

# Special PLACES

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Seeing 'New Englandly'





# Contemporary Voices

By Mary Cotton

OUR LANDSCAPE HAS SERVED AS AN INSPIRATION FOR writers and thinkers since the Pilgrims crossed from Provincetown to Plymouth almost four centuries ago.

But who are the contemporary voices of New England carrying on the tradition of connecting us to our natural surroundings? They certainly are not household names, but they possess a keen wit, a sharp eye, and a sensitivity to the undercurrents of our environment that impact us more each day.

John Hay's work lyrically illustrates how the natural world can reveal something about humanity, if only we stop long enough to pay attention. In books like *The Great Beach*, *The Immortal Wilderness*, *The Run*, and others, Hay encourages readers to see the connections between seemingly disparate events, like seasonal migrations and what they reveal about humans' desire to know our way in the world. If you've never experienced his work, *The Way to the Salt Marsh: A John Hay Reader* is the place to start. Or plunge in with *The Prophet of Dry Hill*, a memoir by David Gessner, which details the

experience of spending a year with Hay. Gessner's other works, *Return of the Osprey*, *A Wild, Rank Place*, *Sick of Nature*, and *Soaring with Fidel* are also insightful, especially for readers concerned about an increasingly nature-hostile world.

New Hampshire resident Sy Montgomery, a regular on NPR's *Living Earth*, is the longtime columnist for the *Boston Globe* whose pieces from her "Nature's Journal" were collected in *The Wild Out Your Window* in 2002. These excellent short pieces have about them a giddy sense of adventure – Montgomery all but dares you out of your chair to follow her as she takes you through the seasons, demonstrating with precision and wit how our world is full of natural mystery.

Robert Finch, author of the acclaimed *Common Ground: A Naturalist's Cape Cod*, recently published an astonishing piece of naturalist memoir, *The Primal Place*, which takes an in depth look at a Cape Cod neighborhood whose relationship to the sea defines not only its natural setting, but the interior landscapes of its inhabitants. Finch expertly walks the fine line

between the personal journey that lies at the heart of every memoir and how that journey is nuanced by the backdrop against which it plays out.

Countless photography books by some of today's most sensitive photographers, like *Between Land and Sea: The Great Marsh* by Dorothy Kerper Monnelly, are a wonderful complement to the books mentioned above. Monnelly's black and white photos of the salt marsh stretching along the coast of northern Massachusetts are stunning reminders of how beautiful, how artful and mysterious, our local ecosystems can be. She says in the introduction, "I'm not an ecologist. Photography is my strongest voice. It's the best way for me to advocate for this landscape." Well said. For those of us who aren't nature writers or photographers, we can still appreciate, applaud, and be inspired by the works of those who are.

*Mary Cotton is the proprietor of Newtonville Books in Newton, MA and a contributor to Greater Boston, the public affairs program on WGBH-Channel 2.*

ABOVE LEFT: Salt Marsh Island, Winter, Ipswich, January  
ABOVE RIGHT: Ice Pattern #9, Gravelly Brook, Ipswich, December  
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