Becoming Nature: Animals, Places + People in Literature

School of English Evening Lecture Series

‘Introduction to Series + Beckett’s Birds’

Dr Julie Bates
Becoming Nature: Animals, Places + People in Literature

*Trinity School of English, Evening Lecture Series*

21 January: ‘Beckett’s Birds’ and introduction to lecture series (Julie Bates)


04 February: “‘The Worms Are Coming Up the Stairs!’: Eco-Horror in 1970s American Cinema’ (Bernice Murphy)

11 February: ‘Climate and the Emergency: the wartime flood narrative in T.H. White’s The Elephant and the Kangaroo’ (Eve Patten)

18 February: ‘Creatures great and small in Edward Topsell’s Histories of Serpents and Four-Footed Beasts’ (Ema Vyroubalová)

25 February: ‘Nature, Knowledge, and the Fall in Donne’s Anniversaries’ (Mark Sweetnam)

10 March: ‘The Sublime: Edmund Burke, Cork, and God’ (Jarlath Killeen)

24 March: ‘John McGahern and the alternative life of the farm’ (Nicholas Grene)

31 March: ‘Environmental Picturebooks for Children’ (Sinéad Moriarty)

07 April: ‘Canyons and Native-American Traces in Zane Gray’s Riders on the Purple Sage’ (Dara Downey)

For dates and more information please visit: [ww.tcd.ie/owc](http://ww.tcd.ie/owc) or email: wilde@tcd.ie
Introduction to Lecture Series
LANDMARKS
ROBERT MACFARLANE

ROBERT MACFARLANE
UNDERLAND
A DEEP TIME JOURNEY

ROBERT MACFARLANE
THE WILD PLACES

ROBERT MACFARLANE
MOUNTAINS OF THE MIND

ROBERT MACFARLANE
THE OLD WAYS
A JOURNEY ON FOOT
The danger of this writing style is that there will be an awful lot of ‘I’. If there is a lot of ‘I’ ... then it won’t be the wild places we behold, but the author. We see him swimming, climbing, looking, feeling, hearing, responding, being sensitive, and because almost no one else speaks, this begins to feel like an appropriation, as if the land has been taken from us and offered back, in a different language and tone and attitude. Because it’s land we’re talking about, this leads to an unfortunate sense that we’re in the company, however engaging, of another ‘owner’, or if not an owner, certainly a single mediator.

‘My sleepings-out, in cups and dips of rock and earth and snow; this was the habit of the hare. But the pull to the high ground, to the summits and ridges, to look down upon the land, this was in mimicry of the hawk.’

The author is everywhere, north, south, east and west. High and low. He is both hawk and hare.

I wake, or waakken, as it is in Old Norse, or Njórs.

The sunlight strikes my eyes with all the force of a sheep’s bladder hurled against a brick wall by a Morris Man in the Peak District performing an ancient jig, Ye Olde Plum Tree.

I feel the call of nature, demanding to be answered. Trickles turn to torrent and back again to trickle. I experience an intense feeling of oneness with what the Inuit call the splassen that surprises me with its force.

Placing my right hand on the bannister, I steel myself to take the journey down, down, down to the kitchen belowwe. “When I die, I would like to be reborn as a bannister,” I think, “so that I might help travellers traverse the stairs that confront them.”

Fear squeezes my heart. Just fourteen steps, so simple for others. But, as a writer, I am compelled to take them in alphabetical order—eight, eleven, five, four, fourteen, nine, one, seven, six, ten, thirteen, three, twelve, two. This makes my downward progress, leap on giant leap, doubly hazardous: one slip and I could be pitched headlong into a limless future.

ROBERT MACFARLANE

leaf blown hither and thither on the windyskar hotspers in an ancient Saxon settlement high in the Cairngorms.

Early morn, late spring: milk from the cow, skimmmed semily, poured plangently o’er puffs of sugar; coffee roasted over fire of the ancient gods, in the manner of the Hokikoki tribe of South Eastern Indonesia, as sharp as a long-handled scythe; across the airwaves, like a

who was in the Royal Navy for some years before venturing into the marmalade and jam trades, and remains a remarkable poet—on my toast and, while doing so, realise with a jolt that I am unconsciously echoing the manner in which, in the fourth century BC, a woman’s corpse was prepared for burial in Thessaly by placing a coin on her lips, there to pay the ferryman who would carry her towards the realm of death. Marmalade: a coin: lips. Each one of us is his own ferryman.

I take time to reflect on the nature of marmalade, and death. We spread marmalade on toast with a frequency that is, by its very nature, disarming; but is it not high time we reversed the procedure, or prokkedorrr—and spread toast on marmalade? It is only by changing our habits, and shooting our bronze arrows of hope at all such barnacled procedures, that mankind can ever hope to reverse our drive—driv—towards planetary extinction and, by doing so, find some form of salvation, however sticky to the touch.

Before we set off for skwool, I embark on a quest for the car keys or, as we call them, the keys to the car, in the kitchen drawer. I plunge my hand in, madly, wantonly, cravenly,
The climate emergency and the political crisis in which we are now trying to find our way, and which we are anxious to oppose by saving the world have not come out of nowhere. We often forget that they are not just the result of a twist of fate or destiny, but of some very specific moves and decisions—economic, social, and to do with world outlook (including religious ones). Greed, failure to respect nature, selfishness, lack of imagination, endless rivalry and lack of responsibility have reduced the world to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed. That is why I believe I must tell stories as if the world were a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it.

Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Prize Lecture (2018 laureate)


Kathleen Jamie, short film featuring her reading from her essay ‘The Hvalsalen’ in her 2012 book Sightlines: https://youtu.be/igRFy8fdDks


Thom Van Dooren, ‘Making Worlds with Crows’ ongoing project: https://thomvandooren.org/encountering-crows-project/

Beckett’s Birds
Visited by partridges now daily, about midday. Queer birds. They hop, listen, hop, listen, never seem to eat.

Beckett, letter to Pamela Mitchell, March 1955
It is against Ussy’s funerary silence and sobriety that the sight and sound of birds – always so dear to Beckett – stand out, if at times they also do so paradoxically, as when he writes: ‘Everything sopping wet under a black sky. Only bright spot a blackbird.’ In the ‘Fizzle’ he writes four years later, ‘Au loin un oiseau’ (‘Afar a Bird’), a bird makes a welcome appearance, reminder as it is of a world beyond the seeking-sought self - birds are forever other and elsewhere than the human. It is with something approaching schoolmasterly thoroughness that he sends the roll-call, to his cousin the musician John Beckett: ‘Back yesterday from Ussy. Larks & cuckoos satisfactory. Swallows few. Nightingales in the copse behind the house.’

Molloy (Minuit, 1951; Grove, 1955)

Malone meurt (Minuit, 1951; Grove, 1956)

L’Innommable (Minuit, 1953; Grove, 1958)
From an Abandoned Work, 1957

Happy Days, 1960-61

Rough for Theatre II, 1958-60
My birds had not been killed. They were wild birds . . . I tried to understand their language better. Without having recourse to mine. They were the longest, loveliest days of all the year. I lived in the garden. I have spoken of a voice telling me things, I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted.
Sapo loved nature, took an interest in animals and plants and willingly raised his eyes to the sky, day and night. But he did not know how to look at all these things, the looks he rained upon them taught him nothing about them. He confused the birds with one another, and the trees, and could not tell one crop from another crop.
But he loved the flight of the hawk and could distinguish it from all others. He would stand rapt, gazing at the long pernings, the quivering poise, the wings lifted for the plummet drop, the wild reascent, fascinated by such extremes of need, of pride, of patience and solitude.
Birds with my piercing sight I have seen flying so high, so far, that they seemed at rest, then the next minute they were all about me, crows have done this. Ducks are perhaps the worst, to be suddenly stamping and stumbling in the midst of ducks, or hens, any class of poultry, few things are worse.
Rosaleen Linehan in *Happy Days*, dir. Patricia Rozema, Beckett on Film (2002)