Lake Isle of Innisfree
Ecology in Fiction:
Getting nerdy with eco-fiction

by Mary Woodbury
Introduction

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What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. –Tyrion Lannister, Game of Thrones (S8, E6)
Some Easy Answers

Stories set in fictional landscapes that capture the essence of natural ecosystems. –Mike Vasey

Fiction that deals with environmental issues or the relation between humanity and the physical environment. –Jim Dwyer

A component of two related literary phenomena: nature-oriented literature and environmental literature. –Patrick D. Murphy

A way to intersect natural landscape, environmental issues, and usually human connection, into any genre and make it come alive. –Mary Woodbury

Fiction with a conscience. –John Yunker

An elastic term, capacious enough to accommodate a variety of fictional works that address the relationship between natural settings and the human communities that dwell within them. –Cambridge
**Eco-fiction Characteristics and Traits**

| **Is diverse in emotional outcomes:** can be weird, hopeful, joyful, scary, disastrous, and so on |
| **Can take place in the past, present, or future** |
| **Can be a novel genre on its own or a composite subgenre; when a composite subgenre, it may take place in other genre and literary fictions (i.e., in science fiction, fantasy, or literary fiction)** |
| **Evolves with natural history and newest ecological and climate crises and, when realism, accords with science** |
| **May have common environmental topics such as droughts, floods, wildlife, extinction, and place-based issues as well as common human topics such as cultural diaspora, refugee crises, love, politics, mystery, and survival** |
| **Can take place anywhere in the world, representing cultural and environmental diversity** |
Eco-fiction evolved with ecocriticism, which simply examines the relationship between literature and the environment. Fiction that falls under the umbrella happens in all genres, in all times, in all ages, and in all places, even those not found on our Earth.

The ecology, nature, or environmental issues within the story generally drive the plot, character development, and/or provide a natural landscape that is important, however.

Ecologically oriented fiction has been around since people began telling stories long ago. As eco-fiction evolved with natural histories and currently with environmental “hyperobjects,” such as climate change, an uptick has shown that more and more authors are writing in this field, especially since the 1970s. Many authors, even when writing about disaster, inspire with courage, strength, and community rebuilding.

Also, readers don’t like to be preached at, and a lot of readers hate grimdark, so, yeah, papa don’t preach and we shall overcome.
One genre does not rule them all. Other similar modes of storytelling have specific traits on their own.

- Afrofuturism & Africanfuturism
- Nature writing
- Ecological weird fiction
- Eco-horror
- Literary fiction
- Rewilded novels
- Green fiction
- Environmental science fiction
- Eco-Fantasy
- Climate fiction
- Solarpunk, biopunk, ecopunk, lunarpunk
- Anthropocene fiction
- Indigenous speculative fiction
Originally evolved with the study of natural history, along with ecocriticism; became popular in the 1970s, though earlier works predated the term.

The anthology *Eco-fiction*, edited by John Stadler and written by major science fiction authors, was published by Washington Square Press in April 1971.

Jim Dwyer’s academic and reading studies lead to *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*, University of Nevada Press in April 2010.

The field is evolving thanks to modern media and academic groups (Dragonfly.eco, Cambridge Ecofiction Group, New York Times, ASLE, etc.).
Why Is this Fiction So Important?

- Fiction humanizes the world around us
- Fiction can foster more empathy for others, including for plants and animals, and can guide the reader to other world views
- Science fiction can provide real futuristic warnings and inspire new and cleaner technologies
- Symbolism, a tool used in fiction, helps create impact by enhancing dry facts and figures and allowing us to see things in a different light
- Fiction entertains but also informs, widening our knowledge of the natural world but usually without being didactic or preachy
### Historical Examples (Up to 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/Translator</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moby-Dick</td>
<td>Herman Melville</td>
<td>1851</td>
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<td>The Grapes of Wrath</td>
<td>John Steinbeck</td>
<td>1939</td>
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<td>The Giving Tree</td>
<td>Shel Silverstein</td>
<td>1964</td>
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<td>Hainish Cycle Series</td>
<td>Ursula K. Le Guin</td>
<td>1984</td>
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<td>Dune</td>
<td>Frank Herbert</td>
<td>1965</td>
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<td>Parable of the Sower</td>
<td>Octavia Butler</td>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>Forest of a Thousand Daemons</td>
<td>D.O. Fagunwa</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wolf Totem</td>
<td>Jiang Rong</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
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Modern Examples (2000 and Beyond)

Strange Beasts of China, Yan Ge (2006)
Flight Behavior, Barbara Kingsolver (2006)
The Man with Compound Eyes, Wu Ming-Yi (2011)
Wolf Light, Yaba Badoe (2019)
Dreamtime, Venetia Welby (2021)
Oil on Water, Helon Habila (2016)
Bangkok Wakes to Rain, Pitchaya Sudbanthad (2019)
Oryx & Crake Trilogy, Margaret Atwood (2003-2019)
My Picks

Books that Shaped Me: Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O’Dell, Dance of the Coyote by Bill Hotchkiss, various fables and fairy tales


Sci-fi and Fantasy Classics: Dune by Frank Herbert, The Dispossessed by Ursula K. Le Guin, The Lord of the Rings books by JRR Tolkien, A Song of Ice and Fire series by George RR Martin, Ice by Anna Kavin

The Weird: Southern X Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer, Fauna by Christiane Vadnais, The Other Side of the Mountain by Michael Bernanos, The Willows by Algernon Blackwood, Jagannath by Karin Tidbeck

Travel the World: Dreamtime by Venetia Welby, Oil on Water by Helon Habila, Bangkok Wakes to Rain by Pitchaya Sudbanthad, Dark Constellations by Pola Oloixarac, Memory of Water by Emmi Itäranta, How Beautiful We Were by Imbolo Mbue

Currently Reading: The Morning Star by Karl Ove Knausgård; next: Broken Earth trilogy by NK Jemisin
Web Projects
- https://dragonfly.eco
- Research Projects at ASLE
- Cambridge Ecofiction Bookgroup
- Empirical Ecocriticism

Web Articles
- Atwood, Margaret. “It’s Not Climate Change—It’s Everything Change.” Medium, 2015
- Beres, Derek. “Why reading fiction is as important now as ever.” Big Think, 2018.

Books and Journals

See Ecolitbooks.com for a large list of journals and references.

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Some Books