

## **Green Shoots from Old Roots: Writing Realist Ecofiction**

### **DESCRIPTION**

Realist, character-driven ecofiction and cli-fi play a special role in the urgent dialogue on humanity's culpability for and response to the desecration of the natural world. We discuss how, and to what effect, we ground such stories in history and science, center non-human characters and natural settings, negotiate despair and hope, harness environmental messaging to character and plot, and approach the global- and generational-scale changes that drive speculative ecofiction.

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Panelists draw on a variety of experience: their ecofiction ranges across Nigeria, Uruguay, New England, Newfoundland, and Alaska—from ocean and air to forest and wetland—and, in addition to their work as novelists and teachers of creative writing, they've worked as scientists, naturalists, scholars, and journalists.

**Anne Coray (Moderator/ Organizer)**

**Catherine Bush, Julie Carrick Dalton, Helon Habila, Susan M. Gaines**

#### **Intro (Anne):**

Edward Albee quote: "We write because we want to change the world. It doesn't do any good of course, but we still try."

Announce panel title: **Green Shoots from Old Roots: Writing Realist Ecofiction**

Name other panelists (detailed introductions to follow as we each take our turn speaking)

Explain Green Shoots from Old Roots—indebtedness to authors who have come before, importance of historic perspective. Admittance that my perspective is largely a Western one. I'm excited to learn more from other panelists about writers I'm not familiar with.

Define Eco-lit: Eco-lit is not nature writing. Nature writing tends to be more celebratory, focusing on the wonders of the natural world. Eco-lit, by contrast, highlights humanity's carelessness and disrespect for it. Eco-lit brings up questions about our roles and responsibilities in the destruction of the biosphere. So there is a

culpability angle at play here. That doesn't exclude a work of ecofiction from containing beautiful, descriptive passages of landscape, flora, and fauna.

Broad definition-panelists may elaborate or give a more nuanced definition of their own.

Gilgamesh- earliest surviving work of Western literature, considered by many to carry a strong environmental message. A number of scholars have cited one theme of the work as a reprimand/warning to humanity: cut down all the trees and there will be consequences. This work was Assyrian, written on clay tablets which are variously dated between 1700 and 1300 B.C. In tablets 3 through 5 Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu kill Humbaba, the guardian of the great cedar forest.

Mesopotamia had all kinds of fertile soil, but it didn't have timber, so those cedars of Lebanon were some damn valuable shit, like oil today and water tomorrow.

Shakespeare "As You Like It" (1623) may qualify; but we have this problem—or variable—of interpretation. Himmet Umunc in his essay "The Green Shakespeare" (avail. online) makes a case for this. He says: The Forest of Arden, in which the action of the play is set, in fact becomes an ambivalent epitome of the natural world; it is not only idealized and romanti-cized in pastoral terms but also depicted as a kind of wilderness manipulated and exploited by human beings.

Still, largely a dearth of material prior to Industrial Revolution (1790).

Credit Nature writing-ancient Chinese poets, English Romantic poets.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798) collaborative work by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Tells of this mariner who shot an albatross with his crossbow (after the bird had guided the sailors and their ship to safety when they were almost crushed by polar icebergs.)

Moby-Dick (with Dean Flower quote) Melville greatly influenced by The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Interpreted this way Moby-Dick would make Melville one of the earliest eco-fiction novelists. Dean Flower:

"Whatever Melville adopted from Coleridge, he transformed; but surely its stimulus was vital. Mightn't it be said that the poem's deepest moral—not just the Mariner's resistance to loving all creatures great and small, or his purposeless cruelty in killing the Albatross, but the arrogance that puts man first and subjects other creatures to his will—is the same moral carried over and writ large in Moby-Dick?"

In the Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick, contemporary account of the destruction of the whaleship by an enraged sperm whale.

Poets: W.S Merwin, William Heyen, Richard Wilbur, Robinson Jeffers preceded others, writing well before the 1990s, supposedly when ecopoetry was born.

Nonfiction writers Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) & Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962).

Now we have this genre known as ecofiction. It's a relatively recent phenomenon, but in America it arguably became recognized with the publication of Ed Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in 1975.

Ann Pancake, *Strange as this Wx Has Been*/ Nancy Lord, *pH* / Jennifer Haigh, *Heat and Light*

**Panelists' Perspectives: Backgrounds, Influences, Ecofiction Subjects (50 mins.)**

### **Catherine Bush**

**Anne:** Catherine Bush's five novels include the climate-themed *Blaze Island* (2020), a *Globe & Mail* Best Book. "Writing the Real," an essay on writing climate fiction, will appear in *Best Canadian Essays 2021*. She is the Coordinator of the University of Guelph Creative Writing MFA in Toronto.

### **Catherine:**

*In summary: I'll consider my own interests/definitions when it comes to eco-fiction: how to shift narrative focus from the wholly human and amplify the more than human world; how to bring the more than human world to life; and how to write from my own perspective as a child of immigrants living on historically stolen land. Some points of reference for me: French writer Jean Giono's 1929 novel *Hill/Colline*, recently re-translated for the NYRB classics series; Canadian Barbara Gowdy's novel of imagined elephant life, *The White Bone*; Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's recent *Noopiming*, with its human and more than human personae.*

I'll offer my own view of what I consider eco-fiction to be. As ecology is concerned with relationships between organisms, so eco-fiction as opposed to straight up nature writing puts the emphasis on relationship between species, and on the contemporary fragility of many ecosystems.

I'll note that my interest in human and non-human relations goes back to my first novel published in the '90s.

In my current climate-themed novel, *Blaze Island*, set on a small island in the north Atlantic, I've attempted to de-centre the human story somewhat and amplify the non-human elements, to rebalance the world in this way. This is a literary project of ongoing interest to me. As a reader, I search for a sense of a more-than-human living world on the page; stories of the solely human often feel like a kind of unreality. Read from novel briefly?

I'll acknowledge an uneasy binary: that indigenous cultures approach the more-than-human world as living kin, Western industrialized cultures don't. Identify the problem as industrialism and the conceptual framework it brings. Land-based knowledge and relationships were extirpated earlier in Western cultures, even as the horrific histories of colonial violence and genocide to people and the theft of land on this continent must be acknowledged.

How do I, as a child of immigrants, write ecologically focused fiction in relation to this history?

Touchstones: 1) Jean Giono's 1920s French novel, *Hill/Colline*, work of deep animism, perils of demonizing that aliveness. 2) Ted Chiang's koan-like short story, "The Great Silence," narrated by a parrot; also Barbara Gowdy's novel, *The White Bone*, one an act of giving voice, the second of deep embodiment, not anthropomorphism; refer to Kamila Shamsie quote re how the refusal to imaginatively enter another can be an act of further 'othering.' 4) Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies*, Nishnaabeg writer's rendering of an animate world. How to write in awareness of, witness of a literary project of reclamation and reparation such as this?

## **Julie Carrick Dalton**

**Anne:** Julie Carrick Dalton's (she/her) debut novel, *Waiting for the Night Song*, was a CNN, Newsweek, Parade, and USA Today Most Anticipated 2021 book. A Tin House and Bread Loaf alum, Julie owns a small farm in rural New Hampshire and speaks/teaches about fiction that engages climate crisis.

### **Julie:**

While eco-fiction is not a new form of writing, I believe the increasing number of eco-fiction titles is a reflection of growing climate anxiety.

Fiction offers a way to explore our fears and our hopes. The novelist Jeff VanderMeer talks about novels as 'laboratories for possible futures.' By this, he means novelists have the opportunity to play out futures that do not yet exist.

Glimpsing an undesirable possible future can motivate readers to want a different future. In this way, I do believe fiction is a form of activism. (I know others may disagree. I'm happy to have a friendly conversation about this in the Questions segment)

Some writers choose hope and create a path for optimism. Other writers see more bleakness. I will offer examples of two different novels – *Migrations* by Charlotte McConaghy and *The Wall* by Jon Lanchester. Both of these novels envision a climate changed near-future, but McConaghy manages to fill the reader with hope because of her reverence for and love of nature. Although she grieves for what we have lost due to the climate crisis, McConaghy forces us to look at what we still have left and challenges us to love the beauty that still remains rather than be paralyzed by grief. By contrast, Lanchester approaches a very similar world in *The Wall*, yet his novel is more of an indictment of the generations who failed to prevent the climate crisis. My takeaway from *Migrations* is tempered hope. My takeaway from *The Wall* is guilt.

My novel *Waiting for the Night Song*, and my forthcoming novel *The Last Beekeeper*, both rose out of my own anxieties about climate-related phenomena I witnessed on the land I farm in New Hampshire. *Waiting for the Night Song* focuses on a small farming town in which summer temperatures have risen four degrees in a century, a slow-burning disruption in which crops, animals, and trees can thrive in the region. Over time, the rising temps affect the town in different ways for different people. I write about invasive species and species threatened by a changing ecosystem. In *The Last Beekeeper*, (I am a beekeeper) I explore what might happen if our pollinators started dying off much faster than predicted. Both of my books are set a few years in the future but feel contemporary.

Although I wasn't thinking about it this way when I wrote them, I now think of my books as examples of 'future laboratories as described by Jeff VanderMeer. My novels are my own attempts to work through the climate anxiety I was experiencing as a farmer and a beekeeper. I want my readers to witness the wonder and awe in the wild places of New Hampshire I write about in *Night Song*, and I want them to experience my reverence for bees in *The Last Beekeeper*. If we can help readers fall in love with nature, maybe they will be moved to fight for it.

## **Helon Habila**

**Anne:** Helon Habila is a Professor of Creative Writing at George Mason University in Virginia, USA. He studied at the University of Jos in Nigeria, and the

University of East Anglia, UK. His novels include, *Travelers* (WW Norton, US/Penguin UK) and *Oil on Water* (WW Norton/Penguin UK)

### **Helon:**

--I'll begin by giving a brief definition of Petrofiction/Oil Cultures---how the term "petrofiction" was coined by the Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh, in his review of the book, *Cities of Salt*, by Abdulrehman Munif.

--In his review, written over a decade ago, Ghosh laments the dearth of novels on the Oil Encounter, and how this dearth arises from many factors, one is the novelist's uncertainty about how to situate such literature, and of course a lack of models to follow. Most books about the Oil Encounter tend to be nonfiction.

--Since then of course there has been a rise in publications about this encounter.

--I'll reference my own novel here, *Oil on Water*, and how I used the paradigm of the post-colonial narrative to situate the stories of the oil encounter. Meaning, the oil companies are basically nothing but a continuation of the colonial enterprise.

--What does this mean for democracy, how can democracy survive in such places when the new rulers and governments owe more loyalty to the oil companies than they do to their own people?

--How does the writer approach such subject matter without being too didactic or too political (if there's anything as being too political in fiction) Petrofiction, like Munif's *Cities of Salt*, can thus best be understood within this paradigm of postcolonial fiction.

--I'll talk about activism and the pioneering contribution of writers like Ken Saro-Wiwa, focusing on his memoir, *A Month and a Day*. I want to draw attention to the contribution, often unacknowledged, of third world activists like him, and how his life and work has inspired writers, like myself.

--One to two-minute reading from *Oil on Water*, a passage that describes a rural setting that resists the incursion of the oil companies, and serves to show how traditional African cultures respected and took care of the environment. The point being that what scientists and politicians call Climate Change and all its imminent threats, have always been known to different cultures, who have their ways of addressing it and co-existing with nature...

--I'll also briefly mention Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, and how she makes use of anthropomorphic devices, like narrating from the POV of animals and plants. These are ways writers are increasingly using to show how important the non-human environment is. Of course, this technic has its critics, who see it as

a sort of appropriation or colonization of animals by humans, a sort of ventriloquism, no more.

## **Susan M. Gaines**

**Anne:** Susan M. Gaines's books include the novels *Accidentals* and *Carbon Dreams*, and the non-fiction science book *Echoes of Life*. She serves as the international author liaison for the Fiction Meets Science Program at the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study in Germany.

### **Susan:**

Much of my writing has dealt with human relationships to the rest of the natural world. Those relationships include both the celebratory and the destructive, usually in interaction. I might posit that we need the former to fully appreciate the meaning of the latter. And, in the case of my own writing, I want to offer readers (and myself) a chance to indulge in the joy and beauty of the natural world, along with grief, despair, and anger at its destruction.

In discussing my experience with writing and reading eco-lit, I'll touch on the following:

- The convergence of science, nature, and politics with all the usual concerns of literary fiction that gave rise to *Carbon Dreams* (2001) and *Accidentals* (2020), and has become more prevalent in the decades between those two books (high profile examples include Richard Powers' recent novels, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, but there are many more)
- Writing about the other-than-human natural world through a scientific lens, and the different ways one might go about this. *Carbon Dreams*, which I wrote in the 1990s, I wanted to write about science as a way of *celebrating* rather than exploiting the natural world, about science as a way of looking *closely* and understanding, rather than science as a way of making new technologies. The novel deals with our understanding of the greenhouse effect and the oil industry's role in undermining that.
- Catherine talks about decentering the human story. One of the less obvious, somewhat metafictional, themes of *Accidentals* is just how difficult it is to do this—how human violence and sociopolitical

relationships have historically upstaged the crises of other species, ecosystems, and the earth system, even as our understanding of those crises have grown. I love how the weather is almost a character in its own right in *Blaze Island*, and I look forward to discussing other ways authors are decentering the human element of the natural world, including Helon's examples of writing from non-human POVs. In *Accidentals*, the POV is decidedly human, but the avian characters' story is center stage, and I've used empathy and deep knowledge to recount it. (Read brief example)

- Exploring perceptions of nature and environmentalism across time and place
- Stories of the past, present or future? I'll reflect on how and why we might choose one or the other, what these timeframes might have to offer readers, as they try to come to terms with the Anthropocene

Some texts I may mention or add to our bibliography: Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations*, Brian Kimberling's *Snapper*, Ian McEwan's *Solar*, Rick Bass's *Where the Sea Used to Be*, Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*, William J. Cobb's *The Bird Saviors*

### **Anne Coray:**

Anne Coray's novel *Lost Mountain* is a love story inspired by the Pebble Mine project. Author of three poetry collections, her work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Kestrel*, *Poetry*, and *AQR*. She has received fellowships from the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the Rasmuson Foundation.

### **Anne:**

Open-pit mining not a subject I've seen addressed in fiction

Lost Mtn billed in part as a cli-fi book

Personal background / Alaskan born & raised / Alaskans and environmentalism-predator control, oil & gas drilling, politicians. Development at all costs

Reading and lifestyle both shaped my views

Lake Clark description

Move from poetry to novel

Rumors of mining prospect to SW of us, background for novel.

Love story, alternating povs.

Short, one-minute excerpt from my novel.

What I think makes good ecofiction: same thing that makes any good writing-attention to language.

Risks of writing ecofiction:

Too much technical detail in a given passage (whether writing abt animal behavior or the science of climate change/ fracking). I tried hard in Lost Mtn. to sprinkle the info about mining throughout the book.

Authorial intrusion /didacticism / having an “agenda” /different tolerances for different readers

Empathy (Jennifer Haigh)

I do believe that anger/ invective has a place in literature. My characters: one angry, one avoids issues. I empathize with both.

Re: hope. A recent poem of mine just out in AQR: Gullible Hope. About climate change.

Extreme pessimism about humanity’s ability to live in harmony with the natural world. I think money and power will triumph in the end. But Lost Mountain ends ambiguously. I think if it were writing it today from start to finish it would be much darker though.

**DISCUSSION** 5-10 min

**Discussion Questions/ Prompts for Panelists:**

1. How do you see your role and responsibility as a novelist in a world beset by climate change and environmental degradation? Do we as authors have an obligation to address these topics in our writing?
2. Why eco-fiction and not nonfiction? What does fiction have to offer that nonfiction doesn’t? (Let’s talk about character and plot.)
3. The topic of didacticism has come up a couple of times. Helon and I have shared some thoughts on that, but if any of you have something to add, please do.

4. Some authors and educators believe that fiction has no place as a tool for activism or science communication. How do the rest of you feel about that?
5. Julie and I touched on hope versus despair. Would anyone like to add to those comments?
6. We haven't talked about speculative fiction. This is a popular genre today and much of it deals with environmental disasters. But it is typically set in the future. Would someone like to comment on why there seems to be an abundance of speculative fiction and very little of what we are calling realist fiction?
7. A couple of you mentioned decentering the human in writing about the natural world. Can this be effectively accomplished in literary fiction? How are novelists are going about this, and what are the pitfalls and opportunities this approach offers?

**AUDIENCE QUESTIONS & COMMENTS** 10-15 minutes

It may be possible to include audience questions as we work through the discussion topics.