

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 18, 2014 at 2:40pm

What words can do with nature

by Donna Schaper

Eco Catholic

Author Barry Lopez has an encyclopedia of geography. It includes an explanation of the gorge, the rim, the clearing and a thousand other descriptions of places and spaces and geos.

He gives a name tag to the land and its parts, but he's hardly the only one engaged in such writing.

Amy Leach has written *Things that Are*. It is about reindeers, many of whom I have never met. Yes, whom.

Andrew Isenberg has written the *Destruction of the Bison*, whom I also never met. If there is any truth to the vegan's claim that she would eat nothing with a face, or the Gaia claim that earth is alive, reindeers and bison should be allowed more, not less, personal grammatical structures.

Alan Weisman has written *The World Without Us*, a story about persons being gone, leaving small growths coming out of the top of skyscrapers. All that is left is plastic and radiation. I am thinking cell phone batteries survive, too. His book is spurred by the question, how colossal or recoverable is our damage? Like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, it looks at what we have already done. Who can forget that Carson opens her book with a silent morning because the birds are gone to the pesticides?

In *Lucy*, Novelist Jamaica Kincaid objects to daffodils, because they are not native to her place, and tells a whole anti-colonial story through something yellow.

Just because you write about nature doesn't mean you name it or know it. The virgin wilderness that John Muir wrote of is a destructive fantasy, erasing native people and acting like nature belongs to only one group. Muir sets up a nature-culture divide that has turned savages into nobility and "nobility" into savages.

Wendell Berry understands: It is easy to turn nature writing into a gymnasium for the rich. "I just love nature." But good nature writing puts the human in her proper place.

Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* argues that the Aurora Borealis is the human destination. I love the idea of dying to become a star. So do the political prisoners in the Chilean high desert concentration camps: They tell us that only the night stars reminded them, amidst torture, that they were still living.

Consider also Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." One of the major actors in that fictional dream is the willow tree. In the first act, the tree is barren. In the second, the willow tree has sprouted four or five leaves. Most people who really see the play are astonished at the quiet hope, lifted out of the quiet despair, which is the play's words and pictures. Nature lifts us, in spirit, whether she or he or it intends to or not.

You don't have to be a great writer to enjoy words. Consider words for snow: flurry, sleet, hail, freezing rain, wintry mix. Or think about ice and how powerful it looks on the Hudson River right now, stacked up, like Legos that won't fit together. Or think of Jennifer Murwin describing ice as the "groom crushing the glass under his feet." Or in her words again, "Ice had accumulated on the doorknob like a coat of nail polish, slick and clear and thick."

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Verlyn Klinkenbourg wrote for decades in *The New York Times* about a barn full of chickens upstate. You and I write about nature every time we emit a sentence, whether we know it or not.

Nature is not just for English majors or grammaticians: It's for all of us.

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