“My heart leaps when I behold / A Rainbow in the sky!” Are such reactions natural, or are they learned? Many of us feel that scenes of natural beauty put us in touch with something beyond us, something transcendent and perhaps spiritual. Are we instead projecting our own desires and values onto the natural world?

Viewing nature as the home of our best feelings and a portal to the transcendent can raise further problems. We may, for instance, wish to empty landscapes of their inhabitants, the better to enjoy the view. This lecture will maintain that, despite such complications, it’s perfectly natural and eminently human for our hearts to leap up when we behold a rainbow in the sky—or (with John Muir) Yosemite Falls, or (with Anne Radcliffe) a sublime landscape in an Italy she never visited, or (with Jane Austen) the city of Bath as seen from a height, or (with Walter Scott) the Scottish Highlands—even though it turns out that we can hardly escape viewing nature through bookish eyes.