

# John Daniel (1948–)

By Delana Heidrich

The winner of three Oregon Book Awards, John Daniel is the author of essays, memoirs, poems, and fiction. In his work on the significance of nature and place in the evolution of self, he explores what it means to understand one's role on a planet that is increasingly endangered. Motifs in his Thoreauesque works include experiments in solitude, human relationships, rootlessness and home, a spiritual sense of nature, and the grandeur of the Pacific Northwest.

Daniel was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on May 25, 1948. He grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and developed a fascination with the open land in the West when his family road-tripped through the Intermountain West. In 1966, he enrolled in Reed College in Portland but found that his studies kept him "indoors too much" and his "mind too busy with abstractions." He left Reed after three semesters and immersed himself in the outdoors, taking solitary hikes to alpine meadows and making rock climbing expeditions in the region. Two stints on a Weyerhaeuser logging crew, in 1969 and 1970, opened his eyes to the effects of clear-cutting. Backpacking, climbing, and logging gave Daniel self-confidence and helped him feel that he "belonged a little better" to his life.

In 1973, Daniel moved to Klamath Falls to work as a freight inspector for a railroad, and he began to write fiction in response to a romantic breakup and the death of his father. When an editor responded to his work with the observation that he wrote "lyrically about landscape," he turned his attention to poetry. Daniel quit his job, rented an old house on a ranch in Langell Valley, southeast of Klamath Falls near the California state line, and began writing verse about sandhill cranes and sagebrush. Oregon poet William Stafford, who became a mentor and friend, supported and influenced Daniel's early efforts and recommended him for a position as a poet-in-the-schools. He supplemented his income hauling brick and mortar and cutting firewood.

In 1982, Daniel received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Poetry at Stanford University, where writer and English professor John L'Heureux lobbied to allow Daniel admittance to the graduate school even though he had no undergraduate degree. Daniel earned a master's degree in English with a thesis he would later develop into *Common Ground* (1988), his first collection of poetry. He remained at Stanford for five years as a part-time instructor, living with his wife Marilyn in a cottage on Stegner's property and writing essays and journalistic pieces that explored the interface between people and the natural world. In 1988, Daniel followed his "longing for place" back to Oregon, first to Portland and then to the foothills of the Coast Range west of Eugene.

Over time, Daniel's writing evolved from one-page lyric poems to personal essays to book-length memoirs and, eventually, to a novel, *Gifted* (2017). His first narrative, *Looking After* (1996), which chronicled the time Daniel spent with his mother as she declined from Alzheimer's, opened the way for two more memoirs and a novel. His first essays about landscape and the natural world, which appeared in *The Trail Home* (1992), inspired the collection of essays in *The Far Corner: Northwestern Views on Land, Life, and Literature* (2009), which includes pieces about death and dying, the craft of personal narrative, and writers Wallace Stegner and Ken Kesey.

Daniel's essays, journalistic writing, and poetry have appeared in anthologies, textbooks, and magazines, including *Audubon*, *Poetry*, *Portland Magazine*, *Wilderness Magazine*, and *Northwest Review*. His books of poetry include *All Things Touched by Wind* (1994) and *Of Earth* (2012), and his memoirs and personal essays include *Rogue River Journal: A Winter Alone* (2015), *Looking After: A Son's Memoir* (1996), and *Oregon Rivers* (1997). In 2002, he published *Winter Creek: One Writer's Natural History*, a reflection on his life and writing.

Daniel is the winner of three Oregon Book Awards for Literary Nonfiction (1993, 1997, 2011), a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award (2006), and the John Burroughs Nature Essay Award (1995). He received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and has been a writer-in-residence at nine universities, including Ohio State University, St. Mary's College of California, and Saint Lawrence University. He chairs PEN Northwest and administers the annual Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Residency in the Rogue River Canyon.

## Sources

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