

JODIE MARTIRE explores the art of nature writing, which can serve as a counterweight to our modern industrialised lives.

# In the mood for nature

Nature writing is a broad genre that welcomes essayists, poets, fiction and non-fiction writers alike – and it’s experiencing something of a renaissance. Tracing its roots back to 19th century, nature writing or ‘literature of place’ encompasses natural history writing (like Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*), romantic poets such as William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and nature philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Today’s reader will find a diverse array of writings to inform, delight and act as a counterweight to our modern industrialised lives. Nature writers help us form a sense of place, offer us words to shape the loveliness of the world around us, and remind us how we fit into the environment which gives us life.

The book generally credited with

kick-starting modern-day nature writing is Annie Dillard’s 1974 work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a contemplative, charming memoir of daily life in rural Virginia, US. Sourced from Dillard’s journals, *Tinker Creek* has largely set the standard for the casual, worshipful tone that now characterises much of nature-writing essays and books.

American voices continue to dominate the field: readers might like to dip into the writings of Barry Lopez, with his reflective and sociological study of the far north in *Arctic Dreams*; conservationist Terry Tempest Williams, respected for her powerful yet beautiful eco-political writings on the American West; and Diane Ackerman, poet, science writer and author of *The Moon by Whale Light*, which is a stunning exploration of whales, bats, crocodilians and penguins. Also, Edward O. Wilson, a

Harvard-based scientist who advocated for interdisciplinary work between the sciences and the humanities in his work *Consilience*, and essayist and philosophy professor Kathleen Dean Moore in her book *Wild Comfort – The Solace of Nature* (see extract, right).

One anthology that showcases both Australian and North American writers is *A Place on Earth*, edited by prize-winning Australian poet Mark Tredinnick. Another collection, *Granta 102 (The New Nature Writing)*, is edgier and more international, stretching the concept of nature writing to include urban areas, architecture and human anatomy.

## Home-grown scribes

The genre’s big names may be North American, but Australia has a long tradition of ‘literature of place’ (many Australian writers prefer this term to



## ‘MORNING IN ROMERO CANYON’

In this short extract from her book *Wild Comfort*, **KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE** savours the sounds and sights of sunrise near a thawing creek.

**A**t first, the morning is flat as a sketch – sleeping bag laid out on a stone slab, narrow creek flowing from left to right, hillside filling most of the page. What texture there is seems to be drawn in lead pencil. Sound is flat and monochrome, too, the creek seeping steadily rock to rock. People call it white noise, but today it’s pale gray.

I boil creek water, pour a cup of tea, and sit cross-legged on sand, looking west. I know the sun will rise at my back. Under the weight of desert light, shadow will slowly sink down the mountainside in front of me. I hope it hurries. The morning is very, very cold.

I can figure out how long it will take for the sun to set at this latitude. When my hand is at arm’s length, pointing sideways, the width of each of my fingers is 15 minutes to sunset. The sun must also take just this long to rise, given the regularity of things. I lift my hand in front of the hill. Three fingers: 45 minutes before light will travel from the crest to the bottomland where I sit. I tuck my hands into my armpits, wishing I had remembered to bring gloves.

There is already a little bit of light tangled in the top of an ancient cottonwood tree upstream. Light had no sooner hit the tree than birds began to sing: I think I could close my eyes and track the sun by birdsong. I could close my eyes and track the time of day by the song of the creek too. It’s so cold at night that the snowfields at the head of the canyon freeze up and the flow of water slows and drops to a single tone, a cello maybe. When the sun strikes the snowfields, the creek will become all flutes and bells, fortissimo. I close my eyes and listen:

yellow-rumped warblers, the thrumming creek, and the cooing mourning dove, an overture so dependable you could set your watch by that soft sound, an hour before dawn.

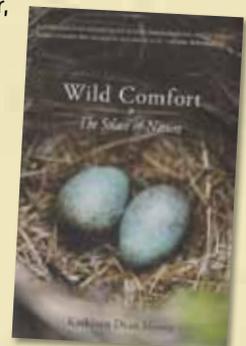
“There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature,” Rachel Carson wrote. “The assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.” I have never felt this so strongly as I do now, waiting for the sun to warm my back. The bottom may drop out of my life, what I trusted may fall away completely, leaving me astonished and shaken. But still, sticky leaves emerge from bud scales that curl off the tree as the sun crosses the sky. Darkness pools and drains away, and the curve of the new moon points to the place the sun will rise again. There is wild comfort in the cycles and the intersecting circles, the rotations and revolutions, the growing and ebbing of this beautiful and strangely trustworthy world. Kathleen Dean Moore is a writer, activist and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Oregon State University. This extract from *Wild Comfort*, © 2010 by Kathleen Dean Moore is reprinted by arrangement with Trumpeter Books, an imprint of Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, US. [www.shambhala.com](http://www.shambhala.com)



‘nature writing’). Novelists such as Tim Winton (*Dirt Music*) and Richard Flanagan (*Death of a River Guide*) are in some ways standing on the shoulders of Australian explorers, farmers and bushmen and women who wrote of their experiences from 1788 onward.

While American poets such as Mary Oliver (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry), Galway Kinnell and Gary Snyder are rightly recognised for their insightful works that explore human relationships with the earth, we have our own poetic traditions ranging from bush poetry (Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson), to Judith Wright’s collection *Birds*, Les Murray’s evocations of pastoral Australia, and John Kinsella’s deep connection to his native Western Australia.

Indigenous Australian writers demonstrate a different approach to nature writing. Some indigenous oral



culture has been transmitted as myths, songs and stories telling of Aboriginal relationships to country and the dreaming, as in the *Wonguri-Mandjigai Song*.

Lionel Fogarty writes poems as modern Aboriginal-English songs, while Lisa Belleair and Samuel Wagan Watson explore their surroundings in Melbourne and Brisbane respectively. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) rejected European romantic themes of nature in her poetry, in favour of practical, local outcomes – in one poem, she asks a lover to bring her tree grubs instead of birds, stars and heaven.

In contemporary times, Native American Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony*) and Australian Alexis Wright (*Carpentaria*) are novelists who write about indigenous country and people it with pressing

indigenous concerns.

And finally, one of the most inspiring and informative styles of nature writing is the garden journal or memoir. Early journals that have charmed generations are *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898) by the author of *The Enchanted April*, Elizabeth von Arnim – and Edith Holden's delightful *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*. Published as a facsimile of the original diary in 1906, *The Country Diary* is gorgeously illustrated with Holden's own watercolours of birds, plants and the Warwickshire countryside.

In more recent years, Barbara Kingsolver wrote *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a practical and loving journal of a year of self-sufficient gardening in North America's Appalachian Mountains, while Australian poet Kate Llewellyn made the genre her

own in 1987 with the wry, earthy bestseller *The Waterlily: A Blue Mountains Journal*.

There has been room here to only lightly touch on Western nature writing, which also forms a strong part of many cultures and literary traditions around the world.

With so many writers and styles of nature writing to explore, readers are spoilt for choice – and if you can't find a book that suits you, perhaps it's time to start a journal of your own gardening life?

For more information and connections to Australian nature writers, see the Watermark Literary Society, formed in 2003, which holds a literary muster every two years (the most recent in October 2013). See: [www.watermarkliterarysociety.asn.au/index.html](http://www.watermarkliterarysociety.asn.au/index.html) **OG**