

Literature in the Modern World:
Nature Writing
ENG 209
CRN 6092: Spring 2018
MW 1:30—3:20, TA 226

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“We sit on park benches and beaches and couches and hilltops, listening and dreaming seemingly to no particular purpose. But isn't it often the case that when we cease to move and think, we see and hear and understand a great deal?”—Brian Doyle

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”—Rachel Carson

I'm happy to hear from you and **email is quickest**. I usually respond to email between 24 and 48 hours during the week, but occasionally I get behind. Please send me a follow-up email if I don't respond within a couple of days. I will use our Moodle website to communicate fairly regularly about assignments and other class notices as well as email, so please check your email! Feel free to follow me on my public Twitter site @melmatthewson for tweets about teaching, writing, environment, and politics.

Course Description (per catalog): Focuses on reading and analysis of texts organized around a specific topic, with an emphasis on the literary work in its social and cultural context. Topics vary. Repeat credit is allowed for different topics. Approved for University Studies (Explorations Strand E–Humanities).

Course Introduction

Goals and Outcomes

This course has two main objectives: to teach you how to become careful readers of literary texts and explore writing about those texts in a variety of ways. Making you a better reader, thinker, and writer is the primary goal. We will analyze texts not only for their ideas but for the artful ways that their authors convey those ideas. That said, everything we read will be about nature to one degree or another. Therefore, if you are a nature lover, you will probably enjoy this class more than someone who isn't.

Writing assignments will vary. Some will be analytic, others creative. Thus, it is both a close reading and an intensive writing course. You will be introduced to three genres of contemporary nature writing and environmental literature. The genres we will read are poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. All texts on the course focus on the natural world and humans' relationships with it. We will discuss such questions and topics as the following: the role of literature in how we perceive and conceptualize nature; earth as literary setting and stage but also as habitat; sense of place; mammals, birds and concepts of the more-than-human world; notions of wilderness and wilder places; settlers and nomads; observation and contemplation of nature; nature and silence; the relationship between landscape and story; ethics, environmental activism and questions of responsibility to the earth; and related topics.

Class Format

Class will be run primarily by discussion. I will come to each class with questions to help facilitate discussion. I encourage students to also come to class with questions for the class. Students will share answers and observations. We will also go outside to talk and write and observe, so on nice days, come prepared to go outside.

In this class, we will embark on creating a learning community. I encourage you to share with me any learning you do outside of class relevant to our class. You are encouraged to share with me links of videos, programs, websites, songs, questions, observations etc. You can send these to my email: matthewm2@sou.edu. Once I have read or viewed what you have sent me, I will post your information on Moodle for the rest of the class to see. We can discuss or reference your item in class and learn from it.

There will be times when I give mini-lectures to the class in order to more effectively convey information. Students are required familiarity with Moodle as all assignments and course materials will be posted there.

Course Objectives

- Students will be able to articulate the differences between different genre forms (as they relate to nature literature).
- Students will learn close reading techniques in order to become careful readers of literary texts.
- Students will gain an appreciation of the various genres explored in class.
- Students will learn how to structure effective short analytic papers.
- Students will experiment with various styles of creative writing.

Required Texts

- Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*
- Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces*
- J. Drew Lanham, *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature*
- Additional readings will be posted on Moodle.

Assignments

- **Natural History Writing Assignment (25 points):** In this assignment, you will use the devices we observe in natural history and literature to write your own description of a place. Practicing the modes we identified in the writings of Thoreau, Muir, and others, you will introduce your reader to a local place, such as the campus, Bear Creek, Mt. Ashland, Lithia Park, the SOU Farm, or your own dorm. This assignment will require that you spend a lot of time observing the place, so reserve enough time to visit several times to just be there. We will also try to visit some of these places during class.
- **Close Reading Writing Assignment (25 points):** If there is one skill literary scholars hold claim to, it's "close reading"; reading texts closely is our "methodology." Paying attention to the details of a text—the choice of words, composition of images, and other aspects of its "form"—is our bread and butter. In closely reading a text, we ask, how, exactly, does a text convey its meaning? In other words, we're not just interested in what the text is saying, but how it is being said.

- **“Into the Wild” Assignment (25 points):** Toward the end of the term, we will view the 2007 film based on Jon Krakauer’s book, *Into the Wild*. “Environmental literature” plays a significant role in the film. I will ask you to take note of the literary references in the film, choose one that you found particularly significant or powerful, and do some research on that author and text. You may also choose a song or place in the film to examine as a “text.” By examining the author, text, and its context in the film, you will explore the significance of literature to the film and to environmental thought more broadly.
- **Little Bitty Papers (5 points each):** We will usually (not always) begin class with brief (5 to 10 minute) “on the spot” (and graded) writing designed to get you to respond intelligently to the readings and offer up questions for that day’s class discussion. Due on notecards in class. *These cannot be made up if you miss that week’s class.*
- **Nature Writing Journal (100 points):** This will be your journal for recording observations, in-class writing prompts, anything you want to record as part of your nature journal. You will turn this into me toward the end of term and before the final so I can review and give them back. I will expect a minimum of ten thoughtful entries. You can use any type of journal you like.
- **Participation (50 points):** In addition to attendance, you will receive points for participation based on your engagement with your class community. We will engage in a number of different activities: small group discussion, large group discussion, in-class writings, field observation, etc., so your participation is critical to creating a dynamic learning community.
- **Proposal for Final Paper (15 points)**
- **Annotated bibliography for Final Paper (25 points)**
- **Final paper (100 points).** Due on finals week. We will discuss this assignment in some detail during class time, but in essence, you will write a relatively traditional research paper, focused on one of the semester’s texts, writers, or theoretical concerns. (2,000 words, 5-6 pages)

Class Engagement

Your engagement in class is essential to your success in this class. I expect that you will:

- *Be physically and mentally present.* Be on time and bring the necessary materials to class. Put away your phone and computer so you can focus on what is occurring in class. Someone is paying money for you to be here and earn a grade; don’t let that person’s money go to waste. Please shut off or put your phone on silent in addition to putting it away during class. If I see you using your cell phone in class for non-emergency situations, I will ask you to put it away and you will lose participation for that day.
- *Be prepared.* Complete the assigned reading and writing to the best of your ability and bring them to class. Provide yourself with enough time to prepare for class.
- *Actively engage in class activities.* Practicing writing techniques and challenging yourself with new perspectives and skills will help improve your writing.
- *Intelligently contribute to class discussions.* Point out something that interested you in the reading. Identify something you’d like the class to spend time discussing. Answer questions. Add to what another student said. Make a connection. Suggest a way to reconsider the topic. Respectfully challenge an idea or opinion.

- *Ask thoughtful questions.* Your classmates and I cannot read your mind! Speak up when you need something clarified or would like the class to contemplate an element of a topic.
- *Put whatever negative past experiences you've had with writing behind you and give yourself a blank slate.* Writing is a process and a skill you develop over time. Have faith in your abilities.
- *Show up and speak to each other.* This class is a collaborative learning community; everyone must engage and participate. If you are quiet you must find ways to speak up more often, and if you are a talker you must find ways to help open discussion space for others.
- *Be the community member you'd like your classmates to be.* Listen closely to comments before responding; don't interrupt each other; don't overshare; don't lead discussion into side topics; remember to critique the ideas, NOT the speaker. Come to me with concerns.
- I expect my classroom to be a welcoming and invigorating environment for all students. Any behavior that disrupts it will not be tolerated. Please do not talk excessively, make loud or distracting noises, leave and enter the classroom repeatedly, make threats or insults to the faculty member or other students, produce offensive language or gestures, or sleep during class.

Attendance Policy

You are expected to be present in class and on time. Think of this class like a professional workplace environment. By choosing not to attend class or arriving late, you decrease your chances of success in the course--just as being tardy or not present will negatively affect your standing at work. Your daily attendance and class engagement will enhance the overall classroom/work environment and aid in broadening both your own and other students'/colleagues' knowledge.

I will take attendance every day promptly at the beginning of class. If you have four unexcused absences, you will lose 5% of your final course grade. Each additional unexcused absence will dock 0.5% off your course grade. If your unexcused absences become excessive, you will be asked to withdraw from the class. Consider this your warning. I will not remind you of how many times you've been absent.

I realize there are, on occasion, unexpected and unavoidable circumstances that will cause you to be unable to attend class. I ask that you notify me as soon as possible of your absence; e-mail or in person is best. You should ask a classmate for what we did on that day(s) you miss. You are responsible for what is assigned. *Please note:* notifying me of why you were absent does not necessarily excuse your absence.

Excused Absences: If there are legitimate and verifiable circumstances for your absence (subpoenas, jury duty, religious observances, illness, bereavement for immediate family, and intercollegiate athletics), you may request an opportunity for make-up work. To do this you must provide written documentation to legitimize an excused absence immediately following the absence if not before.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM ME: committed attention to your individual voice and talents; a strong push in areas where I believe you can do better; my own long and tenacious experience as a working artist and teacher, the lessons of which I am happy to share; an abiding belief that if you work and stay open, you will learn and develop as a thinker, writer and citizen; a fair and direct communication style; a willingness to engage in creative problem solving; a deep love and respect for the material of this class, which I'm eager to share.

I look forward to all the ways you will amaze me this term. Unleash yourself and bring me your best work!

Grading Policy

You start this course at zero and earn a grade through accumulating points, earned by the work you do. If you show up, are an engaged attentive citizen, turn in all your work you'll do fine. Absences beyond the minimum, consistent lateness, and leaving a class in session show up as subtractions from your final points. If you don't turn in any of the required major drafts, you will fail. I do not like to accept late work. Please be on time with your assignments. If you are late with assignments, they will take longer to get graded and lose points.

NOTE!! All assignments must be complete in order to pass this course.

Grading Guide

Percentages

100-93 A	82-80 B-	69-67 D+
92-90 A-	79-77 C+	66-63 D
89-87 B+	76-73 C	62-60 D-
86-83 B	72-70 C-	59 or lower F

In a perfect world there would be no letter (or number) grades at all. This is not to say that I am making a claim for slacker assessments or shoddy knee-jerk opinions about the QUALITY of one's work. As you will soon find out, I offer quite a few informed judgments about the quality of work. My experience gives me a certain insight into what makes for effective or ineffective academic work, and I am willing to outline those expectations and to tell you why your assignments meet or fail to meet certain academic expectations. Yet, since our current system obliges me to evaluate the work you produce for this course with a letter grade, what is important for you to know about the grading scheme?

- Students must complete all of the work assigned in order to pass the course.
- Late work is undesirable and most certainly affects the final grade (because you are “skipping out” on the dialogue).
- Persistence trumps innate talents.
- Consistent and sustained effort trumps last-ditch effort.
- Typically, office visits (and visits to the Writing Center) help students to perform well in this class.
- I try hard to grade fairly, justly and with great attention to detail.
- I give important feedback to help students improve their work.
- Last, but certainly not least, I sincerely wish for every student to succeed.

SOU Academic Support/Disability Resources

To support students with disabilities in acquiring accessible books and materials, and in planning their study and time management strategies, SOU requires all professors to include a statement on Academic Support and Disability Resources on course syllabi. It is the policy of Southern Oregon University that no otherwise qualified person shall, solely by reason of disability, be denied access to, participation in, or benefits of any service, program, or activity operated by the University. Qualified persons shall receive reasonable accommodation/modification needed to ensure equal access to employment, educational opportunities, programs, and activities in the most appropriate, integrated setting, except when such accommodation creates undue hardship on the part of the provider. These policies are in compliance with

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other applicable federal and state regulations that prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.

If you are in need of support because of a documented disability (whether it be learning, mobility, psychiatric, health-related, or sensory) you may be eligible for academic or other accommodations through Disability Resources. Call Academic Support Programs at **(541) 552-6213** to schedule an appointment with Disability Resources. The Academic Support Programs office is located in the Stevenson Union, lower level. See the Disability Resources webpage at www.sou.edu/dr for more information. If you are already working with Disability Resources, make sure to request your accommodations through them for this course as quickly as possible to ensure that you have the best possible access.

Academic Honesty Statement and Code of Student Conduct

Students are expected to maintain academic integrity and honesty in completion of all work for this class. According to SOU's Student Code of Conduct: "Acts of academic misconduct involve the use or attempted use of any method that enables a student to misrepresent the quality or integrity of his or her academic work and are prohibited".

Such acts include, but are not limited to: copying from the work of another, and/or allowing another student to copy from one's own work; unauthorized use of materials during exams; intentional or unintentional failure to acknowledge the ideas or words of another that have been taken from any published or unpublished source; placing one's name on papers, reports, or other documents that are the work of another individual; submission of work resulting from inappropriate collaboration or assistance; submission of the same paper or project for separate courses without prior authorization by faculty members; and/or knowingly aiding in or inciting the academic dishonesty of another.

Any incident of academic dishonesty will be subject to disciplinary action(s) as outlined in SOU's Code of Student Conduct: http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/rules/oars_500/oar_573/573_076.html

In case of loss, theft, destruction or dispute over authorship, always retain a copy of any work you produce and submit for grades. Retain all written work that has been graded and handed back to you.

SOU Cares

SOU has a wide range of resources to help you succeed. Our faculty, staff, and administration are dedicated to providing you with the best possible support. The SOU Cares Report allows us to connect you with staff members who can assist with concerns, including financial, health, mental health, wellbeing, legal concerns, family concerns, harassment, assault, study skills, time management, etc. You are also welcome to use the SOU Cares Report to share concerns about yourself, a friend, or a classmate at <http://www.sou.edu/ssi>. These concerns can include reports related to academic integrity, harassment, bias, or assault. Reports related to sexual misconduct or sexual assault can be made anonymously or confidentially. Student Support and Intervention provides recourse for students through the Student Code of Conduct, Title IX, Affirmative Action, and other applicable policies, regulations, and laws.

Statement on Title IX and Mandatory Reporting

Federal law requires that employees of institutions of higher learning (faculty, staff and administrators) report to a Title IX officer any time they become aware that a student is a victim or perpetrator of gender-based bias, sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, or stalking. Further, Oregon law requires a mandatory report to law enforcement of any physical or emotional abuse

of a child or other protected person, including elders and people with disabilities, *or* when a child or other protected person is perceived to be in danger of physical or emotional abuse. If you are the victim of sexual or physical abuse and wish to make a confidential disclosure please use the confidential advising available at

<http://www.sou.edu/ssi/confidential-advisors.html>, or use Southern Oregon University's Anonymous Harassment, Violence, and Interpersonal Misconduct Reporting Form https://jfe.qualtrics.com/form/SV_7R7CCBciGNL473L

Disclaimer

I reserve the right to amend or modify this syllabus throughout the term to best serve the learning objectives of the course and the pace of the class.

Tentative Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

Week One **April 2:** Introductions. Syllabus. Ground Rules. In-class writing.

[**Read:** “We are shaped by the sound of wind, the slant of sunlight” Barry Lopez; “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” Excerpt from *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau. **Links provided on Moodle.**]

Bring: Tackle one or more of the following questions, following your own interests. If you’re so inclined, question the questions themselves. There are no right or wrong answers. Explore your thoughts in your nature journal. Come up with a couple of questions or ideas you would like to bring to the next class discussion. **Questions to consider:** What is nature literature? Why do people create it? Why should people read it? Who benefits from it? Whom (and/or what) does it leave out? Is “nature literature” a useful category? Does this literature make a difference to the landscapes, ecosystems, and phenomena that constitute its subjects? What is its relationship to literature that focuses on social, ethical, political, historical, psychological, philosophical, or cultural concerns? What are your goals in studying this subject?

April 4: Introduction to nature literature. Historical context of nature writing. Discussion of readings. Themes: natural history, sense of place, discovery, observation.

[**Read** pp. 1—58 in Williams’ *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*; Preface & “The Land of Little Rain” Mary Austin; “The Sense of Place” Wallace Stegner. **Links on Moodle**]

Week Two **April 9:** Observation. Sense of Place. In-class discussion & writing.

[**Read** “A Wind-storm in the Forests” John Muir & “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasure of an American Farmer” Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. **Links on Moodle**]

April 11: Writing the West & Early Nature Writing. In-class writing. Intro to Natural History Assignment.

[**Read** pp. 60—123, Williams’ *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* & Willa Cather’s “On the Divide”; “The Audubon Effect” Scott Russell Sanders. **Links on Moodle**]

Week Three **April 16:** Landscape in Fiction; Discussion & Writing.

[**Read** “The Marginal World” Rachel Carson; “The Judgment of Birds” Loren Eiseley; “He Sets Me in the Stream” David James Duncan]

Bring/Due hard copy of natural history assignment (**Due April 18th**)

April 18: Natural History & Eco-Fiction cont’d. Discussion & Writing. Natural History Assignment Due.

[**Read** pp. 124—229 in *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*. Explore appendices of the book as well.]

Week Four **April 23:** Discussion. Introduce close reading writing assignment.

[Read “Total Eclipse” Annie Dillard]

April 25: Discussion. Outdoor writing.

[Read Preface & pp.1—61 in *The Solace of Open Spaces*]

Week Five **April 30:** Discussion

[Read: “The Way to Rainy Mountain” N. Scott Momaday; “The Bats” Linda Hogan; “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” Leslie Marmon Silko
Bring/Due: Close reading assignment due to Moodle. **May 2nd!**]

May 2: Native Voices. Introduce final paper. Close Reading assignment due.

[Read 62—131 in *The Solace of Open Spaces*; Poems TBD & available on Moodle]

Week Six **May 7:** Discussion & Eco-poetics

[Read Poems TBD & available on Moodle]

May 9: Eco-poetics.

[Read pp. 1—79 in *The Home Place*]

Week Seven **May 14:** Writing About Home

[Read: “The Ecology of Magic” David Abram; “Coda: Wilderness Letter” Wallace Stegner; “The Phantom Limb” Ellen Meloy
Bring/Due: Final paper proposal due to Moodle on May 16th]

May 16: Film. Notions of Wilderness/Wildness. Philosophy of Nature. Introduce Film Writing Assignment.

[Read pp. 81—132 in *The Home Place*]

Week Eight **May 21:** Discussion & Writing.

[Read “Paradise Lost” Rick Bass; “The Case for Going Uncivilized” Barry Lopez; “Polemic: Industrial Tourism & The National Parks” Edward Abbey]

May 23: Eco-Activism/Ethics

[Read pp. 135—212 in *The Home Place*]

Week Nine **May 28:** NO CLASS. MEMORIAL DAY.

May 30: Annotated Bibliography Due.

[**Read:** “Joyas Voladoras” Brian Doyle; “Pea Madness” Amy Leach; “Ten Years, You Own It” Joni Tevis; & “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA” Jenny Price]

Week Ten

No classes this week as I will be in Vermont at the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers’ Conference. We will be conducting a few activities online to make up for the missed classes (TBD). These activities will be required and count toward your final grade. You will also be working on your final papers during this week. I will be available for questions via email or phone this week.

June 4 (Tentative): Answer three questions I will pose in Moodle forum about the readings. Minimum of five sentences for each response. Respond to two of your peers’ responses.

June 6 (Tentative): Choose one piece (fiction, nonfiction, or poetry) from Orionmagazine.org or Terrain.org. Read, provide a link to the class on the forum, and write a forum response (two to three paragraphs) on the Moodle forum. Respond to two of your peers’ responses.

FINAL

Monday, June 11, 2018, 1:00-3:00 p.m. Final paper due as hard copy at this time.