

On honoring complexity in your work



Author Megan Mayhew-Bergman discusses the power writers have within the climate crisis, learning from your hate mail, and the unique perspective of southern artists.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2248 words.

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What made you first realize that you wanted to focus much of your writing on the natural world?

I always grew up with a sensitive heart. I've been naturally attuned to animal life in the natural world since I was young, but I think it was after my first book was published. That first book, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, is pretty squarely environmental. I don't think I realized how much it was, though, until someone wrote me a piece of hate mail. You learn a lot by praise, but you also learn a lot from your hate mail. And this piece of hate mail said was from a group of human exceptionalists, and they were like, "You're an anti-human exceptionalist." I'd never heard the term, and I was like, "You know what? You're absolutely right. Thank you."

This idea, human exceptionalism, is the idea that humans have transcended their animal nature. That we are somehow entitled to the Earth's resources. And I definitely believe in interconnectedness and a sort of feeling that we've underestimated animal intelligence and rights. It was interesting: that piece of hate mail sort of illuminated a core belief.

I was on a run about that time. Back then, I would run six miles a day. It was sort of like a way to cope with mental health, early motherhood, work stress. And I was out on a run, and it was a winter where it had not snowed in Vermont. And I remember this kind of crushing feeling of environmental anxiety. I was in my early thirties at the time, and I thought, *We're not going to fix this*. I know that sounds gloomy, but it was this sort of like, *I don't think we're going to make the sacrifices we need to make in order to fix this*. And it hit me so hard that I made an enormous pivot in the tone of my work.

There's something I feel a lot in the grand scheme of the climate crisis: writing doesn't always feel like an active role. It can sometimes feel like a passive role. What power do you think writers have in the climate crisis?

More than we think.

I'm of a couple of beliefs. One, I'm from a blue collar southern lineage. I don't have any false notions that I'm saving lives with my work, necessarily. I do think the more I have a voice and a platform, the brighter the spotlight I can place on certain things. And I've always looked at one of my roles in the world as welcoming more people into the environmental conversation. As a young, petite, five-foot-two blonde with an easy sense of humor and a southern accent and not much of a science and camping background, I did not really feel early on welcome in that conversation. It felt like there are a lot of litmus tests for people who are like, "Am I environmental

enough? Do I know enough? Do I know enough to have a voice in this conversation?" I feel like one of my contributions in environmental writing has been to widen the aperture of what it can be and who belongs in this conversation. And that means changing the profile of faculty that I invite to the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers' Conference. It means mentoring people who have never really seen themselves as environmental writers.

I also think, right now, the power we have is in honoring complexity. I feel like probably the most common mistake environmental writers make is righteousness. I think self-righteousness is an enormous turnoff to readers, and I think it presumes that the writer has something figured out that the rest of us do not. And I think that's actually rarely the case. So I find humor, nuance, complexity, grounding things more in science, grounding things more in specific experiences: these are all important. There are a lot of under-tread opportunities in environmental writing that we still haven't touched in terms of really understanding the experiences of others. There are people who aren't intensely scientifically literate who still have a really valid viewpoint on what living in the Anthropocene is like or what living on the front lines of climate change is like.

I also would love to see more scientists and people with policy expertise writing in first person. It's historically been taboo for scientists and lawyers to be passionate, to write in first person to talk about emotion. And I think the best sort of writing that actually changes hearts and minds has a blend of the rational and the emotional. For those of us who do come from a more artistic angle or lived experience angle, I think we need to make sure we're grounding our ideas in science, in scientific reality. I think people who are in the science world can focus more on letting people in emotionally.

In terms of your own cultural diet, then, how do you balance the intake of the rational and the emotional?

We need a diet that blends both in order to have a well-rounded sense of the climate crisis. I feel like journalism can give really necessary facts and shine bright lights on true experiences that are happening and unfolding and examine policy and the impacts of policy. I think what fiction can do—and this is why I still write and read both fiction and nonfiction—I think we've vastly underestimated the spiritual and emotional impact environmental degradation has on the human psyche and spirit. And I think fiction can speak to that and model that.

You spoke earlier about positioning yourself within the environmental conversation and feeling out of place. I feel that way a lot, too, in particular as a fiction writer. I feel self-conscious, like it's not as important or "hardcore" or something to write fiction as it is to write journalistically about climate. How can fiction writers embrace the form in order to educate others and promote a sense of empathy around this crisis?

I admire climate writing that already folds the climate crisis into the everyday pressures that people are living under. Fiction often under-tends to everyday people and their working lives. So I admire writing that shows how the effects of the climate crisis are already pressurizing characters. A beginner's mistake sometimes is to use climate change as a sort of plot point, or in a way that feels like a little bit of a hot take. And I guess I just want people to write as if it's already happening. Because it is.

I think, in futuristic and sci-fi writing, of course it makes sense to imagine what could happen and what that would feel like. And I think there's real value in laying out that emotional experience for people. An opportunity that I've also heard spoken of that I have not made use of myself is the fact that we are, traditionally in literature, really great at building dystopian worldviews and what if it goes wrong and how bad it will be and how we will handle this. But we have not been traditionally great and how good it could be if we made changes. And I don't know if I'd buy into any utopias at this point, but I think there is maybe a missed opportunity to say, "What if we did make these changes? These policy amendments? What if we incorporated this tech? What does that look like? What does that feel like?"

You mentioned the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers' Conference earlier. As you've built this conference to what it is today as its director, what have been your goals from an environmentalist standpoint?

I want more people to feel welcome in this conversation and this type of writing. I want more people to look at themselves and say, "I am an environmental writer." Because I think environmental degradation and climate touches

everything. I feel that way about jobs when people ask me, "Am I in a climate job? Is my line of work and climate?" Almost everyone is, if you think about it and if you regard it that way.

I feel like old environmental writing used to be a man in a green tweed suit walking through waving golden fronds of wheat or staring at a frothing ocean. And I think a lot of people still have that sort of feeling when they think about what is environmental writing, and they don't see themselves in that ideal. But environmental writing can be urban. We have indoor environments. Different environments pressurize things in different ways. They affect water. Affect work. Affect emotions. And I feel like there's a natural narrative arc in the way places are changing. Change and tension are essential narrative ingredients, and they're all over the climate crisis. So there are just so many ways for more people to see themselves in this work and for more people to learn how to do it well again.

There are a lot of traps that people fall into when they first attempt environmental writing. And I've read a lot of admissions in slush piles, so I know what those look like. They're usually referencing Thoreau a little too hard. Thoreau is this sacred cow in environmental writing, but we need to widen the canon. And people have been giving him a more critical look. Again, it's the righteousness trap, and I think we have to ask ourselves how we can give the gift. Readers don't owe us their time, and we all have saturation points. How do we give readers a gift?

I have a friend who's an Italian director, and she said something that I think is the greatest tip for craft for environmental writers: "Hide the medicine in the cake." I think people forget that you actually have to tell a story that people want to read and that people will invest emotionally in. My mentor, Amy Hempel, used to say, "Story first."

You're originally from the south, but you live in Vermont now. What was your trajectory toward Vermont?

I'm going to have to give my age here, but I spent my first 30 years in the south, and it was like a pre-internet south. I was born in Gaffney, South Carolina, where they have the peach water tower. I moved to Rocky Mountain, North Carolina before I was one. And that's really where I was raised, by the beach and in the eastern tobacco towns of North Carolina. And then I went to Wake Forest University. I didn't even cross the Mason-Dixon line much until I was 30. I moved with my husband to the family farm in Vermont, where he took over his mother's position in the family veterinary clinic. I still feel like an alien species.

In what sense do you feel like an alien species?

I've never been able to accept the lack of light. I can sort of deal with the cold, but it's dark by 4:00 PM here in November. I think that shows up in people's personality types. Southern people are fast to a joke. They're friendly. People are definitely more stoic up here. I miss warmth in all ways. Personality warmth. Warmth of temperature. I still have a biochemical reaction to getting off an airplane in the south and feeling humidity. It's just home. That's just still what registers as home.

Do you think southern writers are uniquely positioned to write about the climate crisis?

Yeah. I actually do. I think people underestimate southerners in general, especially intellectually. I feel like I've dealt with that most of my life. I know a lot of other people have too. There's this pressure to feel like, "Oh, I have to neutralize my accent to be taken seriously," or that if you write exclusively about the south, you're going to be regionalized in a way that harms your career. People think you're only writing about Meemaw eating biscuits on a porch. I think there are a lot of unfair traps that still exist for southern writers. I think people are absolutely aware of them now, exploding them as they should.

The story of the land is complicated everywhere, and anybody on American soil is already in a complex relationship with land and land ownership and land stewardship. Southerners have to contend with an especially fraught narrative there. Sometimes, it's not north versus south, but people who are living in close proximity to the land, I think, in urban environments. There, the estrangement from the natural world becomes easier and more pronounced. For me, I think I've realized that, no matter where I live, I'm better suited in small rural places

where I can see the moon. I am thinking about the weather, and I don't feel that pronounced estrangement.

Megan Mayhew-Bergman recommends:

A daily walk that you know intimately.

Moleskine notebooks with blank pages. All sizes. Stashed everywhere. Bedside table. Car console. All five bags. Upstairs. Downstairs.

A memorized poem. Committing a poem to memory: it's just a healthy thing for your brain to do. It's like having a signature cocktail. I think everyone should have a signature poem.

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm's Greatest Hits.

One go-to internet video that makes you laugh. It's a harsh time. We need to know how to laugh.

Name

Megan Mayhew-Bergman

Vocation

author

□

Cameron Russell