

“Place Lives & Breathes”

Page Lambert & Laura Pritchett in Conversation



Page Lambert



Laura Pritchett

The West is defined, in large part, by the natural world—there is simply too much open space to be ignored, either in life or in literature. With that come the trials of living in a world imbued with the forces of the environment—wildfire, for example. As Page Lambert and Laura Pritchett put together this conversation, Laura was being evacuated and the plumes of smoke from the High Park fire were dropping ash onto Page’s mountain home. It’s no wonder, then, that these two authors both focus on the role of place, but in ways that defy “nature-writing” stereotypes and may surprise you.

Page Lambert grew up in the Colorado mountains, where she fell in love with harebells, wild onions, and gangly ponderosas. In her teens she courted the South Platte River, cottonwood trees, horses, and frogs. She’s been “writing nature” since the mid-1980s, when she moved to a small ranch in the Black Hills in Wyoming. Her books include a Wyoming memoir, *In Search of Kinship*, and the novel *Shifting Stars*. You can also find her essays and poems in dozens of anthologies. In 2006, Oprah’s *O Magazine* featured her *River Writing Journeys for Women* as “one of the top six great all-girl getaways of the year.” Page writes the blog *All Things Literary*. *All Things Natural*, and enjoys coaching other writers and leading retreats. Her works-in-progress include a second novel, “The Exquisite Passion”; a book of narrative nonfiction, “Sweetwater: A Mountain Cabin, A Life Unfolding”; and “Animal Heart,” a poetry collection.

Laura Pritchett lives in northern Colorado, near the ranch where she was brought up, with her husband and two children. She is the author of two works of fiction: *Sky Bridge*, which won the 2006 WILLA Fiction Award, and *Hell’s Bottom, Colorado*, winner of the Milkweed National Fiction Prize in 2001. Her most recent book, *Great Colorado Bear Stories*, is nonfiction, and more than 80 of her essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of magazines, including *High Country News*, *OnEarth*, *Orion*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The Sun*. She has also been coeditor/editor of three anthologies, and her own work has been included in several anthologies.

Page Lambert: You know, Laura, about eight years ago when I left Wyoming, which has an incredibly supportive writing community, you were one of the first writers who reached out to me. Then, when I was asked to be a finalist judge for the Colorado Book Awards in 2006, I read your novel *Sky Bridge*, which ended up winning the WILLA Award from *Women Writing the West*. Even though the rural landscape in that novel and in your short-story collection *Hell’s Bottom, Colorado*, is much different from the landscape in my Wyoming memoir, *In Search of Kinship*, I knew that if the two of us peeled off the outer layers of our books, we would find kindred spirits lurking beneath. In *Sky Bridge*, the beekeeper Ed Monger says to Libby, “I think we should all be living more dangerous lives. We have to be careful, yes. But when we get too fearful, we become small.” I thought, “Laura lives life large too, and she takes emotional risks.” When someone reads my nonfiction work, they get an intimate glimpse into my life. But I’m curious, Laura, how well does a reader of your fiction get to know you?

Laura Pritchett: We are both creatures of place—no doubt about that—and I’m guessing we recognized each other as kindred spirits right away. (Isn’t that lovely, when you read a book and realize with a great degree of certainty that you’d like to befriend this person?) Anyway, yes: Many of the plots are based on pure imagination, or stories I’ve heard, or situations that I’ve inferred, and so on. On the other hand, I have cut the hide off of one calf to graft onto another; I have run cows through the chute (“The Record Keeper” is nearly completely autobiographical). We’ve both seen the death and life that occur on a ranch, and our writing has been informed by the hard work of manual labor: fixing fence, putting up hay, doctoring an animal. In fact, recently I was out looking at the carcass of a llama that a mountain lion had killed. Yesterday I was watching people steadily haul out their animals before a wildfire engulfed them. Today I awoke at my parents’ ranch with a bunch of other evacuees—both the peo-

ple and the animal kind (including a blind horse). That is the day-to-day stuff of my life.

What I think I do is this: I synthesize my own hands-on experience and real emotional state with stories I hear elsewhere. As an example, I was a new mother when I wrote *Sky Bridge*. I had a crying infant and was exhausted and very scared about this new gig called motherhood. I used that emotional state (and all the details that go along with it, such as scratchy eyeballs from lack of sleep) with a made-up story about a single mom at a minimum-wage job with a boyfriend she didn’t love. That part is all made up. But the real Libby is not made up. Libby’s basic emotional core is me. We are one and the same.

The two things that “guide” me as a human being are (1) books and (2) the natural world, and they are so linked for me that I can barely see the difference. Possibly it comes from reading books outside by the river when I was a kid. I don’t know. But I will say that nature and literature are my two life force gigs (besides my husband and kids).

Place is enormously important in all my writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Place is important to me as a human being. I find my solace, my center, and my ideas while outside, engaging in the natural world. I hike and walk for miles in the foothills of Colorado every day—and I will continue to do so, as soon as I can return home. I couldn’t live without doing so. Since my center is so tied up to place, it’s difficult (or probably impossible) for me to write about characters who are oblivious to place.

Place is important to you too, Page, but it’s more than just “place-based-writing,” that kind of vague and somewhat derogatory been-there, done-that terminology used to describe some of us western writers. How do you use place, and to what end? Who has been influential?

PL: For me, when a story attaches itself to a place, we get *Place with a capital P*. It becomes as central to the story as the main characters. *Place is more than context; place lives and breathes. It comes alive as both character and setting. At an early age, I gravitated toward stories set in rural areas, or in the wilderness, or in preindustrial times, but not*

necessarily in rural America: stories like Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*; Jack London’s *White Fang*; Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*; or closer to home, A.B. Guthrie’s *The Big Sky* and Fred Gipson’s *Old Yeller*. I loved these stories because they romanced me with fiercely loyal animals and coming-of-age adventures, with jagged mountains and end-

less grasslands that stretched beyond the imagination, with intimate meadows and meandering creeks that fit inside the nooks and crannies of the heart—settings where the struggles of humans and animals and place unfolded simultaneously and organically. These were responsive landscapes. The characters took risks. They lived life large, like your beekeeper talked to Libby about in *Sky Bridge*.

Later in life, when I was actually living on and with the land—bringing up our son and daughter, watching cows raise calves and sheep raise lambs, watching white-tailed deer struggle through deep winter snows, finding coyote pups curled in patches of buffalo grass—I began reading nature-based literature like Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders’ 1985 book, *The Sacred Paw*, and Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and James Galvin’s *The Meadow*, and I began to understand why human beings have historically named places because of what happened in those

places, like the wonderful Western Apache place-name “Widows Pause for Breath.” Wouldn’t it be great to know the story that inspired that name? Do you have any personal favorites, Laura, authors who really inspire you?

LP: Picking one author might be more painful than pulling wisdom teeth, which I’ve just had done, and so the pain is fresh in my mind! But in all seriousness, each writer has such a different energy, questions, presence—and my bookshelves are crammed with different voices speaking to me. I love them all for what they’ve individually offered me. Each is a spark of life, of joy, of understanding.

Having said that, there have been three writers fundamental to my development. As a child, I fell in love with Laura Ingalls Wilder (and wrote in my first diary, at age 7, “I would like to be a riter [sic] some day, just like Laura Ingalls Wilder”). As a teenager, I fell in love with Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and that’s when I decided I wasn’t kidding about that dream because literature was seriously

amazing stuff. And in college, when I decided to get busy with the work of becoming a writer, Willa Cather was the first writer who “spoke to me,” to use that cliché, which is actually pretty apt. My *Antonia* in particular. That book showed me that my rural life was worth writing about, that it was complex, that the natural environment was an essential tool, that sentences could be drop-dead gorgeous, that images could be used as metaphor. At that time, I started writing down beautiful sentences in a book, so that I could learn how to write them. My first entries are from *My Antonia* and Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*.

Rick Bass rocks. So do Walt Whitman, Kent Haruf, Alexandra Fuller, Claire Davis. Ooh, man, I could go on and on. I tend to like writers who will be very raw—get at the heart of things without blinking or turning away—and also writers who care about place.

PL: I think these writers help us redefine nature. Their stories remind us that nature does not exist only outside the windows of our homes. Nature and place exist in every pore of our bodies. When we reawaken ourselves to our own body’s responses to our environment—how the updraft that stirs the ashes at the base of the fireplace also stirs a sense of foreboding, or how the shadow that falls across the dining-room table lengthens as our own energy wanes—we also reawaken our writing to the sensate world. David Abram’s book *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, reminds me that the world that my characters inhabit is a living, breathing world, and I must allow them to respond sensually. Nature and place must become elemental to the story, and to the characters’ internal journey.

There’s a killer short story by Colum McCann that lives inside my gut in a very raw way. He wrote *Let the Great World Spin*, the 2009 National Book Award winner. His 2000 story “Everything in This Country Must” is set in rural Northern Ireland, and I try to find a reason to talk about it at every retreat or workshop I teach, because it’s so damn powerful. Colum anchors (Continued on page 22)

NOTE: You can learn more about Page Lambert and her work at www.pagelambert.com.

You can learn more about Laura Pritchett and her work at www.laurapritchett.com.

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Cold Case: Missing Reviewers

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What It Is Like (Continued from page 17)

To break the silence or your newly acquired Ming vase,
or raise my expectations and the flag over the Brooklyn Navy Yard.
To employ a veritable army of secretaries, or your for once awake faculties
in coming to grips with the enemy, the notion that nothing outlasts
our fleeting perception of it

And so on for eight pages astonishing in their virtuosity. North studied as a young man with Kenneth Koch and has much of his master's humor, but he links it to a sensibility with a decidedly philosophical bent. Even in North's wildest flights of abstraction, a detail from the natural world or a wry joke is likely to make an appearance, keeping the poem from floating off into some Platonic ideal. One of his funniest poems, "Boul' Mich," lets both sides of his poetic personality fight it out, as it takes the form of a session between an earnest interviewer asking questions about poetic theory and a wise-guy interviewee determined to turn every answer into a joke.

You're in print about the connections between
poetry and bowling. Perhaps you'd like to comment further
on what you once characterized as "strikes, spares, splits
and the heartbreak of the gutter ball." It was the Boul' Mich,
wasn't it, where you spent so much time as an 11- and 12-year old?
I always thought that was a clever name for a bowling alley.

—Are you sure you're not referring to the time
I was talking about poetry and bowling? [laughs] Arco,
pizzicato, sostenuto, playing with all 13 strings, or however many
there are? [laughs] Come to think of it,
the Boeing idea isn't so bad either, flying away on the "viewless wings
of poesy." I'll leave the ailerons and Fasten Your Seatbelts signs to you. [laughs]

Whether he's writing a prose poem comparing the tragic flaws of Prometheus and Red Sox great Carl Yastrzemski ("Prometheus at Fenway")—

Prometheus literally (or semi-literally) and Yastrzemski figuratively are chained to
their errors-cum-excellence: in Prometheus' case a strong sense of Self tinted by a
rather stubborn self-righteousness (mitigated, it must be said, by the encouraging
knowledge that he will live to see his tormentor's downfall); in Yastrzemski's case
an unreliably expanded Self-image, possibly helped along by an inflated salary.

—or constructing a modernist poem in the form of Anglo-Saxon kennings,
North is one of the most challenging, amusing, and accomplished poets writing
today.

Lambert & Pritchett (Continued from page 13)

the reader's emotions so firmly to place that you find yourself literally gasping for breath. The story is told from the viewpoint of a 16-year-old Irish farm girl whose mother and brother were killed by British soldiers. She lives alone on the farm with her grieving father. In the story, her father faces one of the most difficult questions a human being can face: Will I let the rest of my life be ruled by hate, or will I choose forgiveness? Here's the opening line: "A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river." In the end, the father is so afraid of the pain of loving that he makes a decision that cuts him off from life itself, choosing to kill his beloved mare rather than forgive the soldiers who saved her from the river, because to forgive them would have meant forgiving the soldiers who were driving the vehicle that killed his wife and son.

You do this too, Laura; you use place as a way of illustrating your characters' needs/wants/desires.

LP: I do this in my writing on a daily basis—both my magazine writing and my longer fiction works. It's my favorite writing "tool" and my favorite class to teach. Basically, it's how to render the internal landscape by describing the external landscape. As an example, one of my favorite stories is "Rattlesnake Fire." Here, I wanted to write a story about drought and the fires and the devastation that the West has experienced and will continue to experience. But I also wanted to write about New West and Old West cultures coming together. On top of that, I also wanted to write about a brother and a sister, and the state of their hearts, and what money can do to a family's dynamics. So, what I did was to use the wildfire as a metaphor—hopefully in a noncliché way. Many things are "burning up" in this story: the main character's health, his relationship to his sister, the planet, the West's mythos. (By the way, I find it oddly prophetic that I set this story in the location that is now burning.)

So basically, I used the place—a burning Colorado ranch—to illustrate all kinds of emotional states. There is a trick for doing that, and more or less it comes down to using the right details of place to speak to theme. As a writer, I think I've found ways to use place as a contributor to plot and characterization, which is essential. You can't just go on and on about place. Readers want to hear a story, and they want to see people moving through that story. As an aside, with both place and emotions, I don't want the Hallmark-y sappy stuff. I want the real, raw truth. Always, as a writer, I am seeking to put words to the inchoate, as truthfully as I can.

PL: I love how people and animals moving within a physical landscape shape your stories, Laura. I've been working on a Denver novel, *All the Water Yet to Come*, for eight years—geez, that's embarrassing to admit. It's about a brother and sister who were raised by their Basque father and Cherokee mother on a sheep ranch in Wyoming, and about how the landscape both shapes and controls their destinies. Recently I wrote an epic poem taken from the novel's research—it's really a love song to Denver—a deep mapping of the land where Denver sits, from her ancient geological beginnings to the contemporary high-rises built on her alluvial floodplains. A copy of the poem, "Whisper of the Land," is buried inside of *Mud Woman*, a monumental sculpture on the third floor of the Denver Art Museum (by Santa Clara Pueblo artist Roxanne Swentzell). When Roxanne was sculpting *Mud Woman*, she asked me to write something that she could put inside *Mud Woman's* core, her heart space. "You're from here, Page," she said. "You know this landscape ... you know the stories."

That's how I feel when I read your essays, Laura, the ones that appear in High

Country News or in *Denver's* 5280 Magazine. In all of your books, like your newest (*Great Colorado Bear Stories*), the natural world seems to be very organic to who you are as a person and as an author. Do your thoughts intersect, with regard to your fictional and environmental works, or are they very separate aspects of who you are?

LP: I loved writing that book. This newest book is nonfiction, of course—I love switching between the genres. Anyway, yes, I loved crawling in a bear den with hibernating bears inside and then writing about it. The two best things on earth! (I had tagged along on a study, and the bears had been tranquilized by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and researchers, who treated the bears with the utmost care and respect.)

PL: So do you have a bucket list, Laura? Something you really want to do or want to write about that you haven't written about yet?

LP: Of course. I'm addicted to writing. I'll never stop. I've just sent two novels to my agent, and already I'm raring to write another. Even though the writing life is fraught with rejection and low pay, I love it. As one of my characters, Ed, says in my novel *Sky Bridge*, "Art is what gets us beyond what is real. It makes reality more real. It also shortens the distance we gotta travel to see how connected we are. That's what art should do." I think that's what writing—and reading—is all about for me. It helps me to be human, to work on being a full and complete human.

And you, Page? Do you have a question you're dying for someone to ask you?

PL: I suppose it would be "If you were 20 years old again, what would you do?" Well, I'd move to Alaska and spend a couple years training for the *Iditarod*—there's just something about the dogs, the wilderness, and the "Last Great Race on Earth." Then I'd move back to the Lower 48 and start riding my red roan mare again, only this time I'd take my sleeping bag and laptop to the barn with me. I'd sleep in the stall with her—soak in as much of that horse energy as I could. It's no surprise that my mare appears, in one manifestation or another, in almost all my writing.

Laura, I want to thank you publicly for suggesting to the editors of *West of 98* that they ask me to write a piece for the anthology. And do you remember the lunch you invited me to with your friend B.K. Loren? I just wrote a review about her debut novel, *Theft*, on my blog *All Things Literary*. *All Things Natural*. It's an amazing novel. Right now, sitting on my desk next to my copy of *Theft*, is your *Colorado Bear Stories*. That big black bear on the cover is staring at me, and the lanky Mexican gray wolf on the cover of *Theft* has his ears perked up like he can hear us talking. It's great. Thank you, Laura. I'm back rooted to the Colorado land where I grew up, and I love it.

LP: Well, we book people tend to seek each other out, to take delight in each other's successes. But it's more than a rah-rah cheerleading club. I think we are bound by a real and raw love of books and land. We want others to succeed in their endeavors in that regard. We are aware of how we are trying to break down all kinds of stereotypes: of western writers, of the western mythos, of nature writers. That's a real and serious goal. We are not all a bunch of sappy folk willing to buy into the stereotypes and perpetuate them. On the contrary, we're working hard to produce art that helps us re-see the American West with renewed clarity; we're trying to get New York editors to quit expecting the same stuff from us; we're trying to tell real stories. Frankly, we need each other. And it would be horribly lonely to go it alone. ■

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The Empire of Death

(Continued from page 14)

I never felt that the subject I was dealing with was death, and in presenting the sites I strove to recontextualize them for a modern audience which is all too inclined to view them as products of morbidity and despair. These sites were intended as statements of hope and beauty, and it was important to me that I find a means through photographs and the writing of history to convey that: these sites represent death only in so far as death itself affirms life.

On an aesthetic level, the material is treated with sensual gravitas by the publisher's design team. Many full-page images and spreads, primarily in color, are balanced by smaller, sepia-screened photographs placed throughout the text. The format is guided by a sense of antiquarian whimsy, judiciously restrained. The text is set in a slightly decorative font style. Each page of text opens with an ornamental initial capital letter, supported by page content set in a discreet point size, which is small enough to require attentiveness. These choices, and others, honor Koudounaris' wish that this handsome volume resemble "the kind of book that will definitely get stolen from every school library." ■