

A Breath of Fresh Air: Acclaimed Works of Nature Writing

Moderators: Jonathan Jay and Eve Endicott

Time: Wednesdays, 10:00 – 12:00 Noon

Place: UMass University Without Walls, Room 113
(in Hadley, near Home Depot)



Rachel Carson on the Maine Shore

This seminar will examine seven acclaimed works of American and British nature writing – six prose and one volume of poetry – and explore their unique and varied perspectives on the impact of the natural world on humans.

Nature writing has evolved into a distinctive form of literary expression. While always acutely observant of landscape and wildlife and sometimes bordering on the scientific, it is often highly personal, philosophical, and with a spiritual dimension. We will look at several accomplished female and male writers from the early 20th Century to the present who explore, contemplate, and frequently rhapsodize about a diverse group of landscapes and ecosystems – from Atlantic seashores to the Southwest desert, from the English Fens to the Lake District.

(See list of books we will read and discuss on other side.)

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All participants will read and discuss the following books:

The Land of Little Rain, by Mary Austin (1903): A classic collection of essays portraying the land between Death Valley and the High Sierras, “breath[ing] life into the landscape, describing . . . its savage beauty, its plants and animals,” and the cattlemen, miners, and Paiute Indians who inhabit the land.

The Edge of the Sea, by Rachel Carson (1955): The environmentalist’s exploration of “rocky shores, sandy beaches, and coral reefs [of the Atlantic shore], leading us into unknown worlds to catch the evanescent beauty of a tide pool and tell the story of a grain of sand, and convey[ing] the true complexity, beauty, and wonder of marine life, both animals and plants.”

The Peregrine, by J.A. Baker (1967): A classic of nature writing in Great Britain. An account from fall to spring of the daily comings and goings of a pair of peregrine falcons across the flat Fenlands of eastern England, with detailed observation, capturing, in part, the peregrines’ experience from their perspective.

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, by Terry Tempest Williams (1991): A chronicle of the rise of Great Salt Lake and the flooding of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in 1983 during a time of personal crisis for the author, “transform[ing] tragedy into a document of renewal and spiritual grace.”

New and Selected Poems, Volume Two, by Mary Oliver (2005): A collection of poems – many inspired by the landscape and natural history of Cape Cod – published from 1994–2005 by the Pulitzer Prize and National Board Award winning poet.

The Wild Places, by Robert Mcfarlane (2007): An account of visits to various remote places in the British Isles “evok[ing] their spirit of wildness [and] punctuated with reflections on climate change, on destruction of habitat, on individuals met along the way and others who hover in the wings of history, on kindred-spirit writers, and on larger matters of time and belonging.”

The Outer Beach: A Thousand Mile Walk on Cape Cod’s Atlantic Shore, by Robert Finch (2017): Essays from four and a half decades of explorations on Cape Cod’s ocean coast, interweaving the naturalist’s close observations of the shore’s dunes and cliffs, birdlife, and marine mammals with his reflections on “how the physical environment creates us as human beings.”

(See seminar description, time, and location on other side.)