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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John A. Murray. *Writing About Nature: A Creative Guide.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. xii + 202 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-3085-7.

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Published on H-Nilas (April, 2004)

In the Publishing Corridor

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Certain professional paths are so surrounded by social expectation that the logic of their conclusions seems overwhelming. Until recently, for example, women who wanted careers beyond housekeeping were more or less automatically shunted into nursing or teaching. John A. Murray's book is just what it says it is, a creative guide, but Murray makes a number of more or less explicit assumptions about what nature writers do and why they do it.

Murray says in his preface that one purpose of his book is to provide a semester's worth of course work for teachers from high school up. I think the book would work admirably well for that purpose, and the fifteen chapters Murray designates as a writing course take the student from journaling and the essay form to the ins and outs of publishing, particularly book publishing, in a logical progression. The intervening chapters on subjects like figurative language, storytelling, style, and revision touch on all the areas that a writing course should touch on without interrupting the progress of the book's reader toward a career that includes extensive travel and research, proposals, book contracts, rigorous schedules, and the publication of many books. It points to a career like Murray's, and surely no one could be better qualified to lead the expedition than Murray himself.

The assumption of direction is evident especially in the later chapters on revision, workshopping, and publication, which are based, reasonably, on Murray's own experience and career. The selective lists of twenty creative writing programs and twenty-two writing conferences among the appendices give more impetus to the career assumptions of the book. But the name of Henry David Thoreau comes up in this book the way the name of Moses comes up in the *Qur'an*. Thoreau is the first writer mentioned in the book as the originator of nature writing as it is understood today, and Thoreau's combination of description, narrative, analysis, and philosophy is still difficult to classify. We might remember that Thoreau was doing what he did first, without real models to emulate. And I think that those of us looking back to Thoreau as a patron saint may do well to remember that he never married, did as he thought fit, caught cold doing it, and died young.

That said, we have reason to be grateful for Thoreau, his life, his energy, his humor, his determination, and his courage. Murray even chooses a quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's journal describing Thoreau's oddness and emphasizing the fact that he had "repudiated all regular modes of getting a living" (p. 4).

But, if Murray gives us a corridor to publishing books of nature writing, it is a corridor with windows and doors leading out. His first chapter, on journaling, describes the use of journal writing in the output of the two writers most often mentioned in this book, Henry David Thoreau and Edward Abbey, as well as others. This chapter also quotes from the journal of William Byrd, presented as the author of America's first nature book (*History of the Dividing Line*, 1728), and of the contemporary writer Rick Bass. The "practice exercises" at the end of the chapter provide guidance in the kind of writing and thinking that have been and might be useful in developing writing talent–to describe a season of the year in a journal, for instance, or to take a trip and keep a journal of your impressions.

The second chapter, "The Essay," is rich in allusions to Thoreau and to Edward Abbey, again, and the practice exercises send the student to a number of nature writers, past and present. "The Writing Process" describes the way writers from Thoreau to Mark Twain to ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan worked from notes and impressions to draft. This chapter contains what is to me the most striking and provocative metaphor in the book. After discussing the use Nabhan makes of motifs, ideas worked in like music, Murray says this of his own writing process:

"I believe that just as the complete instructions for building every organism are encoded deep in the DNA of each of its individual cells, so is a completed work of literature enciphered in every constituent sentence; the key is to find that buried or hidden code and give it complete realization." (p. 31)

Easy or difficult to defend as the metaphor may be, it presents a kind of ultimately organic theory of composition, and one that would no doubt have pleased Thoreau. The ending exercises suggest imitation of some of the techniques claimed by, or attributed to, the authors mentioned.

"The Opening" and "The Closing" present clear examples and suggestions, particularly for inexperienced writers, of these crucial and difficult parts of the essay. It may be worth noting that many of the examples of closing passages Murray chooses achieve a timeless quality by using the oracular present: "Mother and I break bread for the geese.... She puts her arm back through mine as we walk shoulder-high in sunflowers," from Terry Tempest Williams's "Canada Geese" (p. 50).[1]

"Word Pictures" wades into the creative writing part of the book by contrasting the relatively verbose descriptive style of Henry Stanley in Africa in 1890 to the more terse descriptions demanded by today's readers and practiced by writers like Jim Harrison, John McPhee, and Edward Abbey. I found Murray's discussion and analysis of the examples he gives in this chapter to be particularly penetrating, and the extent of the ending exercises shows that this must be an area of special interest for him. "Figurative Language" and "Character and Dialogue" continue with competent advice and exercises that deliver just what the chapters promise. "Story Telling" offers more penetrating analysis and examples of a difficult subject–what storytelling is and how to do it (as a nature writer).

"Style" is presented, wisely, with examples rather than forbidding analysis. Formal style is contrasted to colloquial informal style and is divided into "elegant" style represented by the prose of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "laconic" style represented by the prose of Terry Tempest Williams, and a "middle" style represented by the prose of Mark Twain. Edward Abbey's prose is used to illustrate a mixture of formal and informal, and of the levels of formal prose. Murray mentions William J. Strunk, Jr.'s 1919 book on style just before presenting his own twenty-two suggestions, rather than rules, for style.

"Fiction and Poetry" contains a relatively few examples from a potentially enormous number, from writers from William Shakespeare to contemporary poet John Haines. A surprise for me came in a longish paragraph (pp. 116-117) on a book called *The Tree* by John Fowles, an author I was not accustomed to think of as a nature writer. *Writing about Nature* contains the sprinkling of typographical errors one would expect, but this chapter contains a paragraph (pp. 120-121) that begins referring to song "Full fathom five" quoted from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but ends with references to assonance and alliteration from the first section of Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill," a quotation apparently left out by accident.

The chapter on workshopping gives Murray's experience and generally positive evaluation of this activity of prospective writers in America. In the chapters on research and on publication, Murray's professional status is evident. He speaks with authority about his own research and his own experience with publishers and publishing, taking the book from concept through promotional tours.

The last chapter, "Nature Writing and Environmental Activism," makes another explicit assumption, that the writer will be an activist. In all his chapters together, Murray's assumptions are presented clearly and are coherent. For someone planning a career as a nature writer, specifically as a writer of books about nature, *Writing about Nature* presents a clear plan, but that view of the subject seems to me to leave out many of the possibilities that are suggested in the examples.

Another interesting and, it seems to me, fertile feature of the book is that it is in many ways a book of lists. The lists of creative writing programs, environmental organizations, and writing conferences in the appendices are only the most formal lists in the book. There is a list of recommended readings as the first appendix, and the middle chapters in particular contain lists of authors. Rick Bass, Jim Harrison, Bill Kittredge, John Gierarch, Ed Engle, James Crumley, Russell Chatham, Tom McGuane, Bob Shacochis, and Doug Peacock are given as practitioners of the informal style (p. 110). The list of books in Murray's personal reference library (pp. 142-144) is of great interest to anyone who has come to grips with the process of writing about nature or any other subject. I find Murray's list of references cited at least as interesting as his recommended readings appendix. These lists come from a man of wide reading and careful habits, and they present openings for those wanting to explore the (mostly American) field of nature writing even if they do not necessarily seek careers as nature writers and activists.

A last list that I compiled from the index may be of interest as well. It is a list of the authors most fre-

quently mentioned in the book: Henry David Thoreau, 25 times; Edward Abbey, 22 times; Mark Twain, 14 times; and Ernest Hemingway, 12 times.

Note

[1]. Harry Williams points out the effect of the emphatic "now" of the present tense in the later poems of Theodore Roethke (p. 124), a poet mentioned prominently in Murray's chapter on "Fiction and Poetry." Harry Williams, *"The Edge Is What I Have": Theodore Roethke and After* (London and Canterbury: Associated University Presses, 1977).

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Citation: Thom Harrison. Review of Murray, John A., *Writing About Nature: A Creative Guide*. H-Nilas, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9186

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