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University of Kentucky

Course Syllabus  
Masaryk University  
September 2014

## **American Nature Writing**

### **Description:**

This course offers an overview and sampler of a nonfiction genre peripheral to conventional literary history but central to American sensibilities and self-regard as “Nature’s Nation.” Grounded in nature observation yet distinct from natural history, voiced in first person yet subordinating personal history, nature writing arises at junctures of science and memoir, where Linnaeus and St. Augustine collide. The course will take up several moments in nature writing’s unfolding: Thoreau (the genre’s progenitor) and Transcendentalists; the turn-of-the-century Cult of Nature; and postwar expressions of modern environmentalism. It will conclude with recent morphings of the genre in light of the postmodern and so-called posthuman.

### **Assignments and Grading:**

Readings will consist of short to mid-length essays, several per class, as per the course schedule below. Written responses to reading will be due for each session, at least a half page (single-spaced) in length. As a rule, responses will address prompts assigned in advance, though you’ll be welcome to pursue any line of observation that compels you. Responses will be evaluated by a system of checkmarks—a check for satisfactory completion, with a plus-sign appended for exceptional efforts and a minus-sign for perfunctory work—from which a letter grade will be derived at course’s end. Since class sessions will often take points of departure from these responses, it’s required that they be brought to class on time.

It’s also required that you have your copies of assigned texts ready to be worked with in class, whether by printing PDFs out and marking the copies or by electronically annotating and/or taking side notes on texts you view on a screen. I reserve the option of spot-checking to see that you’ve prepared to work with texts in some manner, and of deducting the equivalent of one reading response from your grade if you have not.

A brief essay of synthesis and response, four to seven double-spaced pages in length, will be due a week after class sessions are done, on Friday 19 September. You’ll submit the essay via email, as an attachment, to this email address: **randall.roorda@gmail.com** I’ll provide suggestions for essay topics, but you’ll be free to adopt whatever topic you come up with, perhaps extending something you embarked on in a reading response.

The course grade will be calculated thus: 50% for reading responses; 40% for the essay; 10% for class participation, my evaluation of how actively and helpfully you work with others and contribute to discussions in class. There will be no exams.

## **Course Outline and Readings:**

### **Day 1, AM session: Intros and Issues**

Thomas Lyon, "A Taxonomy of Nature Writing" and "The American Setting"  
David Rains Wallace, "The Nature of Nature Writing"  
Joyce Carol Oates, "Against Nature"  
Barry Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative"

### **Day 1, PM session: Precursors**

William Bartram, from *Travels*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Nature* (plus journal entries)  
Susan Fenimore Cooper, from *Rural Hours*

### **Day 2, AM session: Touchstone**

Henry David Thoreau, chapters from *Walden*

### **Day 2, PM session: The Two Johns**

John Muir, two essays from *The Mountains of California*  
John Burroughs, "Wild Life About My Cabin" and "The Still Small Voice"

### **Day 3, AM session: The Cult of Nature (Fakers)**

Essays on corvids by Ernest Thompson Seton and William J. Long  
Mary Austin, two essays from *The Land of Little Rain*

### **Day 3, PM session: Mid-Century Tempers**

Henry Beston, from *The Outermost House*  
Donald Culross Peattie, from *An Almanac for Moderns*  
Loren Eiseley, "The Judgment of the Birds"

### **Day 4, AM session: Environmental Apotheosis**

Rachel Carson, from *The Sea Around Us*; from *Silent Spring*  
Aldo Leopold, from *A Sand County Almanac*

### **Day 4, PM session: Canon-Making**

Edward Abbey, from *Desert Solitaire*  
Annie Dillard, "Heaven and Earth in Jest," "Living Like Weasels," "Sojourner"

### **Day 5, AM session: Revisionings**

Robert Sullivan, from *Meadowlands*  
Charles Seibert, "An Elephant Crackup?"  
Amy Leach, from *Things That Are*

### **Day 5, PM session: Into the Woods**

Wendell Berry, "An Entrance to the Woods"  
Class convenes at Wilson Woods (weather more or less permitting)