

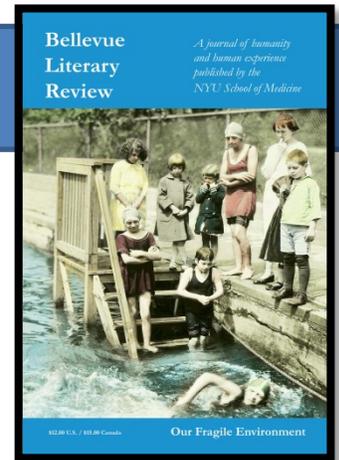
Writing and the Environment: A Roundtable Discussion

In 2012, Bellevue Hospital shuttered its doors for the first time in its 276-year history, as water from the East River surged with the force of Superstorm Sandy into elevator beds and generators. Two years later, we published the themed issue "Our Fragile Environment," which explored illness, health, and healing in this context. Our lives – and the life of this magazine – are inextricably linked to environmental issues.

Three writers from the "Our Fragile Environment" issue, Ben Goldfarb, Jeanine Pfeiffer, and Martha Serpas, were generous enough to share their time and knowledge in this roundtable interview. They bring perspectives from points as distant as Bristol Bay, Alaska to the Gulf Coast. As Jeanine wrote, "I believe the same mechanisms that drive curiosity, compassion, and forgiveness, also drive us to educate ourselves, to care for beings beyond ourselves, and to take responsibility for the upstream and downstream impacts of our life choices."

I was impressed with the level of writing in this issue as well as in the interview. For these writers, literature is not something that ought to shy away from difficult topics, but a way to engage with the very things that threaten us. By revealing our differences – who we are and what we believe – we can witness there, in those cracks and fissures, a map that shows us where we are, and where we can go.

Monica Wendel
Associate Editor



Our Participants



Ben Goldfarb is a Seattle-based correspondent at *High Country News*, a magazine that covers natural resources throughout the West. His writing has appeared in publications including *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, and *Earth Island Journal*. He is working on his first novel.



A Fulbright scholar, NSF, and NIH grantee, **Dr. Jeanine Pfeiffer** has written one book, edited two others, and published highly-cited scientific papers on biocultural diversity. Her prose appears in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Nowhere*, *Langscape*, and *Between the Lines*, and her poetry is featured on radio broadcasts.

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Martha Serpas's three poetry collections are *Côte Blanche*, *The Dirty Side of the Storm*, and *The Diener*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Nation*, and in anthologies such as *The Art of the Sonnet* and *American Religious Poems*. "Veins in the Gulf," a documentary about Louisiana's disappearing wetlands, also features her poetry. She teaches at the University of Houston and is a hospital trauma chaplain.

Environmental issues are sometimes the victims (or subjects?) of a “manufactured controversy” in which scientific consensus is presented as though it is up for debate. As a writer, how do you manage to not engage with an unproductive back-and-forth? How do you shift the focus away from controversy?

Ben: My day job is journalism, so this is an issue I’m constantly thinking about. Clearly, the media has contributed to the “manufactured controversy” that has sprung up around the indisputable fact of climate change. For a long time, many journalists seemed to say, “Well, we got a quote from a climatologist, now time to track down a dissenting opinion from a policy fellow at a conservative think tank whose salary is paid by an oil company.” As though those two viewpoints carry equal weight.

“From whence do our emotional reactions to environmental realities such as ecotoxicology, ocean acidification, species genocide, and climate change come from? Different forms of fear.”

Fortunately, the media is less frequently quoting paid climate deniers. In other areas, though, we’re still too ingenuous about accepting claims at face value. You see this a lot around the alleged costs of environmental regulations: “According to a study by the Association of American Polluters, reducing carbon emissions from power plants will cost the country 100 gazillion dollars” — when that “study” hasn’t received any peer review and doesn’t stand up to even cursory scrutiny. Environmental groups can overstate their case, too. Fear-mongering about the safety of genetically modified organisms — despite reams of evidence demonstrating GMOs’ harmlessness — is one instance in which well-meaning advocates for human health are, in my opinion, not on the right side of history.

In sum (and I think this applies to all kinds of writing, not just journalism): If you’re trying to avoid manufactured controversy, choose your sources of information with the utmost care.

Jeanine: There is a photo circulating on Facebook from the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray sitting in a truck behind the infamous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, holding the steering wheel. The caption reads, “Only in America do we accept weather predictions from a rodent but deny climate change evidence from scientists.”

From whence do our emotional reactions to environmental realities such as ecotoxicology, ocean acidification, species genocide, and climate change come from? Different forms of fear. Fear that we would have to admit our ignorance. Fear that the unthinkable might be true. Fear that we might be required to relinquish something, make sacrifices. Fear of profound, yet necessary, change.

Most of the climate deniers — including members of my family and the church I was baptized into — are from the American Bible belt, which is such a travesty. The most heavily cited parts from the biblical Old Testament are King David’s poetic songs, the Psalms, extolling the beauty and irreplaceability of creation. In the New Testament, there’s a scene where Jesus throws the money lenders out from the temple, arguing that profiteers have no place in a sacred space. This was true in BCE and it’s true in the Current Era. Our earth, our life-giving systems are sacred. Fundamentalist Christians should be the first in line to protect the Creator’s creation.

Controversy turns scientific realities into soap opera dramas, and distracts us from our fears. How do we combat fear? As a writer, I appeal to our higher selves. I appeal to our hearts and souls: our love of life, our love for beauty, our love for one other. I try to harness our collective belief in spirit.

We overcome fear with love. I believe the same mechanisms that drive curiosity, compassion, and forgiveness, also drive us to educate ourselves, to care for beings beyond ourselves, and to take responsibility for the upstream and downstream impacts of our life choices. The greater we extend our concept of "family," and the more we embrace the inter-disciplinary, the cross-sector, and inter-tribal, the more we train our neural synapses to avoid dead end dichotomies.

Martha: Coastal erosion—land loss in Louisiana greater and faster than anywhere else on Earth—is not disputed and does not really involve manufactured controversy as surrounds some other environmental crises. However, there is no consensus—scientific or otherwise—about how to prevent or reverse the land loss. Rather than engage with those asserting different strategies, I'm trying in my poems and essays, in the midst of many paradoxes, to focus on the land as it remains and as it disappears. Only sustained attention to the situation as it is right now can inform any decisions about next steps and bring more people into awareness.

Speaking again of debates – often, rhetoric is framed as though if an objective is good for the environment, it's bad for the economy. But all of your writing demonstrates something very different. Do you have any comments on that? Is that something you consciously decided when writing about the environment?

Ben: My story was absolutely intended to show how we're connected, both economically and emotionally, to natural ecosystems — and I think salmon fisheries are the perfect vessel to convey that idea. Salmon require clean water, healthy habitat, and intact ecosystems; in turn, they create jobs and cash, nourish our souls, and, of course, literally feed us. (I like mine roasted whole, stuffed with garlic and lemon, over potatoes.)

"...we're connected, both economically and emotionally, to natural ecosystems"

During my time in Bristol Bay, I was profoundly affected by the region's material reliance on returning salmon. The economic activity generated by this fishery is breathtaking: There's the boats and fishermen themselves, the canneries and processing plants, the marine supply stores, the bars and restaurants — a thousand small businesses, radiating wealth to Anchorage, Seattle, Portland, and other cities. (Not enough of the prosperity stays local — a different, though related, story.) Without fish, of course, that well would go dry. That's the idea I tried to explore in "The Run": How does the economic, social, and spiritual fabric of a community disintegrate in the absence of a natural resource?

Jeanine: In a TedxDublin talk on climate change, the British film maker Lord David Puttnam begins with an illustration of a slave ship. He draws parallels between the economic arguments used to perpetuate slave labor with the arguments used to perpetuate dependence on fossil fuels. It is a chilling parallel, because both systems depend heavily on greed, extortionary profits, disproportionate negative impacts on

marginalized peoples, and the complicity of otherwise good people. Significant technological advances occurred in the 19th century only after slave labor was outlawed in the business sector. We desperately need a similar emancipation in the 21st century.

For me, environmental justice and social justice are inextricably linked. An environment of hate — whether it is subliminal or overt, directed towards nature or cultures — perpetuates a polluted atmosphere. This pollution comes at a tremendous cost: a social cost, a medical cost, an ecological cost, an economic cost. And the pollution, in the form of racism, atmospheric particulate matter, and greenhouse gases, circulates and infiltrates everyone's lives. Right now in the United States, because of high-profile cases of police brutality, people are wearing T-shirts that say "Black lives matter" and "I can't breathe." I believe that all lives matter, and if one of us is having trouble breathing, then we all are suffocating, in one way or another.

If only we invested more widely in prevention, something every highly trained professional (physician, scientist, mechanic, educator, law enforcement officer, fireman, insurance or securities agent, et cetera) knows is far less costly, no matter what system we are referring to.

Martha: As Ben said, there are few true villains in these situations, and I'm with Jeanine that social justice and environmental justice are inextricable. I wrote an article for the *Times* called "Our Life Between Sea and Oil" (terrible title) about my sinking homeland. I hoped to describe the Gulf as the center of life and the devastating effects of the BP/Halliburton/Deepwater disaster on the coast. I also hoped to respect what the oil industry has contributed to Louisiana and what Louisiana has sacrificed for the country's oil dependence. Both a major oil industry boat builder and a water conservationist responded positively, for example. Tar balls on beaches and dispersants on the Gulf's floor are catastrophic for the environment and bad for the economy, especially fisheries. "How does the economic, social, and spiritual fabric of a community disintegrate in the absence of a natural resource?" Ben asks. Yes, and in this case the potential lost resources are shrimp, fish, oysters, and oil. Shutting down all deepwater drilling would be bad for the area's economy as it exists now. It may also be bad for my area's Cajun culture, which may not have survived into the 21st century if not for the stability and money that drilling has brought to imperiled communities. Social justice demands a voice for workers who risk their lives and work very hard to sustain our current way of life. Certainly families are dependent on the good pay and flexible schedules that jobs in the oil industry bring. A family-oriented culture thrives when a working parent, usually a father, is home one week out of two or two out of six—he's home for breakfasts, lunches, after-schools, and parent/teacher conferences. Unions once protected these conditions in some industries, but no longer. (Picture two brothers watching TV news of a potential moratorium on deepwater drilling. One is a supply boat captain and one trawls for shrimp. They are both in agreement about what should happen: keep drilling, do it right, and clean up the mess. That is the prevailing opinion of Cajun Louisianans. The mess can't be cleaned up. An economic mess may not be able to be cleaned up either. Right now, by means of alternative industries, communities need to resist adding drilling, refining, or transport to their economic bases.)

All writing relies on close observation, and maybe that's even more difficult with environmental writing: you attempt to observe an event that took place millions of years ago, or understand an interaction between living things that use senses we don't have. In other words, we have to go outside our normal human experience. How do you observe? What kind of research do you conduct? Do you see writing as a vehicle to help the audience observe?

Ben: This isn't quite "going outside normal human experience," but generally my goal is to see the world through the eyes of the scientists and resource managers whose very lives revolve around understanding and protecting ecosystems. Scientists — ecologists in particular — are, after all, professional observers whose powers of detection tend to be honed to a razor point. Not only do they notice more, they notice differently — the timing of a fish run, the browse line drawn by deer in a forest, the incursion of weeds that suggests an ecosystem in the early stages of decay. Thinking like a scientist will not only lend authenticity to your depiction of the natural world, it will also create opportunities to imbue your writing with ecological drama. Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behavior*, for instance, is predicated on a migration of monarch butterflies thrown askew by climate change. It's Kingsolver's grasp of monarch ecology and phenology, as well as her keen understanding of climate science, that allows her to deftly pull off this tricky book.

"As you get to know scientists, you'll find they make great literary characters."

How do you learn to think like a naturalist? Read a lot of scientific literature (Google Scholar is your ally). Conduct interviews. Get out in the field with your interview subjects. As you get to know scientists, you'll find they make great literary characters: They tend to be obsessive, articulate people with fascinating personal journeys and deep emotional investment in their study subjects. For my money, there aren't nearly enough novels about scientists. TC Boyle's *When the Killing's Done*, which focuses on biologists trying to eradicate invasive species from California's Channel Islands, is exemplary. We tend to see science as predominantly intellectual work, yet how science is used often has a complex moral dimension that's anything but objective. *When the Killing's Done* has a wonderful grasp of invasive species ecology, and musters its knowledge to make sharp points about how we interact with other organisms.

Jeanine: Before I began to formulate my responses to these questions, I took a deep breath. Then another deep breath. I felt my heart beat, and soften. I asked myself, what elements and practices bring us closer together, and what silly or sordid devices separate us? How do we make hundreds of microdecisions to choose to (dis)associate or (dis)engage?

My best work is done when I can stretch myself to open up: intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. When I am at my humblest and most patient. When I allow my curiosity, rather than my preconceptions or biases, to guide my six senses. This all may sound clichéd and obvious, but it's also the hardest thing to do on a regular basis.

(Note: I'm enjoying writing my responses after Ben's!) I'm an ethnoecologist: I study the intersection of ecological and social systems, most especially the inextricable links between biological and cultural diversity. I like to joke that my research could potentially include the entire world! I am a PhD-trained scientist, a scholar and a nerdy bibliophile who cites hundreds of references in my theoretical works. Yet my most powerful training comes from life experiences: from my peers, students, co-workers, and elders. From fishermen, hunters, farmers, basket weavers, tribal members. From the furry, feathered, finned, clawed ones. From thousands of hours spent on my hands and knees on the earth, straining my eyes and neck behind a microscope or binoculars, or with fins and snorkel, free-diving underwater.

“Poets and marine biologists should hang out a lot. Careful observation, passion for precise naming, and a wide interest in all forms of life—enthusiastic imagination—are common interests.”

Are there any writers you particularly admire for their environmental writing?

Martha: Wendell Berry, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, A.R. Ammons, Denise Levertov, to name a few poets. I favor poems that bring me into the present tense, immerse me in a land or seascape. From that attention ideas and emotions come. The poem may even turn didactic, but didacticism cannot be the poem's scaffold or its trigger.

Ben: There are dozens of writers whose work I admire — far too many to list here! The aforementioned *Flight Behavior* and *When the Killing's Done* are both high water marks in the recent history of environmental fiction. But there's also one non-fiction book that should be required reading for any writer trying to wrap their head around our ecological predicament: John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid*.

Where, even, to begin with McPhee? He's the master, of course, and his powers — his feel for landscapes, the economy of his language, his hypnotic ability to make you share his passion for abstruse subjects — reach their peak in *Encounters*. But what's really revolutionary about the book is its structure. The titular archdruid is David Brower, a legendarily hard-line conservationist; the three encounters, staged by McPhee, are prolonged meetings between Brower and his ideological adversaries: a mining engineer, a coastal developer, and Floyd Dominy, the West's most famous dam-builder. McPhee coaxes Dominy into accompanying the archdruid on a rafting trip through the Grand Canyon, which Dominy wants to plug up with a dam and Brower, of course, hopes to save. (Posterity, thankfully, would see Brower win that battle.)

My allegiances are with Brower, and so, I suspect, are McPhee's. But Dominy is far from villainous; in fact, he comes across as more recognizably human than his sphinx-like foe. And the dam-builder scores plenty of rhetorical points in their floating tete-a-tete: After all, everybody, even the archdruid, uses electricity. What McPhee illustrates, wonderfully, is that Dominy's affection for disastrous mega-dams is not a perverse character flaw, but rather the logical product of his background (he grew up in parched farmland where dams were necessary for agriculture and life). When Dominy built, say, the Glen Canyon Dam — of which Edward Abbey once said, "No man-made structure in all of American history has been hated so much, by so many, for so long, with such good reason" — he wasn't acting out of malice. Crazy as it sounds, he was doing what he thought right.

Not every opponent of conservation is a soulless, venal sycophant of the Koch Brothers (though there are plenty of those). Ranchers whose cattle run roughshod over public land, hunters who shoot wolves, farmers who divert precious water into their own ditches, commercial fishermen accused of plundering the sea — all of them are doing what they know, for reasons that flow inevitably from upbringing and experience. Anyone writing about the environment has to grapple with that fact: Natural resource conflicts aren't always moral battles or "manufactured controversies," but collisions between value sets. McPhee's genius is to demonstrate how momentous environmental decisions flow from individual humans; if Floyd Dominy can be made sympathetic, anyone can. I'd like to see more fiction explore that terrain. How do our egos, past lives, and biases influence the way we regard nature, and the positions we stake out relative to its preservation?

Jeanine: Writers whom I admire are people who connect the dots, who push our understandings of contemporary and historical complexities into new directions, and do so with equal amounts of compassionate rage and humor. One of today's best compository teams writing on environmental and social issues are the writers for the HBO news series *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. The writers who've had the greatest impact on me as a thinking human include people who write about the nature-culture connection via personal stories or meticulously researched histories, in both fiction and non-fiction forms. These authors include Louise Erdich, Linda Hogan, Winona LaDuke, and David Quammen.

Professionally I have been most influenced by the field studies of prolific ethnobiologists including Gary Paul Nabhan (for the American Southwest), M. Kat Anderson (for California), Nancy Turner (for the Pacific Northwest), Paul Alan Cox (for the Pacific islands), and the late Darrell Posey, who edited the go-to anthology entitled *The Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*. I am also profoundly influenced by audio podcasts, such as the live true stories on "The Moth Radio," and film. I screen films each year at the Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival in Nevada City, California, where I've learned of the works of filmmakers such as Toby McLeod, who produces documentaries on sacred sites throughout the world.

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