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State of nature

by Dominic Green

Is nature writing making a comeback in Britain?

The English were the first modern people to develop a city-dwelling majority: some time around 1850, the year when Dickens was writing *Bleak House*, Henry Mayhew was editing his explorations of London's meaner streets, and American literature was still dwelling in the small-town world of *The Scarlet Letter*. More than a century had passed since the English had invented a modern urban art form: the novel. Admittedly, Cervantes and Rabelais had shown the way, by organizing its parent formats—the romance and the short story—around characters rather than situations, as Boccaccio and Chaucer had done. But stringing together short stories is not the same as the intense realism of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding. We experience Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe as real people, because their experience is comprehensive. Defoe does not need to digress into daisy chains of anecdote...

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Dominic Green is a contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and a columnist for the *Washington Examiner*. His latest book is *The Religious Revolution: The Birth of Modern Spirituality, 1848–1898* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

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