Endlings

Pyne, Lydia

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Introduction: We Humans Are a Storytelling Species

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE END.


These are names of the dead. Nicknames. Informal names. Certainly not names that the dead have given themselves. These are names that we humans have given—names we have bestowed, assigned, and conferred to the nonhuman animals whose stories we tell. Naming creates a familiarity between us and the dead.

These names are a way—fair or not—to lay claim to these animals and their stories; in a bit of dark, anthropocentric irony, perhaps we use these names to humanize them. And these particular names are a roll call of extinctions and endings on earth.

For billions of years, millions of species have come and gone as ecosystems have changed and evolutionary paths unfolded. We can see bits and pieces of these ancient species’ stories through the fossil record. A bone here, an outline of an imprint there—an archive of life and death told through stones. Taken together, fossils show five mass-extinction events in earth’s history; that is, five different events where large numbers of species died in a relatively short amount of time. The earliest was around 447 million years
ago, during the late Ordovician; the most recent was at the end of the Cretaceous, roughly 66 million years ago, popularly known for bringing about the “end of the dinosaurs.”

Fast-forward through deep time to today’s Anthropocene, when humankind has inexorably altered the earth in ways that are unprecedented in the planet’s 4.5-billion-year history. We are currently in the throes of what many scientists, journalists, thinkers, and concerned humans refer to as earth’s sixth mass-extinction event. Unlike earlier extinctions, this one is driven by people—people and the havoc that their environmental and economic decisions have wreaked on the planet. The fossil record shows us the other five mass extinction events; the sixth we can watch in real time.¹

Estimates vary of just how fast species are going extinct right now. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (a survey called for by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2000) estimated that twenty-four species a day went extinct. More recently, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity concluded that 150 species a day are lost.² Regardless of the precise number, it is safe to say that in the time it takes you to read this book, at least one species will have become extinct.

With so many extinctions, so much death, so much loss—what is so remarkable, then, about Martha, Benjamin, Lonesome George, and others like them? What makes these particular animal deaths so notable?

They are endlings—the last known individuals of their species.

_Endling_, itself, is a rather recent word.

In 1996, Robert M. Webster and Bruce Erickson wrote a letter to _Nature_ proposing the word to fill a linguistic niche. “We need a

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¹ Kolbert, _The Sixth Extinction_.

word to designate the last person, animal, or other species in his/her/its lineage,” they wrote. “We do not have one word to describe the last person surviving or deceased in a family line, or the last survivor of a species.”

At the time, Webster and Erickson were working at the Christian City Convalescent Center in Union City, Georgia, where a patient, reflecting on his own imminent mortality, remarked, “I am the last of my line.” (Trying to come up with a word apropos of himself and his situation, the patient proposed that he might be an “omega,” but Webster and Erickson worried that “omega” was not a word sufficiently unique to capture the last-ness of what the person was experiencing.) Webster and Erikson informally polled their colleagues and others in medically adjacent fields for word possibilities and compiled a short list that included: lastoline (a contraction for “last of the line”); yatim (Arabic for “orphan” or “unique of its kind”); ender (“one who ends or finishes”); or even endler.

Ultimately, endling was the word that stuck. It just fit. Endling was the right portmanteau of end- and -ling. End is self-explanatory. The -ling suffix means, in a general sense, “a person or thing belonging to or to be concerned about” when attached to a prefix noun. In Old and Middle English, for example, the word æðeling (atheling) combined æðel- (family) and -ing to refer to a person who belonged to a noble family or an heir apparent to the throne. A more recent instance, foundling, combines found- and -ling where the Oxford English Dictionary defines a foundling as “a deserted infant whose parents are unknown, a child whom there is no one to claim.”

The word endling is “Tolkienesque,” science journalist Michelle Nijhuis summarized in The New Yorker in 2017, “like Halfling or Enting, evoking a lost world.” This otherworld-ness of the word is
no doubt part of its appeal. It’s familiar and new at the same time. It’s
cure and it sounds diminutive, almost like a term of endearment—
the sound of the word elicits an emotional response, perhaps want-
ing to be protective of the organism in question. “The sound of
endling as a word would turn out to be a large part of its attraction,”
environmental historian Dolly Jørgensen notes.7

*Endling* is a word that sticks with people the first time they hear it
or say it out loud. When I introduce people to the word (“I’m writing
a book about endlings”), I catch myself pronouncing it slowly and
carefully, emphasizing the l to make sure the listener is not confus-
ing *endling* with *ending*. People would repeat “endling” back haltingly, out loud, pronouncing it with the careful precision of learning
a word in a new language. It took months for Microsoft Word and
my phone to stop autocorrecting “endling” into something else.

For years after its invention, however, the word languished.8 Although its usage and popularity have grown over the last two de-
cades, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and other formal, gatekeeping
institutions of language have yet to include the word in their cata-
logs. (Even a contemporary search of the *OED* in 2021 still results
in “No dictionary entries found for ‘endling.’”) At the beginning of
the twenty-first century, *endling* was simply a word without cultural
narrative—like a character without its own story.

This changed in 2001 with a gallery exhibit at the National
Museum of Australia called Tangled Destinies that introduced
museum-goers to the interplay between environment, technol-
ogy, and social history of Australia and Tasmania. The gallery
was designed by Mike Smith, an archaeologist and senior curator
who joined the National Museum of Australia in 1996. The exhib-
it highlighted the extinction of the thylacine species—*Thylacinus
cynocephalus* or the Tasmanian tiger—that was hunted to extinc-
tion by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British settlers

7. Jørgensen, “Endling, the Power of the Last in an Extinction-Prone
World.”
8. Nijhuis, “What Do You Call the Last of a Species?”
in Tasmania. At the center of the exhibit was Benjamin, the last known thylacine, who died in captivity in 1936 at Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart. In the exhibit, Benjamin was labeled as an “endling” and presented as the final chapter—the conclusion, if you will—to the story of the thylacines’ extinction. It was here that endlings found their extinction narrative, and extinction narratives had found new protagonists.

The word and its cachet have long outgrown the original letter in *Nature*. Today, the “endling” is used almost exclusively in reference to nonhuman organisms—animals, and occasionally plants, that have been identified as the last vestige of their species. “The endling label puts extinction on the human scale—it gives an animal a name, recognizes its worth, and asks for the human to empathize with the imminent end of a whole animal’s line,” Jørgensen offers. “The word recognizes the permanence of group extinction on an individual level.”

“The last pure dusky seaside sparrow died today, ending a steady drift toward extinction of the little bird that refused to yield to man’s intrusion,” *The New York Times* published on June 17, 1987. “Orange Band, named for the colored band used to tell him from the other four [males], was the last.” Before endling was even the word to describe Orange Band, the *Times* marked the extinction of *Ammodramus maritimus nigrescens* with the death of its last surviving member in a short “obituary” for the species at the bottom of page A20 in the *Times*, below an article about tax evasion and to the left of a report of a gubernatorial divorce. For Orange Band, the story of the birds’ extinction was—and is today—told as one of habitat loss. The birds only lived in a limited, ten-mile stretch of Florida’s eastern coastal marshes that had been overtaken by the

space program at nearby Cape Canaveral; people were unaccommodating to the birds, and the birds were unable to survive outside of their narrow range.

Orange Band was hardly the only one. Martha the passenger pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*, named after the original First Lady of the United States, Martha Washington, died on September 1, 1914. “Booming Ben,” a heath hen, *Tympanuchus cupido cupido*, was last seen on March 11, 1932 in Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. Celia the Pyrenean ibex, *Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica*, died in the Spanish Pyrenees on January 6, 2000. In 1996, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Turgi, the last *Partula turgida*, a Polynesian tree snail species, died. (“It moved at a rate of less than 2 feet a year so it took a while for the curators at London Zoo to be sure it had stopped moving forever . . . The Polynesian tree snail is extinct after the last survivor of the species passed away in a plastic box at the zoo . . . [it] will have a tombstone inscribed ‘1.5 million years BC to January 1996’ to mark its passing.”11) 淇淇 (Qi Qi) the baiji—the Yangtze river dolphin or *Lipotes vexillifer*—died in 2002 at the Institute of Hydrobiology in Wuhan, China. Sudan, the last male northern white rhino, *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*, was euthanized by veterinarians at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya on Monday, March 19, 2018. George, the last known *Achatinella apexfulva*, a species of O’ahu tree snail, died on January 1, 2019.

Because the end of every endling story is the same, it’s easy to assume that the stories that get to that end must be the same as well. It’s comfortable for us to read endling stories as an inevitable arc of death, varying only in the details, like whether it’s a story of an ibex or a treefrog. In the end, this simplistic narrative goes, endlings die as a result of human action or, perhaps more damning, inaction. “Endlings are avatars of loss,” science journalist Ed Yong notes.12

Why do stories about endlings matter?

“Storytelling is a human universal,” a team of anthropologists conclude in a 2017 study published in *Nature*. “The universal presence and antiquity of storytelling indicates that it may be an important human adaptation.”\(^ {13}\) In other words, we humans are a storytelling species. “There are countless forms of narrative in the world,” French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes notes. “… indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds.”\(^ {14}\)

But what, then, is a story? How do we tell it? How do we hear it? Why do certain “types” of stories—or literary devices—work particularly well?

On a fundamental level, narratives are built out of parts—story elements like an arc or plot, the development of characters, building tension and conflict, and, of course, resolution or catharsis. Although philosophers have debated the nature of storytelling since Aristotle, the twentieth century saw a burst of research from literary theorists like Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell, and Tzvetan Todorov (to name a few) who proposed ways to think about the most essential elements of narratives—the building blocks of stories—particularly stories like myths (*mythos*), fairy tales, and folk stories.

Many of these theorists argued, there are particular ways that the building blocks of those narratives are assembled over the centuries that become familiar and even predictable. (For example, a heroic journey, a trickster sowing discord, a magical intervention, a lesson learned.) Perhaps, then, in the case of endlings, as we try to work


\(^{14}\) Barthes and Duisit, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 237.
out how to treat them as characters and how to tell their stories, we borrow what is familiar and predictable. As Barthes points out, “Narration can indeed receive its meaning only from the world which makes use of it.”

As a storytelling species, we tell stories about ourselves, our environments, the animals in our environments, the things we encounter, the things we feel, and the things we imagine. Some stories offer cosmologies, morals, and lessons—others offer satire and entertainment. Over the evolution of our species, humankind has told its stories using a plethora of tropes that have evolved with us. Narrative, according to Barthes, might be universal, but the specifics of stories can vary considerably across time, space, and culture.

Endlings, as we’ve come to shape them, are creatures steeped in pathos, gravitas, and tragedy. But endlings are more complicated characters than simple tragic heroes and are more varied in narrative than we might assume at first glance. Each individual endling—Benjamin, Turgi, Orange Band, and the like—is unique in its biography and singular in the twists and turns of its species’s evolutionary history. Unpack the story of an endling and you will find more stories—their species, evolutionary history, cultural cachet, beginnings, and endings—nestled inside each other like matryoshka dolls.

In the decades since the word was first proposed in Nature, “endling” has grown to become a powerful, emotional character in contemporary Anthropocene storytelling. “The concept of endling as the last of a species holds cultural power,” Dolly Jørgensen notes, “encouraging its mobilization in a world facing extinction around every corner.” Today organisms are named—witnessed—in order to be remembered and not be forgotten.

15. Barthes and Duisit, 264.
When Lonesome George, the last Pinta Island Galápagos tortoise died in 2012, for example, media reports invariably decried the extinction of the species and the anthropogenic reasons for it. The stories would eulogize Lonesome George and remind readers about the fragility of Galápagos ecosystems—the other tortoises and species currently under threat of extinction. In such tellings, Lonesome George is a warning that, if we’re not careful, other Galápagos species will dwindle down to their own endlings. (Incidentally, Wikipedia notes that Lonesome George is best known for “being an ending.”)

“In the context of extinction, these kinds of stories are not an attempt to obscure the truth of the situation, but to insist on a truth that is not reducible to populations and data,” philosopher Thom Van Dooren describes of his approach to writing about extinction, which he says was heavily influenced by practices of literary witnessing that surround Shoah (Holocaust) and genocide writing. “In place of an approach that aims for an impartial or ‘objective’ recitation of the ‘facts’ . . . our stories [can] play a role of witness or testimony to the suffering and death of others.” This sort of witnessing is a form of truth-telling about extinction and loss; one that Van Dooren argues “might draw us all into a greater sense of accountability.”

But this begs the question of what endlings stories we tell, who tells them, and how they’re told. As we tell endlings stories, we are inevitably drawing from established, familiar literary tropes. What endlings offer us now is the potential for careful, deliberate storytelling about extinction in the Anthropocene. As we tell stories about endlings, we should ask ourselves: Do we want endlings to be agents of change? Tragic heroes? The animals that hold up the cosmos? Virgil-like guides for taking us through the circle of hell that is the sixth mass extinction? Aesop’s fables for the Anthropocene?

Or is there a yet-to-be-told story that is unique and specific to the organism that is the last of its kind?

Over the past two decades, endling has moved out of its initial museum discourse. Artists, musicians, poets, and a plethora of others have found the word and the idea of a “last of its kind” has prompted a very human response, be it music, art, poetry, or the like. With these encounters, we continue to shape, write, and frame endling encounters here in the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, endling stories are the stories of species and how they end. These stories also mirror how we tell stories about extinction; they are ways that humankind marks loss, harm, and environmental trauma that our own species has inflicted on other species. But endlings are also individual organisms with their own evolutionary and cultural histories. They are Ben, Martha, Celia, Toughie, and the dozens and dozens of individuals that die every day without names but are, nevertheless, the last of their species.

These are their stories so far. And the stories of their stories.