

**“HER KNOWLEDGE OF FLORA AND FAUNA CAME MOSTLY FROM FICTION”<sup>1</sup>:  
THE ADOLESCENT AS GREEN SUBJECT IN THREE  
CANADIAN YOUNG ADULT NOVELS**

by

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## **Abstract**

Using the lens of ecocriticism, this thesis focuses on the literary portrayal of nature in three contemporary realistic Canadian young adult novels: *Mistik Lake* by Martha Brooks, *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* by Iain Lawrence, and *The Uninvited* by Tim Wynne-Jones.

Ecocriticism—the critical and political inquiry into the discourses influencing our ideas of nature—questions our understanding of and relationship to the environment and to ecological concerns as portrayed in literary texts. As such, this research takes a green cultural-studies approach and draws upon sources from environmentalist criticism and literary studies to investigate the ways in which the three novels characterize the natural world, the quality of the relationship between the adolescent and nature, and how this relationship might influence readers' attitudes toward the environment. The resultant explication describes the ways the narratives construct the natural world and produce the adolescent as green subject and provides insight into the young adult's indeterminate and ambiguous relationship to the natural world.

## **Preface**

Portions of chapter four were presented under the title “Outsiders in Nature: Green Subjectivity of the Adolescent Protagonist in Two Contemporary Canadian YA Novels” at the “Strangers in a Strange Land” Graduate Research Conference on Children’s Literature held at the University of British Columbia on April 28, 2012.

## Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Abstract.....   | ii  |
| Preface.....  | iii |
| Table of Contents.....  | iv  |
| Acknowledgements.....   | vi  |
| Dedication.....   | vii |
| Chapter 1: Introduction.....                                      | 1   |
| Introduction.....   | 1   |
| Origins of Interest.....  | 2   |
| Rationale for Primary Texts.....                                  | 4   |
| Introduction to the Primary Texts.....                            | 10  |
| Methodology and Research Questions.....                           | 12  |
| Value of this Research.....                                       | 12  |
| Outline of the Chapters.....                                      | 13  |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review.....                                 | 15  |
| Chapter Overview.....   | 15  |
| Introduction.....   | 15  |
| Young Adult Literature.....                                       | 15  |
| YA Literature and the Canadian Context.....                       | 20  |
| Ecocriticism: Its Roots and Definitions.....                      | 21  |
| Ecocriticism and the Canadian Context.....                        | 23  |
| The Trouble with Ecocriticism.....                                | 23  |
| Ecocriticism and Children’s Literature.....                       | 25  |
| Chapter 3: Theory and Methodology.....                            | 27  |
| Chapter Overview.....   | 27  |
| Introduction.....   | 27  |
| Methodology.....  | 29  |
| Ecocritical Framework.....  | 31  |
| Conclusion.....   | 33  |
| Chapter 4: The Literary Portrayal of the Natural Environment..... | 34  |
| Chapter Overview.....   | 34  |
| Introduction.....   | 34  |
| A Resistant Reading of the Background as Setting.....             | 35  |
| Nature as a Literary Device.....                                  | 37  |
| Young Adult Subjectivity.....                                     | 40  |
| Conclusion.....   | 53  |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 5: Nature Tropes and Binaries.....  | 55  |
| Chapter Overview .....                      | 55  |
| Introduction.....                           | 55  |
| Retreat and Return .....                    | 58  |
| Urban and Rural.....                        | 65  |
| Conclusion .....                            | 73  |
| Chapter 6: Secrets and Transgressions ..... | 76  |
| Chapter Overview .....                      | 76  |
| Introduction.....                           | 76  |
| Secrets .....                               | 77  |
| Transgressions.....                         | 84  |
| Conclusion .....                            | 94  |
| Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions.....  | 97  |
| Introduction.....                           | 97  |
| Summary of Findings.....                    | 99  |
| Contribution to Existing Scholarship.....   | 101 |
| Implications for Future Research.....       | 102 |
| Concluding Thoughts.....                    | 103 |
| Endnotes.....                               | 105 |
| Bibliography .....                          | 106 |

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For my two wonderful sons Reegan and Caelan.  
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For the shore pine.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

In Tim Wynne-Jones' young adult novel, *The Uninvited*, the female protagonist, Mimi Shapiro, enters a driveway surrounded by a richly described meadow. She observes a tree in bloom and thinks, "Dogwood? The name came to her, but her knowledge of flora and fauna came mostly from fiction. So all she could say with any authority was that it was beautiful. Something from a fairy tale" (24-5). To think that a real plant might look as if it came from a fairy tale or that one could identify it from its depiction in a novel underscores several issues fundamental to environmental literary criticism. One is the role literature plays in the construction of our world. Rather than knowing a dogwood from personal real-world experience and drawing on that familiarity to respond to its fictionalized counterpart, Mimi's identification of the real plant relies on its portrayal in a work of fiction. The idea that a plant looks as if it came from a fairy tale holds relevance as well. It speaks not only to the tendency of literature and other cultural artefacts to idealize or romanticize the natural world but also to the conundrum that regardless of the cultural meanings influencing our knowledge of the natural world, a real nature exists outside these constructions as well.

Indeed, a premise motivating green criticism is the concern that unless societal attitudes toward nature undergo significant change, the environmental crisis will continue at an accelerated rate. To that end, the goal of green literary criticism is two-fold. On one hand, it endeavours to unpack the ideologies present in literary depictions of the non-human environment. On the other hand, through these kinds of analyses, the ecocritic hopes to influence cultural attitudes in a way that contributes to slowing or halting human-caused environmental degradation. This political stance separates green criticism from many forms of academic literary criticism. Finally, something not immediately apparent from the above quotation is that Mimi is eighteen years old. Her age and the age of the other protagonists in the novels examined in this research thesis raise questions about the environmental identity of teenagers and the ways literary constructions play into their understanding of the natural world. North American society puts great stock in young people and their ability to put right the legacy of pollution and environmental damage left by preceding generations. Will they struggle to resurrect a fairy-tale



version of nature or does our literature situate them in a relationship with the natural world that is more realistic and empowered, and what does this relationship look like?

### **Origins of Interest**

My interest in ecocriticism and Canadian young adult literature evolved from disparate events and experiences in my life. The appeal of young adult literature, for instance, stems from the astounding selection of books available to teens today. When I was a teen, I went directly from reading children's books to reading books for adults. There was nothing in between. One day it was *A Wrinkle in Time*, the next it was *I Robot*. I went from reading *Little Women* and wishing Jo would marry Laurie to reading Harlequin romances. Now, as the parent of teenagers, I have a more vested interest in YA literature. Adolescence and the dramatic transformation that occurs during this intermediary pre-adult life stage as well as the cultural influences brought to bear on this age group fascinate me.

To complicate this picture, for many years I had a negative attitude toward Canadian literature. I think it may have been predicated on an unfortunate encounter with Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* when I was in my late teens. I can't express the antipathy with which I viewed that book. Twenty years later, I read a different novel by Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, and experienced a complete about-face. Sections of this novel seemed so eerily familiar I wondered if there was any way that perhaps Atwood and I might have been childhood acquaintances despite our age difference. Her descriptions of the protagonist's childhood were descriptions of my childhood. Rain dripped, loam smelled, clothes looked exactly the way they did in my memory, but now they appeared in a book written by a stranger, a Canadian stranger, who told the story of my Canadian childhood. Her writing resonated with me like none had for many years. While at the time I thought this was just the effect of a well written book, I realise now that I was having a moment of Canadian identity. Across all the boundaries separating us (the boundaries of time, space, strangers, and the book's pages) I was feeling my Canadian-ness through literature. This experience has contributed to my abiding interest in all things Canadian, particularly Canadian literature, but it also demonstrated the difference a few more years of life experience can make to one's response to a book. I believe that the life experience gained between the early and late teen years affects interpretation in a similar fashion.

Perhaps the most pivotal experience relating to my interest in all of this—young adult literature, Canadian literature, ecological content in literature—came during my undergraduate degree here at UBC. It was then that my nascent green focus crystallised in a Canadian literature class with Dr. Laurie Ricou, where my task was to use as my touchstone a little known Canadian species, the shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta*), and unearth its literary significance. This was a near impossible task. After three months of searching, I found only three literary references to the shore pine; however, as a process of research and of challenging the conventions of literary analysis that I'd been previously exposed to, this was one of the most personally, educationally, and conceptually transformative and illuminating projects I've ever undertaken. I didn't know it at the time, but this was also my first venture into ecocriticism. My research blended texts from forestry, poetry, Canadian literature, American ecocriticism, and my own personal narrative. Toward the end of the project, I found myself finally sitting under a shore pine on a windy bluff at Lighthouse Park in West Vancouver. I had been thinking about a quote by Canadian eco-poet Don McKay that Laurie had read to us in class. It went like this:

Suppose we try to define place without using the usual humanistic terms—not home and native land, not little house on the prairie, not even the founding principle of our sense of beauty—but as a function of wilderness. Try this: 'place is wilderness to which we have occurred.' Or: 'place is land to which we have occurred.' This would involve asking, for example, not 'what's the beach to me?' but 'what am I to the beach?' Our occurrence to the land—the act which makes place place—could be a major change . . . or a smaller claim . . . but it shifts the relationship; it brings the wild area into the purview of knowledge and makes it—perhaps momentarily, perhaps permanently—a category of mind. . . . Place becomes place by acquiring real or imagined borders and suffering removal from anonymity. (17-18)

That day, as I looked at this lone spindly shore pine, I did something out of my comfort zone. Just as I had observed my children do when they were very young, I (rather self-consciously) put my nose right up against the trunk to see underneath the bark and asked (in my mind), as McKay encourages, "what am *I* to the shore pine?" My response to the question, if I found one, is now hazy, but the experience as a whole was momentous. It emphasized the impossibility of speaking for nature in any way that wasn't biased by my selfishness for the creature comforts and the sustenance the natural world affords my society. More importantly, it showed me how little I

question the constructions I bring to my interpretation of the world. And how impossible they are to unpack or even identify. That day, I found myself looking at the natural world from a microscopic perspective, and it made me wonder how children and youths who have never had this kind of experience would view the natural world if all they ever knew was its literary representation.

My thesis topic, then, arises from the convergence of these disparate experiences which have given me an appreciation for the Canadian context in all its facets, both natural and cultural, and a steadfast curiosity about teenagers and their relationships with literature and vice versa. In a way, my thesis takes Don McKay's question and reframes it to ask: "What is the young adult to the natural spaces of the Canadian landscape in literature?" What follows describes the journey taken to unravel the answer.

### **Rationale for Primary Texts**

Research on YA literature is still sparse, especially in the area of Canadian material, and on the cultural messages contained in this literature. In particular, I want to know what Canadian writers of contemporary fiction have to say to young adults about the Canadian landscape. When I use the terms "teenager," "young adult," or their derivatives, I am zeroing in on readers on the cusp of adulthood. Childhood is behind them. They are experimenting with and solidifying their soon-to-be adult identities. By extension, their environmental identities are undergoing a similar transformation. Today's young people hold their own and subsequent generations' futures in their hands. Contemporary Western society views their potential as stewards of the earth positively; hope rests with this generation, yet they know a completely different natural world than their parents and grandparents experienced. Accordingly, what views of nature do we provide them through the cultural artefacts of their literature and which ones will they choose to bring with them as they move toward fulfilling our expectations?

Based on the assumption that they reflect current twenty-first century attitudes toward the natural environment at a time of heightened concern about climate change while also providing a contemporary Canadian perspective, I decided to work with the most recently published novels available. My choice of realistic fiction is influenced by the variety of male and female narrative voices within each text, the intertextuality of their narratives, and the significant voices given to the adult characters. Also important is the literary attention to and evocation of unique

characteristics of the natural environment as well as a substantial part of the story taking place in a rural setting. Although scholars such as Mary Elizabeth Wilcox have plausibly argued for the application of a range of narrative qualities in defining Canadian fiction, I wanted to keep my parameters narrow to ensure that the landscape depicted is a lived Canadian landscape familiar to the authors. Lastly, I wanted the texts to have a certain edginess to them and to display qualities of narration or plot that challenge conventional literary portrayals of events affecting adolescents not only to make my analysis interesting but to provoke consideration of the potential relationship between these edgy components and portrayals of the natural environment.

Canadian literature for adolescents has a rich and extensive history of outdoor survival narratives (Egoff and Saltman 22). When I began the search for my primary texts, classic Canadian standouts such as Tim Wynne-Jones' *The Maestro* (1995), William Bell's *Crabbe* (1986), Jan Truss' *Jasmin* (1982), Kevin Major's *Hold Fast* (1978), and Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens* (1956) seemed like obvious choices. These novels present the natural environment as a space of transformation where the young protagonist (usually a male) comes to terms with the issues or constraints awaiting him back in his home society. The elements of his struggle to survive (often in the face of starvation, an encounter with inclement weather, or a predatory animal, but equally as often due to an act of ignorance endangering another) serve as metaphors of transformation preparing him to integrate back into the social framework he had left at the beginning of the story. *Jasmin* contains many of these tropes, yet the novel is unique for its portrayal of a female protagonist in a wilderness survival situation.

Although my description of these novels is highly generalised, the dominant tropes of escape from problems in culture, survival in the Canadian wilderness, transformation as a result of this wilderness experience, and eventual return to a socially constrained urban space reflect many of the Canadian literary tropes identified by both Sherrill Grace in *Canada and the Idea of North* and Margaret Atwood in *Survival*. However, my reading of Canadian YA novels published within the past ten years shows fewer conventional outdoor survival narratives depicting a male adolescent protagonist pitted against the wilderness in a battle for survival. This, in turn, suggests that today's youths are likely reading fewer of them as well. Even so, survival narratives have not disappeared completely; rather, they appear to have evolved and hybridized. Some authors blend the survival motif with contemporary but strikingly unusual topics such as teenage schizophrenia in K. L. Denman's *Me, Myself and Ike* (a 2010 Governor

General's Literary Award finalist). Some play on our social fears of child predation and abduction in suspenseful novels such as Norah McClintock's *Taken* (2009), where a young girl must use her somewhat contrived wilderness skills to escape from her abductor, and Nichole McGill's novel, *Girl #3* (2009), which uses the ravines in suburban Toronto as the backdrop for a psychological thriller told from the perspective of the teenage girl who may be the third victim of a serial killer.

Novels such as Eric Walters' *Northern Exposures* (2001), Jamie Bastedo's *On Thin Ice* (2006), and Monique Polak's *The Middle of Everywhere* (2009) have much to recommend them. They are particularly noteworthy for their northern Canadian settings and for integrating the subjects of polar bear migration and population decline. Both topics point to current environmental issues related to climate change. Unfortunately, the novels were just too didactic and simplistic for my purposes. They also presented me with concerns about my ability to adequately address the First Nations content given my lack of academic specialization in that area. Julie Burtinshaw's *Adrift* (2002), Katherine Holubitsky's *Alone at Ninety Foot* (1999), and Gayle Friesen's *Losing Forever* (2002) draw on natural spaces as the catalyst for a cathartic resolution as the protagonists cope (in order) with a mother's slide into clinical depression, the death of a sibling and a mother's suicide, and lastly the death of a sibling, divorce, and a mother's remarriage. As with the other novels, I decided against these ones for various reasons. For one thing, the protagonists are all younger teens. Moreover, *Adrift* is written for reluctant readers and is lacking in complexity. In the case of *Losing Forever* and *Alone at Ninety Foot*, part of the resolution has to do with the experience of first love, but this topic has become commonplace in young adult literature and I was looking for something edgier and less predictable.

The novels preoccupying my choice for the longest time came from the rich array of Canadian fantasy and science fiction. I considered the Triskelia (Droughtlander's) Trilogy by Carrie Mac, *Dust* (2001) by Arthur Slade, and even Cory Doctorow's wonderful post-9/11 novel *Little Brother* (2008). Mac's characters trek across a futuristic landscape characteristic of the Rocky Mountain range and the foothills of Alberta although never so identified. Moreover, climate-control technology and restricted access to water are used as forms of social control which would provide for an interesting ecocritical analysis of globalised corporate greed and its effect not just on the environment but on third world countries and politics. *Dust* takes place

during the Depression on a drought-plagued Saskatchewan landscape and draws on the literary technique of magic realism. The idea of access to water as a means of controlling behaviour makes it a complementary text to hold up against *The Droughtlanders* (2006); however the disparity in time frames (*Dust* takes place during the Depression and *The Droughtlanders* takes place in a distant future) and landscapes (*Dust* takes place in Saskatchewan and *The Droughtlanders* takes place in an imaginary landscape) adds a layer of complexity that might muddy my overall discussion about contemporary attitudes towards recognizable landscapes. *Little Brother* takes place in an urban American setting and uses as its cautionary frame fictionalized events based on reported 9/11 incidents. Little scholarly ecocriticism has been written on the topic of war and notions of pollution, and, analysis of a novel such as this would be a welcome addition to the literature. Even so, these are not aspects I wanted to pursue as they take away from a regional Canadian focus. Besides, the only thing Canadian about *Little Brother* is its author (who now lives in the United States). Monica Hughes' Isis Trilogy (published in the 1980s) and Janet McNaughton's Blake Raintree series *The Secret Under My Skin* (2000) and *The Raintree Rebellion* (2006) are ideal novels for ecocritical analysis as both series portray a future circumscribed by environmental degradation resulting from human actions in the reader's present. The first book in McNaughton's series takes place in a Gros Morne Park (Newfoundland) of the future and provides a didactic but authentic portrayal of local flora, fauna, and ecosystems. Hughes' series takes the reader to another planet and demonstrates the human propensity for colonizing the natural landscape and ignoring the environmental lessons of our past. This genre as a whole holds great potential for future ecocritical analysis, but except for *The Secret Under My Skin* and *Dust*, does not reflect the physical regional features of the reader's contemporary Canadian landscape that my research probed.

Although Canadian writers are producing a growing body of environmentalist non-fiction books, particularly illustrated books for younger readers, I have found very few Canadian novels written with the purpose of expressing an environmentalist position. Other than *Poster Boy* by Dede Crane and *Earthgirl* by Jennifer Cowan, I am aware of only two other works of realistic fiction for teen readers with environmentalism as the theme and focus: William Bell's 1996 novel, *Speak to the Earth*, which tells a story reminiscent of the "tree hugger" activism that took place from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s in the Carmanah Valley on Vancouver Island, and Sue Ann Alderson's 2007 verse narrative, *The Eco-Diary of Kiran Singer*, which addresses the

restoration of Camosun Bog in Vancouver (near UBC) from a 12-year-old girl's perspective. Crane's and Cowan's novels are recent (both books were published in 2009) and feature sixteen-year-old protagonists. Both books have received enthusiastic responses from reviewers, but neither has yet to win a Canadian literary award. These books also struggle to meet my criteria for Canadian outdoor content: *Earthgirl* takes place in the urban setting of Toronto while, despite the fact that Dede Crane lives in Victoria, BC, *Poster Boy*'s urban and rural locations are unidentifiable. Overall, their environmental content and positioning as Canadian books for adolescents made *Earthgirl* and *Poster Boy* books to consider for their environmentalist perspective; however, they did not fully meet my criteria for quality, edginess, and portrayal of an identifiable landscape.

My final choices were *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* (2002) by Iain Lawrence, *Mistik Lake* (2007) by Martha Brooks, and *The Uninvited* (2009) by Tim Wynne-Jones. They are written by highly acclaimed Canadian authors, each of whom has previously won a Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature. Although these particular books have not received Governor General's awards (*The Uninvited* was a 2009 finalist), they have been lauded in book reviews and have received numerous other awards and recognitions. They also all feature older teenage protagonists. For instance, the narratives in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* and *Mistik Lake* shift back and forth in time, providing the reader a significant amount of information about the protagonists' childhoods; however, the voices and attitudes conveyed in their retrospective and present-time accounts reflect their older ages (seventeen and eighteen years old) at the end of the novels. The three characters (Mimi, Cramer, and Jay) in *The Uninvited*, whose ages range from eighteen to twenty-two years, are even older if not in age, then through their life experiences, in their language, and in their relative sophistication. Each novel also takes place in a distinct Canadian landscape: BC's west coast (*The Lightkeeper's Daughter*), the Manitoba prairie (*Mistik Lake*), and rural Ontario (*The Uninvited*). Although the three novels rely on nearby bodies of water to situate their narratives—the Pacific Ocean in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, a lake in *Mistik Lake*, and local river channels in *The Uninvited*—the landscape garners far greater attention. Indeed, the natural environment features strongly in each novel and includes detailed descriptions of the local vegetation and wildlife, giving each setting a regional specificity that elevates it from background to a distinction akin to that of a unique but minor character.

In terms of their edginess and distinguishing qualities, unlike much children's literature where authors do away with adults to provide the young protagonists more freedom to act, the adult characters in these novels have strong voices and play important, but not always parental, roles. The edginess comes in part from the multi-voiced present and retrospective narrative styles employed by the authors and from the nature of the secrets kept from the protagonists. Although teen pregnancy is no longer the provocative subject it was to previous generations of readers, Lawrence makes it edgy when it happens to a thirteen-year-old girl who lives on a remote island and has virtually no contact with the outside world. The ambiguous ending leaves the reader uncertain whether the father of Squid's daughter is the mysterious kayaker who spent one night on the island, or her brother, who committed suicide shortly after she became pregnant. Similarly, the suggestion of incest adds to the mystery of the unnamed stalker and the growing sexual attraction among three strangers who turn out to be siblings in *The Uninvited*. Brooks' *Mistik Lake* brings in the somewhat more conventional issue of sexual identity relevant at the historical time it takes place in the novel but no longer a concern in the present, as well as the issue of illegitimacy and unknown parentage.

Each author uses an interesting dialogic narrative style that draws on adult characters as much as the adolescent protagonists to tell the story. Lawrence uses the voices of Squid and her mother Hannah along with her dead brother Alistair's diary entries to reframe other characters' memories of a time before his suicide. Brooks' rich narrative style draws on past, present, adult, and teen characters to weave a story about the effect of a tragic accident on three generations of women. As Lawrence does, Wynne-Jones juxtaposes past and present time and narrative points of view to show the same event from different perspectives. Occasionally the perspective is from an unnamed observer, which enhances the mystery of his or her identity, creating suspense and uncertainty about his or her status as reliable witnesses to events.

From Lawrence's very precise naming of plants, animals, and geological features, to Wynne-Jones' ecosystem of the Snye, and Brooks' upward poetic gaze describing the stars and sky above the prairie landscape, each author draws heavily on the natural world to frame and authenticate the realistic setting and experiences of the novels. Plants are not simply trees and flowers; they are hemlocks, irises, and poppies. Whales aren't the iconic photogenic orca; rather, they are the behemoth humpbacks that migrate along the Pacific coast of Canada. At times the natural world is depicted in idyllic terms and at times in very realistic ones. Common to all three



novels is an attitude shown by the characters toward the city as corrupting and toward nature as healing. At times, however, we are shown opposite attitudes such as that rural communities are small-minded and that the city is a place of knowledge and progress—issues to be addressed more closely in later chapters.

All together, as popular works of fiction by three of Canada's best YA authors, these novels embody contemporary attitudes toward the natural environment typical of Canadian realism for the older teen reader. They are valuable works to study in this context because they demonstrate how nature is constructed by and disseminated through culture and the cultural literary artefacts of our time. Moreover, as regionally specific works, they have the potential to offer up qualities of the Canadian landscape as part of the larger conversation about our literary national identity.

### **Introduction to the Primary Texts**

The secrets and series of events contributing to the sadness and loss experienced by the characters in Martha Brooks' *Mistik Lake* are recounted in multiple voices by Odella McLean, her great Aunt Gloria, and Odella's boyfriend Jimmy Tommason. The story follows a non-linear chronology but generally progresses forward in time beginning when Odella is nine years old and ending when she turns eighteen. Brooks uses first-person narration to convey Odella's point of view and mostly third-person narration for Gloria and Jimmy as well as the epistolary form to provide information about past events and their contribution to the situation in which the characters find themselves toward the end of the novel.

Odella and her family are devastated when their mother Sally abandons them to move to Iceland with her new boyfriend. Not yet recovered from Sally leaving, life for the family goes from bad to worse when only a few years later she dies in a freak hiking accident. Her death, however, proves to be the catalyst that brings many secrets to light. We learn, among many other things, that Odella's great aunt Gloria is a lesbian and lives with her partner in Toronto and that she once had an affair with Violet Isfeld, the mother of Gerald Isfeld who, it turns out, is Odella's biological father. Although portions of the story take place in Winnipeg, both Sally and Odella seek out Gloria's cabin on Mistik Lake when their lives become troubled. Thoughts of Mistik Lake help keep Odella grounded and give her a sense of stability when life becomes particularly difficult. Brooks' talent for evoking the Manitoba landscape is unerring. She

describes the landscape in metaphors that convey the majesty and spirituality of the sky and cosmos while also imbuing the undulating prairie landscape with colours, smells, and sounds that lend the Mistik Lake area and environment a strong presence in the novel.

Iain Lawrence's *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* takes place in the ecosystem of a remote lighthouse station on the fictional Lizzy Island off the coast of British Columbia near Prince Rupert, and is told from the perspectives of Squid McRae and her mother Hannah and through her brother Alistair's journal entries. Several years have passed, but the family continues to struggle with the grief and unanswered questions left by Alistair's suicide. Squid's return to the island with her three-year-old daughter triggers memories for both Hannah and Squid that provide the reader with the background information to fill in the gaps of the family's history on the island. Although the story moves chronologically forward in the present time of the main characters, their memories and flashbacks dip in and out of time in a seemingly random pattern. The narrative paints a picture of the children's lives growing up on the island while interweaving (through excerpts from his journal) Alistair's concerns about his increasing myopia and feelings of being trapped. He commits suicide a few months after Squid becomes pregnant. In addition, the notion of incest figures prominently in this novel. Indeed, Squid's family all too readily believes the story of the handsome red-haired stranger who made love to the thirteen-year-old Squid on the one night he camped on the island. Yet, too many clues suggest Alistair may have been the father of her daughter.

*The Uninvited* by Tim Wynne-Jones takes place in a small community a few hours' drive from Toronto. The narrative recounts the chance coming together of three young adults who turn out to be siblings related through their father, Marc Soto, a famous artist. Mimi Shapiro has left her home in New York to avoid the unwanted attention of her former lover. Planning to work on a screenplay for the remaining months of summer holidays, she arrives at her father's cottage only to discover it already inhabited by Jay Page. Their attraction is instant but held in check once they discover their sibling relationship. Jay uses the cottage as a recording studio but finds his work disturbed by someone who breaks in and, rather than stealing, leaves disconcerting gifts. This same person, who unknown to them happens to be their other brother Cramer, also begins stalking Mimi and fantasizes about being her lover. It isn't until the end of the novel that Mimi and Jay learn Cramer's identity and their relationship to him. The unusual land formation of the snye in which the cottage is located provides a small oasis in the middle of a forested

green space—a green space in which Cramer and others hide while they spy on the comings and goings at the cottage. In combination, the sexual attraction between the siblings, the tension created by the reader knowing more than the characters, and the gothic undertones of the seemingly isolated location bring suspense and mystery to the novel.

### **Methodology and Research Questions**

Using the method of close reading, I have brought to these texts green cultural criticism in the environmentalist tradition to explicate the portrayal of the natural environment and to ask the following questions about the literary representation of nature in contemporary Canadian adolescent fiction:

1. How is nature characterised in literature written for young adults and how might it influence and be influenced by cultural attitudes toward the natural environment?
2. What is the quality of the relationship between the adolescent and nature?
3. What is the young adult to the natural spaces of the Canadian landscape in literature? How do the novels construct the young adult as green subject?
4. In what ways does the text use outdoor experiences and natural settings to influence the adolescent reader's ecological or environmental point of view?
5. What preliminary suppositions might one begin to make about contemporary Canadian realistic fiction for young adults based on the associations made between the depiction of the natural world and the edgy components of the respective narratives?

### **Value of this Research**

A child's experience of nature as a real space influences his or her environmental attitude as an adult. Scholars such as Gary Nabhan and Stephen Trimble and Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd suggest that a child's impoverished experience with the natural world reduces the likelihood she or he will develop the deep and lasting affinity with the outdoors believed necessary to inspire environmental conservation or activism. Given that the majority of Canadians live in and around the cities dotting our southern border, most children's experience of the outdoors is mediated by the constructed urban landscapes in which they live. Nonetheless, cultural artefacts such as books and other media also contribute to the formulation of an

environmental identity. Literature, in particular, plays a powerful role in the intellectual development and perceptions of readers. Indeed, as John Stephens notes, young readers “are highly susceptible to the ideologies of the text, especially the unarticulated or implicit ideologies” (*Language* 68). The ideologies to which he refers include among other things attitudes toward nature and the natural environment. If, as many argue, our concept of nature is a socially conditioned phenomenon, then images of nature as represented in literature are important to examine if we want to understand our relationship to the present state of the environment and the ways in which we remain part of the problem or become part of the solution. A cultural studies approach with a green emphasis provides an excellent framework through which to examine the ideological representations of the non-human world as portrayed to young adults through literature. While traditional ecocriticism has focused on American nature writing and poetry and more recently British and American fiction, very little scholarly work exists on ecocritical approaches to children’s literature. Indeed, an extensive search has revealed the lack of scholarly ecocriticism on *Canadian* children’s literature and even less on Canadian young adult literature.

Ecocriticism’s lack of a unifying theory presents opportunities for research such as mine, but it also presents challenges because without a guiding theoretical framework the construction of a practice of scholarly inquiry and the development of a body of investigation to build upon become compromised. However, while the scarcity of ecocriticism specific to Canadian adolescent literature may offer some difficulty, it also opens up the field for pioneering and significant scholarly work. Ecocriticism is growing in popularity, and good research is being produced. I believe that a cohesive theory of Canadian ecocriticism will emerge in the near future and I hope that this thesis will play a part in its development as well as contributing to research on Canadian YA literature as a whole.

### **Outline of the Chapters**

I locate this research thesis within the field of ecocriticism which I categorise as a form of cultural criticism with a green focus. The choice to distinguish my approach as “green” rather than “environmental,” which is a common stance in ecocriticism, stems from my observation that popular realistic Canadian YA fiction contains little to no environmentally oriented political content. Moreover, a cultural studies approach allows me to explore the ideologies of nature and

(youth) culture with some freedom. In that vein, the chapter following this one (chapter two) begins with a review of the current state of academic study in the areas of young adult literature, Canadian young adult literature, and literature and identity formation. After a brief assessment of nature tropes in Canadian fiction the literature review transitions to a discussion of environmental literary criticism and its origins, ecocritical theory, and ecocritical writing on young adult literature. Chapter three reviews the theories and methodology brought to the research and analysis of the primary texts.

Rather than progressing through the thesis on a book-by-book basis, chapters four, five, and six take a thematic approach to exploring the various ideologies of nature present in the three novels I have selected for close study. Chapter four examines the primary texts to identify themes and patterns in the literary portrayal of the natural environment and discusses the ways in which these themes might influence a character's (or a reader's) subjectivity. Binaries such as culture/nature, city/country, and male/female provide neat and contained perspectives for literary comparison; however, they also sustain the patterns of dominance inherent in this way of thinking. For there to be a revision in the way we consider the natural world and adjust our anti-ecological practices, we need to become comfortable with conflicting and indeterminate perspectives. While chapter five focuses on the culture/nature binaries evident in the novels and explores the juxtaposition of city and country and retreat and return, it also looks to identify meaningful non-dualistic perspectives. Chapter six concentrates on the motifs of incest and secrets—to tease out possible ties to the portrayal of the external environment. The final chapter, chapter seven, summarises the findings in light of the five research questions asked of the primary texts and suggests opportunities for further research in the area of environmental literary analysis of contemporary Canadian YA fiction.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews the current state of academic study in the area of young adult literature and introduces several significant issues involved in bringing green cultural studies to the genre. It begins with an introduction to existing criticism on YA literature and progresses to a discussion of Canadian young adult literature, and literature and identity formation. Following a brief review of conventional nature tropes found in Canadian fiction, the literature review transitions to a discussion of environmental literary criticism and its origins, ecocritical theory, and ecocritical writing on young adult literature and their applications in the Canadian context.

### Introduction

Contemporary criticism on young adult literature is limited and patchy. Many book-length works whose titles suggest theoretical study of this literary category follow the format of well-annotated bibliographies or reading guides repeating the same lists of canonical works. Other texts subsume YA literature within the larger category of children's literature as if there was no difference between a book for a twelve-year-old and a book for a sixteen-year-old. At the same time, studies pertinent to Canadian YA literature are scarce. Indeed, extrapolating information on YA literature in the Canadian context usually requires careful combing through disparate British and American material. Ecocriticism offers similar challenges on several fronts, including lack of a unifying theoretical framework, limited scholarship within the Canadian context, and even less research pertaining to children's and young adult literature.

### Young Adult Literature

In "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists" (1996), Caroline Hunt observes a "striking lack of theoretical criticism" (4) on young adult literature, noting that of the "influential critical texts, produced over the fifteen-year period from 1980 to 1995, . . . *not a single major theorist in the field deals with young adult literature as something separate from literature for younger children*" (5; emphasis in original). Since 1996, more critical books on young adult literature have been published. Karen Coats mentions three noteworthy books in a 2004 review article (*Disturbing the Universe* by Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Great Despair Meets Hopeful* by

Martha Westwater, and *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* by Robyn McCallum) (214); however, most critical writing remains focussed on literature for younger readers or children's literature as one undifferentiated age group. Echoing Hunt's lament in a 2006 article praising the literary merits of young adult fiction, Cindy Lou Daniels notes that "to date there has not been a large body of [critical] work created that explores the genre, so there is plenty of opportunity for original scholarship" (79). Indeed, a search of the Proquest Thesis and Dissertations online database using the thesaurus search phrase "adolescent fiction" and limiting the results to material produced within the past ten years generated fifty results—a combination of dissertation and thesis-research papers—the majority of which focus on social sciences topics in education and youth development such as literacy, multimodality, and learning behaviours. Few involved literary analysis.

Of the texts ostensibly dedicated to young adult literature, many focus on an audience of teachers and librarians, and other than a nod to reader-response or feminist theory tend to avoid theoretical content. Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen's frequently cited 1997 textbook, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, provides a thorough overview of young adults' reading behaviours, extensively annotated lists of books categorized by genre, and useful sections on writing book reviews, teaching literature, and censorship. Pam Cole's *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century* (2009) takes a similar but more contemporary tack, focussing on information useful for classroom instruction but also providing a wide-ranging (and updated) list of YA titles categorized by genre and topic. Their lists, as do many others, include much-lauded authors such as Judy Blume, Robert Cormier, S. E. Hinton, and J. D. Salinger. Although some British classics appear on these lists, the overall emphasis is on American literature. Canadian YA literature appears to garner little interest outside the country. Indeed, as Caroline Hunt insists, "young adult practitioners in the United States have . . . been handicapped by a sort of myopic nationalism [as] . . . some YA critics seem oddly unaware of the existence of Canada" (10-11).

Canadian authored surveys of Canadian children's literature do not suffer from the same myopia; in fact the situation is quite the opposite. We seem to have a good sense of our literature and its development under the influences of our colonial past and the ongoing effect of American culture. Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman are well aware of the continental and international contexts within which Canadian children's books function. They frequently reference popular American and British works, as for example their description of Canadian teen characters being

“more like Huck Finn, in their ability to control their destiny, rather than the emotionally lost Holden Caulfield” (73). Despite its datedness, their 1990 edition of *The New Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian Children’s Literature in English* continues to be the most in-depth catalogue, comparison, and overview of Canadian children’s books currently available.

While their insightful categorizations highlight major themes and trends in Canadian publishing, Egoff and Saltman confine their seventeen-page discussion of YA novels within a chapter on realistic fiction (70-87). Similarly, Deirdre Baker and Ken Setterington’s *A Guide to Canadian Children’s Books in English* (2003)—a book-length annotated bibliography of exceptional Canadian children’s literature—includes two chapters listing books and short-story collections for readers twelve and up. Elizabeth Waterston’s *Children’s Literature in Canada* (1992) brings Piaget’s developmental theories to her discussion of Canadian children’s literature and its influences up to the early 1990s. In her one chapter on YA readers, she also notes the regional influence of the Canadian landscape on the formation of our literature and insists that “a study that concerns itself with Canadian children’s literature must reflect a sense of place” (163). While many have focused on the works of individual Canadian authors such as L. M. Montgomery, no critical book-length works are to be found on Canadian young adult literature.

Children’s literature as a whole is distinguished from other categories by the age of its reading audience, unlike adult literature, which distinguishes itself by genre (fiction, romance, Western) or by period (eighteenth century, Victorian, medieval), leaving the age of its reading audience implicit. Likewise, YA literature struggles to achieve a status distinct from the larger category of children’s literature. Many scholars treat children’s literature as one large homogeneous group. In some discussions, children’s literature is for infants to twelve or fourteen years of age. In others, young adult literature is for twelve- to twenty-year-olds. Often, young adult literature isn’t mentioned at all. In their argument for defining children’s literature as a genre, Nodelman and Reimer (2003) note that all books can be similarly categorized (e.g., horror, adventure, romance, etc.); however, books for young readers “have enough in common to be identified as children’s fiction—as do even those texts for older children about apparently unchildlike matters that are often labelled as literature for young adults” (*Pleasures* 187). In this sense, Nodelman and Reimer see the gamut of literature for children, regardless of whether it is a book for infants or a book for teens, as having too much in common to be considered as



different. Writing in 2008, Nodelman expands on this earlier view, observing that “young-adult literature seems to involve an intersection of the qualities of children’s literature with ideas about adolescent readers and various types of adult fiction that turns it into a similar but distinct variation of literature for younger children” (*Hidden* 97), yet he remains unwilling to concede sufficient differences to warrant extended separate treatment. Nodelman and Reimer are not alone in considering literature for children and young adults collectively. For instance in *Sticks and Stones* (2002), Jack Zipes warns that he will “be using the category of children’s literature to include books for teenagers and young adults” (41). And, although Maria Nikolajeva devotes one chapter of *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children’s Literature* to a theoretical exploration of YA narrative structures, throughout the book she nevertheless discusses these structures within the context of children’s literature as one large category distinct from adult works (230). The challenge then lies in extrapolating the YA context from the aggregate of children’s literature generally.

The relative lack of literary criticism on YA literature means I have inevitably looked to a combination of young adult and children’s literature scholars from time to time during this research project. Of particular relevance are Roderick McGillis, John Stephens, Robyn McCallum, and Kimberley Reynolds. In *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature*, Roderick McGillis provides a useful discussion of the political function of children’s literature. Although he focuses on the moulding of child readers to become “docile citizens, productive members of a nation-state” (110), the concept of the ideological functions of children’s literature holds relevance in light of how literature portrays the natural environment. As McGillis argues, “reading for the ideological assumptions of any book is important if we believe in knowing how our culture works upon us” (128). Similarly, in his book on the pedagogical and ideological functions of children’s literature, John Stephens notes that “fiction presents a special context for the operation of ideologies, because narrative texts are highly organized and structured discourses whose conventions may either be used to express deliberate advocacy of social practices or may encode social practices implicitly” (*Language* 43). Both McGillis and Stephens invoke the idea of literature’s socialising role as the conveyor of practices and beliefs considered important to instil in the young.

Robyn McCallum’s *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* complements these two children’s literature critics by bringing a YA

perspective to the discussion of ideology in literature. She notes, for instance, that “concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people, and while this dialogue is ongoing, modern adolescence—that transition stage between childhood and adulthood—is usually thought of as a period during which notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation” (3). Another emphasis brought to this discussion comes from Kimberley Reynolds who, in *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformation in Juvenile Fiction*, raises the idea of the ways in which literature “subdues” young adults (71). She explains that YA fiction picks up on the youth culture (music, television, fashion) operating beyond the confines of literature, reflecting it back to young adult readers in reconstructed ways to show the adolescent as “impotent and puerile” (71). How then, given the political underpinnings of ecocriticism (which will be discussed in detail later), can literature for young adults contribute to the development of environmentalist subjectivities, particularly in light of these ideas of revisionism and reconstruction of the young adult?

When McGillis, Stephens, McCallum, and Reynolds talk about the formation of readers’ subjectivity, they presume this development based on the reader’s relationship to other characters in a novel. This reader-character identification presents a noteworthy situation from which to examine the portrayal of the natural world given the tendency in YA literature to locate the narrative within relatively constrained settings. Referring to literature for younger readers, Sidney I. Dobrin contends that “the role of acculturation of the child subject as green subject . . . question[s] in what ways children’s texts contribute to long-term attitudes toward nature and environment and how the child is represented textually as connected with nature/environment” (“Through Green Eyes” 270). However, the landscape of Canadian children’s literature has become more urban and reflective of our cultural mosaic (Kertzer 201), which means very few contemporary works present the reader with tales of outdoor experiences such as readers a few decades ago encountered in Farley Mowat’s novels, for example. Although I have continued searching, to date I have found little to draw from in aid of understanding the formation of the young adult as green subject. To address this, I have instead contrasted the tropes common to nature portrayals in both children’s and adult literature in terms of their convergence, divergence, and where they challenge existing paradigms for either group.

## YA Literature and the Canadian Context

Young Adult literature's role in regulating and reshaping adolescence has parallel associations with the literary construction of nature and our perceived relationship to it. Many Canadians, including Margaret Atwood, Sherrill Grace, and Laurence Ricou, have written of the literary tropes common to Canadian (adult) literature. Atwood observes several themes to do with topics such as survival and "nature as monster" (*Survival* 87). Grace looks to features of northern geography and life to construct our identity (*Canada and the Idea of North*), while Ricou speaks to the "primitive geometric contrast between vertical and horizontal" (*Vertical Man* 137) of humans on the prairie landscape. Indeed, wilderness settings have long been a mainstay of Canadian adult fiction and no less so in our children's fiction. Most famously, Margaret Atwood has articulated that Canadian literature is unified by the idea of survival (*Survival* 41), a characteristic common among explorer narratives where the objective of daily existence was staying alive in adverse conditions. Atwood wittily contends that our survival stories are "likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back from the awful experience . . . that killed everyone else" (42). While one might think that today's authors are more protective of young readers' sensibilities, the occasional death, animal attack, or disfigurement caused by a wilderness experience is, paradoxically, neither common nor rare in contemporary Canadian children's fiction (e.g., a grizzly bear attack in Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*; the main protagonist loses two fingers in William Bell's *Crabbe*). Indeed, according to Egoff and Saltman, Canadian children's literature of the late 1980s emerged from a tradition of outdoor adventure stories written in the mid-nineteenth century. Stories from this earlier time propose that "nature must never be assumed to be either benign or savage, for it can be beautiful, entertaining, or perilous by turn" (Stringam 55). In contrast, Canadian children's writers of the 1980s, "use the wilderness more as a haven and place of healing than as a direct challenge to survival" (Egoff and Saltman 29).

Additionally, Ron Jobe notes the defining qualities of the environment in Canadian children's literature. Citing canonical Canadian novels such as Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, Tim Wynne-Jones' *The Maestro*, and Kevin Major's *Hold Fast* that portray distinctively regional landscapes, Jobe contends that children's literature has maintained "authentically Canadian settings and characters so that they do not merge into a melting pot of commonality. Survival is what Canadian children's literature and Canada is all about" (144).

Elizabeth Waterston, too, speaks of the inextricable relationship between the Canadian landscape—its size, its many and varied geological features—and the identity derived from its portrayal in children’s literature. Egoff and Saltman, Jobe, and Waterston particularly emphasize “our vast wilderness . . . [and its] influence [on] the Canadian literary imagination” (Egoff and Saltman 33).

In contrast, Adrienne Kertzer concludes that the Canadian outdoors holds far less significance than that accorded by Egoff and Saltman. Rather, “Canadian children for the most part inhabit a multiracial, urban world and . . . the sensibility which produces their books increasingly, if still problematically, reflects that world” (201). It is worth noting that Egoff and Saltman’s, Jobe’s, and Waterston’s observations pertain to literature written before 2001. Indeed, having read numerous book reviews and YA novels over the past few years, I have observed, as Kertzer asserts, very few recently published works with an emphasis on the outdoors. However diminished in representation the natural world in literature might be, Egoff and Saltman’s observation that realistic Canadian children’s literature takes place “in well-defined landscapes, obviously known to their authors and imaginatively embraced by them” (29-30) remains valid. Yet, despite the attention to accuracy and detail in portrayals of natural spaces, rarely do we see the outdoor setting in children’s literature given the prominent status it attains in many adult works (such as those referred to by Atwood, Grace, and Ricou). Perhaps this is because characters and plot draw young readers in, whereas enthusiastic descriptions of setting other than to create a mood (usually gothic) put them to sleep. While the relatively light emphasis given to descriptions of outdoor settings in children’s literature presents certain challenges for an ecocritical undertaking, many argue that every text has ecocritical merit—the absence of nature as telling as its presence, the urban as much an environment as the non-urban. This then raises the issue of ecocritical theory and how it might be applied to works for young adult readers.

### **Ecocriticism: Its Roots and Definitions**

Although undertaken by disparate researchers since the seventies, ecocriticism did not coalesce to a critical academic practice until the early 1990s (Glotfelty, “Literary Studies” xviii). Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s pioneering book, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, presents these various studies as a collection and provides one of the earliest definitions of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, “Literary

Studies” xviii) as well as a discussion of the similarity of place- or nature-oriented studies to gender, race, and class as a critical position of investigation. She thus emphasizes the political character and expansiveness of ecocriticism. Similarly, Laurence Coupe describes ecocriticism as a critical and political inquiry into the discourses we bring to our ideas of nature, stating that “[i]f green studies . . . does not change behaviour, does not encourage resistance to planetary pollution and degradation, it cannot be called fully ‘ecocritical.’ . . . Green studies makes no sense unless its formulation of theory contributes to the struggle to preserve the ‘biotic community’” (4). Indeed, scholars such as Laurence Buell, Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd, Greg Garrard, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Richard Kerridge approach ecocriticism from the perspective that we live in a time of environmental crisis and that this anthropogenic—human-caused—state results from attitudes toward nature that privilege human needs and technology above all else. As Glotfelty contends, “believing that the environmental crisis has been exacerbated by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and overly specialized way of knowing the world, humanities scholars are increasingly making an effort to educate themselves in the sciences and to adopt interdisciplinary approaches” (“Literary Studies” xxii). The political and interdisciplinary requirements of ecocriticism asserted by Glotfelty and Coupe present challenges to the conventionally educated literary critic. The most obvious, the requirement to bring an interdisciplinary approach to literary analysis, requires expansion to fields outside the English department, most commonly the ecological sciences. While a politicized literary analysis is not uncommon, the challenge for the budding ecocritic is that early ecocriticism was based on analysis of the nature-writing genre and until recently seemed closed to other literary genres or cultural forms lacking an environmental theme. Indeed, common criticisms of ecocriticism are its focus on nature writing and that it ignores the fact that most human experience takes place within a social and urban environment. This situation has much to do with the origins of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism began in the United States with an emphasis on the nature writing genre made popular by nineteenth-century writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). The American context from which ecocriticism emerged reflects “particularly American conditions, such as the persistence of various forms of frontier and pioneer ideology” (Kerridge, Introduction 8), not to mention America’s political structures, colonial history, and Native Indian populations. Furthermore, the presence “of large areas of land which can be called ‘wilderness’” (8) differentiates the American experience from the British

experience and therefore produces a different ecocritical stance. Ecocriticism came to British literary theory after it was well-established in the United States. It tends to focus on Romantic poetry, particularly Romantic poetry via the works of William Wordsworth and his peers but in some cases reaching back to older works such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and to Shakespeare's plays. As is the case with American ecocriticism, British ecocriticism is influenced by its political structures; however, as a product of its state as a geographically developed nation, the "British perspective has to accommodate the densely populated and suburban character of most of the British countryside, and, most importantly, the historical meanings assigned to 'nature' in Britain, particularly the identification of rural life with feudalist traditions and hierarchies, in opposition to urban capitalism and its forms of social mobility" (8).

### **Ecocriticism and the Canadian Context**

Largely ignored by the major ecocritics, Canadian ecocriticism has not proliferated to the same extent it has in the US and Britain. As Simon Estok (2009) comments, "the only full length published manuscript (aside from dissertations) that bears the words 'ecocritical' and 'Canadian' in the title concerns poetry" (90). According to Laurie Ricou, however, Canadians have been producing green readings of literature for decades. In "So Big About Green" (1991), he comments that "nature has loomed large in the Canadian consciousness. Canadian critics have been loud (if they are ever loud about anything) on landscape (either to emphasize its literary prominence or to lament its obsessiveness as a theme). . . . [But p]erhaps Canadians' writing of the land as adversary inhibits eco-criticism" (3). Continuing Kerridge's delineation of international differences, Ricou's comment suggests "land as adversary" as a starting point for a Canadian ecocriticism that connects (or disconnects) our depictions of and attitudes towards nature in terms very different from the other Western nations; however, a clearly articulated Canadian ecocriticism comparable to Kerridge's overview of American and British ecocriticism has yet to be published.

### **The Trouble with Ecocriticism**

As ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell, Joseph Carroll, Serpil Oppermann, and many others claim, the trouble with ecocriticism in general is that "despite all the attempts to define [it] . . . there is no guiding strategy of interpretation, and no monolithic theory to support it" (Oppermann 105). This doesn't mean that ecocritics ignore theory all together. Although at times

unstated, Bakhtinian, feminist, Foucauldian, Marxist, and postcolonial readings are relatively common in ecocriticism. Some scholars claim that the focus on the environment is ecocriticism's unifying element, whereas others such as Joseph Carroll suggest that "ecocriticism, might seem little more than a special topic area within the general field of contemporary literary study" (85). Greg Garrard's review of ecocritical theory produced between 2007 and 2008 best captures this dilemma by emphasising that as it stands now, ecocriticism's problematic status has much to do with its name. He explains:

as leaders in the field, Lawrence Buell and Jonathan Bate have expressed a preference for the names 'environmental criticism' and 'ecopoetics', respectively. Nevertheless, while 'ecocriticism' risks sounding faddish or raising scientific expectations, it is the most prevalent and widely accepted name for cultural criticism from an environmentalist perspective, and I call it 'ecocriticism.' ("Ecocriticism" 1)

Indeed, since I first encountered it, it has always been my contention that ecocriticism is a form of cultural criticism. It was reaffirming to find my ideas authenticated by Garrard in this way because his comment also confirms my opinion that YA literature is well-suited to cultural criticism given its role in producing and mirroring youth culture.

Several problems confront the undertaking of ecocritical analysis of children's literature. The first issue is to do with the fact that many practitioners of ecocriticism, especially American ecocritics, believe ecocriticism should only focus on environmental literature. Literature, that is, with a particular stance toward the environment according it a prominence significantly above that of setting and activist or political in nature. Patrick Murphy is one such proponent. To determine the canon of ecocriticism, Murphy argues, the critic must consider "the difference in the concept of advocacy in the literature to be emphasized, the author-reader relationship in terms of the potentially transformative function of literature, and the implicit attitude toward the severity of the global environmental crisis and the responsibility of the critic not only as literary interpreter but also as participative inhabitant of the world" (57). From Murphy's perspective, unless literature has an environmental agenda and contains realistic content, it should not be subjected to ecocritical analysis. Dana Philips is critical of ecocriticism's focus on nature writing (or "ecomimesis" as Garrard calls it ("Ecocriticism" 10)) and realistic content. He argues that ecocriticism's "desire to celebrate under-theorized popular forms like nature writing, to carve out

some new dimension in canonical texts, to valorize the experience of wilderness as culturally essential, and to force a general rapprochement of literature, culture, environmentalism, and ecology on realist grounds” (140) is too narrow an approach. While on one hand, as we see in Glotfelty’s definition, ecocriticism has retained a certain openness, on the other hand scholars such as Murphy and Buell (in his earlier writing) restrict it to a particular genre of writing. However, the untouched wilderness of the previous centuries extolled in nature writing no longer exists—it has been made into parkland, diverted for agricultural or resource extraction purposes, and converted to urban sprawl. Moreover, as Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace note in *Beyond Nature Writing*, the narrow focus of ecocriticism on ecomimetic writing only perpetuates dualistic (culture/nature) thinking while simply inverting the binary to privilege nature over culture (4). Yet, as Garrard’s (2010) review attests, the field has opened up significantly in the last decade to encompass different stances including globalised and multicultural views as well as a range of literary genres and themes while it continues to exist as a multifaceted discipline.

### **Ecocriticism and Children’s Literature**

This shift described by Garrard is indeed fortunate because the ecomimetic form is not available in children’s literature. Certainly, there are environmentally and ecologically oriented information books, but none that I am aware of that might be described as belonging to the nature writing genre and certainly none written in Canada in the last decade. This, again, is why, in part, I welcome Garrard’s acknowledgement of ecocriticism as a form of cultural studies because it further legitimises ecocriticism’s applicability to analyses of young adult literature. Moreover, many children’s literature scholars including Sidney Dobrin, Kenneth Kidd, Seth Lerer, Perry Nodelman, and Mavis Reimer (to name but a few) agree that “the study of children’s literature *is* cultural studies, not just in that it draws on literary, socio-historical, and economic methods of analysis, but in that it may serve as a test case for the syntheses of current cultural criticism” (Lerer 9). As such, children’s literature and environmental criticism are well paired. Interestingly, however, although much has been written about children and the natural world to date, *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism* (2004) edited by Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd remains the primary book-length anthology of ecocriticism on children’s literature. The collection focuses on analyses of materials produced for young children. Of the sixteen essays, two address works for older children (C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of*



*Narnia* series, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy) and one discusses a Canadian publication (*Owl Magazine*). Although Pullman's series might be considered YA material, none of these texts assess reading materials for young adults at the older end of the YA age spectrum, and explication of the Canadian ecocritical context is minimal.

As Serpil Oppermann contends, "representations of nature both in environmental and traditional literature project an effect of reality but do not merely represent the real material condition of nature. In fact what they do is create a model of reality that fashions our discourses and shapes our cultural attitudes to the natural environment" (112). By extension then, young adult literature, too, as an expression of a perceived reality as well as an expression of cultural attitudes offers a rich location for research. Moreover, if the purpose of children's fiction is to pass on cultural messages deemed significant and appropriate for their age and sensibilities, an understanding of how young adult literature locates the adolescent and his or her relationship to the natural world may speak to how we align ourselves with the natural world in light of the environmental crisis.

## Chapter 3: Theory and Methodology

### Chapter Overview

This chapter discusses the methods and theory brought to the analysis of the three primary texts. It begins with an overview of the critical cultural and literary framework within which the analysis is situated. Following an overview of the methodology used to explicate the novels, it transitions to a discussion of the particular green lenses through which the narratives are considered in the subsequent analysis chapters.

### Introduction

Using the method of close reading, I bring green cultural criticism in the environmentalist tradition to explicate the portrayal of the natural environment in the three primary young adult novels *Mistik Lake* by Martha Brooks, *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* by Iain Lawrence, and *The Uninvited* by Tim Wynne-Jones. A cultural studies approach such as this looks at the methods and modes through which meaning is produced, communicated, and transferred in society. In this research thesis, literature is considered the medium through which meaning is conveyed, whereas culture is the arena in which meaning is produced and shared. As culture is ever changing, meaning is as well. Moreover, realistic fiction sets up certain expectations about the accuracy of the world portrayed within the text for its mimetic representation of the world outside the text. However, as a work of fiction, the realistic text need not bear much resemblance to real places; rather it must simply convey a place as if it were real.

Pursuing a similar line of thought, but looking specifically at the literary portrayal of the natural world, Robert Kern maintains,

[r]epresentations of nature in literature . . . have typically been dealt with and understood in the twentieth century not as images of literal or factual reality . . . but in terms of the formal or symbolic or ideological properties of those representations—which is to say that nature (leaving aside the question of whether it can be portrayed accurately or even adequately in literary texts) is important not for what it physically is but for what it conceptually means or can be made to mean. (258)

Accordingly, examining the cultural construction of the natural world through the artefacts of our culture, which for this research project comprises three realistic Canadian young adult novels, provides insight into social attitudes not only towards the natural world but also towards young adults in terms of what our literature says to them about the environment and how it constructs the relationship between the two.

Bringing a green cultural-studies approach to the examination of the portrayal of nature in literature positions this thesis research under the umbrella theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, according to Cheryll Glotfelty,

is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: . . . What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?

(“Literary Studies” xviii-xix)

Indeed, ecocritical theory challenges the conventionally anthropocentric approach inherent in literary criticism which looks at literature from a humanistic perspective. Consequently, ecocriticism requires the critic to read in such a way that “expose[s] and facilitate[s] analysis of a text’s orientation both to the world it imagines and to the world in which it takes shape, along with the conditions and contexts that affect that orientation whatever it might be” (Kern 260). It behooves the critic to evaluate her own cultural biases. In that regard, Lawrence Buell cautions that “one also needs an inner voice like Foucault’s as a reminder that the ‘who’ that engages in ecocritical work is neither as individuated nor as extricated from social institutions as one might wish to think” (*The Future* 8). Indeed, I endeavour to remain open to the messages I perceive in the text; however, my culture certainly influences my interpretation in ways I may not be aware of. My status as a white, middle class, middle-aged female, single parent, student, and former business professional among other things, likely influences the attitude I bring to my explication of the texts. However, academically speaking, in general, a post-structuralist approach underpins my analysis. As post-structuralists such as Foucault posit, social discourse plays a highly

influential role in the development of cultural attitudes. In keeping with this social constructivist approach, I investigate the patterns of relationships evident in the text by exploring the ways they are conveyed. Although I begin by looking at binaries, typically a structuralist approach, the post-structuralist attitude I subscribe to then probes those binaries for the ways in which they are subverted, affirmed, or denied. The intention of this method is to elucidate patterns of representation that might make the portrayal of nature or the development of the young adult's green subjectivity unique in young adult literature compared to adult or children's literature.

## **Methodology**

Using scholarly analysis typically brought to English literature, I approach each novel using the method of close reading. Close reading, sometimes called *explication de texte*, focuses on the symbols, images, and words of a text more than its plot, character, or psychological aspects as the means of textual interpretation (Abrams 181). Both Patricia Kain and Sophia McClennan instruct that a close reading begins with a detailed inspection of the text searching for patterns and relationships while also asking particular questions of the texts. Analysis of these observations relies on inductive reasoning to develop an overall interpretation of the messages conveyed by the text.

Greg Garrard's approach in his book *Ecocriticism* also informs my methodological approach in terms of how I consider the patterns and metaphors revealed through close reading. He explains: "I will be reading culture as rhetoric, although not in the strict sense understood by rhetoricians, but as the production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale metaphors. . . . Rhetorical analysis suggests that the meaning of tropes is closely related to their wider social context. They are therefore not fixed entities but develop and change historically" (7-8). My reading of the texts focuses less on how messages are conveyed and more on what is said, thereby treating these fictional works as "modes of communication" (Abrams 270). In addition to using this rhetorical approach, I take cues from Robert Kern and Don McKay, who encourage resistant reading of the text. Kern recommends a strategy of "reading against the grain" which requires the critic

to marginalize, if not completely overlook, precisely those aspects and meanings of texts that are traditionally privileged or valorized, by . . . anthropocentric attitudes and assumptions whose authority and even hegemony in reading and criticism are often still

taken for granted. What ecocriticism calls for, then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another—more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism (since we cannot evade our human status or identity) informed by an awareness of the “more-than-human.” (267)

Don McKay also advocates a resistant reading such that the reader turns her back to the social/human perspective and for a moment considers it as an outsider, thereby questioning culture’s relationship to nature rather than nature’s relationship to culture (17-18). This may seem like a subtle distinction; however, it serves to destabilize and disrupt sufficiently to create a more open-minded approach to interpretation and the development of insights about the text from a creative and less conventional stance not derived otherwise.

In reading against the grain, I look at certain conventional portrayals of the natural world to see how these YA authors affirm or subvert them. Certainly ideologies are important to tease out for their normalizing influence on cultural discourses. As John Stephens observes, “[f]iction presents a special context for the operation of ideologies, because narrative texts are highly organized and structured discourses whose conventions may either be used to express deliberate advocacy of social practices or may encode social practices implicitly” (*Language* 43). With specific reference to the discourses influencing children’s literature, literary critic Tony Watkins considers the presence of ideology in the genre. In “Homelands: Landscape and Identity in Children’s Literature,” he discusses theories of cultural studies and cultural geography as they might be applied to children’s literature to explore the relationship between landscape and national identity. Drawing on several cultural theorists including Yi-Fu Tuan, Dennis Cosgrove, Paul Ricoeur, and Clifford Geertz, Watkins articulates the relationship between the cultural construction of the landscape in literature and, in turn, literature’s cultural role in constructing the landscape. Stating what many children’s literature theorists before him have noted, Watkins reiterates that “if ideology is embodied in cultural texts, including the representation of landscapes, the major task of the cultural critic is not only understanding the meaning of the text, but also unmasking what appears as natural [and revealing it to be] . . . a social construction” (60; underlining in original).

As a starting point in the process of unmasking meaning, this research project begins by exploring certain binary conventions. Although essentialist approaches, such as are implied by binary dualisms, can be problematic, they provide a preliminary stance from which to consider the ways the texts align with or veer away from conventional thinking. Explaining constructivism as a mode of structural analysis, Roderick McGillis acknowledges that “reading for the ideological assumptions of any book is important if we believe in knowing how our culture works upon us” (128), and exploration of binary patterns provides a viable approach in this regard. The problem with using binaries, however, is that “this method seeks closure” (148). Moreover, “[w]e find it difficult not to privilege one of the two opposites” (149). Being aware of the challenges proposed by binary analysis is important; however, in the spirit of resistant reading, such an explication based on binary dualisms is feasible. Indeed, as Thwaites, Davis, and Mules assert, “[a]s analysts, our task is to *denaturalise* the text, demonstrating that its common sense meanings are not givens, but the product of ideological coding” (161). In other words, nothing can be taken for granted when perusing the three primary novels.

As for this thesis, the purpose of the analysis is to take an interpretive approach by looking at the ways the texts portray nature and the human relationship to the natural world. To that end, ecocriticism provides a suitable overarching theoretical framework or green lens through which to examine *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, *Mistik Lake*, and *The Uninvited* for the ways the ideologies of nature infuse them.

### **Ecocritical Framework**

Ecocriticism's lack of an encompassing theoretical platform provides me the luxury of amassing a diverse but useful set of theoretical perspectives to inform the critical framework for this research project. Although very little ecocritical work exists in the area of young adult literature, a reasonable selection of material is available from the field of adult literature. Simultaneously “young” and “adult,” older adolescents hover in a liminal social space somewhere between childhood and adulthood. Accordingly, this plural identity suggests a potentially complex yet fluid relationship to the environment. With this plurality in mind, I draw on criticism from the fields of adult literature as well as from children's literature. This combination of theoretical perspectives provides a solid base of literary thought from which to

explore the portrayal of the environment, the young adult, and their relationship in the three primary texts.

Chapter 4 considers the figures and patterns of representation typically found in adult literature and discusses the ways in which they converge with, diverge from, or are subverted in the young adult texts under scrutiny. Guided by Roderick McGillis' admonition to "read against the grain" (122), the analysis undertakes to provoke the dominant ideologies represented in the texts as well as to prevent a complacent reading of them. In keeping with this approach, the texts are "read in such a way as to amplify the reality of the environment in or of a text, even if in doing so we resist the tendency of the text itself (or of our own conditioning as readers)" (Kern 260). This resistant reading, which is also in keeping with Greg Garrard's rhetorical approach to analysis (*Ecocriticism* 7-8), looks to identify themes and patterns in the literary portrayal of the natural environment.

Aspects common to all three novels make pastoralism a useful critical perspective. To that end, the analysis in chapter 5 draws upon the Marxist critic Raymond Williams and his analysis of the city and the countryside as dominant ideologies in English literature. My critical perspective also incorporates the work of Terry Gifford, which both complements and updates Williams' seminal work. In general, pastoralism, as Gifford sees it, "is a retreat from 'our manners,' 'our climate,' 'our age,' into a literary construct. . . . In other words, pastoral is a discourse, a way of using language that constructs a different kind of world from that of realism" (45). Creation of this different world separate from realism results in a reversal of sorts, which as Gifford observes "is the essential paradox of the pastoral: that a retreat to a place apparently without the anxieties of the town . . . or the present, actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates" (82). John Rennie Short and Lawrence Buell also provide significant information useful to unraveling the relationship between the pastoral and our constructed view of the world through literature. Buell, in particular, articulates the conundrum of removing one's own cultural biases and presuppositions from critical analysis in light of the fact that "some form of pastoralism is part of the conceptual apparatus of all persons with western educations interested in leading more nature-sensitive lives" (*Imagination* 32). Not only does this comment emphasize the historical and cultural influence of pastoralism on interpretation, it also serves to remind of ecocriticism's political orientation, which seeks to address in some form the environmental crisis.

Several motifs of interest stand out in the primary texts—secrets and incest in particular—and become launching points for the discussion in chapter 6. This chapter draws once again on Robert Kern, who asks “what happens to a text when it is read not in its intended mode (of romance, say . . .) but in terms of its implied or unconscious orientation toward the environment” (250). If we agree that “every literary work can be read from a ‘green’ perspective” (Branch and Slovic xix) then certainly these motifs can be read from a green perspective as well. To that end, this chapter draws on Greg Garrard and the idea that a range of cultural processes play into social discourses. In his words, “[a]s ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyze and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place” (*Ecocriticism* 4). Using this stance to provoke a transformative discourse shows the correspondences and affinities aligning these particular motifs with the portrayal of nature and culture and illuminates the role they play in the young adult’s green subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the methodology and ecocritical theories brought to the analysis of the three primary texts. It discusses the method of close reading and explains its function and usefulness in light of the aims of this textual analysis. Certainly, the ecocritical theories brought to the analysis are diverse and somewhat loosely defined. Thus, as Erika Lemmer explains, this stems from the fact that “ecocriticism offers no method/praxis for the description of texts, but rather represents ‘a strategy, an attitude, an angle of vision’ that allows for a myriad of literary critical methods; an ethical inquiry into the connections between self, society, environment and text—a classical example of issue replacing theory” (225). Despite these concerns, this research holds fast to viewing the texts through a green lens so as to deliberately reveal the messages coded therein.



## Chapter 4: The Literary Portrayal of the Natural Environment

### Chapter Overview

This chapter examines the three primary texts to identify themes and patterns in the literary portrayal of the natural environment and discusses the ways in which these themes might influence a character's (or a reader's) subjectivity.

### Introduction

In *The Art of Fiction* David Lodge writes, “description in a good novel is never *just* description” (57; emphasis in original). Indeed, while the portrayals of nature in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, *Mistik Lake*, and *The Uninvited* maintain authentically realistic qualities, the authors nevertheless exploit the natural environment to achieve a number of narrative purposes. Perhaps the most typical is the use of the outdoors as background setting. Mood, metaphor, and the varied renderings of the human against the landscape also produce human-nature juxtapositions of note. Yet, the challenge of an ecocritical reading when confronted with texts such as those under scrutiny in this thesis (fiction with a focus on the human condition rather than nature writing with a focus on the natural world) is in Roderick McGillis' words “[t]o read against the grain . . . to rough the surface of the dominant ideological forces” (122). Correspondingly, an ecocritical reading according to Robert Kern requires us to

read in such a way as to amplify the reality of the environment in or of a text, even if in doing so we resist the tendency of the text itself (or of our own conditioning as readers) to relegate the environment to the status of setting, so that it becomes a place chiefly interesting because of the human events that unfold in it, or to see its significance as primarily symbolic, so that it becomes something essentially other than itself. (260)

A resistant reading, then, requires close scrutiny of the language, tropes, and presuppositions brought to the text by both the author and the reader. It means shifting one's perspective to an uncomfortable degree in the way Don McKay proposes when he suggests we consider “the possibilities for reverse flow in a relationship [the culture-nature relationship] that has been so thoroughly one-way” (18). Indeed, McKay proposes that we shift our outlook to ask “not ‘what's the beach to me?’ but ‘what am I to the beach?’ Our occurrence to the land . . . could be a major change . . . or a smaller claim . . . but it shifts the relationship; it brings the wild area into the

purview of knowledge and makes it . . . a category of mind” (17-18). This monumental shift in viewpoint turns out to be a challenging undertaking; even so, the remainder of this chapter endeavours to ask a variation of McKay’s question: What is the young adult character to the landscape? And, in a more conventional form of literary analysis in order to engender not just a reverse flow but a two-way flow: What is the landscape to the young adult character?

### **A Resistant Reading of the Background as Setting**

Lawrence Buell claims that the literary term *setting* “deprecates what it denotes, implying that the physical environment serves for artistic purposes merely as backdrop, ancillary to the main event” (*Environmental* 85). Certainly, the setting in these novels is a space in which human events unfold, yet the three novelists bring to their descriptions an artistry and subtlety that invites the reader to enter the specific and realistic outdoor world of the narrative. Lawrence, Wynne-Jones, and Brooks convey a deep familiarity with the Canadian regions they describe that only accentuates the authenticity of the setting framework in support of the unfolding narrative. In this regard, as Buell stresses,

the subject of a text’s representation of its environmental ground matters—matters aesthetically, conceptually, ideologically. Language never replicates extratextual landscapes, but it can be bent toward or away from them. We can see this in such basic aesthetic decisions as whether or not to foreground local toponymy, vernacularization, and indigenous names for uniquely native species. (*Future* 33)

Undoubtedly, the natural setting plays an important role in Canadian realistic fiction for children in particular. As Egoff and Saltman note, the “most noticeable characteristic of early Canadian children’s books . . . and one that distinguishes them . . . is a fascination with, and love and respect for, the land itself” (8). Although much has changed throughout the history of Canadian children’s literature, a “strong sense of place still dominates our best realistic fiction” (Egoff and Saltman 19). In terms of the aesthetic decisions listed by Buell, we see that Lawrence, Brooks, and Wynne-Jones incorporate various strategies to ensure successfully realistic descriptions of the locales in which their novels take place. Place names and plant names are treated informally, yet it is through the naming and specific articulation of plant species and of regional topography that the background emerges with distinction. For example, Lawrence, who draws from personal

experience kayaking the west coast of British Columbia (Lawrence, Acknowledgements n. pag.) describes Lizzie Island's landscape as follows:

There was a trail that . . . [went] over moss and devil's club, round windfalls and enormous old cedars, past tumbling banks of shells turned gray with age. Then a side trail led down to the shore, to a smooth shelf of rock where sea lions lay like buff-colored slugs, in a mass all over one another. (Lawrence 45)

Named plants such as "devil's club" and easily visualised features such as "windfalls," "enormous old cedars," and "banks of shells" make this space come alive. Lawrence also avoids overly romanticizing with emotive words. Indeed, the sea lions seem rather unappealing to look at but if you've ever seen sea lions, that is what they look like. Adding to the realism, is the fact that Lizzie Island is the fictional name for a real island, Lucy Island, (as noted in Lawrence's Acknowledgments) located not far off the coast of Prince Rupert (Lawrence, *The Lightkeeper's* 9). Lawrence's description here is noteworthy for the absence of anthropomorphism in his choice to describe sea lions in terms of other natural creatures (slugs).

Brooks brings a similar authenticity, albeit a spare one, to her portrayal of the Manitoba prairie landscape her narrator describes:

towns spaced like dots on a vast prairie map. . . . [and] soft rolling hills before [the] descen[t] into the deep wide valley of Mistik Lake. . . . [where] [s]pring has started to show—bright green along the ditches, and the sloughs are edged with burgundy-coloured willow bushes. (96-7)

Mistik Lake is fictional but not unlike the myriad of generic lakeside communities dotting the Laurentian Shield of Manitoba. Moreover, the image of soft rolling hills, the spring colour of grass growing in the ditches, along with the reddish hue of spring tree-growth are specific enough and certainly familiar to readers from that region while also showing the author's attention to detail that comes from close observation rather than imitation of standard nature tropes.

Likewise, Wynne-Jones draws on the technique of naming plants, which lends them and the space they inhabit realistic characteristics: "Passing by on the river, you'd see nothing but swamp, dense with soft rushes, water lettuce and arum, arrowhead, loosestrife" (80). Unlike Brooks, who chooses to group the ditch growth under the umbrella description of "bright green,"

Wynne-Jones uses very specific and individual plant names such as “loosestrife,” “arum,” “arrowhead” and so on. Indeed, for the most part, the realistic portrayal of nature in these three novels, in keeping with realism as a literary tradition, establishes the landscape and the outdoors as a carefully articulated space. However, the specificity of these references, in light of Buell’s observation about representations of the real world, suggests that Wynne-Jones prefers to align the literary landscape with the real one rather than away from it. For that matter, all three novelists bring an authenticity to their descriptions that goes beyond fulfilling the basic requirements of realism and demonstrates a respect for the landscape and for their readers’ ability to comprehend and appreciate these three-dimensional settings as places and not just as backgrounds.

### **Nature as a Literary Device**

Because *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter*, *The Uninvited*, and *Mistik Lake* are not environmentalist novels (i.e. nature writing with a focus on the environment), it seems logical that their settings serve a predominantly literary purpose. As such, we invariably find the natural world—including weather—used to create atmosphere and suspense in the plot. As David Lodge comments, “[w]e all know that weather affects our moods. The novelist is in the happy position of being able to invent whatever weather is appropriate to the mood he or she wants to evoke” (85). With this in mind, however, it is worth noting Roderick McGillis’ observation that “texts participate in the nonliterary [*sic*] as well as the literary world; the text expresses cultural beliefs and emotional content beyond the control of the author” (21). Whether deliberate or not, the author’s decision to use atmospheric conditions to create an effect most likely draws upon a culturally conditioned understanding of literary configurations to do with the portrayal of weather. Indeed, the weather-induced mood has an important place in all three novels. For instance, the climactic moments in *The Uninvited* and *Mistik Lake* take place during stormy weather and Iain Lawrence uses different meteorological conditions in *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter* in a way that enhances the emotional quotient of significant events. At other times, such as in *The Uninvited*, early impressions of the natural world present it in benign fair-weather terms “looking pretty as a picture on a corny calendar” (Wynne-Jones 131). Similarly, Brooks develops her distinctive prairie narrative by turning the reader’s attention upward to the horizon and sky while creating a sense of heat and stillness only an insect can move through, as in this

example: “It is a breathlessly hot August day. An orange butterfly flutters up from the trees. It soars over the water” (18).

Descriptions of the outdoors do not necessarily require overt descriptions of the weather, particularly when sunny summer conditions prevail; however, bad weather serves to heighten the suspenseful events taking place in each of the three novels. For example, Wynne-Jones uses an incoming storm to elevate the tension leading up to the book’s climactic event involving a shooting injury and death. As described first from Mimi’s point of view, “It was three o’clock . . . but it looked more like eight. The sky was low and black and heavy with rain. . . . there was quite a wind” (314), and then from Cramer’s point of view, “the storm came . . . and it didn’t take but a moment before there were sheets of rain pounding down on the road . . . . then there was an almighty flash of lightning and a thunderclap, so loud and close . . . as if the whole roof of the sky was caving in” (Wynne-Jones 318). This extreme weather, the intense rainfall, and the clap of thunder prefigure (in the form of the “thunderclap”) the violent altercation involving Cramer’s mother. Of course, one might expect the bad weather to result in lost cellphone reception, which would serve to heighten the tension in this part of the novel by making the teenagers’ predicament seem even more helpless; however, Wynne-Jones subverts this common trope by enabling their communication with the outside world. In so doing, he shows through its literary deployment that nature creates mood but has little effect on newer technology when young people’s safety is at risk. Moreover, the weather does not prevent the emergency services vehicles from arriving to rush Cramer to the hospital.

Iain Lawrence uses the weather to bring gothic overtones to his narrative and thereby conjure the idea of the supernatural. In one instance, he produces the ghost of a former lighthouse keeper, Murray’s predecessor, who hanged himself. As Hannah recalls, “[i]t was Squid who saw the keeper first. She was only five years old. On a night of electrical storms, she looked up and saw him [the ghost] there” (55). In addition to drawing on certain climatic conditions to build suspense, Lawrence uses them to extend the nature-child relationship in a different direction by situating Squid’s arrival into the world during a storm: “Squid came along . . . on a night that was stormy. . . . There was blood and pain, an anguished scream, and the wind howled and shook at the walls” (53). In this example, the weather appears to respond to the pain of childbirth while also heralding Squid’s birth by howling and shaking the walls. Indeed, the

energy and drama brought by the weather become a metaphor for her passionate nature and somewhat stormy personality.

Martha Brooks also draws on atmospheric conditions to frame the scene in which Odella learns her biological father's identity. Brooks' treatment of the weather suggests it as a metaphor for the tears and sadness brought on by the news. The scene begins with Odella's observation, "[i]t's been raining all day and the sky is dark" (Brooks 190). A short time later Gerald Isfeld arrives to talk to her but by then Odella has stopped crying and coincidentally "[t]he sun has come out. Everything is dappled with light" (197) although "rivulets of water . . . are still coursing down the ruts in the driveway" (197). Here, the weather foreshadows the bittersweet resolution of the event and serves as a physical manifestation of Odella's own tears while at the same time avoiding the romantic cliché of the uncomplicated happy outcome coinciding with return of the sunshine.

On the use of weather in fiction, David Lodge emphasizes its rhetorical function, explaining:

Weather is . . . frequently a trigger for the effect John Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy, the projection of human emotions onto phenomena in the natural world. 'All violent feelings . . . produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the pathetic fallacy,' he wrote. . . . [U]sed with intelligence and discretion it is a rhetorical device capable of moving and powerful effects, without which fiction would be much the poorer. (85)

While Lawrence, Wynne-Jones, and Brooks avoid such formulaic use and portrayal of the natural world (the above examples, which are relatively typical, escape the overt personification to which Ruskin refers), they nevertheless draw heavily on it as a resource to emphasize moments of drama and crisis. Interestingly, as seen in the earlier examples, the adolescent-weather associations developed in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* and *Mistik Lake* rely on the reification of natural atmospheric phenomena as external manifestations of (or, arguably, sympathetic responses to) human emotions such as sadness or those to do with the birth of a child. In *The Uninvited*, however, Wynne-Jones employs a different tactic. First, he shows the storm and related events from Cramer's point of view and then from Mimi's point of view. Then, by juxtaposing Mimi and Cramer's different reactions and behaviour in light of the ensuing

storm, the weather effect obtains different qualities thereby suggesting distinctive and individualized relationships with the natural world for these young adults. Unlike the examples of inclement weather portrayed by Brooks and Lawrence where the focalizers experience and observe the weather from indoors, Mimi and Cramer experience the weather directly. For example, Cramer, who has a comfortable if not embedded relationship to the natural world as will be discussed later in this chapter, crouches in the bushes as the storm arrives. In this scene, Stooley Peters is furious with Cramer for having driven his truck into the river. Just as Peters is about to “start peppering the bush” (317) with his shotgun, nature intervenes to save Cramer: “he [Peters] might have started shooting, but the storm came instead, and it didn’t take but a moment before there were sheets of rain pounding down on the road and Peters was running for the shelter of his car” (317-18). Here, nature saves Cramer from being shot. Mimi, on the other hand, begins her encounter with the pending storm from indoors when the sky is simply dark. She goes for a run and is on her way back when the storm intensifies and she is compelled to catch a ride home in Peters’ car. The different experiences of the storm assigned to Mimi and Cramer suggest different relationships to nature for each character. Cramer enjoys protected status shaped by his more integrated relationship to the natural world—one partially demonstrated by the fact that he crouches invisibly among the bushes—unlike Mimi, who despite being afraid of Peters, shelters from the storm in his car. However, she uses her cellphone to keep Jay on the line as a measure of insurance should Peters behave inappropriately toward her while she is there. In other words, nature protects Cramer from technology (Peters’ shotgun) whereas technology (car and cellphone) protects Mimi from both nature and Peters.

### **Young Adult Subjectivity**

John Stephens insists that western literature has long conveyed the idea that “[c]hildren are apt to be thought of as nature-associated . . . because they seem more overtly to display organic embeddedness than do adults” and therefore the child “is constructed as being much closer to nature” (“From Eden” 40). Stephens continues with specific mention of the child body and its portrayal in literature as “‘irrational’, lacking in discipline and uncontrolled, and hence . . . constructed as . . . much closer to nature” (40). Such references to the child body suggest certain presuppositions about the inclusiveness of the term “children” as well as the (possibly unintentional) exclusion of the young adult from the literary child/nature discourse. Moreover,

the tension inherent in the notion of the young adult as both “young” and “adult” hints at the potentially complex and multifaceted relationship between the adolescent and the natural world. Certainly, many would acknowledge that children and youth display similarities in terms of lack of discipline and control; however, the considerable difference between the child body and the young adult body and the related psychological differences demand an examination of the literary construction of young adult subjectivity as it manifests relative to the literary outdoor spaces of a novel.

Perpetuation of the notion of the child’s innate nature association arises from the cultural-literary production of the child’s relationship to the natural world as losing dimension and thinning out to the point of disappearing once an individual enters adulthood. As Sidney Dobrin contends: “If children are understood to be inexperienced—and simultaneously innocent—their greenness has also been understood to provide a connection to nature that is lost as one loses innocence and gains experience” (“Through Green Eyes” 267). In other words, the change in greenness evolves in a positive sense then disintegrates as the child enters and eventually leaves young adulthood.

These ideas of the child’s nature association, the eventual dissociation from nature, and notions of the young body as uncontrolled, lacking discipline, inexperienced, and innocent appear with varying emphasis throughout young adult literature. Examples to do with the body, just from the primary literature under scrutiny in this thesis, include Mimi’s somewhat controlled sexual attraction to her siblings, Squid’s uncurbed physical and verbal cruelty toward her brother, and the response of Odella’s sisters to their mother’s abandonment and eventual death evidenced by their choice of inappropriate clothing and their food addictions.

In terms of the body and an associated nature connection, however, we do not see the young adult body or persona depicted as having the same degree of bodily lack of control or turmoil as suggested of children. Mimi, for instance, exhibits a literary response to the environment, claiming to have learned everything she knows about nature from a book. As we are told, “her knowledge of flora and fauna came mostly from fiction” (Wynne-Jones 24-5). This comment is witty and in keeping with Mimi’s irreverent city-savvy persona. On the one hand, it suggests a certain astuteness and ability to perform a close reading of literature that readily transfers to identification of and implied familiarity with the natural world. However, one struggles to imagine the level of detailed description available in a work of fiction that would



enable this particular feat of identification. On the other hand, and more significantly however, the cleverness of this comment serves to focus on the ironic collocation of Mimi's nature association—one naively based on knowledge gleaned from reading fiction. Through this juxtaposition, Wynne-Jones positions Mimi in an impoverished relationship with the natural world further emphasized by her outspokenness and characterisation throughout the novel as a contemporary, glib, and worldly city girl. This, in turn, makes apparent her limited ability to interact with nature without an interceding fictional representation. Her nature association results from a literary reading, which in turn denies any embedded nature-association. In this way, as far as a relationship with the outdoors goes, Mimi retains a certain physical aloofness (the aloofness resulting from her experience of nature coming first from a work of fiction) as well as a removed intellectual familiarity with nature that positions her well outside the outdoor domain.

As an interesting contrast Murray also gleans his knowledge from literature in the form of non-fiction reference manuals. Indeed, Hannah describes him as never being without the “Audubon guide that he carried in his pocket the way her own father had once carried the Book of Common Prayer” (Lawrence 48). Although his knowledge of the natural world comes from a book, Murray imparts it in the outdoor laboratory of Lizzie Island. The term “laboratory” is apt in this case because of the scientific overtones brought by Murray's word choices and lecturing style. Although they may begin in a seemingly objective way, his lectures quickly shift to subjective anthropomorphic interpretations of the natural world as in this example: “‘The nudibranch,’ he said. ‘A snail without a shell. A free spirit wandering wherever the currents take him. He carries no weapons, no armor. He drenches himself in a strong perfume that protects him like a magic potion’” (143-44). Arguably, Murray's style may be a deliberate choice to engage his children's attention. Nonetheless, the fact that they are right next to the nudibranch renders their learning in a phenomenological experiential way. Furthermore, in the same scene, Lawrence presents the reader with three different attitudes toward nature: Murray's whimsically romantic view of “free spirits,” “strong perfume,” and “magic potion” as just mentioned, which stands in high contrast to Squid's pragmatic curiosity about body functions and Alistair's scientifically academic response.

“Which end is the head?” she asked.

Murray launched into one of his lectures. . . .

“But where's his head?” asked Squid. “Does he breathe, or what?”

Murray had no answer. He shook his head.

“Those tentacles are called cerata.” It was Alastair talking. “The animal breathes through those. That darker part in the center is a crude liver. There can be vast differences between the nudibranchs, even among the solids. MacFarland says the *Hermisenda* is a voracious killer of other nudibranchs. It slaughters its own kind with the cruelty of a shark.”

Squid stared at him. “Huh?” she said.

Alastair blushed horribly.

And poor Murray. His little whimsical lecture sounded pathetic compared to the teachings of Alastair. He said, “I didn’t know that. A killer nudibranch?”

Alistair didn’t answer. He seemed embarrassed that he knew more than his father.  
(143-44)

In light of the idea that the loss of innocence results in greater dissociation from nature three different nature-associations emerge from this passage: Murray’s handbook-informed romantic orientation, Squid’s child-like single-focus curiosity and impatience, and Alistair’s precocious textbook-informed scientific view. Squid’s response seems callous in comparison to Murray’s somewhat reverent one, which in turn makes Murray’s response appear the most naïve and child-like of the three. Alistair’s comes across as the most dissociated because of the technical language and the objectivity of references to a type of nudibranch as “solids” and citing an authority such as MacFarland. Even so, the rhetorical impact of phrases such as “voracious killer” and “cruelty of a shark” makes Alistair’s comments no less subjective than Murray’s anthropomorphic ones. In an interestingly Lacanian twist, through the act of demonstrating greater knowledge than his father and Alistair’s recognition of this fact, both Alistair and Murray shed some of their innocence. Alistair’s ruined faith in the parent as all knowing and the realisation that the child knows more than the father shatters the father-son dynamic. Correspondingly, Alistair’s relationship to nature moves along the continuum to a more adult-like one. Because of his adult status, Murray already experiences a greater distance from nature. However, Alistair, barely a teenager, has begun the process not only of distancing himself from his father but also from a close nature association by removing himself from the equation in his use of remote technical language. Unlike Squid whose curiosity is basic and down to earth, the two male McCraes incorporate an interpretive layer in their interaction with the natural world.

There is nothing especially abnormal in the way they learn and talk about the natural world; however, their phenomenological experience of it is mediated.

More fully embedded in the environment, Cramer seems unaware of its presence. Yet the narrator describes him in ways that suggest him as a natural creature living in tempo within the natural world, as in this example: “Cramer Lee sat in his canoe in a stand of bulrushes so dense and high it was like being in a small green room. A windowless room with a high blue ceiling and a brownish-green shimmering carpet. A room laced together with the whirring of dragonflies” (Wynne-Jones 47). Despite the anthropocentric description of nature in terms evocative of the constructed landscape of the home—the sky as ceiling, the river as carpet, and the bulrushes as walls—Wynne-Jones shows Cramer situated in the house of nature at one with the natural world. Indeed, the dragonflies continue to flit around him as if he were not there or rather as if he were part of their natural environment as well.

Although Lawrence shows Squid and Alistair similarly at home in the outdoors, their nature relationships have different qualities. Squid, for example, runs and plays in the natural world with abandon: “It seems impossible that she was once seven years old, coming home all covered in burrs. Somehow, inside her, is the child who played at soldiers with skunk cabbage heads for grenades, who crawled into otter dens to see what was there, and stood on her head like a barnacle” (169). For her the outdoors is both playground and classroom, especially given the important role her father has in her upbringing and his penchant for using nature’s creatures to teach his children biology as much as social norms. The simplicity of her relation to the material aspects of the outdoors—material as in trees are for climbing, shells are for necklaces, paths are for running on—stands in stark contrast to Alistair’s spiritual and imaginative involvement with the natural world. With the aid of an underwater recorder, he comes to believe that whales communicate ideas in the form of pictures through sound. As he professes to Squid: “Sometimes they talk and I *see* what they’re saying. . . . I *see* water with the sunshine in it, bits of plankton floating. I *see* whales all around me, as though I’m one of them. Traveling. Squid, I’ve *seen* salmon all shiny and bright. I’ve *seen* icebergs. And, listen: I *saw* me” (43; emphasis added). With his point of view influenced by a profound belief in an ability to understand and relate to whales, Alistair not only sees himself as part of their ecosystem, he becomes both the object and the subject of his experience. Even though it is mediated through recordings of sounds, Alistair’s nature association intensifies as he bridges the gap between the cultural and natural worlds,

thereby accentuating his affinity with nature specifically because of his connection with the whales. This transformation manifests as a result of the detailed imagery of connection conveyed through language of a sensory experience stemming from an act of hearing, which in turn elicits an act of seeing. Indeed, this act of seeing evokes not just images but ideas (whales' ideas) and the idea of membership (of belonging) in the whale community as if from the whales' perspective.

In the course of Squid's and Alistair's experiences, Lawrence presents the reader with several models of nature association as might pertain to older children. In keeping with the child-as-connected-to-nature trope, he links Squid's two-year-old daughter, Tatiana, to the environment by portraying her with an innate ability to attract and communicate with wild animals. Unlike Alistair, she does not require technology to amplify her affinity. For instance, as the Coast Guard boat arrives to deliver her and Squid to Lizzy Island, her awareness of the whale presents well ahead of the adults' awareness:

Tatiana is staring at the water. She's reaching down . . . her arms stretching out, her fingers spread open. . . .

"Coming," whispers Tatiana.

"Who?"

"Hear him," she says.

"Who?" asks Squid again. Then Tatiana's whole weight is suddenly in her hand. . . .

And up from the sea comes the whale. It's enormous and dark, wrapped in a cascade of white. . . . And still the whale rises, arching, above them, an eye and a throat and a long curving fin that is studded with barnacles all down its length.

. . .

Then, with impossible slowness, it rolls onto its back and crashes into the sea.

"Holy smokes," says Squid, in a whisper.

For a long time, nobody moves. . . . The sea ripples and swirls, and the screaming gulls swoop. And Tatiana, with her eyes closed, trembles all over. (11-12)

Although all who see it are affected by it, Tatiana's response borders on rapturous as evidenced by the fact that she trembles but does not cry or turn to her mother for comfort the way a frightened child would. Interestingly, Squid, the Coast guard crew on the boat right next to

Tatiana, as well as Murray watching from a higher vantage point on the island, do not see the whale until it surfaces. In contrast, Tatiana is aware of its presence much sooner. Thus, the child displays a greater and more intuitive responsiveness to the natural world than either the young adult or the adults.

The child-nature association manifests for the three-year-old and the young teenager in a similar fashion, yet, the resulting relationships present with slightly different properties. Indeed, Tatiana's next experience, which further demonstrates her affinity with the natural world, recalls memories of Alistair who, at approximately thirteen years of age, also acted as a strange draw to wild animals. Hannah remembers "how the wild birds flocked around Alastair. They filled the trees, ravens next to gulls, cormorants with crows. They spaced themselves along the branches to hear the music that he played [on his flute]" (Lawrence 43). However, once again, mediated through a technological form (the flute) Alistair's nature association seems reliant on a cultural artefact—one (arguably) designed to reproduce the sounds of nature.

In contrast, Tatiana's encounter with a large raven elicits a different response. Murray, for instance, sees this animal-child affinity as symbolic of a nature-sanctioned form of belonging to the island. Referring to Tatiana, and upon seeing evidence of the bird's presence he declares, "She's come home, Squid. Can't you see? She's come home" (43). Murray's ecocentric—earth centred—understanding of the environment suggests that nature has the power to recognize or identify humans of significance in terms of their potential membership within nature. It is noteworthy that even though Murray positions his understanding in a way that privileges nature, the idea of "home"—in that he describes the association in terms evocative of the domestic environment—nonetheless expresses an anthropocentric stance particularly as this is solely his interpretation of events. When considered from Murray's perspective, however, nature apparently has the ability to form relationships with humans.

Interestingly, although thirteen-year-old Alistair's experience is mediated through technology, the underwater recorder nevertheless aids in bringing him closer to nature, whereas in *The Uninvited*, eighteen-year-old Mimi's technological apparatuses, her video camera and car, act as barriers to the natural world and to the world in general. She first enters *The Uninvited* in a swirl of dust enveloped in an iconic symbol of consumerist western society, a red Mini Cooper. We are told that the colour of her clothes and car match "as if the car were an accessory" (14). Not only do the cultural symbols of her fashionable clothes and trendy car envelop her body, her

worldview is construed through the lens of technology via the viewfinder of her video camera. The device is described several times in pointed detail as a “wine-red JVC HDD” (Wynne-Jones 14) and later on by Cramer as “a JVC HDD, with thirty gigabytes of drive. Laser-touch panel operation. . . . worth, a thousand bucks or so, and yet so small he could completely conceal it in his grip” (54). High-tech icons, which include items such as the expensive video camera and the Mini Cooper, are very much part of youth culture today. Although it may enable the reader to achieve greater identification with Mimi, her technological affiliation distances her from a strong nature association and aligns her more firmly with her city roots. With her view filtered through the lens of her camera, Mimi describes the place in which she finds herself as “Nowhere” (14). Her version of nowhere emerges as follows:

She swiveled the wine-red JVC HDD around to take in the countryside: the empty dirt road stretching out before her, the overgrown borders and broken-down fences, the unkempt and empty fields, the desolate forest beyond them.

“Not a Starbucks in sight.” (14)

From Mimi’s young adult perspective, this rural Canadian setting of dirt road bordered by foliage, fences, fields, and forest qualifies as “nowhere” for lack of an identifiable corporate presence. Certainly, this is a snappy and amusing commentary, which by its inclusion shows that she is at least somewhat aware of her surroundings, except it thwarts the possibility of Mimi’s sympathetic relationship to the natural world. This circumvention is achieved with words such as “empty,” “overgrown,” “broken-down,” “unkempt,” and “desolate,” which reinforce the undesirable qualities of the country environment. In reality, natural spaces are impartial and incapable of exhibiting or conveying these culturally construed values; therefore, the depiction of the outdoors in such negative terms imparts, beyond a literary purpose, an ideology of worthlessness in nature.

Discussing how the value Western society places on the countryside has shifted from one privileging agricultural productivity to one privileging “countryside as a place of leisure, refuge, and alternative living,” Michael Bunce notes how “attraction of the countryside has taken on the form of a commodity, with land acquiring market value based upon its amenity rather than its productive value” (110). In this regard, Mimi’s anthropocentric worldview suggests the insignificance of rural Canada because it lacks the apparent sophistication of her New York

home and amenities. Indeed, requiring the presence of a Starbucks to turn this place into a “somewhere” rather than a “nowhere” results in what Glen Love points out as “one of the great mistaken ideas of anthropocentric thinking, and thus one of the cosmic ironies, that society is complex while nature is simple. . . . That nature is dull and uninteresting while society is sophisticated and interesting” (230). However, a closer look would show an abundance of complex ecosystems flourishing at the side of the road and contributing to processes such as those causing the fences to deteriorate. Unfortunately, Mimi’s capacity to view the world differently is complicated by an interpretive frame that privileges culture and society and which is further limited by the viewfinder of her video camera. These interrelationships between the young adult and technology and the young adult and contemporary social norms contribute to the concept of the young adult’s disassociation from nature.

Wynne-Jones continues to foster the idea that Mimi might be several steps removed from nature in the way he portrays her reading of the environment. Her understanding draws on literary references evocative of classic children’s stories, fairy tales, and magical spaces. An ecocritically significant moment in *The Uninvited* takes place when Mimi arrives at the cottage on the snye in her red Mini Cooper:

It *was* magical.

The driveway meandered through a meadow alive with slender trees, their bright green leaves trembling. And so was Mimi—trembling with anticipation.

There were wildflowers, all kinds of them. She would get a book. . . . But even without a book, she knew a black-eyed Susan when she met one, and there were hundreds of them, hundreds of Susans waving at her.

And there were buttercups, and pink things.

At a weeping willow, the driveway veered right and passed into a copse of slender who knows what and some other kind of tree, still in showy bloom, though it was already July. Dogwood? The name came to her, but her knowledge of flora and fauna came mostly from fiction. So all she could say with any authority was that it was beautiful. Something from a fairy tale.

. . .

The quiet flooded into her, but it was a busy kind of quiet full of insect sounds and birdsong and the wind in the . . . well, the willows! . . . It was half fairy tale, half impressionist painting, and half golden-age Disney. (24-25; emphasis in original)

This quotation highlights the troping of the child's privileged relationship with nature particularly in light of the intertextual reference to *The Wind in the Willows* (a classic naturalist children's work), which in turn reinforces the idea of the child's green subjectivity. However, Mimi is not a child. In fact, based on her use of language and her view of the world, Mimi is more of an adult than an adolescent. Yet, with Mimi as the focalizer, notions of fairy tales, magical spaces, and picturesque images influence her view of the outdoors throughout the novel. In part, this technique enables Wynne-Jones to lull the reader into the gentle rhythms of idyllic literary spaces, which in turn, makes the suspense and creepier goings-on that much more intense when they happen. However, as with the example of her video camera, Mimi's ability to see nature through literature reinforces her indirect connection to the real outdoors. Not only that, by linking the leaves' trembling with Mimi's trembling Wynne-Jones conflates the two while at the same time employing the pathetic fallacy Ruskin condemns when he puts forward the notion that the leaves might be capable of the act of anticipation. This results in the notion that Mimi might be more closely associated with nature (for her leaf-like trembling and the fact that, in her view, the black-eyed susans wave at her). However, the quality of her relationship comes from an outlook that draws upon literature and fairy tales. Moreover, by employing the strategy of specifically naming plants Wynne-Jones bends the reader's version of nature toward the real world whereas Mimi's version of nature with its fairy-tale connotations pushes her away from the real world.

In *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, Iain Lawrence presents the adolescent's relationship to nature in distinctly different terms. Murray McCrae's (adult) attitude toward nature provides a counterpoint to the adolescent view. Murray attributes to natural spaces the capacity to produce miraculous results. When faced with Alistair's increasingly severe myopia he asserts, "McCraes have never worn spectacles. . . . The sea, the sun, the air: It's better than any doctor" (21). In contrast, Alistair, who is not yet twelve years old, knows his reality. As he tells Squid, "I'm myopic. . . . Probably I'll be blind before I'm thirty" (21). This exchange and others like it contrast Murray's idealistic view with the children's more realistic perspective on the world they inhabit. Juxtaposing the child's innate astuteness (even though it refers to human physiognomy)



with the adult's romanticization of nature's capabilities locates children in closer association with nature for their less clouded view of naturally occurring processes.

Like Mimi, who condemns the rural area for its wildness, nature-loving Murray desires a tidy and contained landscape. He is forever sweeping leaves, mowing, or raking. Interestingly, these acts of order and control are tasks he makes the children do as chores. Indeed, their inculcation begins early. As Hannah reminisces, "Painting that little row of stones was Alastair's first job. He was two years old, and he cried himself along the row, but Murray kept him at it until every stone was painted" (83). Moreover, Murray's painstaking dominion of nature involves the entire family: "At the end of the month, after thirty-four days [of rain], came sunshine. It broke through the clouds on the last Sunday morning, as the four of them, all in a row, went across the lawn with tablespoons, digging up the old and flattened dandelions that Murray waged his war against" (188-189). Hannah sees it as a war, a war against nature. In his comment on humankind's desire to impose order upon the chaos of nature, Michael Bunce sees efforts such as Murray's stemming from a socially constructed preference for "an amenity landscape, designed to provide pleasure rather than economic sustenance" (110). Murray's determination to keep this portion of the island free of weeds and seasonally deposited debris indicates unquestioning adoption of social norms associated with control of the landscape in the form of mown lawns and clipped hedges. This, in turn, emphasizes the conflict between his uncritically romantic view of nature and his desire to shape it into something unnatural and tame.

Lawrence depicts Squid and Alistair with contrasting views of nature. Like his father, Alistair holds a romantic view, whereas Squid appears more pragmatic and less inclined to hyperbole:

They were talking about ravens. . . .

"They're showing off," said Alastair. "They're trying to see which one's the best."

"Yeah, because the best one gets the girl," she said. "All they're doing is mating."

. . .

"Sure," she said. "They can't conk each other on the head, so they fly around a bit."

She gazed at the sky. The ravens moved as fast as darts, soaring on the rising wind. "I wish I could do that," she said. "What a waste that only birds can fly."

. . .

“What’s to think about if you’re a bird?” [She said.] . . . “You fly, you eat, you poop a lot.”

“Oh no,” he said. “No. You fly up as high as you can, just to see what things look like from there. You go hurtling down and you think, I’ll loop the loop when I get to the bottom. I’ll do a roll and a spin, and I’ll do it better than anyone else. You figure out where the clams are and how to break the shells. And when the sun goes down you think about tomorrow and all the things you’ll do in the morning.”

. . .

. . . . “Forget the dumb birds.”

“They’re not dumb,” he said. “Ravens are smart. They’ve got the same IQ as a dog.”  
(73-74)

Two strands of thought emerge from this exchange. Alistair sees birds as capable of thinking and feeling, whereas Squid sees them simply as being. As emphasized by the use of the personal pronoun, Alistair’s complexly if not romantically imagined response to the birds’ flight conflates the human and the bird, particularly in light of the comparable human experiences of joy and strategic thinking ascribed to them. In contrast, Squid’s view assumes that because of the apparent simplicity and purposelessness of their lives, birds hold little value. Yet as Joseph Meeker claims, “however the human mind imagines the world, that is how the world tends to become. . . . We apply human mentality to the earth according to the requirements of the model we have adopted to explain it to ourselves” (7). Although Meeker generalises about western society as a whole, the idea that we understand the world in terms that enable us to perceive ourselves resonates in this conversation between the siblings. Alistair needs to know that there is more to life than what he sees ahead of him as Murray’s successor. He feels trapped thinking he might have to continue Murray’s legacy and become the next light keeper: “I’m so sick of this place. I feel like I’ve come from a shipwreck, and I’m just waiting here for someone to come and rescue me” (Lawrence 101). More content than Alistair and unquestioning of her life’s prospects, Squid’s view is basic and pragmatic although she too recognizes the limitations of living on the island: “Squid turned and sprinted off. . . . And she slowed to a walk when the futility struck her; she could only run in a circle and get back where she started” (75).

Three worldviews emerge through Murray’s, Alistair’s, and Squid’s responses to the environment. Murray’s is conflicted. On one hand, nature offers perfection—the perfection of

20/20 vision and as a healing space—but on the other, nature requires human intervention to prune and shape it to a standard of order and tidiness. Less complex and clearly androcentric, Alistair’s view imbues the natural world with the capacity to feel, think, discern, experience joy, and act with intention. In contrast, Squid’s view, the simplest of the three, situates the world in biological terms. It exists and performs natural functions, but underpinning all behaviour is the biological imperative of survival through reproduction and eating.

Martha Brooks brings an artistic sensibility to her writing and draws on sensory perceptions, particularly smell and sensations on the skin, to link humans to the landscape. In this regard, the adult and the adolescent experience the landscape in similar ways. Gloria recalls summer haying time: “Later, . . . the smell of clover and new-mown hay filling the truck, the hazy heat-filled day cooling as the sun set in the mighty west, Gloria felt a familiar tug deep in her spirit. She was glad to be home” (40). In this example, the smell and the heat of the day give Gloria the feeling of belonging to the landscape, of being “home.” Hers is a corporeal response that grounds her spiritual connection to the land. Odella’s response to the environment of Mistik Lake echoes Gloria’s response:

By Friday evening I am in the family car driving out to Mistik Lake . . . . Two hours after leaving the city, prairie flatlands give way to round wooded hills. The road weaves up through them until at last the lake appears below, rolling like a shimmering ribbon through the valley. The main road licks the shore before heading through town.

I roll down the window and smell the damp earth. It feels, in a way, like coming home. (141-2)

Both women experience their relationship to the landscape in a phenomenological way (primarily through smell in these examples). Unlike Mimi, whose sense of the land is visually construed and therefore more remote, Gloria and Odella’s nature-association is understood through their bodies, making their relationship more embedded and physical. Even though their individual sense of themselves relative to the environment draws on a spiritual connection, theirs does not hold the romantic and highly imaginative overtones Alistair experiences with the whales or even Tatiana’s premonition-like response. In contrast, then, their connection comes across as more grounded and authentic because of its sensory origins. Moreover, the similarity of their responses suggests that either Odella, because her response is like Gloria’s, is experiencing

an adult-like nature response or that Gloria, because her response is like Odella's, is experiencing an adolescent-like response to nature. Either way, their nature associations are far from remote.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the three primary novels for their portrayal of the natural environment, the human relationship to it, and its relationship to the human. It draws on various ecocritics and scholars from within the field of children's literature to paint a picture of the adolescent's affiliations with nature. Little scholarly work exists on the topic for comparison; however, as might be expected, the relationship is not static. As Robyn McCallum points out, "[c]oncepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people, and while this dialogue is ongoing, modern adolescence . . . is usually thought of as a period during which notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation" (3). Accordingly, as part of that overall discourse, the portrayal of nature in literature acts as a crucial agent in the social dialogue informing adolescent identity. If adolescents have a nature-association distinct from children and adults, and if adolescence is a crucial and malleable stage in which the young adult identity begins to take shape, these novels provide some noteworthy perspectives. Indeed, despite some variation, in general, the young adult is aware of his or her environment but engagement and perception are tied to personalities and are externally influenced. Although the novelists treat the natural world in slightly different fashions, they establish the literary outdoors in a way that aligns it with its real world counterpart rather than away from it through tactics such as naming plant species. Regardless, when interacting with the natural world, each character exhibits his or her own unique response to it. These patterns of relatedness manifest in numerous ways—some more positive and entwined than others. When it comes to the young adult's relationship to the natural world, literature, technology, and science provide the enabling means from which these associations emerge.

Annette Kolodny asserts that "insofar as we engage or interact with our environment, what we engage is not raw physical reality but the symbolic structures that we inherit from our culture that tell us what that physical reality is about, and how we are to relate to it. So, we do not really engage our environment per se; we engage paradigms about our environment" (qtd. in Dobrin and Keller, "Taking Back" 18). The young adults in the novels under examination in this chapter have all transitioned toward a position of greater experience brought on by a range of

events, including a natural progression toward adulthood resulting in the acquisition of adult responsibilities, the experience of love, or the death of a loved one. Inspecting the young adult's experience of nature provides insight into the type and quality of her or his relationship to the natural world. When contrasted with adults, their nature associations fluctuate in a variety of ways including the young child as intuitive, the young teen as imaginative but unconventionally so, the young teen as brutally pragmatic and unimaginative, and the older teen as also pragmatic. Influences on these attitudes include the adolescent's city or country origins, the amenity value they place on the landscape, and the mediating role played by technology.

## Chapter 5: Nature Tropes and Binaries

### Chapter Overview

This chapter examines a selection of nature tropes and binary juxtapositions and discusses their manifestation in the three primary novels. Questions asked of the texts in light of these literary conventions include the following: How is nature characterised in literature written for young adults and how might it influence and be influenced by cultural attitudes toward the natural environment? What is the quality of the relationship between the adolescent and nature? What is the young adult to the natural spaces of the Canadian landscape in literature? How do the novels construct the young adult as green subject?

### Introduction

Northrop Frye's often quoted question "Where is here?" (222) has been taken up by many looking to capture the essence of what determines Canadian identity. In this chapter, however, the notion of "where is here" is used as the bridge to a discussion of ideas pertaining to the representation of the natural spaces of here and not-here in the three primary novels *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, *Mistik Lake*, and *The Uninvited*. In most cases, "here" is the central place of the novel while not-here is the place from which the character is running or to which he or she eventually returns. Binary juxtapositions such as the portrayal of rural versus urban spaces may seem simple on the surface; however, when probed, complex associations, particularly in light of the young adult's relationship to these places, begin to emerge.

In "North American Pastoral: Contrasting Images of the Garden in Canadian and American Literature," Patricia Hunt notes a continuum encompassing three distinct spaces in literature ranging from urban city spaces through rural country spaces to uninhabited wilderness areas. In recognition of the gradually dissolving boundaries between these spaces, Hunt proposes the idea of a pastoral middle landscape to address the in-between space usually designated as the country—as a space between uninhabited wilderness and densely populated cities. The middle ground of the rural countryside retains qualities of the pastoral, which stands out because of the use of characteristic nature tropes (40-41). Nature tropes persist throughout Western literature, most strongly in configurations reminiscent or imitative of literary pastoralism. Indeed, critical scholarship (see, for example, Buell, Garrard, Gifford, Short, and Williams) has demonstrated

pastoralism's deeply embedded and lasting influence on the portrayal of nature in literature today.

According to M. H. Abrams, pastoralism began as a literary trope idealizing the countryside in nostalgic and simple terms. Originating in third century BCE Greek poetry, later refined by Virgil, and heavily imitated by the Romantic poets, classical pastoral conventions typically point to rural or natural spaces as places of retreat. These places provide the individual—usually an individual from an urban locale—the opportunity to experience a simple way of life in order to achieve perspective and distance from the concerns and pressures of living in complex social spaces such as in cities. Pastoral literary figures, for instance the shepherd or the child, emblemize these notions of simplicity and a life lived according to natural rhythms (202). Pastoralism's influence on the portrayal of nature in contemporary literature relies on an accumulation of ideologies about the natural world. According to Lawrence Buell, these ideologies have “had an ambiguous impact on pastoral representation, opening up the possibility of a more densely imagined . . . art [including literature] yet also the possibility of reducing the land to a highly selective ideological construct” (*Environmental* 32). Pursuing a similar train of thought, Glen Love explains:

the terms by which pastoral's contrastive worlds are defined do, from an ecological viewpoint, distort the true essence of each. . . . The green world becomes a highly stylized and simplified creation of the humanistic assumptions of the writer and his audience. Arcadia has no identity of its own. It is but a temporary and ephemeral release from the urban world, which asserts its mastery by its linguistic creation and manipulation of the generic form itself, and by its imposition of its own self-centered values upon the contrastive worlds. (231)

Accordingly, culturally constructed ideologies of nature not only influence literary content but also the readers' interpretation of it and by extension their interpretation of the real world outside the text.

The idea of Arcadia, a utopian garden-like space wherein one experiences the simple life, figures strongly in classic children's classics such as *The Wind in the Willows*, where characters living in the countryside enjoy a leisurely lifestyle and nobody seems to work. Although Arcadian imagery may be typical of pastoral works for young children, scholarly information on

the prevalence and depth of the use of pastoralism in realistic literature for young adults is scarce. Critics such as Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* and John Stephens in "From Eden to Suburbia: Perspectives on the Natural World in Children's Literature" look at children's literature as a whole rather than distinguishing among different reading ages. However, they observe of children's literature that tropes of retreat, the simple life, the child as innocent, and the child as attuned to the natural world continue to figure in contemporary writing. In fact, when it comes to Canadian literature, Karen Sands-O'Connor observes that "the Romantic notion of the child as innocent, sacred, and free still dominates children's literature criticism in Canada" (149). Although Sands-O'Connor refers to criticism in particular, her comment reinforces the idea that pastoralism continues to flourish in Canadian children's literature all the same.

As with notions of retreat and return found in pastoral literature, in a similar fashion, children's literature follows a narrative arc transitioning from home to away-from-home (retreat) and back home again (return). In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer point out "[a]dult fiction that deals with young people who leave home usually ends with them choosing to stay away" whereas the "home/away/home pattern is the most common story line in children's literature" (197-98). However, of young adult literature, Nodelman and Reimer note a correlation between "escape . . . [and] the preservation of some form of innocence . . . in which characters journey from a broken or disrupted home to a new one" (198). The home to which the protagonists return rarely holds the same qualities as when they left. Through his or her experiences, the character changes, as do those who remain behind at home. In this regard, Nodelman and Reimer identify a modified "home/away/new home pattern: a move away from the familiar experiences of home through new experiences that lead to a new and better understanding of what both home and oneself are and should be" (198). Certainly, pastoralism and children's literature hold several noteworthy parallel associations.

Pastoral tropes infusing adult literature present the natural world in familiar ways not necessarily representative of the real world outside the text. While many versions of the pastoral appear in the three young adult texts under consideration in this thesis, the adolescent characters' relationships to the pastoral world challenge and make ambiguous their place within the natural world of the novel. Contrasting binaries of retreat/return and urban/rural as they appear in young



adult literature are important to consider through the lens of ecocriticism for what they convey about adolescents and their relationships to the natural world.

Because of the lack of scholarly research on pastoralism in young adult literature, references to research on its use in adult literature provide a point from which to begin. In his book *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford describes three characteristic uses of the pastoral evident in canonical adult literature. One is as a “literary device involving some form of retreat and return . . . either within the text, or in the sense that the pastoral retreat ‘returned’ some insights relevant to the urban audience” (1-2). Another use of the term “refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban. . . . A delight in the natural is assumed . . . [and] a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude toward what it describes” (2). The third use is “pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country” (2). Although these qualities stand out most noticeably in nature-oriented literature, they also appear in other literary genres. However, Gifford contends, “[w]e cannot pretend that the relationship between texts referring to nature and urbanised readers (who may live in villages but be economically orientated towards the urban) has not changed. . . . That the pastoral has become not only a ‘contested term’, but a deeply suspect one, is the cultural position in which we find ourselves” (147). Indeed, the contested nature of the pastoral appears to hold true in contemporary young adult literature, particularly in light of the trope of retreat and return.

### **Retreat and Return**

Despite changes in its literary portrayal since it was first popularised, Gifford notes that the “pastoral impulse of retreat and return persists in writing about nature” (147). This retreat and return paradigm appears with variations in children’s literature, too, particularly literature involving some form of wilderness adventure. As Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman explain, Canadian writers have “tended to use the wilderness more as a haven and place of healing than as a direct challenge to survival. . . . [Often,] the young find through their experiences relief from personal pressures and a new self-confidence, and so achieve an ability to come to terms with themselves as well as with the difficult situations in their everyday life” (29). Although the term “wilderness” hardly describes the rural locales of the three primary texts, metaphorically speaking, when it comes to the urban youth’s experience away from culture many rural places

would qualify as wilderness to some degree. The wilderness to which Egoff and Saltman refer, one with wild animals, the occasional Aboriginal character, and treacherous terrain, appears rarely in contemporary Canadian literature for young adults. Indeed, with urban sprawl and even anthropogenic (human caused) airborne pollution such as appears in relatively uninhabited spaces such as the arctic, the ideal of the pristine wilderness—a space untouched by humans or human inventions—has become a myth of the past. Blurring of the distinction between the physical boundaries of wilderness and places not-wilderness, nature and not-nature suggests the need either for new understandings of what these words mean or new terminology. Patricia Hunt proposes, as an alternative, the idea of a “middle or pastoral landscape . . . between the opposing qualities of nature [used somewhat generally] and the city” ( 40). Recognizing that the majority of Canadians live in the heavily populated urban areas close to our southern border, virtually any place not the city has the potential to be a rural wilderness or middle ground. As such, the definition of a natural pastoral space as used in this thesis, especially in light of the fact these novels occur in places more rural than wilderness, depends on its location relative to the most remote and most populated spaces of the narrative.

In *The Uninvited*, eighteen-year-old Mimi Shapiro journeys from New York to the (relative) back woods of Canada to stay in a small rural area not far from Toronto. The small community of Ladybank might be considered part of the middle pastoral landscape situating New York—the place *from* which she retreats—at one extreme and the cottage on the snye and its environs—the pastoral space *to* which she retreats—on the other. Following her first year at university, Mimi finds herself in a tricky situation because of an affair with a married professor, Lazar Cosic. He refuses to accept that she does not want to see him and has been stalking her in New York. She believes a sojourn in the country will give her time to assess her situation: “She had a lot of thinking to do, in somewhere other than New York. Somewhere Lazar Cosic wasn’t” (106). Her father, Marc, makes his cottage available to her: “A magical place, Marc had said. It wasn’t the kind of word he used very often. A place to get your thoughts together” (16). In this situation, Wynne-Jones uses pastoral ideals as a literary device—as noted earlier, one of the three key uses identified by Terry Gifford. Here, retreat to a rural space provides Mimi the opportunity to assess her situation and come up with a strategy to deal with it. Moreover, it is not just the time to think that retreat offers but also the place itself, “a magical place,” where she can gather her thoughts. By extension then, this middle landscape, perhaps due to its magical qualities,

enables a kind of thinking impossible in the city. Certainly, once in her rural retreat, Mimi sees her situation quite differently, but not in the peacefully resolved fashion suggested of pastoral retreat or as she had hoped, particularly when she believes Lazar has discovered her location and is coming to find her. Here, in an inversion of the pastoral tradition of the country as a simple and safe place to retreat to, the countryside becomes unsafe—a place to escape *from*—whereas the city becomes a place to retreat *to*. As Mimi tells Marc:

“Father, do you know what you did? That man is mentally unstable. I am truly frightened.”

“Don’t be,” he said.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re safe in your loft in the middle of safe old Manhattan. I’m in the middle of nowhere with a maniac on his way here because of you.”

(244)

Here, the middle of nowhere, which in a traditional pastoral sense is the place expected to be simple and uncomplicated, becomes an unsafe place whereas the middle of Manhattan—a complex social space—becomes the preferred place of respite.

Interestingly, Lazar too gains insight from travelling to a remote part of Canada. In an amusing twist, when Lazar contacts her father on the pretext of needing to convey to Mimi, in person, the offer of a research position at the university, Marc sends him on a wild goose chase to a location far from hers. He describes the phone call to Mimi:

“I told him about the old family cottage on the South Shore of Nova Scotia where you were holed up.”

...

“... Lovely place. About two hours out of Halifax. Down near Liverpool. Sandy beach, quiet bay, wonderful privacy. I gave him very precise directions.” (246)

The expense and resultant humiliation of the trip give Lazar much needed perspective into his actions. He apologizes, telling Mimi “I have been a pest. But I have come to my senses, okay” (271). His journey of imposed retreat and return differs from Mimi’s in that he gains clarity and insight into his behaviour, apologizes, and resolves to take steps to act maturely toward her, his wife, and his career. His plan is to return to teaching but at a different university. In contrast, Mimi’s retreat to the country locates her in the Edenic space of the cottage and its surroundings.

Although she initially experiences it as a place of respite, the feeling is short-lived once she learns she has attracted the attention of more than a stalker. As she observes, “why, suddenly, was she the attention of sneaks and creeps? She had run away from New York to escape the increasingly alarming focus of an ex-lover. But it seemed as if her safe house in the pretty forest was anything but!” (242). Indeed, the countryside surrounded by the “pretty forest” becomes a sinister place and Mimi rarely leaves the cottage without her pepper spray. Although the adult gains perspective, the middle landscape no longer offers the young adult the safe contemplative space of the typical pastoral retreat.

Mimi’s retreat to the country results in several transformations. For instance, her writing skills undergo improvement. As she thinks to herself, “[s]he had played at writing that summer. Writing fanciful scenes loosely based on her life. But this [writing about Cramer’s injuries and recovery]—this was hard and important. It was training, she thought, good training, she wasn’t sure for what” (346). Moreover, her identity as an only child shifts and she becomes a sister and a member of a new family paradigm. Finally, the experience leaves a lasting imprint that may well transfer across generations. As the narrator explains, “[t]he gunshots of that night would stay with Mimi for a long time. . . . So deep was the sense of those gunshots, Mimi wondered were she ever to have children whether the shots would be part of their memories, too” (342). Time spent in this rural space irrevocably alters her. Indeed, for Mimi, home will never be the same because of her experiences away. As such, Nodelman and Reimer’s proposed home/away/new home narrative arc is realised as predicted. Moreover, although the subversion of the pastoral retreat-and-return trope occurs in the place of retreat, Mimi will nevertheless return home profoundly changed and with a different understanding of the world and her place in it. The pastoral simplicity of the rural space, however, contributes little to Mimi’s relative transformation. Rather, Wynne-Jones’ discursive and narrative strategies draw the reader into anticipating the pastoral influence on the narrative. Destabilizing these expectations enables Wynne-Jones to create a suspenseful and exciting account. Certainly, she becomes a sibling and the shooting will affect her forever; however, Mimi’s limited outdoor experiences (paddling a kayak, jogging along the road, exploring the cleared area around the cottage with pepper spray in hand) have little effect on her identity or the knowledge she gains. In fact, the natural world and its bucolic qualities merely serve as literary devices used by Wynne-Jones to great effect.

In “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” Glen Love points out that “[l]iterary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach” (231). Unlikely to be described as a “sophisticated urbanite” primarily because of her youthfulness, within her cultural milieu, Odella McLean from *Mistik Lake*, appears sophisticated in contrast to individuals such as her boyfriend, the country-raised, Jimmy Tomasson. His lack of familiarity with ordering coffee in an upscale coffee shop, for example, reinforces Odella’s relative sophistication: a result of her urban upbringing (86). Furthermore, although she does not search for “lessons of simplicity,” Odella is drawn to Mistik Lake for the peace she derives from her connection to the landscape even when the space she needs to escape from is nearby:

Sometimes, when I can’t stand being the responsible one, I give Mom and Janelle and Sarah the slip. Before they can miss me or call me back to them I’m gone, into the hills that rise above Mistik Lake. Up the shouldering sides, where prairie grasses are speckled with bergamot and pasture sage as soft as feathers and wolf willow bushes and black-eyed Susan and purple blazing star. Where I can sit down and feel as if I’m sinking into the heart of the earth. In the blasting heat, far above the beach, I see Mom below sipping coolers as she watches my tanned sisters splash around in the lake.

I watch over them all—but by myself. Free of everything for an hour or so. Free to wait for copper-coloured dragonflies, rustling wings spread, to soar around me in the pale sky or, sometimes, when the magic is right, to land like angels on my bare shoulders. In the winter, back in the city, I can see those summer hills behind my closed eyes. (Brooks 21)

This quotation shows the experience of retreat happening in close physical proximity—Odella is within visual range of the place she has left. She retreats from the worries and cares associated with her family situation, and gains solace from connecting with the green world. Distance matters little as the physical place and not its relative location enable her retreat. Furthermore, the memories she makes here provide the images for the mental retreat she later visualizes in the city during the winter. Considering Love’s idea of the “lesson of simplicity” to be learned in a pastoral retreat, the narrative suggests that Odella benefits from the experience of retreat rather than from learning a lesson *per se*. All the same, her retreat amounts to a form of escape from responsibilities normally the purview of adults. Being alone in nature, “by myself,” as she puts it,

allows her a sense of freedom. The impression of freedom provides her the opportunity to connect with the natural world on a deep, almost visceral, level. In turn, this connection manifests itself in her minute observation of the dragonflies' colouring and the sound their wings make. Furthermore, by withdrawing to this green space and temporarily putting aside her adult responsibilities, Odella becomes part of a natural world where dragonflies freely land on her skin and her body becomes part of the landscape as it merges (in her mind) with the earth. Retreat to freedom, to a time in her childhood when she was unburdened by adult worries and cares, gives her the sense of being free as if she were once again a child. As such, the real outdoor space of Mistik Lake, or an image of it remembered months later in the city, provides the means by which Odella achieves a form of retreat. However, the distance travelled to achieve this retreat is insignificant. Perhaps, then, rather than experiencing a situation of retreat and return as observed of literary pastoralism in adult books, the lessons available to this adolescent urbanite derive through the physical and sensory experience of the landscape as well as through memories of that experience. Moreover, even though she has removed herself from the complex social space of her family dynamics, by continuing to watch over them from a distance, she avoids complete relinquishment of her feelings of responsibility. This, in turn, suggests that full benefit of the learning and respite typical of the pastoral retreat and return remains unachievable for Odella at this particular time in this particular situation.

The closing events of the novel take place at the cottage in Mistik Lake. Over a period of weeks around the same time she turns eighteen, Odella learns the identity of her biological father, the truth about her mother's role in the drowning accident that took place over twenty years ago, and she meets her half-sister from Iceland. Her life experiences and dilemmas transcend whichever space she enters. Certainly, Brooks could have situated these events just as easily in Winnipeg, but the catharsis achieved through these revelations in the calm, neutral, and much loved space of Mistik Lake makes them and the resultant forgiveness and strengthening of family ties that much more substantial. In this situation, retreat to the countryside enables a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the events affecting Odella's life as a whole rather than in a compartmentalized fashion dependent on her locale.

In *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, the adult characters, Murray and Hannah, see Lizzie Island as the pastoral space they retreat to and, in Murray's case, never leave. After Alistair's suicide and the birth of Squid's daughter; however, Hannah can barely tolerate living there for

the few months of the year that she does: “She can’t stand it anymore, winter on the island. Days eight hours long, endless nights crammed with Murray into a brooding, shrunken world. The storms, one after another. The rain. And worse, her fear of the snow” (55-6). From her perspective, the bucolic space in which she raised her children has become a place of dread. Indeed, except to Murray, the pastoral location of Lizzie Island has not been a place to retreat to; rather it has ultimately become a place from which to escape. Even Alistair’s suicide suggests his desire to leave. He writes in his journal of a conversation he had with Murray:

*He said, “Alastair, will you make me a promise?” I said I would try. “Just wait a few more years,” he said. “Wait until you’re twenty-one before you go away. The years will pass like the blink of an eye, and you’ll be old enough then not to have your head turned by the temptations of the world.” Then he asked again if I would promise him that.*

*I did. I had to. In that place, knowing all it meant to him, I had no choice but to promise. “Alastair,” he said, “you’re a man of your word and I’ll take that as gospel.”*

...

*But now I feel like a man on Alcatraz. Sentenced to life on the rock.* (184-5; italics in original).

Hannah and Alistair come to dislike Lizzie Island and Murray makes it a permanent retreat. Indeed, Squid might be the only one to experience Lizzie Island in a somewhat pastoral fashion. Having lived away from the island for the past three years, she considers Vancouver her home. In this way, Lizzie Island ostensibly becomes a place of brief retreat even though her purpose for being there is to let her parents know she is getting married and moving to Sydney, Australia.

The pastoral experience proposes to provide the individual with cathartic insight to take back home to the city. Discovering and reading Alistair’s journals and remembering her childhood through them helps Squid, belatedly, deal with his suicide. Although she never achieves full closure, burying his journals is like burying Alistair: “For Squid it’s like a funeral, like the service they never had for her brother. The sound of the surf is in the distance; there are birds singing in the trees. Visions of Alastair flicker through her mind—his face, his voice, his laughter. She is carried through years before she finds herself back in the forest” (232). Not exactly the desired effect of the classic pastoral retreat, which Gifford claims is to achieve greater understanding of the complex social world by spending time in the simple countryside.

However, the movement of the surf and the bird song (simple acts in their own right) anchor her in the real world while enabling her mind to travel into the past to remember the things she loved about her brother in an emotionally uncomplicated way. Accordingly, Squid's liberating experience shared with her mother in this pastoral setting makes it easier for both of them to let go of the past. Although Squid's experience provides closure and renews her ties with the living, its effect on her home life (the place to which she returns) seems negligible. Her plans to marry and move to Australia remain unchanged and any residual effects on how she understands the social world to which she returns remain unaddressed at the end of the novel.

### **Urban and Rural**

In *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society*, John Rennie Short explains that the cultural construction of our perceptions of the wilderness began 10,000 years ago during the agricultural revolution as a way to distinguish between domesticated spaces and spaces of settlement and agriculture (5). For centuries, portrayals of the wilderness conveyed it as "something to be feared, an area of waste and desolation" until the nineteenth century when romanticism engendered a notion of wilderness as "a place to be revered, a place of deep spiritual significance and a symbol of an earthly paradise" (6). Ecocriticism takes the general position that fear of the wilderness encourages domination of and by extension exploitation of the natural world, whereas romantic notions of reverence inspire its preservation. Problems arise when attitudes such as these influence our view of the natural world in ways that privilege its aesthetic or anthropocentric value (as a resource, for instance) over its inherent value. As Annette Kolodny maintains in an interview with Dobrin and Keller,

insofar as we engage or interact with our environment, what we engage is not raw physical reality but the symbolic structures that we inherit from our culture that tell us what that physical reality is about, and how we are to relate to it. So, we do not really engage our environment per se; we engage paradigms about our environment. That explains why one culture may worship a tree and carefully tend to it, while another culture cuts down the very same tree and sends it to a sawmill. (qtd. in Dobrin and Keller, "Taking Back" 18)

Understanding of the natural world both inside and outside the text draws heavily on the cultural discourses coding the relationship between social spaces and natural spaces. For example, as



Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd argue, “[p]ut simply, the ‘wild’ is hardly a neutral concept but an ever shifting rhetorical and political term in need of specific elaborations. Neither are terms like nature or the environment free-floating or self-evident” (“Into the Wild” 2). Indeed, John Short’s survey of wilderness ideals proposes that in some circumstances “contact with the wilderness was contact with the wild unconscious . . . a symbol of spiritual despair” (9). Moreover, experiences in the wilderness subvert civil behaviour and attitudes suggesting “civilization is a thin veneer, quickly burned off by contact with the wilderness to reveal the dark underside of the human condition” (9). Other views convey the wilderness as a place in which one obtains self-knowledge where “the wilderness experience becomes one of individual growth and development” (21). Negative attitudes toward the wilderness as a place where the cultural veneer fades and base instincts take over have transferred to depictions of urban centres in disparaging terms as “concrete jungles.” Short also observes that descriptions of the city as “an alienating environment where we are all strangers, all part of a lonely crowd” reflect living conditions in heavily populated urban areas (27). Indeed the countryside provides a criticism of the city as the two are often held in contrast to each other with the city portrayed as dirty, fast paced, jaded, criminalised, and driven by capitalism, whereas the country comes across as clean, safe, and innocent (Short 31-35). Additionally, Raymond Williams suggests that rather than privileging the country as a positive space relative to the city that the relationship can go both ways with either place holding positive or negative values. In *The Country and the City*, Williams outlines the various ideologies of the country and city as transmitted through literature. He claims: “On the country has gathered a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation” (1).

As Terry Gifford observes, with expanding urban centres encroaching on the countryside, the boundary between the two spaces blurs (*Pastoral* 3). Indeed, while representations of the country and the city appear in *The Uninvited*, *Mistik Lake*, and *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter* as relatively concrete and distinct spaces, the wilderness does not. For instance, although not typically characterised this way, one might consider the Pacific Ocean surrounding Lizzie Island in *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter* a wilderness of sorts. In *The Uninvited*, Mimi refers to the forested areas in the far background as “the desolate forest” beyond “the empty fields” (14), but

the narrative takes place primarily in the domesticated spaces of the Ladybank community and around the cottage. Martha Brooks locates the setting of *Mistik Lake* in Winnipeg and Mistik Lake; the two areas separated by prairie farmland. As such, the novel oscillates between the city and the middle landscape of Mistik Lake.

Brooks, Lawrence, and Wynne-Jones convey shifting attitudes toward the city and the country in their novels. Certainly, at times the city and the country exhibit distinct qualities with one portrayed more positively than the other while the opposite can hold true as well. Indeed, at times, neither the country nor the city displays qualities that particularly distinguish one from the other. In *The Uninvited*, Tim Wynne-Jones uses the idea of the city to develop Mimi's personality as a sassy outspoken New Yorker. Her defiant attitude masks her feelings of being out of place in her new environment. Nevertheless, the privileged status of the city stands out strongly when considered from Mimi's point of view. As discussed in chapter four, she views the rural area of Ladybank and the cottage on the scene dismissively at first, using the absence of a Starbucks to describe her location as nowhere; however, other criteria affect her positive or negative valuation of her locale. For instance, she associates country residents with the stereotype of the hillbilly, referring to "Clem and Jed" (15) and implying that only rednecks wear ball caps. Indeed, the computer memory-stick "hanging around . . . [Jay's] neck gave her hope" (31) because "[s]he didn't think the average redneck carried a memory stick" (33). Associating Jay's acceptability with the fact he carries visible signs of technology on his body suggests in binary terms that rednecks and the absence of technology belong in the country and that technology and people who use it align with the city and the city values she privileges.

Yet, Wynne-Jones conveys the city in a pejorative sense, too. For instance, Mimi ironically describes her knowledge of how to cut through a titanium bike lock as "more wisdom from the city" (44)—wisdom learned from the experience of having several bikes stolen. In another scene, Mimi stands on a back porch in the early morning rain and muses: "Rain without exhaust fumes. Strange" (177). Nevertheless, the city is the only place, until now, that Mimi has spent time, which explains her fondness for New York and her ties to the city as in these examples:

"She had gone to bed, missing the comforting sound of traffic, of car horns and sirens. Of cabbies arguing with drunk passengers" (102).

“. . . her thoughts drifted, inevitably to New York and humid evenings, sun filtered through dust and crowded sidewalk cafes. Suddenly she felt an intense stab of homesickness” (155-6).

In addition, despite its cheery façade, the description of Mimi’s garrisoned apartment building suggests an undercurrent of things to be feared in the city as well as the social isolation that comes with living in the city: “It was red brick and there were flower boxes bursting with blooms, under many mullioned windows, alive with sunny reflections, but with black bars on them to keep the world out” (51). Here Wynne-Jones provides a stark contrast between the friendly exterior of the building with its “flower boxes,” and “sunny reflections” and the prison-like image of the barred windows which speaks to John Short’s claim that in the city “we are all strangers, all part of a lonely crowd” (27).

Although she treats it dismissively at times, Mimi also has positive experiences in the countryside, experiences that show not only an openness to the natural world but an acute (if sardonic) sense of it, too. For example, the country sounds and smells have the power to shift her attitude as demonstrated in this sentence: “She breathed in deeply and closed her eyes and let the sound of the stream enter her and calm her city brain” (Wynne-Jones 27). In the following example, while Mimi enjoys the simplicity of the country night sky, the city comes across negatively for the air and light pollution that prevents one from seeing the stars: “Mimi looked up into the night sky for a friend of her own, like the moon, for instance. This was something she was only just learning how to do—look for heavenly light of one kind or another. Apparently, there were stars and planets, too, and you could actually see them sometimes. Who knew?” (157). Indeed, the fact that she looks up and essentially draws on nature and natural phenomena to derive a connection beyond herself suggests a shift in the scope of her frame of reference, one that extends outward significantly rather than the somewhat self-centred focus she has demonstrated to that point. Interestingly, her observation speaks to the phenomenological experience of what she sees and does not rely or draw upon superlatives to describe its beauty or aesthetic effect on her.

Despite becoming more comfortable in her surroundings, Mimi still finds herself targeted by a stalker. Indeed, the perceived dangers following Mimi from the city to the countryside show both the city and the country as dangerous. As the reader is told, “[a]part from her morning run

along the road, she explored the island, her mace in her pocket, though it seemed absurd in the light of day. She explored but not too far. Never into the Dark Forest” (142). Carrying mace while running along a road in a rural area virtually devoid of people might seem paranoid; however, it is of significance that her fear of the forest draws from its folktale reputation as the “Dark Forest” and not from a personal negative experience in the wilderness. Arguably, Mimi’s fears may represent the transference of attitudes toward the country as developed by living predominantly in an urban milieu. Her fear draws upon knowledge of urban perils, which have somehow transcended the city to apply to her situation in this rural area. Of note, however, is her reference to the “Dark Forest”—the meaning packed into these two capitalized words is significant. Not only do they evoke the gothic fairy-tale forest in which monsters and witches live and children are led to be eaten, they also bring to mind ideas associated with notions of the wilderness. Short proposes, for instance, that literary portrayals of the wilderness have come to represent the idea that “contact with the wilderness was contact with the wild unconscious . . . a symbol of spiritual despair” (9). As such, the culturally imbued meaning inherent in the phrase “Dark Forest” points to the forest as a dangerous place. Indeed, Mimi is only safe within the cultivated space surrounding the cottage and bordered by the water and the land formation delineated by the structure of the snye.

Although the domesticated space of Iain Lawrence’s *Lizzie Island* stretches the idea of what constitutes the countryside, its remoteness locates it reasonably within the scope of Patricia Hunt’s definition of the pastoral middle landscape, particularly if we consider the Pacific Ocean surrounding the island to have qualities similar to a wilderness space. Within this pastoral space we find Murray McCrae, an outspoken adult character in *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter*. He holds a deep and abiding reverence for the outdoor space in which he raises his children. At times, his attitude seems naïve based on his preference to ignore what happens in the larger world beyond his island. Furthermore, he sees the city and areas beyond the island negatively and, as Hannah notes in the following excerpt, he does so in a way that denies the full experience of living on their island and their relationship to the rest of the world:

He said, “Hannah, I think we’re about the luckiest people in the world.”

“Och, we’ve no money in the bank. We’re dirt poor if you think about it. But we’ve got all this.” He lifted his hand and made a small, shy gesture. “We’ve got two healthy children and a paradise to live in, free of crowds and smoke and noise.” It wasn’t exactly

true. There had been one day, several years before, when electricians came to rewire the light. To do it, they had to shut down the generators. Hannah was outside when they pulled the switch. It was sunny and calm, a wonderful day. Then suddenly there was silence. There was total, absolute silence. For the very first time she heard nothing. No machines or generators, no fans or radio noise. And it was eerie, even scary. She was actually frightened at first.

...

“And what does it matter,” he said, “what goes on in Russia or Cuba or Korea or anywhere else? What scrap of difference does it make whether you know or don’t know which group of people is killing which other group of people?” . . . . “It matters not a whit.” (111)

In this conversation, Murray’s affection for his island paradise is paramount, while the verbal inarticulateness of his “shy gesture” hints at the depth of feeling he brings to his words. In contrast, he willingly ignores the negative aspects of living on the island such as the constant noise. Moreover, his head-in-the-sand attitude toward the rest of the world, particularly in light of the many decades he has lived away from society suggests his worldview might be outdated and narrow-minded. Indeed, as Hannah sees it, they are raising their children “in isolation, with no idea of a world outside. . . . ‘In captivity’” (111).

A biology lesson on the reproductive habits of the barnacle provides further insight into Murray’s view of the world beyond his island, particularly, in this case, the city. As he lectures to his family:

“See how they live in cities?” asked Murray. “In high-rises even, one atop another? But as children they go swimming through the ocean. They’re as free as butterflies, no shell to weigh them down.”

...

“When a barnacle gets a little older he decides to settle down. He finds a city and gives up his wandering ways; he builds his own little house in the city. And in it he’ll live for all his days.

...

“In every house there’s a barnacle,” said Murray. “They stick their heads to the rock with cement. . . . Their days of swimming are gone forever; they can never leave their houses. And at the slightest danger, they lock themselves inside. They bolt their doors and cower in the darkness.”

He stood up. “There,” he said. “That’s what city life does to you.” (86-88)

From Murray’s perspective, the city is a dangerous place and those who live there do so in fear. Moreover, the city creates this fear. In addition, a free life, a life free to roam in nature, is available during childhood, whereas with adulthood comes immobility and lack of choice along with a lifestyle circumscribed by isolation and fear of danger. Interestingly, his barnacle lesson emphasizes Murray’s attitude toward the world outside his domestic space. Not only does he display little interest in the outside world, he deliberately ignores it. Like the barnacles and city dwellers he describes, Murray also locks himself inside and “cowers” in the solitude of Lizzie Island, his “days of swimming . . . gone forever,” too.

Through Murray, we see an adult’s view of the city and the country, yet his view is quite different from his daughter’s. Certainly, despite her father’s teaching strategies, Squid has unusual expectations of city life (the foundations of her expectations never revealed in the novel) when she, Alistair, and their mother spend a week in Prince Rupert waiting for Alistair’s glasses to be made:

A week later they were on the helicopter . . . . They flew across Digby Island and over the harbor, and the city spread out below them.

It was smaller than Squid had imagined. She had hoped there would be skyscrapers and great deep canyons they would fly through, past people staring from the windows. Lights of all colors. Masses of cars. Long, silver trains crawling on elevated tracks, stretching round the corners like strings of linked sausage. She had hoped to find a clamor of sirens and bells and horns.

“It’s boring,” she said, disdainfully. “It’s just a boring little city.”

But the houses amazed her. They were clumped together, side by side and back to front, house after house after house, like barnacles on a rock, except they stood in tidy rows.

“How can people live like that?” she asked.

...

And the city smelled of rotten eggs. But no one seemed to notice.

“It’s the pulp mill,” said Alastair. “I guess you get used to it.”

...

They were only gone a week; they couldn’t wait to get back, and so they went on the chopper. Alastair on one side, Squid on the other, they watched like explorers for the first sight of their land. Alastair won.

“There it is!” he shouted. “Hello, Lizzie Island.” He turned around, and his grin was almost as wide as his glasses. “It looks so beautiful,” he said. (120-121)

Indeed, phrases such as “silver trains,” “deep canyons” (in the city), and “elevated tracks” suggest that Squid has formed an impression of the city as a futuristic metropolis. The isolation and size of her island home make the city seem crowded and challenging to live in. Getting used to the smell of the pulp mill versus getting used to the sounds of the generator on the island presents an ironic juxtaposition of the relative side effects of living in either space. When held up against Wynne-Jones’ portrayal of Mimi’s nostalgia for the dust and noise of New York, it becomes apparent that regardless of what one might consider a negative quality, the familiar space is privileged no matter its flaws. In this way, the binary of city and country becomes mute. Noise or unpleasant smells mean nothing. The qualities of one’s home space are what matters.

Martha Brooks provides little descriptive material to enable a lengthy comparison of the city to the country in *Mistik Lake*. The city of Winnipeg is rarely described and even then with a light touch. Normal activities such as going to school, family dinners, and the usual events surrounding family dynamics take place there. Mistik Lake, in contrast, is more fleshed out than Winnipeg although its actual physical geography lacks specifics. In general, Brooks conveys a sense of the country as friendly and welcoming and in that regard personal and unpretentious. For instance, Jimmy notes that community support is typical of country places like Mistik Lake, observing: “That’s also the way of a small town. They stick up for their own. If he moves to the city, as he hopes to do in the fall, he’ll miss this” (113). Unlike the examples from *The Uninvited* and *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter* where city dwellers at times barricade themselves inside their houses to keep out the world, country residents accord each other the courtesy of acknowledgement: “Jimmy gets in and drives away. His grandfather raises his hand in a slow country wave and he raises a steady hand, too—the way he’s been taught” (126). This very

personal style of human relationships stands in stark contrast to New York style which as Mimi somewhat jokingly points out to Stooly Peters (who has been staring at her breasts and generally making her feel uncomfortable), “[w]here I come from, we shoot neighbors” (Wynne-Jones 184). There is even a certain cachet to living in the country because of the experiences offered that are not available in the city such as drive-in movies which, as Jimmy describes, are the “[u]ltimate country experience. Bad speakers. Bad popcorn. Bugs on the window” (53). On the other hand, Brooks portrays the city as having a certain beauty and aliveness. One early morning with a coffee in hand Jimmy “. . . takes it out into the chilly air where he can sit at one of . . . [the] tables under the brilliant sun and watch the city come alive” (133). While we more commonly find the natural world depicted as a living entity, the idea of the city coming alive gives it an organic quality when seen from Jimmy’s perspective. Certainly, the idea of the monolithic city coming alive provides a striking contrast to the individual one-to-one human relationships cultivated in the country because for a moment it is easy to forget that the city’s aliveness really stems from its inhabitants.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the three primary texts for their treatment of the pastoral tropes of retreat and return and for their portrayal of urban and rural spaces. With little scholarly criticism available to draw upon from within the field of young adult literature, the discussion explores the conventional uses of these tropes as identified in adult literature in light of their representation in the three primary novels. As Joseph Meeker contends,

[c]onsciously and unconsciously, people imitate literary characters and often try to create in their own lives the circumstances depicted in literature or the motivations which produce its events. Literature which provides models of man’s relationships with nature will thus influence both man’s perceptions of nature and his responses to it. (8)

Accordingly, romantic notions of pastoral spaces, because of the depth of their integration within our culturally constructed views of the natural world, become important sites of investigation for what is said as much as for what is not. The challenges presented by this approach are twofold. First, the critic must be aware of her own culturally constructed impressions of the natural world and their influence on the assumptions brought to her interpretation. Second, one must remain cognizant of the fact that plot-driven adolescent literature relies on the natural environment as a



literary device. This use of setting inevitably relies on the reader's familiarity with, in this case, pastoral literary conventions without which the relative effect intended by the author would be lost. This reading capability might be reasonable to assume of young adults but less so of young children. That said, while the tropes of retreat and return retain many conventional properties, Martha Brooks, Iain Lawrence, and Tim Wynne-Jones subvert them as well. Retreat can be a very short distance, a psychological experience or memory, a stop on the journey to faraway places, and even a place to escape from. Similarly, the city and the country obtain distinct qualities with one portrayed more positively than the other while the opposite can hold true as well. However, on occasion neither the country nor the city displays qualities that particularly distinguish one from the other. This ambiguity suggests a potentially complex relationship between the adolescent and the natural world for its indeterminacy. On the other hand, nature—the real outdoors—is indeterminate in many ways, as well.

In general, the evidence agrees with Onno Oerleman's observation that "the bulk of response to the built environment . . . suggest[s] not so much a rupture between rural and urban landscapes as a continuity between them—that clear distinctions are hard to define and possibly unnecessary to make" (178). Indeed, clear distinctions attributable to particular spaces have been difficult to make through this chapter of analysis. Some characters such as Odella (*Mistik Lake*) experience the landscape as a place of retreat, whereas others such as Mimi (*The Uninvited*) find the countryside a place to retreat to and retreat from. As does Squid (*The Lightkeeper's Daughter*), all three protagonists experience the country or have experiences in the country that bring them some sort of conclusion to or clarification of an issue. The authors' handling of these experiences in subtle and non-didactic ways is a testament to the respectful use of the natural environment rather than the overt troping found in other genres particularly the nature-writing genre. Through this literary treatment, readers obtain a more realistic picture of the natural world. However, use of these tropes provides the authors a narrative tool to generate certain effects. Wynne-Jones in particular relies on the reader's familiarity with notions of retreat and return and conventional ideas about the city and country to make Mimi's observations about the relative spaces humorous and to develop the suspenseful aspects of the story.

The green subjectivity of the young adult remains ambiguous when considered from the perspective of these pastoral tropes. What the country sojourn does is reduce the clutter of the

day-to-day to locate the adolescent in a place where the events of the plot can unfold with selective deployment of relevant narrative inputs the author desires.

## Chapter 6: Secrets and Transgressions

### Chapter Overview

This chapter surveys the transgressions and secrets in the three primary texts. It explores the relationships between these two narrative components and the portrayal of the natural world and discusses the associations that emerge.

### Introduction

In “Environmentalism and Ecocriticism,” Richard Kerridge explains that ecocritics are concerned with “the whole array of cultural and daily life, for what it reveals about implicit attitudes that have environmental consequences” (530). This array includes not just decisions such as to walk rather than drive, for instance, but also decisions such as the ethical ones we bring to the choices we make and how we conduct our lives in general. These aspects, and more, contribute to the composite of values and attitudes informing our participation in the larger communities to which we belong and therefore have implications on how we respond to environmental issues. The three primary novels contain several noteworthy themes to do with incest, non-normative sexuality, and the keeping of secrets. These aspects of the narratives influence the characters’ lives and are worth considering for what they reveal about the adolescent’s connection to the natural world. In particular, this chapter looks at the relationship between the young adult and the environment to identify patterns of association in light of the secrets and transgressions presenting in the three primary novels.

In *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*, Robyn McCallum explains that “[a]lienation and transgression are categories of personal experience and action, both of which are generated via the social construction of subjectivity. Both designate positions of otherness or outsideness, in relation to cultural or social structures from which those structures can be represented or examined” (100). A discussion of alienation lies outside the purview of this chapter; however, my analysis draws on McCallum’s idea of transgression loosely interpreted to encompass the taboo issues of incest and lesbianism as they present in the three primary novels. Rather than using McCallum’s “positions of otherness” to

outline social structures, I use these transgressions as well as the type and use of secrets in the novels to identify patterns of relatedness suggestive of the characters' green subjectivity.

Robyn McCallum also guides the definition of subjectivity brought to this analysis. She points out that

subjectivity is an individual's sense of personal identity as a subject—in the sense of being subject to some measure of external coercion—and as an agent—that is, being capable of conscious and deliberate thought and action. And this identity is formed in dialogue with the social discourses, practices and ideologies constituting the culture which an individual inhabits. (4)

By extension, then, a close reading of the young adult's responses to the discourses of transgression under consideration in this chapter when viewed through the lens of ecocriticism provides insight into the ideological representation of the young adult and his or her green subjectivity.

Taking this analysis to the necessary extent requires looking at the green subjectivity in ways that avoid simplified binary comparisons. McCallum reiterates the problem of using binaries in literary analysis noting that “an underlying problem is how to conceive of the relation between individuals and society without structuring this relation as oppositional, that is, as a relation in which one term is privileged over the other” (119). Again, although McCallum specifically refers to society and the individual, this chapter focusses on the natural world as well. As such, it becomes important to avoid essentializing these relationships because doing so reinforces patterns of dominance rather than providing a reading that exposes their contingent qualities. To that end, this chapter simply discusses the aspects of transgression and secrets apparent in each book, looks closely to see where they take place, and considers how or whether the natural world intersects with these experiences.

## **Secrets**

In many ways, Gloria, one of the adult characters in *Mistik Lake*, captures the essence of the issue (of secrets) dealt with in this section when she observes: “One secret, and then another, and pretty soon you're living a life of secrets. And, of course, the first secret gets ensnarled with all the others. Entangled, impossibly; with other people, other lives, other lies” (36). Indeed,

secrets play an important role in the various plotlines weaving through each of the three primary texts. Shared among some characters but withheld from others or only available to the narrator, the dissemination of secrets influences the reader's interpretation of events. At times, information is revealed or concealed in fragments making a character's or the reader's knowledge incomplete thereby complicating the interpretation they bring to the various events in the novels. As a literary device, the use of secrets creates drama and suspense while also helping to propel the plot forward. Without secrets, secrets they know or secrets withheld from them, the characters would not experience the misunderstandings leading them to make certain choices, which in turn compel them along the varied and twisted paths forming the labyrinth of their narrative trajectories.

Secrets kept by Odella's mother Sally and her great aunt Gloria contribute to the sadness and confusion Odella experiences as she comes to terms with her parents' divorce and then her mother's death in *Mistik Lake*. Patricia Hunt observes a pattern appearing in Canadian literature that runs across generations worth considering in light of Odella's situation. As Hunt explains,

the child figure is the primary image found in regional and prairie literature. The child is focus for a place that once was, a lost Edenic innocence. . . . [M]y reading of Canadian literature finds that the imagery of a garden forever located in childhood and a middle landscape marred by generational (and sexual) conflict is typical of a tellingly Canadian pastoral. (43)

The goal here is not to define or categorize the primary novels as pastoral or otherwise, nor is the focus on (young) children per se; however, the idea of generational conflict bears consideration in light of the three generations of women in *Mistik Lake*. Contrary to Hunt's observation, the events between the generations cannot be characterised as conflictual. However, decisions made by Odella's mother or her great aunt Gloria have a significant effect on Odella. In effect, Odella bears the burden of an earlier generation's decisions, decisions contributing to the sadness she feels and the choices she makes during her early teens.

Early in the novel Odella and her sister, Janelle, hide evidence of their mother's drinking from their father by taking "empty bottles and cans in green plastic garbage bags into the woods" with the full knowledge, as Odella explains to Janelle, that they are "polluting the environment . . . . When I'm old enough to drive I'll take them to recycling" (19). They do this to avoid

returning to the city because “[t]hat’ll be the end of our summer, we’ll go back to the city and there’ll be no more days at the beach” (21). This incident raises several noteworthy points. First, Odella and Janelle enable their mother’s drinking by hiding it because their time at the lake is more central to them than returning home to Winnipeg. In fact, time at the lake is likened to the idea of summer which in turn suggests that time in the city is akin to winter. This association of summer with Mistik Lake and winter with the city is further reinforced by the label “Winter” (15) preceding this section of the book. Second, Odella’s choice to pollute the woods demonstrates the greater importance, in her mind, of more time at the lake over their mother’s problems and any environmental concerns. Third, the layers of secrets mount—the secret that causes Sally to drink, the secret they hold on behalf of Sally about her drinking, and their secret behaviour in disposing of the bottles.

Sally drinks because she feels guilty about being the cause of the accident that happened the night the car she was in went through the ice and all the passengers but her drowned. Except for telling Gerald Isfeld, she keeps her feelings of guilt a secret. Moreover, her secret affects her relationship with her husband and children and is at the root of her inability to remain in her marriage. While Sally takes full responsibility for what took place that night the prologue to the novel suggests a different possibility, the possibility that the lake played a role in the ensuing events:

Mistik is a Cree word meaning “wood.” On hot, still summer mornings, drifting clouds of mist pass close to the surface of the lake just before the sun rises and burns them away. Then the oaks and poplars and birches that edge the water reflect back at you, all light and shadow play—everything so calm and peaceful you could almost forget the damage a lake can do. (14)

This description contrasts the beauty and stillness of the reflective lake with the idea that the lake *causes* damage. As such, the anthropomorphization of the lake proposes it as a complicit player in the drowning accident. Indeed, the fact that the lake remains a mute participant in the tragedy not only brings a sinister quality to the cause of the accident it serves to diminish Sally’s culpability by taking some of the blame. As such, with knowledge of the lake’s agential role in the drowning accident, the reader has access to a number of perspectives each of which contributes to the layers of secrets underpinning the narrative.

Mistik Lake serves as a location in which significant information is conveyed such as Sally's pregnancy and Gloria's homosexuality. When Sally becomes pregnant, she asks her aunt Gloria to keep her twofold secret—the secret that she is pregnant and the secret that the child is Gerald's. She explains to Gloria “Gerald doesn't know and I don't want him to know. Daniel thinks it's his. But it isn't. I'm almost one hundred percent sure it's Gerald's” (194). The secret of Odella's parentage affects a number of people including Daniel who, for the first few years of her life, believes Odella is his child, Gerald who suspects Odella might be his but whose query Gloria denies, as well as affecting Odella, who learns she has been lied to her entire life.

Although Mistik Lake is the location in which at least one side of the exchanges to do with to do with the secrets in the narrative takes places, the location in which a secret is revealed appears to have little direct bearing on the quality, type, or timing of its revelation. Yet the making of these secrets and the space in which they are made holds somewhat greater significance. For instance, Sally gets pregnant in Mistik Lake and Gloria recognizes that she is a lesbian while camped on the shore of Mistik Lake. Indeed, although of little concern in the twenty-first century, being a lesbian in the 1940s was taboo and had to be kept secret. Yet any thoughts of whether her feelings are right or wrong disappear in the outdoor space where Gloria falls in love with Violet:

She can almost tease out the beginning of this lie, this secret, one summer long ago when she and Violet Isfeld both turned thirteen. . . . [C]amped overnight on the grass near the beach, the green waters of Mistik Lake rolling in, . . . the full moon sitting on the water, and Violet's black hair spilling over the damp pillow beside her—there was a moment in which all sense of who they were supposed to be vanished. She reached out in the darkness and found Violet's soft hand and fell in love. (36-37)

Gloria considers the keeping of her secret a lie (presumably a lie to her society but not to herself). Moreover, the social mores dictating the “sense of who they are supposed to be” have no apparent effect on how she proceeds—they do not make her feel deviant nor do they prevent her from holding Violet's hand. Considering it from an ecocritical point of view, the environment in which this takes place provides a beautiful, calm space free from the social expectations of propriety and heterosexual behaviour already moulding the young girls' conduct

at that time. Indeed, the only watchful “eye” is the full moon, which rather than looking down on the girls in judgement, sits on the water as if it were lighting their way in approval.

Secrets in *The Uninvited* play a less significant role than they do in *Mistik Lake*; moreover, they have different properties. Rather than deliberately kept secrets, the secrets in *The Uninvited* might be more accurately described as narrative devices designed to keep information from other characters and the reader. David Lodge explains this approach as one common to mystery and contemporary realism but which also appears in “traditional romance” where the “mystery concerning the origins and parentage of characters, invariably resolve[s] to the advantage of the hero and/or heroine” (31). Likewise, the unknown parentage of characters plays a pivotal role in *The Uninvited*. This secret, once revealed holds the promise of an improvement in Cramer’s life, at least, beyond the closing pages of the novel. However, another mysterious aspect in the narrative is the secret life Cramer leads traveling the local waterways by canoe and lurking concealed in a tree or his boat watching the goings on from afar. Situated on the periphery as a silent observer of the events and social spaces to which he so desperately wishes to belong, Cramer imagines interacting with Mimi or Jay:

The summer evening closed in around the dinner party on the lawn. . . . Cramer shimmied down his tree and moved silently closer. They would not hear him. . . . They drank and sang and laughed. Then one or the other of them would drift into the house and come back with something else to eat or another bottle of wine. And Cramer imagined walking out of the gathering night right up to the table. . . . Then he would drift into the house and return with a chair of his own. He would watch and listen. That would be enough. He would smile at the right moment, be careful not to drink too fast or too much. (264)

Always on the outside looking in, here Cramer envisions being part of this comfortable and friendly social space. The persona he imagines for himself is as adept in this cultural milieu as he is in nature. In fact, in his imagination, he glides in and out of the house much the way he climbs down the tree so silently and glides along the water in his canoe. Yet, in both spaces, he is a watcher. He watches the social environment while situated within the natural world and he watches the social environment from within as well.

Cramer also secretly leaves messages and gifts for Jay at one time programming the sound of a cricket into a musical recording, another time leaving a dead bird, and yet another



leaving a snakeskin on Jay's pillow (35). While Cramer seems self-aware enough to articulate his desire to be part of Jay's life and to disturb it he seems unaware that his behaviour will only push Jay further away from him rather than forging the hoped for connection:

He didn't want to scare him away. He wanted to be noticed, and he had no idea how—no other idea how. And yes, he wanted to disturb Jay's comfort. Comfort was what Jay had a whole lot of. A *world* of comfort! He wanted Jay to know what it felt like to never really be able to relax, to never really feel at ease, to never have any time off. In a way, though he couldn't exactly explain it, he was just trying to make smaller the distance—the gulf—between them. (147-8)

His actions have, in part, the desired effect of upsetting Jay's comfort; however, he is shocked to hear Mimi's interpretation of his actions. Tired of the unpleasant intrusions and thefts at the cottage and after hearing a bush snap Mimi—speaking to the trees knowing someone is there—says, “[y]ou are a sick person . . . you are really sick . . . What have we done to make you hate us so much” (266). His response is animal-like in the way he leaves the scene:

He slunk away through the glade, and when he was out of earshot, he ran, whipped and slapped and slashed at by the underbrush, until he arrived at last at the cove where he kept Bunny [his canoe] hidden under a blanket of cedar boughs.

He was bleeding. The back of his hand, his cheek, his left ankle. Angrily he tore off the tendrils of undergrowth still clinging to him. (267)

Aspects of his journey through the bush and out into the river as well as the blood and clinging debris are suggestive of a journey through a birth canal. This interpretation resonates with Mimi's and Jay's concluding thoughts about how Cramer emerged into their lives “two weeks ago in a startling and bloody birth” (351). Yet, this example also shows that Cramer's nature association has changed. Rather than protecting and sheltering him as it has in the past, the natural world injures him punishingly as he runs away. His mode of transportation fails him, too, and his canoe sinks “from holes along its keel” (268). This is the point in the novel where Cramer's life hits the proverbial rock bottom because “with every stroke he only drove her [his canoe] farther down into the water. He stopped, midstream, and sat there, sinking” (268). Indeed, these events—being flagellated by nature and sinking in the river—signal Cramer's loss of innocence, the innocence attributed to the natural child. Sidney Dobrin associates this loss of

innocence with loss of the child's connection to nature stating that the child's nature association or "greenness has also been understood to provide a connection to nature that is lost as one loses innocence and gains experience. Loss of youth and innocence distances one from nature and environment, a trope profoundly evident throughout children's literatures" ("Through Green Eyes" 273). Although in his early twenties and physically no longer a child, Cramer's confident ability to negotiate the natural world (unlike his social awkwardness) and his relative naiveté as regards the effect of his stalking on Mimi and Jay suggests he functions closer to a state of greenness than many his age. His ability to get around in the natural world gives him the means to avoid the distressing aspects of his life such as being financially responsible for his mother and stealing for her. As such, this freedom in nature makes it possible for him to sustain a state of relative innocence because, while in this space, it helps him avoid the social spaces within which he struggles to navigate. However, without his boat, his liberty is curtailed and his relationship to nature diminishes as he begins to move toward a state of greater experience.

Indeed, from this point forward, Cramer spends less time hidden in the bushes and more time in the open working to correct the problems his actions have caused. Eventually, rather than finding himself in the outdoor space of the waterways around the Ladybank area—waterways bordered by bushes and greenery—he ends up in the city. In contrast to the familiar green border spaces he inhabits while watching Jay and Mimi, his new border space around the city is described as "dull" with "swampy land, . . . dead trees, [and] . . . endless construction" (349). However, coincident with his transition from belonging to a natural space to belonging to an urban space Cramer also shifts from a solitary state to being a member of a family group. In all, although Cramer's loss of innocence and gain in experience results in separation from the natural world, a space in which he was so comfortable, the future ahead of him holds the prospect of belonging to a family which is of greater value to him.

Fewer secrets than mysteries circulate in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*. The big mystery for Alistair's family is what prompted him to commit suicide, a question that remains unanswered by the end of the novel. Another mystery, one the characters avoid and which the reader can only guess at, is whether Alistair is Tatiana's father. A discussion on the issue of incest follows in the next section. As far as secrets go, however, one of note is the location of Alistair's journals—a secret that tantalizes Squid for years. After numerous attempts as a child to find them Squid finally locates the journals in the novel's present time under the floorboards in

Alistair's room. Reading Alistair's interpretation of the events they experienced together enables her to examine her childhood from a different perspective. For instance, Alistair writes, "*Squid seems restless. She's surly and snappy but I don't know why. She threw a paintbrush at me and called me a freak. Paint in my hair*" (72). As Squid recalls, the incident came about over an argument to do with the intelligence of birds and ended with her calling Alistair a freak and throwing a paintbrush at him. More significant, however, is her memory of the realization she came to after the incident which was "[t]hey were all freaks, every one. But what difference would it make, so long as they stayed together? They *had* to stay together, but Alastair *was* desperate to be gone" (75). Nothing in the narrative at this point suggests that Alistair was planning to commit suicide or that he was planning anything except to leave the island for the mainland at some time. Yet, it is possible that in recognizing they "*had* to stay together" because they were freaks Squid made certain choices to aid that—choices such as the one that led to her getting pregnant.

Squid and Hannah decide to bury the journals to prevent Murray and future lighthouse keepers from finding them. Having never read them, their contents remain a secret from Hannah and from Murray who is unaware of their existence. As such, burying the journals means that their contents will remain a secret to everyone except Squid who appears to have read parts but not all of them. While the act of burying the journals is akin to the act of burying Alistair it also adds another layer of secrets—secrets about the existence of the journals, secrets about their contents, secrets about their burial—to the biggest secret, or rather mystery which is the identity of Squid's daughter's father. Moreover, although his physical body disappeared in the ocean the act of burying Alistair's journals embeds his teenage thoughts and emotions within the island. Ironically, Alistair becomes part of the island he loved yet so desperately wanted to leave.

### **Transgressions**

According to Kimberley Reynolds, "it is now possible to find everything from the most chaste of kisses to explicitly described sex between adolescents in YA fiction" (115). Despite the common occurrence of teenage sex and sexuality in realistic contemporary literature, a search through Canadian young adult literature shows portrayals of incest to be rare. Similarly, scholarly writing on the literary portrayal of incest of the type found in *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* and *The Uninvited* (not sexual abuse) is equally rare. In *Incest and the Literary*

*Imagination*, a collection of scholarly essays focused on incest as a form of trauma, editor Elizabeth Barnes notes that “the incest taboo is relative to time and culture” as well as being a “cultural construction” (1). She furthermore emphasizes that “the narrativizing of incest reveals the ways in which discourses of sex, gender, class, race, desire, intimacy, family, domination, love, and violence inform, and have informed, understandings of personal, political and cultural experience” (3). It seems possible, then, that an ecocritical look at narratives involving transgression of the incest taboo as depicted in *The Uninvited* and *The Lightkeeper’s Daughter* provides a frame through which to view the discourses in literature contributing to the construction of the “cultural experience” of the young adult and by extension how these experiences relate to experiences of the natural world. Of concern in looking at incest narratives, however, is “the presumption of normative kinship relations that incest is said to transgress” (Barnes 9). Likewise, nature, too, can have normative qualities. As Bruce Braun argues, the view of nature as universal . . . lends itself to the naturalization of social relations: if humans are like any other animal, then human relations can be seen to be as fixed and timeless as natural processes (a position that feminists have so clearly shown authorizes forms of domination based on biology). To say an aspect of human social relations is “natural” (i.e., patriarchy) is to say that it is pointless to try to change it. (12)

In other words, the normativizing of social practices such as produced the incest prohibition and that influence how humans treat nature are the product of cultural discourses. As such, an examination of these qualities in young adult literature shows how the adolescent characters respond to these discourses and the agency they bring to their response.

In *The Uninvited*, three young adults converge in a rural Canadian locale as strangers only to discover their biological relationship through their father. Mimi and Jay learn of their sibling relationship within a few hours of meeting. Before that, however, their sexual attraction is strong, particularly that of Mimi for Jay. The following excerpt comes from a point in the narrative when Mimi and Jay have known each other for several weeks: “It was confusing, when your heart wasn’t quite sure where it wanted to be. Sometimes when she was alone with him [Jay], her heart was in her throat. She had the feeling he felt the same way about her. She was glad that Iris was in his life. And hers, too, for that matter” (251). Although neither of them act on their attraction, Mimi is grateful that Jay has a girlfriend and that the two of them (Mimi and

Iris) get along so well. It appears, then, that a social code between young adults—one where an existing boyfriend-girlfriend relationship takes precedence over an individual's desire—prevents Mimi from pursuing her attraction to Jay. Indeed, Iris' involvement with Jay appears to be the prohibitive factor not the incest taboo.

The attraction between the siblings is mutual although neither expresses or shows it to the other. Particularly significant is how they respond to their feelings even though they believe them to be inappropriate. For instance, after Mimi and Jay learn they have the same father we are told: "They sat for long moments at the table not quite able to look straight at each other. Embarrassed—at least he was. He had been entertaining thoughts about her, for Christ's sake! Thoughts that now made him cringe, but only sort of. And that made it worse" (56-7). In this example, Jay is bothered by his attraction to Mimi but not as repulsed by it as he expects. Both his response and Mimi's emphasize the relevance of Barnes' observation about the cultural constructedness of the incest taboo because neither fully extinguishes or berates him- or herself for their response to each other. Even after they have spent significant time together living with the knowledge they are siblings, Mimi continues to have feelings of attraction to Jay. At one point, she seems almost willing to entertain the idea of transgressing any social prohibitions, thinking to herself, "she might fall in love with him, anyway, despite all the taboos about that kind of thing" (117). Although both Mimi and Jay apparently subscribe to the idea that incest would be wrong, it does not diminish their feelings of attraction nor does it make them feel disgusted. In fact, Jay's comment that his thoughts "made him cringe, but only sort of" and Mimi's willingness to overlook the taboo suggest that very little compels them not to act on their feelings.

In contrast, although Cramer knows he and Jay are brothers, he does not learn that he and Mimi are also related until the end of the novel. His initial response to her is physical and somewhat primitive. For instance, sitting in his canoe hidden from Mimi's view but able to spy on her Cramer's breathing is described as being "ragged with excitement" (47). Later, when he believes Mimi will be staying at the cottage for a period, the thought makes the "blood buzz in his veins" (55). Contributing to the primitive quality of Cramer's response is the idea that he can "almost—almost—smell her" (193). Although similarly physical, Mimi's response to Cramer once they actually meet is somewhat more cerebral. For instance, in the computer repair shop while the two of them talk, Cramer turns away and she sees that the "cloth with which he had

been cleaning his hands now hung from his back pocket, drawing attention to his butt. *I have been in the wilderness too long*, thought Mimi” (210). During that encounter, while watching him speak, Mimi’s attention is drawn to his lips. She tells herself, “touching his lips would not be a good idea. There was something disturbing about him. Not bad disturbing” (209). Again, in that same conversation she thinks to herself, “I’ll continue to ogle your delicious arms, thought Mimi, but decided that she should at least try to seem more interested in his research” (210). Compared to Mimi’s reaction Cramer’s manifests as simple lust occasioned by the glimpses he gets of her from his hiding spots in the bushes and trees, which is in keeping with the stalker persona Wynne-Jones cultivates. Mimi’s response, on the other hand, presents her as somewhat more sophisticated and experienced because of the introspection she brings to her thoughts and responses to Cramer.

Of particular significance from an ecocritical point of view is Mimi’s reference to having “been in the wilderness too long.” On one hand, this observation suggests the wilderness as a place of sexual deprivation. However, despite its ironic tone, the comment more plausibly describes Cramer’s situation. For a good part of the novel, Cramer spends his time looking from his hiding spots in nature into the domesticated social spaces Mimi and Jay inhabit. Often his fantasies involve him leaving his hiding spot and entering Mimi’s social sphere as her lover such as in this example: “He wanted so much to walk over to her now and take her in his arms. . . . He would hold her, and she would realize that he meant her no harm, that he would look after her, that she was loved” (192-3). As with the following excerpt, this shows Cramer’s strong desire to move out of nature and into Mimi’s cultural space with a new identity as her socially sophisticated lover:

From a tree he watched Mimi sitting by the snye in white jeans and a peach-colored halter top, her hair tied up in a rose-colored scarf. . . .

How he would have liked to sit there beside her. Not talking—not doing anything. Not so much as touching her. He had never felt like that before. Someone he just wanted to be with.

He would take her out in Bunny [his canoe]. He could imagine her leaning back against the thwart—except he’d take pillows along for her to lean on. She could drag her fingers in the water, like in some old movie or like that. They would have a picnic—he

knew just where. He'd buy wine. He'd ask her to choose. She could teach him about things like that: wine and fancy stuff and conversation. (262)

While these excerpts on their own suggest Cramer's filial attraction to Mimi, the surrounding narrative of his spying and physical responses to Mimi confirms the overall sexual nature of his fantasies as evidenced by his rapid breathing and predatory watchfulness. Yet the romantic pastoralism of Cramer's fantasy of Mimi in his canoe also serves to deny this primitiveness. Mimi, on the other hand, despite her physical attraction to Cramer, responds to him on a different level. When Jay wants to report him to the police, Mimi argues for a different strategy of dealing with the problem. She struggles to justify why she thinks Cramer is a good person despite the evidence against him and the only way she is able to articulate this is to base it on her instincts:

Jay just looked exasperated. "So we're back to *feelings*. Is that all you've got?"

Mimi didn't want to admit it, but feelings were exactly what she had. And she might as well express them. "Cramer Lee is just this boy—"

...

"Okay, he's this *guy*. But he's like a boy. He's not ironic. He's not wily or crafty. He's shy—kind of a bumbler—but he's really sweet."

...

"No," said Mimi, throwing up her hands. "I mean yes, he's okay, but that is totally *not* what I'm saying. There is something about him that is . . . I don't know. I keep feeling there's something there—"

...

". . . Well, there is something about him. And *seriously*, I am not talking about his bod. Give me credit, okay? There is just this magnetic thing . . ."

Jay was staring at the floor . . . Then he looked at her.

"Are you interested in him?"

Mimi sighed. "I don't think so." (285-6)

As it turns out, Mimi's assessment of Cramer is correct; however, the shift from being physically drawn to him to having this compassionate response contributes to the possibility that she may have confused the intuitive recognition of her brother—and therefore feelings of affection and protection—with sexual attraction. This in turn raises the question of the relationship between

these events and what might be construed as the siblings' instinctive attraction toward one another in light of the natural space in which these events take place. Although they are young adults, the trope of the innocent child-as-close-to-nature influences the reading of the siblings' responses to each other. It proposes the possibility that natural spaces encourage or become the site of natural responses and that the naturalness of one human's response to another is "true" and therefore supersedes any culturally imposed prohibitions. On the other hand, the fact that their sexual attractions to each other remain unconsummated reinforces the incest prohibition as natural. Either way, the unlikely circumstances of three strangers who are actually siblings converging in this one natural space proposes interesting possibilities for the environment as a magnetic force, at least as far as anything is possible in nature. Nevertheless, this is a problematic assessment to make because the presumption of an innate response raises the question of whether or not this becomes an essentializing view of the effect of nature on humans. Can we really attribute any sense of "naturalness" to how the young adult responds and whether, as young adults, this positions them with a more natural and less socially conditioned response to circumstances in their lives?

In Iain Lawrence's *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, the fact that Squid's daughter, Tatiana, might be the product of sibling incest is alluded to rather than specifically articulated. Lawrence provides a number of hints about Tatiana's parentage. For instance, her hair is "as dark as Alistair's. If it weren't combed and bound [in pigtailed] . . . it would probably fly apart in the same way, into a clown's mad tangles" (136). In addition, the way she attracts animals compares to the way Alistair attracted them as a child. For instance, hermit crabs in a tidal pool leave their shells to climb on to Tatiana's hands which from Hannah's perspective is "almost like magic. It's something that Alastair might have done" (141). Further evidence accumulates in the inconsistencies and embellishments in Squid's story about Erik's arrival on the island—Erik being the kayaker who came to the island one day and apparently seduced and impregnated the thirteen-year-old Squid. The following excerpt is Hannah's recollection of Squid's account of what happened:

"He had a beard and long hair," said Squid. "He looked like a Viking." He paddled a boat that rose up at the bow, in a curve like the neck of a swan. He made a fire in a scraped-out pit in the sand, and he lay on his back, reading poems by Keats. This is what Squid told them had happened.



“He read me a poem,” she said. “It was beautiful, like it was just for me. He read me a poem, and he told me how pretty I was.”

He had a tent with flags on the poles. He read her a poem and then . . .

Hannah doesn’t want to think of this. (107)

The curved prow, the flag-tipped tent poles, and the idea that Erik looks like a Viking seem exotic, unlikely, and therefore fictitious. Further evidence of the unreliability of Squid’s version of events takes place in a conversation with Hannah:

Hannah says, “What happened to Erik?”

“Who?” asks Squid.

“Erik,” she says. “Erik with a k.”

Squid frowns. “Huh?”

Hannah picks up the handset. She whispers across it. “Tatiana’s father.”

“Ohhhh!” says Squid, wide eyed. “Well, he died, Mom.”

. . .

“Yeah, he died,” says Squid.

“What happened?”

. . .

“I don’t know really. I’m just sure that he’s dead. I think I saw it in the paper.”

“Really?”

. . .

“I did something incredibly stupid one night, and a million times I’ve wished I hadn’t done it.”

. . .

“Oh, you don’t understand. You don’t know what happened that night.”

“Then tell me,” says Hannah.

“I *should*.” Squid looks up, over her shoulder. “I should tell you what really went on.”

There’s a fire in her eyes, but Hannah feels only a coldness inside. It’s welling up, spreading through her stomach to her spine. Let it go, she tells herself; you don’t want to know what *really went on*. Her hands start to tremble. The coldness reaches her fingers.

(178-80)

The vague quality of Squid's response suggests it includes some fabricated components. Moreover, the concreteness of her final words "I should tell you what really went on" puts an almost threatening tone to her response which in combination with Hannah's feeling of coldness—the word "coldness" repeated twice—emphasizes the likelihood of bad news withheld. Indeed, the one truthful part could be in Squid's assertion that Tatiana's "father" is dead, which would be correct if indeed Alistair is Tatiana's father.

More evidence pointing to Tatiana's parentage comes from Alistair's diary in which he writes:

*Thank God for Squid. It would be HELL here if it wasn't for Squid. I'm afraid to tell her that I think I'm falling in love.*

...

*I think she's maybe in love with me too, but doesn't want me to know it, and that's why she acts mean. I think she would like us to go away together. (214)*

After reading this part of his journal, Squid's response is not one of revulsion or dismay such as one might expect from a person learning about a sibling's love expressed in a way suggestive of romantic rather than brotherly love: "She shakes her head. 'That's *it*?' she asks herself. '*That's* the terrible thing?'" (214). Indeed, her reaction affirms the accuracy of Alistair's observation that she might love him back. This entry in Alistair's journal causes Squid to remember her encounter with Alistair after her tryst with Erik. Seeing his distress at the possibility she might leave the island to go off with Erik, Squid changes her approach: "'Oh, Alastair,' she said again, but tenderly now. 'I'd do *anything* for you. I'd do anything to make you happy.' She hugged him with all her strength. 'Anything'" (218). Italicization and repetition of the word "anything," combined with the word "tenderly" and her strong hug, put forward the idea that he may have taken her up on her offer of "anything," particularly in light of his journal confession that he was in love with her.

Of all the things that could happen on a remote island, rarely visited by other people except for routine deliveries and equipment repairs, Squid gets pregnant at thirteen years of age. According to Hannah, Murray was "obsessed with crime in the city" such as "burglaries" and "muggings" (93) but she makes no mention of crimes that are sexual in nature. Perhaps this is why neither parent seems particularly upset about their daughter's apparent violation. Their

attitude may reflect their general approach to parenting, which is relatively hands-off (and possibly naïve), an approach made easier by the fact that they are isolated from the larger corrupt world Murray fears. His general parenting philosophy is that “[t]he best thing you can do for a child is, really, nothing at all” (36). He also goes to great lengths to ensure the children’s education; however, as Hannah observes, he avoids the topic of sexual reproduction:

They [the Coast Guard boats] came loaded with Murray’s books, bringing boxes of books as they never had before. There were books on herbs and kangaroos and dinosaurs, on ancient Greece and superstitions. There were travel books from around the world, and even one on photography, though no one owned a camera. Only one thing was missing: any mention of sex. (127)

The absence of sex education raises the possibility that the children are not aware of the incest prohibition. Certainly, Squid attempts to abort the foetus using herbs and mushrooms she collects, little more is said of this but a straightforward reading of her actions suggests it was motivated by concern about concealing her pregnancy rather than concern about parentage.

Referring to research on sexuality in Renaissance drama, Karoline Szatek proposes that “sanctioned ideologies regarding human sexuality become intersected with alternative ones in the shaded space of the pastoral borderland, providing an area where authors can point out other, perhaps more appropriate, views on female sexuality, explore notions of cross-dressing, and examine the realm of alternative sexual relationships” (qtd. in Gifford 67). While this may be relevant to older works of literature, the idea that authors might use borderland pastoral spaces to explore alternative sexualities has interesting connotations for the portrayal of incestuous sibling relationships. In *The Uninvited*, from Mimi’s perspective, the cottage lies in such a borderland space. Looking from a window in the cottage, she observes, “[a] rough meadow rose to a low hill. . . . A hundred yards beyond it, there was an impenetrable wall of conifer green, as if that was the end of the magic vale and the beginning of the proverbial deep, dark forest” (Wynne-Jones 41). Located in this liminal space not far from the “deep, dark forest,” Mimi can live alone with her brother and be sexually attracted to him, but choose not to act on her desire. In contrast, Cramer, located within the borderland of the bushes, experiences an intense and dark kind of attraction. These qualities come from the portrayal of where he sits (invisible and quiet) and the secretiveness of his stalking. At times, his attraction to Mimi seems dangerous. Moreover, he

lacks the knowledge Mimi and Jay have of their sibling relationship. Wynne-Jones sets up a heteronormative triangle of attraction yet the attractions are never acted upon, which suggests, in light of Szatek's observation that while Wynne-Jones might be exploring alternative sexualities, he confirms the norm.

The same is harder to say of *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* because the possibility of incest is only alluded to. Certainly, Squid and Alistair "play doctor," as it were, when they are "playing barnacles" (109):

They were upside down. Alastair had his head in an otter den; Squid had hers in another. They were holding themselves on their elbows less than a yard apart. Squid's dress had fallen around her, and her stomach was bare—and her chest—so smooth and pale. Her legs kicked from white panties, her red shoes flailing. Alastair's feet groped like tentacles, like stalks of blue in his overalls.

Suddenly, from the ground, burst another chorus of muffled giggles. Then Alastair's foot touched Squid's, and she trapped it between her ankles.

Hannah. . . . said, "What are you doing? What on earth are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Squid, in her cheery voice, chirpy as a songbird. "We were playing barnacles."

"Well, stop it," said Hannah. . . .

Alastair kept rubbing his ear. "We were only playing," he said.

Squid grinned. "He was trying to put his penis in my house."

. . .

"We were only playing," said Alastair again (108-9).

While Hannah is upset at their behaviour, the narrative is unspecific as to whether she conveys to them the incest prohibition. The children may have left this incident knowing they had done something wrong but not knowing what it was because Hannah does not explain her displeasure. Of note in this scene is the children's embodied experience of the natural world—not only do they place their heads and upper bodies right inside the otters' dens, their imaginary play re-enacts animal reproduction. Children's play frequently involves impersonating animals such as lions, dogs, dinosaurs, or gorillas; however, it is rare to see the same in the play of older children. Instead, older children are more likely to take on the roles of the adults in their social world and

play at being teachers, or doctors, or figures of authority. Lawrence proposes that Squid and Alistair participate in a type of play informed by their social world, which is comprised of their family of four, and the natural world of animals and sea life inhabiting the island. This in turn puts forward the possibility in this natural context, one limited by the number of people and knowledge of social taboos, that incest may be a natural response to the situation in which Squid and Alistair find themselves the night of Tatiana's conception.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter draws on scholarly research from within ecocriticism and literary criticism to facilitate a discussion of the transgressions and secrets in the three primary novels. The analysis also endeavours to locate points of intersection between these themes and the literary portrayal of the environment in light of the young adult's relationship to the natural world. The absence of a body of scholarly material makes this analysis challenging; however, several noteworthy qualities stand out.

In *Mistik Lake*, a number of secrets contribute to the drama of the novel. The locations in which they are kept or revealed vary, although the majority take place near Mistik Lake. For instance, Odella and Janelle conceal their mother's drinking by hiding her empties in the bushes. Gloria reveals her homosexuality to Sally, and Odella learns Gerald Isfeld is her father while at the cabin overlooking Mistik Lake. Moreover, Gloria recognizes that she is homosexual while camping in a tent on the edge of Mistik Lake without the fanfare of "coming out of the closet." Rather her experience occurs in a natural place removed from society and its heteronormative expectations.

In general, the young adults in these novels experience sexual attraction and partake in sexual activities by choice. Social prohibitions appear to influence their conduct minimally. Rather their actions and behaviours, which start as instinctive physical responses, conclude with freely made choices. Growing up in the 40s and 50s, Gloria must be circumspect, but social prohibitions do not prevent her from following her natural inclinations throughout her adult life relatively guilt-free. Again, although the narrative implies Alistair and Squid's incestuous encounter, it also suggests it was consensual. The three siblings in *The Uninvited*, most noticeably Mimi, appear to subscribe to a code less influenced by the incest taboo and more influenced by respecting another person's prior claim to affection such as Iris' for Jay.

Furthermore, the natural spaces in which these encounters and decisions take place link with the natural-seeming sexual responses and courses of action chosen by the young adults. To a certain degree, non-romantic affection and loyalty to a sibling seem to guide these young people's choices.

When it comes to secrets, the characters in the three novels bring an array of responses. Cramer, the holder and creator of many secrets in *The Uninvited*, epitomizes some of the binary juxtapositions common to pastoralism. As he loses innocence and gains experience (common pastoral tropes associated with the child figure in literature), he becomes distant from nature to the point that the natural spaces that had been like home to him become foreign and punishing spaces. For a while, his actions and responses correspond to the nature side of the nature-culture dualism and correspondingly to the innocence side of the innocence-experience dualism. However, coincident with his desire for Mimi and his fantasies of being part of the cultural space she and Jay inhabit Cramer experiences a subsequent loss of innocence that in part manifests as a rebirth, but which ultimately aligns him with the culture and experience side of these dualisms. Moreover, the rural settings of the novels become the spaces in which secrets develop or emerge such as the parentage of Sally's unborn child, Gloria's lesbianism, and even the likelihood Alistair is Tatiana's father. Certainly, as a literary device, these settings reduce the encumbrances that come with a larger population, the related scrutiny and appraisal found in urban spaces, and propose instead an open environment in which confessions and discoveries can take place without judgement. Making an assessment such as this, however, is problematic because it proposes nature as a space within which unique and defined human experiences take place. Of course, natural spaces are much more than this. Indeed, as Richard Kerridge explains, "ecocritics [set out] to unmask the dependency between different niches in cultural ecosystems, so that nature will not be seen only as the space of leisure where we entertain Romantic feelings that we must leave behind when we return to work" ("Environmentalism and Ecocriticism" 541). While these novels do not treat nature solely as a space of leisure, it nevertheless functions as a space separate and protected from the realities and stress of work and school found in culture.

The natural spaces also serve to affirm the young adult's agency as demonstrated by the choices they make independent of social prohibitions. For example, Odella decides to pollute the woods rather than lose the chance to spend the summer at the lake and Squid lets Alistair love her, presumably, out of affection for him. Indeed, even though Wynne-Jones concludes with a

hetero-normative non-incestuous ending, which appears to affirm these two social codes, the young adults' choice of how to proceed is empowered because they make decisions on their own.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

### Introduction

This research project undertook to examine, through the lens of environmental literary criticism, three contemporary Canadian realistic young adult novels: *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* by Iain Lawrence, *Mistik Lake* by Martha Brooks, and *The Uninvited* by Tim Wynne-Jones. The challenge of bringing ecocriticism to these texts is manifold not just because of the dearth of scholarly criticism relevant to children's material (particularly young adult material) and to the Canadian context but because ecocriticism still lacks a unifying theoretical framework. Moreover, its interdisciplinary expectations—merging the science of ecology with literary analysis—are occasionally difficult to uphold when brought to the analysis of fiction. This is particularly significant in the case of literary analyses of realistic fiction for young adults because, as opposed to the didactic characteristics evident in some children's literature, the young adult genre purports to entertain and delight its readers. It does not necessarily aim to teach a moral lesson (young adult readers are too sophisticated to accept this kind of directness), nor does it require to replicate the natural world beyond the level necessary to achieve the sense of a realistic setting regardless of how detailed or vague that description may be.

For these reasons, I confined my research to the realm of literary criticism and undertook a close reading of the novels with a focus on literary tropes and patterns rather than commenting on them for the absence or presence of environmentalist agendas or content. To that end, I employed a tripartite approach with the goal of triangulating my findings. First, I scoured the texts for repeating patterns of relationships in the literary portrayal of the natural world. I found many, but for reasons of scope I focused on the various strategies brought by the authors to develop the natural setting in which the stories take place. Three aspects stood out for me: one was the use of atmospheric conditions to create mood and establish the qualities of a character's personality, another was the portrayal of the various characters' nature associations and third was the authenticity of representation in the descriptions of the natural world. Next, I contrasted the texts for the use of two literary conventions commonly found in depictions of pastoral spaces: tropes of retreat and return and treatment of rural and urban spaces. I then identified several outstanding qualities of the texts noteworthy for their effect on the narrative and the fact that, on the surface, their presence in the novels appeared unrelated to the depictions of the natural world.



While this may seem like an obtuse strategy I thought it was important to trouble my research somewhat by striking out along an unconventional path—rather than knowing where it would end up, I wanted to discover where this portion of my analysis would take me—in the hopes of discovering something unusual. As such, I settled on the non-normative sexual content (incest and lesbianism) and on the various secrets playing out in the narratives.

Readers of this thesis will also note the pairings of binary oppositions used as topics for my analysis. This can be a problematic approach because as Roderick McGillis explains “[w]e find it difficult not to privilege one of the two opposites” (149) and it proposes only one of two ways of considering an idea. Moreover, “binary thinking seems to be the common principle in all human thought” (McGillis 148) and it can be difficult to avoid. The binaries I chose allowed me to put a meaningful structure to my overall analysis; however, the tripartite strategy I employed and my focus on avoiding a complacent reading also helped de-emphasize these binaries thereby bringing greater dimension to my interpretation. In all, my goal in employing the approach of triangulation was to identify ruptures, links, and intersections among the literary portrayal of the natural world, the young adult characters, and events taking place in the novels as the means of addressing my five research questions.

At all times, despite the difficulty, I endeavoured to adhere to Robert Kern’s advice. He recommends that to avoid a complacent reading one must read “against the grain” (267) and “read in such a way as to amplify the reality of the environment in or of a text, even if in doing so we resist the tendency of the text itself (or of our own conditioning as readers)” (“Ecocriticism” 260). Although the natural world was an identifiable and significant part of all three texts, employing this strategy proved a challenging task. This was especially so in my close reading of *Mistik Lake* where the natural world is imbricated within the narrative. Brooks frequently creates an ambiance of vastness by referring to the cosmos (the sky, the stars, and the moon) and by drawing on the sensuous to create an aesthetic of sounds, tactility, and smells. The cumulative effect of her description makes it difficult to tease out the unique qualities. Although she also describes the landscape for its visual appeal, Brooks’ style is very different from Lawrence’s and Wynne-Jones’ who depict the natural world for visual effect with nature as object rather than as a whole-body experience.

I also approached my analysis from the perspective that our views of nature are culturally constructed. In other words, notwithstanding the real existence of the extratextual world, nature

is a social construct created through language and the cultural artefacts of our time (which includes literature) and these, in turn, inform our cultural identities and attitudes.

### **Summary of Findings**

Brooks, Lawrence, and Wynne-Jones portray the natural world realistically and with careful attention to detail. Authentic three-dimensional portrayals of the natural world round out the narratives and although conveyed subtly, the landscape is always present. Likewise, precise naming of species and clustering of flora and fauna in their natural ecosystems bring a regional specificity to the novels, which as Buell notes, “bend” the world of the novel toward the “extratextual” (*Future* 33) or real environment beyond the text. Despite these careful renderings, the natural world predominately functions as a literary device. Atmospheric conditions, for instance, serve to boost the emotional intensity of a scene or contribute to the rounding out of a character’s personality. The weather does not cause human behaviour; however, it frequently presages the human condition and significant events (wet when events are sad, stormy during a cataclysmic event, sunny otherwise). In general, the weather serves to punctuate the narrative.

The relationship between the young adult and the natural world portrayed in the three novels cannot be generalised. For instance, Mimi (*The Uninvited*) participates in nature the least and views it through the filters of literature and technology. Yet of all the characters, she is the most consciously aware of it. Cramer, in contrast, has a strong nature association but his attention is always focused away from nature and toward the social world to which he wishes to belong. Constructions of the adolescent-nature relationship rely on representations of nature conveyed through a variety of characteristics including playground, science lab, commuter route, and fairy-tale space. At times, portrayals of the natural world evoke a sense of homecoming and belonging, and the feeling of groundedness. At other times, the narrative orients the reader in the subject position looking at nature as object.

In keeping with literary pastoral conventions, young characters such as Squid’s daughter, Tatiana (*The Lightkeeper’s Daughter*), are depicted as close and preternaturally connected to nature; however, atypical of pastoralism the twenty-year-old character of Cramer (*The Uninvited*) also demonstrates strong nature ties but these ties evolve and change throughout the novel. Indeed, across the three novels the young adult’s relationship to the natural world varies. Rather than exhibiting pastoral notions of the child-as-innocent the young adult is proposed as

having an ambiguous relationship to the natural world—some characters are closer to nature, some are more removed—and the quality of these young adult-nature relationships can shift. Insufficient evidence is available to support the generalization that with age and experience comes distance from nature; however, each character's relationship is unique and runs the gamut from intuitive to pragmatic to imaginative to embedded to technologically mediated to having a scientific orientation. Indeed, the young adult's relationship to nature is individual and contingent. Of note is the enabling role literature and technology play in facilitating the relationship between the young adult and the natural world. Moreover, knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, appears to put a wedge between innocence and experience particularly when the child knows more than the adult does.

Experiences with nature are mediated through the social apparatuses of today's youth such as video cameras and recording devices but also through fiction, science, and the body. The resultant range of responses—some whimsical, some pragmatic, and some fleeting—suggest the young adult has little to no effect on the natural world. Other than experiencing nature by being in it, the adolescent characters do not endeavour to change it in a significant way although the McCrae children (*The Lightkeeper's Daughter*) under their father's direction clear away seasonal debris and dig up dandelions, and Odella (*Mistik Lake*) leaves bags of empty liquor bottles in the woods. In the end, the question of whether or not literature of this genre presents the reader with characters to identify with who might influence their green subjectivity in a positive way remains unanswered.

These novels uphold the literary conventions of the pastoral retreat and return, but they also lightly subvert them. For instance, the place of retreat does not require distance to achieve effect. It can be a memory of a natural space, a pit stop, or a place from which to escape. Although in general the natural world is depicted more positively, urban and rural spaces garner both positive and negative qualities. Moreover, while the rural space provides the location within which closure or clarification occurs, it neither facilitates nor prompts these resolutions. As such, the natural world does not obtain privileged status nor is it reified with the ideas of catharsis or closure. This respectful and realistic treatment of the environment, rather than drawing attention to it, serves to bring it within the purview of the larger social world. Nature does not stand out or garner attention to a significant degree. This literary treatment shows fiction mirroring real life and the reality of human experiences in outdoor spaces, yet culture stands in the foreground

while nature remains in the background. Furthermore, anthropocentric attitudes toward the natural world and the human-nature relationship remain unchallenged by these texts leaving young adult readers to determine how they choose to interpret the mosaic of indeterminate qualities accorded nature and culture.

Many of the secrets made, kept, or revealed occur in the natural spaces of these novels. However, after the scrutiny of close reading, the qualities or performance of the secrets in the novels were of little significance in establishing correspondences to the use or portrayal of the natural world. On the other hand, natural spaces appear to provide an open forum free from the social pressures of conformity and judgement, thereby suggesting a possible, albeit tenuous, relationship between natural spaces and the young adult's natural (unmediated by social prohibition) sexual responses. Although *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* and *The Uninvited* broach the idea, insufficient evidence exists to support the premise of the liminal space as a place to experiment with socially illicit desire. Nevertheless, the characters make their own decisions about how they respond to the sexual opportunities they encounter. Agency such as this proposes a corresponding willingness to challenge social norms and to advocate for important issues; however, the novels provide little to go on in terms of modelling a green subjectivity to the reader.

### **Contribution to Existing Scholarship**

Very little scholarly work has been undertaken on the young adult strata of Canadian realistic literature, particularly in the area of green studies. Moreover, to my knowledge, this is the first time ecocriticism has been brought to the segment of children's literature categorizable as contemporary, Canadian, young adult realism. Other than *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, which was included in a discourse analysis (Harrison) from within the field of human geography (marginally related to ecocriticism), this is the first time *Mistik Lake*, *The Lightkeeper's Daughter*, and *The Uninvited* have been subjected to environmental literary criticism in a thesis or dissertation. Indeed, the young adult and Canadian focus makes this research thesis unique, as very little scholarly writing exists in this area as well. My thesis contributes to the field of Canadian literature, children's literature, and ecocritical scholarship and will be useful not only to researchers scaffolding on ecocriticism in these areas but also to educators looking to offer

students different ways of considering fiction and hoping to inspire youth to greater environmental consciousness.

Certainly, to look at the natural world in ways that challenge and confront the dominant paradigm of nature versus culture requires reading nature from a different perspective. As Don McKay writes, to do so “brings the wild area into the purview of knowledge and makes it—perhaps momentarily, perhaps permanently—a category of mind. . . . Place becomes place by acquiring real or imagined borders and suffering removal from anonymity” (17-18). In this regard, this thesis has been successful because the natural world appearing in the backgrounds of these novels has been removed from anonymity by appearing on the pages of this thesis.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This research thesis focusses on a discrete area of Canadian young adult realism. It fills a small gap in the much larger gap of scholarly materials pertaining to Canadian children’s literature in general, ecocritical analyses of children’s literature, and more specifically ecocriticism of young adult literature. While I undertook to perform a thorough analysis the parameters of this thesis did not allow for the depth and breadth of comparison possible or that I would have liked. Generalisations to the larger category of Canadian young adult literature based on findings from three novels lacks substantiation; however, it is my hope that future researchers will build upon my findings and my methodological structure, thereby expanding the body of ecocritical work pertinent to Canadian literature for young adults and beginning to develop a repeatable methodological structure.

Research in Canadian ecocriticism and ecocriticism in general would be well served by examining environmentalist novels such as Jennifer Cowan’s *Earth Girl* and Dede Crane’s *Poster Boy*. I had planned to include these two books in my research but later decided to focus on contemporary realism rather than diluting it with the addition of environmentalist fiction that also did not quite meet my text selection criteria. Future scholarship would also benefit from comparative analyses employing historical perspectives and a larger selection of literature to distinguish patterns of change in portrayals of the natural world. The inclusion of research drawing from other materials such as media reports to identify the possible cultural influences on an author’s perception of the environment (one similar to Bruce Braun’s analysis of the social construction of the temperate rainforest) would provide a striking complement to the literary

analyses of the portrayal of nature in his or her works. A comparative ecocritical study of Canadian and American young adult literature would bring insight as well. Certainly, a genre-based approach targeted to science fiction, fantasy, picture books, or fiction by age would provide a valuable matrix through which to consider the Canadian context as would an examination of contemporary themes such as war, pollution, access to fresh water, or representations of nature in youth culture and new media. Research on urban spaces and waterscapes (liquid and solid) should not be overlooked either.

It also occurred to me after my efforts to locate and then apply theories to this research that ecocriticism in general might benefit from a phenomenological reading strategy. I was introduced to such a one by Aidan Chambers in a course he taught at The University of British Columbia in the summer of 2008 called “How Writers and Readers Make Meaning in Children’s and Young Adult Literature: The Journey to Consciousness.” This method, loosely based on reader response theory, encourages the reader (or literary critic) to use the initial reading of a text to capture all first impressions. A green phenomenological approach patterned after Chambers’ reading method would complement a close reading strategy while also providing a more ecocritically conscious analysis. In this way, the critic’s cultural biases become apparent. Moreover, the reader’s or critic’s response to the natural world in the text, although being consciously recorded, would more closely approximate an individual’s response to natural world phenomena, thereby setting up an interpretive framework of juxtaposed reading positions and provoking a rounded and more meaningful analysis of the text, one somewhat in keeping with the political aims of ecocriticism.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

At one point in *The Uninvited Mimi*, the main protagonist, affirms, “her knowledge of flora and fauna came mostly from fiction” (25). I chose this phrase for the title of my thesis because to me it emphasizes the dilemma of today’s youth whose mediated experience of the natural world prohibits or limits how they see it. For there to be a revision in the way we consider the environment, we must choose whether to adhere to environmentalist or anti-ecological practices. Ecocriticism is motivated by the desire to affect environmental change. While it may seem like a contentious claim to those unfamiliar with ecocritical discourses, according to Richard Kerridge, “[t]he starting point for the ecocritic is that there really is an unprecedented global environmental

crisis” (Introduction 5). Accordingly, the “ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to . . . evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (5). In this way, ecocriticism brings a political orientation or motivation to literary analysis. Consequently, one of the aims is to influence attitudes toward how humans view and interact with the non-human world and respond to the environmental crisis. Certainly, social discourses are influential in the weight they bring to bear on the adolescent’s identity formation. Moreover, literature and literary portrayals (among many other cultural artefacts) inform our discursive practices. Yet, when all is said and done “[i]nsight comes from readers delving into their own relations to the texts they read” (McGillis 179). As such, providing alternative critical positions (such as are offered by ecocriticism) through which to consider cultural texts provides other ways of deriving insight about the world we live in and our influence on that world.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> (Wynne-Jones 25)



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