

You Don't Know What You've Got till It's Gone: Ecofiction and social realism

By Tracy Patrick

As issues of environmental concern become more prevalent in the public consciousness, a new branch of fiction is emerging that reflects the idea that, if there is an imminent threat to our green and glorious land, it no longer lurks in the deep dark woods of fairytales, or in the emotional whims of classical gods and goddesses, or even in the fire and brimstone of the Old Testament prophets, but in human nature.

Ecofiction is defined vicariously as all literature that encompasses environment orientated works of fiction, or as literature that embodies 'some sense of the environment as a process, rather than a given' (Dwyer, Jim. (2010) *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*, University of Nevada Press), but most definitions suggest that if fiction is to address ecological concerns, the plot and characters must go beyond the human timeframe and its immediate context to capture the almost immeasurable vastness of climate change. When reading about ecofiction, one inevitably comes across the concept of the 'hyperobject', a term coined by philosopher Timothy Morton to describe a 'phenomenon so vast it is beyond human comprehension' (Collins online dictionary). Issues like climate change and species extinction are referred to as hyperobjects, whose ungraspability leaves us feeling helpless, afraid and depressed. Perhaps it is for this reason that the bulk of ecofiction has so far concentrated on genres such as fantasy, dystopian and science fiction to explore the impact of human civilisation on our planet: authors such as James Bradley, Jeff Vandermeer, Margaret Atwood, and Kim Stanley Robinson, and novels that often depict bleak apocalyptic visions in which human technology and nature are at war.

Although many of these novels are important and brilliant in themselves, the focus on the futuristic in ecofiction suggests that social realism is too limited a genre to tackle the issue of human accountability to the environment. Yet, how we

react emotionally to changes in the natural world, and the impact it has on our communities and social relationships, is worthy of exploration. In fiction, the wider debate can invariably be played out through contemporary settings and characters, without having them voyage to distant planets, or wander through post-apocalyptic cities populated by cannibals.

I still hesitate over applying the term ecofiction to my novel, *Blushing is for Sinners* (Clochoderick Press, 2019), yet a third of the story takes place in British Columbia where, Ava, taken from Paisley by her aunt in the sixties, is now a high-flying executive for a logging company involved in a corruption scandal over the clear cutting of old growth trees. Certainly, the novel's principal theme, a family drama, sits more comfortably within the genre of social realism, domestic noir and women's fiction. The novel tells the story of Ava's mother, Jean, a mill girl in sixties Paisley, who longs for a better future for her and her daughter. Ava's subsequent search for her mother and her desperation to rebuild her relationship with her son, Scott, who has joined the protests against the logging company, calls into question her moral core. Although Temple Grove, the area of primeval forest at the centre of the environmental campaign, is fictitious - to use another trope of ecofiction - it is based on an actual stand of old growth trees on Vancouver Island, the remnants of a forest that once covered southern BC and Washington State, and of which only 1% survives. Constructing the plot involved some painstaking research, including the perusal of statistical reports on the effects of windthrow, clear cutting and soil degradation, as well as research into British Columbian environmental law, private logging interests, and land grabs. However, the ultimate effect of this storyline is that it forms a source of family tension, with Ava torn between her loyalty to her husband and a mother's love for her son.

Blushing is for Sinners attempts to draw parallels between family roots and the environment, urging us to question what it is we value, and what we are willing to fight for. Mill girl, Jean, has never heard of the 'hyperobject', but is constantly looking beyond herself to imagine life as it is elsewhere: 'I think of mountains and oceans and giant forests with trees taller than buildings. I think of JFK and Cuba and important people marching down corridors and how with one push of a button it could all be gone. There's so little time.' Her grandson, Scott, is a dreamer like her, a source of frustration to his mother as he moves from one project to another, experimenting with drugs and joining bands with names like

'Subversive Clones.' His reasons for taking part in the protests are twofold: as an act of rebellion against his mother, and as the actions of an environmentalist exercising his right to civil disobedience.

Environmental issues inevitably affect our immediate relationships, from arguments over the recycling to differences in political allegiances. I have been an ethical vegan for twenty years, to which a well-meaning lady recently responded, 'Aw, that's a shame hen.' The point is that the job of contemporary fiction, and all its associated genres, is to reflect the ongoing and complex ways in which we identify with the world, including our effect on the environment. Framing issues like deforestation within the context of domestic storylines can reach readers whose tastes do not incline towards the dystopian, weird, fantasy or science fiction genres. I have a nice image of Jean and Ava from *Blushing is for Sinners* walking through the Caledonian pine forest together, mother and daughter, experiencing the healing power of nature. Although I've never been as far as British Columbia or stood in awe beneath its giant redwoods, cedars, and Douglas firs, the power of nature to connect us with something greater than ourselves is just the same in Scotland, and will surely be the subject of much ecofiction to come. As issues of environmental concern become more prevalent in the public consciousness, a new branch of fiction is emerging that reflects the idea that, if there is an imminent threat to our green and glorious land, it no longer lurks in the deep dark woods of fairytales, or in the emotional whims of classical gods and goddesses, or even in the fire and brimstone of the Old Testament prophets, but in human nature.

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