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Book Review: Sisters of the Earth: An Anthology of Women's Prose and Poetry about Nature.

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**Sisters of the Earth:
An Anthology of Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature**

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SISTERS OF THE EARTH: AN ANTHOLOGY OF WOMEN'S PROSE AND POETRY ABOUT NATURE, Edited by Lorraine Anderson, Random House, 1991, \$17.50Cn. Reviewed by Trudy Frisk.

Most well known 'Nature writers' are men, a fact which may reflect both the greater ease of access to the outdoors and society's proclivity to accept them as authorities. Women, if they figure at all in such writings, are peripheral; the tacit assumption by both author and public is that women's wilderness experiences can be subsumed under the heading "Man and Nature."

Lorraine Anderson was perplexed and disturbed at the dearth of available women's writing about

nature. She admired such authors as Thoreau and Abbey and concurred with their conclusion but believed that, in order to achieve diversity and balance, women's voices must be heard. *Sisters of the Earth* her collection of women's prose and poetry about nature is the result.

Anderson states in her preface that she doubts there is a woman's view of nature. "Women, like men," she contends, "are individuals, each with a slightly different perspective, conditioned by innate sensibility and experience. It now seems to me that there are as many women's views of nature as there are women." (preface xvii)

There are indeed. *Sisters of the Earth* may be read on several levels: as natural history and conservation, ecophilosophy, women's history, or, simply, compelling literature. Contributions span the centuries from the first European settlement of North America to the present. They include early descriptions of presumed limitless Eastern forests and current warnings about pollution and species loss.

We are reminded that the women of another era whose works are excerpted here were as staunch conservationists as they were suffragettes and abolitionists. Celia Loughton Thaxter was involved in the Audubon Society. Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* influenced Thoreau. Anna Comstock, a key figure in the nature study movement of the late 1800s wrote three college textbooks on insects and taught nature study at Cornell, where she was a full professor.

Anderson's selections, from a wide diversity of authors and literary forms, reflect women's lives on a continent where wilderness is an ever-present influence. Some are familiar: Susan Griffin condemning the taming of all that is wild, Elizabeth Dodson Gray reiterating connections between despoliation of nature and degradation of women, Rachel Carson's classic *Silent Spring*. To these are added unexpected, delightful surprises. One such is nine year old Opal Whiteley whose writing is so lyrical that when her diary (from which the selection is chosen) was published in 1920, critics refused to believe the author was a child. Ursula le Guin, Alice Walker, Mary Austin, Barbara Nor, Margaret Murie and Neridel le Sueur are included. To some of us, Emily Dickinson, Geneva Stratton-Porter and Laura Ingalls Wilder are old friends.

Indigenous women are well represented. Linda Hogan Brooke Medicine Eagle and others tell of their rituals and ancient ways of knowing.

Many contributors describe their affinity with a special place; Mabel Dodge Luhan writes of Taos and mysterious Blue Lake, Edith Warner, autumn in the Jemez foothills, Anne Zwinger the Green River and canyonlands, Willa Cather the ever changing beauty of desert and mesa. They emphasize the importance of time spent alone in wilderness, attuned to ecological rhythms; to "seed time and rock time." (p. 43)

Spiritual closeness implies no sentimental anthropomorphism: quite the contrary. These women are keen observers and accurate recorders of natural phenomena. Death and predation are accepted. "If I have learned nothing more.... I have thoroughly learned to keep hands off the processes of nature." affirms Laura Lee Davidson. (p. 191) Some of the selections are from scientific studies or diaries kept during such field work as Lois Crisler's study of a wolf pack in Alaska's Brooks Range, or Theodora

Stanwell-Fletcher's collecting flora and fauna for B.C.'s Provincial Museum in that province's remote Driftwood Valley.

These women are prepared to sacrifice physical comfort. "For the pleasure of living outdoors," insists Edna Brush Perkins, "you are willing to have your eyes smart from the smoke of the campfire, and to be wet and cold and to fight mosquitoes and flies." (p. 140). And, like Gretel Ehrlich, they value the solitude. "Wilderness has no conditions, no sure routes, no peaks or

ethnic, they relinquish security. wilderness has no conditions, no sure routes, no peaks or goals...it is a many-pointed truth." (p. 116)

Anderson is skeptical of claims that women, as a group, are innately closer to nature than men. She asserts that traditional gender socialization, by emphasizing caring and nurturing as female qualities, have relegated us to the domestic sphere; the antithesis of everything wild and free. The obverse of the nurturing woman is the domesticating woman, from whom most men and many women ceaselessly try to escape.

There are no domesticating women in this anthology. Sue Hubbell reflects for us the feelings of many of us when she muses;

I wonder if I am becoming feral. Wild things and wild places pull me more strongly than they did a few years ago and domesticity...not at all. It is a good time to be a grown up woman with individuality...we have lived long enough and seen enough to understand in a more than intellectual way that we will die and so we have learned to live as though we are mortal. Time for us will have an end. That is why I have stopped sleeping inside. A house is too small, too confining. I want the whole world and the stars, too. (p. 136)

Such women accept danger as an integral part of wilderness. China Galland relates in "Running Lava Falls",

The tension this morning is like a wired fence sparking at the slightest touch. Today we run Lava Falls. Water flow is about fifteen hundred cubic feet per second, giving Lava a solid ten rating on the scale of difficulty for rapids. Number ten. Lava marks the outer limit...The mist that covers much of our day to day life is burned off in the heat of the apparent risk we are taking. The possibility of death is no longer veiled or morbid consideration; it is valid and essential to take into account. (p. 149)

A common theme in *Sisters of the Earth* is that humans, male and female, threaten the existence of other species; that it is our duty to make room for them. Dorothy Richards accepts the inevitable conclusion: "To accommodate ourselves to beavers and a variety of other creatures, we must 'think small' in the realm of human population." (p. 354)

Sisters of the Earth reminds us that women possess the qualities of endurance, courage, foresight, strength and observation necessary to appreciate wilderness and survive there, and that women on this continent have passionately defended wild places. It is a book for everyone who, forced to choose between human cities or wild places and herons, prefer the latter.

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