

Prentiss & Wilkins, "Environmental and Nature Writing: A Writer's Guide and Anthology"

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Book Review

Prentiss, Sean & Joe Wilkins. *Environmental and Nature Writing: A Writer's Guide and Anthology*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

This new book by Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins will be a breath of fresh air for many educators. As the title suggests, *Environmental and Nature Writing: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* is a complete and self-contained course, in one volume, on reading and writing about the environment. According to the publisher, it is "a complete introduction to the art and craft of writing about the environment in a wide range of genres." It begins with a brief survey of the history of environmental writing and concludes with advice and resources for the writers who are ready to revise, submit, and publish their work.

As an all-in-one course, this book would be well suited for genre-specific creative writing workshops, or for undergraduate classes that focus on nature writing or ecocriticism. While its primary audience will probably be students and teachers of literature or writing (including journalism), its subject matter is probably broad enough to be applied to the social sciences, interdisciplinary programs, and ecology as well.

Environmental and Nature Writing is divided into three sections: Part I: An Introduction to Nature and Environmental Writing, Part II: The Craft of Nature and Environmental Writing, and Part III: Nature and Environmental Writing Anthology. The chapters in Parts I and II begin with vignettes (written by Prentiss and Wilkins) and references to relevant readings from the Anthology section, and then take the reader through free-writing activities, short but informative essays, exercises, and writing prompts. There are 12 chapters, which means the entire book, including writing exercises and readings, could fit nicely (and affordably!) into a 15-week semester.

Unlike many textbooks, this is a volume that will also be read and used outside of the formal classroom setting. An interested individual or a book club-type small group could use it as a self-directed course in environmental writing; it would be ideal curriculum for an adult education program, a summer camp, or a wilderness retreat centre. It could also be treated as a DIY crash course for anyone, in school or out, who wants to understand or try their hand at environmental writing. At just under 400 pages it is a hefty trade paperback, but *Environmental and Nature Writing* is much smaller than many of the literature anthologies out there: it will easily fit in a backpack for reading outdoors or on public transit.

Some of the subjects addressed in this book include the importance of research, fundamentals of argumentation, science writing, and calls to action. With chapter titles like "The Writer in Place," "A World Larger Than Ourselves," and "The Art of Activism," Prentiss and Wilkins do not

shy away from the social and ecological issues of our time. Literary terminology and theory share the pages with frank discussions of politics and environmental degradation. Every day the news provides us with startling (and sometimes depressing) reminders of the importance of this type of thinking and this type of education.

While it is difficult for me to find flaws in a book like this—because its interests and intentions are so closely aligned with my own—there are a couple of points that should be raised here. The book's Anthology section features only American writers. There are no offerings from Canada, the UK, Australia, or other nations with long histories of environmental and nature writing in English. There are also no international writers, in English or in translation. For all intents and purposes the book does what it sets out to do, and so in many cases the absence of other nations or nationalities will not be an issue; but literature and writing instructors looking for Canadian content (for example), will have to look elsewhere.

Furthermore, while each chapter refers conveniently to the writing included in the Nature and Environmental Writing Anthology section, the book provides no additional reading lists. For those who are new to environmental writing in general, and for those who would use this book as an undergraduate course text, further suggestions (and thematic or topical reading lists) would have been extremely helpful. With 200 pages of Creative Nonfiction, Fiction, and Poetry, the Anthology section is certainly impressive; but it features only recent and contemporary work and does not contain any of the foundational environmental writers that students should be exposed to (a list that would include Thoreau, Dillard, and many more). But perhaps this is asking too much of a single book. If it is used in a classroom setting, *Environmental and Nature Writing* could certainly be supplemented with other literature. Prentiss and Wilkins have already provided a great deal more than many other textbooks do.

I have critiqued this book's anthology section, but I would like to conclude on a more positive note. Put simply, and setting all objections aside, this anthology is a fantastic resource. It may not include Canadian or international authors, but it does provide a broad spectrum of fascinating and important voices nonetheless. There are pieces by Camille T. Dungy (editor of *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*), Juan Felipe Herrera (the first Latino Poet Laureate of the United States), and many others. The Biographies list at the back of the book contains dozens of award-winning poets, essayists, fiction and nonfiction writers. And while I maintain that every beginning reader and student should be exposed to the classics of the nature and environmental genres—and numerous other literature teachers and professors who I have spoken to agree—those essential works have already been published in numerous editions and anthologies; additionally, many are accessible online. But how is a reader to find out about what is being written about the environment right now? The anthology in *Environmental and Nature Writing* is a great place to start.

Even if one does not intend to teach or enroll in a class on environmental writing, this is definitely a worthwhile book for the desk or library. This is the book for anyone who is hoping to familiarize (or reacquaint) themselves with the vibrant and increasingly important literary field of nature and environmental writing—and for anyone who is thinking about joining in the conversation.

Sean Prentiss teaches at Norwich University, in Vermont. He is author of *Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave* (2015), which won the National Outdoor Book Award for Biography/History, and co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* (2014).

Joe Wilkins teaches at Linfield College, in Oregon. His poetry collection *When We Were Birds* (2016) was a finalist for the Miller Williams Poetry Prize and his memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry* (2012) won the GLCA New Writers Award for non-fiction.

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