



UNIwersytet
JAGIELLOŃSKI
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**“Escape into Nature”: A Seminar on 20th- and 21st-Century Literature in English
13-14 May 2022, Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków (online)**

The winter 2021 issue of *Orion Magazine* contains an essay by Tyler Orion, a trans writer and photographer, who explains his decision to move into a cabin in the wilderness of Vermont in the following way:

Out here in the wild, I feel human beyond identity. I experience being in community without judgement, embraced by all the rooted, furred, feathered beings around me. I am learning how to love myself from every tree, stone and star. I feel unconditional acceptance in a way that no human knows how to offer (“Wild Embodiment”).

The belief in the beneficial effects which communion with nature has on the human soul and general well-being was recognized by the Romantics and most vocally promoted by such early American naturalists as Thoreau, Emerson and Muir. The medical proof came in 1984, when *Science* published an article by Roger S. Ulrich, which concluded on the basis of a decade-long study conducted in a hospital in Pennsylvania that, as the title succinctly puts it: “View Through the Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery”. However, nothing has brought the message as painfully home as the current covid-19 pandemic. Locked up in our more or less comfortable homes, we have all experienced the urgent need to go outside, to look at trees, to listen to birdsong. The connection to nature became vital in alleviating the anxiety and stress of pandemic and lockdown.

Michael McCarthy, one of the co-authors of *The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the Time of Coronavirus* (2020) thus commented on the 2,000 % growth in the popularity of wildlife webcams during the pandemic:

... it was in contemplating numbers such as these that it became clear what was important about the coronavirus spring – the fact that it was there. It had not been thrown off course, it had not been knocked out by the pandemic, by this great world-historical event that was making 2020 a lost year in human affairs. At this time of chaos in the world of people, nature was a constant. The covid-19 virus had wrecked, if only temporarily, so many human artefacts; it had stopped business, trade, travel, sport, education, entertainment and social gatherings of all times – but it hadn’t stopped the spring.

We would like to invite fellow academics to examine the theme of escape into nature in contemporary literature in the English language. We do not want to limit the scope of our discussion to (post-)pandemic fiction, or to dwell on environmental apocalypticism, otherwise known as climate grief (not that we do not share those concerns, but rather because much has been said and written about them). Instead, we hope that together we will find inspiration and hope for the future in the areas of:

- nature’s resilience and what humans can learn from it;
- nature as solace from grief, loss, trauma;
- the wild other i.e. the encounter with animals and plants and what it can teach us about what it means to be human and what it means not to be human?
- the promise and challenge of finding meaning in the natural world;
- the moral lessons of the garden, the power of gardening;
- the pastoral mode in 21st-century fiction, can it adapt to our ecocentric consciousness?

Please send 150-word abstracts with short bionotes to Dr hab. Beata Piątek (beata.piatek@uj.edu.pl) or to Dr hab. Bożena Kucala (bozena.kucala@uj.edu.pl) by 10th April 2022. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 15th April.

Wydział Filologiczny

Instytut

Filologii Angielskiej

Al. Mickiewicza 9A

31-120 Kraków

tel. +48 12 663 44 47

+48 12 663 43 71

www.ifa.filg.uj.edu.pl