

## **Learning about the environment is not always easy, but literature can help**

Maina Durafour: Hi, everybody. This is Maina and today we're going to talk about literature and environment. Our guest is Wayne Franklin, professor at the university of Connecticut. Wayne's specializations are American literature, novel and fiction prose and nature writing. How are you today?

Wayne Franklin: Good.

Maina Durafour: Can you tell me a little more about your link to literature and why you're interested in, environmental literature?

Wayne Franklin: Well, I, always was a reader. I liked reading, but I also liked being out in the woods where I grew up. There was a stream and trees and some wildness behind, and I think I probably spent 90% of my waking hours in the summer down there in the woods. So it was something that was second nature to me, in a way. I enjoyed it. I lived near a city. I enjoyed visiting the city. I went to school, finally in the city. But I liked the wild, open land. And as I started reading, it occurred to me that the books that I liked more than most were ones that engaged the natural world, that described it, talked about action in it, advocated for it, but many things. And I eventually came to think very highly, in particular, of Henry David Thoreau, who was a Massachusetts born, Harvard educated, careerless, wanderer who loved being in nature. He traveled, he saw things. He wrote a book about river trip he took with his brother John, going down the Concord River in a boat they built and up the Meramack River into New Hampshire and eventually climbing Mount Washington and coming home. And then, most famously, a book called Walden, in which he wrote about his experience building a cabin by himself

and living for about a year and a half in that cabin on the shores of a pond, Walden Pond, about a mile from his home in Concord. And he went back and forth to the village. A train line runs right next to the pond. He would walk on the tracks to the village and then come back. He'd eat in town, he'd go back. He had visitors. primarily what he was was not a hermit, but a literary worker, because he was writing the account of his river trip with his brother and starting to write Walden. And in the process of living there, he took one of his trips to Maine. So he was thinking about close and far and middle distance places in which he'd had a lot of experience. And he was very good at probing what was immediately around him and making you care about it by the depth and passion of his own concern. As I read more, it occurred to me that Thoreau wasn't just inventing this scheme of building a sort of pioneer cabin by a pond. It was a, miniaturization or ritualization of what a lot of Americans were doing as they moved into formerly native lands to the west of the original colonies and opened those lands for settlement, building cabins, clearing things, and in the process, attending to nature in some ways that are surprising. They weren't just clearing it and killing it. They were also appreciating. and in particular, there was another writer who came from an area near where I grew up, named James Fennimore Cooper, whose father was the founder of Cooperstown Lake Otsego about 50 miles west of the Hudson River at the source of the Susquehanna River. And Cooper, loved that area. He played in the woods. He and his brother loved running about, skating on the frozen lake in the winter, et cetera. However, as he grew older, the family lost control not only of the land it owned and developed there, but also their own house and much of their wealth. So, he had started building a house there and had to leave it unfinished, move into rented quarters near his wife's family in Westchester, just north of New York City, so 180 miles away. And he had to find a career. He'd been an officer, a midshipman in the US. Navy. But his wife didn't want him to stay in the military, so she made him quit. And he did. But then he had no income, so he started writing. It's just implausible to think then that you'd make

any money writing. But the third book he wrote was sort of recollective account of Cooperstown and Lake Otsego And he introduced a character named Natty bumpo over the leather stocking and who became almost immediately a national and then, international hero figure for a lot of readers and also sort of imitated in people's lives. So Natty Bumpo in the pioneers lives in a log hut near a lake. The book was a smash hit. It sold out all of its copies by noon the first day it was published. I mean, it's unheard of for an American novel at that time. and it quickly was reprinted, translated to French, German, et cetera. and, it launched Cooper's career. The pioneers really set the environment at the center. And it's not know that Natty's a deer killer or a woodsman. he also cares about the environment. So as settlers move into this area in the novel, he invades against their wasteful ways. There's a great scene in the book in which passenger pigeons, which have been extinct since 1914, come in huge flocks, millions of birds flying over as they migrate north. And the villagers in the novel shoot at them with cannon, knock them out of the sky with sticks, make fun of as if the suffering of the birds doesn't matter.

Maina Durafour: Yeah, that's crazy.

Wayne Franklin: It's crazy, but it's one of those things. it's a double bind. But anyway, Natty repeatedly criticizes the misuse of nature and makes it weird, this early 1823 that misuse is being seen, being felt. My theory is that Cooper, having lost the place, empathized with everything else that lost it the birds, the indians, Natty who's forced to leave at the end of the story. So that made a big impact on me. But I also felt immediately that Thoreau was continuing that scheme of a solitary, nature loving person living by a lake. And then it occurred to me that really, that's what Elizabeth Little was doing in her cabin by the pond. So things came together in interesting ways for me.

Maïna Durafour: You mentioned this novel by Cooper. Do you think novel is the most common type of writing for environmental stories? And why?

Wayne Franklin: You know, it can be because fiction, engages people's affections and feelings. You care about what happens to heroes and heroines, and you want villains to suffer, and you want things to turn out well. So you get engaged in it the way you get engaged in a movie or a drama. However, Thoreau never wrote fiction at all. He wrote prose narratives based on his experience in nature. And that became too, I think, because of him, a dominant form of literary engagement with the natural world, an advocacy for the natural world. But if you follow forward from Thoreau, you find a whole range of later figures. John Muir, who becomes sort of leader of the environmental movement, particularly on the West Coast, he's an advocate for, making national parks of places like Yosemite, which he was very early to write about. And he wrote books like *My First Summer in the Sierra*, which is about his experiences as a shepherd leading a bunch of sheep into the high mountain pastures, but at the same time going down into Yosemite Valley and seeing its wonders. And Yosemite Valley is it knocks your eyes out the first time you see it if you can see beyond all the other people who are seeing it and the traffic jams. The best kind of this writing, I think, is inhabitants stories that is, about people living in places that come to matter for them as the seasons pass. Nature writing is invented, I think, in the 19th century as a way to enlist ordinary people who aren't scientists in the appreciation and understanding of nature. So Thoreau is great. He's reading Darwin's *Origin Species* as soon as that comes out. He's reading geology. He's adept in geological science. He intuits something about the history of Walden Pond. It's a kettle pond, which means it was formed by a block of ice, broke off a glacier thousands of years ago, got buried as the glacier moved on, and then got covered with gravel and sand. When the glacier retreated. It took thousands of years for those buried chunks of ice to melt. And when they did the stuff above them, the gravel and sand

collapsed, leaving kettles and Barot knew that Walden Pond had no visible entrance and no visible exit, and yet it was always fresh. So he knew there was subterranean water flow, and in fact, there is. He intuited that, meaning that he understood the science. But he didn't write science for people. He wrote nature appreciation. He tried to develop people's sense of their place in the world.

Maïna Durafour: So would you say that to write a perfect nature novel, you need, a little bit of science, but also a lot of emotion?

Wayne Franklin: Yeah, I think you do. It's not just about OOH and, AAH's It's about understanding how nature works and what our place in it is and what our responsibilities toward it are. So I think, yeah, you need both. And that's really the niche that nature writing occupies.

Maïna Durafour: Yeah. I see. Can you tell me more about how literature can help to learn about environmental issues?

Wayne Franklin: Well, I think it uses the ability of people to identify with characters, and therefore, through their perspective, you become invested in the issues that matter for them. And if those issues are issues of the natural world, then you become induced, led to understand something through the secondary experience of someone else, either a fictional character or a real person.

Maïna Durafour: I know you published a biography of James Fenimore Cooper, how his novel the pioneers helped understand environmental issue for you.

Wayne Franklin: Cooper, in a sense, had reclaimed his world, but he also felt protective

of anything that was his because he had lost so much. He valued very much his attachment to places, but the loss of them became a major theme for him. And I think he saw natural process as an analogy of his own experience that nature itself suffered, animals suffered. There were no deer in Cooperstown in the whole area around it by 1820. But the more I studied his life, the more I became convinced that his sense of loss, which was enduring and repeated, colored his treatment of the natural world. The natural world is dispossessed. We don't do things right when we do that to nature. We're all attached to the earth by gravity, right? Our feet are stuck to this thing. We're also mobile. We have feet. We're famous among all species for going any place we might possibly survive and making a go of it. But I think in every person's mind and feelings, there's a place they recall as a good place, a place where they are themselves. It's home. It's not just a house. It's evanescent, immaterial things. And I know when I think about my experiences, I think about the woods behind the house I grew up in. I think about this, lake a mile away that was owned by a woman who was a pioneer in women's rights and in natural rights, and who abandoned her family's mansion and built a cottage by her pond and then let all the kids from the two adjoining towns come there. But, just to see her attachment and her generosity with it, and then this preservation of great tracts of land, I think, stayed with me. So attachment matters. We all have that place. My parents left, New York where I grew up. a mile from that pond, they moved to California. They sold that house in New York. The neighborhoods changed. The pond's still there. I still swim in it in my mind.

Maïna Durafour: Do you think that this attachment to natural places can help people to care more about nature and their environment?

Wayne Franklin: Yeah, I think if you care about a place, you can do that very selfishly. You have to make that transition away from what matters to you, to what matters for

other people and what matters for society. But finally, what matters for the unrepresented creatures who live in the world with us animals, plants.

Maina Durafour: And how do you think literature can help maybe teach people more about the place of attachment and make them realize that where you grew up and the nature that surrounds you is not eternal if you don't take care of it.

Wayne Franklin: That's right. What I like about books like *The Pioneers* is that the setting is more than the setting. It's a character partly because it has a human character who cares for it, like Natty Bumppo cares for it and articulates his concerns. Fiction can distract us from nature. It can be about society. That's why I think nature writing steps in, because it's always about real places. If it's not about a real place, it's not nature writing. So nature writing is important in that regard. Somehow we have to school ourselves to recover that attachment and value it and then act on it. So that's the final thing, is to act on it.

Maina Durafour: Can you give the listeners maybe a book that you would recommend to start learning about the environment or maybe to start reconnecting with nature?

Wayne Franklin: Sure. There are many ways to do that, to approach it. I'm always looking for new ones that are good. I think Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a great one because of the intensity of her investigation of a single place, a creek. It's not a great lake. It's not the Mediterranean Sea. It's this little creek, Tinker Creek. Tinker suggests tiny, and yet it blooms. It becomes the kind of case in point for the world at large and her ability to see it, feel it, and describe it and track it to see it. And she doesn't write about people. She's not watching those people eating hot dogs. There aren't any. She's watching nature. I think it's instructive when you read it because it

teaches you how much can be seen, how much is there, how much you may be missing, how much you maybe want to see more. So it's a good book in that regard. But my favorite of all, I think, is Herman Melville's Moby Dick. It's about this destructive whale hunting business, but it's also about the glory of whales and the sea. You can learn an immense quantity of things by reading it well, but it's less accessible. Moby Dick is a complicated book. You have to kind of learn how to read it. I'm glad I read it then. And I've repeatedly read it, taught it, written about it, and just admired it for how it imagines human interaction with the natural world through what is, at the same time, an adventure story about whaleships and whalers and blood and gore.

Maïna Durafour: Okay. Thank you.

Wayne Franklin: You bet.

Maïna Durafour: Is there anything else you would like to add before we end this conversation?

Wayne Franklin: No, I just think I welcome these conversations. I think nothing's more critical than getting people to care about the world. Inspecting your own attitudes and applying what you discover about yourself matters. I think that's what the woman who had that pond, she gave up the big mansion. She wasn't concerned about money. She lived in a cabin. And she was, greatly influential on my life, life of other people who recalled her, but also on the environment at large. So we have to find what it is we care about personally and then connect that to the world as we should care about it and know it.

Maïna Durafour: Thank you so much.



Wayne Franklin: Yep.