

New Directions

A Conversation With Nature Writer & Environmental Activist John A. Murray

By Roger Von Struve

This spring Johnson Books published *Another Country: Encounters With the Red Rock Desert* by John A. Murray. As readers will soon discover, *Another Country* is a different kind of book. The work includes both stories and essays, which alternate in a natural rhythm around the theme of the desert. In this respect, *Another Country* represents a bold new literary form, combining imaginative prose with realistic prose in such a way as to produce a powerful meditation on place.

The stories in *Another Country* range across the human experience. The title story, which relates the slow death of a young woman in the summer heat, mixes the narrative tension of Jack London's "To Build a Fire" with the magic realism of Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Later, "Points and Lines" provides a surprising response to the events of 9/11, as we follow a young missile officer at an ICBM base in the San Rafael Desert. Other stories explore such diverse themes as greed and grace, separation and reunion, birth and love.

The essays are no less fascinating. "Becoming the Desert" is a wild, freewheeling prose poem. In the essay "What We Found," the author describes his photographic work in the desert, which has involved figure studies in the manner of Edward Weston. Murray's seasonal quartet also provides a fresh perspective: Who would have thought one could write about waterfalls in the desert? And his essay "A Walk in the Desert" takes the reader deep into the wilderness to a nowhere place called Stevens Arch in the Escalante Canyon.

Murray is also a well-known environmental activist. In his 1987 book, *Wildlife in Peril*, he first proposed restoring the grizzly and the wolf to areas in the West and was regarded as a dreamer. Today, as these programs gain popular support and policy momentum, some might call him prophetic.

Murray was educated at the Universities of Colorado and

Denver. From 1988 through 1994 he was an English professor at the University of Alaska, where he began his serious photographic work and also directed the graduate program in professional writing. In 1995, he began painting. He is the author or editor of more than 40 books and is a contributing editor to *The Bloomsbury Review*. His recent books include *Cinema Southwest*, which received the Southwest Book Award for "literary excellence and enrichment of the cultural heritage of the Southwest," and *Mythmakers of the West*, which garnered widespread acclaim. This interview took place in Denver in the winter of 2001-2002.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Could you tell us about your latest book, Another Country?*

John A. Murray: The book consists of 15 short stories and 15 essays. It is the first in a trilogy on the American West. The next two volumes are devoted to the Yellowstone area and the Big Sur coast. The purpose of the trilogy as a whole is to explore three representative regions of the West: desert, mountain, and seacoast.

TBR: *What is the status of the other books in the American West trilogy?*

JAM: The Yellowstone book is done. I'm currently finishing the book on Big Sur.

TBR: *And this is part of a larger series?*

JAM: Right. The collection is called *The American Experience* series. The second trilogy will be

devoted to the American East. And there will be a final volume on Alaska. The purpose of the suite as a whole is to present a unique picture of the American people and landscape.

TBR: *Do you have a favorite short story in Another Country?*

JAM: I like "The Story of Diego," because it deals with the notion of justice.

TBR: *What about an essay?*

JAM: "Hunt's Mesa," because it seeks out the heart of the landscape. The desert, in particular, is a spiritual environment, and I tried to address that quality in the essay.

TBR: *How did you come to write Mythmakers of the West?*

JAM: An editor at Northland Publishing called and asked if I could write a book on myth in the West. I said, "Give me 24 hours and I will fax you a table of contents." That was the book. I have always been curious about the way that myth shapes perception and culture. Writing the music section—Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix, Willie Nelson, and so forth—was a lot of fun. So was the film section, with the frontier mythology.

TBR: *Could you tell us about one specific myth discussed in the book?*

Selected Books by John A. Murray

Another Country: Encounters With the Red Rock Desert (Johnson Books, 2002)

Becoming the Mountains: Journeys in the Yellowstone Country (forthcoming)

Cactus Country (Roberts Rinehart, 1996)

Cinema Northwest (forthcoming)

Cinema Southwest (Northland, 2000)

The Colorado Plateau (Northland, 1998)

Desert Awakenings (NorthWord, 1998)

The Islands and the Sea (Oxford University, 1991)

Mythmakers of the West: Shaping America's Imagination (Northland, 2001)

Out Among the Wolves (Alaska Northwest, 1993)

A Republic of Rivers (Oxford University, 1990)

A Thousand Leagues of Blue

(Sierra Club Books, 1994)

Wild Africa (Oxford University, 1993)

Wildlife in Peril (Roberts Rinehart, 1987)

Writing About Nature

(University of New Mexico, 2003)

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JAM: Well, the eternal youth myth pervades Southern California life and culture. I explore the myth in terms of the music—the Beach Boys, The Doors, Fleetwood Mac, The Eagles, and No Doubt. They were all concerned primarily with the romantic component. I trace the myth back to the Greeks. They were fascinated with youth and beauty in their art and literature. If the Greeks could be reconstituted, they would feel very comfortable in Southern California.

TBR: *How did you get the idea for Cinema Southwest?*

JAM: In the nineties I wrote three desert books [*Cactus Country*, *Desert Awakenings*, and *The Colorado Plateau*]. Wherever I traveled in the Southwest I was finding old filming locations. The book partially arose from that experience, as well as from the fact that, like most people, I love movies. It's the great medium of our time. Films are, to borrow a phrase from V.S. Naipaul, "little miracles." The book examined film and landscape across seven states in the Southwest. I took a monthlong, 5,000-mile trip to research that book, and it was one of the high points of the larger journey.

TBR: *This book is part of a series, too?*

JAM: Yes. I've already written the next one, *Cinema Northwest*.

TBR: *Over the last 15 years you've written or edited more than 40 books. How do you maintain the productivity?*

JAM: You know, I visited William Faulkner's home once, and there on the wall of his study he had written in crayon the outline for his last book, and he carefully kept a running word count, by day. That's what I do. I go to work each morning and write books. The process is, at least at the most visible level, very ordered and methodical.

TBR: *How do you feel about graduate writing programs?*

JAM: My alma mater, the University of Denver, offered an outstanding program. Bill Wisner was a wonderful professor, as was Bin Ramke. Bob Richardson, who now teaches with his wife, Annie Dillard, at Wesleyan, was the smartest person I ever met. These programs can give the emerging writer a sense of community. They also tend to have superb libraries.

TBR: *The 10th-anniversary edition of the American Nature Writing series will soon be coming out. What sort of experience has this been for you?*

JAM: Editing this series provides me with the opportunity to remain in contact with emerging writers and help them as much as I can. Since the beginning, I have divided the annual equally by gender. Over the past 10 years, I've published more than 200 writers. A dozen of the emerging writers I have featured—Alianor True, Louise Wagenknecht, and others—have gone on to publish books. The series is a chance for readers to meet writers before they become better known.

TBR: *How would you characterize publishing as a business at the current time?*

JAM: The world of books is like any ecosystem. Flawed entities tend to self-destruct. Those with integrity, competence, and a commitment to quality tend to endure and sometimes, if conditions are favorable, to flourish.

TBR: *Who among contemporary writers do you read?*

JAM: My favorite poets are Czeslaw Milosz, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott. Among dramatists, I'm fond of Horton Foote. I love the stories of Annie Proulx and Alice Munro. In terms of longer fiction, I find myself returning to the works of V.S. Naipaul and Gabriel García Márquez. Also Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Among the nature writers I admire are Edward O. Wilson, George Schaller, and Peter Matthiessen. The biographies of Jeffrey Meyers are always notable for their craft and insight. Linda Hogan is a fine writer.

TBR: *How would you assess the current state of American literature?*

JAM: Clearly, we are not in a golden age. I believe we need a literary revolution that will involve writers, agents, and editors once again dedicating themselves to producing works of excellence. We need to remember that we are the inheritors of a great national literature. Writers need to aim, as their predecessors did, for the peaks and not the foothills. The public is waiting patiently for those works that will hold a mirror up to the modern world and help to make it comprehensible.

TBR: *What single writer had the greatest influence on you?*

JAM: Albert Camus. I read *L'Étranger* for a French course in high school and the book changed my life. I went on to read *L'Homme révolté*, *La Chute*, *Le Première Homme*, and all the rest. What appealed to me most was that Camus was a modern thinker operating in the tradition of the Greeks. From the beginning, even when I was a teenager, I said to myself, "I want to be like him." You know, to passionately embrace life and to reflect my age truthfully in my art and to always be affirmative. And, of course, to oppose evil and injustice.

TBR: *How would you describe your philosophy of life?*

JAM: I guess I would call it neohumanism, in the tradition of Renaissance humanism and the Greeks, especially the pre-Socratics who were the conceptual pioneers. You know, to find an equilibrium, to be a good person, and to create things that cheer people up. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Roger Von Struve** is a graduate in American studies from the University of Colorado. He also holds a law degree from the University of Colorado and has practiced law since 1978.