

Cheapening a Landscape: How Barry Lopez Doesn't Do It

By: Emma Barnes

I am a young writer. Writing about place is important to me. I want to be able to write stories after exploring landscapes. But I often find that when I write about the natural world, my words cheapen the place. Descriptors like “beautiful” and “glorious” and “grand” feel empty. How do I write about a place that is beautiful, glorious, and grand without using these words? I want my writing to invite my reader alongside me, to show them what I see. When I'm older and my memory is fading, I want my stories to bring me back to places I once explored.

On a spring weekend just weeks ago, I spent three days hiking by myself in the Grand Canyon. I had never been there before, and I had a free weekend, so I went. One morning, I woke at three and hiked down the South Kaibab Trail from the rim. It took me four hours, and when I made it to the bank of the Colorado River at last, I pulled out my old black Moleskine journal to write about what I had seen.

It's so . . . vast, I wrote. No.

The Grand Canyon's vastness . . . No.

How beautiful, how glorious, how grand the Grand Canyon . . . Definitely no.

I closed my journal and laid back onto the sand. Frustration welled up inside me because I was disappointed in the lack of depth and honesty in my words. It was late morning, and the light fell over the walls around me and on the water and it glowed. I got up and went to the water and dipped my hands in it. I washed my face, I watched an eddy. Once I was clean, I sat cross legged in the sand and scanned the walls of the canyon wall across the river from me. After a while, maybe an hour or so, I lifted my sore body from the sand and began my walk back up to the rim.

A few days later, after returning to my home in Texas, I picked up a collection of stories by Barry Lopez called *Outside*, and read the story “Empira’s Tapestry.” In the story, a woman named Empira weaves a scene of the Grand Canyon into a tapestry. She reminisces about the first time she saw the canyon, and says, “I never forgot its breadth, how delicate the colors of the rocks and the sky and the trees that were hung in it. I wanted to fill that space up, to be inside it like a bird, graceful, rising, falling, flying long winding spirals from the rim down to a landing far below” (80). Here, in these few



Grand Canyon National Park, 2016.
Photograph by Emma Barnes.

sentences, Lopez shows us the depth and detail and openness of the Grand Canyon. Whereas I had written about surface details using descriptors, Lopez encourages the reader into the landscape by writing about how it would *feel* to be there.

Lopez, the author of many books and stories, and winner of the National Book Award for nonfiction, is a master of writing about places. That collection of his short stories, *Outside*, is an example of this mastery. Using the stories from *Outside* and his papers from the Sowell Collection (here), I have found three things Lopez does in his writing about landscapes that doesn’t cheapen them, but honors them. I want to use these three things to become a better writer myself, and stop cheapening landscapes. So, here they are: Lopez is honest, he takes himself out of the center of his writing, and he writes clear sentences.

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Lopez is honest. Barry Lopez goes to places and studies them and writes about them. He does his research. In his fiction, Lopez writes characters with stories that he has imagined, but the landscapes he places them in are real, mapped out, true, or otherwise created from experience. Lopez also writes nonfiction. His book *Arctic Dreams* is a study of the Arctic, its natural history and indigenous people and the story of its land. Years of research and traveling the Arctic went into this book. In it, he asks and explores the questions, “How do people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? How does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it? How does desire itself, the desire to comprehend, shape knowledge?” (xxvii). Lopez asks questions about landscapes and people, and answers them with his stories.

Another book by Lopez called *Crossing Open Ground* includes the essay “Landscape and Narrative.” In it, he writes, “Every storyteller falls short of a perfect limning of a landscape—perception and language both fail. But to make up something that is not there, something which can never be corroborated in the land, to knowingly set forth a false relationship, is to be lying, no longer telling a story” (30).

As a young writer, I’m challenged with putting my perception onto paper. My language fails a landscape. Rather than writing what I see, I embellish. When I try to write from a place that is not from my own perception, I fail to be honest. And that’s how I do it—how I cheapen a landscape. But Barry Lopez doesn’t do it.

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Lopez takes himself out of the center of his writing. And I mean both his fiction and nonfiction. The story and the reader are more important to Lopez than himself. His motive isn’t

to show his readers how smart he is. (Although, he is pretty darn smart.) He gives them what they need: a story.

In the fall of 2014, Lopez visited one of my writing classes here at Texas Tech University. He sat on a stool toward the front of the room and spoke about his life, his writing, the places he had been. I remember he said something about how when he writes a story, he takes the hand of the reader and guides her through it, and then, once it is time, he lets go, places his hand on the reader's back, and gently releases her into the story, into the place.

The story "Desert Notes" in *Outside* is an embodiment of this analogy. The story begins, "I know you are tired. I am tired too. Will you walk along the edge of the desert with me? I would like to show you what is before us" (15). Lopez brings the reader along with him in "Desert Notes," showing rattlesnakes and rocks and stillness and silence. Then he quietly leaves. In the closing paragraph, Lopez writes, "I will leave you alone to look out on the desert. What makes you want to leave now is what is trying to kill you. Have the patience to wait until the rattlesnake kills itself. Others may tell you that this has already happened, and this may be true. But wait until you see for yourself, until you are sure" (18). This is classic Barry Lopez. He makes his presence known, guides us, then leaves us in the story to explore it ourselves.

A good friend of mine once had dinner with Lopez and wrote to me about it. He wrote, "There is an intensity to Barry, as if he has struck the rock and is drinking the spring dry . . . only the spring is you, the moment, the story." My friend loved that Lopez tells stories to keep storytelling alive, and to bring people joy and perspective.

In Lopez's fiction, his narrators show the reader what is to be seen. Here's an example from the story "Twilight," which details the history of a Navajo rug as it passes from one owner to another. Lopez writes, "I see the woman who smells like sagebrush and her three children with

large white eyes and tattered leggings. I see the boy who rolls in dust like a horse and the legionnaire with the alabaster skin polished smooth by the wind. I see the magnificent jethery loping across the desert like a grey-hound with his arms full of oars” (27). These sentences all start with “I,” but not a single one is about Lopez. They are about what he wants us to see with him.

And that’s how Barry Lopez doesn’t do it.

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Lopez writes clear sentences. Some of them are simple. Some of them are long and detailed and have a lot of commas, but each sentence he writes has clear direction and meaning. Because you can understand his sentences, you can better understand the landscape Lopez wants to show you. His language brings the landscape closer, within grasp. Here’s a passage from his story, “The Falls”:

When we came through Stanley Basin in Idaho we crossed over a little bridge where the Salmon River was only a foot deep, ten feet across. It came across a big meadow, out of some quaking aspen. ‘Let’s go up there,’ he said. ‘I bet that’s good water.’ We did. We camped up in those aspen and that was good water. It was sweet like a woman’s lips when you are in love and holding back (57).

Lopez writes what he means: The Salmon River was shallow at the bridge. The water was good and sweet. Clear sentences let the story come through. I struggle with this, because I try to make my sentences pretty rather than clear. Lopez’s stories are powerful because he just writes clear sentences.

And that’s how Barry Lopez doesn’t do it.

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Well, Barry Lopez has a few years on me. He has traveled the globe, studying landscapes on every continent. He writes a *lot*. With time and experience, and learning from masters like Lopez, my writing will mature, and it will stop being cheap. Writing is powerful, as it documents and honors landscapes and people and stories. And story is powerful because, as Lopez once said in an interview, “Everything is held together with stories.”

If this is true, and everything—the whole universe—is held together with stories, then I better focus on these three things: I will be honest, I will take myself out of the center of my writing, and I will write clear sentences.

Works Cited

Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Print.

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