Child of Nature: Wilderness, Myth, and Childhood in Middle-Grade Fantasy

by

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Abstract

Childhood forms the basis for a lifetime of ecological interaction. Due to many contemporary ecological challenges, including the threat of climate change, children today grow up with complex relationships to the environment. However, there remains relatively little scholarship on recent novels for preteens dealing with ecological themes. This thesis aims to further scholarship on children's literature by applying an ecocritical lens to three representative middle-grade fantasy series published in the first decade of the twenty-first century: Patrick Carman's *The Land of Elyon* series (2005-2008), Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur* series (2005-2008), and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005-2009). These texts, all marketed to children aged approximately 9-12, were all international bestsellers, and all prominently feature depictions of environmentalist awakenings in their protagonists. How does middle-grade fantasy use magic and mythology to contextualize ecological conflict for children? What is the role of the child in this conflict? Finally, how do these texts construct childhood in relation to nature? I argue that texts for and about the liminal age between child and teenager are uniquely situated to explore the simultaneous elusiveness and necessity of human bonds with non-human beings. All three texts appeal to an assumed affinity between child and wild, drawing on children's experiences of alienation with the adult world to build sympathy between children as a class and the marginalized figures—animals, plants, and nature spirits—that inhabit the natural world. The mythological and speculative elements in these novels dramatize and foreground environmental agency, and orient child readers towards recognizing and defending the "real magic" of the ecosystems around them, with the aim of educating children into ecological awareness. These novels use fantastical elements to portray children as natural allies of the environment, and specifically this affinity for nature places children at the centre of ecological crises.

To Tristan, and to the Mill Creek Ravine.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.……………………………………………………………………………………1

Chapter 1: "When you're a child": Wilderness Narratives in Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide*…………………………………………………………………………….……12

"Only" A Child: Children in the Margins of *The Dark Hills Divide*…………………….17

Beyond the Wall: Animals and Social Outsiders in *The Dark Hills Divide*……………..21

Only One Chance: Wilderness Ideology in *The Dark Hills Divide*……………………...28

Chapter 2: "Infused with your mother's love": The Ecofeminist Fantasy of Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur*……………………………………………………………………………………38

Nourishing all that Accepts its Flow: Magic as Emotional Connection In *Little Fur*…...43

It Wished to be Only Itself: Disconnection as the Root of Cruelty……………………...48

An Answering Echo: Little Fur as Child-Heroine and Children as Nature-Heroes……..54

Healing Humanness: *Little Fur*'s Hope for Ecological Awakening……………………..60

Chapter 3: "Nostalgic for something I'd never known": The Discourses of Pollution and Pastoral in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson*…………………………………………………………...63

Pillaging Pan's Kingdom: Human Responsibility in a Polluted World………………….67

Anywhere and Nowhere: The Pastoral Ideal as Elegy and Utopia………………………74

I'm Not Hercules: Community-building as Heroic Environmental Action……………...79

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………………….87

Works Cited…………………………………………………………………………………...91

Introduction

Perhaps the most well-known example in Anglophone children's literature of children ageing out of their ability to access magical realms and wondrous adventures is C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56). In Lewis's classic children's novels, his English schoolchildren protagonists are called to adventure in Narnia, a magical realm of noble knights, evil witches, talking animals, and mythological creatures. But the day always comes when a child's visit to Narnia will be their last. At the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Aslan, Lewis's Christ-like Lion, tells the "despairing" Edmund and Lucy they will no longer be summoned to return to Narnia: "You are too old, children . . . and you must begin to come close to your own world now" (247). *The Last Battle* blames Susan's inability to return to Narnia with her cousins and siblings on her desire for adulthood and its trappings. According to Jill, Susan is "interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up" (Lewis 154). On the one hand, leaving Narnia is not supposed to be a terrible thing; Lewis describes the Pevensie children's first glimpse of England after an adventure in Narnia as "a little flat and dreary for a moment after all they had been through, but also, unexpectedly, nice in its own way, what with the familiar railway smell and the English sky and the summer term before them" (*Prince Caspian* 223). On the other hand, it is debatable whether this description would truly capture any child's imagination with enthusiasm for the smell of a railway, particularly in contrast to the intensity of sensory experiences in Narnia. Lewis states that even simple grapes are better in Narnia: "whatever hothouses your people may have, you have never tasted such grapes. Really good grapes, firm and tight on the outside, but bursting into cool sweetness when you put them into your mouth" (159).

Whether it is to sympathize with children's experiences of disconnection from the adult world or to express an adulthood nostalgia for an idealized childhood that now seems lost to time, childhood in children's books is frequently diametrically opposed to adulthood. In fact, "children's literature tends to take adulthood as the norm against which children are constructed as deviant" (Reynolds 113). Because of how intricately the child has been tied to nature, at least in the "Anglo-American" tradition (19), there is a marked tendency in children's literature to involve severing bonds with animals or other aspects of the "natural" world in order to leave behind the magic of childhood. Leaving Narnia, for example, means leaving behind a world in which animals can talk. This tendency creates a dichotomy with children and nature on one side, and adults on the other, implying that adulthood is incompatible with the kind of magically intimate, magical nature-connection experienced by children. As an environmentalist vision, the motif of "ageing out of nature" has pernicious implications. The implications of the idea that childhood stands for magic, exploration, deviance *and wilderness* as opposed to the mundane, unchanging, normative urban landscape of adulthood is what I will explore in this thesis.

In this introductory chapter, I begin by presenting the ways in which an ecocritical approach lends itself effectively to the analysis of children's literature. Traditionally, there has been a cultural linking of children to nature, so it is not surprising that ecological themes are prevalent in children's literature. I continue my discussion of the theory that underlies my analysis by analyzing children's literature as a literature of marginalization, and explain in brief the way themes of marginalization interact with the portrayal of animals in children's literature. I conclude by outlining the three chapters of my thesis.

Positions: Ecocriticism

According to Greg Garrard, "the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself" (5). Ecocritics like Garrard and philosophers like Kate Soper have written about the problem of defining "nature." While I acknowledge the difficulties inherent in my terminology, I will be using "nature" and "environment" interchangeably to refer to "everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity" (Soper 15). "Nature" is "both that which we are not *and* that which we are within" (21, original emphasis). Humanity is, of course, not physically separate from nature, as the word "environment" implies, but in order to discuss human relationships with non-human entities, I subscribe to Soper's view regarding the distinction between that which is manmade (i.e., urban environments), and that which is not:

> If ordinary discourse lacks rigour in referring to woodland or fields, the cattle grazing upon them, and so forth, as "nature," it is still marking an important distinction between the urban and industrial environment . . . the criteria employed in such distinctions may be difficult to specify, but the distinctions are not of a kind that we can readily dispense with, or that a more stringent use of terminology can necessarily capture more adequately. (20)

Garrard writes that the "challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which "nature" is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse" (10). In other words, "wilderness" is culturally constructed, but the trees and animals that comprise it are real.

Ecofeminism, which I discuss in more depth in my second chapter, is generally considered a subfield of ecocriticism. Ecofeminist beliefs are diverse, but may be simplified as

the belief that the oppression of nature shares a root cause with the gender-based oppression of women: a systemic capitalist, imperialist patriarchy (see Mies and Shiva 14). Ecofeminists Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva advocate for a resacralization of the natural world, which they consider to have been disenchanted by "capitalist patriarchy and its warrior science" (16).[1]

In viewing children's literature through an ecocritical lens, I hope to "analyse critically the tropes brought into play in environmental debate, and, more tentatively, to predict which will have a desired effect on a specific audience at a given historical juncture" (Garrard 16). It may seem awkward to describe literature as a debate, but only, I hope, at first. The children's literature I analyze is frequently didactic and sometimes polyphonic, stating an overt position with its narrative voice, while subtextually or thematically advocating for a contradictory position. Additionally, according to Karin Lesnik-Oberstein,

> children's literature offers one of the most extensive sources for the study of ideas about nature, the environment, ecology and the role of humans in relation to all of these, in contemporary society. Ideological, political, and moral issues are asserted with concentrated force with regard to the "child," and find their clearest articulation in books assigned to a child-audience in the prevalent belief (right or wrong) that those books have a unique capacity to affect, and therefore enlighten, their child-readers. (216)

Thus, the study of children's literature provides valuable insights into the culture of the adults writing for children, as well as into what appeals to children.

Children and Nature in the Canon of Children's Literature

[1] Ecofeminism is not an inherently anti-science critical lens (see Copeland), though early forms of it attracted criticism for vehement anti-science attitudes (Garrard 27).

Children's literature critics and ecocritics alike have commented on the interconnections between children's literature and nature. In *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Kimberley Reynolds writes that in the first half of the twentieth century, "[c]hildhood was strongly associated with nature, and children in books were regularly shown as highly capable, whether tramping and camping, sailing and riding ponies, or solving crimes" (19). Reynolds further asserts that "animal stories have been a staple genre of children's literature since the 18th century" (81). Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd take up the history of the association of children with nature in their introduction to the volume *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism.* According to Dobrin and Kidd,

> Children are still presumed to have a privileged relationship to nature, thanks largely to the legacy of Romantic and Victorian literature, which emphasized—often to the point of absurdity—the child's proximity to the natural world and consequent purity. The child is positively pastoral in the Anglo-American literary tradition, from William Blake's oppressed and angelic chimney sweeps through Charles Kingsley's water babies and beyond. (6)

Lesnik-Oberstein's analysis extends the history of nature and childhood even farther back than Dobrin and Kidd's, arguing that the history of "the child" in Western thought and the history of "nature" developed in tandem. To Lesnik-Oberstein, "[t]here can be few ideas in Western culture as intimately connected and intertwined as "nature" and the 'child'" (208); "both concepts, the "child" and the "natural" . . . developed simultaneously and interdependently, most significantly and famously in Rousseau's *Émile*" (210). Rousseau, "[r]ecommending that the child learn from direct experience in the natural environment, devoid of the corruptions of a man-created civilization . . . retrieved only one book for his child: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*" (211).

Lesnik-Oberstein links two meanings of "nature"—the state of a child's nature uncorrupted by society, and "nature" as "the totality of non-human matter" (Soper 1), i.e. animals, plants, and so forth—through the impact of Rousseau and Locke's educational recommendations on the development of children's literature:

> As in Rousseau's *Émile*, the child, in its linking to the natural, is initially exempt from the contaminated knowledge of civilization as represented by the book . . . In short, the "child" and the "natural" were created out of a split in which they represented the opposition to civilization and the book. Because of this paradox, "children's books" were defined and developed, along the lines suggested by Rousseau's choice of *Robinson Crusoe*, as the only books which were "safe" for the child: the only books which preserved and perpetuated the natural in the child and the natural from which the child was to learn. (212)

Thus, "Locke's and Rousseau's statements were used to develop "children's books" . . . as texts with "pictures" and "animals," and lone individuals (Robinson Crusoe) surviving outside of a contaminated and contaminating human society" (212). It is this need for "natural" education, Lesnik-Oberstein argues, that accounts for the "prevalence, in children's books, of themes to do with nature, the environment, animals, and ecology," listing dozens of examples spanning the period from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (209). Furthermore, Lesnik-Oberstein connects the idea of "the child" to the idea of "nature" as "most strongly related through their joint construction as the essential, the unconstructed, spontaneous and uncontaminated. Both the "child" and the "natural" have been assigned the status of being prior to, above and beyond man, and therefore man's language, history and culture. They are held to preserve that which is primeval, original and transcendent" (210).

It is little wonder, then, that many classic children's books portray the end of children's connection to nature as arriving with adulthood. Consider, for example, the panther Bagheera's comment to the child Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*: "Now I know thou art a man, and a man's cub no longer. The Jungle is shut indeed to thee henceforward" (31). M. Lynn Byrd's analysis of J. M. Barrie's *The Little White Bird* (1902) points out that

> around the age of eight, "children fly away from the Gardens, and never come back. When next you meet them they are ladies and gentlemen holding up their umbrellas to hail a hansom" (30). In terms of an ecological vision, this becomes one of the most poignant images of the book, as the narrator paints a picture of adults cumbersomely attempting to control nature with umbrella, carriage, and domesticated horse. This image reveals that in this earliest version of the Peter Pan myth, the loss of nature and the loss of imagination are simultaneous and related. (52)

The effect on children of projecting the loss of imagination, magic, and nature onto the process of growing up is often not examined.

A Literature of the Marginal

According to Reynolds, the "long history of writing about slavery for children," generally arose from a comparison of children to slaves "made in the 18th century on the basis that children too were largely powerless and subject to the authority of most of those around them" (116). Abolitionist literature for children frequently assumed that, because of their similarity in circumstances, "child readers would have had reason to take the injustices of slavery to heart" (116). Historically, it was a small step from Abolitionist children's literature to children's literature aimed at reforming human treatment of animals. Lawrence Buell points out that Anna

Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) was called "the Uncle Tom's Cabin of the horse'" in its day ("Environmental Writing for Children" 409). Buell explains the connection between the two texts: "[j]ust as with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Black Beauty* seeks to enlist its readers as secondary witness to the protagonist's trauma narrative, so as to instill in them by force of sympathy a kind of surrogate memory of how animals experience suffering" (413). The child as witness to non-human trauma is a feature that occurs in the three texts I will examine.

Although the question "are children marginalized?" is outside the scope of my current analysis, I argue that marginalization is a frequent topic of children's literature. Marginalization is broadly defined as "[t]he process by which individuals, social groups, and even ideas are made peripheral to the mainstream by relegating or confining them to the outer edges or margins of society" (O'Leary), but I also draw on ecofeminist theory in my understanding of hierarchical power imbalances. I use the term "marginalized" to refer to the "inferior others" created by "dualistic thinking" that "upholds certain forms of privilege as in the human/animal, man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body dualism," and is "one of the factors that undergirds oppression" (Adams and Gruen 3). For the same reasons that children were assumed to be analogous to slaves or to animals, children's literature is often an underdog story, a story of those with less power struggling against an unhearing society. Furthermore, as the examples above indicate, children's literature assumes a natural empathy of children with the marginalized. In the texts I will examine, the theme of children on the margins and children in nature pair together: wilderness is the margin of civilization; and plants and animals are the marginalized entities to whom children's empathy is assumed to extend.

Chapter-by-chapter Outline

In this thesis I will employ an ecocritical lens to analyse three children's fantasy series published in the first decade of the twenty-first century: Patrick Carman's *The Land of Elyon* series (2005-2008), Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur* series (2005-2008), and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005-2009). These texts, marketed to children aged eight to twelve, construct the child as central to ecological conflict, with a unique understanding of the non-human world and a responsibility to address environmental destruction. Carman, Carmody, and Riordan assume a natural affinity between child and wild in order to build sympathy between children and the natural world. The fantasy elements of these texts orient child readers towards recognizing and defending the "real magic" of the ecosystems around them, with the aim of educating children into ecological awareness.

My first chapter, "'When you're a child': Wilderness Narratives in Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide*" argues that Carman's novel uses rigid spatial divisions between city and wilderness in order to portray children as an ecologically-oriented marginalized class. Carman defines children as wild against a civilized adult norm, and portrays the ways depriving children of access to the wilderness deprives them of crucial childhood experiences. Aside from children, the human characters in *The Dark Hills Divide* who live outside of civilizational centres are adults marginalized by disability or criminality. By portraying an unjust civilizational structure opposed by a coalition of civilizational outcasts—in this case, animals, marginalized adults, and children—Carman implies both that children may be meaningfully classified as marginalized, and that marginalization is a prerequisite to exist in the wilderness.

My second chapter, "Infused with your mother's love": The Ecofeminist Fantasy of Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur,*" argues that children in Carmody's eco-fantasy *Little Fur* series are portrayed as in touch with a primal magic that connects them to nature in a way that adults,

through the disconnection of modern life, have lost. Carmody uses “earth magic” and an “earth spirit” to personify the living earth as motherly and nurturing. This spiritual earth is a metaphor for experiencing connection to other aspects of nature, whether animal, vegetal, or even mineral. By portraying adulthood as an alienated outgrowth of a more natural childhood existence, Carmody idealizes children as figures humankind can emulate in order to achieve an ecologically healthier future.

In my third chapter, "‘Nostalgic for something I’d never known’: The Discourses of Pollution and Pastoral in Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson,*" I analyze the popular *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series with an eye for how its merging of Greek mythology into American modernity is used to advocate for combining elements of the bucolic with urban settings. While importing an agrarian ideal to the city initially seems like a contradiction of terms, it is ultimately representative of the way Riordan advocates for incremental changes towards an environmentalist future. The central figures of Riordan’s nature ideal are nature spirits (nymphs) who take on the forms of girls. In this way, Riordan subtly centres children, and specifically female children, as the most natural advocates of nature.

Dobrin and Kidd write,

> We believe both that children are naturally close to nature and that nature education, even intervention, is in order . . . The essays included [in this collection] underscore the consensus belief across narrative genres that even if the child has a privileged relationship with nature, he or she must be educated into a deeper—or at least different—awareness. (7)

The books I examine reflect this assumption. By doing so, they create a self-fulfilling cycle. By telling children they are naturally close to nature, they create that expectation in the children

themselves. As such, children are encouraged to foster activist mindsets with regards to nature and emulate the environmentalist actions of the books' protagonists: Carman's Alexa Daley befriends animals and defends them against a destructive civilization, Carmody's Little Fur heals wounds and plants seeds in order to care for the physical and spiritual well-being of all living things, and Riordan's Percy Jackson learns to wield power responsibly in order to avoid recreating patterns of human behaviour that pollute and destroy the natural world.

Chapter 1

"When you're a child": Wilderness Narratives in Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide*

The Dark Hills Divide (2005) is the first in the four-book (plus prequel) children's fantasy series *The Land of Elyon* by bestselling American children's author Patrick Carman. Initially self-published, Carman's effective self-promotion and emphasis on "school appearances and the importance of literacy" scored him a deal with Scholastic that included a "six-figure preemptive offer for world rights" and "an unusually extensive promotion" in the form of further school tours (Baker 12). I mention the publication and reception history of *The Dark Hills Divide* in brief because, arguably more so than books aimed at adults, the popularity of children's books is inextricable from marketing and pedagogical forces. According to Seth Lerer, children's literature is "a kind of system, one whose social and aesthetic value is determined out of the relationships among those who make, market, and read books . . . [W]orks attain canonical status through their participation in a series of literary values" (7). Lerer further argues that the quality of the work is secondary to "how successive periods define the literary for both children and adults, and how certain works and authors were established in the households, schools, personal collections, and libraries of the time" (7). *The Dark Hills Divide* has thus far avoided critical attention likely because, like many other books in the vast sea of commercial children's literature, it is not an enduring classic. It sometimes appears awkwardly written, didactic, and carelessly constructed,[2] but it was a commercial success. As the emphasis on literacy and school

[2] *The Dark Hills Divide* received generally positive reviews, though Beth Wright's review for the *School Library Journal* criticizes the inconsistency of the narrative voice, which "varies occasionally from precocious fantasy heroine ("I . . . was immediately captivated by the audacious subject matter") to anachronistically modern preteen ("a wimpy meow")" (129).

tours suggests, Scholastic's promotion of *The Dark Hills Divide* was based on Carman's value in encouraging children *to read,* not on the values the book's content might instil in children. Still, *The Dark Hills Divide* merits critical analysis because it exemplifies the ecocritical concerns created by stories of children "growing out of" magic. Carman's tale of a child escaping the city to adventure in the wild, befriending animals, and ultimately returning home to civilization, where she will remain apart from the magical realm of the wild for the rest of her adult life, draws on structures and themes present in children's classics such as *Peter Pan* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*: namely, the garden as a site of play and the adventure story.

Writing about J. M. Barrie's *The Little White Bird* (1902), M. Lynn Byrd points out that "in this earliest version of the Peter Pan myth, the loss of nature and the loss of imagination are simultaneous and related" (52). Children who "fly away from the Garden[3] and never come back" grow into adults who "cumbersomely attempt to control nature with umbrella, carriage, and domesticated horse" (52). Although Byrd argues later versions of *Peter Pan* stray away from an overt ecological message, earlier versions explicitly link childhood with nature in opposition to adulthood. Furthermore, by following a narrative of departure and return (the child leaves the home to play in the garden, then leaves the garden to return home), "[t]hese adventure stories temporarily disrupt and even subvert the "home," only to restore a reinforced and more secure status quo" (52). Additionally, ecocritical literature on C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) is relevant to my analysis of *The Dark Hills Divide*, especially because Carman's books draw inspiration from Lewis's.[4] In "ecoLewis: Conservation and Anticolonialism in *The*

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[3] Kensington Gardens, the setting of *The Little White Bird.*

[4] At times, Carman's blatant reuse of material from Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* extends to paraphrasing famous lines. One of the clearest examples is the line "Elyon is on the move" from

Chronicles of Narnia," Nicole M. DuPlessis argues *The Chronicles of Narnia* "depict deforestation, exploitation of natural resources, and the political and social evils of colonialism, which have implicit ecological consequences because the indigenous population of Narnia are talking animals" (115). Clare Echterling counters DuPlessis and other ecocritics' praise of *Narnia* by arguing that instead of an anticolonialist worldview, "Lewis presents a deeply imperial, parochial environmental vision that implicitly encourages imperial exploration and control of distant lands" (100). Echterling points to how the series' "fixation with geographical exploration and adventure promotes the imperial project. Throughout, the books present the empire as a vast space full of possibilities for adventure and places that the children have an unquestionable right to explore, name, and own. The empire, as presented in these novels, is the backyard garden writ large" (103).

The "garden" Echterling and Byrd both mention has been studied as a traditional element of children's literature "from Frances Hodgson Burnett's urtext *The Secret Garden* onward" (Dobrin and Kidd 6). In the garden "the child is situated in his or her ostensible natural habitat . . . The garden is not only the classic Judeo-Christian space of renewal but also a literalization or emplotment of the child's organic innocence" (Dobrin and Kidd 6). The "adventure story" in *The Little White Bird, The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Dark Hills Divide* is a genre of children's literature defined by its traditional elements: "a deserving hero who is tested, a journey to distant places, fights with villains/enemies/rivals, and a triumphant conclusion, usually involving a return home" (Reynolds 83). The genre of "the children's adventure story was originally

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The Dark Hills Divide (Carman 124). *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* contains the line "Aslan is on the move" *three times* (Lewis 67, 78, and 107). Carman's Elyon is God, while Lewis's lion, Aslan, is a Christ-allegory (see Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 247).

associated with and has tended to thrive during times of colonization" (Reynolds 83). In *The Little White Bird*, the children play-act "a colonial tale in miniature" in Kensington Gardens (Byrd 51). *The Chronicles of Narnia* appeal to the same sensibilities, providing the child protagonists with vast, magical lands to explore, name, and administer (Echterling 103). As I will address in this chapter, the portrayal of wilderness and magic in Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide* is indebted to the colonial legacy of classic children's adventure literature.

In the rest of this chapter I will briefly explain the story and premise of *The Dark Hills Divide*, then discuss the divisions in Carman's text between children, animals, wilderness, and the marginal on one side; and city, ordered society, and normative adulthood on the other. I begin by arguing that in *The Dark Hills Divide*, children have a special relationship with nature based on mutual exclusion from the world of adulthood. Children and animals both live in the shadow of the titular barrier of *The Dark Hills Divide* (Carman 205), the wall that divides the wilderness outside from the city inside. The wall at first seems to both create and enforce a nature/civilization dichotomy. However, as Carman's coming-of-age story unfolds, it becomes evident that the walls do not create the fundamental divide between nature and civilization. The divide is inherent to the world and cannot be overcome. As outsiders to the adult world, children can cross between nature and civilization, but adulthood inevitably reinstates the boundary. The (unintentionally) grim message to children is that their intimate relationship with wild places and animals peaks in childhood and cannot be recovered. Having established that Carman depicts wilderness as a discrete space outside of, and opposed to, civilization, I will discuss how this portrayal perpetuates a colonial discourse of wilderness. I conclude this chapter by returning to *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a parallel text to *The Dark Hills Divide*, and contrast Carman and Lewis's depictions of talking animals in order to argue that Carman's nostalgia for an

ecologically-intimate childhood belies a deeper anxiety about the loss of the wild to human encroachment.

The Dark Hills Divide begins with an epigraph that quotes from Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall":

> *Before I built a wall I'd ask to know*
>
> *What I was walling in or walling out,*
>
> *And to whom I was like to give offense.*
>
> *Something there is that doesn't love a wall,*
>
> *That wants it down.* (Carman, *The Dark Hills Divide*)

The first chapter begins *in media res*. Carman's protagonist, Alexa, is a twelve-year-old child who has lived her entire life shut inside walled towns. On a nighttime walk with Thomas Warvold, an old man we learn is the "leader" of Alexa's civilization (3), Alexa listens to Warvold express his life's regrets, in particular his conflicted feelings over having built the walls. Warvold gives Alexa his cloak, metaphorically passing on responsibility for his life's works, and then he dies suddenly. The narrative flashes back to earlier in the same day to introduce Alexa's world, and its wall. Alexa explains,

> The wall I am speaking of is the one that surrounded all of Bridewell, which encircled not only the village and the old prison, but stretched out along each side of the roads leading to the three cities of Lathbury, Turlock, and Lunenburg. Our kingdom was a wagon wheel made of stone. Bridewell sat at its hub, with the other three towns on the end of the three spokes. (9-10)

After Warvold's death, Alexa steals his key, hoping it will help her accomplish her goal: to find a way outside the walls. The key opens a secret passage that takes Alexa, for the first time in her

life, outside her walled civilization and to the forest and mountain beyond. In the wild Alexa is led to a magical stone that allows her to speak with animals. The wild animals reveal to her that it is her destiny to bring down the walls and save the town of Bridewell from the danger that lies outside them. This danger is not the wild animals or nebulous dangers of the wild, feared by the citizens of Bridewell, but rather the human convicted criminals who were once conscripted to build the walls and who now dwell in secret outside them, scheming to take over Bridewell.

"Only" A Child: Children in the Margins of *The Dark Hills Divide*

The critical view that "children's literature tends to take adulthood as the norm against which children are constructed as deviant" (Reynolds 113) is especially relevant to Carman's construction of childhood. Childhood in *The Dark Hills Divide* is characterized by the child's status as an outsider to the world of adulthood. Allegedly "for [her] own good" (Carman 192), Alexa is excluded from the conversations of her father and the other mayors:

> With . . . work to be done, it was time for me to go off to set up my room. On my way up the creaking oak stairs, my one bag in hand, I looked back at the massive smoking room – stone walls, dust dancing in the air, the echo of important men becoming reacquainted. I felt much too young to care about the politics of running our towns, and I sensed a strange sensation as my father glanced my way. His look told me I was not welcome in these discussions because it was not safe for me to know what they would speak of. (21)

Alexa experiences her father's world as "silhouettes" (192) and "echo[es] of important men" (21) (she herself is unimportant, shuffled out of the way of adult "work" or "politics"). Excluded from the central social and political locations (the smoking and meeting rooms) of Renny Lodge, Alexa spends her time "[l]urking in dark corners" or on "creaking oak stairs" (21), "sneak[ing]

around" (68), and "hiding under tables and behind couches near the walls" (192). She shares a building with adults, but is relegated to its edges and corners. Because she is a child, Alexa spends her days literally in the margins of her father's physical space. It is her marginal position that both motivates and enables her to slip outside the bounds of civilization and into the wild.

Adults in *The Dark Hills Divide* perceive the walls as protection from "the uncharted dangers and scary legends of the wilderness" (Carman 11), a view that places them at odds with Alexa, who experiences the walls as a source of oppression. Alexa is an unruly child who "plot[s] and scheme[s] in search of a way outside the wall" (105). Her unambiguous affective response to the walls is stiflement and circumscription. Carman's intent is clear in naming Bridewell after a famous prison (253), but Alexa also remarks as she stands "alone at the center of town, the walls of Bridewell towering all around," that she feels "like a prisoner" (69). Alexa's imprisonment motivates her escape from civilization and subsequent adventure into the wild, while her exclusion from adulthood makes it possible. She "burn[s] to feel the freedom of the forest and the mountains" (33) and repeatedly contrasts freedom and imagining "how it might feel beneath the tall trees outside the wall on the cool forest floor" (61) against the oppressive "furnace"-like heat of Bridewell (61): "The walls loomed above us on both sides of the road, holding in the heat like a long, skinny oven" (10). Alexa's childlike curiosity and her lack of supervision or adult responsibilities allow her escape into the wild. As she puts it, "While my father was busy running the kingdom, I would be busy exploring. And maybe, just maybe, this summer I would find what I had been looking for . . . A way outside the wall" (23).

The titular walls of *The Dark Hills Divide* ("divide" is here used as a noun) create and enforce Alexa's marginalized experience of childhood. Carman acknowledges that the walls are especially problematic for Alexa because she is a child, and children are adventurous. Alexa's

father tells her that Warvold "saw a lot of the adventurer he once was in you, and he mentioned more than once how unfortunate it was that you were locked inside the walls he built. He understood why you liked to sneak around by yourself" (Carman 68). Harkening back to the idea that childhood is constructed as a deviation from adulthood, Bridewell's walls create the circumstances under which adults interpret Alexa's behaviour as deviant, unruly, and problematic. Alexa's father's comment implies that the walls are the reason for Alexa's deviant behaviour, as her circumscribed freedom motivates her sneaking. Furthermore, it is obvious to Alexa that the walls are oppressive and "sickening," (201) but the dominant view in her civilization is that the walls are necessary protection against the wilderness. This view of the walls is embodied by guardsman Pervis Kotcher.[5] Pervis's "everlasting love for Bridewell and all it stands for" (157) manifests in his "suspicious demeanour," targeted at unruly Alexa (25): "Mean, nasty, and always watching me — to my thinking, that summed up Pervis Kotcher" (25). Pervis fears wildness in all its forms, including Alexa's curiosity, justifying his relentless surveillance of her by insisting that her interest in the world outside the walls "*will* endanger us" (66). The dogma of the walls casts Alexa's curiosity, independence, and desire for freedom as unhealthy and dangerous to society:[6]

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[5] Understood through the lens of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," which Carman uses as his epigraph, Pervis's shares a position with Frost's "neighbour," who wants the wall to exist, and represents "an ideology of human separation" (Trachtenberg 115), or isolation from the non-human.

[6] Carman's wall is an allegory for a society that cuts itself off from the outside. Mary Douglas's anthropological monograph, *Purity and Danger,* argues that "society is a powerful image," and the imagery of society typically "has external boundaries, margins, internal structure" (115).

> "[. . . O]nce people start spending all their free time looking for strange things outside the wall, you'll have an even bigger problem . . . Take Alexa, for instance," Pervis continued. "We give her the only room in Bridewell that has a window with a teensy view of the wall. She's only a child, and we assume a child is timid and afraid. What interest would a child have in the outside? But even sweet little Alexa here figured out that if she stands in the sill she can get a little taste of what's out there. (64-65)

The imposition of a view of childhood in which children are "timid and afraid" is itself a direct result of the walls and the perceived necessity of the walls' protection. On the road to Bridewell at the beginning of the book, Alexa's father tells the story of the walls, which is also Bridewell's founding myth. According to Alexa's father's account, explorer Thomas Warvold's first settlement (Lunenburg) became overpopulated, but expansion was a fearful prospect:

> The north held giant mountains, the east a thick forest; the west was covered in what came to be known as The Dark Hills. The people of Lunenburg were afraid to venture out past the valley and into the wild . . . It was then that Thomas Warvold had a most wonderful idea. (11)

Furthermore, "[a]ny structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" (122). Douglas's view of "social pollution" as a fear of "danger pressing on [the structure of society's] external boundaries, . . . danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system," or "danger in the margins" (123-24) maps thematically onto Carman's depiction of intense, but directionless fear against unknown threats to Bridewell's wall. Like discourses of "separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions," the wall aims "to impose system on an inherently untidy [human] experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without . . . with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (Douglas 4).

Warvold's idea was to "build a walled road out into the unknown, and at the end of it he would build a new town. As long as the wall was in front of the people, the enchanted dangers that lurked about could be kept away" (14). This account does not explain where the people's concept of "wilderness" and their deep fear of it comes from. The fear and danger are so deeply ingrained that they require no justification. Only Warvold's account of his life to Alexa attributes them to a cause:

> Most people don't know how much I traveled when I was young. I walked for miles and miles in every direction for months on end, all alone . . . But Renny and then Nicolas came along, and I grew more and more protective. I had terrible fears of being away from them, so I stayed closer to home. Before long I was building these walls to protect my family and everyone else. (5)

Renny is Warvold's wife and Nicolas is their son. According to Alexa, Warvold "had a reputation for conjuring up frightening tales about giant spiders crawling over the wall to eat children" (4-5). There is no basis to these tales, and Warvold, who according to Alexa is "the man who had ventured farther than the rest of us into the mysteries of the outside world," (4), certainly knew this. Warvold's protectiveness is actually paternalism sheltering his social lessers—particularly women and children—who have no voice in running the kingdom, but who believe the walls are necessary due to fears Warvold himself encourages. Protection without knowing what they are being protected from casts children as second-class citizens. Men impose an idea of childhood upon children, an assumption stated explicitly by Pervis in the quotation above: children are not full people, they are "only" children, "timid and afraid" (65).

Beyond the Wall: Animals and Social Outsiders in *The Dark Hills Divide*

The “protection” the walls afford is, as Alexa’s father’s account makes clear, the separation of civilization from a wilderness that must be “kept away” (Carman, *The Dark Hills Divide* 14). But instead of harbouring “enchanted dangers” (14), the wilderness outside the wall is inhabited by animals, who become objects of fear simply by being walled out, because the necessity of the wall goes unquestioned by everyone except Alexa. Pervis’s conviction “that everything outside the wall [is] evil and dangerous” (25) has no basis in experience. The things Alexa imagines before she knows anything about what is outside the wall reveal that she has internalised the dominant idea of the wild as a space populated by dangerous animals that are a threat to children. Looking out from her window into the Dark Hills, Alexa catches a glimpse of movement and wonders, “Could it be a large animal roaming The Dark Hills or an evil beast stirring in the dense thicket?” (26). However, in place of monsters or evil beasts, Alexa finds animals outside the walls who quickly become her friends. The wild animals understand her hatred of the walls and share her experience of oppression by them. DuPlessis argues about C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* that, as “anthropomorphic beasts are a standard feature of fables, fairy tales, and children’s fantasy, the presence of talking animals . . . does not automatically lend the novels to an ecocritical reading” (116); rather, it is the portrayal of the talking animals as Narnia’s “indigenous population” and as victims of ecological evil that lends itself to an ecocritical reading (115). The same is true of the animals in *The Dark Hills Divide*. Alexa learns the full story of the walls’ building from Ander, a grizzly bear who is the animals’ leader and the “forest king” (Carman 119). Ander explains what drove Warvold to build the wall:

> “Warvold’s stone revealed that one day terrible forces from this enchanted land would rise up and cause the destruction of everything he had created,” said Ander. “He took this

> to mean that dark monsters lived out here and would someday enter his kingdom and kill everyone. But he badly misread the meaning of his future." (127)

The animals, who were Warvold's friends, tried to explain that Warvold was misunderstanding the danger and "assured him that [they] knew of no evil monsters lurking about" (128), but Warvold "was terrified for his wife, Renny, and all the people streaming into Lunenburg," and he did not listen (128). While Alexa feels like a prisoner locked inside the walls, the animals have lost the freedom of movement between previously connected territories. The walls cause environmental devastation by imposing artificial boundaries across ecosystems. Sherwin, a wolf who was separated from his father by the unexpectedly swift bisecting of his hunting territory, describes the pain the walls cause him and others:

> At night, my father howls at me, and I howl back at him. We dream of hunting together and of he and my mother being side by side again. He often sounds sad and, in recent times, even a little old . . . Sometimes he howls at me and my mother for hours and hours, until his voice is shredded and cracking. On those nights I often go to the culvert and I put my front paws in, imagining I'm small again. Then I look to the wall and beat my head against the same spot until blood is oozing out of my fur and into my eyes . . . My story is not so different from what many of these animals here would tell you. Most of the large animals have lost a son or daughter, a mate, a close friend, or a parent. Others feel the terrible loss of the mountains and the lush wild streams lined with fruit trees and blackberry patches. (121-22)

Through these stories of "terrible loss" (121) and "terrible sadness" (113), *The Dark Hills Divide* casts the wild animals as highly sympathetic. Alexa's response reinforces to the reader the expected reaction: she calls Sherwin's expression "heartbreaking" (122) and states, "I felt a wave

of compassion for Sherwin, wondering what it must be like to lose your father in such an unjust way" (121). The walls, which previously kept Alexa apart from the animals and afraid of them, become the central point of identification between child and wild.

Alexa's sympathy and heartbreak for the animals' plight is only one example of the way Carman portrays an affinity between marginal individuals on the basis of their shared exclusion. Once she is in the wild, Alexa's status as a child and the traits associated with childhood—traits at best discouraged and at worst forbidden within Bridewell's walls—prove to be exactly what the animals need in an ally. It is through an explicitly sanctioned act of sneaking around and eavesdropping that Alexa hears for herself the convicts' scheme that (in the narrative's logic) poses the real threat to civilization. The convicts' "voices, distant echoes at first," are likened to "sounds from the meeting room at Renny Lodge when I tried to listen from outside closed doors" (Carman, *The Dark Hills Divide* 109), but of course, in Renny Lodge such behaviour was prohibited. Furthermore, Alexa's protests that she is "just a child — a *small* child" (100) are always met with a variation on the same answer: "Your size is your strength" (100). Ander enumerates Alexa's desirable qualities, emphasizing how Alexa operates in the periphery of the world of adults: "you know how to work alone and maintain secrecy. You're small and easily hidden. You have connections to important people, but you're not important enough yourself to be scrutinized too closely. Face it, Alexa, you're perfect for the task" (132-33). The new context of the wild and the animals' needs redeem childhood's deviant qualities. Alexa is an outsider, an overlooked child in a world of adults. She eavesdrops on conversations she's not allowed to participate in, and transgresses boundaries both social and territorial. Her deviance from adult norms, or, in other words, the wildness of childhood, is encouraged in the wilderness.

Instead of forming bonds with other children (who seem scarcely to exist at all), Alexa bonds with those who live in the peripheral space of the wilds. The most concise description Alexa gives of herself and her adventuring companions occurs in the second book of the series: "a mere child, a former convict, a grown man no larger than a five-year-old boy, and an odd assortment of animals" (Carman, *Beyond the Valley of Thorns* 37). Whether they are excluded from adult society due to disability, criminality, animality, or youth, being powerless, small, or misjudged is the assumed point of affinity between Alexa and her friends. The "grown man no larger than a five-year-old boy" is Yipes, an important character in *The Dark Hills Divide*. Size links Alexa and Yipes. Alexa's smallness has been highlighted since the book's first description of her: "I was twelve years old, short for my age, with skinny arms and knobby knees" (9); Yipes's first words to Alexa are "Well now, you are a small one, aren't you?", while Alexa's first description of Yipes is, "the smallest man [she] had ever seen" (80). Yipes was born in the city, but was abandoned due to his size: "When my parents realized I was never going to grow to a normal size, they left me on the streets" (97) Like Alexa, Yipes was determined to get outside the walls, believing "that when he did, he would live in the wild with animals and learn to communicate with them . . . He was treated badly by humans, forgotten, discarded. In the wild, he believed things would be different" (204). He was right. Yipes, like Alexa, has a magical stone that allows him to speak with animals. He lives alone in the wilderness, and his friends when Alexa meets him are all animals. The narration near-constantly likens Yipes to an animal: he scampers "like a rabbit" (83), startles "like a spooked squirrel" (85), and climbs "like a monkey" (93). The similarities between Alexa, Yipes, and the animals place them all firmly on the "wild" side of the civilization/wilderness divide. By emphasising the exploits of the small,

The Dark Hills Divide tells children their interests align naturally with other (literal and metaphorical) small folk.

Children's literature has a venerable tradition of comparing children with society's downtrodden and of assuming natural empathy between children and the marginalized. According to Kimberley Reynolds,

> There is a long history of writing about slavery for children. Children themselves have at times been regarded as being like slaves . . . on the basis that children too were largely powerless and subject to the authority of most of those around them, meaning that child readers would have had reason to take the injustices of slavery to heart. Indeed, several key Abolitionist texts encourage them to do so. (116)

Similarly,

> Many reasons for the widespread use of animals in children's literature have been proposed. Critics have, for instance, pointed to the similarities in status between animals and children which make animals effective points of identification for young readers. Domesticated animals in particular may share similarities with children since they are relatively weak, inarticulate, and powerless in relation to adult humans. (82)

Lawrence Buell makes the link between slavery and animals in children's literature explicit by pointing out that critics "in its own day" called *Black Beauty* (1877) "the "Uncle Tom's Cabin of the horse" ("Environmental Writing for Children" 409). To Buell, the purpose of a text like *Black Beauty* is "to enlist its readers as secondary witness to the protagonist's trauma narrative, so as to instill in them by force of sympathy a kind of surrogate memory of how animals experience suffering" (413). Reynolds is careful to point out that literary "representations of the relationship between children and animals" are not straightforwardly representing reality; "much

19th-century children's literature includes instructions not to harm animals or steal eggs from birds' nests *specifically because it was common for children to do so*" (82, emphasis mine). If it was the natural state of children to take to heart injustices suffered by society's wretched, then there would be no need to promote such a message in children's literature. The assumption that children have a natural affinity with other powerless figures, be it animals or slaves, is a meaning adults attribute to childhood that emerged in tandem with the idea that children themselves were a disadvantaged group in need of legal protections.[7] Alexa's friendship with animals is a logical extension of the idea that children as civilization's outsiders find like-minded individuals by going outside civilization—in Alexa's case, by going literally out-of-doors. Still, there are notable differences from the *Black Beauty* formula,[8] which ends with the titular animal finding a benevolent human master. Wild animals, not domesticated ones, are the points of identification for the child reader of *The Dark Hills Divide*. Carman also encourages a different form of action from classic reform literature like *Black Beauty. The Dark Hills Divide* portrays a coalition between different outcasts from adult civilization, suggesting that this outcast status gives them a unique and valuable connection to the wild. The message goes beyond a call to sympathy—it is a call to action, encouraging children to band together with marginalized people to defeat the social structures oppressing them—in this case, the literal structure of the wall. This message raises a new set of issues and interpretational difficulties, chiefly: what are the implications of

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[7] According to Maude Hines, "animal rights reform tended to precede human rights reform. Indeed, as Kincaid's research suggests, tending animals and raising gardens made the idea of "tending" children thinkable in the first place" (28).

[8] This formula is still in widespread use in the twenty-first century—albeit with strays, not working animals—in popular children's books such as Ann M. Martin's 2005 *A Dog's Life*.

presenting a world with such a rigid divide between nature and civilization, and what are the effects of limiting movement across the divide to children and the marginalized?

Only One Chance: Wilderness Ideology in *The Dark Hills Divide*

As I have established, the walls are blatantly Carman's chief villains. They were built to keep out an imaginary danger; they are monstrous, to Alexa (Carman, *The Dark Hills Divide* 81-82) and to Ander (130); they assuage the fears of the powerful at the expense of the powerless, creating a dynamic of oppression between those who want the walls and those who do not. Even the guardsman Pervis, once the walls' greatest defender (25), comes around to Alexa's perspective by the end of *The Dark Hills Divide*, telling her "It seems as though the only things causing pain around here are these ridiculous walls we keep building" (245). The text could not be clearer that the walls are bad. But the walls are not bad because they impose a divide between civilization and nature. That divide is already there, inherent to the nature of Carman's world. While boundary transgression is encouraged for healthy childhood development, humans can only ever exist in the wild temporarily.

The story Warvold tells Alexa in the first chapter introduces the way childhood will overlap with wilderness in Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide.* According to Warvold's account, the cycle of life goes thus: the small child is protected, the young person explores the natural world freely, the adult walls out the world to protect his family (5). Warvold giving Alexa his cloak, passing the mantle of responsibility to her, starts Alexa on the same journey of maturation, from young and sheltered, to adventure outside the walls precipitating her into adulthood, and thus back into civilization. Over the course of *The Dark Hills Divide,* Alexa goes from ignored child to warning Bridewell's political leaders (including her father) about a threat to Bridewell's safety

they did not even know existed. The narrative emphasizes that Alexa's time of political disenfranchisement is ending when she is invited to the meeting room that, only a year ago, she got in trouble for sneaking into (192-93). This shift was foreshadowed; Alexa may be a child now, but she is "becoming a young lady, and in a few summers, she'll be a young woman. The day is coming soon when she . . . will have her opinions heard; she will be listened to" (66). The epilogue foregoes subtlety and simply states that *The Dark Hills Divide* is about growing up:

> Life is better without the walls, everyone agrees. Still, sometimes I'm afraid of the outside world . . . It feels like growing up, as if the safety of childhood has been stripped away, and I've woken up on the edge of something dangerous. The walls are gone and I can do as I please. It's a freedom I'm not so sure I'm ready for.
>
> These days, when I make the trip from Lathbury to Bridewell, I see animals all along the way. I no longer understand what they say, and it makes me feel old, as if all the child has gone out of me. (248-49)

The epilogue brings the Warvold parable full circle: children are protected, and through escaping that "protection" they grow into adults nostalgic for a seemingly simpler time. Furthermore, Alexa perceives the ability to understand the speech of animals as inherently linked with her childhood self, incompatible with the adult she feels herself growing into:

> Lately I've been wondering whether or not I could go off searching for a place where you could stand in a pool of icy water and come out talking to animals. A place where secret messages could be found, and squirrels are full of comic bravery . . . But then I'm not twelve anymore, and sometimes I'm almost sure adventures like that only happen when you're a child. (250)

Alexa and Warvold are not the only characters who follow this arc. In fact, the ubiquity of characters joining civilization as part of their coming-of-age suggests that severing oneself from wild places is a natural and inevitable part of maturation. Renny, Warvold's wife, is another example. As a teenager, Renny made a home with her sister in "the lush green of the mountain," where she discovered the magic stones and "befriended all sorts of wild animals" (Carman, *Beyond the Valley of Thorns* 94). When Warvold, still an adventurer, arrived, "[Renny] and Warvold fell in love, and soon thereafter the two of them began to tire of living alone in the mountains. It was decided that Warvold would go to Ainsworth and find those among the city that he might recruit into building a new kingdom" (96). The passive tense of "It was decided" subtly removes Renny's agency and reinforces the idea that adults will *naturally* want to rejoin civilization. The only adults in the Land of Elyon who maintain their connection with the wild past childhood are those who turn their backs on civilization entirely. In the case of the convicts, who also found the magic stones and befriended animals (*The Dark Hills Divide* 236), the social rejection is due to criminality[9]. Then there is Yipes, who in *The Dark Hills Divide* "has never left the wild of the forest and the mountains" since finding his stone (126). Yipes's child-like and animal-like qualities—he is curious, excitable, and ever-active—suggest that to be an adult who talks to animals is to live in extended childhood. Though Yipes remains a holdout at the end of *The Dark Hills Divide*, he ultimately rejoins civilization when he finds a spouse in the fourth and final book. Alexa reflects at Yipes's wedding that "[t]hings would never be the same" (*Stargazer* 273). For both Renny and Yipes, marriage puts a sharp end to life out in the wilds.

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[9] This is technically also true of Renny, who is an outlaw of an oppressive regime in another part of the world (Carman, *Beyond the Valley of Thorns* 91).

Leaving readers with a sense of sadness and nostalgia for lost childhood is not uncommon in children's literature. In fact,

> some of the most famous works of children's literature, including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, often seem to lament the need for children to grow up and move into the future. The result is an elegiac note that reveals these works to be more about adult nostalgia for childhood than about children's experience of the world. (Reynolds 96-97)

The difference in *The Dark Hills Divide* is that the nostalgia is not only for lost childhood, it is for the loss of magic, exploration, and wilderness associated with childhood: "I feel like I'm twelve again, the magic filling the forest, and I can almost hear the animals talking" (Carman 249). Carman's text offers no logical reason to exclude wilderness from adult life, only an emotional appeal to the nostalgia of a purer, greener childhood when formative connections with nature were possible. The last key element of Alexa's coming-of-age narrative is the magic stones that allow for communication between humans and animals, and that serve as a metaphor for growing up and away from nature. The magic of talking to animals is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a fact emphasized by Yipes when he tells Alexa the mountain pool where she finds her stone "is a special place. You get only one chance to go there in all your life" (88). The stones' magic, like childhood, is ephemeral, leaving the carrier with nostalgia for experiences that are impossible to relive. Ander explains the the nature of the stone thus:

> Just like any magical effect, this one comes with its own set of rules. For instance, the ability to talk to animals works only if you stay in the wild. As soon as you leave, the power begins to drift away. Once this process starts, it cannot be reversed, and there are no more stones to be had. Once you leave the wild, the stone will start its gradual descent

> into dim regularity. It will throb more slowly — and with less intensity — over a period of undetermined time. (126)

The idea that the "fading" of a stone's magic begins as soon as its carrier is exposed, for any length of time, to human civilization, brings to the forefront the way treating childhood, wilderness, adventure, and magic as overlapping concepts leads directly to the ideological trap of wilderness.

Greg Garrard explains how the idea of "wilderness" as "a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture" relies on the logic of an agricultural economy defining "home" as within the boundaries of cultivation and "wild" as where "beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation" (67). Over time, a "wilderness narrative" developed:

> Wilderness narratives share the motif of escape and return with the typical pastoral narrative, but the construction of nature they propose and reinforce is fundamentally different. If pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds – particularly the United States, Canada, and Australia – with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinctions between the forces of culture and nature. (66-67)

In Carman's work, the child is the ideal subject of a wilderness narrative. The child's liminality facilitates her transgression of the boundaries between human and animal, nature and society. But, importantly, childhood is a state of temporary exile. Children must return to civilization to transition to adulthood. In *The Dark Hills Divide*, the wilderness narrative's "motif of escape and return" pairs seamlessly with the book's nineteenth-century children's adventure story influences. In the adventure story, the hero "journey[s] to distant places, fights with

villains/enemies/rivals," and triumphantly returns home (Reynolds 83). Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd connect wilderness to adventure story in "Maurice Sendak's classic 1963 picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are,* which tells the story of young Max venturing into the land of the wild things, becoming their king, and finally returning safely home—where he finds his supper waiting for him, still hot" (2). Stories in which children go outside, have formative experiences in the wild, then return to the civilized family sphere allows for children to experience the benefits of a "wilderness experience" while maintaining Wilderness and Civilization as strictly delineated spaces. As a result of this hyper-separation, Carman's setting, the Land of Elyon, suffers from what William Cronon calls the "trouble with wilderness" (qtd. in Garrard 77), or "an idea of wilderness, in which any modification of the environment [by humans] is a form of contamination" (Garrard 78). The "trouble" is that "the ideal wilderness space is wholly pure by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there" (78). Furthermore, Garrard argues that the New World idea of wilderness relies on a colonial logic of "purity" that is "often achieved at the cost of an elimination of human history" (77).[10] *The Dark Hills Divide* draws both on the colonial language of a "pure," unsullied wilderness, and on the "complicity of adventure tale and colonialist metaphor" (Dobrin and Kidd 2). What Carman adds to the genre is the idea that the world is literally *becoming less magical* with time and with human expansion.

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[10] Garrard's example is the history of Yosemite National Park; "this myth of an 'uninhabited wilderness' meant that both the Ahwahneechee Indians and the white miners who had lived and worked there were expelled" during its creation (77).

The Dark Hills Divide draws on exploration and colonial metaphor when discussing the linked topics of wilderness and magic. Warvold and his people venture out into the "uncharted dangers" of the wilderness (Carman 11). Magic "prowl[s] around in faraway places" (34), waiting to be "discovered" by the human explorer, but once a place is exposed to any human contact, it loses its magic—its wildness. At the end of *The Dark Hills Divide,* Alexa thinks of travelling "the world just like Warvold did, looking for pockets of magic" (250); her own local wilderness has lost its magic: "I suppose the wall had its own way of holding the enchanting beauty of the wild away from us for a time, but eventually we found a way to snuff out what little magic remained. *Maybe that's just what people do*" (249-50, emphasis mine). The excitement of discovery and of mapping new lands is transposed to discovering new pockets of magic. But Carman suggests that once those pockets are found, they will cease to be magical. Like with the stones, magic itself is "contaminated" by human contact the same way wilderness can be "contaminated" by human contact in the wilderness ideology Garrard criticizes. Garrard concludes his discussion of the trouble with wilderness by writing, "[t]he fundamental problem of responsibility is not what we humans *are*, nor how we can "be" better, more natural, primal or authentic, but what we *do*" (79). In *The Dark Hills Divide,* the problem of responsibility rests solidly in what humans *are.* This is not an encouraging message for children who may wish, like Alexa, to visit forest and mountain spaces.

In *The Dark Hills Divide*, Carman posits that "all magic runs out sometime" (125). By linking the ability of humans to speak with (and therefore befriend) animals to a magic that inevitably and inexplicably "runs out", Carman taps into a wider cultural dread of future generations losing touch with nature. According to Buell,

> With ever-larger percentages of earthlings dwelling in metropolitan areas . . . an increasing concern being voiced in public discourse is fear of what environmental journalist Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder," or mal-formation of adult identity arising from curtailment of children's roaming about and exploration of wild places, such as this author and his peers allegedly did with much greater freedom. ("Environmental Writing for Children" 415)

The existential dread underlying the loss of speech in *The Dark Hills Divide* comes into sharp focus when compared with Lewis's depiction of talking animals in *The Chronicles of Narnia.* In *Narnia*, Aslan the lion gives Narnian animals the power of speech, and, by doing so, anthropomorphizes them and elevates them above the "dumb beasts" who remain "witless" without the capacity for human speech (*The Magician's Nephew* 129). Because speech is a divine gift, Narnia's "talking beasts" can revert to "dumb beasts" if they blaspheme. Ginger the Cat loses his speech after declaring Aslan does not exist (*The Last Battle* 89-90) and summoning demons into Narnia (94). Ginger's "devilish noise" and "ordinary, ugly cat-noises" terrify the other talking beasts, who were taught "that if they weren't good they might one day be turned back again and be like the poor witless animals one meets in other countries" (124). Considering how clear the influence of *The Chronicles of Narnia* is on *The Dark Hills Divide*, the differences between Lewis's and Carman's talking animals are striking. Carman's books are without doubt Christian fantasy; they contain a God, a Devil, and heavy Biblical themes (see *The Tenth City* 163). But the loss of communication in *The Dark Hills Divide* is not a reflection of loss of Christian morality. Ander the bear tells Alexa, "[a]ll magic runs out sometime . . . and this place has been running out for some time now. We used to be able to communicate with the birds . . . But it's as if we speak completely different languages now" (Carman 125-26). The loss of

comprehension is slowly spreading amongst mammals, who can "comprehend one another most of the time, but occasionally [their] voices become garbled for a morning or an afternoon, only to return again some hours later" (126). Ander adds, "[t]his process accelerated after the wall went up" (126). Both the fact that human action accelerated the loss of magic and the fact that the magic was fading anyway are crucial to Carman's eco-anxiety. Furthermore, unlike Lewis's talking beasts, the magic of Carman's stones does not grant speech. It only mediates communication barriers between Alexa and the animals she befriends:

> "Allow me to introduce myself," said the wolf. "I am Darius." His lips did not move to speak like a human, but I comprehended him entirely. The way he moved from side to side, his paws shuffling on the floor. The tilt of his head, the subtle noises from his throat, and a hundred other things combined to form a language I understood with perfect accuracy. (99)

Darius the wolf does not speak like a human, nor does Carman suggest his animality is inferior to Alexa's humanity.

Fifty years separate the publication of *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) from *The Dark Hills Divide* (2005). Ultimately, the difference between these two texts reflects shifting environmental anxiety in the modern day. *The Dark Hills Divide* expresses the fear that future children will not have access to the wild. Paradoxically, wilderness is essential to children's healthy development into adulthood, but its magic fades faster the more contact it has with human civilization. Children, as marginal figures, are encouraged to transgress the boundaries between civilization and nature. But children's closeness with the natural world is a temporary state of being. By naturalising the process of the wild child growing into a civilized adult, Carman imposes an artificial boundary between culture and nature, a boundary that cannot be

overcome despite the book's call to dismantle destructive human-made boundaries. At the end of *The Dark Hills Divide*, the wall is down but the divide of city and wild gapes wider than ever. In Carman's world, wilderness must forever remain "other" in order to maintain its purity and integrity as a space apart from human interference. While wilderness still exists in Carman's world, my next chapters will analyze texts in which the boundaries between city and wild are not so rigid and in which "the Wild" is increasingly vanishing in the modern world.

Chapter 2

"Infused with your mother's love": The Ecofeminist Fantasy of Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur*

Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur* series is a quartet of short, illustrated fantasy novels recommended for third to sixth grade, or children aged eight to eleven[11]. The publisher's blurb on the back cover of the fourth book, *Riddle of Green*, markets the book as an "eco-fantasy," a label that also appears in many children's book reviews. For example, Elizabeth Bird's *School Library Journal* review states, "This benign eco-fantasy treads familiar territory with its tale of respecting the world around us" (86). *Kirkus Reviews* suggests that "[t]his wee eco-fantasy heroine, with her green message, will win the hearts of young environmentalists" ("Little Fur: The Legend Begins" 1011). "Eco-fantasy" appears to be primarily a marketing term for any fantasy novel that foregrounds environmentalist themes, though some critics employ the term as well. Christine Battista's article "Ecofantasy and Animal Dystopia in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*" analyzes *Watership Down* as "a novel that deploys an ecocritical lens from within the genre of *fantasy*" (159, emphasis in original). Peter Melville uses eco-fantasy to describe a text in the fantasy genre that "engages the relation between humanity and its environment in a rather conspicuous manner" (149). Although two reviewers (Bird and Raklovits) compare *Little Fur* to Patrick Carman's *The Land of Elyon* series, discussed in the previous chapter, *Little Fur* is the only primary text I analyze with environmentalism foregrounded in its marketing. The key difference may be what Melville calls engaging an environmental theme in "a rather conspicuous manner" (149). Unlike with the other texts approached here, ecocriticism is the unavoidable lens

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[11] According to the back cover of the fourth book, *Little Fur: Riddle of Green*, and reviews in *Kirkus* ("Little Fur: The Legend Begins" 1011), *School Library Journal* (Bird 86; Raklovitz 156), and the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (Coats 246).

through which to read *Little Fur* because the relationship between the earth and the creatures that call it home is the defining theme of the series.

There is no scholarly material written about Carmody's *Little Fur,* but the books overlap in genre with animal stories for children, since, aside from Little Fur herself, the books' main characters are all speaking animals: Little Fur's community includes the stray cats Ginger and Sly, Sorrow the fox, Crow, a crow, and Gem, an orphaned owlet. Animal stories are a common genre of children's literature. According to Kimberley Reynolds' *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction,* critics suggest that "displacing potentially disturbing issues and behaviours - such things as death, sex, violence, and abuse - from the human to the animal world allows them to be more easily managed" (82). This function will be clearly seen in *Little Fur*, especially in *A Fox Called Sorrow*'s themes of suicidality and abuse. In recent years, ecocritics have re-examined anthropomorphized animals in children's stories and concluded that anthropomorphization can serve purposes beyond merely "[holding] up the mirror to our own behaviour" (Reynolds 82), and animal suffering need not always be read as metaphorical for human suffering. Battista, for example, argues that children's classic *Watership Down* "[gives] voice, agency and reason to a group of rabbit protagonists," and thus "urges us to identify with the nonhuman world so that we might begin to transform our anthropocentric orientation into a more ethical, ecocentric perspective" (159). Marion W. Copeland argues in favour of the ecocritical value of anthropomorphized animals in "The Wild and Wild Animal Characters in the Ecofeminist Novels of Beatrix Potter and Gene Stratton-Porter." To Copeland, anthropomorphism can be used "as a device to level the playing field" between humans and animals (78) and to foster appreciation for animals as individuals: "The characters' abilities to think and feel (and even to talk) is meant to provide proof of their sentience and, by extension, of

what might be gained by humans if they appreciated nonhuman neighbors as individuals" (77). To Copeland, this purpose puts into practise Patrick Murphy's ecofeminist principle of "recognition "of the "other" as a self-existent entity, a thing-in-itself" to be appreciated and respected rather than dominated or exploited" (qtd. in Copeland 77). Both Copeland and Battista's analyses are relevant to *Little Fur,* since Carmody's portrayal of the human world viewed through the eyes of speaking and thinking animals follows in the footsteps of children's classics like Beatrix Potter's *The Fairy Caravan* and Richard Adams's *Watership Down.*

In this chapter, I will briefly summarize the four *Little Fur* novels, with a focus on Carmody's portrayal of human-nature relationships, her protagonist Little Fur's role as healer, and her vision of the earth spirit. In my first section, "Magic as Emotional Connection," I argue that Carmody uses magic as a metaphor for connection, especially the wonder and awe that come from experiencing contact with other living beings and the living earth. Through environmental destruction, modern humans have become alienated from the lives of nonhumans, as well as from fully embodied experiences in the surrounding world. In my second section, "Disconnection as the Root of Cruelty," I explain how the *Little Fur* books posit that lack of connection with the world is the cause of human cruelty. Within this ideological framework, children are singled out as uniquely open to ecocentric perspectives, as I explore in my third section, "Little Fur as Child-Heroine and Children as Nature Heroes." Children in *Little Fur* intuitively understand the presence of magic in the world, but lose this understanding as they grow to adulthood. Finally, my last section, "*Little Fur*'s Hope for Ecological Awakening," I draw these ideas together and argue that, since cruelty in *Little Fur* comes from alienation from the world, and magic is connection and appreciation for the world, "healing" can be achieved and magic returned only if humankind learns to adopt an ecocentric perspective instead of an

anthropocentric one. Unlike Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide,* Carmody does not portray childhood and adulthood as strictly exclusive experiences. Rediscovering the magic of childhood is both possible and encouraged by the text of *Little Fur* as the first step towards healing adult alienation from the earth.

The first *Little Fur* book, *The Legend Begins*, introduces humans' destructive tendencies towards wilderness in the opening paragraphs:

> In the middle of a great, sprawling gray city was a place that no human had ever entered . . . The power that protected the wilderness came from seven ancient trees. They were all that remained of a marvelous grove of singing trees, which had once been part of a forest that had covered the land. Then humans came and cut down trees to make room for their black roads and high houses. The forest shrank, but the earth magic that flowed through the dead trees did not vanish. It was absorbed by the trees that remained until the seven singing trees were so saturated in magic that they were able to sink their roots deep enough into the ground to touch the earth spirit. When the earth spirit heard the song of the trees' sorrow, it bestowed upon them the power to dim the idea of the wilderness in the minds of humans, and so the chopping ended. (Carmody 1-2)

Carmody describes her protagonist, Little Fur, as a half-elf, half-troll humanoid, "[s]mall as a three-year-old human, with pointed ears and brambling red hair" (*A Fox Called Sorrow* 7). Little Fur's chief calling, skillset, and work is healing. To emphasize the importance of this role the narrative frequently labels Little Fur as "healer," including in her introduction to the reader:

> Little Fur was a healer. Within the wilderness she brought water and seeds to bare patches of earth and looked after new plants by pulling the grass aside to give them breathing space. She collected herbs to make poultices, salves and tisanes, and as she treated the

> wounds of small animals and birds that came seeking her help, she would sing to them, knowing that a wound to the body was only part of what was hurt. The spirit also needed healing. (Carmody, *Legend* 4-5)

This description exemplifies how Little Fur heals holistically, tending to flesh, earth, plant, and spirit alike. Little Fur is also characterized by her desire to protect the "earth spirit," the personification of earth magic, a living energy connecting all beings to "the flow of life" (185). In *The Legend Begins,* Little Fur embarks on a quest to find and awaken an "ancient power" in order to save the trees she loves from a group of human "tree burners" under the corruptive influence of the evil, earth-spirit-hating Troll King (70). Little Fur leaves the safety of the wilderness for the first time and navigates the alien world of a modern human city. She gradually gains an understanding of humankind, and finds her purpose in a human-dominated world: to reintroduce humans to the earth spirit by planting seeds throughout the city. *A Fox Called Sorrow,* the second book, begins with a summary of her mission:

> Little Fur thought that if she could just plant enough seeds, the earth spirit would flow so strongly through the city that humans could not help but feel it. Then they would cease to trollishly loathe and despoil nature.
>
> Little Fur knew that in a way, she was trying to heal humankind. The ambition made her want to laugh. She was so small and the city so large. Yet each time she set out into the streets, she could feel that her plantings were making a difference. The earth magic *was* flowing more strongly there than when she had first stepped out of the wilderness. (13)

A Fox Called Sorrow is about a quest to foil the Troll King's latest plot to destroy the earth spirit, but the story's most striking element is the fox Sorrow, Little Fur's companion on this quest. Sorrow wishes to die, because he "cannot bear [a] life in which there are things that can love the

pain of other living things" (195), but he has been unable to overcome his powerful instinct to live. Though themes of animal-human relationships run through all the *Little Fur* books, the genuinely harrowing story of Sorrow's past abuse in a human laboratory exemplifies the books' condemnation of practices that exploit animal pain for human understanding or profit.

A Mystery of Wolves tells the tale of Little Fur's journey into the mountains beyond the city to uncover the origin of her parents, who she has never met. The quartet's finale, *Riddle of Green,* resolves the mystery of the trolls' evil and the earth spirit's origin. When Little Fur is severed from the flow of earth magic, she travels to find its source: a well deep under the sea. At the source, where it is strongest, Little Fur speaks directly with the earth spirit, who tasks her with restoring magic to, and thus healing, the trolls. Though the whole *Little Fur* series is a journey of personal and spiritual growth, *Riddle of Green* has the strongest Bildungsroman elements. Little Fur's severing from earth magic gives her a taste of what it must be like to be human, and her journey to reconnect with magic models how human children can grow into ecologically oriented adults.

Nourishing all that Accepts its Flow: Magic as Emotional Connection In *Little Fur*

The world of *Little Fur* is one in which the magical creatures of folklore and myth such as fairies, pixies, elves, and trolls still live secretly in the modern world, but they are diminished in number and in power, survivors of "an earlier age of the world — the age of high magic" (Carmody, *Riddle* 3). The modern era is referred to as the "age of humans" (*Mystery* 189) due to human dominance over the earth. As Silk the lemming summarizes, "[t]here are humans almost everywhere . . . And where they are not, they will someday go" (*Riddle* 122). Although the world of *Little Fur* is a deeply magical one, magic can no longer be "worked", meaning it cannot be

drawn upon as a resource to reshape the physical world in the way that elves and wizards of the past age were able to use it (*Mystery* 189).[12] There are still many forms of magic enchanting the modern world, but a distinction is drawn between mythological "high magic" and "earth magic, which could not be worked but which nourished all life that accepted its flow" (*Riddle* 3). Earth magic exists in the form of the earth spirit, "*which seeks to unite all living things just as a mother strives for peace among her children*" (*Fox* 6, original emphasis). Humans are unaware of earth magic, and they have "weakened" and "smothered" the earth spirit "by hewing down trees and covering the green earth with their high houses and black roads" (*Riddle* 3). The earth spirit is capable of emotion; Little Fur feels its "delight as it surged strongly through green places where there were no humans to despoil them" as well as its "mourning" for patches of dead earth (*Legend* 100). Descriptions of the earth's pain in response to human actions like pouring weedkiller are dramatic and visceral, emphasizing the violence committed against the earth:

> Touching the moss protected [Little Fur] from the worst of the dying earth's pain, but she could easily tell that the ground had not only been savagely stripped of life, it had been deliberately poisoned. That was what had driven the earth spirit away. (131)

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[12] Carmody likely borrows her division of time into a pre-historic age of magic and a modern age of humans from the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. The *Little Fur* books are replete with references to Tolkien's books; for example, elves do not inhabit the human world because they "built boats shaped like swans and sailed away when humans came" (Carmody, *Legend* 7). Elves build swan-shaped ships in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (372) and *The Silmarillion* (61). In Tolkien, like in Carmody, the division of ages has magical and ecological significance. The elves' power maintains vast forests that "fade" in majesty when the elves depart and the age of "the Dominion of Men" over the earth begins (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion,* 298-99).

The final *Little Fur* book puts a spin on the concept of Earth Mother. The earth spirit explains, "*I was wild magic before I became the earth spirit — wild magic, as powerful and unaware as that blind tempest of power that flows through the great sea*" (*Riddle* 211).[13] Then Little Fur's mother, believing a sacrifice was necessary to ensure her infant daughter's future, sacrificed herself to the earth magic. The earth spirit tells Little Fur,

> *Your mother gave her whole life, and so worked a great shaping. She bound a great mass of magic not to stone, but to itself, and so what had been elemental power Became the earth spirit, who could think and feel and choose. And so the flow of earth magic through all things became infused with your mother's love for you. All at once it, or I, was filled with the desire to keep you safe. And as I grew and learned and continued to Become, I understood that to love and nourish you properly, I must love and nourish the world and the age in which you live.* (*Riddle* 224)

The revelation that earth magic has sapience because of Little Fur's troll mother is a minor subversion of the automatic gendering of the earth as female, even as it justifies viewing the earth in a motherly manner, infused as it is with the spirit of one particular mother.

Personifying the earth as a caring mother is, of course, not unique to *Little Fur*. "Mother Earth" is not only a literary trope, but also a political position in Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism*. Strategically, "the purpose of "[regarding] the earth as a living being which guarantees their own and all their fellow creatures survival" is to "resist its transformation into dead, raw material for industrialism and commodity production" (Mies and Shiva 19).

[13] The earth spirit's dialogue is denoted using italics rather than quotation marks. The italics in the text are not for emphasis, but to show the earth spirit speaking telepathically rather than aloud.

"Spirituality in this context endeavours to "heal Mother Earth" and to re-enchant the world" (18).[14] From this perspective, *Little Fur* is an unavoidably ecofeminist text. The character of the earth spirit literally enchants the earth and reframes the reduction of the earth to resources and the use of ecosystem-destabilising agents like weedkiller as cruel, causing pain to a living being. The *Little Fur* novels portray a world in which humanity needs ecological healing through the re-enchantment of the natural world. According to Alison Stone, re-enchantment is a response to the perception of a disenchanted modernity:

> By disenchantment is meant: (1) that we have ceased to see nature as an inherently meaningful order; (2) that we have come to assume that nature is devoid of mystery, wholly accessible to our understanding; and (3) that we no longer find nature "sacred," peopled by divine or demonic beings and worthy of reverence or dread. (231)

Environmental thinkers argue that disenchantment "encourages disrespectful and narrowly instrumental attitudes to nature, which are ultimately responsible for environmental destruction" (231-32). Writing about children's fantasy author Madeleine L'Engle, Monika Hilder argues that fantasy can be a "creative response to desacralization . . . a work of recovery in mythic imagination in which the material and the spiritual are shown as one indivisible reality" (245).

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[14] Mies and Shiva oppose a spiritual view of the earth to a scientific one. However, these worldviews are not exclusive. Copeland argues in her ecofeminist reading of Beatrix Potter's animal stories that "Potter meant to help her readers "find a magic that humans have lost" (Blount 139). But to Potter's scientifically oriented mind, real "magic" is the delicate balance created by the community of creatures and plants that share and maintain a habitat like the Lake District's" (73).

Carmody's earth spirit follows in this tradition, emphasizing the spirituality inherent in all living matter.

Magic in *Little Fur* is the experience of connection with other living things. The earth spirit can be felt flowing through plants, animals, earth, and stone alike, a comforting experience for Little Fur that is likened to a welcoming embrace when Little Fur reconnects after her severing from the flow of earth magic in the fourth book:

> Earth magic flowed to her feet and up through her body, right to the tips of each furled ear, with such force that she nearly fell over. Little Fur felt herself embraced and filled, all at the same time. (Carmody, *Riddle* 246)

Earth magic also strengthens bonds of love, like the bond Little Fur feels with her friends Ginger the cat and Crow that allows her to feel their emotions even when they are separated (*Fox* 117). All forms of magic, not only earth magic, operate to connect living beings to one another. In *The Legend Begins,* Little Fur sleeps in an old tree growing in the courtyard of a church, and experiences being "drawn so deeply into the tree's dreaming that she became the tree," feeling the tree's experiences, the "the sun on her leaves, turning them golden and brown, and the small sorrow that was their falling" (76). Little Fur attributes the dream to "the beaked house and the still magic it contained" (77). The beaked house is an old church, a place "full of a still magic[15] brought there unwittingly by humans when they came to sing and yearn" (*Mystery* 31):

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[15] The "still magic" is described as such in contrast to earth magic, which moves and flows. When Little Fur first enters the "beaked house," she is surprised to feel "[a] strange, still magic potent enough to make the hair stiffen on her neck. It felt how earth magic might feel if it were to build up in a great pool behind a dam. But Little Fur had no feeling that this power would ever overflow. It was as if the beaked house were a bottomless vessel" (Carmody, *Legend* 54).

> This was no ordinary church. Raised at the very cusp of the last age, it was a place where humans had brought hope for hundreds of years. So powerful was the accumulation of their longing that a still and potent magic[16] had pooled there. The [Sett Owl], who had retreated, wounded, to this church many years before, was saturated in it. (*Fox* 4).

Although the church's "still magic" was created by the accumulation of human emotions over centuries, it has a symbiotic relationship with the Sett Owl, a prophetic owl who lives in the church. The still magic allows the Sett Owl to interpret omens, see visions of the future, and "commune with the earth spirit" (*Fox* 6). As for the Sett Owl, she "had done for the still magic what [Little Fur's] mother had done for earth magic. She had shaped pure power and had given it purpose and will" (*Riddle* 230). The earth spirit is Little Fur's troll mother bonded to the wild magic of the earth like the Sett Owl is bonded to the still magic of the church. The relationships of Sett Owl with still magic and Little Fur's mother with earth magic show that magic needs a caretaker as much as creatures need magic to feel united with the world. The interspecies nature of these relationships—troll/earth and owl/human—emphasize the interdependence and inextricability of the future of all life on earth, regardless of origin or species.

It Wished to be Only Itself: Disconnection as the Root of Cruelty

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[16] Carmody's world is, by and large, not aligned with Christian beliefs; for example, Carmody's creatures believe they "join the world's dream" after death (*Fox* 74) and Carmody's spirituality is grounded in the earth, not in transcendence. The church's magic is born of the power of human gathering, emotion, and song. The act of gathering itself makes the location sacred, rather than the other way around (see also *Mystery* 46 for the magic of gathering).

According to the *Little Fur* books, the modern environment humans have built disconnects them from the fullness of life. By smothering the earth spirit and killing the land, humans cut themselves off from experiencing the spirituality of their environments. Furthermore, modern urban lifestyles, with their pollutants, sabotage the sensory connection creatures who live in urban environments *should* have with the world around them. Little Fur and the wild animals she interacts with rely on smell most heavily of all their senses. The default state for Carmody's creatures is being able to smell emotions and understand the intentions of a creature even through a language barrier (Little Fur understands human words only through smell, and is even capable of smelling lies). According to Little Fur, "creatures who dwelt with humans lost their proper sense of smell, so that they could only smell *things*, and not thoughts and ideas and feelings" (Carmody, *Legend* 9). Unused to urban smells, Little Fur's reactions to them are extreme; in just one of many examples, she recoils at the "queer, cold, metal-sulfur stink flow[ing]" from train tracks, thinking, "practically everything humans built smelled bad. There must be something in their human lives that killed their sense of smell, because after living with them, animals and birds also seemed to lose their proper nose for things" (114). Where Little Fur speculates humans lost their sense of smell, animals like Sly simply assume "[h]umans can't smell" (49). Carmody's privileging of smell over sight inverts the typical hierarchy of the senses in Western philosophy. Aristotle considered sight the noblest sense, and the use of sight as a metaphor for knowing has continued from Aristotle and Plato into modern English idiom such as, "I see what you're saying" (Peterson 447). Furthermore, Sigmund Freud viewed "the degree to which sight suppresses smell as a 'yardstick of civilization'" (Rothwell 241). To Freud, reliance on sight distinguished humans as superior to animals, "whose dominant sense is that of smell" (qtd. in Rothwell 242). Carmody posits that civilizational "advances" like urbanization

and modern technology smother humans' sense of smell, but, subverting Freud's view, this makes human perception *inferior* to animal perception. There is an additional layer to Carmody's olfactory descriptions, because, of course, the assumed human reader *can* smell, and Carmody's descriptions appeal to that sense. By describing "the delicious scent of human curiosity" (*Fox* 12), or human wonder as "the smell of ripe cherries and mushrooms and rain on hot grass" (*Legend* 104), Carmody portrays humans as contributing to nature's olfactory beauty, even as she appeals to the senses in order to remind readers of the benefit of connecting to nature through smell.

From lack of magic to lack of smell, Carmody presents human existence in a modern urban environment as isolating, even tragically self-centred. When humanity chose to cut itself off from the earth—for it was a choice—it sacrificed community and happiness in favour of a false independence and freedom. This is the story told at the end of *The Legend Begins*. The ancient being Little Fur awakens to complete her quest to stop the tree burners is a "tree guardian," a tree-like sentient creature with a strong resemblance to J. R. R. Tolkien's Ents[17]. Little Fur asks the tree guardian to make humans understand that they are as much a "part of the world" as any other living creature, not apart from or above it (Carmody, *Mystery* 172). The tree guardian agrees, saying she will "unravel the dream [humans] have made and let them see how

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[17] More specifically, Entwives, female Ents. The tree guardian tells Little Fur, "Once, in another dream, I helped humans who yearned to nurture and harvest for the wild world. That dream became a nightmare, for their true desire was to enslave all that was wild and use it for their own purposes" (175). Compare Tolkien's *The Two Towers*: "the land of the Entwives blossomed richly, and their fields were full of corn. Many men learned the crafts of the Entwives and honoured them greatly" (476).

their choices have shaped the world" (*Legend* 179). She sends a dream to all sleeping humans. The dream begins with people deconstructing a city, then continues to "[unmake] time":

> Soon all of the high houses were gone and the city was shrinking inward like a puddle of water drying up. All around it trees sprang into lovely, stately life. Black roads narrowed and melted away to become stony roads and then earthen tracks through dense woods . . . At last there was only a single cloth hut. A human emerged from it carrying an ax that glinted in the sunlight, and strode backward into the forest. It passed beneath all the wondrous majesty of the great trees without seeming to see them. Its expression was grim and brooding as it stopped beside a fallen giant of a tree. It watched as the tree rose gracefully to join its stump. The human moved forward and hacked at it with the ax, but instead of the ax's cutting into it, pieces flew back into place until the tree was whole. Little Fur saw the human's expression shift from arrogance to fear and then to confusion and, last of all, to awe. (181-3)

Little Fur asks what changed in the human. The tree guardian answers,

> At first the heart of the human was touched by the beauty and age of the tree, but then it saw how short its own life was and it became afraid. The human hewed the tree to sever itself from the flow of life . . . It wished to be only itself and to control all other things without having to care about anything but its own wants. (183)

Little Fur is unable to understand this perspective, "astonished" because "Death is part of the flow of life," to which the tree guardian replies, "Ah, but humans have cut themselves from the flow and so they see their dying as an end" (185). At this stage, humans are still mysterious to Little Fur; the use of the pronoun "it" reflects the distance Little Fur feels from humans, even as it depersonalizes, and thus lends a universal, fable-like quality to the human in the vision. Little

Fur only understands much later, after she herself is severed from the flow of earth magic, that "*cut off from the flow, you saw death as evil rather than natural*" (*Riddle* 217).

The tree guardian's tale of humanity's first ecological violence shares an ideological stance with Mies and Shiva's ecofeminism. Mies and Shiva argue, "the West's paradigm of science and concept of freedom are all based on overcoming and transcending" humanity's "dependence to Mother Earth" (18). For "the fathers of modern science and technology . . . this dependence was an outrage, a mockery of man's right to freedom on his own terms and therefore had to be forcefully and violently to be abolished" (18). In *Little Fur,* humanity's desire to "be only itself" is the root of misery and cruelty. The isolation caused by the initial severing leads humanity to seek "mastery" over nature in a misguided attempt to fill its inner emptiness.

When Little Fur is severed from the earth spirit in *Riddle of Green*, she is the closest to human she will ever be, a parallel made explicitly: "right now she was not like a troll or an elf; she was most like a human, because she could walk anywhere and feel nothing" (Carmody 102). It is the first time Little Fur recognizes beauty in "dead" human structures, but the experience is saturated with intense loneliness and "a despair so strong that it numbed her" (41):

> She gazed up at the forest of darkly gleaming high houses and saw a chilly beauty in them, for all their deadness . . . It was strange to think that this was how humans went through their cities, striding about without fear . . . *I ought to feel free,* Little Fur thought, but when she passed a stunted tree and couldn't reach down through the roots to commune with the seven ancient sentinels in her beloved wilderness, she felt alone. (89-91)

Feeling "the terrible silence of the mossy earth," Little Fur thinks, "*Perhaps [humans] build their roads to block out the deadness of the land*" (47). Furthermore, without the grounding

connection to the earth spirit and the other lives it touches, Little Fur struggles to regulate her emotions and, for the first time, experiences violent impulses when she is frustrated:

> Little Fur had a wild desire to shake the [Sett Owl]. The violence of the impulse shocked her, and she stepped back in dismay. Was this rage of emptiness and confusion what humans felt? And trolls? No wonder they did so much harm! (57)

Though the tree guardian's dream introduced the theme, Little Fur's severing reinforces the idea that cruelty comes from being separate—willingly or unwillingly—from the other lives inhabiting the earth. The endpoint of alienation from other living beings is a level of disconnection in which cruelty can be engaged in dispassionately. This is how *A Fox Called Sorrow* presents animal exploitation in scientific experimentation. When Sorrow confides in Little Fur near the end of the book, he tells her his life's story:

> Listen: I remember my birth. I was born inside a machine. I opened my nose and senses into a world of metal and wires and the smell of humans. The humans were the only warm things that smelled of life, and so I yearned for them. When they touched me, I licked at their hands, but they wore strange coverings that would not let me taste their scents. (196-97)

Sorrow came to love the first person to touch him with bare hands, "for there was nothing else to love" (197). Then, this same person "began to hurt" the fox (197). Sorrow "sniffed for his regret or even for guilt, but there was nothing" (198). Sorrow came to realize

> the human did not hate any more than he loved. It was as if I were dead in his hands. He smelled of nothing I could understand. But I made it my quest to learn what he did feel. To understand . . . Then, one day, it came to me what I could smell on the human when he

> was hurting me. He was hurting me with sky-fire, and I smelled that he was interested in the hurting . . . He was curious about what I would do next. (198)

On the one hand, the universality of Sorrow's experience of abuse[18] leads to a metaphorical reading: that Sorrow's tale displaces a difficult human subject onto a fox in order to be more easily handled by child readers. This is one effect of the passage. But the specifics—the laboratory setting, the scent-obscuring gloves, and the context of animal experimentation—cannot be dismissed. Sorrow's story exposes social incentives that permit human disregard for non-human subjectivity to the point that pain can be inflicted purely to satisfy curiosity. Sorrow's experience of alienation, being born "inside a machine" in a "world of metal and wires and the smell of humans" also provides insight into the world that created the humans capable of hurting Sorrow. Although Sorrow himself is not cruel to other creatures, his desire to die is framed as "seek[ing] to thwart nature," by the Sett Owl, who tells him "[t]hat is a very human desire . . . The human way is to set will against nature" (*Fox* 73).

An Answering Echo: Little Fur as Child-Heroine and Children as Nature-Heroes

Having established the ecofeminist ideology of *Little Fur* that seeks to expose and reform exploitative attitudes towards non-human life, I will now discuss the role of children in the novels. Carmody portrays children effortlessly exhibiting humanity's most positive traits, implying that humanity's return to nature would involve a return to the wonder of childhood. Young creatures are portrayed as naturally closer to magic and to the earth spirit than adult

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[18] Especially Sorrow's account of how the abuse started with "Small hurts to begin with, that I thought must be accidents. My instincts told me that such accidents could happen among those who were pack, for pain is not separate from love. So I accepted the pain" (Carmody, *Fox* 197).

individuals in *Little Fur,* possessed of a "distinct smell of wildness" (Carmody, *Fox* 44). Children are also more attuned to magic than adults. *A Fox Called Sorrow* opens with a description of various creatures' reactions to a magical thunderstorm filled with omens. Humans notice nothing amiss, with the exception of human children, who respond instinctively to a sense of danger: "Humans, blind and deaf to all but their own desires, could not easily read such signs. But as the storm gathered, children tossed in their beds and threw up an arm as if to ward off a blow" (1). Children are also capable of feeling the earth spirit, a fact that shocks Little Fur despite her mission being to strengthen the earth spirit enough that humans can feel it. A dog-shaped magical being named Wander tells Little Fur that he sometimes travels "with humans who can feel the earth spirit" (*Riddle* 109). In response to her disbelief, Wander clarifies, "they don't feel it all the time, and those that do are always very old or very young" (109). Children (and, in this one instance, the elderly) are not "blind and deaf" to the world around them in the way presented as typical of humans.

Rather than being a form of naivety, the clear-sightedness of youth is a form of wisdom. In response to Little Fur's comment that the owlet Gem is "too young to know what she says most of the time," Sly replies, "Some say the greatest wisdom is hidden inside a nut of foolishness. The trick is how to crack it open" (*Mystery* 57). *Mystery of Wolves* contains the series' only reference to a human who knows about magic and magical creatures. This person is portrayed as holding onto the truth from childhood stories, presumably myths and fairy tales, into adulthood. Balidor, a wolf who ate this human's soul, tells Little Fur "[t]he tales humans tell one another are full of clues, and even as a youngling, this human heard the truth hidden inside the tales. Unlike most of his kind, he did not forget those truths when he grew to maturity (165). According to Balidor, this human failed to convince others of his beliefs, and was considered by

most other humans to be a “madman” (166). However, the adult who maintained his belief in magic is morally ambiguous at best. He hoarded “rare and strange artifacts” (165) from magical creatures, even body parts, and wanted to take magic away from “a creature of the past ages of the world” in order to put it into himself (169). His actions support Little Fur’s view that humans “always wanted to possess things that interested them” (*Riddle* 196). Of all the humans portrayed in the *Little Fur* books who see Little Fur, it is only the child in *The Legend Begins* who exhibits pure joy, unadulterated by possession, over the sight. The following passage is Little Fur’s only interaction with a human child. The encounter is one of two key incidents that challenge Little Fur’s belief that humans are inherently bad:

> The small human gave off a scent that was richer and lovelier than anything she had ever smelled! It was the scent of the Old Ones mixed up with the smell of Crow telling his stories, and of Brownie galloping. It was the smell of ripe cherries and mushrooms and rain on hot grass.
>
> Enchanted, Little Fur found herself limping a few steps closer. The small human’s lips curved into a smile of delight, and Little Fur realized with wonder that seeing *her* was making the human smell like this . . .
>
> Little Fur knew that she ought to retreat, but something stopped her. Maybe it was the smallness of the human, or the longing in its voice, which woke an answering echo in her own heart, but she was on the verge of replying when she heard another human calling out. [. . . I]t spoke and its words were full of tenderness and love, soured slightly by a bitter under-scent of disbelief.

> The small human climbed down from the tree and Little Fur was horrified to smell herself in its words . . . the scent of disbelief given off by the other human grew stronger, and the incredible sweetness of the small human began to fade. (104-106)

It is clear the child's longing is positive and the adult's disbelief is negative. The "bitter under-scent of disbelief" is enough to sour the adult's "tenderness and love." Overall, *Little Fur* suggests that children have a pure, uncorrupted wisdom that allows them to see the magic of the world around them, but it is difficult to maintain childish innocence and clear-sightedness into adulthood when confronted by a disbelieving society. Uncorrupted by the influences of society, children are "naturally" filled with wonder and curiosity, and have no desire to hurt or possess other creatures. Carmody's human child is idealized, a vehicle for nostalgia for an ecologically intimate experience where the world seemed full of magic. The depiction of the human child speaks to adult desires for childhood, but the *Little Fur* books do speak directly to children, using Little Fur as a surrogate child to convey their message.

Little Fur and the child in the passage above are mutually enraptured with the other. Something in Little Fur calls to the "longing" in the child and the child's beautiful wonder entrances Little Fur. The fellow-feeling between Little Fur and child points to the way Little Fur is portrayed as a peer of the children reading her adventures. Though it is ambiguous whether or not Little Fur is a fully-grown elf troll, she operates narratively as a child, and as a relatable protagonist for the child reader. Carmody's physical descriptions of Little Fur compare her to human children. Little Fur is as "tall as a three-year-old human child" (*Legend* 2), and she resembles a human child enough that she is mistaken for one (*Riddle* 26). Furthermore, her relationship to the earth spirit is framed as a mother-daughter relationship. This theme becomes apparent when Little Fur learns her literal mother joined the earth spirit, and farewells her as

such: “in her heart she thought, *Goodbye, Mother. Goodbye, my daughter,* said the earth spirit” (228) Narratively, Little Fur follows a coming-of-age storyline. Vocabulary a child might not know is presented as a learning opportunity for Little Fur, such as when she hears the word “antidote” for the first time: “‘Antidote?’ Little Fur echoed. The word smelled like a potion to heal those poisoned by snake bite” (*Fox* 209). Other characters, framed as older or more worldly than Little Fur despite their shorter lifespans, often help Little Fur make sense of the world’s moral complexity. The Sett Owl explains to Little Fur that sometimes sacrificing an individual for the sake of the world is necessary: “A great darkness looms over the world, and if it comes, this one fox’s sickness will be as a single drop in a deluge of pain.” Little Fur asks, “You are saying that the earth spirit is more important than the fox?” and the owl responds with a simple “Yes” (92). In another example, Little Fur is “shocked” by her cat friend Sly’s cruelty in taunting a dog because “Sly liked it that the dog was hurt” (157). Sorrow explains to Little Fur, “Some creatures are like that . . . It is in their nature to walk the edges between things like safety and danger, pleasure and pain. It is the balancing they like, rather than one thing or the other.” (157) These are complex issues of morality repackaged for the pedagogical benefit of Little Fur, and, by extension, the child-reader.

Since Little Fur operates, in role and understanding, as a surrogate heroine for a child reading the books, it is reasonable to assume that Little Fur’s actions and lessons are meant to be instructive to children. The connection to Little Fur encourages children to do as Little Fur does. On the one hand, Little Fur is relatable, and on the other, she is aspirational. Little Fur is relatable to children as a small person in a small world, called upon to do great things the way the next generation is often looked to for hope in fixing the state of the world—in this case, the environmental degradation children inherit as part of the world. Little Fur frequently feels small

and overwhelmed by the enormity of the task in front of her. She wonders, "[h]ow could someone so small and unimportant possibly save all of the trees in the city? That was a task for a hero" (Carmody, *Legend* 159). But she soon realizes, "there are no such thing as heroes except in Brownie's stories.[19] There are only things that must be done and somebody must try to do them" (178). Little Fur's hope models a way that children can remain hopeful despite feeling small:

> *I am like a mouse nibbling at the edge of a mountain,* Little Fur thought as she stood up. But she was smiling as she closed her seed pouch. Being small, she had no contempt for small triumphs. If a mouse lived long enough, it might nibble away a mountain of cheese . . . There was no telling how many seeds she could plant before she entered the world's dream. (*Fox* 47-48)

Carmody presents children as Little Fur's peers, while building Little Fur up as a role model for children. The description of the human child seeing Little Fur and Little Fur's effect on the world around her combine to evoke both wonder and fellow-feeling amongst children. The *Little Fur* books, as a whole, interpellate[20] child readers as Little Fur's fellow small things. It calls on them to take action, external and internal: to plant seeds both literal and metaphorical, and to maintain the traits of curiosity and awe from childhood into adulthood.

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[19] Brownie is a pony, and Little Fur's friend.

[20] Giving animals and plants a voice in order to advocate for social reform is also a longstanding practice of children's literature. Maude Hines applies Althusserian interpellation, "in which we are hailed as certain types of subjects" (29) to the 1822 children's book *The Blue Flower; or, Henry's Shirt,* in which a speaking, feeling flax plant calls on children who wear clothes to harken to its suffering (16).

Healing Humanness: *Little Fur's* Hope for Ecological Awakening

Chapter 15 of *The Legend Begins* is titled "An Awakening" (172). The title refers both to Little Fur waking the tree guardian, and to the humans who will dream the tree guardian's dream and wake in the morning, hopefully changed. Little Fur sends "her own longing into [the dream] just as she sent her mind inside trees, and she had the strange sensation of being unraveled into the mist" (Carmody, *Legend* 186). Little Fur's dream is her experience, her essence—the contents of the book. Little Fur's stated hope is that understanding will lead humans to act differently. At the end of the first book, she reflects that, in order to counter trollish influence, "someone must work to claim [humans] for the earth spirit. The dream of the tree guardian might have helped some of them to resist their darkness, and perhaps some of them had woken with a longing to be part of the flow of life again. But many of them would wake and forget" (194). This is the birth of her seed-planting mission, "for each seed that grew would summon the earth spirit until the flow was strong enough to encompass humans" (195). Little Fur plants seeds in the hopes they will make humans "wake up" and feel the earth spirit, metaphorically planting the seeds of the understanding that "magic" is interconnectedness and "the rediscovery of the sacredness of life," not in an "other-worldly deity, in a transcendence, but in everyday life, in our work, the things that surround us, in our immanence" (Mies and Shiva 17-18).

The final book, *Riddle of Green*, bookends the themes of *The Legend Begins*. Little Fur's ultimate triumph in *Riddle of Green* is healing the trolls, not humanity. Despite Little Fur wanting to "heal humankind" (Carmody, *Fox* 13), the books reinforce that this is not her

responsibility. In Crow's words, "You not healer of humanness!"[21] (*Mystery* 21). Humans must choose to fix themselves, a point emphasized in *The Legend Begins*. When Little Fur asks the tree guardian if her dream "will make humans choose not to be bad?" the guardian replies,

> Halfling,[22] those who sleep this night will dream my dream, and they will understand the darkness in their natures, but whether this will make them choose to resist it, I do not know. Maybe they will rub their eyes and forget the dream. Humans are very good at forgetting. Almost as good as they are at not seeing. (184)

The earth spirit's comment, "*[t]here are dreams and then there is choosing*" (*Riddle* 227), calls back to the first book and emphasizes the power of choice.

Little Fur heals "trollkind" by "bring[ing] it to the flow of magic" (Carmody, *Riddle* 218), a healing and opening of the spirit that proves connection has the power to cure cruelty. As for humanity, *Riddle of Green* offers hope for the future by showing it is possible to reconnect with the earth spirit simply by willing it. This is the solution for Little Fur's severing. The earth spirit explains, "*all you needed to do was to will yourself back into the flow*" (217). Little Fur had not realized this was possible because she believed the severing was a "punishment" for the death of one of her patients as she tried to heal him (217). But the earth spirit does not punish, it only

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[21] Carmody uses alternate grammar to represent the different minds of some of her animal characters. Crow means "you don't heal humans," but the comment is layered, and operates thematically as a comment on the limits of Little Fur's healing; she cannot "heal" human nature.

[22] Another explicit reference to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.* By referring to Little Fur as "Halfling," the term used alternately with "Hobbit" by Tolkien, Carmody draws a parallel between Little Fur and Tolkien's small garden-loving creatures who are implied to still live secretly in the modern world (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 1).

waits for the return of its wayward children. *Little Fur* ultimately offers hope that ecological healing is open to all who choose. Carmody's hope that the soul of humanity can be re-wilded, just as Little Fur slowly brings wild spaces back to the city with her planting, offers a more encouraging message for children than Patrick Carman's harsh child/adult and city/wild distinctions in *The Dark Hills Divide*. To Carmody, growing up is not a child/adult divide, but an ongoing process of "Becoming" in which we are encouraged to become our best selves and to not lose our wonder. The earth spirit hopes that the current age of the world will "*last long and all the trolls and elves and humans and beasts and birds and others that inhabit it can have time to Become*" (*Riddle* 219). To become what (as Little Fur asks), the earth spirit does not know, because "*[t]hat is for each to discover"* (219). "Becoming" to Carmody means "to grow and change; to understand more" (230). By shifting from end-point to process, Carmody portrays any system or person as capable of change at any stage of life. In fact, only one character in *Little Fur* has reached the end of their Becoming and "Become all that she could be" (231): the Sett Owl, who, at the time of her death, has reached the end of a very long lifespan and "yearned to join the world's dream" (*Riddle* 230). Little Fur realizes that, even at the end of her adventures, she is "still Becoming" (231). Like the adult/child divide, *Little Fur* distinguishes between wild and city. But instead of being wholly separate spaces, city and wild can leak into one another. The message is the opposite of Carman's: change is lifelong, but it begins with a return to the wonder and awe of childhood.

Chapter 3

"Nostalgic for something I'd never known": The Discourses of Pollution and Pastoral in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson*

Percy Jackson and the Olympians is a five-book children's urban fantasy series by American author Rick Riordan consisting of *The Lightning Thief* (2005), *The Sea of Monsters* (2006), *The Titan's Curse* (2007), *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008), and *The Last Olympian* (2009). The books became a popular culture sensation.[23] Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson describe Riordan as

> a franchising phenomenon who has transformed the original five books not only into international best sellers but also into film adaptations (two at the time of this writing), merchandise, . . . day camps run by independent bookstores from Texas to Georgia to Brooklyn, and three related book series. (237)

The years since Nelson and Morey's 2015 article have seen additional *Percy Jackson*-related phenomena. Riordan has continued to publish spin-off books, the most recent of which at time of writing is the 2023 novel *The Sun and The Star*, co-authored with Mark Oshiro. In 2018, Riordan launched Rick Riordan Presents, an imprint of Disney Hyperion Publishing which aims "to publish great middle grade authors from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to let them tell their own stories inspired by the mythology and folklore of their own heritage" ("Rick Riordan Presents"). A new TV adaptation of the *Percy Jackson* novels by streaming service Disney+ is due to air in December 2023 (McNab).

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[23] In 2010, one year after the release of *The Last Olympian*, the Seattle Times reported that "Riordan's children's books have sold more than 20 million copies and in 35 countries" (MacPherson).

There is a small and growing body of scholarly literature on Riordan's books. The primary critical interests displayed in the English-language *Percy Jackson* scholarship are adaptation, pedagogy, and the presentation of American identities. Sheila Murnaghan analyzes *Percy Jackson* in her study of classical mythology retellings for child audiences that "present classical material as fun while also using it to educate" (347). Saffyre Falkenberg's analysis of cultural assimilation in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and the *Heroes of Olympus* sequel-series argues the texts reveal "a desire to pass Greek mythology on to children because of [its] significance to white American culture and the Western world in general, thereby inspiring younger generations to seek out or at least be able to know and reference culturally significant source texts" (82). Morey and Nelson show how carefully Riordan crafts his pedagogical message in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. "Riordan's saga," they argue, is deeply concerned with "educating children for effective citizenship" (237). However, none of these critics engage the question of how Riordan aims to teach *ecological* citizenship in *The Lightning Thief* and its sequels.[24]

The same environmental threads that I analyzed in the previous chapters—the association of children with nature, the giving of voices to non-human characters in order to advocate for environmentalist messages, and the encouragement of children to take responsibility for leading humanity into an ecologically wiser future—all run through Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels. While all of the novels I discuss were bestsellers, the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series

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[24] Jenny Tollstern's 2018 dissertation, *Pans Ande : En Ekokritisk Analys Av Rick Riordans Bokserie Om Percy Jackson* [*The Spirit of Pan : An Ecocritical Reading of Percy Jackson and the Olympians by Rick Riordan*] likely approaches this question, but I am unable to evaluate Tollstern's arguments, as only the title of the thesis has been translated out of Swedish.

alone enjoys lasting cultural impact to the present day. It is especially surprising that the environmental themes in this popular franchise have thus far gone under-investigated.

In this chapter I will summarize the basic premise of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, then discuss the books' engagement with environmental themes in three sections. First, I will discuss the role of pollution in Riordan's world with relation to human responsibility. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* understands ecological crisis overwhelmingly through the lens of pollution. Riordan's narrative on pollution draws from dominant narratives in American literature and culture that emphasize the destructiveness and immorality of human emissions. Though pollution is initially implied to be the result of humans tainting the environment, the resolution of Riordan's Pan storyline makes it clear that humans are not inherently pollutant. Second, I will explore how Riordan's use of the pastoral in mythological spaces and figures offers an ideal humans are encouraged to replicate. Finally, I will argue that the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series intends for its protagonists to wield their power in service of achieving a better, greener, world. Riordan's discourse of pollution individualizes a complex, systemic ecological crisis, but it also encourages a coalitional approach to resolving ecological issues based on a shared investment in a cleaner world.

At the beginning of the series, protagonist Perseus "Percy" Jackson is a twelve-year-old "troubled kid" living in Brooklyn, New York (Riordan, *Lightning* 1). Percy has always felt like an outsider, in part due to the impact of his learning disabilities on his schooling (7), and in part due to the supernatural dangers that have plagued him since he was a baby, and that nobody else seems to notice or acknowledge (40). Percy's world begins to make sense when he learns that the Olympian gods, monsters, and other figures from Greek mythology are living in modern

America and impacting the lives of their half-human, half-godly children—of which Percy is one. Morey and Nelson summarize Riordan's fusion of modernity and mythology:

> The series posits that the gods perennially migrate to whatever society serves its era as "the great power of the West" (*Lightning* 73), so that Olympus is currently moored somewhere over the Empire State Building and its denizens may appear garbed as beachcombers (Poseidon) or bikers (Ares). (235)

Percy gradually comes to embrace his place in this world of modernized Greek myths. He learns his absent father is the sea god Poseidon (Riordan, *Lightning* 126), and his best friend Grover is a satyr from "Camp Half-Blood,"[25] a summer camp where the demigod children of gods and humans live, play, and train to fight monsters under the protection and tutelage of Chiron, the centaur trainer of Hercules (82). Each *Percy Jackson* book follows a single quest with a repeating basic structure: one of Percy's friends or loved ones is endangered;[26] following a prophecy from Camp Half-Blood's Delphic Oracle, Percy and his companions embark on a dangerous quest that involves criss-crossing America, fighting monsters and escaping mythological dangers, until they reach their destination and confront the book's final antagonist. Frequently the villain will not be exactly who or what Percy was expecting; uncovering

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[25] The books use "demigod" and "half-blood" interchangeably to refer to a child of one human and one Greek-god parent. I use "demigod," aside from references to the camp, because of the problematic racial history of the term "half-blood" (a history Riordan later acknowledges when his first Native American character (Piper, who is half-Cherokee and half-Aphrodite) comments that the term as applied to mixed-race children is "never a compliment" (*The Lost Hero* 33).

[26] The fourth and fifth books vary the formula: in *The Battle of the Labyrinth* Camp Half-Blood is in danger, while in *The Last Olympian* the danger has escalated to threaten Mount Olympus.

deception or betrayal is a recurring feature of the series.[27] Across all five books, the overarching plot consists of Percy's ongoing struggle to prevent "ancient Titans led by Kronos, a figure as dignified as he is terrifying" (Morey and Nelson 245), from rising from the Underworld prison of Tartarus and destroying Olympus. With the help of his friends, Percy is ultimately victorious over Kronos. At the end of the final book, the gods offer Percy a reward for saving Olympus: godhood and immortality for himself. Percy, who has seen the gods' many failings over the course of his lifetime, refuses the offer, asking instead for a series of reforms. Percy asks the gods to swear to acknowledge all of their half-human children, so that no more demigods feel abandoned or uncertain of their parentage. He also asks the gods to expand Camp Half-Blood to include cabins and recognition for the children of all gods who do not have thrones on Olympus (Hades is the major one; then there are "minor gods" like Hecate, Nemesis, Janus, etc.); and, finally, to pardon all Titans and children of Titans who did not fight with Kronos against Olympus (Riordan, *Last* 352-53). That Percy's journey as a hero concludes with him rejecting a personal reward, and instead using his power to demand justice for the disenfranchised individuals he has met on his quests, will be central to the theme of personal responsibility I discuss in this chapter's third section.

Pillaging Pan's Kingdom: Human Responsibility in a Polluted World

According to Greg Garrard, the word pollution initially "denoted moral contamination of a person," but was "gradually transformed into an exterior or objective – in fact, specifically environmental – definition between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries . . . indicating the

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[27] See also Morey and Nelson's analysis of Riordan's cultivation of "productive paranoia" as an instrument for encouraging critical thinking in child readers (246).

deep cultural roots of the fear attaching to such immoral emissions" (8). Garrard's definition of pollution as "immoral emissions" helps frame Riordan's depiction of litter, light, and chemical pollution. As Lawrence Buell demonstrates, the discourse of toxicity, or the "expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 31), is a major cultural discourse in America. The defining tropes of Buell's "toxic discourse" consist of "the shock of awakened perception" experienced when a safe-seeming environment betrays hidden chemical dangers (35), "totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration" (38), an underdog narrative, or "moral passion cast in a David versus Goliath scenario" against "a common enemy of corporate greed" (40), and "gothic" descriptions of squalid conditions in the genre of the environmental exposé (42). In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Riordan engages with "toxic discourse" in a manner that showcases evolving cultural anxieties around pollution in modern America.

The American landscape as painted by Riordan—cities, deep woods, rivers, and shorelines alike—is contaminated with smog, foul smells, light pollution, and ever-present litter. Percy describes "walking through the woods along the New Jersey riverbank, the glow of New York City making the night sky yellow behind us, and the smell of the Hudson reeking in our noses" (*Lightning* 168). There are "[c]louds of silt and disgusting garbage—beer bottles, old shoes, plastic bags" at the bottom of the Mississippi River (212). When Percy walks into the Pacific Ocean from Santa Monica beach, Annabeth tries to stop him, saying, "You know how polluted that water is? There're all kinds of toxic—" (270). No corner of the world is free from "toxic penetration" (Buell, *Writing* 38). Even the remotest corners of the magical world (with some notable exceptions I will discuss later) are filled with human waste. The River Styx in Hades's Underworld is as full of garbage as the Mississippi:

> Charon was poling us across a dark, oily river, swirling with bones, dead fish, and other, stranger things—plastic dolls, crushed carnations, soggy diplomas with gilt edges.
>
> "The River Styx," Annabeth murmured. "It's so…"
>
> "Polluted," Charon said. "For thousands of years, you humans have been throwing in everything as you come across—hopes, dreams, wishes that never came true. Irresponsible waste management, if you ask me." (Riordan, *Lightning* 289)

The American equivalents of Ancient Greek river gods have integrated the pollution into their very beings. In *The Last Oympian*, when Percy bribes the gods of New York's Hudson and East Rivers with a sand dollar containing Poseidon's power "to sweep pollution away" (Riordan 180), he notes the East River's "radiation green" eyes and the Hudson River's "chain-mail coat made of bottle caps and old plastic six-pack holders" (178). The Hudson and the East practically beg for the long forgotten feeling of cleanliness the magic of Poseidon can (temporarily) grant: "'Oh, man,' Hudson whimpered, reaching out for the sand dollar. 'It's been so long since I was clean'" (180). As New Yorkers, Percy, Hudson, and East inhabit the city Andrew Ross calls, "Hollywood's perfect toxic landscape . . . a city teeming with biological perils. Surely no other city has had such a fantastic bestiary of historical residents – from alligators to ninja turtles – in its sewage tunnels" (qtd. in Garrard 14). The fear of pervasive contamination in Riordan's texts, expressed through the perspectives of characters for whom a lack of pollution is a distant memory—or, in Percy's case, entirely unknown, represents a shift away from Buell's toxic discourse trope of "awakened perception" (*Writing* 35). Buell focuses on public discourse arising after the publication of Rachel Carson's pesticide exposé *Silent Spring* (1962) through to the 1990s. The exposé genre itself presupposes a public previously ignorant of chemical dangers, newly shocked by the "betrayal" of their sense of safety (39). Writing in the mid-to-late 2000s,

Riordan creates, in Percy, an urban protagonist who never expected safety from his surroundings; "for you non-sea-god types out there, don't go swimming in New York Harbor," Percy's narration tells the audience: "It may not be as filthy as it was in my mom's day, but that water will still probably make you grow a third eye or have mutant children when you grow up" (Riordan, *Last* 177). Having grown up surrounded by "biological perils," Percy's "awakening" is instead to the possibility of a healthier world.

Camping in a clearing in the woods "littered with flattened soda cans and fast-food wrappers" (Riordan, *Lightning* 188), Percy learns of his friend Grover's dream to find and awaken Pan, the "God of Wild Places" (189):

> ". . . *This* makes me sad." [Grover] pointed at all the garbage on the ground. "And the sky. You can't even see the stars. They've polluted the sky. This is a terrible time to be a satyr."
>
> "Oh, yeah. I guess you'd be an environmentalist."
>
> He glared at me. "Only a human wouldn't be. Your species is clogging up the world so fast… ah, never mind. It's useless to lecture a human. At the rate things are going, I'll never find Pan."
>
> . . . A strange breeze rustled through the clearing, temporarily overpowering the stink of trash and muck. It brought the smell of berries and wildflowers and clean rainwater, things that might've once been in these woods. Suddenly I was nostalgic for something I'd never known. (188-89)

By framing this conversation in the littered clearing, Riordan associates Grover's comment about humans "clogging up the world" with material and light pollution—emissions that are immoral due to the lack of regard for how they affect non-humans. The accusation, "[o]nly a human"

would not be an environmentalist, singles humans out as uniquely polluting. Grover attributes successful human dominion over the earth to the death of Pan:

> "The God of Wild Places disappeared two thousand years ago," he told me. "A sailor off the coast of Ephesos heard a mysterious voice crying out from the shore, "Tell them that the great god Pan has died!" When humans heard the news, they believed it. They've been pillaging Pan's kingdom ever since. But for the satyrs, Pan was our lord and master. He protected us and the wild places of the earth. We refuse to believe that he died. In every generation, the bravest satyrs pledge their lives to finding Pan. They search the earth, exploring all the wildest places, hoping to find where he is hidden . . ." (189)

Pan, famous in Greek mythology as a "lustful and sportive nature-spirit," is more commonly known as a fertility god of "shepherds and flocks," and of "the wild countryside" (March 382). Riordan's Pan is purely the "God of Wild Places." Riordan's adaptation of Pan's death closely resembles the classical version in content,[28] but thematically recontextualizes the anecdote. Pan's death has historically been interpreted through a Christian lens,[29] an interpretation *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* thoroughly rejects. The series alludes to religious beliefs only in *The Lightning Thief,* when Percy misinterprets Chiron's explanation of the Olympians to mean "there's such a thing as God"; Chiron replies "God—capital *G*, God. That's a different matter altogether. We shan't deal with the metaphysical" (Riordan 67). The refusal to engage with

[28] See March 382.

[29] According to Jennifer R. March, "Christians took the statement to refer to the death and resurrection of Christ, and to signify the death of the pagan gods and the end of the pagan era" (382). See Borgeaud for a detailed discussion of the phrase, "the great god Pan is dead."

"capital *G*, God," characterizes the rest of the series. In other words, the roots of Riordan's ecological crisis are insistently secular.

Each time Pan makes a narrative appearance, Percy must confront human responsibility in the destruction of the environment. In his first conversation with Grover, Grover tells Percy the shared belief that "Pan can still be awakened" is "the only thing that keeps us [satyrs] from despair when we look at what humans have done to the world" (Riordan, *Lightning* 190). The next time Grover feels the presence of Pan is two books later. Percy perceives the smell of "[f]resh air seasoned with wildflowers and sunshine" (*Titan* 166), but only Grover and Zoë Nightshade are able to identify the presence of Pan (174). Zoë is a lieutenant of Artemis[30] and a nature spirit, though Percy does not yet know her origins. When Percy's friends discuss the presence of Pan, Zoë laments the proliferation of human emissions: "[w]hole constellations have disappeared because of human light pollution" (177). When Percy responds, "You talk like you're not human," Zoë tells him, "I am a Hunter. I care what happens to the wild places of the world. Can the same be said for thee?" (178). Like Grover before, Zoë implies that blame falls on Percy simply for being human. Based on these exchanges, Riordan's pollution discourse initially seems primed to "perpetuate a harmful distinction between nature, seen as wild and pure . . . and the toxic taint of humanity" (Garrard 15). Grover even implies that Pan and humans should not mix when he tells Percy and Annabeth, "I wish you could come with me, guys, but humans and Pan…" (Riordan, *Lightning* 357; Grover trails off without finishing his sentence). It initially seems that Pan's wild places subscribe to "an idea of wilderness, in which any modification of the environment [by humans] is a form of contamination" (Garrard 78)—the same problematic depiction I discussed in my analysis of Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills*

[30] The "Goddess of the Hunt" (*Titan* 28).

Divide. But the series' later books revisit the depiction of "the Wild" and recenter Riordan's pollution discourse firmly on the role of personal responsibility rather than on humanity as contaminant.

Grover, Percy, and their companions find Pan in the fourth book, *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, in an "unexplored" area of the Carlsbad Caverns (Riordan 311). Pan reveals that he has been dying for two thousand years, his prolonged existence "more like a memory" (314), persisting only due to the satyrs' collective unwillingness to let him rest in peace: "You sweet, stubborn satyrs refused to accept my passing. And I love you for that, but you only delayed the inevitable. You only prolonged my long, painful passing, my dark twilight sleep. It must end" (314). Pan explains that gods can die, or "fade . . . when everything they stood for is gone. When they cease to have power, and their sacred places disappear" (314). Pan is dying because his "realm above is gone . . . Only pockets remain. Tiny pieces of life" (313). Pan is depicted as calm and dignified as he delivers his environmentalist directive:

> "You have found me. And now you must release me. You must carry on my spirit. It can no longer be carried by a god. It must be taken up by all of you."
>
> Pan looked straight at me with his clear blue eyes, and I realized he wasn't just talking about the satyrs. He meant half-bloods, too, and humans. Everyone.
>
> " . . . You must tell each one you meet: if you would find Pan, take up Pan's spirit. Remake the wild, a little at a time, each in your own corner of the world. You cannot wait for anyone else, even a god, to do that for you." (315-16)

Pan addresses the teenage characters present and absolves them of the misdeeds of previous generations. He tells Rachel, the daughter of a wealthy human land developer (319), not to feel guilt for her father's actions: "I know you believe you cannot make amends . . . But you are just

as important as your father" (316). In doing so, Pan provides child readers with the hope that a new generation—their generation—can do what their parents' generations have not. Furthermore, the fact that Pan tasks humans with remaking the wild means human intervention cannot be incompatible with Pan's idea of wilderness. What, then, is Riordan's ideal for living with nature?

Anywhere and Nowhere: The Pastoral Ideal as Elegy and Utopia

To stand against the image of a polluted modernity, Riordan builds a mythological world imbued with nostalgia for a pastoral pre-modernity. Greg Garrard analyzes the American pastoral, an heir to ancient Greek literature, arguing that in American writing, pastoral "continues to supply the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilization for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal" (54). Pastoral is situated in a rural "middle landscape," in which the (human) subject "is spared the deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness" (Leo Marx, qtd in Garrard 41). According to Garrard, pastoral continues to hinge on "two key contrasts" from the Hellenic period: "the spatial distinction of town (frenetic, corrupt, impersonal) and country (peaceful, abundant), and the temporal distinction of past (idyllic) and present ("fallen")" (39). Because of the temporal distinction, "pastoral has always been characterised by nostalgia" (41). The Garden of the Hesperides and Calypso's island of Ogygia are prime examples of Riordan's pastoral utopias. These locations reflect the classic pastoral themes of retreat from civilization, well-tended abundant nature, and nostalgia for a simpler, more primal, past.

Riordan's mythological beings are suffused with nostalgic longing for an indeterminate earlier time when the world was cleaner. Immortal characters living in or learning about the

modern world express dismay at how much the world has changed. For example, Zoë claims that "[i]n the old days, there were more [constellations]" (Riordan, *Titan* 177). But "the old days" Zoë remembers are implied to be in the mythic, not the historic, past. While travelling with Zoë, Percy experiences events from her backstory in a dream. In the dream, Percy is not himself—he is Hercules,[31] visiting the Garden of the Hesperides.[32] The dream reveals that Zoë was one of the Hesperides, and shows the source of Zoë's nostalgia: "A million stars blazed above. We were running through tall grass, and the scent of a thousand different flowers made the air intoxicating" (157). The description of the smell of flowers in the mythological time of Hercules is reminiscent of the smell of Pan's presence: the "[f]resh air seasoned with wildflowers and sunshine" Percy smells when Grover and Zoë sense Pan's distant presence (166), and "the smell of berries and wildflowers and clean rainwater" in the woods when Grover first mentions Pan, that make Percy "nostalgic for something [he's] never known" (*Lightning* 189). Pan himself is portrayed as a relic of the distant past. Riordan's protagonists meet Pan surrounded by famously extinct animals like the mammoth, the Tasmanian tiger, and the dodo bird:

> In the center of the cave stood a Roman-style bed, gilded wood shaped like a curly U, with velvet cushions. Animals lounged around it—but they were animals that shouldn't have been alive. There was a dodo bird, something that looked like a cross between a

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[31] Riordan uses the more easily recognizable Roman equivalent instead of Greek Herakles.

[32] The Hesperides (literally, "Daughters of Evening,") are nymphs living in a garden to the west of the sunset. The Garden of the Hesperides is where the Titan Atlas holds up the sky and where the nymphs, with the help of the dragon Ladon, guard an apple tree bearing golden apples. Hercules's eleventh labour was to steal the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides (March 247). Riordan's version is similar, but he makes Atlas the Hesperides' father (*Titan* 261).

wolf and a tiger, a huge rodent like the mother of all guinea pigs, and roaming behind the bed, picking berries with its trunk, was a wooly mammoth.

On the bed lay an old satyr. (*Battle* 312)

The parallel between Pan and the "animals that shouldn't have been alive" is made explicit when Nico, a demigod son of Hades, and an authority on death-related matters, says Pan "should have died long ago" (314). Riordan implies that, like Pan, the concept of the wild itself has been nearly extinct for so long as to have become mythological.

The image of a nostalgic, mythological pastoral as a site of retreat and rest cut off from the contamination of the modern world reaches a pinnacle in Riordan's depiction of Calypso and Ogygia. The Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey* is a "nymph and goddess," the daughter of Atlas (March 110). Odysseus washes up onto "the lush and beautiful island of [Ogygia]," where "Calypso, falling in love with him, keeps him there as her lover for seven years while all the time he longs to return home to rocky Ithaca, his homeland" (110). Riordan's Calypso episode recreates numerous details from *The Odyssey*, with Calypso offering Percy immortality and a home on her island paradise. Homer's Ogygia is "idyllic" in contrast to rocky Ithaca in order to emphasize Odysseus's homesickness (March 354). Riordan's Ogygia is also idyllic; Percy falls asleep "to the sound of the fountains and the smell of cinnamon and juniper" (Riordan, *Battle* 212). Calypso's garden is a picture of abundance with "six different colors of roses, lattices filled with honeysuckle, [and] rows of grapevines bursting with red and purple grapes that would've made Dionysus sit up and beg" (213). Riordan's Calypso falls into what Garrard describes as a "naïve" or "sentimental" approach to pastoral, "in which the ancients enjoyed an intuitive and unalienated relationship to nature that is inaccessible today" (50):

> Sometimes [Calypso] would hold out her hand and birds would fly out of the woods to settle on her arm—lorikeets, parrots, doves. She would tell them good morning, ask how it was going back at the nest, and they would chirp for a while, then fly off cheerfully. (Riordan, *Battle* 215)

Calypso stands for the "natural" in the pastoral "contrast of civilised poetic artifice and [the] "naturalism" to which it is conventionally opposed" (Garrard 40). Looking at Calypso in her garden at night, Percy thinks:

> I've seen the goddess of love herself, Aphrodite, and I would never say this out loud or she'd blast me to ashes, but for my money, Calypso was a lot more beautiful, because she just seemed so natural, like she wasn't trying to be beautiful and didn't even care about that. She just *was.* (Riordan, *Battle* 212)

Unlike Homer's Calypso, Riordan's Calypso does not try to keep the hero with her; she gives Percy the choice to stay or leave and allows him to make it of his own free will, although she grieves his departure (223-24). Like Calypso, the idyllic Ogygia acquires a new narrative purpose in *Percy Jackson*: to contrast not only city and country, but past and present. Ogygia is a place out of time, a "phantom island" that "exists by itself, anywhere and nowhere" (211). Calypso cannot leave—she has been under "house arrest" since the mythological first war of the Olympian gods against the Titans, when she sided with her father, Atlas (217).[33] Calypso has never seen a modern polluted world, and her perspective is the opposite of Percy's, as shown in their conversations. While Calypso gardens, Percy tells her offhandedly, "my mom always wanted a garden" (213). When Calypso asks why "did she not plant one?" Percy replies, "[w]ell, we live in Manhattan. In an apartment" (213). Calypso has no frame of reference for either the

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[33] A further parallel between Zoë Nightshade and Calypso is that they share the same father.

word “Manhattan” or the word “apartment,” so Percy tries to explain: “Manhattan’s a big city, with not much gardening space” (213). Calypso tells him,“That is sad. Hermes visits from time to time. He tells me the world outside has changed greatly. I did not realize it had changed so much you cannot have gardens” (213-14). Later, when Percy chooses to leave Ogygia, Calypso farewells him by asking, “Plant a garden in Manhattan for me, will you?” (225). Ogygia, like Pan, inspires nostalgia, but it also seeds in Percy the desire to recreate his own world slightly more in the image of this utopian ideal. At the end of *The Battle of the Labyrinth,* Percy plants a “moonlace” cutting from Ogygia in his mother’s apartment’s planter box, and the plant thrives (360). Bringing a small piece of Calypso’s utopia into urban Manhattan is not only an emotional act of memorialization—though that is the meaning foregrounded in the narration—it also advocates for a form of ecological idealism. Like Pan’s directive to “[r]emake the wild, a little at a time, each in your own corner of the world” (316), Percy planting Calypso’s moonlace in his mother’s apartment window advocates for an incremental re-creation of a past ecological ideal in the modern world.

Additionally, Pan and Calypso are good examples of how Riordan’s mythological creatures are associated with well-tended, not “pristine” or “untouched” nature.[34] Calypso is a gardener. Pan states his cave is “one of the last wild places” (Riordan, *Battle* 313), but Pan’s definition of wild evidently allows craftsmanship of natural resources: Pan reclines on a bed of shaped, gilded wood, wearing reed pipes around his neck (312). Discussing the trope of wilderness, Garrard argues:

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[34] The so-called “purity” of wilderness “is often achieved at the cost of an elimination of human history” (Garrard 77).

> If pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds – particularly the United States, Canada, and Australia – with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinctions between the forces of culture and nature. (67)

Riordan's fusion of Greek mythology and American modernity imports an "Old World construction of nature" to the United States, calling back to an ancient Greek agricultural ideal. The fact that the wild is not antithetical to human care and cultivation avoids the pitfalls Garrard identifies in thinking of "true wilderness" as untouched, uncorrupted by humanity: "[t]his model not only misrepresents the wild, but also exonerates us from taking a responsible approach to our everyday lives"; by presenting "our working and domestic lives [as] effectively irredeemable" (78). Morey and Nelson argue that Riordan upholds Greek mythology as an imparter of important lessons. Clearly, one ideal Riordan wishes to impart from the classics is a pastoral tradition of care and craftsmanship.

"I'm Not Hercules": Community-building as Heroic Environmental Action

Having explored the *Percy Jackson* books' depictions of environmental crisis and environmental ideals, I will now turn to Riordan's depiction of environmentalist action. More precisely, how do Riordan's books encourage children to engage with the non-human world as responsible environmental citizens? The answer to this question can be found in Percy's departure from the mythological heroes depicted as his predecessors. Percy's adventures frequently recreate specific events from Greek mythology, like washing up on Calypso's island or trespassing in the Garden of the Hesperides. But Riordan does not merely recycle classical material for referential or parodic purposes. Percy has to learn to be better than his heroic

predecessors, whose selfish pursuit of their goals caused harm to someone less powerful — usually a woman, a child, a nature spirit, or all of the above. By finding new solutions to the problems faced by heroes like Theseus, Odysseus, or Hercules, Riordan criticizes the hierarchical worldview of his source material. This critique is essential to avoid recreating what Garrard calls the "[d]estructive "hyper-separated" and hierarchical sexual and gender oppositions" that plague both American settler and Ancient Greek pastoral traditions (61).

Garrard explores how the American nature writing canon reflects gendered fantasies of conquest: "as a desirable Other of a self-consciously virile frontier society, the land might well become a lover to be subdued by aggression" (56). This "androcentric" settler pastoral is rooted in "an essentially adolescent masculine symbolic order" (57). This symbolic order has its origins at least partially in classical literature. According to Chris Eckerman, the Ancient Greeks believed "that it is legitimate for humans to control the earth" (80), and Greek myths commonly include anthropomorphized "imagery of land as female" (84). Eckerman calls this "an early example of the dominant narrative of the Euro-masculinist West, which has largely viewed geological and biological phenomena as feminine objects fit for subjugation and exploitation" (88).[35] When Riordan's Dionysus tells Percy "you heroes never change . . . You take what you want, use whoever you have to, and then you betray everyone around you. So you'll excuse me if I have no love for heroes. They are a selfish, ungrateful lot. Ask Ariadne. Or Medea. For that matter, ask Zoë Nightshade" (*Titan* 124) it is significant that all of Dionysus's examples are women, and Zoë is also a nature spirit—a nymph. Although nymphs in Greek mythology are

[35] Eckerman's analysis focuses on the depiction of Rhodes (the island and anthropomorphized goddess) in Pindar's "Olympian 7," but argues that this depiction is characteristic of standard Ancient Greek objectification of land and nature as female (81).

“female spirits of nature” (March 336), the word in ancient Greek simply meant “girl” or “bride” (Eckerman 85). Riordan’s nature spirits are still depicted as “beautiful young girls” (March 336), but his portrayal transforms them from objects that exist primarily to be “amorously involved (willingly or unwillingly) with gods or men” (March 336) to speaking, active subjects. Riordan’s nymphs are defenders of nature who fiercely resist incursion and whose experiences comment on the gendered power imbalance to which nymphs in mythology were subjected. Although there are many examples of Percy confronting the wrongs of mythological heroes, Percy learning not to follow in the footsteps of Hercules showcases the ecological aspect of gendered oppression.

Twice, Percy talks to female nature spirits victimized by Hercules, and chooses to find common ground with the nymph rather than with Hercules. The first nymph is Zoë, Percy’s companion on their quest in *The Titan’s Curse.* Zoë tells Percy that she was exiled from the Garden of the Hesperides because she “betrayed [her] family and helped a hero” (Riordan 205). Percy is confused as to why Zoë seems to act like he should know which hero she’s referring to, and Zoë responds, “Don’t all you boys want to be just like him?” (204). In the same conversation, however, a parallel is also drawn between Percy and Zoë—Zoë’s mother is Pleione, “a water goddess,” (204) while Percy is the son of Poseidon. Throughout *The Titan’s Curse*, Percy finds himself following in Hercules’s footsteps. He acquires the Nemean Lion skin, just as Hercules did as his first labour (March 236), but, when Percy realizes it was Hercules who betrayed Zoë, he throws the skin away. The moment is presented as a heroic decision:

> “Are you sure? That lion skin… that’s really helpful. Hercules used it!”
>
> As soon as [Grover] said that, I realized something.

> I glanced at Zoë, who was watching me carefully. I realized I *did* know who Zoë's hero had been—the one who'd ruined her life, gotten her kicked out of her family, and never even mentioned how she'd helped him: Hercules, a hero I'd admired all my life.
>
> "If I'm going to survive," I said, "it won't be because I've got a lion-skin cloak. I'm not Hercules." (Riordan, *Titan* 243)

Percy's determination to not be Hercules is tested in the following book, *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, when Percy's friends are captured by Geryon—reimagined as a Texan rancher—and Percy offers to clean Geryon's stables in exchange for his friends' freedom.[36] When he arrives at the river crossing Geryon's ranch, he realizes that he is not the first person to be given this labour, nor the first person to think of diverting the river:

> When I got to the river, I found a girl waiting for me. She was wearing jeans and a green T-shirt and her long brown hair was braided with river grass. She had a stern look on her face. Her arms were crossed. "Oh no you don't," she said.
>
> . . .
>
> "Oh, save it, sea boy. You ocean-god types always think you're soooo much more important than some little river, don't you? Well let me tell you, *this* naiad is not going to be pushed around just because your daddy is Poseidon . . . The last guy who asked me this favor—oh, he was way better-looking than you, by the way—he convinced me, and that was the worst mistake I've ever made! Do you have any idea what all that horse

[36] This is a combination of Hercules's fifth and tenth labours—the fifth is to clean the stables of Augeas in one day, and the tenth is to rustle the cattle of Geryon. Augeas's stables had never been cleaned, so, in order to accomplish the task, Hercules diverts the courses of two rivers (March 236-37).

manure does to my ecosystem? Do I look like a sewage treatment plant to you? My fish will die. I'll *never* get the muck out of my plants. I'll be sick for years. NO THANK YOU!" (150-51)

As the naiad rants at him, Percy hears "a little quiver in her voice" and realizes her bravado is just that: "she was afraid of me. She probably thought I was going to fight her for control of the river, and she was worried she would lose. The thought made me sad. I felt like a bully, a son of Poseidon throwing his weight around" (151). This thought makes Percy back down. He promises the naiad he will not fight her, but simply tells her that he wants to save his friends. Ultimately, the naiad helps Percy out of kindness and gives him the key to cleaning Geryon's stables.[37] Her parting words to Percy are:

> "You're not so different from me, demigod. Even when I'm out of the water, the water is within me. It is my life source." She stepped back, put her feet in the river, and smiled. "I hope you find a way to rescue your friends."
>
> And with that she turned to liquid and melted into the river. (152)

In the case of the naiad and Zoë Nightshade, Percy has to choose between taking an action that benefits only him and thinking of the needs and feelings of others. Percy must learn to responsibly exercise power without abusing the less powerful, and he is rewarded with help and friendship.

[37] The naiad tells Percy, "Millions of years ago, even before the time of the gods, when only Gaea and Ouranos reigned, this land was under water. It was part of the sea," and shows him petrified seashells in the dirt. Percy realizes that he can use his powers as Poseidon's son and the shells' memory of the sea to summon spouts of seawater in the middle of Texas (152-53).

The naiad on Geryon's ranch both exemplifies the changes in Riordan's nymphs from their mythological precedents and draws together Riordan's environmental ethic of solidarity. The naiad is given a voice and presented as a responsible ecological steward, capable of advocating for her river's needs in modern, scientific terms with the reference to her "ecosystem" and her refusal to be objectified as a "sewage treatment plant" (Riordan, *Battle* 151). Simultaneously, she is presented as Percy's peer: a normal teenage girl, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, telling Percy "[y]ou're not so different from me" (152). Percy's conversation with the naiad is emblematic of the way Riordan challenges the hierarchical view that treats feminine nature spirits as passive, exploitable objects. Percy *does* have the power to impose his will on the naiad, but when he empathizes with her, he finds himself unable to use that power, appalled by the thought of being a "bully" (151). Furthermore, the point of identification between Percy and the naiad occurs through reference to pollution: Percy realizes, "I'd be pretty mad if somebody dumped four million pounds of manure in my home" (151). As I previously demonstrated, living in a polluted home is not hypothetical to Percy; it is an experience he intimately understands. According to Buell, toxic discourse has power as a social unifier, capable of "[bridging] the divide between hostile factions. As Ulrich Beck has written, whereas "poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic" (qtd. in Buell, *Writing* 40). In other words, Riordan transforms a hierarchical literary inheritance into an argument for solidarity using an appeal to the shared anxiety of a toxic world.

On the other hand, focusing on pollution as the primary environmental concern has limitations. Highlighting waste—such as litter, land development, or sewage treatment—as humanity's worst environmental degradation, and focusing on individual actions to address pollution, can risk individualizing the climate crisis. One area in which Riordan limits the scope

of environmental action deemed ethical in his books is the question of systemic change. Since Riordan's main villain, Kronos, aims to destroy and supplant the Olympian gods, who represent Western civilization, Percy's ultimate victory over Kronos and his forces preserves "not merely the Olympian status quo but Western civilization itself" (Morey and Nelson 248). Morey and Nelson argue that Percy ultimately becomes "the heroic citizen who keeps the flame of the West alive" (250), but that "metamorphosis" and "flexibility" are "represented as crucial to the saving of Western society" (236). Percy is an "ambivalent" champion of two flawed, "malignant" societies—America and Olympus—while seeking to reform both (246). But while Riordan posits that society can and should change, the books advocate against anything more drastic than an incrementalist approach.[38] Luke, a camp counsellor who defects to Kronos's side and becomes a major antagonist, claims at the end of *The Lightning Thief*, "'Western civilization' is a disease, Percy. It's killing the world. The only way to stop it is to burn it to the ground, start over with something more honest" (Riordan 365). The narrative frames this comment as the revelation of Luke's treachery, and Percy calls Luke "crazy" for it (365). However, Grover's superficially similar exhortation to Percy in *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, "[t]he world is dying, Percy. Every day it gets worse. The wild… I can just feel it fading. I *have* to find Pan," is met with Percy's, and the narrative's encouragement: "You will, man. No doubt" (Riordan 176). Riordan resists the

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[38] Riordan's position falls under Garrard's definition of "environmentalism," the moderate, mainstream position of "people who are concerned about environmental issues such as global warming and pollution, but who wish to maintain or improve their standard of living as conventionally defined, and who would not welcome radical social change" (21). Garrard's environmentalists view Western tradition as "valuable, to a greater or lesser degree, even in the light of environmental crisis" (22).

idea of civilizational responsibility in subtle ways, sympathizing with Grover's passive-tense lament that the world "*is* dying" but demonizing Luke's attribution of responsibility to "Western civilization." Following Pan's instructions, Grover takes responsibility for the future of the wilds. He sends satyrs "to the national parks" to "search out the last wild places," and to "defend the parks in big cities" (341). What opposition the satyrs will face, and what they can do about it without political representation, is never clarified.

Riordan's texts are not anti-modernity by any meaningful metric. What they advocate for is the infusion of classical elements into the modern world. After all, even Grover the satyr enjoys eating tin cans and enchiladas too much to want the whole world to be wild (Riordan, *Last* 112). Although Riordan's vision of environmental progress is, overall, incremental and individual, his work nevertheless suggests that the path to environmental responsibility is achieved through building bonds of solidarity with those most victimized by the climate crisis. More often than not, those most affected by human-driven environmental defilement are teenage nature spirits like naiads, dryads, the Hunters of Artemis, or Grover himself. These same characters are nature's most ardent defenders, creating the implication that "the Wild" is the inheritance and the responsibility of society's youth. Riordan presents a polluted modern world which is contrasted with a utopian pastoral antiquity, imbuing child readers with longing for a carefully-cultivated world where nature and humans live in harmony. He encourages children to understand their place in the world as equals with the trees and rivers around them. By centreing children as those most responsible for the future of the world, and by focusing on individual responsibility for ensuring the health of one's human and non-human neighbours, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* attempts to empower a generation of young eco-citizens to make necessary reforms to the modern world.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have presented three different approaches to the question of the child character's relationship to the wild in middle-grade fantasy literature. I have also examined how the fantasy elements employ the language of magic and myth in order to model an ecologically-oriented image of childhood.

Patrick Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide* portrays a world in which the city and the wild are two discrete spaces, walled off, with no possibility of reconciliation. Children are permitted to move between spaces only due to their position as outsiders to normative adulthood. Carman's protagonist, Alexa, has no peers amongst the other children, and finds them instead in people marginalized by civilization. These peers include animals, whose cause Alexa learns to champion. Carman presents a childhood wilderness narrative of escape and return: going out "into the wild" to explore and learn is presented as an essential stepping stone to adulthood. However, the freedom to transgress the civilization/wilderness and animal/human divides is a privilege afforded only to children; the adult may only look back with nostalgia on the ephemerality of childhood magic.

The *Little Fur* books by Isobelle Carmody centre around pockets of wilderness within threatening urban environments. Wild and city are separate spaces, but the boundaries between them are porous, opening up both dangerous and hopeful possibilities. Just as human destruction can encroach upon a pocket of wilderness, so too can a city be re-wilded. Carmody's ecofeminist approach seeks to re-enchant the modern world and inspire a return to ecological harmony. Just as Little Fur the character coaxes earth magic back into the human city, the *Little Fur* books seek to coax an appreciation for sensory experiences of nature-connection in their readers. If humans are capable of recognizing the magic in themselves and in the world around them, Carmody

argues through the characters in her novels, a meaningful desire for ecological redemption may be awakened.

Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series reflects the anxiety of a modern world where the presence of human waste is inescapable and true wilderness went extinct long ago. But pollution can be a useful discourse for building friendship and community between different factions. Percy's empathy for disenfranchised individuals enables him to create bonds of solidarity with anthropomorphic representations of nature who might otherwise be seen as objects to be exploited. By choosing a community-based heroism over an individualistic heroism, Percy learns how to exercise power responsibly. Riordan engages with two well-established environmental discourses: that of pastoral and that of pollution. His contribution is the merging of classical pastoral into modern American environments, advocating for a reform-oriented nostalgia as a guiding principle for improving human relationships with the earth.

All three of these works and sets of works engage in selective re-mythification of natural environments (and sometimes man-made environments) in order to emphasize the joy and necessity of childhood experiences outside urban centres, and to heighten the sense of nature under threat from human actions. In Carman's *The Dark Hills Divide,* it is Elyon, or God's, enchantment that maintains the majesty of the wilds, as well as the capacity for speech across species boundaries. In Isobelle Carmody's *Little Fur* the motherly earth spirit suffuses each creature and corner of the earth that allows it in. Finally, in Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, the presence of gods and nature spirits from Greek mythology ensures that every tree, stream, or river has an advocate. Magic, in all three texts, facilitates community-building

between humans and non-humans and attempts to nurture a lifelong appreciation for, and longing to return to, nature in the child reader.

Exploring these novels for middle grade children from the perspective of ecocriticism is, in a way, charting new territory. As Lawrence Buell writes in his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, from the perspective of ecocritical analysis, "the archive [of children's literature] as a whole is still largely *terra incognita*" ("Environmental Writing for Children" 408). While I have tried to fill one lacuna, others have become apparent to me. Children's literature is subject to rapid market fluctuations, as the sheer volume of writing makes comprehensive scholarship impossible. Other texts from the same period merit ecocritical attention, as do the shifts that have occurred since 2005 in representing ecological crisis and the re-enchantment of nature in texts written for children. Additionally, while the texts I chose all represent a hegemonic settler perspective, the past and present work of Indigenous and other marginalized voices in children's literature should not go unexamined. Darcy Little Badger's *Elatsoe* (2020) is a good example of children's fantasy that contrasts settler and Indigenous perspectives in a world where magical beings inhabit modern America.

One of the limitations of the texts discussed here is that all, to some extent or another, individualize questions of responsibility in the face of environmental crisis. The vast majority of environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change is the result of the actions of industry titans, while inaction in the face of these issues is often the result of lobbying, media conglomerates artificially amplifying the views of climate change "sceptics", and politically motivated misrepresentation (see Garrard 18-20). But narratives of powerlessness in the face of corporate misconduct do not make good children's literature. They undermine the purpose of providing children with a sense of individual identity and agency. It seems that one of the

messages considered too difficult for children, at least in the early twenty-first century, is the idea that individual actions of planting or picking up litter cannot meaningfully resolve systemic abuses. However, this does not mean individual actions—actions analogous to Alexa's destruction of ecologically-damaging physical barriers, Little Fur's guerrilla gardening, or Percy's holding of authority figures accountable for the world their children will inherit—are meaningless or without impact. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for children's literature is, and will continue to be, communicating the discrepancy in power between the average citizen and the systems driving environmental destruction, while also instilling the ethic of personal responsibility and the hope for a better world in the next generation. Buell identifies four purposes of the "acts of environmental imagination" that occur in nature writing, purposes that are undeniably at play in Carman, Carmody, and Riordan's work:

> They may connect readers vicariously with others' experience, suffering, pain: that of nonhumans as well as humans. They may reconnect readers with places they have been and send them where they would otherwise never physically go. They may direct thought toward alternative futures. And they may affect one's caring for the physical world: make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable. All this may befall a moderately attentive reader reading about a cherished, abused, or endangered place. (*Writing for an Endangered World* 2)

Buell's argument addresses the ways environmentally oriented literature differs from pragmatic environmental activism. Literature operates on the longer timescale of shifting sensibilities or beliefs, transcending a single moment or cause. Children's literature, especially, aims to reshape beliefs at a mutable moment in life in order to foster lifelong empathy and appreciation for the nonhuman.

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