



Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction.

By Jim Dwyer. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010. 264 pp. Paperback \$29.95

Jim Dwyer's "Where the Wild Books Are" is a useful and engaging introduction to ecofiction. Subtitled "A Field Guide to Ecofiction", the book provides an overview of the enormous quantity of fiction dealing with a variety of ecological subjects which has been published over the past forty years. According to Dwyer, it was the early 1970s when a "veritable fusillade of new fiction emanating from the environmental movement exploded onto the American literary scene." The idea of a field guide to maneuver through a genre that has become increasingly crowded is thus a useful one.

For anyone who loves creating and pondering various lists, either for personal reading or professionally, the book will offer a helpful starting point. Want to mount a course on dams in the American West or Elephants in Africa? Interested in reading more about "The Real West" or want to find some books on eco-romance? This field guide would be a good place to start looking for appropriate titles. While Dwyer does provide some background into the rise of ecofiction and does include some literary works from the nineteenth and twentieth century, his main focus is on contemporary fiction. Genres covered are surprisingly diverse, ranging from traditional stories like animal tales to the wildest of speculative fiction. Green mysteries provide an unexpectedly hefty category with a variety of environmentally minded sleuths and detectives uncovering murder and other bad deeds in wilderness areas, as well as on city streets.

Other chapters include "Ecofiction from All Around the World", "Native American and Canadian Ecofiction" and a surprising new genre, "Ecoromance: Doin' the Wild Thing." As Dwyer queries, "What could be more natural than sex?" (Who said environmentalists never have fun?)

Because of the enormous amount of material that is covered, there are occasional confusions as a book is slotted under one category, rather than another. Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* doesn't show up in the section on tales about animals, or in the section devoted to Canadian writers, rather, it appears in a subsection devoted to African elephants, which in turn is a part of a larger section on African environmental writers. Missteps also occur; Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* is set primarily in Newfoundland, not Nova Scotia, and it seems odd (to me) to describe Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature* as a work of fiction. But these are quibbles; Dwyer has obviously spent a long time reading, selecting, and categorizing ecofiction and the value of the book as a whole is in providing a comprehensive overview of a field which is becoming increasingly varied and internationalized.

Included in the appendix is a list of the 100 best books of ecofiction, with the ten best highlighted in bold. Such lists are always equal parts provocation and entertainment, thought-provoking or all-too-obvious. Since such lists have an obvious subjective component, part of the fun of pursuing them is comparing your own choices and would-be-choices against someone else's. For example, Annie Dillard's novel *The Living* would never be found on my list of "best" books & Peter Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga* is a far better work, I think, than *At Play in the Fields of*

the Lord. It also struck me that many of the fictional choices were weaker works than non-fictional writings by the same authors—something that gave me pause. Is it *necessarily* true then that “imaginative literature is best suited to engaging people intellectually and emotionally”? Is it true that fiction is “frequently less didactic and more nuanced than non fiction”? Compare Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*; while I love both books, I’m not convinced that the novel is a stronger literary work than his nonfictional masterpiece. Still, any reader looking over the list will be challenged to reflect, amend, an/or create their own list of “best” books.

It is a pleasure and a challenge to go through this field guide, finding old friends, and above all, many new suggestions for reading. Part of the challenge of the book is confronting larger questions about genre and the meaning of “eco” in describing literary works. Should Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse Five* be included in the genre of ecofiction? Why not add Richard Powers’s *Generosity*, a metafiction about writing and genetic enhancement? Reading this book stimulates these kinds of questions and proposals, even as Dwyer brings his own shrewd history of personal, scholarly, and selective reading to the project.

Since historically the underpinning of ecocritical theory was wedded to natural history and its writers, there has long been a sense that other genres have somehow been under-represented in developing ecocriticism. Karla Armbruster’s and Kathleen Wallace’s 2001 volume, *Beyond Nature Writing*, and Patrick Murphy’s 1998, *The Literatures of Nature*, were pioneering attempts to open up the field not only to fiction, but to other (pre-ecological) eras. Today, rather than feeling that the “eco” label is too limited or too tied to one genre, readers might very well be excused for thinking that just about anything can be considered a form of “ecoliterature” as poems, plays, fiction & films from all eras are scrutinized under the rubric of ecocriticism. Dwyer’s timely selection of books can possibly bring us back to a consideration of fundamentals.

Finally, there is a paradox in the growth of ecofictional works. As Dwyer points out in the chapter “Ecofiction’s Roots and Historical Development”, the great “greening of literature” in the United States began in the 1970s, and was spurred on in part by anxiety arising from “accelerated population growth and the development of previously untrammelled land” (29). It is sobering indeed to consider that the growing strength of a genre like ecofiction emerges from continuing ravages to the environment.

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