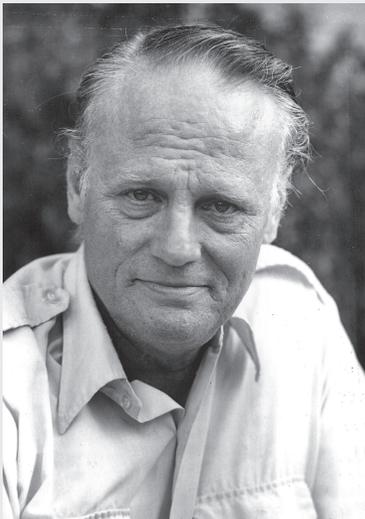


2021 JOHN EHLE PRIZE WINNER

an Ethic of Everyday Nature
in John Ehle's *The Road*

by Savannah Paige Murray

COURTESY OF PRESS 53



In efforts to address the complex and continually worsening issues facing our planet today, scholars, students, and activists alike might employ an interdisciplinary, postmodern approach. As the ramifications of global climate change manifest in the modern world – with increased frequency and ferocity of storms and natural disasters, extended periods of heat waves and droughts, rapid biodiversity losses, increases in average oceanic and atmospheric temperatures, and disruptions to water and food security – there has never before in human history been a time when an understanding of the environment was so incredibly necessary for the survival and success of both people and planet. These environmental crises are not only alarming, they are interconnected. Human beings have degraded our natural environment to such a degree that as scholars we no longer have the luxury of operating in a closed system, only communicating and collaborating with those in our own insular fields. As the effects of climate change and the overall degraded quality of planet earth become increasingly more apparent and threatening, we must take up an approach that postmodern blends various knowledge bases and discourses.

Given the multitude of environmental crises impending upon the world today, it is vital to develop more coherent, interconnected understandings of the relationship between nature and human nature as expressed in all mediums, including literature. Ecocriticism, as an approach to literary criticism with the environment as the analytical nucleus, is a burgeoning and quickly growing field with many opportunities for original scholarship. Further, ecocriticism is “an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human” and focuses

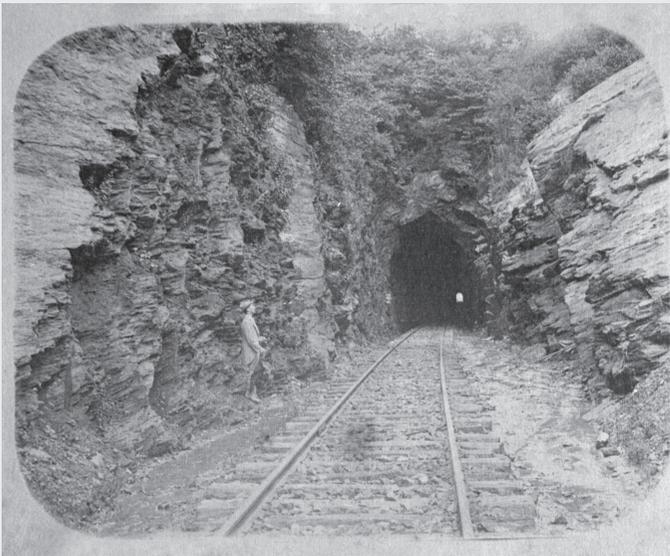
ABOVE John Ehle, circa 1962–64

SAVANNAH PAIGE MURRAY, a native of Asheville, NC, has reviewed regularly for *NCLR* since 2018, when she was a graduate student at Appalachian State University. This essay is adapted from her 2017 thesis, “In this way the mountain lives’: An Ecocritical Reading of John Ehle’s *Appalachian Fiction*.” After earning her PhD in Rhetoric and Writing from Virginia Tech, she returned to North Carolina to serve as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at her alma mater and is now on the tenure track. Her writing focuses on Appalachian literature, the French Broad River, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Read more about her in the story about her Ehle Prize in *NCLR Online* 2021.

largely on the “anxieties around humanity’s destructive impact on the biosphere.”¹ Because ecocriticism incorporates such a wide variety of discourses, including “diversity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, situatedness, contextuality, and subversion of unitary categorizations,” it is a field that embraces the fractured reality of the modern era and is therefore applicable to practical interactions between humans and the non-human world.² For the purposes of this essay, the definition of ecocriticism provided by Cheryll Glotfelty in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* is most useful: “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”³ Glotfelty draws connections between the contributions of feminist and Marxist criticism to the examinations of gender and class, respectively, within literature and ecocriticism’s ability to encourage “an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). In this essay, I offer an ecocritical reading of one of John Ehle’s acclaimed “Mountain Novels.”

John Ehle’s *The Road*, set in 1876, features several scenes in which protagonist Weatherby Wright is terrified and traumatized by his interactions with the rugged mountain landscape of Western North Carolina. Weatherby Wright, a native of the region, spent most of his adult life making a name for himself as a railroad builder in other segments of the American South. As the novel begins, Wright has returned to his mountain home in order to open up the seemingly isolated “mountain world” to commerce and trade with other regions. While Weatherby has lofty goals, his opposition to the natural world shows that even an accomplished man, one of wealth and means, is no match for the mountains, especially not Sow Mountain, “the mountain on whose body” Weatherby and his men “were to work.”⁴ In the process of putting a railroad along Sow Mountain’s spine and creating a tunnel through the mountain, Weatherby perpetually questions his own place and power within the mountain landscape and the universe. Ultimately, Weatherby’s failure to find balance and peace with his own relationship to the natural world leads him to madness and proves fatal for many of those who work with him on the railroad.

In contrast, a young woman in the novel, HenryAnna Plover, offers a starkly different example of the relationship between people and planet. Remarkable and spunky HenryAnna exhibits an ethic



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ABOVE Licklog Tunnel, Swannanoa Gap

¹ Pippa Marland, “Ecocriticism,” *Literature Compass* Nov. 2013: 846.

² Serpil Oppermann, *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons* (Cambridge Scholars, 2009) 18.

³ Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (U of Georgia P, 1996) xviii; subsequently cited parenthetically.

⁴ John Ehle, *The Road* (1967, U of Tennessee P, 1998) 3; subsequently cited parenthetically from this edition.

“The main character in these seven mountain novels is the mountains themselves, I was born under them, they cupped me as a boy, have shaded my own life, they’ve lorded it over me, and in my novels they lord it over my people. Their streams are the region’s blood, their winds are deep breaths.”

—John Ehle

of “Everyday Nature,” a thoughtful integration of the natural world into one’s daily life. HenryAnna’s ethic of everyday nature helps her avoid ill-fated romantic entanglements with both Weatherby and Hal Cumberland, two educated, upper-middle class men decades older than she. Neither of these men share her ethical approach to the environment; rather, they arrive in the “mountain world” to systematically alter and degrade it in the name of progress. Recognizing HenryAnna’s ethic of everyday nature offers readers an ecofeminist method for engagement with the natural world as an integral part of daily life and also brings a fresh perspective to Ehle’s acclaimed novels.

While there has been some scholarly inquiry aimed at John Ehle’s Appalachian fiction,⁵ there is far more work to be done, particularly in examining the interactions between nature and human nature, mountains and mountaineers in the Mountain Novels. In particular, the role of the mountains themselves in Ehle’s work could use more critical attention. In the opening pages of the 1987 “John Ehle Issue” of *The Iron Mountain Review*, Ehle penned the following remarks about his work set in Appalachia: “The main character in these seven mountain novels is the mountains themselves, I was born under them, they cupped me as a boy, have shaded my own life, they’ve lorded it over me, and in my novels they lord it over my people. Their streams are the region’s blood, their winds are deep breaths.”⁶ As Ehle’s words demonstrate, understanding and appreciating his Appalachian fiction is inextricably linked to understanding and appreciating the natural world. In other words, Ehle’s mountains cannot be separated from his mountaineers. Therefore, an ecocritical approach focusing on “Everyday Nature” in Ehle’s work is appropriate.

In the influential article “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” Scott Hess offers a conceptualization of the environment in which humans do not draw divisions between nature and human nature, but instead incorporate a respect and appreciation for the natural world into their daily lives and identity as a species: “Nature in environmental writing and culture today often appears as a form of refuge . . . the place where we go, both imaginatively and physically, to escape from this modernity.”⁷ The alluring escape of nature was certainly appealing to transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau who retreated from urban life to his venture in solitude as documented in *Walden*. As a regional, modern example of this retreat, poet and environmentalist Thomas Rain Crowe documents his retreat from society to the remote forests of Western North Carolina in *Zoro’s Field: My*

⁵ See Leslie Banner, “John Ehle and Appalachian Fiction,” *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, ed Danny L. Miller, Sharon Hatfield, and Gurney Norman (Ohio UP, 2005) 169–184; Carol Boggess and John Ehle, “Interview with John Ehle,” *Appalachian Journal* 33.1 (2005): 32–51; Terry Roberts, “wonderfully simple, yet complex’: The Mountain Novels of John Ehle,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 19 (2010) 11–23; Terry Roberts, “Within the Green Bowl: Community in the Mountain Fiction of John Ehle,” *Pembroke Magazine* 31 (1999): 90–98 (and other content in this John Ehle: “Born to Be a Writer” issue of *Pembroke*).

⁶ John Ehle, “Near and Distant Kin,” *Iron Mountain Review* 3.2 (1987): 4.

⁷ Scott Hess, “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 17.1 (2010): 85; subsequently cited parenthetically.

Life in the Appalachian Woods.⁸ While these works of retreat are certainly valuable (in fact both of these books rank highly in my favorite texts of all time), it is also important to expand the canon of environmental writing to recognize other interpretations of the relationship between people and planet. Rather than framing nature as a pastoral retreat or an unmanned wilderness, John Ehle's *The Road*, which centers around the construction of the railroad in Western North Carolina in the late nineteenth century, is what

Hess describes as “a literature of everyday nature,” which is not simply about chronicling an expansive or far-off location, but instead provides “a kind of attention, . . . a way of defining our identities and values through local relationship rather than through imaginative escape” (90–91). In Ehle's *The Road*, HenryAnna Plover makes the value of local knowledge about the Southern Appalachian environment clear, as she embodies an ethic of “everyday nature” throughout the novel.

HenryAnna has been dismissed by some readers as little more than a childish, flirty young woman who intrigues two of the novel's main characters, railroad men Cumberland and Weatherby. For example, historian John C. Hennen, in his review of *The Road* for *Appalachian Journal*, provided a reductionist portrait of the novel's

main female character, arguing that while HenryAnna initially emerges as “a font of traditional folk wisdom,” as the novel progresses, she becomes “little more than the stereotypical trickster nymph” which is a common trope for “romanticized sketches of mountain women.”⁹ While HenryAnna is certainly capable of tricks, including leading Cumberland straight into the entrapment of a laurel slick to avoid his romantic advances, her character is much richer than Hennen allows. In contrast to Hennen's opinion, HenryAnna possesses a mature and respectable ethic of everyday nature.

Indeed, HenryAnna is far more than an archetypal mountain “nymph.” She provides a remarkable example of how an ethic of everyday nature can help us advocate for the environment and the natural world, particularly as this philosophical orientation fuels her critique of the railroad building at the center of the novel. As she observes the burgeoning work sites along Sow Mountain while Weatherby and his men begin the quixotic task of building the



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ABOVE Southern Railroad tracks beside the French Broad River near Hot Springs in Madison County, circa 1920–22

⁸ Thomas Rain Crowe, *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods* (U of Georgia P, 2005).

⁹ John C. Hennen, rev. of *The Road*, by John Ehle, *Appalachian Journal* 26.2 (1999): 201.

railroad, HenryAnna comments to Weatherby, “I’ve been many times to this place, and I never saw you here before,” asking him, “You come out of the sky?” (28). Here HenryAnna’s own everyday nature first appears. For her, spending time along Sow Mountain is not a temporary act of retreat from her own life but a routine part of her daily activities. It is clear how intimately her own identity is tied to the mountain as she comments, “looks like the world is getting smaller ever day. If it goes on like this, it’s going to be too small for a woman at all. It’ll be filled up with men and mules and their kind” (28). HenryAnna’s sentiment of being overcrowded by men and “progress” is a notion she shares with Sow Mountain, and it points to the interconnectedness of her identity with the surrounding landscape of the North Carolina mountains. Here HenryAnna’s ethic of everyday nature includes a deep feeling of loss surrounding the “shrinking” of her own mountain world as Weatherby and his workers encroach upon her and the landscape.

HenryAnna’s ethic of everyday nature allows her to critique the divide of nature and culture inherent in the exploitative practices of railroad building in Southern Appalachia. Hess points out the inherent irony in modern interpretations of “nature,” as it excludes key

elements of human society and culture, including “productive work and everyday habits of consumption,” particularly because “these are the ways in which we [as humans] are most physically grounded in our environments” (91). As HenryAnna emerges as a critic of the railroad and the “progress” it will inevitably bring into the mountains, her ethic of everyday nature is also demonstrating how to preserve the mountain world. HenryAnna makes it clear that the only way to protect Sow Mountain, and accordingly, the future

of the surrounding mountains, is to abandon the railroad altogether, highlighting the tragic interconnectedness of her beloved landscape and the work that brings Weatherby and his men to the region.

HenryAnna’s everyday nature, which emphasizes the intimate connection between who she is and the mountains around her, empowers her to steer clear from any long-term romantic entanglements with Cumberland and Weatherby, men who do not share her environmentally aware sentiments. HenryAnna makes clear that the inner workings of the human mind and soul are shaped by the outer workings of the natural world, and coming to understand one helps us understand the other. Acclaimed American nature writer Barry Lopez, in his essay “Landscape and Narrative,” describes two landscapes: “one outside the self, the other within.” For Lopez,

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“the external landscape is the one we see” and the second, interior landscape is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape.” These two landscapes interact and inform one another: “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes.”¹⁰ HenryAnna’s knowledge of these inner and outer landscapes is clear in her criticism of the development and subsequent destruction of Sow Mountain. Even Weatherby, who lacks HenryAnna’s ecological awareness is clearly cognizant of her everyday nature as he thinks to himself, “She knew the ways of nature very well; there was nothing in this place which she had not been able to understand before today” (30). It is this connection to the natural world that attracts Cumberland, Weatherby’s foreman, to HenryAnna. Cumberland sees in HenryAnna “one who viewed the real world in terms of her own experiences, who was natural and free as life itself, and who was, therefore, his own opposite. . . . [S]he had experienced, not simply considered and discussed, her own world” (31). Here it is clear that what Cumberland admires about HenryAnna is indeed her ethic of everyday nature. Hess posits that a nature of

the everyday requires a different understanding of nature that urges us to alter “how we define our selves, no longer through forms of imaginative escape or transcendence but through our ordinary lives, work, actions, and relationships” (97). What draws Cumberland to HenryAnna is her incorporation of nature into her everyday life, rather than simply thinking of nature as the source of exaltation with the natural sublime frequently found in literature, that which, as a former university English professor, Cumberland had become accustomed to reading.

HenryAnna further illustrates her knowledge of both her own “inner nature” and the “outer nature” of the natural world as she criticizes Cumberland’s impulse to dominate the wildness around him. While sitting atop a mountain bald watching deer graze, Cumberland notices there “were perhaps a thousand cleared acres, unfenced, untended. Nobody knew for sure how it came to be here, but another mountain close by also had a bald top and deer grazing.” According to local mountain legends, “These balds were the footprints of a giant who had once walked through.” Cumberland, who is completely immune to the majestic origins of these natural balds, is unable or unwilling to recognize this part of the landscape as a “nature of the everyday,” and instead sees them as an easy way to make money. Cumberland suggests to HenryAnna, “You could put cattle up here,” and he “wonder[s] if he could build a cabin near where they sat.” Just as she did with Weatherby, HenryAnna criticizes Cumberland’s impulse to purchase and possess land, telling

¹⁰ Barry Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative,” *Crossing Open Ground* (Scribner’s, 1988) 64–65.

him, “It’s not yours to do. . . . You can’t own what’s not yours to own. . . . What would the deer do?” (127). HenryAnna is questioning the divide between nature and culture, questioning Cumberland’s belief that as a member of a Western, industrialized culture he could dominate the mountain with no concern for the open bald land and

the deer. In pushing against Cumberland’s impulse to alter the landscape to his own whims, HenryAnna is once again illustrating her ethic of everyday nature, a paradigm that allows her to recognize the needs of the species around her, even deer, as well as the nonhuman nature of the mountaintop.

HenryAnna is not only set apart from the novel’s male characters as a practitioner of everyday nature, but as a woman, as well, emphasizing her connection to key issues in ecofeminist thought, including the themes of ownership and domination. HenryAnna is vehemently critical of Weatherby’s railroad building, chastising him, “If you’re going to come through here ever spring and fall with your stock, the least you can do is stay on the turnpike and off’n other people’s property” (28). Weatherby, failing to recognize HenryAnna’s connection to the mountain world, quickly informs HenryAnna that he, in fact, owns the land in question. Voicing her critique of environmental domination, HenryAnna asks Weatherby, “What do you mean own?” elaborating, “I’ve been here so much, it’s the place I come to to get off to myself, and I’m the only living person I ever saw here before.” In questioning Weatherby’s claim of mountain ownership, HenryAnna asserts her understanding of Sow Mountain as part of her everyday nature. HenryAnna denounces Weatherby’s notion that Sow Mountain can be “owned” as an object that he can shape and exploit to suit his own will. HenryAnna’s critique of Weatherby’s claim to the mountain continues,

I never heard so much talk about who owns something which has been mine for years. If you mean did I ask somebody in an out-land office if I could have a paper on it, I haven’t had a paper on a woods in my life. I don’t see how you can own a tree any more than you can make one, or how you can own land you didn’t make the dirt for, or how you can be so proud as to say you buy what’s nobody’s to sell. (29)

HenryAnna’s critique of the ownership and domination of Sow Mountain helps demonstrate the connectedness between everyday nature and ecofeminist themes as well. For example, Josephine Donovan points out that ecofeminist thought “critiques the ontology of domination, whereby living beings are reduced to the status of objects,

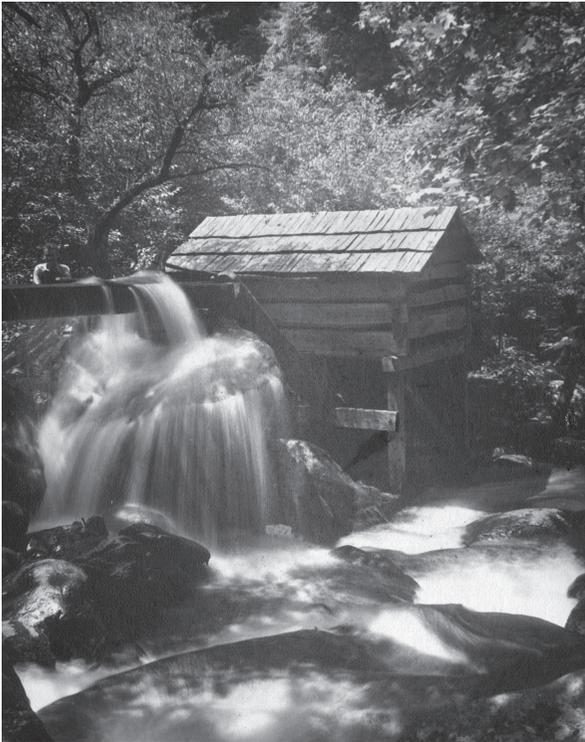


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which diminishes their moral significance, enabling their exploitation, abuse, and destruction.”¹¹ Similarly, Ynestra King emphasizes that “Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination.” King elaborates that “ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of nonhuman nature.”¹² In her critique of Weatherby’s domination of Sow Mountain, HenryAnna Plover reflects the connection between her complaint that the world is getting smaller, filling up with men and mules, and Weatherby’s willingness to say he can “buy what’s nobody’s to sell.”

HenryAnna’s critique of the domination of Sow Mountain is not unfounded. Her deeply rooted environmental awareness stems from the connection between her own identity and the surrounding mountain landscape. The parallels between the wildness of the Appalachian environment and HenryAnna’s own appearance attracts Cumberland’s attention throughout the novel. According to Ehle, Cumberland is drawn to HenryAnna because “she was unlined and unmarked, uncontaminated and untormented. Even beyond that, she was free, not only in the sense that she could go and come when and where she chose, but she carried with her the breath of the mountain air; she was free in the sense that she was natural, and in her own place” (47). The parallels between HenryAnna’s “unlined and unmarked” body and Sow Mountain are quite clear. Cumberland recognizes in HenryAnna a virginal purity similar to what he found in the mountain landscape when he first arrived. Tragically, Cumberland sees HenryAnna (much as he sees Sow Mountain) as something for him to dominate and ravage. And yet, “[i]t was, he told himself, completely unreasonable of him, a well-educated person, once a college-instructor, to be interested to a point of distraction in an untamed, uneducated female.” In spite of himself, however, “he was” (53–54). It is precisely HenryAnna’s closeness to nature that, on one hand, Cumberland admires, but at the same time, as a product of his own Western industrialized society, he seeks to tame and control. King notes that a key component of ecofeminist thought is the realization that “Western industrial civilization” is built “in opposition to nature,” a circumstance which “reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature” (151). Therefore, HenryAnna’s closeness to the mountain landscape is not only a key component of her ethic of everyday nature, but is also connected to Cumberland’s understanding of both women and nature.



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ABOVE Photograph by Edgar S. Purdom (1900–87), hobby photographer and custom furniture shop owner in Wayah Valley, near Franklin, NC

¹¹ Josephine Donovan, “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading the Orange,” *Hypatia* 11.2. (1996): 161.

¹² Ynestra King, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology,” *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Sheed and Ward, 1995) 151; subsequently cited parenthetically.



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*...she was part of the
place and he was not*



In her conversation with Cumberland, HenryAnna also calls into question the arbitrary nature of the divide between nature and human culture. HenryAnna resisted Cumberland's impulse "to write down the different species of trees on the mountain. She had not been enthusiastic about this, even when he explained that scientists could systematize such a list and use it." For HenryAnna, this "list was starkly removed from the substance of the mountain itself; she didn't much want to help him, but as he worked at the process of identification, she was an accompanying witness" (128). HenryAnna was reluctant to embark on what to her seemed an undoubtedly strange cataloging project. She held the myriad of trees and plants within the mountains in high regard because she was so familiar with them, because they were

part of her routine life and her lived identity in connection to the environment around her. HenryAnna's description of Cumberland's list as "starkly removed" from "the mountain itself" conveys her connection to the broader landscape through her everyday nature.

HenryAnna's everyday nature does not remain entirely lost on Cumberland: "He supposed she was telling him she was part of the place and he was not, that even yet he could come here and think he owned or possessed or dominated it, but he didn't even know it. Maybe, he thought, this was one other difference between them, in terms not only of the place but of the people, too" (127–28). Given the differences between HenryAnna and Cumberland, it is no surprise that the pair did not transform their love affair into a lifetime together. There is no stereotypically romantic "riding off into the sunset" scene for HenryAnna and Cumberland. Instead, HenryAnna demonstrates an admirable embrace of an ethic of everyday nature and highlights the interconnectedness of everyday nature and ecofeminist principles surrounding domination and dominion. Her ability to understand her "interior landscape" of her own feelings and thoughts as well as the "exterior landscape" of the mountain world around her further demonstrates her ethic of everyday nature and the ways in which it offers a path towards rectifying the historic and continually troubled relationship between people and planet.

In arguing for an everyday nature, Hess suggests that "environmental thought and imagination needs this category of 'everyday nature' precisely because the legacy of Romantic and wilderness nature as a 'place apart' is so deeply embedded in modern Western assumptions, often in ways that are impossible to see without close critical attention" (102). As Hess suggests, "Nature" in environmental literature and in the public imagination has been defined in opposition to

the social, the economic, and the everyday” (85). By redefining nature into an “everyday nature,” Hess suggests, we may come to realize that “we can imagine nature without having to escape our own lives, work, and relationships.” An ethic of everyday nature, as demonstrated by HenryAnna, therefore, reintegrates nature “into the ordinary, returning value and spirituality into our everyday lives and relationships as part of a wider process of resacramentalization” (Hess 102). Henry-

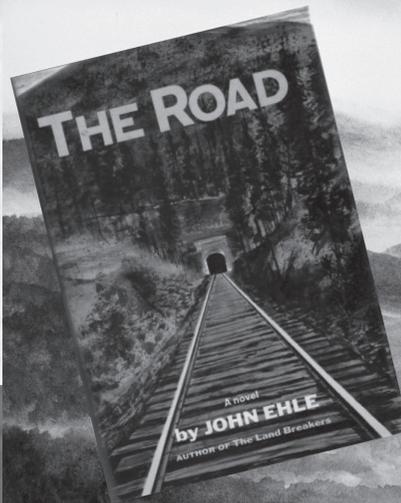
Anna’s ethic of everyday nature in *The Road* offers a powerful example for a path towards repairing and advocating for the natural environment.

John Ehle’s fiction offers a poignant example of how an ethic of “everyday nature” can help individuals realize that they cannot be separated from the land on which they work. In *The Road*, HenryAnna Plover navigates the rapidly changing world of her own “exterior landscape,” the mountain world, with an adept understanding of her own “inner nature.” Her environmental knowingness and everyday nature are part of her core identity, and both of these components of how she understands herself allow her to openly critique the arrival of “progress” via industrialization and railroad building in the mountains. The connection between HenryAnna’s inner nature and the outer nature of the “mountain world,” ultimately allows her to confidently walk away

from Cumberland, a man who did not share her connection to the mountains, ending their love affair before it smothered her everyday nature. Ultimately, the understandings of nature in Ehle’s fiction allows readers to see the inherent value in an ethic of everyday nature, an accessible inclusion of the landscape around us into our daily lives, which provides a greater understanding of how to repair our fragmented, strenuous, yet absolutely necessary relationship with the environment. ■



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ABOVE Photograph by James E. (Jim) Thompson (1880–1976), called the “Official Photographer of the Great Smokies National Park Movement”