

Eco-Fiction and M. A. Monroe

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Annotation: The article analyzes the concept of “eco-fiction” genre in the American Modern literature, chiefly in the works of one of the best-selling author Mary Alice Monroe. The definition and characteristics of the genre is briefly explained and its usage in the M.A.Monroe`s works are analyzed in the research work. The table included in the article identifies the important parallels between nature and human nature by sorting out the eco-themes mentioned in most of her “green” novels.

Keywords: Eco-fiction, “green” fiction, environmental issues, endangered species, eco-theme, the family saga, The Beach House series”, Skyward”, “Sweetgrass”, “Turtle Summer”, “The Islanders”.

INTRODUCTION. Sweetgrass is a historic tract of land in South Carolina that has been home to the Blakely family for eight generations. But Sweetgrass—named for the indigenous grass that grows in the area is in trouble. Taxes are skyrocketing. Bulldozers are leveling the surrounding properties. And the Blakelys could be forced to sell the one thing that continues to hold their disintegrating family together. That`s the premise of “Sweetgrass”, a 2005 book by Mary Alice Monroe, describing the history of basket weaving, the lush land, the threat imposed by developers and the difficulties of making a plantation prosper in the modern era. “Sweetgrass” falls under the niche category of “eco fiction,” a literary genre that`s developed quite the canon in the past few decades.

Eco-fiction is the branch of literature that encompasses nature-oriented (non-human) or environment-oriented (human impacts on nature) works of fiction.¹ While this super genre's roots are seen in classic, pastoral, magical realism, animal metamorphoses, science fiction, and other genres, the term ecofiction did not become popular until the 1970s when various movements created the platform for an explosion of environmental and nature literature, which also inspired ecocriticism.²

MAIN PART. In most fiction, environment plays a passive role that lies embedded in stability and an unchanging status quo. But this is changing. Our world is changing. We currently live in a world in which climate change poses a very real existential threat to life on the planet. The new normal is change. And it is within this changing climate that eco-fiction is realizing itself as a literary pursuit worth engaging in.

Eco-Fiction (short for ecological fiction) is a kind of fiction in which the environment—or one aspect of the environment—plays a major role, either as premise or as character. Our part in environmental destruction is often embedded in eco-fiction themes. At the heart of eco-fiction are

¹ Murphy, Patrick D. (2000). *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. p. 1.

² Dwyer, Jim (2010). *Where the Wild Books are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*. University of Nevada Press.

strong relationships forged between a major character and an aspect of their environment.³ The environmental aspect may serve as a symbolic connection to theme and can illuminate through the sub-text of metaphor a core aspect of the main character and their journey such as Herman Melville's man vs. wild epic *Moby Dick* or H.G. Wells' cautionary tale about meddling with nature, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. But eco fiction as we know it didn't truly take off until the 1900s. It started with texts from socially and environmentally conscious writers, including *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair and *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London. As the century progressed, science fiction writers like George R. Stewart and Ray Bradbury imagined Earth on the brink of collapse after plagues and natural disasters. Eco fiction got perhaps its biggest boost after *Silent Spring* was published in 1962.⁴

"The terms 'environmental fiction,' 'green fiction,' and 'nature-oriented fiction,' might better be considered as categories of ecofiction. Eco-fiction in writing is applied along with the following traits (or characteristics) that we might underline:

- Interdisciplinary and holistic
- Cross-cultural and syncretic
- Developing⁵

Eco-fiction is **interdisciplinary and holistic**: As appeared above, it uncovers integrity in the concern for our natural world as well as what can be found on various narrative platforms: suspense, romance, dystopian, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic, Arcadian, futuristic, crime, detective, and so on. Given the upstream and downstream effects of such issues as climate change, fracking, coal mining, animal justice, pollution, deforestation, and so on, this branch of fiction is not comprehensive and has no boundary other than the nature impacts by which it is characterized and clarified.

Eco-fiction is **cross-cultural and syncretic**: Ecofiction is written by authors all over the world. Natural issues, the desire to ensure our common environmental frameworks, and the praise of nature is an all-encompassing intention of numerous creators, which crosses all borders, languages, ethnicities, and belief systems.

Eco-fiction is **developing**: This branch of literature is evolutionary. Dwyer's field guide has hundreds of examples of ecofiction across time, from the roots and precursors---the earliest cave drawings, pastoral and classic, etc.--up through the 21st century. The continuity goes on. In May 2017, writing in *The New York Times*, Yale scholar Wai Chee Dimock reviewed Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Borne* and said, "This coming-of-age story signals that eco-fiction has come of age as well: wilder, more reckless and more breathtaking than previously thought, a wager and a promise that what emerges from the 21st century will be as good as any from the 20th, or the 19th."⁶ Two months later, The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment's (ASLE) 17th biennial conference⁷ focused on ecofiction as one of its main streams. Ecofiction continues to be alive and relevant, evolving into contemporary study and a way of thinking about new literature.

³ [https://www.tor.com/2020/11/10/ten-eco-fiction-novels-worth-discussing/Nina Munteanu](https://www.tor.com/2020/11/10/ten-eco-fiction-novels-worth-discussing/Nina_Munteanu) "Ten Eco-Fiction Novels Worth Discussing"

⁴ [HTTPS://WWW.GREENMATTERS.COM/NEWS/ECO-FICTION-CLIMATE-CHANGEWHATISECO FICTION?THESEBOOKSIMAGINE THE SCARY FUTURE OFCLIMATE CHANGE](https://www.greenmatters.com/news/eco-fiction-climate-change-what-is-eco-fiction-these-books-imagine-the-scary-future-of-climate-change) BY KRISTIN HUNT

⁵ Dwyer, Jim (2010). *Where the Wild Books are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*. University of Nevada Press. p. 2.

⁶ Dimock, Wai Chee (May 5, 2017). "There's No Escape From Contamination Above the Toxic Sea". *The New York Times*.

⁷ "Rust/Resistance: Works of Recovery". ASLE. ASLE. Retrieved 24 June 2017.

American contemporary author, conservationist Mary Alice Monroe is also famous for writing her novels based on the eco-fiction genre. She believes that moving to the coastal South Carolina was the ultimate decision which helped her to get close to the nature and write environmental fiction novels. Before moving there, she was already a noteworthy author. But, her new home allowed her to witness the fragility and the beauty of nature surrounding her new home.⁸ The quickly changing habitat of the region made her experience the necessary and the strong things, which she used in her books. Many of the books written by Mary are richly textured and delve into the various complexities of the parallels and the interpersonal relationships of the life and land. For example, *The Beach House* and *Swimming Lessons* refer to the plight of injured sea turtles. Her novel *Time Is a River* is about breast cancer survivors in a fly-fishing group in North Carolina, and *Last Light Over Carolina* describes the life and times of the shrimping industry. Mary Alice Monroe's writing is always sensitive and true, as inspiring as the natural wonder about which she writes.

THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. Mary Alice Monroe is The *New York Times* bestselling author of 27 books, including *Beach House*, *Swimming Lessons* and *Sweetgrass* and *Islanders* and so on. Monroe immerses herself in both academic research and volunteering to learn about a species or conservation issue. Then, she uses the knowledge and experiences working with animals and the wildlife experts to craft captivating stories that identify important parallels between nature and human nature. Bottlenose dolphins, monarch butterflies, shorebirds, and loggerhead sea turtles are among the wild species she has worked with and woven into her novels. We can analyze that in the following table as well:

Eco-theme	Title of the novel	Publication Year	References
sea turtles	<i>The Beach House Series</i> (The Beach House Memories, An Ocean Boulevard, The Beach House Reunion)	2002	The family moved to the Isle of Palms in 1999 and Monroe's work evolved from formulaic women's fiction to more mature, textured narratives. Notably, Monroe's works also shifted to focus on environmental themes.
	<i>Turtle Summer: A Journal for My Daughter</i> (picture-book)	2007	Teaching children about coastal conservation, this juvenile title eventually won several awards including the ASPCA Henry Bergh Award for 2007 and the Children's Book Council Award. ⁹
birds of prey	<i>Skyward</i>	2003	Monroe volunteered at the Center for Birds of Prey of the Avian Conservation Center in Awendaw, South Carolina.
basket weaving	<i>Sweetgrass</i>	2005	For her novel, Monroe learned the craft of the lowcountry's African American sweetgrass basket makers.
injured loggerheads	<i>Swimming Lessons</i>	2007	Expanding her knowledge regarding loggerhead sea turtles, Monroe volunteered at the South Carolina Aquarium's sea turtle rehabilitation program.
fly-fishing	<i>Time is a river</i>	2008	With a strong, warm voice that brings the South to life, "New York Times" bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe writes richly textured stories that intimately portray the complex and emotional relationships we share with families, friends, and the natural world.
shrimping	<i>Last Light over Carolina</i>	2009	The author embedded herself into the local

⁸ Epps Edwin. *Literary South Carolina*. Spartanburg, S.C.: Hub City Writers Project, 2004. "Mary Alice Monroe." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2012

⁹ [http://www.maryalicemonroe.com/"Mary Alice Monroe Books page"](http://www.maryalicemonroe.com/). Archived from the original on 2008-08-02.

industry			shrimping culture.
butterflies	<i>The Butterfly's daughter</i>	2011	Winner of the 2011 International Book Award in the category of "Fiction: Environmental/Green Fiction," this title was also selected as a Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA) Book Award finalist.
	<i>The Butterfly called Hope</i>	2013	Monroe's second children's photographic book and is the result of her monarch-raising research for <i>The Butterfly's Daughter</i> . Monroe uses scientific vocabulary along with dialogue to keep readers interested.
dolphins	<i>Summer Girls</i> <i>The Summer's End</i> <i>The Summer Wind</i> <i>A Lowcountry Wedding</i>	2013	Monroe investigated at National, Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and at the Mote Marine Lab Sarasota in Florida
shorebirds	<i>Beach House for Rent</i>	2017	The author made studies at the Department of Natural Resources: Coastal Birds
Sea turtles	<i>The islanders</i>	2021	The author's first fiction for middle-aged readers. It reveals a beautiful story of friendship, loss, and the healing power of nature

Table 1. Completed by the author

From the table it is clear that Mary Alice Monroe's books, in their describing elements are delved into the themes of nature together with complex and emotional human relationships we share with the family, friends and natural world.

In her successful book "The Beach House series" we can discover uncommon bonds between human and animals. The family saga teaches to the readers that they are the special part of the nature. The setting, the characters, the dialogues and different elements used through the novel give rise to particular feelings for the inspiration to protect the species in the nature. In part 3 called "Swimming lessons", the main character Toy Sooner, a worker at the South Carolina Aquarium loves her job that is to take care of species at the Aquarium. She is especially fond of the loggerheads and always is able to prove that she was capable of the responsibility:

The stable turned out to be the cavernous basement of the Aquarium. It was being used for storage. Ethan and his dive team chipped in to move gear out and clean a corner of the area for the small tanks that Jason scrounged up for the initial fresh water baths. It was a temporary solution at best. By the end of the first week, with two tanks upstairs and two downstairs, Toy was exhausted at running up and down all day. Her supplies were tapped, as was her food budget. She didn't know how she was going to make it through another week. Her prayers were answered by the kindness of strangers. In the days following the television report, the Aquarium received an avalanche of donations from local people who had seen the program and wanted to help the poor sick turtles. Most of the checks and cash were in small denominations, tens and twenties, and each one was welcomed. There was the occasional \$100 check and one for \$500 from a Good Samaritan that sent the whole staff cheering. School children took up collections that totaled a couple hundred dollars. Other children wrote heartfelt letters and donated their allowances and emptied their piggy banks. Toy could hardly believe that strangers would care so much to send in their money to help, especially the children. Their generosity and care brought tears to her eyes. Jason wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper to officially express the Aquarium's thanks to the good people

of Charleston for their help and support. Sure enough, that letter brought another flurry of donations.¹⁰

This extract from “The Beach House series” confirms that although known for her intimate portrayals of women's lives, Monroe's writing has gained added purpose and depth with her move to the South Carolina Lowcountry. “Living on Isle of Palms provides a stimulating place for me to think and to write. I've always been interested in nature, but living on the island and near the wetlands has influenced by work. I draw themes for my novels from nature and the parallels with human nature. And, in my own small way, I hope that by bringing to life the beauty and mystery of this fabulously varied ecosystem and various endangered species in my stories, readers will perhaps be inspired to support efforts to protect them.”¹¹

Mary Alice is actively involved with several environmental groups including the South Carolina Center for Birds of Prey and The Island Turtle Team, and is on the board of the South Carolina Aquarium. Her work with these groups provided the inspiration for her novels, “*Skyward*”, “*The Beach House*”, “*Sweetgrass*”, “*Swimming Lessons*” and her children's books “*Turtle Summer*” and “*The Islanders*”.

CONCLUSION. Nature is one of the most powerful forces that has ran through literature throughout human history. Nature writing (or eco-fiction) participates in an intellectual history of the science of ecology while prompting a re-evaluation of how we understand the relationship between literature and ecology in the early modern period.¹² Mary, Alice Monroe, a successful author, is entirely captivated by the beauty and fragility of the nature. Her experiences living in the midst of a habitat that was quickly changing gave her a strong and important focus for her novels. For instance, Monroe, “skilled storyteller, who never lets her readers down” (*Huffington Post*) returns to her beloved Beach House series with most tales of new beginnings, resilience, and one family's enduring love. Other “authentic, generous, and heartfelt” (Mary Kay Andrews, *New York Times* bestselling author) novels from the *New York Times* bestselling author are about the bonds and new beginnings that are born from disasters and how, even during the worst of circumstances—or perhaps because of them—we discover what is most important in life.

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¹⁰ Monroe M.A. *Swimming Lessons*, 2007/1st Gallery Books ed.p 80

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