



# Illness Narrative Tactics and Eco-philosophy in Rick Bass's Nature Stories

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**Abstract:** Rick Bass's nature stories are the stories of people adventuring in the wilderness. It is different from the traditional nature works mainly focusing on nature or animals to show the de-anthropocentric thoughts straightforward. In Bass's nature works, ill people exist in most of his stories. The narrative tactics of ill people and their diseases play an important role in expressing Rick Bass's ecological thoughts. In some stories, the description of ill people is long and complicated, but the narrative of animals is short; and in some other stories, the narrative of ill people is simple, but the narrative of animals is long and detailed. With such imbalanced narrative, Rick Bass shows the imbalanced situation between human beings and non-human beings in his stories to reflect and respond to the imbalanced situation between human beings and non-human beings in reality directly, and convey his ecological philosophy: On one side, in the short and simple narrative of ill people, he let readers understand the helpless situation of non-humans at the moment by empathy, which conveys his de-anthropocentric thoughts; and on the other hand, in the long and complicated description of ill people, he has revealed the therapy function of illness narrative, and the way to improve the relationship between human beings.

**Keywords:** Rick Bass, Nature Stories, Illness, Narrative Tactics, Eco-philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

Rick Bass (1958-) is one of the best contemporary nature writers in the United States. His collections of short nature Stories, such as *The Hermit's Stories* (2002), *The Lives of Rocks* (2006), *For a Little While* (2016), have earned him many fames: The Best American Short Stories, The Best American Science and Nature Writing, Pushcart Prizes for Fiction, and O. Henry Collection, etc.. Scott Slovic takes Bass's work as the politics of the wilderness; Jonathan Johnson compared Bass to Emerson and Thoreau for their similar views on nature and life; Thomas Bailey thought that we can find ourselves in Bass's work; Carl Hiassen, a contemporary American novelist, called him a national treasure. Rick Bass's nature stories inherit and develop the pioneers' ecological philosophy, such as Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson, and also remedy to correct pioneers' missing and deficiencies on many aspects.

Rick Bass's nature stories are the stories of people adventuring in the wilderness. It is very different from the

traditional nature works which mainly focused on nature or animals. Those works discovered the de-anthropocentric thoughts in such a direct way that common readers can observe it easily. Bass's stories are more implicit and profound. In Bass's stories, people, especially ill people, go to the wilderness and adventure in fantastic nature. We can find ill people in almost every his story, and the narrative tactics of ill people and their diseases play an important role in expressing Rick Bass's ecological thoughts. In some stories, the narrative of ill people is long and complicated, and in some other stories, the description of ill people is concise. Since Bass said "I'd feel I missed my goal if they were seen as about man in nature, or man vs. nature, as opposed to being about men and women with internal battles and conflicts and desires" [1], why did he made such large gap of the length of ill people narrative between his different stories?

Meanwhile, we found that in the text with long narrative of ill people, the narrative of animals must be short and simple; and in the text with short statement of ill people, the

description of animals must be long and detailed. Again, there is no balance between the narrative of human beings and non-human beings inside each story. If the imbalance between the narrative of human beings (more) and the narrative of non-human beings (less) in the texts reflects the imbalanced situation between human beings and non-human beings in reality, what will Rick Bass want to tell us with the imbalanced narratives between the human beings (less) and non-human beings (more)? This article aims to discover the ecological thoughts of Rick Bass in his imbalanced narrative from the aspect of ill people.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars began to pay attention to Rick Bass and his works at the end of the 20th century. In 1998, Bill Stobb interviewed Rick Bass about his transition from geologist to nature writer; in 1999, Michael Rosovsky interviewed him about the differences between his different types of works. At the same time, they all focus on Bass's stories about nature, animals and life. In 2000, Weltzien O. Alan published an article "Rick Bass's Activism Dialectic and Postmodern Ecofiction: Or, a 'Fiber' Tougher than 'Anything Made of Wood'" in ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). In the article he noted that the work *Fiber* is a fusion of fiction and nonfiction. *Fiber* narrates Thoreau-esque self and local contexts through a particular place, and honoring Bass's activism of living in the wilderness (Yaak Valley) and self-reliance. In 2001, Utah State University Press published the book "The Literary Art and Activism of Rick Bass". The book explored the dilemma of the literary environment which was raised by that Bass, praised his activism, and supported his idea that literature can save ecology.

In 2004, Natalie, a scholar at Anglos Saxon Laboratory of Universite de Toulouse, France published an article "*Winter, ou la cartographie intime DE Rick Bass*". She pointed out that the *Winter* is Bass's first work of nature writing, and this work not only updated the concept of realism, but also revealed the most intimate and invisible aspects of nature, and showed Bass's respect to the mysteries of nature, which arouse the attention to loss and abandonment. In the following decade, Claire Cazajous-Auge, another scholar at the lab, conducted a systematic study of Rick Bass's nature works, including interviewing and reporting on him. Clare's doctoral thesis, "*À la trace: l'animal dans les nouvelles de Rick Bass*", pointed out that Bass's short stories reveal the elusive side of the non-human (animal) world through fragmented description of animals. The presence of animals in the wilderness or in the text disrupts the narrative, but does not threaten the story's progress, causing the author to question the way humans describe the non-human world. The depictions of animals in Bass's stories attempt to hide them from human sight to create a biblical approach, which not only allows the author to redefine the description modes, but also reestablishes the relationship between humans and the non-human world. Since 2013, Claire Cazarus Auger has published nearly 10 papers in this field, and has given more

than 10 lectures and presentations in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Portugal and other countries.

In 2015, Elizabeth Hash at Texas Tech University published an article "Adventure in Our Bones: A Study of Rick Bass's Relationship with Landscape" on ISLE, which affirms Bass's activism, arguing that risk-taking is to some extent a form of conservation, and only when people contribute to the beauty of nature, and create more stories in nature, can people realize the value of the environment. In 2017, Ina Bergamann, a scholar at the University of Wurzburg, Germany, published "'The Blue Zone': Liminality Rick in Bass's '*The Hermit's Story*'". In this article, he discussed the legitimacy of people's treatment to nature from the perspective of ecological criticism methods, and he considered that Bass explores the limitation of human world (anthropocene) from the aspects of people, time, space and place, theme, narrative perspective, and genre and narrative models, etc.

In 2014, *New Perspectives on World Literature*, a domestic journal, published an review on Rick Bass's novel *All The Land to Hold Us* (2013), which is the first book review of Rick Bass's work in China to introduce Rick Bass and his works. In 2016, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* published an article "Approaching 'Midland': Rick Bass's Fourth Phase of Meta-ecocritical Narrative". This article pointed out that Bass revealed the ecological philosophy of symbiosis between nature and human, and showed his deep reflection on the ecological discourse strategies through fictional narrative strategy and metaphor. *Midland* marks Bass's writing becomes mature, and that is his fourth stage of creation. In 2017, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* published an article "Speculative Realism and Post-Nature Writing in 'The Hermit's Story'". This article pointed out that Rick Bass's nature imagination is different from the former ecological literatures. He considered that nature exists with its own logical system independent of human consciousness, and humans exist as a part of nature beyond rationality, which is different from the traditional ecological literatures. In 2018, Nanjing University held a lecture, and the topic was "Rick Bass's Cautious Anthropomorphic Narratives", which officially introduced Rick Bass and his works to China's scholars and readers. And the lecturer pointed out that Rick Bass's writing methods and eco-philosophy worth studying. In 2019, *English Studies* published an article titled "Cautious Anthropomorphism, Furry Men, and Rick Bass's Animal Narratives". This article pointed out that there is an obvious paradox in telling "de-anthropocentric" animal stories by way of anthropomorphism, or making animals human-like, for such stories almost always end up in the vicious anthropocentric loop. To realize "de-anthropocentrism", Bass adopted the way of "cautious anthropomorphism". Without removing human beings, he cautiously gives "feelings" or "sentience" to all things in the world, and puts human beings and non-human beings on the same ontological plane while cautiously maintaining their own differential features. In 2015, I published an article "Narrative Models of *The Cave* and Rick Bass's Post-nature Writing" (Harbin Normal

University) to analyze the narrative models in Rick Bass's nature stories.

It is obvious that in the 21st century, European and American eco-literature scholars have attached great importance to Rick Bass and his nature stories, and their focus is Bass's activism and the traditional study of animals and nature. The study of Rick Bass began a little late in China, and Chinese scholars mainly focused on animals and anthropomorphism. But Bass's nature stories are more implicit and complicated, because he tries to discuss the relationships between people and nature, people and animals and people and people from the aspect of ill people. Therefore, this thesis tries to set about people, especially ill people, to interpret Bass's ecological philosophy.

### 3. Imbalanced Narrative

In almost every Bass's nature story, there are people in trouble with their health. Some of them are protagonists, and some of them are supporting roles. Some descriptions of the ill people are long and complicated, and some narratives are short and simple in his different stories.

For example, in the story of *The Cave* (2000), Bass described the protagonist Russel, a silicosis patient, with his cough and spitting blood repeatedly and in details.

He sat up, stiff, and spit out a little blood, which he could taste but not see. He coughed again—splashed another spray of it across the walls, unseen—the silicosis, the lung-lattice of scars, clenching within him as his body realized where he was once again—almost an allergic reaction—and he wondered if, fifty or sixty years hence, were some pilgrim, lost or otherwise, to pass through this tunnel with torch or flashlight and encounter the brown and red spray of his lungs on that wall, would they be able to guess or discern even a hint of what story had transpired? Would they catch or detect even an echo of it? [2]

This is not the first time that Rick Bass described Russell's disease in the story. In this paragraph, Rick Bass explained the reason why Russell spit out blood, described his blood spitting behaviors, the shape and color of his spitting blood, and his imagination after he spit out blood. Such detailed description of an ill person and his symptoms involved readers into a deep concern about the patient's life being, and attract readers' attention to read further to know the ending of the patient and the story. We can find the similar tactics in the story of *The Lives of Rocks* (2006), which told a patient's story by narrating her illness experiences and feelings.

On the contrary, in some other stories, Rick Bass gave a very short and simple statement of ill people. For example, in the story of *Her First Elk* (2003), Bass told readers the life ending of the ill brothers, Ralph and Bruce, in one sentence.

Ralph died of a heart attack several years later and was buried in the yard outside the ranch house, and Bruce died of pneumonia the next year, overwhelmed by the rigors of twice the amount of work, and he, too, was buried in the yard, next to Ralph,..... [3]

The narrative of ill Ralph and Bruce's life ending is so

short and simple, which contrasts to their participation in hunting and butchering the elk greatly. Since their participation in hunting and butchering accounts for a great length of the story, the short and simple news of their death brings readers a sense of surprise and loss.

Such imbalanced narratives of ill people in Bass's different stories is because those ill people play different roles in their stories? For instance, Russel and Jyl (*The Lives of Rocks*) are the protagonists, so the descriptions of their illness are long and complicated; but Ralph, Bruce and Gray (*The Hermit's Story*, 2002) are supporting roles, so the narratives of them are short and simple? I believe it is one of the reasons, but it is not the single reason. Will Rick Bass want to convey a more profound significance with the imbalanced narratives? And why does Rick Bass set ill people, no matter what they are, protagonists or supporting roles, in almost all of his stories?

If we observe the texts closely, we may find that there is the other type of imbalance. In the stories with long and complicated description of ill people, the narrative of animals must be short and simple; and in the stories with short and simple statement of ill people, the narrative of animals must be long and detailed.

In the story of *Her First Elk*, as what mentioned before, the statement of the ill people, Ralph and Bruce's life ending is very short. Meanwhile, we find that the description of the hunted elk's life ending is long and detailed correspondingly, including it running away, falling down, and being dissected, and its trails, its organs, its colors, and its forms. The different proportional distribution of narratives of ill people and wounded animals form a sharp contrast. When readers lost themselves in the strong vitality of the hunted elk, suddenly they got a hard blow from the short news of the abrupt stop of the brother hunters' life. The short and sudden news of death make readers experience the feeling of confusion and helplessness, because it's so short that readers can't seize any clues of their death, and Bass didn't give any more information so readers felt helpless. What is worth noting is that such feelings were presented in Bass's story to describe the responding of the elk herd when they were facing the hunted elk's sudden death.

The cows and calves in his herd, as well as the younger bulls, stared at him, trying to discern his meaning, and disoriented, too, by the sudden explosive sound.

They stared at the source of the sound..... the rest of the herd stared at her with.....disbelief.

The rest of the herd turned and followed him into the timber, disappearing into the forest's embrace almost reluctantly, still possessing somehow that air of disbelief... [3]

In the quoted paragraphs above, we can find some words that Bass used to describe the herd's responding when they were facing the elk's sudden death: stared, disoriented, stared, disbelief, reluctantly, disbelief. If we put the situation of the herd facing the sudden death of the elk and the situation of readers facing the short death news of Ralph and Bruce together, and compare, we may find the situations are so

similar, and the responding from the herd to the sudden death of the elk and the responding from humans to the short and sudden news of Ralph and Bruce's death are so similar. If we use those words we found in the description of the herd's responding to the elk's sudden death to make a sentence to describe the responding of the readers' responding to the short news of the brothers' death, we may find they are identical: we stared at the news, reluctantly to believe it, and we were confused with the short news. We feel confused because the hunter brothers were so strong in the story, but just "several years later" they died of diseases, and the news was so short and simple without supplying a hint or clue for their death.

What is worth noting is that when we read the situation as the herd facing the death of the elk, we don't feel painful or loss in our heart. Only when we read the short news of Ralph and Bruce's death, the painful feelings spring up. C. D. Batson, and E. Harmon-Jones, etc. pointed out "Empathic concern toward a member of a certain out group represented in a story may translate into improved attitudes toward that group as such "[4] So, when we put the two situations together and compare, and realize the similarity of the two situations, suddenly we make sense of the feelings of the herd, and abruptly understand the place of humans, non-humans, and nature---In nature, human beings and non-human beings have no difference, both of them are a part of nature. Nature treats humans and non-humans equally---they can be nourished by nature, and stopped in a moment without a hint or a clue. "If stories of animal suffering tend to exert such an impact in themselves, without any external aid, then it is precisely this feature that might make them more convincing than those means of persuasion that rely on cognition rather than emotions, such as arguments and statistical data"[5] With such understandings, Rick Bass shows his ecological thoughts of de-anthropocentrism and wishes people treat animals the same as people.

On the other hand, in some other stories, such as *The Cave*, and *The Lives of Rocks*, Rick Bass described the patients and their illness elaborately. Meanwhile, he gave a strong comparison with an extremely simple statement of the animals. For example,

They surprised a doe and fawn, who jumped up from their daybed and stood staring at them for the longest time, not recognizing them as humans, before finally flagging their tails and cantering off into the woods. [2]

This sentence is the one and only one sentence describing animals in the story of *The Cave*. The plenty of description of ill people, as what mentioned before, and the concise statement of deer form a sharp contrast to make readers easily realize the imbalance between humans and non-humans in the text, and of course it is a real refutation to the imbalanced situation between humans and non-humans in our true world.

Therefore, the imbalanced narrative of ill people in different stories, is not only because of the different roles of protagonists and supporters, but the expression of Rick Bass's ecological thoughts. On one side, the imbalance narrative of

humans (more) and non-humans (less) reflects on the imbalance situation of humans and non-humans in reality; on the other side, the imbalance narrative of humans (less) and non-humans (more) let humans understand the difficult situation of non-humans, and realize the equal place of humans and non-humans in nature.

However, it is worth noting that the text with long and detailed narrative of people is a typical narrative method for anthropocentrism, and that is the reason why so many nature writers chose animals and nature as their writing objects. Will Rick Bass show his eco-philosophy of anthropocentrism instead of de-anthropocentrism? Does Rick Bass only convey his ecological thoughts of reflecting the imbalance situation of humans and non-humans in reality? But if we observe closely we may find that all the centered human beings are ill people, instead of healthy people. Does that deliver a message that there's something wrong with human beings?

#### 4. Narrative Therapy

"Narrative therapy is a style of therapy that helps people become—and embrace being—an expert in their own lives. In narrative therapy, there is an emphasis on the stories we develop and carry with us through our lives. As we experience events and interactions, we give meaning to those experiences and they, in turn, influence how we see ourselves and our world. We can carry multiple stories at once, such as those related to our self-esteem, our abilities, our relationships, and our work, for example." [6]

In the stories with long and complicated narrative of ill people, Rick Bass revealed the therapy function of narrative, and found the way improving the relationship between human beings, which is also a crucial part of nature. It is as Bass said that his stories will try to solve the problems of people and improve the relationship between people, and if readers cannot observe his intention, he will feel sad. In the story of *The Cave*, Bass applied the therapeutic method of narrative to cure Russell's illness and make him full of energy again.

In the story, there are two people, Russell and his girl friend Sissy. They drove to the mountains of West Virginia mountains, where Russell once had worked. To Russell, the trip was a revisit, but to Sissy it was a city dweller's first adventure in the wilderness. They got caught behind one slow-moving caravan, and they pulled over and went for a short walk into the woods. In the woods, Russell told Sissy "on that breeze he could detect the odors of an abandoned mine", and he "led them right up to the lip of the old adit". [2] The adventure in the abandoned mine began. Since the adventure is the revisit for Russell, he got the opportunity to re-experience what he had experienced which had affected his life a lot. When he looked back his hard experiences with his new fresh experiences this time in the mine, he divided himself into two parts: his previous self, and present self, and successfully separate his present self from previous self.

"Sometimes there are different layers," Russell said. "Adits below adits. We have to be careful not to step into one

and fall a hundred feet down to some lower level. In the old days you could be working on one level and feel the mountain shaking when a train of ore passed above or below you.” [2]

From Russell's words, we find that Russell used two tenses: present tense and past tense. When he warned Sissy to be careful, he used present tense; and when he told Sissy his experiences, he used past tense. No matter what tense he used, both of them show that Russell put himself at present life, and that means he separated his present self from his past hard experiences. What's more, it is noting that when he used past tense to describe his old experiences, he did not use "I" or "we" as the subject of the sentence, instead he used "you" as the subject. "I" or "we" contains "me"---Russell himself, but "you" is a general reference for anybody else excluding "me"---Russell himself. So, that means he determined to separate present "me" from the past experiences, and abandon his old experiences and memories.

In fact, this is the first time Russell spoke to Sissy on his own initiative in the adventure story, and it is the only conversation so long between them. At other times, either Russell always gave a simple answer with a few words to Sissy or he replied nothing. So here is the question: why did Russell speak to Sissy actively and speak much more than before this time? Because Rick Bass used a simple method of narrative therapy --- patients are compelled to recount their traumatic events, instead of patients feel compelled.

From the beginning of the story, Rick Bass implicitly told us that Russell had experienced some traumatic events.

“Russell had quit his job as a coal miner on his twenty-fifth birthday, though still, five years later, he would, at various times of exertion, spray flecks of occasional blood when he coughed. He was as big as a horse, fully in the prime of his life, and to look at him, no one would ever have guessed that he was not completely healthy.” [2]

He “quit his job”, “spray flecks of occasional blood when he coughed” and “no one would ever have guessed that he was not completely healthy.” It's obviously that Russell quit his job because he caught a serious disease (silicosis) that made him cough with spraying blood. So he must have some hard experiences during the process of his work, coal mining. And after he came back from the coal mine and lived in a city, for five years nobody knew his disease. With the implicitly in the following paragraph, “Sissy knew it, as they had had numerous conversations, increasingly intimate, on their lunch and dinner dates during the last month”[2], we found that Sissy knew his disease from their conversations, but it also implied that in the past five years, Russell locked himself by refusing to talk with other people, and kept the traumatic events and experiences to himself.

“The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.” [7] “Instead of clients who carry within themselves a defect, the person seeking therapy is someone troubled by a problem.” [8] Therefore, if we want Russell to solve his problem, he need not do anything, but he need an external force to compel him to externalize the problem-- to speak out, and then the problem will be solved. Throughout

this process, the problem is given full credit for being formidable.

From the beginning of their adventure in the woods, we know that Russell “on that breeze he could detect the odors of an abandoned mine”, he could tell the bones were “Deer” by touch in the dark mine, and he could go and come freely in the dark and dangerous mine. Nobody can do these as a common person. Sissy, a new visitor in the woods and mine, is the representative of common people. By comparing Sissy---a new one in woods, and Russell---a senior in woods, we may find that Russell's “super-abilities” came from his past experiences in mines. And these “super-abilities” have become a part of him, his instincts. As he entered into the woods and mine, his instincts were unlocked by the environment of wilderness. When his instincts gave a play in their adventure in the woods and mine, he was compelled by the wild environment to open his memory box of his past hard experiences. But this time, he found his “super-abilities” played a great role in their adventure, which could not only protect his girl friend, but led them go out of the dark mine safely. He found such new experiences totally different from his past hard experiences and memories. He rediscovered himself and became more confident. It is as Frank pointed out, “What sparkles is the quality of empowered creativity that the person demonstrated in that event. But the person has never before noticed, or perhaps has forgotten, that sparkle. One of the narrative therapist's most important contributions is to make singular moments of success sparkle, showing the person the life that she or he is already capable of living.”[8]

When Russell said, “It's honeycombed,” and laughed. “Hell, maybe it goes all the way.” we may find that Russell put down his past experiences, and be confident with present self because he found his “sparkles”, so he could laugh in the dark mine and metaphor the dangerous mine as hell. It is a relaxation of a winner who “getting past” and “moving on”, and it's a joking which Russell put an end to his past experiences. Up to the present, Russell separated the present “me” from the past “me”, and recovered.

Narrative therapy is a method to externalize the problem of a person. “While people are becoming accustomed to talking about and thinking of the problem as something out there, separate from their identities, the narrative therapist is asking other questions that emphasize knowledges and capacities that people had forgotten they possessed.” [8] In the story of *The Cave*, Sissy played the role of a narrative therapist. She asked many questions about the woods and mine for she was a green hand in the wilderness. And precisely because she raised those questions, Russell's knowledges of the wilderness and capacities were unlocked. He applied his capacities, which had been forgotten in the past five years, in their adventure, at last he became confident with the present “me”, and farewelled to the past “me”.

## 5. Conclusion

Rick Bass's tell the stories of ill people adventuring in the wilderness, which is different from the traditional nature

writers focusing on animals or nature to discover the de-anthropocentric thoughts straightforward. Ill people exist in all of his stories. In some stories, the narrative of ill people is long and complicated, meanwhile the narrative of animals is short and simple; and in some other stories, the description of ill people is concise, but the description of animals is long and detailed. With such imbalance narrative of human beings and non-human beings in texts, Rick Bass reveals the imbalance between human beings and non-human beings in the reality.

In the text with long and complicated description of ill people, Rick Bass revealed the therapy function of illness narrative. The process of therapy is simple: First, Ill people were compelled to externalize their problems instead they felt compelled, because they were compelled by the environment instead of people; then, a therapist (their partner in the story) asked them many questions to stimulate them realizing their sparkles; in the end, ill people solved the problems in the story with their capacities, and they found that they are different from the past "me", and they separated themselves from the past experiences and rebuilt themselves. In those stories, ill people need an alliance to put it in its place, the therapist or their partner is the ideal ally. In this way, ill people cured themselves, and together with their partners improve the relationship of human beings.

In the text with short and simple statement of ill people, Rick Bass make readers understand the helpless situation of animals at the moment by comparing the responding of the herd to the hunted elk's sudden death and the responding of readers to the short sudden news of the brother hunters' death. "The idea that narrative interspecies empathy and narrative interspecies empathic concern can stimulate pro-animal attitudes "[9], so we understand the feeling of the herd to the elk's sudden death instantly. "If animal stories can impact attitudes toward animals via empathy this may make them more persuasive than typical cognitive forms of persuasion." [10] However, it is a pity that when we read the responding of the herd to the elk, we can not understand such feeling, but only when we read the short news or the brothers' death, we can realize the similar feeling of animals. Rick Bass is a smart writer. He knows that animals' stories can not impact our attitudes toward animals, so he made people's stories which are similar to animals' stories to let readers experience interspecies empathy and change our attitudes.

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