



Literature Gone Green: Daryl Farmer on Ecocriticism
Tyler Heath

Dr. Daryl Farmer received his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Contemporary Literature from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who also granted his M.A. in Creative Writing. He is a graduate of the Rocky Mountain School of Photography. Born in Colorado Springs, Farmer developed an interest in nature at a young age. His debut book: *Bicycling Beyond the Divide: Two Journeys Into the West*, demonstrates his desire to explore the lands of America. Farmer puts himself at the mercy of nature and culture, an observer of the ever-changing landscape, alongside the ever-changing self. Barnes and Noble chose *Bicycling Beyond the Divide* for a Discover Great New Writers Award. Farmer has also published pieces within multiple literary journals, including: *The Fourth Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Isotope*, and *Quarter After Eight*. His essay "Like a Haggard Ghost: A San Francisco Journal," originally published in *Paddlefish*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in non-fiction. Farmer teaches non-fiction and is the faculty advisor for *HUMID*, the undergraduate literary journal, at Stephen F. Austin State University.

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Interview:

As a scholar of ecocriticism, what do you feel are the most significant points one should understand about the subject? How do you suggest one goes about the study of ecocriticism? What resources are available on this literary topic?

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Often it's associated with nature writers such as Thoreau, Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams. But it's also looking at how natural settings are represented in literary works. This can be ways in which environment affects plot and character, how nature is used as metaphor, or how characters respond to "place" in literary works. I think it's important to say that it's not only about rural or wilderness settings. An environment of asphalt and concrete can also invite an ecocritical response. Also, how writers respond to environmental crisis. The best way to go about the study of ecocriticism is to look closely at the role setting plays in literature. To some extent this has to do with regionalism—what makes an East Texas story different from a Nebraska story different from an Alaska story? One resource of this subject is the book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The professional organization for ecocrit is ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and their website is www.asle.org.

You talk of regionalism as a defining characteristic of an environment. Does environment have more to do with the physical appearance, or does its form take shape more so from the daily routines, language, and culture of its people? Would it be possible to write of an environment strictly based on those that live within it rather than its concrete features?

I think that there is a reciprocal relationship between natural environment and human culture, but this relationship begins in the natural world. But it's not just the "physical appearance" of the landscapes, which suggests an otherness of landscape, and objectifies wilderness. The truth is that we humans are both a part of, and surrounded by nature all the time. One example is the circulatory system which connects humans to plants: we produce carbon dioxide, which plants need to survive and in turn, plants produce the oxygen that we breathe. So, if one were to write only about people without including their environment, the portrayal would be incomplete.

You teach Annie Dillard in your non-fiction workshop. How does your study of ecocriticism affect your teaching? Does the environment have a natural system of teaching us?

Well, when I teach writing I want my students to think about an audience outside of their region. If you're writing a story that takes place in East Texas, in part, you are educating

people on what the East Texas experience is like. So it's important to create a setting to make people feel they know a place, even if they haven't been there. I'm constantly reminding my students to orient readers in place. Also, I think that an engagement with the natural world is important for a writer—to be aware of the feel of the air on your skin, of the smell of the decaying leaves in the fall, of the songs of the birds in the neighborhood. One purpose of writing (and reading, so this applies to my literature classes as well) is to guide a reader into deeper connection with the world we're living in. To write about that connection, you have to develop awareness for the ways we connect. There's a reason why so many writers—Thoreau, Emerson, Rick Bass, Annie Dillard—go into nature to write. I do think the natural world has a way of teaching us. In fact, there's a branch of psychology—Ecopsychology—that suggests a disconnect from nature is psychologically unhealthy. And this has been my experience: when I go hiking, or sleep beneath the stars, I feel a healing that I didn't even realize I needed.

You state that you must write of an environment in which you connect. Does this mean that in order to write of a “place” in relation to its people you must have personally experienced it? If this is the case, are travel photos, videos, and writings a false way to familiarize ones self with a “place”?

I do think one should have experienced a place in order to write about it. People's perceptions of place tend to be coated in stereotypes, and one thing good writing does is break down such stereotypes. The South is a good example. It's hard for me to imagine someone who has never visited the South writing accurately about it, even if that writer has studied it extensively. There are always nuances in any place that must be felt to be understood. However, I also can't imagine writing effectively about a place without doing some preliminary research beforehand. Certainly photos, videos and writings are an effective way to familiarize ones self with a given place. I don't think those things are “false.” Just incomplete by themselves.

Within David Mazel's book, *American Literary Environmentalism*, the definition of “wilderness” is up for debate. Do you feel that it is vital to ecocriticism, as well as for writing for this debate to continue unresolved? How has your perception of the “wilderness” changed with your bicycling and writing your book? Do you feel it is inevitable for our perceptions of the environment to change?

David was an instructor of mine, many, many years ago when I was an undergrad at Adams State. He has since become a very important voice in environmental issues in Colorado's San Luis Valley, which is a place of great importance to me. So I'm thrilled you reference him here! What David writes about is how representation of environment has historically been imbued with political and social repercussions. I think that what he's saying is that by treating nature as an “other” or as “exotic” (he invokes Edward Said's *Orientalism* here) it is easier to exploit. From my view, what has happened is that “wilderness” has become a place to go, separate from where we live. And so, we have separated ourselves from it. Even the National Parks, which I love, are construed as places to go, to get away from our “real” lives for awhile. As if nature itself is separate

from reality. This is why thinking locally is so important. The truth is that, even in a place like New York City or Chicago, we are living in wilderness all the time. So, yes, I think that a continued debate is important—but I don't think it's "wilderness" that needs to be defined so much as how we define ourselves in relationship to it. This may sound like splitting hairs, but I think this distinction is very, very important. How we define ourselves is going to determine how (or if) we deal with environmental crisis.

As far as the bicycle trip, it was that first trip taken in 1985 that really served to make me realize how important a connection to the natural environment was for me. I was an athlete, so the value of exercise wasn't new to me. But it became very obvious that part of the whole health package was not just the exercise, but being outdoors, becoming a part of the changing weather, of the varying landscapes. Because of the speed and the enclosure, a car tends to also separate us from the natural world even as we move through it. But on a bicycle you become part of it. As far as the writing, that was its own form of engagement. It allowed me to re-live the experiences I had on my bicycle and also to reflect on their importance for me.

I'm fearful that we'll continue to become more and more disconnected from our environment, so I'm not sure a changing perception is inevitable. I do think it's imperative. I'm not entirely fatalistic about it, but I do worry that a continued disconnect from the natural world will have unfortunate consequences, psychologically, spiritually, physically, economically....

You criticize cars for enclosing us as we travel through environments. Do you view technology as an emerging barrier between humanity and the environment?

Well, that was in the context of comparing cars with bicycles. But I do drive a car, and appreciate the convenience and freedom it gives me. And emerging technologies can't be avoided, nor should they be, at least not all of them. This is an old question, one that humankind has been grappling with for a long time. It is at the core of the question being set forth in a novel like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for example. What happens when science and technology evolves unchecked by any social system of ethics? On one hand, we create more comfortable lifestyles for ourselves, expand our knowledge, create new opportunities, are able to communicate immediately with almost anyone anywhere on the globe. On the other hand, we risk creating "monsters" and further disengagement from the immediate world around us. How to strike a balance is one of the challenges we each face as individuals, and as local and global communities. And it may be that emerging technologies work to reduce the environmental impact of current ones. So it's not the technologies themselves so much as how they are used, and what restraints are placed on them.

Do you feel that your early encounter with a leading environmental figure, like David Mazel, shaped your literary approach as well as your writing?

David taught a composition class I took, but that was over 20 years ago. I've always remembered him, so obviously he had some impact on me. More recent mentors include

Susan Rosowski--a brilliant woman who is sorely missed, as she passed away a few years ago--and Fran Kaye at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I think that my interest, my sense of the importance of a relationship with the natural world was already sealed by then, and my reading interests have always been around stories heavy with setting—from Jack London, to Edward Abbey to Rick Bass. I think what David, Susan, Fran and others did for me was give me a language, a way to articulate this sense that I had, and a theoretical approach to studying literature. And, of course, this has greatly influenced my writing as well.

You speak strongly of the psychological consequences humans will suffer because of a disconnect with their environment. You also explain that an environment can be made up of asphalt and concrete. If this is the case, do you feel that psychological effects based on a lack of environment would be of equal value for a farmer and a New York stockbroker? Is a city environment simply humanity trying to create nature?

I'm not sure that an environment can be made up of asphalt and concrete, but an environment can have asphalt and concrete within it. The distinction is that any environment encompasses a wide range of things, and a city is a merging of natural and human-made elements. The psychological problems associated with urbanization have been pretty well documented—health issues, pollution, crime, etc. One of the big movements in city planning has to do with parks and open spaces, in part to alleviate some of these problems. I don't think a city is trying to create nature, so much as exist within it.

Do you feel one genre of writing has emphasized the importance of the environment more so than others? What specific literary paradigms do you feel have shown a direct relationship between literature and the environment? Are there specific writers who have diligently worked to demonstrate this relationship? Do you feel we are in a time of writing when environment is the focus?

I think you can find models that emphasize its importance in all genres. As far as paradigms, environment certainly plays a key role in naturalism and regionalism, but I think most literary paradigms can merge with ecocriticism in various ways, but ecofeminism has become a common approach to reading text. And I think a lot of magical realism seeks to engage with the mystical aspects of nature in ways that move beyond the scope of just setting.

There are many, many writers who work to demonstrate the relationship between literature and environment. Some of my favorites include poets Mary Oliver, Bob Wrigley, Joy Harjo, Ted Kooser, Simon Ortiz and Gary Snyder; nonfiction writers Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, Chuck Bowden, Craig Childs, Wendell Berry. Edward Abbey still reigns supreme for me as one of the most important. In fiction, Rick Bass again, Ron Rash, Chris Offutt, Leslie Marmon Silko (Ceremony is to me one of the most important novels in this area), Barbara Kingsolver. And I think it's

important to look beyond traditional “nature” writers, and consider writers like Don DeLillo, whose book *White Noise* is directly responding to environmental social issues. There are so many writers who can be studied through an ecocritical lens.

I’m not sure that we live in a time where environment is more of a focus than times past. The natural world has always been important to writers, and has always added to the drama of human lives, to our stories. I think that literature is always a response to current realities in the world, and we can see over time how literature mirrors a movement from agricultural to industrial to technological societies. The study of environment and literature is important, I think, in helping us to understand our culture, our direction and our deepest, and oldest, human relationship.