Patrick D. M u r p h y. *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009, 217 pp., \$ 60.00.

Ecocritical Explorations is a new collection of essays by one of the most vocal and persistent environmentalists in American literary studies. Patrick Murphy takes up and expands many of the concerns that have shaped his earlier publications: the theoretical grounding of literary ecocriticism, the dissemination of environmental issues in public discourse, and the impact of the environmental approach on disciplinary boundaries.

The question of theoretical grounding is addressed in the Introduction to the book and in essays on complexity and simplicity (ch. 1), difference and responsibility (ch. 2), and transnational ecocritical theory (ch. 4). Like Karl Kroeber and Vernon Gras, Murphy endorses an understanding of ecocriticism that we might broadly call 'non-poststructuralist.' He defends the notion of referentiality as a prerequisite for politically responsible literature, criticism, and teaching, and he has no qualms about measuring literary representations of ecological phenomena against scientific documentation. In contrast to Kroeber's approach, however, Murphy does not reject poststructuralist epistemology outright but explores new conceptions of referentiality that go beyond simplistic notions of mimesis. One

DOI 10.1515/angl.2010.044

such 'post-poststructuralist' conception, he suggests, can be found in the work of postcolonial theorists who maintain that "no representation can avoid reference to [the world] because materiality comprises an inseparable and indissoluble component of human existence and cognition" (7). In a similar vein, he adapts the concept of "extrapolation" as it is used in science fiction studies to emphasize that fictional projections of alternative or future worlds presuppose and communicate assumptions about the writer's real world – and thus establish an indirect but inevitable referentiality. His richest source of theoretical adaptation is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, on whose affinities with environmentalism Murphy has written extensively. In *Ecocritical Explorations* he draws on Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a culturally active medium that involves its readers in concrete ethical choices and thus ideally disseminates a dialogic worldview. Along these lines, Murphy argues that ecocritics should look for texts that "ground their action and ground their readers in ethically referential situations aware of difference and responsibility" (33). What is formulated in general terms here can become rather normative in critical practice, as when Murphy invokes Bakhtin's concept of the 'alibi' to judge texts on the basis of their effectiveness in enlisting readers to the environmentalist cause (108) – I will return to this problem below. As in some earlier essays, Murphy in effect challenges humans to see nature as an ethically deserving subject (an answerable another) in the Bakhtinian sense. The notion of nature-as-subject is not without its problems, relying as it does on anthropomorphic conceptions of the non-human world. Murphy avoids some of these problems by adopting insights from Gregory Bateson and the cultural ecology movement. He traces analogies between ecosystemic and socio-cultural phenomena (for example between environmental destruction and self-destruction through drug abuse) that question the nature/culture boundary as such and subvert anthropocentric impositions.

These theoretical considerations are not pursued in much detail, and they are always linked with concrete examples. It is clear from the outset that Murphy's main interest is not in theory but in practice. The main task of the ecocritic, he asserts, is to spread environmental concerns in the universities and among a wider public. Academic ecocriticism has been criticized for raising apocalyptic alarm about global environmental issues without offering solutions other than comparatively obscure re-readings of 'high' literature. Murphy, for one, is up to this challenge. He is confident about the impact of the humanities on public discourse, and he is prepared to work for it. He largely ignores those literary classics that are hardly read outside the universities and generally focuses on popular literature because of its "wide readership" (87). Five of his twelve chapters (chs. 5, 6, 7, 8, 10) are devoted to comprehensive readings of contemporary novels, with a particular focus on mystery and science fiction. These readings impressively support Murphy's claim that rather than promoting escapism, popular literature frequently engages with environmental questions, if not always in a salutary way. Science fiction, for instance, often takes its cues from apocalyptic visions of ecological disaster. But it makes a considerable difference whether such disaster is extrapolated from eco-political failures of the present day or whether it is merely the result of a catastrophe beyond human powers to avoid. Similarly, such plots can be resolved either through a *deus ex machina* device, which again relieves humans of their responsibility and readers of the need to rethink their relations with the environment, or through a change in

environmental consciousness that might encourage readers to take political action. Another cultural area Murphy examines on the grounds of its impact on public awareness is children's education. He has chapters on environmental education tools for the multimedia generation (ch. 3) and on conceptions of parenthood and nurturing in childcare discourse (ch. 9). In the concluding chapters (chs. 11–12) he takes up the task of environmental education directly and proposes reading lists and course outlines he has developed over many years of teaching.

I have already indicated that Murphy's approach is determined by his explicitly didactic stance. He makes no particular distinction between literature and other media in his search for environmentally beneficent ethical models. Good books, he asserts repeatedly, are those which depict environmental problems correctly and do not give the reader an 'alibi' for passivity and non-involvement. When he goes into specifics this approach can result in rather blunt, reductive readings, as when he reproaches a Barbara Kingsolver novel for failing "to convert skeptics or to hold the interest of younger readers" in the environmentalist cause (57). In other respects, however, his approach seems quite productive. For one thing, Murphy can hardly be accused of belonging to the "praise-song school" of ecocriticism (Michael Cohen). He bases his evaluation of environmental literature on clear criteria, and he offers a salutary warning that not all books that deal with nature are written in an environmental spirit. On the whole, his hands-on didacticism is most convincing when it deals with pedagogical or political issues such as videogames or the war on science. In these areas, Murphy's firm stance enables him to make ecocriticism matter in political debate, as when he defends environmental disaster literature against the conservative charge of frightening the public into counterproductive safety measures. With regard to the academy, Murphy regards the extension of traditional disciplines as a necessary step toward this sort of effective environmentalism. He calls for an "holistic" approach to environmental issues and for courses designed around thematic cores (e.g. "Hurricanes") that include texts from a variety of genres, fictional and nonfictional (183). For literary critics, the main lesson to be drawn from Murphy's book may be that politically aware criticism (and teaching) needs to extend both canonic and disciplinary boundaries. In particular, ecocritics need to give more attention to popular fiction and to non-fictional genres and media, whose influence on public awareness of environmental issues is stronger – or at least more immediate – than that of canonic texts. The method Murphy advocates in his discussion of ecocritical theory is "lateral correlation," or bringing things together spontaneously, intuitively, and transgressively (76). Given his wide-ranging, surprising, and controversial explorations across various discourses, we can credit him for practicing what he preaches.