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Facts, Shapes, Our Relationship to the Landscape—A Conversation with David Quammen



David Quammen was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He studied at Yale and Oxford. In 1973 with a "fly rod and a Volkswagen bus" he headed west, landing in Montana where

he currently resides. Mr. Quammen is perhaps best known for "Natural Acts," a column he wrote for Outside magazine for fifteen years. During this time, he gained a reputation with readers for making natural science understandable and relevant, and with scientists for getting it right. His columns are collected in Natural Acts: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature, and The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature.

Mr. Quammen's nonfiction writing didn't stop with this column. He has published several other works including Wild Thoughts, The Boilerplate Rhino, and the exhaustively researched and eloquently written The Song of the Dodo. He also writes fiction and has published To Walk the Line, The Zolta Configuration and Blood Line: Stories of Fathers and Sons. His talent has been widely recognized by readers and critics alike; in the late eighties, he was honored with the National Magazine Award and a Guggenheim fellowship. He is currently working on a book with the working title Monster of God, "about large, man-eating predators, their ecological and mythic relationship with humans, and their future, if any, on planet Earth."



David Thomas Sumner (Ph.D., University of Oregon) teaches in the English Department at Weber State University. His essays have appeared in Ecocomposition (SUNY Press, 2001) and In Our Own Voice (Allyn & Bacon, 1999). He is also contributing editor for The Shape of Reason (Allyn & Bacon, 2000). Sumner is currently working on a rhetorical study of American nature writing and its connection to environmental ethics.

This interview is part of a series of conversations with contemporary western writers about the ethical and cultural implications of nature writing. Other interviews by David Sumner include:

[Conversation with Barry Lopez](#)

[Conversation with David James Duncan](#)

[Conversation with Stephen Trimble](#)

[Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams](#)

Tell us a little bit about what you do. How do you describe yourself?

The genre or the category itself—nature writing—is fluid and fuzzy on the edges. Thank God it is, because I frankly hate being called a nature writer. So does Barry [Lopez] and many other writers. Barry and I talk about that, not infrequently. And there are some places [i.e., academic departments] now that are trying to get a grip on what has increasingly, in recent years and decades, spilled over the edge of the conventional category of nature writing and involves more politics, more reporting, a different kind of rhetoric, a different set of voices. Landscape nonfiction, or whatever it is that Ed Abbey did, and what Barry and I do, and what Chuck Bowden does, and Terry [Tempest Williams] did in *Refuge*. What do you call it? You don't exactly call it nature writing, but there's no other accepted phrase. It's not political ornithology, which somebody labeled it in a whimsical moment—Margaret Atwood's husband, Graeme Gibson. I don't know. I don't know his work. But we were at a conference together at Port Townsend one time. I didn't talk to Gibson, but Barry and I were talking about this at that point, and he had just read Jonathan Evan Maslow's book, *Bird of Life, Bird of Death* about Guatemala. Do you know that book?

I don't.

A very interesting book. Jonathan Evan Maslow went off to Guatemala essentially as a bird watcher to see the resplendent quetzal, and he ended up seeing body dumps and the evidence of the massacre of Mayan Indians by the army and that whole situation—you know, central America in the '80s. And he wrote, essentially, a travel book called *Bird of Life, Bird of Death*, which started out to be a nature book and ended up to be a political travel critique. Because of that, Graeme Gibson whimsically came up with the phrase "political ornithology" for this—you know, whether you are writing about Salvadoran refugees crossing the Sonoran desert or whatever it is—that involves a certain

amount of landscape, a certain amount of nature observation, but also politics, opinion, outrage, new journalism all sort of mixed together.

When I talked to Barry, we were talking about this very same subject. He was claiming that what we are calling nature writing, at least what he defines as nature writing for lack of a better term, is the literature that looks deeply at the human relationship to place and community. He said that he sees it as the form of American literature that continues to wrestle with big questions, rather than turning inward like much fiction does in the late 20th century. I thought that was interesting.

Yeah, it is. And it is a big claim and I don't entirely disagree with it, although I can't claim to see that kind of shifting continuity between those two traditions. But I certainly think that's what going on in this new sort of nonfiction with landscape as a big and important form of American writing—as big and important at least as any other type of writing. I think that—certainly to me—it is vastly larger and more important than angst-ridden, East Coast autobiographical novels. I think the world has enough of them (laughter).

You read a couple of those and you get it.

Right. We need not mention any names, but there are so many names to mention that it wouldn't be fair anyway. But I think that some people say, "Oh, so and so, he's a nature writer; isn't that nice? Whoever likes nature writing will like this book." Well, stuff and bull-shit. As far as I'm concerned, we're writing about the world, and they're writing about little subcategories, like macroeconomics and global politics. You know, those to me are little categories that fit within this larger category of what I think of as the underlying subject of all my work, insofar as I ever think about underlying subjects—the way landscape shapes human history and vice versa, the way human history shapes landscape.

Before we go further, could you tell us a little bit about your background, how you came to this kind of writing?

As a published writer I started as a novelist. And that seems to be sort of assaround backwards. I literally had not published a newspaper story, a magazine story, anything except in a student literary magazine before I published my first novel, with a good publishing house, in 1970, a book called *To Walk the Line*, published by Knopf the year I got out of college. It was a novel about friendship between a black fellow and a white fellow—liberal guilt in the ghetto, west side of Chicago, fires and strife, 1968. And it was autobiographical.

I grew up in Cincinnati, went to Yale as an undergraduate because they had a great English department. I had always been interested in two things: the natural world and writing. Since I was ten or eleven I wanted to be a writer, but I also thought for a while that I wanted to be a biologist. I ended up with inspiring teachers on the literary side, never any particularly inspiring teachers on the biology side. So I went to Yale, and I wanted to become a novelist, and I became a novelist; but soon I discovered that despite the fact that I had gotten over that hurdle very precociously—young—I couldn't make a living at it. I went to grad school in England for two years and then moved to Montana.

Grad school in what?

Literature. I worked on Faulkner. I did a long thesis on structure in Faulkner's novels. I was obsessed with Faulkner for years.

I wrote a second novel and a third novel, both of which went into the trunk—unpublishable. One of them was titled *Spiders of Madagascar*. It was about a photographer. I came to Montana and started working on a fourth novel, about the death of Faulkner and about relationships between fathers and sons and about the storytelling impulse. I worked on that while I tended bar over in Missoula and waited tables. I wrote that book and never could get it published, except for some of the stories within the bigger story. Those eventually became my book *Blood Line: Stories of Fathers and Sons*. In the meantime, while I was paying dues over there, I started taking grad courses in zoology at the University of Montana. And I started writing nonfiction. Book reviews for the *Christian Science Monitor*, essays about aquatic insects for *Montana Outdoors*, anything. Eventually I turned myself into a nonfiction writer. And, mostly during the late 70s and early 80s, I started magazine freelancing. I started doing a column for *Outside*. And then I found myself, to my great surprise, a science essayist and a science journalist. In the meantime, I wrote a couple more novels—spy

novels—published those in the early and mid 80's, and I haven't written any fiction since, probably, '87. I started working on *The Song of the Dodo* about then, in about '87. I worked on that for eight years, about half or two-thirds time, while I was also doing my column for *Outside*. I ended up doing the column for about 15 years. I spent eight years on *The Song of the Dodo*, and when I came out of all that I could barely remember that I wanted to be a novelist.

And so you've settled into the nonfiction side.

"Settling in" sounds a little too comfortable, but I've tracked toward it because of a number of things. One, I could make a living at it. Two, I could reach a much larger audience doing it. Three, I got a sense that probably I was better at it and more useful—more indispensable—than I was as a fiction writer. I felt like I was doing things that other people weren't doing. I never really claimed to have felt that way very often as a fiction writer. And finally, I really, really like it. It takes me out to see the surface of the planet.

You know, Annick Smith said something really interesting about this flourishing of nonfiction writing. She said that we have so many fictions thrown at us through corporate culture—advertisements to sitcoms—that she thinks the interest is that people are groping for real stories—for stories that connect in a way that those other stories don't.

Yeah, I think that's well thought and well put, and I agree with her.

How did you get involved with this Headwaters project.

First of all, the Blackfoot—when I first moved to Montana in '73, I had a fly rod and a Volkswagen bus and a box of books and a couple of thousand dollars as a

nest egg and a big ambitious novel that I wanted to write. And I didn't know a soul in the state of Montana—zip, zero. I drove into Missoula over Lolo pass on September 12, 1973 and checked into a rooming house down by the courthouse. I didn't know anybody in the state of Montana, and I had never been in the state of Montana before. So it was in some ways a really wonderful, exciting time. I was twenty-five. And in other ways it was kind of a lonely, miserable time because I was trying to start again as a writer after already having started. The editor who had published my book at Knopf was no longer there, so that was one of the reasons that I was starting over.

It's a major thing, not only to publish a novel right out of college, but to publish it with Knopf.

It's a rare thing, yeah. And as I found out, it's not to be confused with a red carpet paving the way for the rest of your career (Laughter). I learned. And it was a healthy lesson. It was not a tasty lesson—but healthy (Laughter). So I got to pay dues. I just paid them after my first book instead of before my first book.

Anyway, during that time, I would fish the Blackfoot a lot. I sold my Volkswagen for another bit of nest egg and bought an old '52 Chevy pickup, and I'd drive that old beater up the Blackfoot and stop at a favorite little hole, and I'd fish and take a couple of fish home and eat them and, essentially, taught myself to fly fish on the Blackfoot. Well, I had taught myself earlier on the Green River in Wyoming—a little bit. But the Blackfoot was where I really learned.

I spent a month on the Little Green, way above Pinedale, living out of the bus while I was on my way to Montana, learning there to fly fish, living off fish and reading *War and Peace*. And that was sort of my vacation after graduate school.

So anyway, the Blackfoot was important to me. It was a river I really loved during those years in Missoula. And then much later this gold mine threatened it and Annick Smith called me about this. I had written a number of things about fly fishing, but I don't fly fish anymore, and I'm not even sure I know why. I know some of the reasons, but there is no single reason. I just don't. And I wrote about that in my piece in there, as I recall. Anyway, I really, really respect and like Annick Smith. She called up and said, "We are doing this thing; how 'bout it?" And I said, "Sure"—because of the Blackfoot and because of Annick.

What is the responsibility of someone writing this kind of nonfiction to environmental ethics?

Whose environmental ethics? Their responsibility to their own ethics is very high, but I'm not going to point at anybody and say that their ethics are wrong. I mean, I might argue with them and try and persuade them that they ought to see things differently, but there are no Ten Commandments of environmental ethics that I've signed off on for everybody. I think that the writers who work in this vein have a responsibility similar to any nonfiction writer: be accurate, be interesting, be graceful—provide good reading—and write about things that are real and important, as *you* see them.

There seems to be a tradition of an ethic in this writing—I'm using the word ethic really broadly...

Deep ecology?

I wouldn't even define it that narrowly. But it seems that in nature writing there is always an implied relationship with the natural world that calls for an ethical response. But you bring up something else. You say, "Be accurate." One of the things that literature has often done is ignore a relationship with the physical world, but nature writing doesn't allow that kind of emphasis on artifice. I would like you to tell us a little about what you think the relationship is between science, empirical observation, and the better nature writing that you have either read or written. How important is it for a nature writer to be a naturalist, for instance? Ed Abbey, for one, resisted that term and said he could only name two birds: the rosy bottomed skinny dipper and the fried chicken (Laughter).

Again, it's a big, woolly category, and there is room for a lot of different kinds of people. I don't think everybody needs to be a naturalist anymore than Ed Abbey

did. I'm not good at birds. I know more about the taxonomy of the primates of Madagascar than I do of the birds of prey of Montana. And in terms of field identification, that's also true. I respect those colleagues of mine who are crackerjack field naturalists of one sort or another. Barry in certain areas. Robert Michael Pyle—Bob Pyle, Mr. Butterfly. I envy his knowledge, and he presents it well. I know a fair bit about entomology in terms of field identification. Not anything compared to an entomologist, but it is one of the few things that I have really focused on and studied. Birds, not so good; wild flowers, terrible; trees, pretty shaky; reptiles, better; but I don't claim to be a naturalist. I would more likely identify myself as a science journalist. Ecology and evolutionary biology are scientific fields that I've followed for about twenty years, and I've spent a lot of time with good, well-trained ecologists and biologists in the field. I've read a lot of scientific papers. So, I'm pretty well informed on that, just the way a political reporter or a crime reporter is informed about his beat. That doesn't mean that you take me out now and point to a little brown bird and hope that I will be able to tell you what its name is.

How about what is actually written. How is nonfiction nature writing different from fiction? They are both literature, but are the responsibilities of each different?

Well, this is, I think, a hot topic still—a hot issue. I believe that nonfiction is a high category that must be ascended to by writing. I don't believe that it's a catchall category that things fall into. If you write a novel and there is a bit of fact in it and you're not sure which it is, you call it nonfiction. That's bullshit as far as I'm concerned. I believe in holding nonfiction to a very rigorous standard of factual accuracy. That means not just what an animal does or where it's found, but things like quotations. I am driven crazy by people who claim to be nonfiction writers, who fill up their books with periphrastic recapitulation that they have assembled from memory and put quotation marks around it.

I mean, their periphrastic recapitulation is a perfectly valid journalistic technique. There are certain times when you can't use a tape recorder and you can't scribble enough notes, so you go back to your hotel and you try to remember what this guy said. But what does a quotation mark have to do with that? A lot of my colleagues see it differently and allow themselves great latitude to treat things that are half-true and half-recollected and half-invented as though they are bits of the nonfiction mosaic. I don't like that as a writer or as a reader. I just about can't read it. Books like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* that

are clearly uneasy mixes, but that call themselves nonfiction, are not nonfiction as far as I'm concerned. They're fiction. They're less interesting to me than if they were actually mosaics composed of real solid fact. Is this getting at your question?

Yes, exactly. I just want to press you a little further on it. Two examples come to mind. Desert Solitaire is structured and framed like Walden. It's seasonal; it takes place in one year, all of these things. The actual experiences that Ed Abbey puts in that book occurred over a three year period of time, and his wife and child were with him for at least one of those years although they never appear in the book. Would that violate your sense of nonfiction?

The part about editing out the wife and child does not bother me. Part of the artful assembling of mosaic is what you leave out. And you are entitled to leave anything out as long as you don't deny it. The part about moving things around in time and sort of creating composite seasons out of a number of summers and a number of different falls does violate what I'm saying. I have infinite affection and forgiveness in my heart for that particular book. I could cite other books—Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

That was my other example.

I can't remember exactly, but there is something in it about a giant water bug and a frog, and Bill Kittredge or Scott Slovic or somebody told me that, well, Annie never saw that. It never happened.

Also, the cat at the beginning of the book that leaves rosettes of blood on her chest is somebody else's—that happened to somebody else, but she claims it is her own in that book. And one more example from that book, a book which I like immensely and respect in many, many ways—but it has also received criticism for the richness of the inner life she portrays. It has been criticized as being far too rich philosophically and emotionally to ever be possible.

This is *Tinker Creek*?

Yeah. And so those are the criticisms Dillard received, and she responds, "Well, I'm a writer," and says, "Most of that happened, and I framed it." So to continue your point, is that less forgivable?

I don't want to be hard on Annie about that. I've never met her face-to-face, but I feel a friendly "colleaguehood" with her. And I can't really explain why I would forgive *Desert Solitaire* and not forgive *Pilgrim*. But, nowadays, I don't like to read anything that gives me the smell of doing that, and I don't allow myself to do it. I don't know, maybe I do it in weak moments.

There's another category of invention—the clearly facetious dialogue exchange. Mike Royko used to write about going into a bar and Slats Grobnik was there, and Slats had all these opinions. We understood that there *was* no Slats Grobnik. He wasn't deceiving us, right? And I have written bits of dialogue in essays where I didn't have notes but I remembered, "Well, seven years ago I went on that trip with that crazy guy and he said something like this....," and then I would create six to eight lines of dialogue, generally for sort of humorous purposes, without any sense that I was really engaged in inaccurate reporting. So I know that I've done that, too. Annie, I suppose, could legitimately say, "Well, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, there's an ambiance and reflection, and I don't want people to take this as literal truth." I don't know how I would judge that if I read that book now. If you want readers to take it as fact, then it needs to be fact; and if it's not fact, then you need to indicate that the edges of it are soft somehow.

So, not to be obtuse, but when you say "fact," what do you mean? That category can sometimes be difficult to define.

It can be. Not as difficult as the category "truth," which I avoid (Laughter). "Fact" is a safer word than that. If it's quoted dialogue—as far

as I'm concerned that means you heard it, you taped it, or you wrote it down—you got it essentially verbatim. You didn't paraphrase it eight hours later. If it's an animal doing a given thing in a given place, it means that that animal did that thing in that place and not some other animal in some other place. I don't know how much further I can define it.

The other thing about being held to standards of fact is that I function mostly as a science journalist. Following scientists in the field and describing their work has taught me that most scientists detest journalists, for good reason. Daily reporters, and most magazine writers, are very sloppy about facts. They don't get it right the first time, and they don't check back to find out whether they got it right. It's understandable not to get it right the first time, but it's inexcusable not to check back and complete that cycle and correct it. It has been necessary for me to work really hard to check with scientists when I'm writing something, and eventually it has become an asset because reasonably often I run into scientists who know my work. The fact that they know it is not necessarily an advantage. It would be a disadvantage if they had read it and they had reason to think that I was another sloppy, much published journalist. But they tend to see that I have been careful to get things right, and it wins me access. It's really important to me that they are not slamming the door in my face. They're saying, "Okay, I've seen what you do and I'll trust you with my work." And I know Barry has the same experience, and for the same reason. In *Arctic Dreams*, the people he spent time with, he worked very hard not to confuse their hardgained insights and data. And with John McPhee, I am sure—the same thing.

There is this other thing that goes on in literature, and this is why nature writing is such a unique place. There is this responsibility to fact, but then there is this appeal to pathos. It's an aesthetic, an artistic and emotional thing that connects to ethics. The best example in contemporary work is probably within Aldo Leopold's work. He moved from science to ethics through this appeal to pathos. So, how does that figure in your work? And secondly, how do you remain true to facts and also incorporate aesthetic considerations?

That is a large and tough question, and I'm not sure that I've got a grip on it; but I'll take a quick stab, and then you can set me back on course. I make shapes. Many of the pieces I work with are facts. The other pieces I work with are jokes and turns of phrase and rhetorical techniques and observations and expressions of passion. And putting all of those together in ways that are surprising and

effective is what the nature writer does, which is different from what the science historian or even the science reporter does. I don't know if I can take it any further than that right now.

Let me clarify myself a bit. We talked earlier about how nature writing is not about nature in the sense of listing the birds you see, but about addressing these bigger questions of our relationship with the natural world—our "relationship with the landscape" is how you put it. And it is a really big question. How does a shaping of those facts figure into addressing that question, groping towards some better understanding of that relationship?

First of all, I guess I should try and answer it this time by saying that I think of my job, my role, my mission, as simply, primarily, to be a good writer and not to be an environmental ethicist or a deliverer of a vision, or a proselytizer of a set of values. My primary responsibility is to be a good writer and go wherever that takes me. Because of my own concerns and beliefs, this takes me more and more often into writing about landscape and humanity's relationship with landscape.

The secondary mission does become trying to affect, in some tiny way, the future—the present and the future of our history with landscape. To influence people. To change the way people see, first of all, and feel and behave—reckless enterprises for a writer to aspire to, but there you are. So, sure, yeah, I want to change the world, and I want to persuade people to see, feel, and behave differently, and I feel like the most likely way I can do that effectively is by mixing entertainment and surprise and literary pleasure with edification and suasion in ways that other people aren't doing—in ways that the reader hasn't already become inured to. Much, much too much, environmental writing is the same old sawing on the same old fiddle, preaching to the converted. Saying things that you know are so right for other people who are already believing. That is just not something I want to do. It just doesn't sound like any valuable way to spend the time.

So, you're saying that of course you've got a point of view; but if you're a good writer, that point of view is going to be fresh, and it's not going to hit the reader over the head, necessarily, but perhaps surprise and delight. It is not that there isn't an ethical

stance, it is that it needs to be presented artfully—in a way that is interesting and a lot of other things.

Yes, and, I think, whether you are talking about the writing of one particular essay or a life's work, if it's interesting work, then the whole thing is the process of discovering what your ethical stance is. You don't decide to identify and outline your ethical stance. You learn your ethical stance by going to places and dealing with subjects—especially with essays—because that is what the essay is classically thought to be about: to attempt to figure out what you believe about a particular thing.

In other words, rather than coming at the writing with an immovable and a concrete ethic, it is more coming to the writing with past experience and then an openness to new possibility, as you learn about what you are going to write about.

Yes, right. Coming to it with past experience and with convictions—call them biases—but with a certain openness and honesty with regard to the material. I mean, maybe you go off somewhere to write a story for *Audubon* magazine about some developer who is going to put a shopping center on top of the last patch of habitat of the California gnatcatcher. And you discover that this guy is a charming character. He has had a shitty childhood and he's overcome it, and he's fat and he drinks too much beer and he smokes too much, but he is incredibly loyal to his Down's Syndrome son and he is supporting three drunken brothers, so you fall in love with this guy—well, say so.

But does that change your position on whether or not...

No, you sort it out. You deal with both those things. And that makes for an interesting piece.