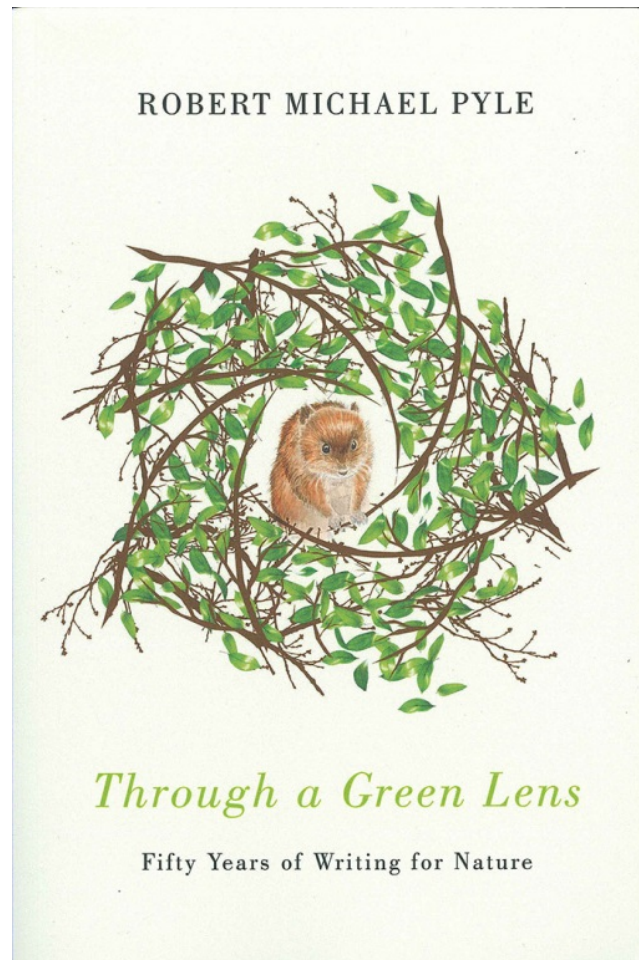


From *Through a Green Lens: Fifty Years of Writing for Nature*

By Robert Michael Pyle



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From *Introduction: Dancing with Pan* (p. 2-5)

Over the years, I have become increasingly aware that my occasional essays have been homeless. Of course, many of the lighter vehicles deserved this; others were quite happy on their own, buried in the periodical stacks in recondite libraries or recycling stations. But others whined about it, lobbying for some sort of group home for the ages, insisting they still had something to say. I came fairly close to compiling collections now and then, even at the invitation of publishers, but never quite did it. Finally, all those voices got to me, and realizing I was approaching a compelling (and appalling) anniversary—that is, *fifty years* since that first must-write essay—I resolved to comb the hundreds of occasional tracts I have inflicted on the serial press, to see if I could dowse from it a body of essays actually worth pulling together into a book.

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Since childhood mine has been a life deeply connected to the more-than-human natural world. Ever since I learned about Pan, Puck, and Robin Goodfellow in grade school, I've felt I was dancing their dance, to their beguiled and beguiling music. Like Ratty and Mole looking for Baby Otter, I felt the sweet piping call must be for me. And ever since I found that I could write better and more happily than calculate, life's been a matter of the pen and the panpipes for me. I trust that placing these essays in the context of a life gives them the sense and movement that I see in them; like me, my writing has undergone change.

My trajectory as an essayist has been a long one, ranging through academia and activism, science and literature, nonprofits and government agencies. Much of my earliest writing came out of a conservation activist role in university and beyond. I've worked for the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, state parks and wildlife departments, and I've managed lands, projects, premises, and committees for various conservation groups, here and abroad. I've taught for any number of institutes, schools, and universities. Along the way I have committed some actual science, and still do, a little. Any one of these professional fields, in research, teaching, nature interpretation, or wildlife conservation, could have offered a safe career. But long ago I understood that my inner poet outweighs my scientist self. Whatever I did, it was always the actual field—the green one—and the writing that I most enjoyed and came back to. Every job, every professional prospect, threatened to bring me indoors and rein in my language. So in 1982 I opted for none of the above, went freelance, and dedicated my energies to natural history and writing in earnest. Most of the results have come as essays. No one would have been more surprised than Mrs. Braswell<sup>1</sup>, except perhaps myself.

With this history, I have been witness to a broad arc of changes: from the optimism and rage of the days of Carson and Ehrlich, through the wisdom and rage of the era

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Michael Pyle's 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher.

of Wilson and Abbey, to the cynicism and just plain rage in the time of tar sands and fracking—engaged as participant and observer all the way along. The journey has stretched from Roderick Nash and the pure fight for wilderness and national parks to this complicated era of the three Cs at the heart of current conservation and social change: Carbon, Climate, and Catastrophe. From John Lennon to Father John Misty, the panpipes have led me through it all. I’ve had the privilege and onus to experience a big slice of the second half of the twentieth century and the start of the next, and the essays that follow ought to furnish a singular window on it all.

That window opens onto a wide range of contents. There are butterflies here, of course, and echoing themes from the front to the back: kids and nature, special places, alienation versus intimacy, and the primacy of natural history to all endeavors. But there are also marshes and dumps, cities and ditches, wilderness and vacant lots, brambles and sex, islands and ethics, Bigfoot and toads, owls, otters, and apes, and outright outrage, alongside love songs for everything under the sun. One alternative title I considered was “Our Lovely World, Our Tardy Rage,” and that about says it. Another one was “By-Catch” —what a fisher brings in that wasn’t the main business of the net-set—true enough here, as the occasional prose is what cropped up between the books.

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It would be a poor scrivener (or person) who failed to grow through five decades of steady scribbling. I hope I’ve grown not only in style, sensibility, and economy of expression, but also in subtlety of engagement and depth of love for my subjects. And if I haven’t become a better naturalist along the way, then there hasn’t been any point. I’d like to think there is a certain consistency of ethic, purpose, and devotion throughout, reflected in every piece, with an upward shift over time in the tools and refinement with which they are told. If there is one common theme throughout the book, let it be exaltation of the ordinary and actual connection with what Nabokov called “the individuating details” of a generous world.

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Last summer, prowling our family’s old ranches in Colorado with my sister Susan, I returned to the site where I had scribbled that first must-write essay in 1965. On a butterfly trip during that especially rainy summer, our mother and I had been blocked from returning to Denver by a landslide on US 40. Where we’d gone to ground, and where I wrote those words after a deeply affecting walk among the rain-wet aspens, was a motel in Silver Plume called the Millsite Lodge. Since then, the old highway, much of the canyon wall, and the west end of the village had been obliterated by the building of Interstate 70. Now, in 2015, along the remains of the former two-lane, Susan and I found the old watermill, and a flat below the freeway where the lodge must have stood. Above it, the place of my wet green epiphany was now nothing more than cast concrete. But later, behind an old log cabin in the town, where various historic bits and bobs had been stowed, I spotted an old, yellow-

painted tin sign, with the rusty words just visible: Millsite Lodge. I knew then it hadn't all been a chimera, and I felt for a moment that ancient rush of urgency to put down on paper just what I'd felt that day. And so, ever since.