. As the book progresses, however, one realizes that Thoreau's pursuit of simplification, his ability to wean out all but the most essential endeavors, has prepared him for life as a skilled naturalist; he has the time to be patient, the ability to sit still or perambulate at will, the uncluttered mind to perceive and absorb his surroundings. In later chapters – “The Ponds,” “Winter Animals,” “Spring” – his focus is more often turned outward; the subtle changes and chance occurrences of the natural world are recorded, showing a man deeply familiar with and highly attuned to his chosen landscape, living in harmony with it to the best of his abilities. Other significant books of nature writing authored by Thoreau include *The Maine Woods* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

Powell, John Wesley. *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and its Tributaries: Explored in 1869, 1870, 1871, and 1872, under the Direction of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*. Washington: GPO, 1875. Print.

Powell, John Wesley. *The Explorations of the Colorado River and Its Canyons*. New York:

Penguin, 2003. Print.

Powell's thrilling travel narrative of his exploration – navigating a branch of the Colorado River through myriad uncharted canyons – is a story that *moves*. Hard enough to bring stilled objects to life. Powell manages, through clear detailed prose, to describe a moving body in what appears to be real time – not just the tension between rock, current, raft and men, but the changing flow. Powell's narrative, based on his journals, originally appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in serialized form. Appropriately, he didn't alter it to include the retrospective glance. Like Powell, and the nine men he traveled with, readers can't tell what's around the next bend. Its tone – uncertain, suspenseful, ominous – calls to mind another great book about a river voyage: *Heart of Darkness*. It has little in common with the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which – while epic in scope – read more like a ship's log, a recitation of bald facts. Powell's work has made its way into the canon of Western literature and is still eagerly perused by river enthusiasts. One major criticism with this edition: the fine illustrations aren't in sync with the text.

Austin, Mary. *The Land of Little Rain*. Boston: Houghton, 1903. Print.

Reading this small spare book is an experience of immersion. One is transported by Austin's stunning prose to the desert she loved – that arid unsettled land between the Sierras and Death Valley – an area she named, in her opening paragraph, as “The Country of Lost Borders.” Austin's cast of mind, in terms of conservation, is modern; she points to the essential interdependence of wildlife, suggests the inherent intransience

of man. She exhibits a rare understanding and sympathy for her Native American neighbors; her integration of their perspectives makes her depictions of the desert feel more complete. Austin is a quintessential desert writer; she portrays the desert's austerity, its bursts of flourishing beauty, its harshness, recalcitrance, and fragility. *The Land of Little Rain* is a classic – one of America's greatest books of nature writing and a landmark achievement for female authors of the genre.

Burroughs, John. *Leaf and Tendril*. Boston: Houghton, 1908. Print.

Burroughs, John. *The Art of Seeing Things: Essays*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001. Print.

Burroughs' essays are marked by the contrast between ebullient flights of speculative thinking and extremely pointed descriptions of the experienced world. In one of his most successful pieces, "The Art of Seeing Things," he eloquently explains how the art form of perception involves not just sharp eyes, but a wide open mind, a heightened state of emotion. Burroughs is known and appreciated for his avid interest in small, humble, and immediate life forms; his descriptions are so particular they seem visceral, transporative. When he discusses science in a larger, more generalized way – for example, his speculations about the formation of soil in "The Grist of The Gods" – his writing becomes more didactic, his claims questionable. Burroughs spent much of his life in rural New York, growing up in the Catskill Mountains, living out his later years on a Hudson Valley Farm. Much of his writing is based on the rural areas he knew, which might explain why he didn't get the degree of acclaim, or share the widespread popularity, of other nature writers of his era, who either traveled more or wrote about

grander and less explored landscapes. These days, the local approach to nature is increasingly respected and regional writers appreciated more. Burroughs wasn't known for any particular work, but for his works as a whole; a prolific writer, he authored over forty books of nature writing. *Leaf and Tendril* was selected for this bibliography because it was the first book to include his classic essay, "The Art of Seeing Things." The John Burroughs Medal was established in his honor in 1926 and is bestowed annually on promising books of nature writing.

Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Boston: Houghton, 1911. Print.

In rampant, revelatory prose, *My First Summer in the Sierra* describes Muir's first experience camping in the Yosemite region of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Commissioned to accompany a friend's shepherd and flock of sheep to their summer pasture, Muir spent much of his time drawing, journaling, and of course, hiking. His journal isn't published until 1911, over forty years after it was written, but any editorializing that later occurred didn't quash or subdue the charge of youthful excitement that courses through the book. A keen sense of irony, often emerging in the form of self-deprecating humor, prevents it from getting tiresome. On the other hand, Muir's frequent use of religious analogies in high-flown prose does tend to wear thin. There is little personal reflection or introspection in this book; Muir's gaze is nearly always turned outward, lavishing the land with his attention and curiosity. His passion for Yosemite helped preserve its valley and high country in the National Park System; Muir, founder of

the Sierra Club, also helped shape the nation's concept of wilderness as a space both roadless and undeveloped.

Muir, John. *Travels in Alaska*. Boston: Houghton, 1915. Print.

Travels in Alaska recounts Muir's first trips to Alaska in 1879 and 1880. He was working on transcribing the notes for his last trip, which took place in 1890, when he unexpectedly died, so the volume breaks off – abruptly and splendidly; his last recorded impression is of the northern lights. Journeying up churning northern rivers, through dense, dripping forests, and over crevasse-strewn glaciers, Muir's prose is exuberant, exultant; one feels the keen edge of excitement in his explorations, the hard grip of the present tense. Even though decades elapsed before he started *Travels*, there is no glimmer of foreshadowing in his writing. The same assessments could be made of *My First Summer in the Sierra* – the book most often associated with Muir. *Travels*, however, is a more interesting book. Muir is more in the company of society in *Travels*; his descriptions of crude Alaskan outposts and ruined Indian villages, missionaries and miners, are, alternatively, satirical and poignant. Like other great writers (Twain comes to mind) his humor is so dead on, it feels modern. In *Travels*, Muir's creativity finds more expression in subtle irony and word play and doesn't bend as often toward religious analogies. Out in nature, he loses his critical cast of mind, becoming a vessel for his impressions; he makes lavish lists of species and describes views with the precision of a photograph. In a rapidly changing world, this rapt attention to detail might be the most valuable component of nature writing.

Beston, Henry. *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*.

New York: Doubleday, 1928. Print.

Beston, Henry. *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*.

75th Anniversary ed. New York: St. Martin, 2003. Print.

The Outermost House chronicles the year Beston lived alone on the remote beach of Cape Cod – in his case, an inadvertent year; he had only intended to spend two weeks in his cottage and couldn't pull himself away. Beston's prose is strongest, his language most enlivened, when he devotes it to his own experiences. His sense of amazement at what's immediately in front of him during his beach strolls inspires his imagery. Like Muir in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, one can feel his joy at just being out there. And like Muir, his book had a direct, though delayed, impact on conservation. Federal officials cited *The Outermost House* as a motivating factor in the creation of the Cape Cod National Seashore. When Beston steps back and gives a disquisition on some aspect of nature – shorebirds or dunes or tides – his language becomes more formal and dispassionate, nearly didactic, and at the same time, less trustworthy; there isn't enough science, in his claims, to support that kind of tone. His spiritual reflections and cultural insights are much more palatable and profound. To this day, *The Outermost House* remains one of the classics of American nature writing.

Steinbeck, John, and Edward Flanders Ricketts. *Sea of Cortez; a Leisurely Journal of*

Travel and Research, with a Scientific Appendix Comprising Materials for a Source Book on the Marine Animals of the Panamic Faunal Province. New York: Viking, 1941.

Print.

Steinbeck, John. *Log from the Sea of Cortez.* New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.

Steinbeck's *Log* recounts the expedition he and biologist Edward F. Ricketts took in 1940 on a sardine boat to explore the Sea of Cortez, otherwise known as the Gulf of California. Nature is shown in all its particularity, with sharp outlines, specific traits. The story of the expedition is also told in detail, whether he's writing about the logistics of traveling or the discrete tasks of collecting. This isn't a work of fiction for Steinbeck; he's as intent on preserving the days and challenges of the journey as he is on helping Ricketts' preserve crabs and coral. However, aspects of literary fiction work their way into his narrative. The strange and wondrous creatures, the play of light and water, the mood of the men create an atmosphere potent as weather. But what makes this book truly remarkable is Steinbeck's inward glance. He explores nature not just outside the boat, but in our mind, memory, and psyche. Here, in his descriptions of internalized nature, his prose is of an altogether higher order, the images and metaphors original and gripping. He is successful in a way many nature writers aspire to, in showing not just that we are connected to or dependent on nature, but inseparable from it, composed of it – how it continues to create us. Steinbeck is one of America's finest novelists; his most enduring and well-known works include *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row*, and *Of Mice and Men*.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford UP, 1949. Print.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*. New York: Ballantine, 1970. Print.

The Sand County Almanac is one of America's classic books of nature writing, stunning not simply for its insights, but also for its prescience; Leopold is first among his peers and predecessors to clearly sound the alarm regarding the wildfire of environmental threats running over the horizon. First, however, he captivates readers in a traditional way. Part I of the *Almanac* chronicles the four seasons as regarded from his sand farm in Wisconsin. Like Beston, Burroughs, and Muir, Leopold is a boots-on-the-ground naturalist. One is struck by the acuteness of his observations, the attention he bestows on even the humblest creatures. In Part II, Leopold takes to the road, seeking bigger vistas, writing the natural landscapes of the West and Midwest. In Part III and IV, he ventures into new territory, exploring issues of land ethics, wilderness, wildlife, and conservation in ways that are both philosophical and political, framing the discourse for years to come. For this reason, we might perceive him as our first modern nature writer.

Carson, Rachel. *The Sea Around Us*. New York: Oxford UP, 1951. Print.

It seems plausible that Carson's intention, in writing *The Sea Around Us*, was to captivate a mass audience. Even those sections of the book which deal mainly with scientific theories and discoveries have a storytelling quality, geared to make them more palatable

for the general reader. The text is peppered with humanist references – Greek mythology, Classical literature, medieval history. Some of the science in the sections that deal with oceanic origins and early life forms seems suspect – the evidence too thin to warrant such strong claims. On the other hand, the chapter dealing with climate change is both beguiling and provocative. Although the theory explaining it, which Carson explores, is not given much credence these days, the fact that she investigated the topic in such depth is visionary for the times, and the illustrating story she tells linking discrete historical events, regional economics, and tidal patterns is the most enthralling of the book. *The Sea Around Us* received the National Book Award in Nonfiction (1951).

Teale, Edward Way. *The American Seasons*. 4 Vols. New York: Dodd, 1951-1965. Print.

The American Seasons is comprised of four previously published books bound in one volume: *North with the Spring*, *Journey into Summer*, *Autumn across America*, and *Wandering through Winter*. In each, the author recounts how he and his wife followed a season from start to finish across a different route in America. Together, they tell the most powerful story. A great strength of Teale's writing is his ability to smoothly impart scientific information. Explanations for natural phenomenon are never too dense or overwhelming and are usually introduced after a captivating anecdote of human discovery, a fascinating piece of natural history, or an aesthetic experience, particularly rendered. Teale tells his story from the perspective of an explorer; he greets each new place with an explorer's fresh eyes, and no one region is esteemed above the others. This easy democracy of place seems in keeping with the times, when long automobile trips

increased in popularity and remote areas of America were suddenly in reach. The cohesiveness of America that Teale presents marks this book as a classic at the same time that it dates it. Much contemporary nature writing is regional or intensely local, and this idea of Teale's to explore and exhibit so much of the country seems a hallmark of those years cushioning the fifties (the road trip for *North* took place in 1947; for *Wandering*, in 1961-62). What prevents his writing from being too diluted or topical is the attention he pays nature during his hikes (though he and Nellie don't cover the ground other naturalists do, they do it more slowly) as well as the absorbing stories he tells of naturalists that preceded him, many of whom were anchored in place.

Olson, Sigurd F. *The Singing Wilderness*. New York: Knopf, 1956. Print.

Olson, Sigurd F. *The Singing Wilderness*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1997. Print.

Olson's narrative of the wilderness lake country of the Quetico-Superior is another chronicle of the seasons; it begins in the teasing month of March and ends with a wolf tale at twenty below. The chapters in-between are easy mouthfuls: simple studies of nature, punctuated parables, and darker meandering tales of adventure and quest. Throughout them all, Olson is listening for the singing wilderness, the book's magic thread and poetic theme: an inexplicable sense of communion with nature. The gift of it is unexpected and never certain. All he can do is position himself accordingly, find the deepest reserves of solitude left, the ragged edges of our primeval forests, and leave himself open to the experience. It is that high level of exposure paired with his desire that makes this feel like such a dangerous book. Olson has published over ten books of

nature writing and was a prominent conservationist of the Midwestern wilderness areas between the U.S. and Canadian border. The Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award was created in his honor.

Abbey, Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: McGraw, 1968. Print.

Abbey, Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine, 1971. Print.

Desert Solitaire is the seasonal memoir of Abbey's zealous love affair with the slick rock desert country of Utah, cultivated during his stint as a park ranger in Arches National Monument. The stories he tells of his encounters with the desert, wildlife, tourists, and government bureaucracy are highly compelling, surprising and rollicking – imbued with a sense of immediacy and gritty with detail. His flights of metaphysical speculation, social commentary, classical and humanist references, absolute delight in nature, and genius at satire all call to mind Thoreau. So does his tendency towards reclusiveness and eccentricity (although Abbey is not the hermit Thoreau was, nor as cynical or hard-bitten). His narrative is strongest where it's framed by personal story. Those chapters that are mainly governed by abstractions aren't quite as potent. Abbey has written and collaborated on numerous books of fiction and nonfiction – all of which could be considered nature or environmental writing. His most famous, aside from *Desert Solitaire*, is the novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper, 1974. Print.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. First Perennial Library Edition. New York: Harper, 1985. Print.

Pilgrim follows the tradition in nature writing where an author settles in a particular place for a year and watches how the seasons affect them both: in this case, Tinker Creek, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Dillard, like most naturalists, talks about what she sees. The facts are plainly put. She is a woman straddling a log, watching the creek move. She is ambling the countryside stumbling on cows. But instead of staying there, skimming the surface of the recognized world, her narrative explores the depths of her impressions – these she describes with a poet's precision. She emerges with questions, the possibility of symbols. She is never unmoved by what she sees, and her persistent acknowledgement of her own overwhelming feelings is one of the singular features of the book. The fact that *Pilgrim* is set in the bucolic countryside, rather than in some rugged and remote wilderness – the animal which painted her chest with bloody paw prints is, after all, only a housecat – does nothing to dispel the wild and weird from the book. Or, for that matter, tame the language. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for General Nonfiction and remains one of the most influential books of nature writing in our time.

Thomas, Lewis. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. New York: Viking 1974. Print.

Thomas, Lewis. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. New York: Penguin, 1978.

Print.

Lewis, a doctor, medical researcher, and professor of medicine, expanded the scope of nature writing by focusing on nature in its minute form: bacterial, hormonal, mitochondrial. The scope of his essays is much wider, however; he takes a huge step back from the microscopic view to hover, farsighted, over society as a whole and deconstruct common cultural assumptions, many of which have to do with science and technology. It is this huge change in perspective that makes his essays so distinctive. At times, his language becomes too technical, obfuscating meaning. On the whole, his prose is clear and elegant, his questions sharp and insightful, his irony quiet and lethal. *The Lives of a Cell* won the National Book Award both for Arts and Letters (Nonfiction) and for The Sciences in 1975.

Warner, William W. *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay*.

Little: Boston, 1976. Print.

Beautiful Swimmers is a contemporary study of the Atlantic Blue Crab in its Chesapeake Bay habitat. In conjunction, Warner also studies The Bay's watermen who make their living from the crab harvest, joining them in their predawn boat trips. The snippets of Eastern Shore dialect, along with bay history and legends, balance all the science in the book, although the science itself is very palatable and often poignantly rendered. The crab, moving through vast tracts of water, from summer feeding grounds to winter shelter, is almost constantly pursued; it molts frequently during its lifespan and, in the

process of losing its rigid exoskeleton, turns into a tourist delicacy. Warner is adept at stepping back and providing the long view: the Bay's prehistoric origins, the hardscrabble history of waterman communities, the crab as it swims towards its diminishing future. *Beautiful Swimmers* won the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction in 1977 and was a national bestseller; failed efforts to clean up the Chesapeake make it particularly relevant today.

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977. Print.

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1996. Print.

The Unsettling of America falls into the prophetic subgenre of nature writing – a category which includes McKibben's *The End of Nature* and Carson's *Silent Spring*. Like those authors, Berry aims to call attention to a state of crisis. The crisis has multiple facets – ecological, agricultural, moral, and communal – but it is the agricultural crisis, and the decline of the family farm, that his book is most concerned with. Berry is a bold, provocative writer with a wide scope and a deep perspective; his insistence that everything is interconnected means nothing is off limits. In fact, his writing is strongest and most seamless in those sections that link the most diverse topics and go beyond the bounds of the current crisis, for example, in the chapter, “The Body and the Earth.” Berry is effective as a persuasive writer; his points are well-researched, his insights and conclusions so startling and sensible, they glitter with self-evidence. What makes some

of his arguments suspect is his strong bias towards agriculture as the historical and contemporary ideal, along with a lack of consideration for other ways of living – hunting and gathering, for example. Berry is the author of numerous award-winning books of fiction, poetry, and essays; his explorations of the many intricate connections between nature and culture make him one of the foremost nature writers of our time.

Lopez, Barry Holstun. *Of Wolves and Men*. New York: Scribner, 1978. Print.

Of Wolves and Men, recipient of the John Burroughs Medal, is an interdisciplinary look at an extraordinary animal. The first section describes the biological origins, social structures, and hunting behavior of wolves and shows how observations of the actual animal have overturned common cultural and scientific assumptions. The next three sections examine Native American, Eskimo, and Western beliefs and attitudes towards the wolf. In the last section, Lopez plumbs Medieval and ancient texts to try and gain an understanding of deep-seated Western prejudices. In all cases, the wolf figures prominently as a powerful symbol. Natives revere the wolf for its scouting skills, stamina, and tendency to care for the pack, while Westerners perceive the wolf in more abstract and contradictory ways, associating it with light, darkness, and twilight; borders and transitional states; the Devil and divinity. What makes *Of Wolves and Men* a significant book in the genre of nature writing is the plurality of its perspectives. What makes it a radical book is Lopez's approach towards inquiry. It isn't knowledge we should be striving for in our study of such a varied and enduring animal – but rather, the ability to pose more truthful questions.

Matthiessen, Peter. *The Snow Leopard*. New York: Viking, 1978. Print.

In 1973, Matthiessen accompanied prominent biologist and friend, George Schaller, to the Crystal Mountain high on the Tibetan Plateau to study the bharal, the Himalayan blue sheep, and possibly glimpse the elusive snow leopard. They journey by foot, walking two hundred fifty miles or more over rugged terrain. In rarified, unsentimental prose, Matthiessen recounts the exquisite beauty and harsh injustices of the land, making no attempt to find meaning in the suffering he sees, pretty it up, or fool himself into believing in easy remedies. With the same clear gaze, he looks inward, describing his own personal journey, including his most recent marriage and the death of his wife the year before. The strangeness of the cultures he and Schaller encounter, the perils they overcome, or just miss, the monastery they arrive at, and the insights Matthiessen gains elevates this trip to a spiritual journey, a true pilgrimage. Matthiessen has a travel writer's eye for fascinating detail and opens the door to a place few Westerners had seen, at that time, and even fewer knew well. *The Snow Leopard* won the National Book Award for General Nonfiction (Paperback) in 1980.

Ehrlich, Gretel. *The Solace of Open Spaces*. New York: Viking, 1985. Print.

This is a memoir one can't help but believe in. Ehrlich came to Wyoming to make a film and stayed for over eight years: marrying, rooting herself in the community, finding new ways to work. Her own story is told plainly, mirrored by the bare facts of Wyoming

itself - she gives us the etymology of its name, its square miles of sagebrush. The narrative acquires complexity, and flares into poetry, whenever Ehrlich dives inward: in the explanations of her motives, her descriptions of the changes her new home wrought on her emotional landscape, her fluid, free-form impressions of the land. Whether it is a truthful memoir is not the point – and can never really be established anyway. What type of fact-checking can reveal past emotions? What is unquestionable is Ehrlich's artistry how persuasive her rendering is, the pleasure of believing. This lean, eloquent book calls to mind Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*. Since its publication, Ehrlich has written numerous books of place-based essays, novels, poetry, and travel writing; she is one of the foremost nature writers of our time.

Lopez, Barry Holstun. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*.

New York: Scribner, 1986. Print.

Arctic Dreams gives us so many different perspectives of the Arctic it feels complete, the subject circled. Most of these perspectives are refreshingly indigenous. A region is explored through the eyes of a specific animal, from a community of Inuit. Lopez writes with the ease of someone who knows his subject intimately, spending decadent amounts of time, over many years, exploring its boundaries. Many of his historical and speculative flights are launched from a boat or an ice floe. Yet his book goes beyond an exploration of the Arctic's islands and waterways to that changing region of the conceptual Arctic. The shifting perspective fascinates, keeps us focused, alert. Lopez has written numerous books of essays and fiction and often explores the myriad ways nature figures

in our cultural myths. *Arctic Dreams* stands out for the quality of its prose. Lopez has created a complex poetry of place with his book, a recipient of the National Book Award in Nonfiction.

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Random, 1990. Print.

Ackerman's alluring book reads like a devotional text; her comprehensive study of the senses, as our primary means of knowing, and enjoying, the natural world, includes her own firsthand experiences: watching bats echolocate as they emerge from a nursery cave, massaging preemies in a hospital, listening to whale songs. Images and impressions of the sensory world are sharp, opulent, and provocative, conjured into existence through an extremely rich vocabulary. There is an urgency and intimacy to Ackerman's prose which makes one want to throw down the book and yank open the window or just run outside. Although many nature writers before Ackerman included a sensual appreciation of nature in their works - Beston in *The Outermost House* and Burroughs in *Leaf and Tendril*, to name a few - none focused on it so attentively. Her influence can be seen in later authors, for example in David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Where her book is less clearly successful is in its presentation. At times, the book feels too cluttered - images heaped on personal reflections piled on literary references and cultural perspectives. Scientific explanations, while tantalizing, sometimes seem shallow.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild: Essays*. San Francisco: North Point, 1990. Print.

Snyder's collection of essays is a fascinating exploration of the wild – an essential text for anyone wishing to contemplate the borders and understand the overlaps between nature and natural, wild and wilderness. His approach is inclusive, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary; he examines the beliefs and practices of North Americans who come from a European heritage, California Nisenan and Arctic Inuit, Chinese and Japanese. He looks at the manifestation of the wild in language, art, philosophy, and design. Snyder is a master linguist, adept at shifting style; his theoretical arguments, intricate and challenging, often end in explosions of story or anecdote. This fluidity lends itself well to pointing out paradox, highlighting incongruity. Best known for his poetry – his book of poems, *Turtle Island*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 – his collections of essays have also helped shape our contemporary environmental discourse and shouldn't be missed.

Williams, Terry Tempest. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

This memoir is an open and prolonged look at loss and grief, as well as an acknowledgment of the unexpected gifts that emerge when both are allowed to flow their course. In the spring of 1983, Williams' mother is diagnosed with cancer. Concurrently, the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge begins to rise to record levels and flood the surrounding wetlands, evicting many of its birds, killing others. What makes this book original is the tight weave between the two narratives – the parity of the two losses this double look implies. Complicating the book is the apparent openness of the narrative and its tone of emotional reserve; the reader is invited to witness, but not share, Williams'

grief. One feels a subtle mirroring in the way Williams approaches her family's Mormon identity, revealing its history, and the current family dynamics, while keeping her own beliefs, and the depths of her questioning, veiled.

Weiner, Jonathan. *The Beak of the Finch*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.

In *The Beak of the Finch*, Weiner chronicles the research of a married couple, Princeton professors Peter and Rosemary Grant, whose research on the finches of a Galapagos Island – some of Darwin's legendary finches – demonstrates how evolution is occurring in real time, measured in the beaks of living birds. This complex work succeeds on many levels, and it is no surprise it won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction (1995). The book is full of suspense: Weiner's descriptions of island life are dramatic, and the endings of chapters feel like cliff-hangers – discoveries open the door to even bigger discoveries. History is written with the import, gravity, and angling of fate. Like a great novel, the book suggests subtle and complicated themes, interdisciplinary in nature. One criticism: the science, at times, is quite dense; conclusions could have been drawn more frequently for general readers.

McPhee, John. *Annals of the Former World*. New York: Farrar, 1998. Print.

McPhee's epic work presents, in narrative form, a dynamic description of America's geology. The book (tome) is broken into five parts; the first four were previously published as individual monographs. Beginning in 1978, McPhee began a series of trips along the fortieth parallel (which more or less coincides with Interstate 80) in the

company of some of the country's legendary geologists. In his travels, rocks are picked up, road cuts examined, and sweeping stories told about a region's deep geology. The most fascinating and developed stories of the book revolve around the geologists themselves. Their ancestry, cultural context, education, and formative experiences are presented in ways that make their choice of geology as a career-path, as well as their research focus, seem almost fated. And like any good story where fate looms large, their stories are charged, suspenseful, and dramatic. If not for these stories and McPhee's masterful use of language, all of the science in the book, both dense and profound, might crush a lay person's interest. Published as a single work in 1998, *Annals of the Former World* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.