
THE CARAVAN

Newsletter of The Friends of Loren Eiseley

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Loren Corey Eiseley
September 3, 1907 - July 9, 1977

"We have joined the caravan, you might say, at a certain point; we will travel as far as we can, but we cannot in one lifetime see all that we would like to see or learn all that we would like to see or learn all that we hunger to know."

--- The Immense Journey

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Friends:

What a wonderful day for the First Nebraska Literature Festival which was on September 28, 1991 at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. So much preparation, so many people involved in the preparations, presentations, booth work, banquet and clean up.

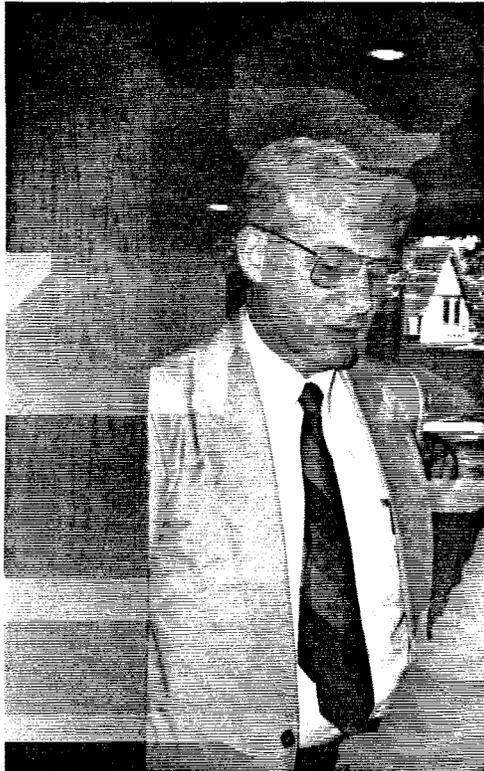
Our Eiseley luncheon at the UNO Alumni House was a great success due to the efforts of Dorothy Willis (our secretary) and her husband Ray.

I served as moderator for the Eiseley Panel of three renowned scientists. Dr. Paul Johnsgard, author and Foundation Professor of Biological Sciences at UNL, spoke about Eiseley's fascination with water--especially as he wrote about floating down a portion of the Platte in "The Flow of the River". Dr. David Sutherland, biologist from UNO, substituted for Dr. Margaret Bolick, UNL, and spoke about Eiseley's love for nature and in particular Eiseley's essay "How Flowers Changed the World". The fact that angiosperms have made an impact of great magnitude on our world was brilliantly revealed by Dr. Sutherland. The last speaker was Dr. Mike Voorhies, UNL's Morrill Museum, who gave us insight into Eiseley's contribution to the "digs". He located those in which Eiseley participated on the Nebraska map, brought fossils from the Museum that Eiseley found, and talked about the poem, "The Innocent Assassins", which is based on a fossil at Morrill Hall.

Lunch was made possible (since we had not enough reservations for the caterers) through the brain child of Dorothy Willis -- why not have box lunches catered in to the UNO Alumni House? The box lunch was a complete light meal and was delicious.

(continued)

The day was filled with bright colors painted by the presenters via the words they chose to speak about Eiseley. Each presenter gave his/her talk to a full room.



Dr. Peter Heidtmann

Dr. Peter Heidtmann, Professor of English at Ohio University, gave an impromptu talk about his new book "Loren Eiseley: A Modern Ishmael" at the panel meeting and again as a formal presentation. He was a most gracious guest to our luncheon and festival. I hope he returns another day.

Keiser's Book Store of Omaha had ordered some of the Eiseley's books and promptly sold them at Keiser's booth.

The Friends of Loren Eiseley will cooperate for the Second Annual Literature Festival to be held in Kearney in the fall of 1992. You will be hearing more about this.

Our next BIG TASK is to make current our membership (dues in January will be \$10.00 due to inflated costs, etc.). If everyone who receives this would send \$10.00 we could become solvent.

Happy Holidays!

Jane Stilwell Smith, President

P.S. Note any potential members on the back of the membership slip -- especially young adults!

EISELEY BOOTH

The Friends of Loren Eiseley booth met with success at the Nebraska Literature Festival as old friends stopped to pick up literature, and many new friends stopped to register for mailing and became acquainted with the literary anthropologist, Loren Eiseley. The booth displayed a series of photographs of the bust of Loren Eiseley which are in the Nebraska Hall of Fame. In addition to free literature, we had books by and about the author. Among them were Gale E. Christianson's book, Fox at the Wood's Edge, in a paper bound edition. We also had some greeting cards for sale with a sketch of Eiseley and four different quotations.

The Loren Eiseley cards are available through the Friends of Loren Eiseley, P.O. Box 80934, Lincoln, NE 68501-0934. Show your appreciation for this author by sending one of these cards as

thank you notes, or send a pack of them to a friend as a gift. Price \$4.00 plus \$.75 for mailing.

Eloise Herrick

EISELEY PROGRAMS AVAILABLE

The catalogue of the Humanities Resource Center of the Nebraska Humanities Council announces three programs on Eiseley and his work available throughout the state. Two are designed for general audiences, one for young people. For scheduling information contact the Nebraska Humanities Council, Suite 225, 215 Centennial Mall South, Lincoln, NE 68508, (402) 474-2131.

RESOURCE GUIDE TO NEBRASKA WRITERS FEATURED IN FESTIVAL

Over 1,500 people attended the First Literature Festival at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. It featured programming on Nebraska's literary heritage and contemporary writers, exhibits and book fairs. Bess Street Aldrich, Willa Cather, Loren Eiseley, Wright Morris, John Neihardt and Mari Sandoz, each of whom has an organization in Nebraska honoring his or her memory were featured and will continue to be a part of future festivals. In 1992 the festival will be at the University of Nebraska-Kearney; in 1993 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

A committee of the Nebraska Center for the Book which planned the festival prepared a Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors, a 93 page booklet with photographs, bibliographies, listing of books, videotapes and programs, research archives, places connected with the six authors lives and work that can be visited.

Sale of this handy reference work will support the second festival. It may be obtained from the Lincoln City Libraries Foundation/Heritage Room, 14th & N St., Lincoln, NE 68508. The cost is \$5.98 plus \$.39 sales tax and \$1.50 for shipping and handling. Make checks payable to "LCLF/Heritage Room."

Excellent present for those who teach and/or read Nebraska literature.

Kira Gale

NATURE WRITING WORKSHOP

Loren Eiseley is recognized not only as a master of the personal essay and a philosopher but also as a nature writer, so as a part of the Eiseley presentations at the Nebraska Literary Festival, a nature writing workshop was presented. It focused on the author's purpose in choosing to write about nature; the parameters of the field, the form selected---fiction, nonfiction, poetry, prose, essays, journals, diaries, autobiographies, field guides, texts, natural history---and the preparation needed to work in this area.

LOREN EISELEY MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

The Loren Eiseley Memorial Scholarships given annually by the Nebraska Academy of Sciences to the Nebraska high school student(s) writing the best essay on Loren Eiseley and his work, were awarded at the April 1991 Academy dinner to Ronald Chen of Hastings High School, now attending Harvard, and Evan Rowe of Omaha Westside now attending a Colorado college.

Tax deductible gifts to the fund for these scholarships may be made to the Nebraska Academy of Sciences, Morrill Hall, 14th & U St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0339.

(With permission of the author, a professor of English at the University of Nevada-Reno, and an Eiseley scholar, we are publishing the following essay.)

WRITING IN THE MARGINS: THE ESSAYS OF LOREN EISELEY

by Kathleen A. Boardman

Readers frequently have difficulty "placing" the work of Loren Eiseley. Anthropologist, essayist, and poet, he wrote for popular and literary magazines as well as for scientific journals. He gained an appreciative general audience with his essays on nature, science, and personal experience--carefully arranged in such works as The Immense Journey, The Night Country, and The Unexpected Universe. Professionally, though, Eiseley was criticized for wandering outside the borders of his scientific discipline. In certain articles, letters, and notebooks, he defended himself vigorously against those who had accused him of wasting time by writing for popular audiences and discussing myth, intuition, and emotion.

The literary world, while recognizing Eiseley's distinctive style, has not wholeheartedly accepted him either. The editor of a scholarly journal in literature recently referred to Eiseley as a "figure of marginal interest." Contradictory judgments of Eiseley's worth have been made even at the University of Pennsylvania, where he taught for years: in 1982, while campus officials were considering a special chair in his honor, the university press rejected a manuscript about him because he was "unworthy to be made the subject of study" (Lost Notebooks 10). Eiseley's work might have received greater official recognition if he had remained within the confines of one field. Nevertheless, I believe his writing continues to be valuable precisely because in many ways it is marginal. In a world of specialization and centralization, Eiseley demonstrates

the value of the people, places, and ideas that lie outside and along the edges of the boundaries drawn by our culture.

We generally look for meaning and value well within the spotlight that society casts on people, events, works, and regions it considers worthwhile. We look to the centers of our culture for ideas and insight. Eiseley is skeptical of this habit, not only because it overlooks the unfortunate and unusual, but because it relies on permanence in life and culture. As an evolutionist, Eiseley sees life and its forms in constant flux: species, like individuals, appear and disappear. As an archeologist, he reviews the remains of societies that have grown, flourished, and died. Because of such change, insight can most likely be found along the margins in our world, where transformation and contingency are most evident. Eiseley teaches us to look at the nobodies, the forgotten works, and the bizarre landscapes we would otherwise ignore.

Because of the beauty of Eiseley's style, it is easy to forget that he rarely describes conventionally attractive landscapes. In his fieldwork, Eiseley became familiar with "marginal" areas: wastelands, badlands, hedgerows, vacant lots, city dumps, marshes and shorelines. For years he lived in an apartment building near a field that was torn up for a shopping center. A chronic insomniac, he also knew the "Night Country", which borders the consciousness of "daytime" people and sound sleepers. These strange territories offer important visions of anyone skillful enough to notice the supposedly insignificant:

A man who has once looked with the archeological eye will never see quite normally. He will be wounded by what other men call trifles. It is possible to refine the sense of time until an old shoe in the bunch grass or a pile of nineteenth-century beer bottles in an abandoned mining town tolls in one's head like a hall clock. (Night Country 81)

Such an eye perceives life in unusual ways, in unlikely places. In the badlands--"the bone lands, the waste places at the margins of everyday existence" (NC 117)--Eiseley sees the traces of a once teeming life. Bones of the ice age lie buried in the hills, and all the chemicals necessary for life are streaked across the now barren landscape. Such lands illustrate the inevitability of change. In swamps and marshes, where "strange forms of life scuttled and gurgled underfoot or oozed wetly along outthrust branches," Eiseley sees evolution in progress:

A world like that is not really natural, or...perhaps it really is, only more so. Parts of it are neither land nor sea and so everything is moving from one element to another, wearing uneasily the queer transitional bodies that life adopts in such places...Nothing stays put where it began because everything is constantly climbing in, or climbing out, of its unstable environment. (NC 162)

City Dumps are excellent place to observe cultural change, past or present. As the attendant at one dump tells Eiseley: "We get it all. Just give it time to travel, we get it all." (Unexpected Universe 28)

Eiseley deliberately places himself outside accepted boundaries for a new, perhaps clearer, perspective on society: "I would speak of these things not as a wise man, with scientific certitude, but from a place outside, in the role, shall we say, of a city-dump philosopher," he says. The archeologist, "last grubber among things mortal," digs, analyzes, and interprets the trash heaps of prehistory and antiquity: "He puts not men, but civilizations, to bed, and passes upon them final judgments". (UU 28-9) Projecting into the future, it requires only a little imagination to judge our own civilization.

For Eiseley the philosopher, wilderness is the place for a "natural revelation." Only a "patch of wilderness" is required: even in a vacant city lot or a hotel room at night, a person can learn to discern "in the flow of ordinary events the point at which the mundane world gives way to quite another dimension" (Immense Journey 164). This process is not necessarily supernatural, but it does require stepping outside everyday boundaries of thought and action:

The world, I have come to believe, is a very queer place, but we have been part of this queerness so long that we tend to take it for granted. We rush to and fro like Mad Hatters upon our peculiar errands, all the time imagining our surroundings to be dull and ourselves quite ordinary creatures. (IJ 163-4)

Time spent in the wilderness simply breaks the habit of seeing only the predictable. A truly marginal landscape is the borderland: the hedgerow, the national border, the demilitarized zone. This is the long, thin, "one-dimensional world" which runs through--but is alien to--cultivated, civilized landscapes:

Along this uneasy border the old life of the wild has come back into its own...The freedom it contains is fit only for birds and floating thistle-down or a wandering fox. Nevertheless there must be men who look upon it with envy. (NC 3)

Eiseley recalls taking refuge in a hedgerow from a storm, along with a flock of birds. Such wild borders are also good hiding places for fugitives; perhaps only a "refugee at heart" can see such a world. Territorial boundaries, human or animal, are often invisible but carefully enforced. They form "a new running through one's brain as well as the outside world." (NC 12) Eiseley finds freedom in the recognition that such lines are everywhere: seeing the borderlines, he can avoid them, or use them for shelter.

Describing himself as a Nebraskan and "son of the middle border," Eiseley originally valued badlands, marshes, and hedgerows because he considered himself a fugitive,

changeling, and wanderer. Due partly to his own marginal position in childhood, he developed empathy for the people society ignores. As a boy in a poor and stressful household, he found himself at the edge of society and caught between his quarrelling parents. Once, he strongly identified with an escaped prisoner whose flight and capture were reported in the newspapers. As a young man with tuberculosis, and as an older man with periodic bouts of deafness, he repeatedly found himself on the borders of the everyday world. As a young drifter, riding the rails with the homeless, jobless men of the thirties, he experienced rootlessness and timelessness. Eiseley's graduate school companions were members of racial minorities, and he observed the discrimination they experienced. His graduate school advisor, who had been partly raised in traditional Indian ways, was "definitely not of the age he inhabited" (All the Strange Hours 85). Although Eiseley had a successful career as a popular teacher, department head, university provost, and museum curator, he often called himself an "anachronism" and a "fugitive" disguised as a good citizen, wearing "the protective coloring of men." (NC 12) He liked the traditional Western appellation, "Stranger."

Eiseley's essays reflect his belief that people who live on the margins often carry important messages--"messages from the gods." They serve as oracles, whom primitive societies would heed and respect, but to whom scientific societies are deaf and blind. A hobo warns Eiseley, "Men beat men, that's all." A derelict on a train tells the conductor, "Give me a ticket to wherever it is," thereby reminding Eiseley that humanity is not sure of its destination. A receiver and interpreter of such oblique messages, Eiseley remains "alert to...events or sayings that others might regard as trivial" but which may carry "momentary meaning, pertinence, or power". (NC 64)

Some people convey messages without speaking. The starthrowers, pitching beached starfish back into the sea, seems mad or at least eccentric; Eiseley finds him heroic, saving living creatures from the hands of collectors. In the badlands, the Neanderthal features of a country girl shows that the past reaches into the present. People with genetic abnormalities carry a silent message from Nature that we should "never...underestimate the potential in favor of the actual":

Below the existent men of every given generation there lurks an army of potential men. The world is never quite where we see it...the machinery of life is gambling machinery bringing into existence both the beautiful and maimed. (ASH 120)

Animals, too, carry the messages across the formidable barriers Western civilization has raised between itself and the animal world: a rat reminds Eiseley of the power of night and dark, a young fox suggests the natural world's vulnerability, and a stray cat speaks of home. Once in a laboratory, Eiseley says, a dog pleaded for its life; other scientists accused Eiseley of an overactive imagination, but he insisted that the dog's life had been wasted on a meaningless experiment. Some scientists try to wrest

information from animals; Eiseley waits for them to deliver their messages.

Another kind of "marginal" person stands at the edges of a great scientific discovery--facilitating, but not making, the famous breakthrough. In Darwin's Century, his study of the history of evolutionary theories, Eiseley focuses not only on Darwin but on other scientists whose work made Darwin's synthesis possible. Eiseley says this history made him "more conscious of the forgotten men who work to produce change before change comes about" and who often "pass away ignored, ostracized, or persecuted". (ASH 186-8) These included Gregor Mendel (who died before his work was recognized) and Edward Blyth, whose acknowledged influence on Darwin Eiseley discovered and supported in several scholarly articles.

Eiseley's essays often return to this theme: that not just the individual person, but homo sapiens itself, is marginal. His experience as anthropologist and evolutionist emphasized time's vastness and humanity's impermanence. "The truth," he says, "is that man is a solitary and peculiar development". (IJ 158) Thus, the marginal characters who populate Eiseley's essays are emblematic of humanity's position: "Alone in the universe," each person is "locked in a single peculiar body; he can compare observations with no other form of life". (NC 130) Eiseley feels the loneliness of humanity--"marred, transitory, and imperfect"--struggling to live without any illusions of the superiority or inevitability of "man". He sees all life in motion, evolving, constantly changing:

Missing links, partial adaptations, transitions from one environmental world to another, animals caught in slow motion half through some nature barrier are all about us. They literally clamor for our attention. We ourselves are changelings. (NC 72)

Homo sapiens is not the center of the universe, the pinnacle of life, or the culmination of evolutionary processes. At best, our species may be a stepping stone, at worst, a dead end. Eiseley warns against modern technological societies that fail to recognize the fragile "place" of humanity: They have power to destroy but no ability to emphasize. Those people are dangerous who have not learned to see beyond the present moment, beyond narrow self-interest, and beyond species boundaries: "Man, modern man, who has not contemplated his otherness...has not realized the full terror and responsibility of existence." (NC 148)

Viewed in the context of time and the universe, we are all marginal: yet our influence and memory may be found in places where we least expect them to endure. In his autobiography, for example, Eiseley commemorates Willy, a dying night watchman whose last days moved him, even though their lives were "tangential" to one another. He records the name of Eugene Smith, whom he never met, but whose book on aquariums was important to him as a boy. "He gave me the gift of wanting to understand other lives," says Eiseley.

We are not important names, I would like to tell him. His is a very common one and all we are quickly vanishes. But still not quite. That is the wonder of words. They drift on and on beyond imagining. Did Eugene Smith of Hoboken think his book would have a lifelong impact on a boy in a small Nebraska town? I do not think so. (ASH 170)

Often the "hidden teacher" (UU 48), rather than the officially recognized instructor, has the most lasting impact. Any influence, any permanence that we may have, is unpredictable.

One of Eiseley's own important messages is that most "margins" are only illusions produced by human culture, which draws imaginary lines between countries, properties, ideas, people, disciplines, and so on. Culture could not exist without such lines, but Eiseley reminds us that they are as ephemeral as they are invisible:

One exists in a universe convincingly real, where the lines are sharply drawn in black and white. It is only later, if at all, that one realizes the lines were never there in the first place. But they are necessary in every human culture, like a drill sergeant's commands, something not to be questioned. (ASH 100)

His role as scientist, Eiseley says, is to refine and reaffirm these lines; his role as artist and humanist is to question and subvert them:

For science seeks essentially to naturalized man in the structure of predictable law and conformity, whereas the artist is interested in man the individual...[and]the world of the personal, the happy world of open, playful, or aspiring thought. (NC 138-9)

Eiseley believes that humanity has made itself unnecessarily lonely by reinforcing the borders between itself and the animal world. As time passes and cultures and environments change, our boundaries constantly shift, and the formerly marginal becomes central. By repeatedly crossing the frontiers between science and art, by paying close attention to what others ignore, Eiseley helps us perceive certain important messages, ideas, people, and landscapes lest they disappear before we awaken to their value.

DUES NOTICES

In January, the beginning our of fiscal year, you will be receiving a dues notice. Those who paid after September 1, 1991 will be considered for all of 1992. In addition, we will be raising dues for individual members to \$10.00 per year -- other categories remain the same. The new dues structure is as follows. (If you wish to pay before the end of the year, please pay the new amount.)

Individual Members - \$10.00
Contributing Members - \$25.00
Supporting Members - \$50.00
Patrons - \$100.00

Send checks to: Friends of Loren Eiseley,
P.O. Box 80934, Lincoln, NE 68501-0934.

GOOD WISHES TO MARIAN

Marian Schultz has been critically ill and is presently in a nursing home in Lincoln. For many years this organization has benefitted by the leadership she and her husband, Dr. Bertrand Schultz, long time friends and coworkers of Eiseley, provided. Our spring meetings at their beautiful home will be long remembered. We send them special greetings and good wishes.

PLEASE NOTE . . .

We welcome comments, criticisms, and material for inclusion in The Caravan, new members. \$10.00 will keep you on the mailing list for a year and include a subscription to the newsletter.

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