

## How to Be a Female Nature Writer

by Joan Maloof

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*The author of this essay, Joan Maloof, an expert on old growth forests, will visit ETSU Wednesday March 21, 2018 for two public events:*

- 1. 1:40-3pm -- Guided walk and talk -- "University Woods: An Old-Growth Forest on the ETSU Campus." Starting at the University Woods Gazebo, which is at the end of parking lot #13, off of Southwest Avenue.*
  - 2. 7-8:30 pm -- Presentation and discussion -- "Old-Growth Forests: What They Are, Where They Are, and Why They Matter." In The Tennessee Room, on the 3rd floor of the ETSU Culp Center.*
- For info contact Dr. Kevin O'Donnell, Director of the Environmental Studies minor, [odonnell@etsu.edu](mailto:odonnell@etsu.edu).*

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6. Tell a story and put yourself in it
7. Don't fear the science
8. Be humbled by complexity
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### 1. *Get up, go out*

Men are expected to be brave and to explore. Women should stay safely protected in the company of others, indoors if at all possible. Although this stereotype is gradually weakening, I think it still exists to some degree in most cultures. Which of these behavior patterns do you think will produce the best nature writers? For a woman to write about nature, then, she must appropriate some so-called male behaviors. Not only must she be brave enough to explore on her own, but more difficult still, she must be brave enough to dismiss the expectations of her culture.

Both John Muir and Henry David Thoreau grew up wandering alone in the woods, and they continued to roam alone and to write about their roamings. This solo roaming takes bravery, even for the statistically larger sex of our species. Honestly, anything could happen out there, to anyone, and having a companion would in many cases increase the chances of survival. But, as any writer, musician or painter can tell you, being alone

nurtures creativity. So the brave men frequently set out alone and the result is that some of the best known early American nature writing was done by men.

To be a female nature writer you must shake off the forces that would keep you safe in the company of others. You must be brave, you must explore. William Stafford wrote a poem about a young girl just discovering this way of being, and its rewards. What makes Stafford's poem exciting is that it is about a *girl* who goes into the woods alone. This adds tension. If it had been a young boy we would have shrugged; everyone is used to the idea of a young boy exploring the woods. But Millicent explored the woods on her own, without permission, and there she found the heart of the world:

*The Day Millicent Found the World*

Every morning Millicent ventured farther  
into the woods. At first she stayed  
near light, the edge where the bushes grew, where  
her way back appeared in glimpses among  
dark trunks behind her. Then by farther paths  
or openings where giant pines had fallen  
she explored ever deeper into  
the interior, till one day she stood under a great  
dome among columns, the heart of the forest, and knew:  
Lost. She had achieved a mysterious world  
where any direction would yield only surprise.

And now not only the giant trees were strange  
but the ground at her feet had a velvet nearness;  
intricate lines on bark wove messages all

around her. Long strokes of golden sunlight  
shifted over her feet and hands. She felt  
caught up and breathing in a great powerful embrace.  
A birdcall wandered forth at leisurely intervals  
from an opening on her right: “Come away, Come away.”  
Never before had she let herself realize  
that she was part of the world and that it would follow  
wherever she went. She was part of its breath.

Aunt Dolbee called her back that time, a high  
voice tapering faintly among the farthest trees,  
“Milli-cent! Milli-cent!” And that time she returned,  
but slowly, her dress fluttering along pressing  
back branches, her feet stirring up the dark smell  
of moss, and her face floating forward, a stranger’s  
face now, with a new depth in it, into the light.<sup>1</sup>

I am Millicent. I mean, I have gone into the woods alone too. If you are a woman and you try this you will probably experience raised eyebrows and concern (whether feigned or real). “Aren’t you afraid?” they will ask. “What if something happens?” You can tell that they’d prefer, like Aunt Dolbee, that you just stay home and do needlepoint. You will find that this reaction is almost universal: young or old, male or female; almost no one will like the idea of you going off alone. My daughter is just as dubious as my husband, or my parents, or my friends.

You must be brave, or some would say callous, enough that the concerns of others are of no concern to you. Ask yourself if they are really afraid for your physical safety, or if deep in their unconscious they aren’t perhaps

more afraid that you will lose yourself and return with a stranger's face reflecting a new depth. It is threatening when those close to us change and grow. Don't let someone else's fear stop you. Don't be nice enough to stay home. If you do you will have nothing to write about.

Getting up and going out is also about having ideas and following through. Paul Krafel writes about watching vultures circle around a particular cliff at dawn. For weeks he had been watching the spectacle from a distance, but then:

*I hiked to the top of that cliff one morning so I could look straight down onto the backs of a hundred vultures rising toward me. I felt the sunrise's invisible magic on the air; a warm updraft blew against my face. As the vultures rose by me a few feet away, I heard them. They made no call. I heard simply the sound of six feet of wing cutting through the air—a gentle but constant breezy swoosh. And now I know that even on the stillest desert afternoon, the soaring vulture hears not the silence but the constant gentle sound of its wings.<sup>2</sup>*

He doesn't mention that he had to set the alarm for five a.m. to get to the top of the cliff in time for sunrise. He doesn't mention the tasks left undone at home, or done by others, so he could make his trek. All we know is that he had an idea and he got up and followed through. Now he has a story.

Some people will be suspicious. They will assume that if you are going off alone it is to meet secretly with someone else. They will suspect that sex must somehow be involved. And, honestly, there is something archetypically sexy about a woman going into the wilds alone. Perhaps it shows that she is the type of woman who breaks rules; or could it be her very vulnerability that is somehow thrilling? Even in Stafford's poem about an innocent young girl there are numerous sexual undertones: the *velvet nearness*, the *long strokes*, the *powerful embrace*. This is nature as lover.

## 2. Love nature

To be an effective nature writer one must love the wild things and feel that they are loving back. This planet is wildly beautiful. You believe that already or you would never consider making it the central character

in your writing. Few pleasures in this life can compare with those moments when what comes through your eyes and your nose and your ears and your skin create an ecstatic hum in the brain's neurons. E. O. Wilson calls this pleasure *biophilia*, literally life-love.<sup>3</sup> The hum of life creates joy because we have literally evolved in life's embrace. We are infants in love with our mother's face.

Now write about what *that* feels like. Why do people line up for hours to see panda cubs? Why do travelers spend great sums of money to go whale watching? Why does waterfront real estate command such high sums? We are in love. Honor that. Write about it.

### 3. *Sit down, write words*

The most challenging part about nature writing is that it alternates active, adventurous, body-based pursuits with sedentary, meticulous, intellectual habits. People are usually good at one or the other, but hardly anyone is good at both. And even if you can do both necessary duties, there is the question of how much time to devote to each one. I no longer have the exact quote, but Rick Bass wrote something that I repeat as a kind of mantra: you've got to know when to sit down at your desk, and when to get up from it.

You can't be a nature writer if you get up and go out *all* the time, because eventually you will have to sit down and put words on paper. As Anne Lamott advises, "You simply keep putting down one damn word after the other, as you hear them, as they come to you."<sup>4</sup> But the words won't come unless you sit down in silence and wait for them. Writing is all about words and silence is the space where words appear. Just as a painter does not begin a painting without a blank canvas, you will not feel the magic of the words bubbling up from nowhere unless you give them a quiet pool in which to rise. No one taught me this in school; our culture seems to place no value in silence. If you want to write, but you don't know what words to use, just be silent for a time. The words will come.

Unfortunately for you, the world won't want you to sit down in silence waiting for words to come. The pets will want attention, your phone will ring, the bathroom faucet will drip. But if you never sit down with pencil to

paper or fingers to keyboard you will never be a writer, no matter how adventurous you are, or what great thoughts you think.

Many people have assumed that the actual sitting down part is much harder for women because of *the children* or *the domestic chores*. I do think it's more difficult for women, but not for those reasons. Every person on Earth has several hundred good reasons not to sit down and write. The trick is being able to leave tasks left undone without feeling guilt. I think the average woman is just more susceptible to self-imposed guilt than the average man.

Some people hesitate; they do not sit down to begin writing because they have no idea what they will write. This is normal and it is nothing to be afraid of. Here is what I would say to them: *something is more important to you this very day than it has ever been in your life*. Now ask yourself what that one thing is. It doesn't have to be big or important; it could at first seem very small and insignificant. It could be the sight of the first woolly bear caterpillar of the year, or the splinter you just got in your finger, or the vultures flying in the distance, it doesn't matter. On this day you feel differently about vultures or splinters or woolly bears than you have ever felt before. So that is where you will begin. Of course you probably still don't know what woolly bears have to do with anything, but when you begin writing you will find out. And that's when writing makes your heart sing—when the thing that was there all along, but hidden, shows itself to you. Sometimes you have to stop and stare out into space, pretend you're not watching, to coax it out a bit. Finally you get a glimpse of truth, or that moment's truth anyway, and the words rush and tumble so quickly that you must get them quickly on paper before they disappear. Joy! You have captured a likeness of the secretive beast. The Chinese poet Lu Chi says, "Each artist has his own way to magic."<sup>5</sup> This is mine.

#### 4. *Find your own fresh voice*

There is a section in Henry David Thoreau's essay, *The Succession of Forest Trees* that I simply adore: *See how artfully the seed of a cherry is placed in order that a bird may be compelled to transport it,—in the very midst of a tempting pericarp, so that the creature that must devour this must commonly take the stone*

*also into its mouth or bill. If you ever ate a cherry, and did not make two bites of it, you must have perceived it,—right in the centre of the luscious morsel, a large earthy residuum left on the tongue.*<sup>6</sup>

It continues so brilliantly that I can barely bring myself to stop, but this much at least gets the point across. And the point is that as perfectly beautiful as this is, it sounds nothing at all like contemporary nature writing. If you model your nature writing on Thoreau—the most well known nature writer in America—you will be obsolete before you begin. Literature has changed. You must still get up and go out, you must still love nature, you must still sit down and write, but the way you write must be your own fresh voice.

I once attended a seminar where a publishing agent was supposed to be sharing the real, inside story about the publishing business. She flatly stated that she didn't think nature writing would ever sell big. "But what about Rachel Carson?" the audience of female nature writers almost blurted in unison.

"Yes," said the agent, "but you know, I was looking at one of her books the other day, and if she were writing now I'm not sure she would be picked up by a publisher."

*Shocked and dismayed* is the sort of expression a good writer is not supposed to use, but it expresses the sentiment of that audience exactly. Of course I didn't want to believe the agent either, but I tried to be open minded enough to consider what she had said. I have a copy of *Silent Spring* and, admittedly, I have never read it from cover to cover. I tried again, but I didn't make it through this time either. If I were the acquisitions editor at a press would I push it forward? Perhaps not. Not now. Her writing was as important as it was because of when it was. But literature changes, and if you write like Carson today you probably won't be able to quit your day job and buy a house in Maine as she did. But that doesn't mean you have to stop writing. Like the moths and the finches, writing evolves.

5. *Tell a story and put yourself in it*

After my book about trees was published,<sup>7</sup> people would ask me about *other* tree books. “Have you read *Tree: a Life Story?*”<sup>8</sup> someone asked. No, I hadn’t. But soon I had my library copy in hand. Faculty are allowed to keep books from the university library for almost a year. Some books get inhaled the moment I get them home and returned a few days later, but *Tree* kept gathering dust under my bed. Some evenings I would wipe it off and start reading again, but before long I would drift off to sleep, and the next day I didn’t feel compelled to reach for it again. There’s no doubt the book was well researched—it had many more facts than my volume—but there was no person telling the story. There was not even a tree telling the story. There was just this disembodied narrator who never seemed to get emotional about anything. I didn’t want to be seated next to that narrator at a dinner party. I just knew that if I was seated next to him I would embarrass myself by yawning into my port. So smart, but . . . I want to sit next to Annie Dillard instead. When she tells a story she is right there in it:

*Someday, I had been telling myself for weeks, someday a muskrat is going to swim right through that channel in the cattails, and I am going to see it. That is precisely what happened. I looked up into the channel for a muskrat, and there it came, swimming right toward me. . . . I could just look and look. . . . I felt such a rush of pure energy I thought I would not need to breathe for days.*<sup>9</sup>

Now I’ve seen plenty of muskrats, and I’ve never reacted in quite that way, but suddenly I want to go hiking with this woman. I don’t want to leave her side. I’m wide awake and I don’t think it’s the chocolate truffle I just ate.

Women are so used to being in their complicated bodies that it naturally spills over into more embodied writing. This is one sphere in which we have an advantage. Before you object to my sexism, however, I want to point out that there are boring writers of both sexes, and some male writers are so present in their writing that I am in love with them even before I get the dinner invitation. Richard Nelson, for example:



*The doe is now ten feet from me. She never pauses or looks away. Her feet punch down mechanically into the snow, coming closer and closer, until they are less than a yard from my own. Then she stops, stretches her neck calmly toward me, and lifts her nose.*

*There is not the slightest question in my mind, as if this was sure to happen and I have known all along exactly what to do. I slowly raise my hand and reach out.*

*And my fingers touch the soft, dry, gently needling fur on top of the deer's head, and press down the living warmth of the flesh underneath.*

*She makes no move and shows no fear, but I can feel the flaming strength and tension that flow in her wild body like no other animal I have touched. Time expands and I am suspended in the clear reality of the moment.<sup>10</sup>*

I am swooning. There is no doubt that he is in this perfect story.

## 6. *Don't fear the science*

Unless you are writing a field guide or a text book, you will need to have a story. Of course you already have one that no one else has—*your* story. But if you've already fully told that story (which is, of course, impossible) then you'll have to tell another story. And this is the biggest reason you should embrace science: it uncovers wonderful stories.

By now you have heard of the lovely symbiosis between flowers and bees—the bees come to flowers for nectar and unwittingly assist the flowers in sexual reproduction. But unless you've been reading the science journals you probably don't know about the symbiosis between a certain wasp and a certain virus. (Hint: your readers probably haven't been reading science journals either so this story will be new to them too.) Neither wasp nor virus can reproduce without the other, their DNA is literally entwined. The wasp builds the virus inside her ovaries alongside her eggs. Her eggs are destined to be inserted into a soft caterpillar where the little larvae that hatch from the eggs can use the caterpillar's body as a sort of nutritious pâté. When the larvae

mature they hatch from the caterpillar's body and fly away carrying the DNA for the next generation of virus particles. But what does the virus do for the wasp? Without the virus the caterpillar's immune system would react to the foreign wasp eggs and kill them. But when the virus enters the caterpillar with the eggs the caterpillar's immune system will focus on the virus and ignore the eggs. The virus is destroyed and literally gives up its life for the sake of the little wasp eggs. But inside the eggs, deep inside the ovaries of the developing female wasps, is the genetic code for the next generation of viral particles. If the wasps live to fly, so will the virus.<sup>11</sup>

See? Science isn't boring at all. There are all these wonderful scientists working very hard in their laboratories just to uncover stories for you. And in the strange way that culture and writing works together, the very people who uncover these wonderful stories are encouraged to print them places where the typical nature lover will never get to read them. Not only that, but they are encouraged to write the stories in the driest way possible. They are not *allowed* to place themselves in the story. It took them years to figure out what was happening, but you're the one that gets to write: "Holy God in heaven, how did something so amazingly complex ever come to be? And what more is there that we have no idea of yet?"

Historically, women have not been as active in the sciences as men, but that is changing quickly. In the University where I teach, proportionally more women than men go on to graduate school in the sciences.

### *7. Be humbled by complexity*

Humans tend to get a little puffed out about how smart they are. We have invented amazing things. We have come to understand the physical world in ways that were inconceivable just a few hundred years ago. But the comings and goings of living things, on just a single acre of land, are still too complex for our most sophisticated computer programs to model. There are just too many variables, and despite the diligent work of many scientists, we still lack an understanding of many basic natural events. There are more unknowns in any natural environment than there are knowns. For instance, on the piece of Earth where I have been living for twenty years the dragonflies appear every June. The population of dragonflies gets steadily larger until

September, when the population begins to shrink. But this year, *this year*, one year out of twenty, there were more dragonflies than anyone had ever seen. Every cornstalk had a dragonfly perched atop it. Why, just this year, were there so many dragonflies? Here is the truth: no one knows. And what effects will that population explosion of dragonflies have on next year's flora and fauna? Another truth: no one knows. We can deny these truths by insisting that someone, somewhere, must know. Or we can practice that trait so rare in humans: humility.

It is when humans ignore humility, and pretend that they understand everything, that unexpected complications arise to teach the hard lesson of humility once again. Take, for example, what happened in 1955. Humans had invented a chemical called DDT that could kill mosquitoes. In Borneo mosquitoes spread deadly malaria, so the World Health Organization sprayed DDT over the tropical island. The incidence of malaria was reduced, but soon the villager's thatched roofs caved in. It turns out that a caterpillar that feeds on the thatch was normally kept in check by a parasitic wasp, but the DDT killed the wasps along with the mosquitoes. No one predicted this. Nor did they predict that the insecticide coated insects would be eaten by lizards that would in turn be eaten by cats. And, likewise, no one predicted that the death of the cats, from DDT, would lead to a population explosion of plague carrying rats. Understandably, the World Health Organization didn't want to publish much about this debacle. But you can. Humility comes more easily to the powerless, and females have historically had less power, at least financially and politically, than males. So perhaps we have an advantage here. It was a humble child, after all, who was not afraid to say that the emperor wore no clothes. Be the voice that tells us what we don't know; help humble us.

#### 8. *Read a lot, but don't try to read everything*

I probably don't have to advise you to read a lot, because if you have read this far it is likely that you are one of those under the spell of the sensuous shapes we call letters. Reading brings you great pleasure, and that is a good thing. But the words of others are like feathers—with the right number of them you can soar to unexpected heights, but with an excess it is difficult to get off the ground. If you really want to be a writer, at

some point you must stop reading and start writing. Many would-be writers have a fear of writing something that has already been written, so they feel compelled to read that next book, just to make sure that it isn't the one they wanted to write. But you know what? It isn't. The book you are reading now is amazing, and it contains many wonderful things, but it doesn't say them exactly like you'd say them. And even if *your* book is out there somewhere, so what. In 2005 four different books were published about the art and science of birdsong. All of them seem to be selling well. Those authors did not let the fear of redundancy stop them. We can use more than one book about everything. Realize that you can't read everything and only then start writing, for there is no end to the words streaming out of our culture. If you want to write you must jump into the water, be a part of the stream.

Men are perhaps at an advantage here with their bravery and 'devil-may-care' attitude. (Note that the birdsong books were all by men.) But we can do it too. With a bit of prodding we can leap from the high dive with the rest of them.

### *9. Try to save the world*

Many women find that nurturing comes naturally to them, and this planet is in serious need of nurturing. Nature is not just beautiful and complex, it is our very lifeblood. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the thoughts we think. We tend to forget this if we are not reminded—and apparently we are not reminded enough. The result of our ignorance is tainting the blood of our newborns: babies are born with mercury and jet fuel additives in their veins. The coral reefs are dying bit by bit, day by day. The butterflies are sprayed with insecticide, from planes. This is real. And this is why Robert Pyle says, “nature writing must be more than an excuse for spending time pleasantly.”<sup>12</sup> It is important work, and it deserves every ounce of your skill. Next to loving each other, I think that trying to save some of this beautiful, complex, joyful, place is the most important work there is. What hope have we if our source of nourishment and creativity runs dry? Making our interconnectedness and our fragility palpable is a noble calling.

Millicent got up, she went out, and she obviously loves nature. She is off to a good start. I think she'll make a fine nature writer.

## Notes

1. William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 1999), 23-24. Reprinted with permission.
2. Paul Krafel, *Seeing Nature: Deliberate Encounters with the Visible World* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 1999) 36.
3. E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
4. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) 236.
5. Lu Chi, "Rhymeprose on Literature," trans. by Achilles Fang, *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 2003) 183.
6. Henry David Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees," *Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, reprint edition, 1989) 76.
7. Joan Maloof, *Teaching the Trees: Lessons from the Forest* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).
8. David Suzuki and Wayne Grady, *Tree: a Life Story* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2004).
9. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974) 192.
10. Richard Nelson, *The Island Within* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 274-75.
11. David Shiga, "Parasitoid Wasps use Viruses as a Weapon," *Science News* 167 (2005): 136-37.
12. Robert Michael Pyle, *Walking the High Ridge: Life as a Field Trip* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000) 113.

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