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“A Model for the World”: Jack Kerouac and Henry Thoreau

by Richard Smith

March 12, 2022, marked the centennial of Jack Kerouac's birth. As Henry Thoreau is revered as Concord's native son, so too is Kerouac honored and remembered in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, a city that sits less than twenty miles from Concord, and it's no secret to say that Thoreau's influence on Kerouac was immense. In honor of Kerouac's 100th birthday, let's take a look at how the Transcendentalist shaped the Beat Poet's life and writings.

Kerouac graduated from Lowell High School in 1940. It was around this time that the 18-year-old, a voracious reader, scrawled a reading list into one of his notebooks. Under the heading of “IMMEDIATE READING LIST,” he listed a dizzying array of world literature, including Indian and Chinese scriptures, Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, James Joyce, and Dante. Included in the list were “Emerson and Thoreau (again)” showing that the recent graduate was already familiar with the works of the two Concord Transcendentalists.¹

Just prior to enrolling at Columbia in 1940, where he had received a football scholarship, Kerouac began seriously reading the works of Thoreau and was fascinated by what he saw as Thoreau's individualism, his need for solitude, and his detachment from society. This exposure to Thoreau caused Kerouac to consider abandoning his scholarship and college education and “living in the woods like Thoreau.”² The scholarship won out, but in the autumn of 1941 Kerouac suffered an injury playing football and he left Columbia shortly thereafter. He would continue his studies of literature at the New School, a private research university in New York City. Still, Kerouac kept Thoreau in high esteem. In his journal he wrote, “Thoreau is a model for the world, and not merely America.”³

In 1949 Kerouac took a copy of Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* out of a New York library (a book, it should be mentioned, that he never returned!). On page 227 of the book, the sentence “The traveler must be born again on the road” was underlined in pencil, with a small, neat check mark beside it.⁴ That sentence seems to have had an effect on Kerouac; it was about this time that he began to form the idea

of going on the road, with the result being his second novel and the book he would become best known for, which he wrote in 1951 and saw published in 1957 under the title *On the Road*.

By the late 1940s Kerouac had become associated with the bevy of New York writers, poets, and artists known as the Beat



Photo by Tom Palumbo, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0

Jack Kerouac, circa 1956.

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“Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed *there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.*”

Henry David Thoreau

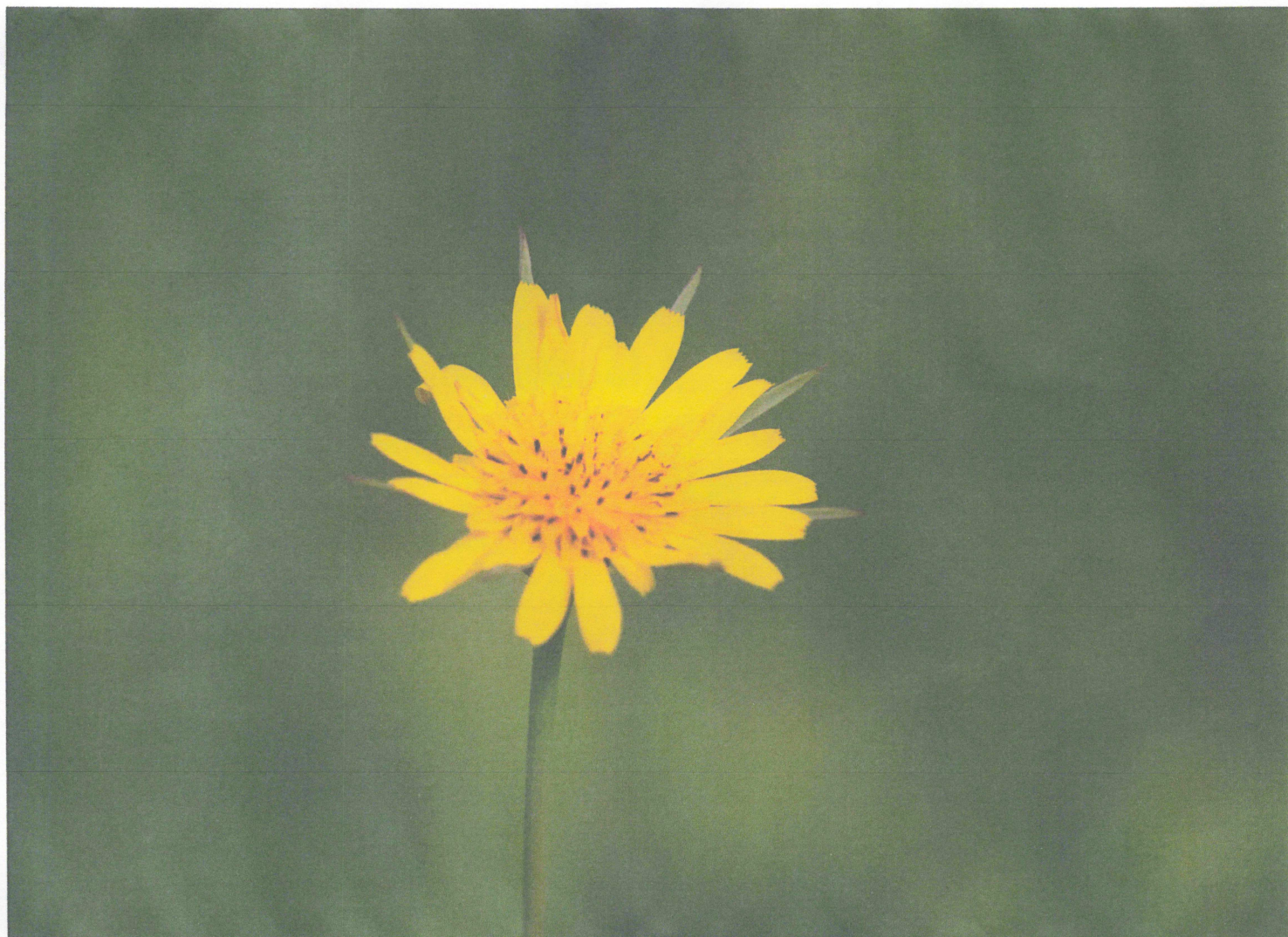
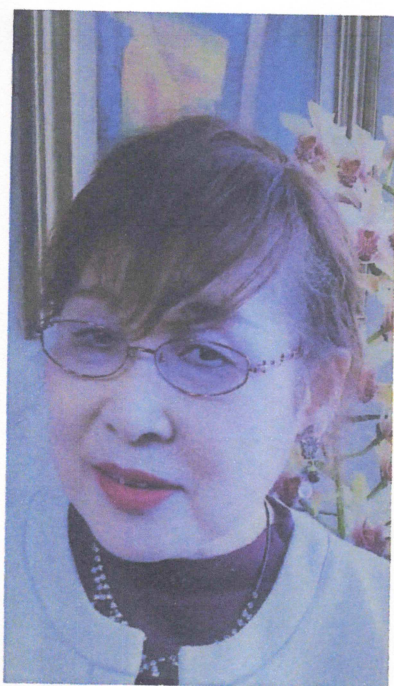


Photo by Michael Frederick

Presented to the Membership at the Annual Membership Meeting held on July 9, 2022, in Concord, MA.

Award Tributes



Shoko Itoh

As a significant contributor to international scholarship on Henry Thoreau, the American Literary Renaissance, and an increasingly consequential environmental literature, Shoko Itoh has earned the **Walter Harding Distinguished Achievement Award** honoring "significant scholarly achievement or other exceptional accomplishment that furthers the mission of the Thoreau Society." Dr.

Itoh's Ph.D. thesis at Hiroshima University was published as *The Revival of Thoreau: Nature Writing and the 19th Century of American Society*. She has written and lectured extensively on Thoreau and his contemporaries, including the book *Henry David Thoreau Bicentennial: Message from the Woods* (published, fittingly, in 2017) and an essay on "Thoreau's *Walden* in the Global Community" in the Society's annual journal, *The Concord Saunterer* (2004).

Dr. Itoh has pursued a concentration on environmental writers such as Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams, who gave the Bicentennial keynote address and is now a Thoreau Society Honorary Advisor. Dr. Itoh's article "American Nuclear Literature on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (*Oxford Research Encyclopedia*) addresses a topic that strikes home to both her and Williams. In 1998 she established the Society of Ecocriticism Studies in Japan (SES-J), serving as president for twenty-four years. She coedited, with Scott Slovic, *Ecotopia and Environmental Literature*. Dr. Itoh has translated into Japanese Williams's *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks* and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. She worked extensively with the late Bradley P. Dean, preparing the Thoreau manuscripts in his *Faith in a Seed and Wild Fruits* books for Japanese publication. A cofounder and current president of the Poe Society of Japan, Dr. Itoh is also a former president of, and now counselor to, the venerable Thoreau Society of Japan.

Now Professor Emeritus at Hiroshima University, where she spent thirty years on the Graduate School of Letters faculty, Dr. Itoh also taught at Notre Dame Sacred Heart College

and was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Brown University and the University of Virginia. A sought-after speaker, she has presented to appreciative Concord audiences at Thoreau Society Annual Gatherings more than ten times, including the Thoreau Bicentennial Gathering in 2017.



Megan Marshall

In her 2010 Dana S. Brigham Memorial Keynote Address, "Women's Work: The Female Transcendentalists and How We Read Them Today," Megan Marshall shared several stories with her Thoreau Society Annual Gathering audience. In one story, she mentioned her 11th-grade English teacher, whom she recalled pacing the classroom and

proclaiming his favorite Thoreau quotation about being "determined to know beans." So, Marshall explained, began her illustrious career. She became determined to dig deep into the annals of Transcendental literature and determined to unearth the untold stories she discovered growing there.

The Thoreau Society is pleased to recognize Megan Marshall with the **Walter Harding Distinguished Achievement Award**, recognizing "significant scholarly achievement or other exceptional accomplishment that furthers the mission of the Thoreau Society." We are honoring her because her work has deeply expanded our own knowledge of Thoreau and his place in his world and in ours.

Megan Marshall has written two biographies that garnered critical praise and widened our knowledge of Thoreau's times. Marshall's first biography, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*, grew out of a phase of research and writing that spanned nearly twenty years. The work received the Francis Parkman Prize, the Mark Lynton History Prize, the Massachusetts Book Award in Nonfiction, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography and memoir. Marshall's second biography, *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Biography in 2014 and the Massachusetts Book Award in Nonfiction.

In addition to her award-winning career as a biographer, Marshall's professional efforts have fostered connections within our Thoreau Society community and, more broadly,

between the various author societies dedicated to fostering interest in New England Transcendentalism and American Romanticism. She is a regular participant at Thoreau Society events and has fostered fruitful collaborations for the Society in cooperation with Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, Thoreau Farm, and the Margaret Fuller Society among others. In 2022, she helped to organize the film showing and panel discussion of *Margaret Fuller: Transatlantic Revolutionary*, a documentary film shown at the Umbrella Arts Center in Concord during the Annual Gathering. We are fortunate to have Megan Marshall among us as a gifted scholar and generous colleague.



François Specq

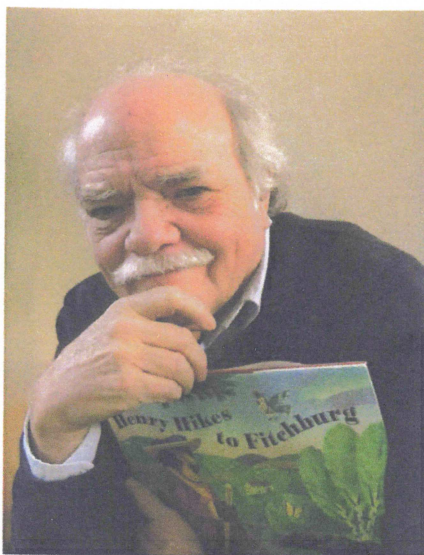
One of François Specq's many books, *Transcendence: Seekers and Seers in the Age of Thoreau* (2006), incorporates chapters on Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, and the Hudson River School painters Frederic Church and William Bradford. Reflecting the book's critical reception, its current Amazon listing declares, "Specq's multiple perspectives as a French

Americanist with a Thoreauvian angle of vision are what make these essays so refreshing." Notably, Amazon's pithy blurb also identifies the author as "a longtime member of the Thoreau Society," an honorable mention, indeed, for all concerned. The growing contributions of Dr. François Specq, Professor of American Literature and Culture at the Université de Lyon, France, continue unabated, as does his association with the Thoreau Society. To honor his accomplishments and that symbiotic relationship, the Society takes pleasure in presenting him the **Walter Harding Distinguished Achievement Award**, recognizing "significant scholarly achievement or other exceptional accomplishment that furthers the mission of the Thoreau Society."

Like Thoreau, François Specq has "travelled a good deal in Concord"—and a very good deal beyond, transcending illusory divisions between worlds and worldviews. A sampling of Specq's publications exemplifies Thoreau's and his own unboundedly "*extra-vagant*" reach: "(Un) framing the Mind: Where on Earth is Walden?" (in an American journal); "Henry David Thoreau's Environmental Humanism" (in a Turkish journal); *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* (coedited book); "Thoreau's Flowering of Facts and the Truth of

Experience" (in a Japanese book); *Thoreau Beyond Borders: New International Essays on America's Most Famous Nature Writer* (coedited book); also his far-ranging translations of Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Jefferson, Jack London, and others. Dr. Specq has taught at Dublin's Trinity College, London's King's College, the University of Paris, and, since 1996, at his home University of Lyon. Professional destinations include Brazil, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The publisher's description of Specq's recent book *Environmental Awareness and the Design of Literature* (2016) affirms his expanding engagement with environmental history and ecocriticism. This book, it declares, "offers analyses of the diverse ways in which literature helps us escape the rigid frames of commonly assumed worldviews and modes of seeing. Literary works . . . affect and transform our relation to the physical world." François Specq has done, and continues to do that, as well. Through his international teaching, lecturing, publishing, conferencing, and community building, he presents his own, Thoreau's, and other eye-opening views to the world.



D. B. Johnson

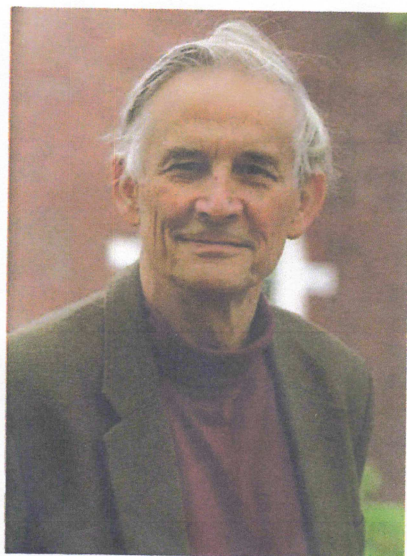
"The cost of a thing," Thoreau says in *Walden*, is the amount of "life which is required to be exchanged for it." Don Bruce Johnson, known as D. B. Johnson to his adoring fans, captures this Thoreauvian sentiment among many others and makes it accessible to children and

adults through his award-winning illustrated works. The Thoreau Society is pleased to recognize D. B. Johnson with the **Thoreau Society Distinguished Service Award** in recognition of the unforgettable "Henry" books, which bring Thoreauvian ideas to young readers, and of Johnson's long dedication to the Thoreau Society's mission of educating the public on the life, works, and legacy of Henry David Thoreau.

D. B. Johnson's first illustrated book in the series, *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg*, follows Henry the bear on an adventure from Concord to Fitchburg. As Houghton Mifflin Children's Books Teaching Guide asks: "Along the way on Henry's walk to Fitchburg, he hopped a river, carved a stick, pressed

flowers, climbed a tree, paddled on the river, found a bird's nest, ate some honey, went for a swim, and ate his way through a blackberry patch. His friend, on the other hand, got to Fitchburg by working all day to earn the fare for the train. Though they both reached the destination at about the same time, who do your students think had the more enjoyable day?" D. B. Johnson's carefully crafted words and drawings make the answer to this question wonderfully clear.

The books in the series also include *Henry Builds a Cabin*, *Henry Climbs a Mountain*, and *Henry Works*. Currently, Johnson maintains a blog, D.B. Johnson Art, where he features a comic strip series, *Lost in the Woods*, which further follows the adventures of Henry the Bear. Over the years, Johnson has led many Thoreau Society programs at Walden Pond and appears often to sign books at the Shop at Walden Pond. During the construction of the new Visitor Center at Walden Pond, when the Shop was temporarily operated out of a trailer, D. B. Johnson offered the Society the opportunity to feature a banner of Henry the Bear that stretched the length of the structure and transformed a trailer into a book mobile. When the Society needed help fostering its mission, D. B. Johnson graciously offered his generous and creative support. We are truly grateful for his art, spirit, and generosity.



Lawrence Buell

The Thoreau Society confers its highest honor, the **Thoreau Society Medal**, in recognition of "sustained, essential contributions to the legacy and vitality of Thoreauvian studies and ideals through extraordinary scholarship or service." This year, we are delighted to extend this

award to Dr. Lawrence Buell.

Lawrence Buell holds the position of Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature (Emeritus) at Harvard University, having taught at Harvard from 1990 until 2011 (and, prior to that, at Oberlin College). Among his many publications, three particular books stand out as path-breaking works that have defined, transformed and challenged the field of ecocriticism: *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005).

As both a scholar of Transcendentalism and a foundational

voice within ecocriticism, Larry Buell has consistently distinguished himself in terms of intellectual breadth and depth, often taking himself well outside of the customary realms of American literary studies and into dynamic conversations with scholars of history, biology, ecology, cultural studies, gender studies, and comparative religion, to name but a few.

The official list of Larry Buell's scholarly and teaching contributions while at Harvard is impressive and daunting. What it fails to capture, however, are the many unrecognized moments when Larry gave of his time, energy and wisdom. At Harvard, Larry oversaw the training of several generations of graduate students who have gone on to make their mark in a wide variety of fields. Larry always took the lives of his graduate students seriously, respecting their quirkiness and independence, while mentoring them in the fine arts of teaching and scholarship with care and compassion. His devotion to his students included setting the scholarly bar very high, while always conveying his belief that these bars could be vaulted over (and his conviction that there was no *one* way to do so).

In awarding the Thoreau Medal to Lawrence Buell, we celebrate not only the gifts that he has brought to us through his expertise in scholarship and teaching, but also the gifts of time, energy and insight that he graciously and consistently offered to the Thoreau Society itself over the course of many years. This includes his delivery of the Dana S. Brigham Keynote Lecture in 2008 ("The Individual and the State: The Politics of Thoreau in Our Time"), his considerable assistance in developing the interpretive story of Thoreau Farm, and his consistent and invaluable participation on many panels at the Annual Gathering. In the context of the work of the Thoreau Society, it is both Larry's intellectual generosity and his unique generosity of spirit that we especially wish to honor. One current Board Member described Larry's contributions in the following way: "In any meeting or presentation, [Larry] has that much-needed, much-admired gift of cutting right to the chase, getting right to the point, honing right in on what's most important."

In his masterful short biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Emerson*, 2003) Buell had this to say about his subject: "If you relish virtuoso displays of mental energy and 'inspired' thinking that doesn't try to fill in all the blanks; if you find yourself vexed by the spectacle of unused or wasted resources in yourself or others—if such things matter to you, then Emerson's writing probably will too."

It's not hard to hear in this description of Emerson an echo of what Larry, himself, has brought to so many of us in terms of what really matters: the asking of good, complex,

and open questions; a truly virtuoso display of intellectual energy, and the warm encouragement, of all of us, to harness our best resources as we face the future.

Thank you, Larry, for all that you have given us.



Rebecca Solnit

The Thoreau Society Medal, the Society's highest honor, recognizes "sustained, essential contributions to the legacy and vitality of Thoreauvian studies and ideals through extraordinary scholarship or service." It is a great privilege to honor Rebecca Solnit for

her urgent and deeply compelling writings about Thoreau and for the manifold ways that her body of work translates Thoreau's legacy and commitments into new and necessary contexts.

Solnit, who was educated in public schools in California from kindergarten through graduate school, is the author of over twenty books and has served as a columnist for *Harpers*, the *Guardian*, and other venues. Her writings range widely from environmental, technological, and aesthetic histories; to memoir; to meditations on politics and praxis (with particular emphases on environmental justice, gender, native sovereignty, and civil disobedience). The list of awards she has won is extensive, including a Guggenheim and multiple NEA fellowships.

Solnit has cited Thoreau as a writer of supreme importance to her, and that debt is apparent across her corpus. We see this especially in essays such as "Jailbirds I Have Loved," "The Thoreau Problem," and "Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved." In each of these pieces, and across books such as *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* as well as *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* and her most recent book on George Orwell, Solnit frees Thoreau from cynical and reductive readings and reconstructs his ideas and commitments in a manner that helps us better understand both Thoreau's world and our own.

Thoreau and Solnit share a set of commitments: to self-scrutiny and to modeling ways of holding oneself and others accountable and to the inexhaustible potential of art,

of nature, and of democracy. Moreover, they write about those commitments in ways that invite us to develop our own commitments with a similarly capacious creativity, hope, and love

Many of us, as a result, read and teach and write about Thoreau in the wake of and with the utmost gratitude for Solnit's work.

Rebecca Solnit Photo © Trent Davis Bailey



Dr. Jane Goodall was awarded the 2022 Henry David Thoreau Prize for Literary Excellence in Nature Writing. An award tribute for Dr. Goodall will appear in Rochelle L. Johnson's President's Column in the fall *TSB*.

Jane Goodall Photo: Jane Goodall Institute
by Chase Pickering
janegoodall.org