



Peregrine Falcon, Scotland

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NATURE WRITING • ROBERT MACFARLANE

A MORAL GAZE

In our regular column on Nature writing, Robert Macfarlane discusses some of the books and writers that have changed the way he sees and writes about Nature.

WRITING IS A CRAFT. It is learnt in the way that cabinet-making is learnt, or a musical instrument is learnt, which is to say by practice and the often effortful acquisition of technique. In his brilliant recent book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett estimates that it takes 10,000 hours to learn to play the violin well or to make an admirable cabinet. It takes even longer to become a writer, be-

cause before you become a writer you must first become a reader. Every hour spent reading is an hour spent learning to write; this continues to be true throughout a writer's career.

You don't have to read within your tradition or form, of course. J. G. Ballard, for instance, reads almost no fiction, preferring what he has memorably called the 'grey literature' of technical manuals,

medical journals and police reports. But I like to read as much as I can from the tradition in which I work. All of the books in my writing room are either travel literature, or Nature writing, or a mix of the two. On the lower shelves, within grabbable reach, I've got my favourites: Jonathan Raban, Italo Calvino, Rebecca Solnit, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Hugh Brody, Annie Dillard, John Muir, Gretel Ehrlich, Tim