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Peter Remien and Scott Slovic, eds., *Nature and Literary Studies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2022), 418 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2024.15.1.5414>



Ecocriticism has an unashamedly vexed relationship with the term nature. On the one hand, nature plays a historically central role in the field to the degree that it developed academically out of responses to nature writers and other nature-oriented literatures, and that these responses are themselves predicated on a functional notion of an “out-there” and our concern with—and somehow separate from—a nature we owe meaningful responsibility. On the other hand, it is also by this point well established that nature is a wildly capacious term that covers over as much as it reveals: too slippery to obtain in discussions in any consistent or universally consonant fashion, but always there as a (semi)functional shorthand for a (nonetheless nebulous) concatenation of social and ethical concerns. For ecocritics to accurately tarry with nature, then, is not to embrace or overthrow it, but merely to recognize the bearing it has—and will continue to have—on the field and on the wide range of specialists and laypeople who invoke it to do intellectual and political work of varying kinds. Any student of the field, or any scholar wanting to be taken seriously in environmental circles, therefore requires their own sense of how nature (whatever we mean by it) functions in their own practice. It is into this needful space that Peter Remien and Scott Slovic’s excellent new collection enters. Both a valuable introductory overview for the neophyte ecocritic, as well as an up-to-date map of the term’s practical uses, *Nature and Literary Studies* provides an array of vantages on the historical development of the term’s critical linkages and the contemporary ways in which nature weaves into literary and cultural studies concerns going on at this moment. While the editors make clear that their purpose is neither encyclopedic or wholly definitive, Remien and Slovic are nonetheless equal to the challenge of wrangling their unruly topic into usable shape. Indeed, the high quality and concision of the introduction’s overview of the term is more than enough reason to give the book a look; the unswervingly first-rate essays that provide the scope and depth of coverage make the work essential.

Part of the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, the collection is arranged into three sections standard to the series: Origins, Development, and Applications. In the first section, the contributors explore the historical underpinnings of the term nature as far back to the origins of orderly recorded human thought—from the Ancients,

through the “book of nature,” and into the early modern era’s concern with natural philosophy and history. In this section, one could do no better than summoning Terry Gifford to overview the role of the pastoral in negotiating the human/nature relationship. Likewise, Debbie Lee’s interrogation of nature’s not-so-distant cousin wilderness ably navigates the semantic slippages that attend both terms that nonetheless slip away, often dangerously, in the face of the need to make concrete policy. In Development, chapters explore the modern era’s preoccupations with imagination and industrial development, from the romantic movement to the more recent establishment of new epochs of human thought and influence. To this end, as just two examples: Timothy Sweet and Ken Hiltner provide effective, efficient accounts of (respectively) extinction and the Anthropocene. In all essays through the first two sections, authors expertly lay out the tropes and points of discussion with regard to nature that should be familiar to veteran ecocritics, while also updating the basis of this scholarship for that same constituency and their students, establishing the foundational understanding of nature for the next generation of scholarship.

No mean textbook, however, what makes the collection an excellent addition to the veteran critic’s bookshelf and will encourage others to continue pushing the boundaries of the field are the chapters of the Application section, which take up problems and texts in pointed detail. Greta Gaard, for example, continues to enliven the role that ecofeminism can play in exposing the utopian and dystopian impulses inherent in environmental literature; in an entirely different vein, Lai-Tze Fan makes headway beyond the page into non-traditional (dare we say, un- or post-natural?) digital environmental texts, and so widens our field’s vision. On this first reading (for this reader and others will doubtless find much to return to), however, two chapters especially drew my attention. First, I appreciated the richly informed pedagogical focus of Erin James’s use of narratology with regard to climate-change fiction, especially the ways that James uses the latticework of narrative theory to help students view more perceptively climate change’s making strange of our world in space and across time—a truly unnatural way of thinking, to the degree that it transcends our more materially-focused cognition. Likewise, in an entirely different register but immediately following James, Pramod Nayar’s chapter, on biocultural precarity, theorizes the mutual constitution of the representational regimes of biotic toxicity along with the framing discourses that make such regimes comprehensible. This theorization assesses the limits and potentials of nature’s (and “the natural’s”) ability to understand illness and care-giving in response to environmental catastrophes such as the Bhopal disaster, but also Huntington’s Disease, caused as it is by the (unnatural?) mutation of a single gene. These two chapters do wildly different, yet wholly satisfying, things—and thereby also illustrate the surprising breadth of the text as a whole, as writers take up various positions across the theory/praxis continuum and urge us to do the same.

It would be too easy in this publishing environment for less rigorous scholars to churn out just another book that covers the same tired terrain about nature—a “once more around the block with Nature,” one might say. This is not that book, for

the value of the individual contributors' pieces are simply too engaging and too dependably high. To be sure, there are some very small quibbles I might raise. A very minor lament is that Cambridge has left the index wanting, as it is dominated almost entirely by proper names. I recognize, of course, that this is an old-fashioned complaint given that we are fast approaching a digital singularity, and the majority of users will interact with the book online and have no need for such things, as I see from the publisher that it is included in the Cambridge Core (a service to which major research collections already maintain access). Of more central concern, however, is that while it is the case that the book collects chapters from scholars representative of institutions on five continents who are reading a highly globalized literature, the presence of Latin America is quite thin, as well as that of certain regions of Asia (especially China). Given that the work is not meant to be exhaustive, the omission, if in this light one can even call it that, is entirely forgivable. More to the point, the perceptive reader who *does* find themselves wondering about these parts of the world might find their way back to, say, Patrick Murphy's more purposively comprehensive *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (1999) to fill in the gaps—but then return to Remien and Slovic's to keep building, as Murphy's is now some twenty-five years old. In this sense, the omission might be seen as a boon, precisely the sort of propulsion of new scholarship the editors would invite.

Certainly, neither of these issues should stand in the way of one's adopting the book for their own research, courses, or institutional collections. *Nature and Literary Studies* is well-suited to become a touchstone in the formation of ecocritical minds as it provides an overarching schema of a central term's development and re-energizes approaches to nature's insistent, troublesome presence in environmental literature. As such, one notes Remien and Slovic's understated humility in closing their acknowledgements with the simple hope that, in a world of more and more ecocriticism, "readers will find this book...to be a unique contribution to the field" (xix). They and their contributors have more than hit the mark: unique it is, not in some esoteric or idiosyncratic sense, but in its singular and very fine overall quality.

Works Cited

Murphy, Patrick D., editor. *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Routledge, 1999.