Why Joseph Went to the Woods: Rootstock for LDS Literary Nature Writers

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Why People Go to the Woods

We could say that Joseph Smith Junior went to the woods for the same reason Henry David Thoreau went: He wished to live deliberately. Or maybe we should say that Thoreau went for the same reasons Joseph Smith did. In 1820, Joseph took to the Sacred Grove to discover "who of all these parties is right, or are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it and how shall I know?" (JS—H 1:10). Thirty years after Joseph went into the grove, Thoreau took to Walden Pond to "front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach."[1] Thoreau stayed at Walden for twenty-six months. Joseph Smith stayed in the Sacred Grove for—we might guess—only a few hours at most. But both men came away from their experiences with the "essential facts" they sought.

Thoreau's *Walden* swaggers with insight gleaned at the pond in the woods. Joseph Smith's more modestly told First Vision gives a matter-of-fact account of what happened when he took to his sanctuary. Lacking wisdom, he says, he dropped to his knees, laid out the seeds of his desire, and watered them with fervent prayer. The season was right, the desire fertile, and the *light*—that is, after Joseph wrestled his bout with darkness—the light broke through, warmed the seeds bearing his desire to know, and split them wide.

Joseph's choice of grove over church, barn, or bedside for putting his Big Questions to God suggests that he trusted solitude

and the stimulating qualities natural environments offer. Perhaps in ways difficult for us to grasp because potential Sacred Groves are harder to come by than they were in Joseph's Smith's time, nature, in concert with scripture and a boy's desire to get beyond limits in his understanding, might have facilitated the emergence of the modern church. Whatever else, the Sacred Grove provided everyone involved, including its Creators, with early geopositioning for the gospel's restoration. Joseph Smith's account of what happened to him when he went to the woods to pray bears many labels. Among them could be that it's one of the world's most striking moments in nature literature.

Through Joseph Smith's First Vision, Mormonism stakes a claim in the grand tradition of finding God in the wilderness. Couple this claim with belief in eternal progression, add the central role that repentance plays in Mormons' lives, and Mormons really have quite the lenses for gazing upon the grandeur of the Mystery. With growing LDS scientific and cultural communities, LDS literary nature writers ought to abound. In fact, given the Mormon belief that there's a mustard-seed god in each of us, one would expect more Mormon writers to be chronicling its growth in the creation. So . . . where are our records of discovery? Where are our LDS literary nature and science "personal journals"?

What Is "Nature Writing"?

Perhaps one reason LDS writers haven't ventured far into the field of nature writing is because they're not sure what it is or does and whether writing it fulfills covenants they have made to help build the kingdom of God. Furthermore, in my experience, many in the LDS population don't know how to interpret the anger, misanthropy, or sorrow that crops up in much contemporary nature writing, especially when the high rhetoric expressing such emotions threatens LDS lifestyles and beliefs. Important, call-to-action terms like "stewardship," a word that many, if not most, Latter-day Saints accept as an essential component of concepts like "service" and "righteous dominion," prove uncomfortably mercurial when applied to environmental issues. Writing nature literature *might* qualify as exercising "good stewardship" and thus as an act of building the kingdom, but what kind of writing quali-

fies as nature writing and what aspects of building the kingdom might it accomplish?

In an internet essay proposing definitions for literary science and nature writing, naturalist Barry Lopez states: "Among the salient and generally agreed upon characteristics of [nature writing] today are: 1) an assumption that 'landscape'—every element and nuance of the physical world, from a snowstorm passing through, to line and shadow in a woody draw, to the whinny of a horse—is integral, not incidental to the story; 2) a thematic focus on the relationship of human culture to place or, more generally, of culture to nature; and 3) a heightened sensitivity to issues of justice and spirituality."[2]

Lopez points out that many stories not commonly considered nature writing cast the natural world in key roles in their tales of good versus evil. He notes that Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is such a story, emanating formidable seagoing narrative energy as it does.[3] Furthermore, the sea is the domain of one of the story's main characters—an awesome white whale. Examples of such "sort of" nature literature abound. Weaving elements of nature writing into the plot of an otherwise non-nature narrative is a common way to explore humankind's place and purpose in the creation. This kind of "nature writing," with its archetypal themes and tensions, lies well within the reach of LDS authors writing for an audience that includes LDS readers as well as readers who are not LDS.

Regarding Lopez's third category of nature writing that contains a "heightened sensitivity to issues of justice and spirituality," many Mormons grow up steeped in such literature. The Old and New Testaments chronicle events staged in the wilderness and also draw on images from nature to make moral points. The story of the Garden of Eden, the plagues that Moses called down upon the Egyptians to persuade them to free the children of Israel from bondage, and the Israelite exodus to the promised land itself, are among those scriptural tales that focus the relationship of culture to place and explore matters of heightened spirituality and social justice.

In the New Testament, Christ's effect on the physical world, ranging from calming the sea to multiplying fishes and loaves, further illustrates nature's integral roles in scriptural narrative in-

tent and is considered an important marker of his spiritual gifts. Furthermore, like Joseph Smith's first petition to God, at least two of Christ's critical prayers occur in nature-rich settings. One crucial prayer took place in the olive groves of the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39). And after feeding the crowd of 5,000, Jesus "went up into a mountain apart to pray" (Matt. 14:23). In Mormonism's home book of scripture, the Book of Mormon, God and the wilderness offer the Nephites the "promised land" they require to build toward spiritual and cultural aspirations that the big city of Jerusalem had repressed.

Lopez provides examples of modern writers whose work integrates elements of this category. "In Cather and Steinbeck," he comments, "and more recently in Peter Matthiessen, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry, we find the same pursuit of a just relationship with the divine in a particularized landscape and, again, themes of social justice. The approach also often assumes that the physical landscape is not ownable, that it may be numinous, and that these landscapes and all they include, from weather to color to basalt boulders, exist in the same moral universe with the human."[4]

For those who prefer their modern writing to be more markedly "spiritual," Lopez notes that Catholic poet, author, and social activist Thomas Merton, "more than any other contemporary prose writer, maintained the tradition of spirituality in American writing now thought to be integral to nature writing."[5] In a writers' workshop in Bluff, Utah, naturalist and author Terry Tempest Williams stressed a similar point, saying that there's a "spiritual quality" to the work of nature writing: "Writing," she said, "is a spiritual practice."[6] In general, spirituality of one degree or another is an expected feature of writing focused on the natural world.

For the logically inclined, an interesting development in nature writing is the advent of lyrical science writing—poetry, prose poems, fiction, and essays—that shapes its themes upon historical and current scientific knowledge. This kind of writing anchors itself in scientific discovery and terminology while relying on metaphor and other traditional tropes and figures of speech to strike insight. Sci-poems commonly bear titles like "Seismicity of the Eastern Snake River Plain Region" (Timothy Doyle) and "Ephemerides of a Minor Planet" (Jessica Goodfellow). Essays with titles

like "Trace Elements" (Jeff Porter) and "V.E.C.T.O.R.L.O.S.S. Project" (Michael Branch) demonstrate how scientific discoveries meet personal voice, at once bringing science down to earth and elevating nature writing above the bipolar tradition of sorrowful lament and wildly celebratory verse and prose popular thirty years ago that still emerges in current literature now and again.

Certainly, aspiring LDS nature writers have many reasons to rejoice. Nature writing has acquired greater narrative diversity, with many avenues that are kingdom-building friendly. New forms in the genre allow for the development of Mormon spiritual themes; in fact, any and all of the narrative pathways opening up rely for their effectiveness on various manifestations of spirituality. Nature writing cannot be said to be this rhetorical creature or that one, but rather many creatures differing in habits but bearing striking resemblances.

Do We Need to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden?

Clearly, whatever other defining qualities nature writing might exhibit, spiritual sensitivity will be the most important for LDS writers. One reason is because the overarching nature of spiritual quests, like the one James 1:5 proposed to Joseph Smith and to every reader of the New Testament, lies at the core of the LDS experience. From the time children enter LDS Primary at age three, they're taught that acquiring a personal testimony of the restored gospel's power and truth and learning how to apply that power and truth in their lives is a foremost goal. While the potential for spiritually heightened experiences in nature is not often suggested over LDS pulpits, Joseph Smith's Sacred Grove experience is frequently put forward as a strong example to follow, especially for the young. For instance, in the summer of 2005, a Payson, Utah, stake sponsored a super-activity urging youth to follow Joseph Smith's spiritual path by basing it upon the slogan, "Find Your Own Grove."

In his *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv describes the triangle that exists between children, nature, and spiritual desire. Among other points, Louv argues that all children carry within them the potential for the sort of spiritual desire that brings about transcendent experiences.[7] He reminds readers that, in older religious texts, not only did notable prophets and leaders begin spiri-

tual quests at what might seem nowadays to be precocious ages (Abraham, Samuel, and Christ, for example), but also that the scriptures overall are fertile with images connecting children with the highest qualities of spirituality.[8]

Louv links children's native spirituality to nature, observing that poets like William Wordsworth and William Blake endowed children with natural spirituality and, in their poetry, bound that spirituality to beauty and to nature. Louv notes: "As a child, Blake announced that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel sitting in a tree. . . . He also reported seeing a tree filled with angels who sang from the branches."[9] Louv also notes that psychologists Abraham Maslow and Edward Hoffman saw the childhood quest for spiritual truth as more widespread than is commonly imagined. Hoffman interviewed "children and hundreds of adults who described spontaneous childhood experiences 'of great meaning, beauty, or inspiration.'"[10] For Mormon readers, the parallels between Louv's thesis of childhood spirituality roots in nature and fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith's experience in the Sacred Grove are striking, especially as Hoffman found that among the "triggers [of experiences of great meaning] are heartfelt prayer or more formalized religious moments" that might result in revelatory dreams or even "a visionary episode."[11]

Louv grants that aesthetics also provide "gateways" into visionary or transmundane experiences. But in his chapter titled "The Spiritual Necessity of Nature for the Young," he stresses: "Most interesting . . . is Hoffman's finding that most transcendent childhood experiences happen in nature,"[12] again a parallel directly relevant to Joseph Smith's vision of God. Joseph Smith states the triggers for his vision: his own heightened excitement of mind, stimulated by the "greatly excited" and "incessant" religious tumult of his time; the impression James 1:5 made on him; and his immersion in earnest prayer. The beauty of the spring day on which he chose to petition God made enough of an impression that he mentions it: "It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty" (JS—H 1:14). Perhaps if Joseph's reading of James 1:5 had brought him to utter his prayer in the vacant town square in the middle of the night, God the Father and Jesus would have appeared to him there. But Joseph chose the woods for his sanctum.

Certainly, interior spaces like LDS temples, chapels, and private household sanctums are dedicated ground in which one might encounter the sacred; and in the Church, they are heartily promoted as such. The potential of outdoor spiritual arenas is not often urged in Church publications, over-the-pulpit talks, or congregational hymns; but as Joseph Smith's experience and the experiences of many spiritual pilgrims demonstrate, natural, outdoor settings ought not to be discounted as sacred settings. Nor should narratives recounting experiences in natural settings be dismissed out of hand as being unsuitable ground for engaging the sacred.

Are Mormon Nature Writers Shy?

Are Mormons having spiritual experiences in nature? In a comment on my "Back to the Garden," a post on A Motley Vision blog, Stephen Carter, current AML-List moderator and writer for the satirical gazette *The Sugar Beet*, laid out his view of why Mormons don't engage in nature writing or even in the environmental discourse at large:

> I know a lot of Mormons who don't think twice about environmental stuff because they believe Jesus is going to come with his very own Super Fund in just a little while now. So why worry?
>
> And then there's the idea Joseph Smith put forward that the world, in its perfect state, will resemble a big ball of glass. It seems that the majority of the ideology popular among Mormons these days leads us to be suspect of this world. After all, Satan has control over it, right?
>
> And the telestial kingdom is supposed to resemble this world. Meaning that there are at least two spheres more exalted than this one.
>
> There's also the idea that, as gods, we're going to be big real estate developers in the sky, with no constraints put on our creative abilities. Which doesn't lead one to think about resource management.[13]

Carter's summary might be a fair, if amusing, catalogue of some ideological obstacles that those wishing to engage in literary nature writing might encounter in their Mormon audiences. But I suspect that Mormons are having more spiritual experiences in nature than they report simply because they hesitate to call them "spiritual." In response to my Times and Seasons post, "A Walk

into the Moon," a commenter named "Darrell," who at the time was an LDS bishop, reported:

> I had a night class in Portland and drove home up the Columbia Gorge on the Washington side. There is a turn-off just a few miles from my home called Cape Horn. I pulled off the road, exited my car and watched the moon as it reflected off the Columbia River.
>
> The river far below, the mountains, the trees, Beacon Rock (off in the distance) were all "aglaze." . . . I watched a barge glide through the water, lights glowing even in the bright moonlight. It was almost a spiritual experience. I offered a prayer of thanks for being in this place in this time of my life.[14]

Darrell prefaced this lovely piece of writing by saying that he wasn't good at putting such experiences into words, a disclaimer many make when recounting spiritual episodes. Questioned about what would have made this moment a fully spiritual one for him, he replied: "I definitely understated the experience. You are right it was spiritual, I should not have used the word "almost." Perhaps I was comparing it to some of the experiences that I have had in the temple. However, more than once, as I have hiked through these woods and mountains and among waterfalls, I have felt as close to God as within the walls of the temple."[15]

In a weblog post from which I've taken the title of this paper, I asked readers of the LDS blog Times and Seasons the following questions:

1. Do you read, write, or care in any degree for literary nature and science writing?
2. Do you feel disengaged from the nature/environment discussion?
3. What in Mormonism provides your spiritual grounding for caring about the well being of this planet and the people and creatures inhabiting it?
4. Have you had spiritual experiences in nature?
5. What ingredients do you think meaningful nature writing should include?[16]

Not everyone who read the post responded, and many of those who did respond are among the most outspoken members of the so-called Mormon bloggernacle. All the same, their responses are telling. Some readers reported liking nature writing and poetry about the natural world as a matter of course. They

don't like environmental rhetoric that paints over the human image in the landscape or that otherwise exhibits disdain toward human beings. Some of the thread's readers echoed Times and Seasons' permablogger Kaimi Wenger's dislike for Jon Krakauer-type nature literature where people having an abundance of money and time turn nature into an exclusive country club. For Wenger, who also teaches at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, the "annoying presence of nature snobs has tainted the idea of nature." Wenger also remarked that unorthodox Mormon nature writers who appear to undermine orthodox beliefs give Mormons good reasons to disengage from the discussion.[17] Likewise, commenter "Kevinf" prefers that nature writing acknowledge the presence of people and human relations: "Nature completely separated from human life is interesting, but I'd take a group of friends and family over solitude about any time."[18]

Russell Arben Fox, another Times and Seasons permablogger, expressed his strong preference for the type of nature writing that Lopez outlines in his second and third categories: thematic focus on the relationship of human culture to place and a heightened sensitivity to issues of justice and spirituality. Fox, a professor of political science at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, said he considers "pastoral, counter-cultural, and agrarian fiction and nonfiction . . . to be nature writing of the highest order." Furthermore, the human element as it manifests itself in human communities and production must be present because he believes that the most compelling issues emerge not in privileged acts of outright environmental protection but "in moral reform and socioeconomic justice." However, where important language overlaps between conservation/nature ethics and moral reform, inspiring people to change their behavior for the better, useful rhetorical ground might form. Furthermore, Fox reports having had some spiritual experiences in nature but says he has had more such experiences while "listening to a fine piece of music, or reading a great book, or viewing a masterful work of art."[19]

Like Russell Fox, Adam Greenwood, a former Times and Season permablogger, sees people as necessary movers and shakers in environmental discourse, though his interest rests mostly with "exemplary people and the communion of the saints." When wilderness does engage him, he sees it more as a function of soli-

tude, which he believes to have an "absence of good and evil." Like Fox, Greenwood said that wilderness as a thing in itself doesn't interest him. To his thinking, spiritual experiences occur in cultivated spaces where human presence is most manifest, such as gardens, fields, and "other places where nature and the works of man meet."[20]

Commenter "MLU" says that nature writers overall "were not helping build the kingdom I wanted to live in." Like Fox and Greenwood, he wishes for nature writing that makes it possible to view people in the Creator's image. The trend in nature writing, he said, "seemed to be away from seeing people in the image of the Creator and toward believing that granting any innate dignity to humanity was 'specism', a constant readiness to blame 'the Judaeo-Christian tradition' for all the ills of the planet, a resurgence of pagan forms of nature worship, etc. etc." Furthermore, because what we know can only be a "semblance" of the whole picture, good writing must display "a sense for metaphor." Echoing Wenger's remarks about unorthodox Mormon nature writers who attempt to undermine orthodox Mormons' beliefs, "MLU" says he would "surely buy any book of nature writing that didn't curry favor with the 'right' people by, for example, criticizing Brigham Young."[21]

A commenter calling himself "greenfrog" said that for him, nature writing must be well written. If it doesn't contain "clear perception and accurate, specific articulation," it runs the risk of making matters worse. Nature writing, he says, that is "imprecise and fuzzy in its focus or its execution . . . is false and prone to mislead, either the writer or the reader or both."[22]

It was with these thoughtful comments in mind that, in February 2009, I, along with William Morris, founder of the Mormon Arts and Culture Blog, A Motley Vision, started the nature-writing blog Wilderness Interface Zone (WIZ). Described as "a Mormon literary backcountry where words and place come together," WIZ is designed to help develop, inspire, and promote literary nature and science writing in the Mormon writing community. Its intent is to open a frontier in Mormon arts, demonstrating in the process that nature writing is not an artistic dalliance but rather that it meets the spiritual needs of many Mormons who feel connections to nature and through nature to God and the divine in

its many creative forms. WIZ features criticism and theory; reviews; interviews; original writing, including excerpts, creative nonfiction, poetry, hybrid literary forms, and fiction; odds and ends such as field notes; and news and commentary on events related to its writers and to nature writing.[23]

It was our hope at the blog's outset that not only Mormon artists but also writers who are not Mormon but are interested in nature writing would find WIZ a vibrant literary ecotone. As of February 2011, the blog has run for two years. Open to submissions, it has developed a modest and slowly growing readership. Many readers are Mormon, but some non-Mormons do indeed follow the blog. Events such as Wilderness Interface Zone's Spring Poetry Runoff Contest bring in high-quality, nature-themed writing, much of which demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that Mormon relationships with nature are alive and well and spiritually vibrant. As for how WIZ will help build the kingdom, we'll let nature take its course and see what arises.

Make It Possible to "Hope All Things"

Here at the outset of the hoped-for development of Mormon-generated nature literature, two basic ways, having many divergent tracks and unbroken trails, lie open to Mormon writers. Mormons could produce nature literature to satisfy Mormon audiences specifically, writing in the traditional religious language that many Mormons expect to find in material produced in their culture and that contains clear and recognizable "building the kingdom" rhetoric. Or they could write nature literature where "building the kingdom" rhetoric is not Mormon-specific, working from Mormon sensibilities to explore broad concerns of stewardship, spirituality, human-nature relationships, and social justice, relying on metaphor and other rhetorical figures and tropes to enable diverse responses to their work. Many Mormon readers, as well as readers who are not and never will be Mormon, expect—indeed, need—to find convincing spiritual matter present in nature writing. LDS writers are qualified to provide it.

Whatever paths Mormon-generated literary nature and science writing takes, writers would do well to create with language that "hopes all things" (Article of Faith 13). That is, rather than relying on traditional lament-style nature narrative or angry social

criticism, both of which often leave audience members feeling attacked, ignored, uninspired, cornered—or worse, that manipulate any sense of outrage readers might be feeling—Mormon writers of nature literature might consider entering the dialogue from two angles. First, they should seek to educate themselves on environmental subjects they care deeply about. Second, they should try to engender hope by providing in their written language the raw materials for experience that readers can use to forge for themselves new relationships with nature. Such language would open the prospects for human progression in relation to the Creation and its creators.

To borrow from conservation rhetoric, any stewardship effort that includes taking a rhetorical stance toward nature must be conscious of its effects not only on the natural environment but also on the environment of human language; it must strive for sustainability in its quality of expression. Sustainable language is creative, productive, replenish-the-earth language that makes it possible for others to care about what you care about. Such language effectively sparks those that encounter it to create their own risk-choice spectrums. Through uses of rhetorical figures and tropes like metaphor and especially irony—irony in its highest forms, not the low forms of irony manifested in sarcasm, cynicism, or sardonic language—sustainable language creates a range of meaning that allows for an audience to make something more of their experiences of it. It opens possibilities rather than applying high rhetoric or limited options to bait others, nor does it use readers' fear, depression, anger, sense of loss, shame, or guilt to channel them in particular directions, as bad writing in any genre is apt to do.

Whether a writer or reader of nature literature embraces the Garden of Eden scriptural account of human beginnings or the emerging evolutionary narrative, human language—what it is and what it does on earth and in the heavens—is a deeply spiritual concern. What people say and how they say it exerts a tremendous influence on the planet at all levels, not just in making policy to preserve natural environments, to address matters of climate change, or to develop more mindful strategies to extract, refine, or harness natural resources. It also affects people's attitudes and behavior when they go out into the natural world or encounter other

species wherever they may. Indeed, with the discovery and development of the electronic frontier and its accompanying rhetorical land rush that continues full tilt today, millions of people are racing to stake out narrative territory. The opening of the electronic frontier and its accompanying scramble for narrative ground has accelerated and magnified human language's effects on the conditions of all human and natural environments. Whether given by God or developed by this planet through us, human language is a wilderness in its own right, containing a superabundance of cultural and natural resources. Language stewardship is as vital to the health of this planet as is stewardship of the land.

Passionate writers wishing to contribute toward the well-being of the planet should recognize and respect human expression's cosmoplastic[24] or "world-building" qualities and not assert declamatory freedom of expression for every turn of phrase without regard for its downstream effects. Among other considerations, this means that a writer of nature literature should not feel him- or herself immune from criticism or, more importantly, averse to self-examination of his or her own motives and behavior in the Logoscape in which he or she creates. This awareness is, of course, a complex matter requiring years of effort. A writer over time and with experience will develop an awareness of, and assume responsibility for, actual as well as possible consequences to which his or her words give rise. But to begin, a Mormon writer of nature literature might find helpful the rule one sees often on signs and pamphlets advising hikers and campers on their behavior in sensitive areas: "Leave it better than you found it." When I've been out poking around in the backrocks where there has been no litter or any condition at all begging for attention, I've wondered how to apply this dictum. But in the wildlands of human expression, its applications could prove limitless.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden–An Annotated Edition*, Chap. 2 ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"), para. 16, http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden00.html (accessed March 1, 2008).

2. Barry Lopez, "Introduction to Our Catalogue of Nature Writing," on the website of Ken Lopez, bookseller, who uses as context Barry's brief introductory remarks (accessed March 1, 2008).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.; from paragraph beginning, "Work of this sort has set American literature apart since at least the middle of the nineteenth century . . ."

5. Ibid.

6. My notes on the Williams workshop, February 2008, Bluff, Utah, in Patricia Gunter Karamesines, "Field Notes #5: Writers' Workshop with Terry Tempest Williams, February 2008, http://www. motleyvision.org/2008/field-notes-5-writers-workshop-with-terry-tempest-williams/ (accessed March 3, 2008).

7. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2005), 285–300.

8. Ibid., 286: "In the old texts, a child's spiritual life was assumed. Abraham began his search for God as a child."

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 287–88.

11. Ibid., 288.

12. Ibid.

13. Stephen Carter, July 11, 2006, comment on Patricia Karamesines, "Back to the Garden," A Motley Vision: Mormon Arts and Culture blog, July 10, 2006, http://www.motleyvision.org/2006/back-to-the-garden/.

14. "Darrell," October 26, 2007, comment on Patricia Karamesines, "A Walk into the Moon," Times and Seasons blog, October 26, 2007, http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2007/10/a-walk-into-the-moon/ comment #12.

15. Ibid.

16. Patricia Karamesines, "Why Joseph Went to the Woods," Times and Seasons blog, November 1, 2007, http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2007/11/why-joseph-went-to-the-woods/.

17. Kaimi Wenger, November 1, 2007, comments on Patricia Karamesines, "Why Joseph Went to the Woods," Times and Seasons blog, November 1, 2007, http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2007/11/why-joseph-went-to-the-woods/.

18. "Kevinf," November 1, 2007, comment in ibid.

19. Russell Arben Fox, November 1, 2007, comment in ibid.

20. Adam Greenwood, November 1, 2007, comment in ibid.

21. MLU, November 1, 2007, comment in ibid.

22. "greenfrog," November 1, 2007, comment in ibid.

23. Patricia Karamesines and William Morris, Wilderness Interface Zone blog, http://wilderness.motleyvision.org/about/.

24. John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral*

Literature (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press: 1999), 4, uses "cosmoplastic," meaning "world-building," to describe the power that human language—in particular oral narrative—exerts on the world, especially on human culture. He asserts: "The conclusions to which my own research have brought me concerning the constitutive value of storytelling . . . are consistent with the hypothesis that narrative had (and still has) a crucial role in human evolution." I find his points on storytelling striking, mirroring the effects storytelling has had upon the development of my own consciousness. While Niles speaks of dominant narratives as stories that have triumphed, for one reason or another, over competing narratives, it seems clear that the most powerful stories come to us through gifted folk speaking to us out of heightened, disciplined sensibilities; in other words, they are good stewards of language and of the cultures that they help to shape. Niles's ideas about oral narrative can be extended to written narrative and thus carry the implication that greater care for language's effects on people and on the planet generally would be of the highest value for the current state and future development of humankind and the planet's well-being. Deleterious rhetoric, on the other hand, has destructive qualities affecting others' minds as tainted rivers can affect their bodies. Any writer, therefore, should take care what "downstream effects" his or her actions in language give rise to, but nature writers should take special care that, to the best of their abilities, the words they put out there build the world rather than poison the rhetorical environment in which human minds live and grow.