

# Ice women, earth mothers, and fairy godmothers: woman as metaphor in two recent Canadian children's novels

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"If you trusted Canadian fiction," writes Margaret Atwood in *Survival*, "you would have to believe that most of the women in the country with any real presence at all are over fifty, and a tough, sterile, suppressed and granite-jawed lot they are. They live their lives with intensity, but through gritted teeth, and they are often seen as malevolent, sinister or life-denying, either by themselves or by other characters in their book."<sup>1</sup> If you trusted Atwood's map as a reliable guide to Canadian children's literature, you would have to believe that two recent children's novels have no place in Canadian fiction. With respect to both Janet Lunn's *The root cellar* and Jan Truss' *Jasmin*,<sup>2</sup> Atwood's comments about the metaphorical use of women in Canadian fiction are fascinating because they seem totally inapplicable.

According to Atwood, the Canadian novel in its complete pattern involves three generations: grandparents who have inherited both the physical structures built by the settlers and the pioneers' force of will; parents who are vague failures, compulsive people who are not committed to the vision of their forebears, but feel guilty about it; and children who are either drawn to their grandparents' "tough values" or hope to get much farther away than their parents did. The dominant generation is that of the grandparents, major metaphors being matriarchal ice woman and the patriarchal masked bear. In Margaret Laurence's collection of short stories, *A bird in the house*, from which Atwood borrows these metaphors, the problem of the child Vanessa is typical: she must try to escape the inhuman self-control and immaculate house of her grandmother and the displaced anger of her grandfather.

Atwood finds the "nasty chilly old woman" to be the most common image of the grandparent in Canadian literature. Since conventionally in literature, woman and nature are metaphorically identified, the use of this female forebear obviously has possibilities for suggesting not only the personality of the dominant generation, but also the nature of the place that fostered it. The Canadian mind, it seems, does take on the frame of the object it views. And so we have in our literature the granite-jawed, sinister, sterile woman who embodies the unyielding, life-denying Canadian landscape, as well as demonstrating the unrelenting and tough posture

required to survive here.

Although Janet Lunn and Jan Truss both use a three-generational schema, each departs in important, and surprisingly similar ways, from the Atwood model. The young heroine of *The root cellar*, Rose Larkin, is introduced to the parent figures of the novel, Aunt Nan and Uncle Bob Henry, only after the death of her grandmother, a rigid but sophisticated woman. Jasmin Stalke, heroine of Truss' *Jasmin*, lives with her parents and numerous siblings, but Grandmother is evoked as a loving memory. The primary conflict in each story involves a child and parent, rather than child, parent, and grandparent, but the need to claim a heritage back of the parental generation is a central motivation for both girls. However, in defining a past for themselves, Rose and Jasmin do not struggle against an ice woman — neither grandmother fits the stereotype described by Atwood — but against the earth mother Atwood finds so conspicuously absent in Canadian fiction.

Presiding over the home at the centre of *The root cellar* is pregnant Aunt Nan, who is short, "as plump as an overstuffed cushion" with a "full mouth, warm brown eyes and a lot of soft brown hair coming undone from a knot at the back of her head." Olive in Truss's novel is a "big fat jolly mother" with a "warm, soft body" against which one child or another always seems to be nestled. These earth mothers are soft while the ice woman is "granite-jawed"; they are expressive and the ice woman is suppressed; they are fertile and the ice woman is sterile.

The two fictional women, in fact, are prodigiously fertile. Aunt Nan is carrying her fifth child and Olive nursing her seventh. Described in contrast to the ice woman, the earth mother seems invariably to embody the positive attribute of the pairs of antonyms. But there is a sense in both novels that the fertility associated with the earth mother is itself life-denying. On the first page of Truss' novel, Jasmin notes with some chagrin that her mother "didn't seem to care about the population explosion." The cliché linking procreation and violence is made metaphor shortly after, when Olive plays out a bizarre little ritual of obeisance to fecundity, hugging Bud's gun against her "tight shiny pink nightie" and "rubbing her plump cheek against the smooth wood of the gun stock." From this opening image, there is an uneasy sense of violence lurking just under the superficial carelessness of Stalke family life.

The cliché of the first page is picked up also in the description of the Stalke family rising the next morning: "Up in the attic pandemonium broke loose." It seems the teeming life of the Stalke household cannot be contained. The lack of containment is seen particularly as people and animals keep crossing over the barriers that should separate them. When one of the children opens the door in the morning, "a crowd of gaudy bantam hens" tries to come into the house for breakfast. The family has

first been awakened by the "loud concert of consternation" the cattle sound as they, once again, break through the fence and onto the road. Leroy, playing Tarzan the ape-man, swings through the attic window and falls to the ground two storeys below. The gun Olive fondles has been loaded and readied by Bud because he mistakes Leroy for a bear.

The result of the uncontainment is that people get hurt, things get broken and turn into garbage. Eglantine steps on her own glasses. Jasmin's science project is ruined by Leroy's jungle act; Leroy himself suffers a mild concussion. A previous assignment of Jasmin's has ended in the outhouse. Like everything else about the Stalkes, the garbage they produce is uncontained, spilling out of the house and onto the yard. The house surrounded by "a junkyard of overturned cars and rusted farm machinery" is an emblem of the profligate production and waste of the human world.

The sense of subliminal violence that characterizes the Stalke home is not present in the Henry home. Where Truss plays with the metaphorical identity of the human and animal worlds, Lunn uses the images of the inanimate world of nature to suggest the characteristic qualities of the home dominated by the earth mother. The Henry house is situated in Hawthorn Bay, a hamlet on an island off the north shore of Lake Ontario. Not only is it surrounded by the feminine, and chaotic, element of water, but also the old red brick house is nearly overgrown by a "tangle of bushes."

Like her house, Aunt Nan is untidy and excessive. She seems warm and comfortable, but also chatters incessantly and wears running shoes with holes in them. The domestic clutter of her home does not so much deny life by its uncontainment and violence, as Olive's house does, as threaten to choke life by its profusion and redundancy. Aunt Nan's four children are all boys and, significantly, two of them are twins. Rose sees the house as a series of identical small, gloomy rooms, and the confusion of noise that characterizes the household seems to her "like turning on a radio and getting all the stations at once."

Both houses are remnants of the early years of Canadian settlement, the Henry house having been built by Loyalist settlers in Ontario after the war of 1812, and the Stalkes' log house having been built by pioneers to serve as the first school in the district. Given the general dereliction of these homes, both would seem likely additions to Atwood's proposed anthology of Canadian literature about "tumbled-down houses and deserted farms."<sup>3</sup> But the evocation of the early history of Canada suggests specifically, I think, that both Lunn and Truss see their heroines' quests as attempts to come to terms with the basic nature of the country in which they live. These children's novels about growing up are also novels about growing up in Canada.

Both Jasmin and Rose leave home convinced that there are places out

there that are governed by a decency and order unknown at home. That this should be the motivation for their journeys away from home is a fascinating fact within the context of children's literature as a whole. The circular journey plot informs the structure of most stories written for children. But from Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* to Maurice Sendak's *Max*, children leave home to escape the orderly strictures imposed on them by the adult world. Away from home, they indulge themselves in the pleasures of anarchy: in *Peter's* story, anarchy is gluttony, and in *Max's* story, a wild rumpus. If Vanessa in Laurence's stories is a typical representative of the child in the three-generational Canadian novel, it would seem that children in Canadian adult literature also see leaving home as escape from rigidity. *Jasmin* and *Rose* are interesting anomalies in finding themselves overwhelmed by the anarchy at home and setting out to find the order the adults of their world have denied them.

*Jasmin* sets out for the Albertan hills believing that life will be simple and safe in the wilderness, "in the thick shelter of the forests on the edge of the Rocky Mountains." And nature as bounteous mother is just what *Jasmin* finds. But the romantic personification has been given an ironic twist. This bounteous mother is, like her own mother *Olive*, characterized not only by her prodigious production, but also by sloppy excess and profligate waste. *Stalke* domestic life is described by *Truss* early in the novel in animal imagery. Here, the natural world is seen to resemble the human world. *Jasmin's* luxurious private bath under the hot sun becomes a nightmare as a massive wind arises out of nowhere, lashing the trees and making litter of *Jasmin's* clothes. Her beautiful nightgown is "tossed like torn paper" before being blown away. Her descent into her valley sanctuary is impeded by the thicket of trees growing out of the cliff, trees that seem "twisted bodies" with pale roots "like gnarled ghost fingers." The little coyote's lair has seemed to *Jasmin* a cozy room, the coyote itself an ideal candidate for the pet she's never had. But it is the little coyote who snaps the nick of the "proud puffed grouse" whom *Jasmin* has mistaken for a trailbike. This is evidently not nature that can be tamed or organized any more simply than her family can be.

*Rose Larkin* prepares the conditions under which magic will operate in her world when she plants some hawthorn branches in the hollow of a fence post. When *Rose* later moves through the womb of the root cellar and discovers the world of 19th century Hawthorn Bay, she believes she has found her secret garden. The house that she knows as "sadly neglected" and overgrown with wildwood is "strong and straight" here, the lilac bushes are blooming, and there are flower beds on either side of the front door.

But as she moves through the American countryside searching for *Will*, it becomes clear to her that the disorganization of this world is an exagger-

ated version of the confusion and redundancy of Aunt Nan's house. Soldiers are everywhere, copies of men multiplied by the hundreds and difficult to distinguish from one another. "We got a lot of brothers here," the sentry at Oswego tells Rose and Susan, "and we're pretty busy getting them sorted out." Washington, when they reach it, is not the white and green city Rose remembers from the 20th century, but "a dream turned inside out" with its "dirt streets, animals roaming untended along them and raw ugly tree stumps." In fact, the only quiet and orderly place is the Arlington cemetery.

Jasmin and Rose complete their quests, having learned only that home and away are places that closely resemble each other. But when their quests have failed — Rose is back home and Jasmin about to pass into unconsciousness — both girls are suddenly touched by grace and given a new vision of what home can be.

Jasmin, huddled in her lair without food or water for three days, is rescued quite unexpectedly by Jules and Hana Townsend. She awakens in another world where dreams apparently do come true. The Townsends' home seems perfect to Jasmin. It is cozy without being crowded, the Townsends sensual but also thoughtful. Significantly, their log house externally resembles the Stalke house. Like the pioneers in the Canadian wilderness, the Townsends have constructed a palisade against the world outside. But the inside is the place they have shaped to fit themselves, the space in which they define themselves as artists.

This vision of creativity has already been articulated early in the novel in Jasmin's recollections of her grandmother. Jasmin has carried two items with her into the wilderness, the quilt and nightgown both made by her grandmother. Grandmother's handwork is consistently described in the novel as meticulous, but also magical. The beautiful and warm patchwork quilt has been painstakingly stitched together from the "bright bits of cloth" of Grandmother's "marvelous rag bag." The flowing red nightgown is as splendid as "a queen's gown from a storybook" and capacious, as though Grandmother "meant it to last forever." When Jasmin first begins sculpting, she recalls watching the nimble fingers of her grandmother work "as garments for a new baby grew in their hands." In managing to combine precision and skill with abundance and joy, Jasmin's grandmother represents a balance of ice woman and earth mother.

This female forebear, who not only knows that a young girl wants "a pretty thing," but is also able to make her wish come true, has an obvious literary progenitor in the fairy godmother of traditional folk tales. Jasmin certainly is something of a Cinderella figure in having assumed the thankless role of household drudge. But as in many fairy tales, the intervention of magic in the world of the heroine remains an inadequately explained phenomenon. It happens. And if the character to whom it happens recog-

nizes that it has happened, new possibilities open up to her.

Like the Townsends, Jasmin's grandmother does not transform the world outside. Quilt and nightgown are both domestic and personal articles. Jasmin's experiences have taught her that the world outside is unamenable to human manipulation. Earth, she learns when she works with clay, will only express the form of its essential nature. The clay that she begins to mould into a container for her home becomes a porcupine "as if by a sort of magic." The only thing that Jasmin can alter truly through her touch is herself. The inner country is spacious and it can be crafted and ordered.

There is some sense in Truss's novel that the magic spills over into the external world. Jasmin's home does improve because of her adventure. Her leaving home occasions the intervention of social workers who move Bud toward constructing a rudimentary order in the home. Jasmin will have a room of her own. Perhaps because Truss insists on ravelling all the loose ends of the plot, the happy ending sits somewhat uneasily on the conclusion of this novel. But the room Jasmin gains is to be read as metaphor as much as fact, I think. Jasmin has discovered that homes are made rather than found. Like the garment her grandmother has built to house Jasmin, they are constructed painstakingly from ragbags and maybe they can last forever.

The conclusion of Lunn's story is in many ways like the conclusion of Truss's story. Rose returns home, not because she has discovered an unacknowledged love for Aunt Nan's house, but because she has found no other place or time in which she belongs. She resolves valiantly to get along with the Henry family despite the arguments and confusion. Her first attempt to do "something truly amazing" for the family ends in dismal failure. Trying to prepare an old-fashioned Christmas dinner for the Henrys, Rose succeeds only in burning the goose and producing a Christmas pudding that looks "like a ball of cement with pebbles in it." She is reduced to serving the family sausages and cabbage salad for their festive meal. But she, like Jasmin, finds her world touched by the magic of a fairy godmother. The Christmas kitchen Mrs. Morrissay produces for Rose out of her disasters is like "a fairytale forest." The table, bedecked with aromatic greenery and set with embroidered linens is a domestic image that, like Jasmin's quilt and nightgown, marries abundance and refinement, naturalness and elegance.

It is because of Mrs. Morrissay's miraculous gift that Rose promises to love the house. Love, she now knows, is not an instinct. It is an act of will. She may continue to support the domestic life of the Henrys, but she will move them too toward renovating their home and replanting the garden. With disciplined creativity, she may yet make the house a place she can love. As in Jasmin's story, the domestic metaphor is a metaphor of the self. Rose is herself the secret garden, as her name suggests, and the gardener

who tends it.

The fairy godmothers in the two novels point the heroines away from contemplating the world outside and toward cultivating the domestic and personal. Rose and Jasmin learn to turn from gazing at distances and to frame, instead, the mind that meets the world. The blatant fictionality of the fairy godmother figures is a significant aspect of this role.

Truss's introduction of the Townsends into the novel is so abrupt as to seem a clumsy solution to a plotting problem. When Jasmin is rescued by Jules and Hana, the reader is completely ignorant of the existence of "THEM PEOPLE." We later discover that Jasmin knows about the Townsends, as all the community does, but the reader has been given no glimpse of them until their faces swim through Jasmin's delirium. Belatedly, a reader might remember that the Townsends' "peeled log house" has been glimpsed by Jasmin on one of her excursions from her den, but neither Jasmin nor the narrator suggest who the inhabitants of the house might be. Jules and Hana Townsend arrive in Jasmin's story as a *deus ex machina*.

Although such fantastical things as time travel are reality in Lunn's book, the Christmas kitchen chapter seems to invoke magic of a different kind. Raymond E. Jones, in his review of *The root cellar* for the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, identifies this scene as one of the novel's "flaws," suggesting that "it seems out of character with the more 'realistic' quality of events in the rest of the novel."<sup>4</sup>

But the very unreality of both these climactic situations is part of the point. Jasmin and Rose both leave home thinking to duplicate the experience of a fictional character. Jasmin has been beguiled into believing that it will be possible to find an alternate home in the natural world by her reading of Keats' poem, "Meg Merrilies." In the poem, the gypsy Meg adopts as brothers and sisters the "craggy hills" and finds that the moon and the rose dew provide ample food for sustenance. Like Jasmin, Rose Larkin plants the hawthorn branches in the hollow of the fence post hoping to recreate for herself the experience of Mary Lennox of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The secret garden*.

Both girls choose fictions for themselves that are English and pastoral. The mother figures of the two stories are each involved with fictions as well. In contrast to the heroines' ideals, the motherly women choose fictions which are American and melodramatic; but like the younger girls, the women use their fictions as escapes from the reality of family and home. The Stalke house is flooded from morning until night with American airwaves. Olive's particular love is the afternoon serial. In fact, she is so intent on discovering whether "the handsome doctor was going to fall in love with the beautiful patient who knew the identity of the real killer" that she is unable to focus on the school principal's questions and concerns

about Jasmin. Aunt Nan, herself an American, writes stories for girls "to get away from boys." The books, with titles such as *Polly learns to ride*, are privately judged by Rose to be "silly."

Jasmin and Rose's attempts to use their fictions as maps of the world in which they find themselves fail. The fictions in which Olive and Aunt Nan lose themselves are clearly no more accurate. Given the failure of all these fictions, it seems ironic that the girls are brought to an accommodation with reality by the interventions of fairy godmother figures, Jules and Hana Townsend and Susan Morrissay solve the heroines' problems by being larger-than-life characters. Apparently, for Truss and Lunn, it is not the fact that Jasmin and Rose have chosen to define themselves by fictions that is problematic, but that they have chosen inapplicable fictions.

In these two novels, it seems that an inapplicable fiction is any precast mould or finished story. Even history and biological heritage are not immutable facts, for in the process of the novels, both girls effectively re-write their own histories. Jasmin gives her grandmother the pre-eminent place in her memory and replaces her parents Olive and Bud with the Townsends. In their nurture of Jasmin, Jules and Hana fill the role of parents, but at the same time, they are Jasmin's peers as artists. Rose develops a fondness for her adopted parents Aunt Nan and Uncle Bob, but seems to dismiss her grandmother entirely from memory. The place of beloved female ancestor is filled by Mrs. Morrissay. And Mrs. Morrissay, of course, is also Susan whose life Rose has helped to shape by her retrieval of Will from the battlefields of the American Civil War.

Jasmin and Rose leave home in their stories to find the orderly place denied them by the adults in their lives. They do not find any such place. Both discover only that appropriate places are not found, but made. The Canadian children of these novels are left with the conviction that they are able to create such places. Jasmin and Rose will learn to speak themselves into being.

## NOTES

- 1 *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) p. 199.
- 2 *The root cellar* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981); and *Jasmin* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982).
- 3 *Survival*, p. 124.
- 4 "Border Crossing: Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*," *ChLAQ* (Spring, 1985), p. 44b.

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