

### *Seductive Worlds*

*Entering the Landscape*, Edited by Eric Henderson & Madeline Sonik. Oberon Press, 2001.

It is perhaps inevitable that the natural world has played more than just a supporting role in the work produced by Canadian writers of fiction in the years since this country was founded. In their perceptive and gracefully written introduction to the present volume, editors Eric Henderson and Madeline Sonik provide a brief survey of the ways in which Canadian fiction writers have used and interpreted their natural surroundings in their work. Early writers living in what amounted to a frontier portray man's adversarial relationship with landscape and nature, writing from a perspective that sees these as enemies that must be subdued in order for mankind to survive. Many of the characters appearing in works by Canadian writers published in the early decades of the last century, and even in works published as late as the 1950s and 1960s, quietly endure their surroundings; and this stoic passivity, enshrined in our literature,

has somehow become a national trait. Inhabitants of the land in Canadian literature have often been depicted as victimized by their physical isolation, and the barrenness of their landscape is reflected in their souls. Another stance sees nature as the victim of human encroachment; the natural world succumbs to alterations that mankind must impose in order to ensure his own survival. The divide between man and nature persists with man as the villain, nature the besieged. However, the editors have detected a trend in some recent Canadian writing that takes as its point of departure the much more spiritual attitude toward nature of our own indigenous peoples and those of other cultures. They see in our current fiction an awakening or release from the traditional relationship that casts man and nature as adversaries, and find in its place one of acceptance. What results is a rapport, or oneness, that means each is necessary to the other. In *Entering the Landscape* they present a selection of stories they believe illustrates this trend.

Not surprisingly, the nine stories in *Entering the Landscape* are written in a variety of styles and tell of people living lives that are vastly different from one another. Lilian Nattel's "The Stranger in the Woods" opens the volume. Set in the Polish countryside early in the previous century, the story begins with Hanna-Leah trying to rekindle the fires of desire in her childless marriage to Hershel, the village butcher. However, the potion she purchased from Misha the midwife fails. Hanna-Leah, an expert mushroom picker from childhood, has grown wary of the forest, which holds too many surprises. Out gathering firewood one day she meets a ragged stranger, a deserter, he admits, from the army. She is both attracted and repelled, but despite her misgivings she returns to give him food. In exchange for her kindness, he carves a wooden doll and presents it to her as a gift, and when their fingers touch she feels a strange energy surge through her. She keeps the doll on the mantle above the fireplace and it speaks to her in a voice like her grandmother's, but also like the stranger's, telling her to go, go into the woods. Hanna-Leah and Hershel clash over the doll, but she cannot resist its message, and she returns to the forest in search, she thinks, of the stranger, but it is really a quest for a deeper more sensual part of herself, which, when she finds it, ignites Hershel's passion. Nattel's story is filled with magic and spells and potions as everyday presences. But presiding over all this is the natural world, where Hanna-Leah finds the connection she has been seeking to her lost self.

In a similar way, the women in Kelly Cooper's "They Secretly Hope for Rain" find sexual solace in the natural world. Their husbands work the land, but during harvest they become slaves to its incessant demands, which drain them of desire, leaving the marriage bed quiet. Yet the women need their husbands no less than they normally do and so must look elsewhere for fulfillment. Throughout this brief story the writing is taut and rich in detail as Cooper builds tension through an accretion of sensual imagery. In the final scene Maureen leaves her exhausted husband alone in bed. It is night, but she

takes her robe and ventures outside, into the field of wheat behind the house. Here she drops her robe, inviting the caress of the natural forces around her. Maureen and the other women in this story achieve a physical bond with the landscape in ways their husbands will never suspect.

Other characters in these stories do not interact with the land quite so vehemently but simply inhabit it, and by doing so attain a level of comfort that denies the possibility of discord even while they remain aware of natural progressions and processes. Young Sol, in Nadine McInnes's subtly constructed "Animate Ghosts," is an intelligent and inquisitive boy whose parents are going through a break-up. Everything around him is in flux, including his own emotions, and the changes he sees taking place within himself and his family are measured against changes in the natural world. Ruth Twirling, in Bill Gaston's "The Northern Cod," has placed an entire continent between herself and a relationship she regards with ambivalence and which she is beginning to suspect is a cold and barren one. Her research into the failure of the east coast cod fishery has taken her from Vancouver to a Newfoundland outpost, where her citified ways and scientific training set her apart from the inhabitants. In her bathtub she has mixed the sperm and egg of the cod she hopes to coax into growing and reproducing under strictly monitored conditions in the bay. As she follows their progress from mere cell clusters into recognizable organisms, she slowly warms to the inhabitants of Champney's West, developing a special relationship with one of the young men she has hired on to help her. A career scientist, Ruth has always controlled her environment and failed to flourish emotionally, but as she opens herself to chance and drops her emotional barriers, she finds herself connecting with her work, and her adopted world, in ways that astonish her. In Mark Anthony Jarman's "Flat-out Earth Moving," the narrator, a petty criminal, is incarcerated after the theft of a van full of donuts and a string of robberies. He and his accomplices are apprehended, ironically enough, because an act of impulsive honesty on the part of the narrator gives the police a lead. The story is filled with the author's characteristic wordplay and odd-ball humour, but its underlying seriousness derives from the poignant contrast Jarman draws between the narrator's current life behind bars at William Head medium security prison — where he can gaze at a panorama of land and ocean to which he is denied access — and his earlier life employed in jobs that placed him in intimate contact with the earth and with nature.

As an anthology built around a theme, *Entering the Landscape* achieves a kind of muted success, limited perhaps by the broad inclusiveness of the theme itself, a theme that encompasses all that falls within the range of our vision and beyond, and yet rules nothing out. The stories certainly engage the landscape, but in different ways and to varying degrees, and though each is engrossing in its own way, stark variations in tone, in setting, in technique and narrative style easily divert the reader from any commonalities the stories may share. It is a testa-

ment to their narrative power, as well as to the undeniable skill of the story-tellers, that as we read these stories we hardly notice the landscape at all, gripped as we are by the characters and their moral dilemmas and quests for understanding. And maybe this is the whole point and simply means that we have finally achieved the “oneness” with the natural world that the editors hypothesize in the introduction.

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