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"Liv[ing] Poetically upon the Earth"[1]

The Bioregional Child and Conservation in Monique Proulx's *Wildlives*

"Solutions are in our nature"

During the back-to-school season of fall 2015, the David Suzuki Foundation issued the Superhero Challenge. Rooted within Suzuki's own childhood experience of exploring the outdoors with his father and fuelled in the present by his concerns over what "the future will hold for [his] grandchildren" (Suzuki and Johal n. pag.), the Challenge's goal was to encourage children and youth to get outside, learn about environmental issues, and make a "superhero"-sized difference as the next generation of leaders. The emphasis on a relationship between the development of "a nature habit" ("Get Back" n. pag.) and the influential childhood memories created from such experiences can be seen within the Foundation's motto, "Solutions are in our nature." It is a doubly charged statement that asks individuals not only to recognize their own potential as creative problem-solvers in the mission to help the environment, but also to see nature as a place where inspiration, healing, and creative stimulation can be found.

We might also extend such thoughts to literature and ask how contemporary Canadian writers are actively adding their own voices to the child-nature movement in the twenty-first century. This essay will explore how one author in particular, Québécoise writer Monique Proulx, unites childhood with the natural environment in order to create a place for growth, exploration, and self-discovery during the coming-of-age process in her 2009 novel, *Wildlives*. In focusing on Proulx's young protagonist, Jérémie Delisle, and the formative moments that make up his childhood environmental experience in nature, we will see how the personal change and self-revelation he undergoes deeply inform the role he will be inspired

to take up as an adult: to become a caretaker of nature through the act(ion) of conservation. The concerns expressed by Proulx's novel in raising the next generation of ecocitizens are not unlike those of Suzuki; and while childhood becomes associated with a state in which ecological morality is yet to be determined, the child-nature relationship in *Wildlives* is also more complex than equating the prelapsarian nature of childhood to becoming a "better" adult. However, before discussing how Proulx acknowledges these issues while upholding the significance of the child's experience in nature as linked to future environmental act(ion)s, it is useful to first look at the wider role of youth and nature in Canadian literature and some of the definitions that shape this essay's discussion.

The Child and Nature in a Canadian Context

In her introduction to the 1979 anthology *Childhood and Youth in Canadian Literature*, M. G. Hesse reflected that while the theme of childhood and youth is a universal one "occurring throughout the world in every period" (1), it holds a rich and diverse place within Canadian literature. From the struggles of growing up in small-town Ontario (Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* [1971]) and the cruel and kind experiences of girlhood friendships (Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* [1988]), to negotiating the hyphen that links "Chinese" and "Canadian" together (Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* [1995]) and navigating the mean streets of Montreal alone (Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals* [2006]), Canadian child figures continue to grow in complexity, while maintaining a value on "their perception of the human experience" (Hesse 1). Equally so, Québécois literature holds its own in the exploration of the childhood experience with writers across its history such as Gabrielle Roy (*Rue Deschambault* [1955]), Mordecai Richler (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* [1959]), Marie-Claire Blais (*Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* [1965]), Gaétan Soucy (*La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* [1998]), and Élise Turcotte (*The Body's Place* [2003]).

Although Hesse wrote about childhood in the 1970s, her argument still resonates today. Our fascination with the theme of childhood and youth, she argues—and I concur—allows us to "discover a kinship with writers who share memories of enchantment and disillusionment with us. Their memories induce us to reflect on our own childhood and youth [and they become] a means of discovering truths about the nature of ourselves and others" (1). The themes Hesse touches upon—self-discovery, identity, imagination, and the movement from innocence to experience—are only a few of the

characteristics found in a "novel of youth," a genre with its own long-standing tradition that carries with it the structures of the *Bildungsroman* and *roman de formation*. Strongly valuing the individual's process of development, learning, and education, the novel of youth is a coming-of-age narrative that initiates young protagonists through a journey riddled with tribulations and obstacles (both physical and psychological) meant to help them emerge as more mature individuals capable of, for example, contributing to society or upholding their rightful places in the adult world.

When nature—as a setting or thematic interest—has a significant influence on the child's coming-of-age process, another deep tradition of literary representation is evoked. According to Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd, the relationship between children and nature is historically twofold at its most general level. Children, on the one hand, were seen through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romantic philosophy, which presumed children had "a privileged relationship with nature, thanks largely to the legacy of romantic and Victorian literature" that emphasized "the child's proximity to the natural world and consequent purity" (6). On the other hand, the child "as positively pastoral in the Anglo-American literary tradition" (6) has been challenged by an empiricist tradition emerging from philosophers such as John Locke, who argue that the child's relationship with nature is founded on the task taken by adults "to educate young people into nature appreciation and analysis" (6).

While Dobrin and Kidd emphasize the American literary tradition in their collection *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, the nuances of their observations can be applied to the Canadian context. According to Elizabeth Galway, "landscape and environment have always had an important impact on the Canadian psyche" (147), and the relationship between children and nature can be traced to some of the earliest writings in Canadian literature. Although a Canadian collection of criticism comparable to that of Dobrin and Kidd has yet to emerge, critics such as Galway have noted that the child-nature relationship has fuelled Canadians' "aware[ness] of the diversity of their environment" (148). She argues that "children [can] play a significant role in changing and shaping the image of, and attitudes towards, the nation" (151) and its regional landscapes as stories probe "expressions of various notions of Canadian nationhood, independence, and national identity" (2). The Canadian child's connection to nature began as a way to articulate "a multitude of symbolic representations of the natural environment" (152): as a land of opportunity "for the thrill-seeker

and adventurer who can test his own power in a bid to conquer the unruly wilderness"; as a celebration of the natural beauty of the landscape, "seeing it as something to cherish and preserve"; and as a landscape that can be both dangerous and foreboding (152).

The second of the symbolic representations Galway lists is of particular interest when we link early works of Canadian literature with more contemporary writing—the celebration of nature is still dominant today, but with a slight twist. During the nineteenth century, in an era of exploration and the formation of a national identity, Canada's natural environment became a central, unifying point of identification, with children holding roles in the nation's future as workers and leaders (for boys) and mothers (for girls) (Galway 8, 11). While we still celebrate the natural environment today, our "clamour to be 'green'" (Ricou 3) turns our attention more towards a view of nature that values children as future caretakers and responsible ecocitizens.

Proulx's Tribute to Nature and Some Working Definitions

In contemporary Canadian novels that feature a child-nature relationship, a noticeable emphasis can be seen in the link between the early development of a positive attitude towards the environment and future moments of activism that usually take place in adulthood. Proulx's *Wildlives* and her vision of the child's relationship with nature is one example which showcases how Canadian authors are choosing to bring attention not only to the deep regional diversity that continues to inspire "a nuanced sense of place" (Raglon and Scholtmeijer 134), but also to what they believe will influence "a deeper—or at least different—[environmental] awareness" (Dobrin and Kidd 7).

Originally published in 2008 under the title *Champagne* (from the Old French for "countryside"), *Wildlives* (translated into English by David Homel and Fred A. Reed in 2009) is considered "one of [Proulx's] first forays into nature writing" (Rogers and Dufault 65). Described as "moody and thick, at times melancholy and angry" (n. pag.) by Carla Lucchetta in her review for *The Globe and Mail*, *Wildlives* unites a small community of troubled individuals who ultimately turn towards the surrounding Laurentian wilderness to help them physically, emotionally, and psychologically confront and overcome the private traumas which haunt them.[2] Part of the beauty and complexity of *Wildlives* as a text comes from the individual stories that eventually mirror nature in their interconnectedness and interdependence in the creation of a "great family of wildlives" (Proulx 273). As Luccetta aptly notes, "[t]he wilderness is camouflage and refuge . . .

Its cloying and relentless presence, full of abundant beauty but hidden dangers, is stirring enough to instigate connection where isolation might have been the goal. Ultimately, this encompassing extra character changes every person" (n. pag.). And indeed, the fictional peak of Mont Diamant, together with its three interconnected lakes (Goose, Sage, and Campeau), gives nature a dominant role in human lives that is both restorative and—as Proulx expresses in an interview with the *French Review*—a source of inspiration: "Si je n'avais pas eu un endroit à la campagne . . . je n'aurais pas eu envie d'écrire" (qtd. in Santoro, McPherson, and Bascom 629).[3] Having her *Wildlives* characters "très connectés à la nature" (628)[4] also supports her belief that the natural environment is an important and vibrant place for today's individuals: "Je trouve qu'on est dans une période de détresse collective, pas seulement au Québec, et ce milieu-là [la forêt], pour moi, est un lieu de guérison et d'émerveillement" (qtd. in Desmeules n. pag.).[5]

The natural world as an inspiring, healing, and creatively stimulating *place* brings us in the novel to Goose Lake and the surrounding forest—the focal setting for Jérémie's coming of age in nature. Place, as Lawrence Buell defines it, is a "space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness [while also being] co-constituted environmentally, socially, and phenomenologically through acts of perception" (*Future* 145). This definition, as we will see in the next section, becomes important for Jérémie as he discovers and learns from the environment around him under the guidance of Lila Szach—an adult who not only holds the matriarchal and guide-to-nature roles in Jérémie's growth, but who also owns the lake and its surrounding forest. Lila's care and affection for Goose Lake and its forest ultimately protect the area from becoming like the other two lakes in the surrounding area: overrun by tourism, neat houses, trimmed lawns, and ubiquitous motorboats (Campeau Lake), or completely abandoned due to a lack of bounty and inaccessibility (Sage Lake).

With Goose Lake sitting comfortably between lakes Campeau and Sage as its extreme opposites, Proulx introduces a nature/human dichotomy that acknowledges both a positive envisioning of the natural environment and regional space, and the more unpleasant challenges that nature attracts from humans. The balance between a picturesque Québécois landscape and the hunters and developers lying in wait just beyond its boundaries is fittingly echoed within Reed and Homel's English title for the novel, as author and reviewer Mary Soderstrom notes in the *Montreal Review of Books*: "Their

title *Wildlives* plays with the inherent wildness of nature which no human can control, and with the unpredictability of human life" (n. pag.). The nature/human binary additionally extends to Jérémie, as the prominent child figure of *Wildlives*, through the idea of an urban-rural polarity. Sent to visit his Uncle Simon just short of the end of his school year, Jérémie begins as a boy hailing from the "noisy solidarity of the city" (Proulx 19) who now finds himself in the Laurentian wilderness for the first time. The clash of the urban and rural worlds, with Jérémie acting as the hyphen between the two, constantly creates a push-pull effect or fluctuation that challenges his initial sense of self and knowledge of place.

Notably, Jérémie exhibits an acute awareness and sensitivity towards the natural environment despite having never previously visited Goose Lake. As this awareness continues to deepen under the nurturing tutelage of Lila, Jérémie's initial perception additionally permits him to undergo a bioregional initiation—the "opening up [of] the human senses and sensibilities to the surrounding landscape" which leads to the cultivation of an ecological consciousness and communal identity (McGinnis 8). The concept of bioregional initiation stems from the movement of bioregionalism itself, which "calls for human society to be more closely related to nature (hence, bio), and to be more conscious of its locale, or region, or life-place (therefore, region)" (Andruss et al. 2). The bioregional initiation Jérémie undergoes ultimately transforms the environment into his childhood place of nature (a place where formative moments of growing up occur and which can be returned to, physically or psychologically, in adulthood for reflection, inspiring action, and so on) and provides one reason behind his adult act(ion) of conservation—his chosen way at the close of the novel to express a sense of responsibility towards the environment of his youth. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the "action of keeping intact or unharmed" ("Conservation" def. n. 1e), conservation inherently motivates an activeness in its very definition of preserving, protecting, and "seek[ing] the proper use of nature" ("Conservation vs Preservation" n. pag.) to ensure its continuity.

A City Boy's First Wilderness: Jérémie's Coming of Age in Nature

When we are first introduced to young Jérémie, we quickly learn three things: he has a lively imagination; his city life becomes a reference point for the foreignness of Goose Lake; and, as a result, he has yet to fully understand what the natural environment may offer him in terms of overcoming the personal trauma that has initially brought him to the Laurentian

wilderness and his Uncle Simon. The urban-rural dynamic is something Proulx consistently revisits throughout Jérémie's development and his transformation of an unfamiliar setting into his own childhood place of nature. Its fluctuating effect captures Jérémie's internal struggle to negotiate between the initial knowledge he has of one place (the city) and what his new awareness of the other (nature) eventually does to that knowledge by the time he becomes an adult.

Proulx immediately foreshadows Jérémie's future struggle with that boundary by having the medicinal pot his uncle grows among the weeds be the first plant he specifically recognizes in his new environment. For Jérémie, the pot is a reminder not just of city life, but also of his "immature father" who dabbles in this "dreary adult business" (9) and exists in a time and space apart from where he currently stands—at the opening of what he imaginatively dubs the Forbidden Forest's trail. The reference to *Harry Potter* in this introductory section, as well as its continued usage throughout the narrative of Jérémie's childhood, emphasizes his reliance on an energetic imagination that uses a specific lens to make the Laurentian environment an identifiable place for him to safely explore. Ultimately, however, the *Harry Potter* fantasy can only go so far in protecting him from the haunting memories of accidentally setting fire to his divorcing parents' home and of nearly dying in the process. The ugly burn that covers part of his face serves as a relentless physical reminder of the incident; and as he summons up "Jerry Potter," Jérémie attempts to hide his insecurities by giving himself the power to transform the surrounding nature into a fantastic place full of hidden enchantments and magical creatures to be battled.

As Jérémie walks through the forest, his wand—a "slender but solid" dead branch paid for by an "invisible gold doubloon" (11)—gives him the confidence to move further along the well-marked but shadowy trail; it also opens his eyes to the more intimate details of his surroundings. His first "battle" with nature marks that realization:

> Then something made him jump and stumble. Stretched out full length, he brandished his knife in front of him, but his assailant was just a thick root on which his foot had caught. *Just a root*, don't make me laugh. A root was a living thing because it was part of a tree, and many trees were bewitched and malevolent creatures. Jérémie followed the root with his eyes: it belonged to one pine or another, or maybe to that huge leafy tree straight ahead of him, or to this one . . . how could he possibly tell? It wasn't the only one, the whole trail was built on roots covered by moss and pine needles like the taut skin of a drum. Jérémie felt a shiver of fear. EVERYTHING here was alive . . . (11)

The feeling Jérémie experiences as his eyes try, and fail, to find a beginning and an end to the root's origins is captured in Proulx's emphatic capitalization of "EVERYTHING"—it is at once overwhelming and deeply encompassing. According to Dobrin and Kidd, "childhood experiences in, of, and with the natural world are often deeply formative" (5); and while the character undoubtedly senses some internal change in perception and consciousness towards his surrounding environment, his return to the wizarding world soon after this moment accentuates his current inability to see more. Jérémie's ability to either embrace or negate his potential growth in nature at this early stage is additionally brought to our attention as Proulx has him continue to "mov[e] forward easily among the trees, as if the forest was shrinking or he was growing, so that he seemed to *occupy* its territory and *command* its mysteries" (15, emphasis mine). The words *occupy* and *command* carry with them possessive and superior colonial connotations that at once turn Jérémie's easy, innocent movements through the forest into ones that are almost threatening and invasive towards the natural world, as well as to any positive relationship between the child and his environment.

Yet, Jérémie's most extreme expression of this fluctuating position occurs when he encounters an ant colony. Mesmerized at first by the way in which the ants' metallic bodies form a continuous ribbon between their tree stump and the surrounding undergrowth, he experimentally crushes one just to see what would happen. As the other ants keep moving, their reaction piques his curiosity: "What were they waiting for? Why didn't they attack him? Didn't they see how huge he was? What could have been more threatening than him on the trail they trod like so many blind soldiers, like zombies?" (17). The questions Jérémie poses to himself reveal a true struggle to understand "the bond between the human and the nonhuman" (Buell, *Environmental* 218) within the larger complexities of the bioregion. The struggle is not unlike the earlier feeling of awe he experiences when observing the network of trees. Nevertheless, the difference here lies in the element of anger that not only builds with each question, but which also culminates in a physical act of destruction:

> Systematically, he started crushing every ant within reach. . . . An insatiable hunger, a thirst for power swept over him. He did not spare the valiant ants who were carrying their wounded and their dead back to the stump, . . . nor did he spare the kamikazes who clambered up his legs to bite him . . . Soon, when his potential victims had disappeared from the trail, he attacked the stump itself. He disemboweled it with fierce blows of his magic wand, and when the wand broke he picked up a sturdier branch to continue his work, and the ants began to stream out of their ruined house by the dozens, the hundreds, in a clear state of panic . . . (Proulx 17-18)

Once again, Proulx's description both reflects Jérémie's imposing state over nature and challenges preconceived notions about the pastoral inclinations of children: he is systematic in his violence, possesses a voracious appetite for power, shows no mercy to any of the distressed ants, and cruelly eviscerates their home. Even the magic of *Harry Potter* cannot help Jérémie as it had previously; and it is significant that his broken wand's replacement is anything but the marker of an intimate relationship with nature. The passing satisfaction he receives from this destructive moment—"to know he was the source of that panic, to know at last that he was recognized and feared" (18)—can be read as a desire for a sense of control, which he lacks in regards to the personal trauma of his parents' impending separation, but feels he can possess by exerting dominance over something else (nature, in this case). Furthermore, Jérémie's "anthropomorphic attitudes," argue Rogers and Dufault, "actually allow him to begin to understand his connection with nature and to commence his apprenticeship as a caretaker of nature" (69). While I agree that Jérémie's bestowal of anthropomorphic qualities creates a way in which he can begin to identify with and make sense of his environment, his moment of violence, I would also argue, establishes that his ecological morality is yet to be determined. As such, I believe that it is his first meeting with Lila Szach that allows him to enter into an apprenticeship and, eventually, a more positive reflection and action towards his bioregion.

Described as a "great tree trunk" that "unfold[s] her limbs slowly, interminably, the way a tree trunk would if tree trunks were allowed to bend and stretch" (19), Lila's inaugural appearance to Jérémie is a powerful one. On one level, it metaphorically captures Lila's own relationship with nature—an embodiment of her "intense love of nature, especially for her own land" (Rogers and Dufault 72). On another level, Jérémie's ability to momentarily see Lila as a part of his surrounding environment accentuates his potential for developing deeper insight into nature and a human's place within it. Nevertheless, Jérémie does not stay in this frame of mind for long; and in revisiting the idea that his ecological morality is yet to be determined, Jérémie's reversion to *Harry Potter* once again reveals a form of escapism that does not necessarily hinder his bioregional initiation, but does greatly influence the lens through which he constructs nature, place, and now, people: "[Lila's] was the kind of voice that *petrifixes* you, turns you to stone before you even have a chance. . . . She surely had a witch's name that she would reveal to him in due time, when they became closer" (Proulx 19-20). When he attempts to impress her by proudly revealing that he has "just killed one thousand three hundred ants" (20),

Jérémie's boastful exaggeration not only fails to win him the admiration he seeks from Szach the Sorceress—he also becomes surprised by her question of how he will make amends for his actions.

Jérémie's first step to appeasing the Sorceress is to undertake an assignment that will ultimately carry him through to the end of his summer visit: "to digest the encyclopedia of insects [Lila] instruct[s] him to learn by heart before daring to show up at her doorstep again" (Proulx 44). But just as he begins to immerse himself in this new knowledge-based exploration of the forest's insects and what it means to focus on nature with a different—albeit still magically imaginative—perspective, his father Marco comes for a visit from Montreal.[6] The disruption is, once more, an incessant reminder for Jérémie of the urban-rural binary he negotiates and that continues to seep into his developing feelings about nature:

> Jérémie's nose was in the grass and his chin was resting on his hands. . . . not one of the clandestine comings and goings of the arthropods could escape him . . . [H]e'd scrambled under a large-leaved bush close to the little cabin so as not to miss a word of what Laurie and Marco were saying as he carried out his investigations, but Laurie caught him in the act. *You get up right now! You're going to get all dirty!* To which Marco immediately replied, *Let him play! He's just a kid!* To keep from taking sides, Jérémie moved farther away to continue his work. (111-12)

With the urban world represented by his parents as cacophonous and somewhat violent, Jérémie bonds even closer to the natural world, which offers the potential for a more peaceful and meditative state. This connection is marked by Jérémie not only taking physical action and moving away to continue his environmental observations, but also simply turning to the Laurentian wilderness for comfort when the "silly little bug stories" he tells his parents noticeably fall "into empty eyes and [die] there, without the slightest effect" (113): "Laurie and Marco were open to nothing, since they needed all their energy to ruminate in silent hostility, so Jérémie's arthropods were welcome, for they kept the outside walls of the house they shared standing, though all the rest had collapsed" (113).

The sense of solace Jérémie begins to feel as he spends more time outside and apart from what his city parents represent for him shapes the natural environment into an even more powerful childhood place of nature where formative moments in his growth can continue to be anchored. Markedly, Jérémie's perception and awareness undergo a significant change as he becomes more intimate with, and knowledgeable of, the world around him through Lila's book and, by extension, Lila herself (who, while not always

present with Jérémie, does keep her eye on how he is achieving a maturity rooted within the bioregion that is also nurturing him). While he does not completely exchange the *Harry Potter* fantasy for the empirical epistemology of his scientific textbook, Jérémie's act of reading does progressively influence his outlook on nature, which Proulx gestures towards through her own increased use of scientific vocabulary just short of halfway through the novel. Furthermore, Jérémie's new stage of internal evolution is emphasized when he finds an ant entangled in a spider's web outside of his uncle's cabin. In feeling both sympathetic and powerless towards the ant, Jérémie attempts to rescue it before abruptly stopping himself, "concerned with maintaining a prudent neutrality" (119). He earnestly reasons that "he'[s] already alienated the *Formicidae*, and he wasn't about to get on the wrong side of the *Arachnida*" (119), signalling that he has come a long way from the anger-induced ant demolition incident and is now beginning to link a "geographical terrain [with] a terrain of consciousness" that, according to Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, is the very essence of what a bioregion is when there are humans involved (36).

Not surprisingly, Jérémie's concept of home—and of who he is within the place he perceives he belongs—also begins to change under the influence of his engagement with the forest and its wilderness. In discussion with Lila (as Sorceress Szach) about exchanging magical incantations, Jérémie reveals that his is "[m]ay the month of August never come" (128). It is a phrase he relentlessly repeats to himself in order to postpone the inevitable time when his parents' divorce will be finalized and he must return to the city with only his mother. The phrase visibly affects Lila, whose growing love and affection for Jérémie parallels her own deep love of nature; yet her response, "[a]nd then you'll go home" (Proulx 129), is interesting, as while the adult sees "home" as the domestic space found in an urban setting, the child attributes it to the bioregion:

> Home. It was true, he felt like he was home as soon as he went down the hill and turned onto the trail that led to the little wooden bridge, as soon as the forest surrounded him with its scent-papered walls. Home. Since it was home, why should he have to leave? *May the month of August* . . . (129)

The decisiveness with which Jérémie calls his childhood place of nature "home"—a word usually reserved to describe an emotional attachment to place or dwelling—highlights an emergent desire to maintain an identity in and through a non-human nature. Moreover, "home," with its "scent-papered walls" (129), adds a noteworthy layer of complexity to the child's relationship

with nature, as Jérémie's visualization of the forest in a domestic way mirrors his previous thoughts of the arthropods keeping the outside walls of his parents' cabin standing while everything else has collapsed. In this way, home-as-nature not only recognizes the transformation of the environment into Jérémie's childhood place of nature—a safe and nurturing space for childhood growth—once again, but that his wilderness experience thus far has become what Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble argue in *The Geography of Children* is "a basic human need . . . Children *do* need wildness" (xiii).

Of Butterflies and Broken Legs: The Final Tests of Jérémie's Ecological Morality

The final moments of Jérémie's coming-of-age process in nature are marked by two interrelated events: the rise and fall of his monarch butterfly, and a broken leg that takes him away and brings him back to Lila, Simon, and the forest in September to recuperate. Symbolically, the caterpillar-turned-butterfly (named "the King") is a bundle of opposing forces itself; and running parallel to the moment the King transforms from caterpillar to chrysalis, Jérémie's fears of separation are confirmed over a phone conversation with Marco. As "a mean, unhappy upsurge boil[s] up from inside" him (186), Jérémie's anger towards Marco briefly—albeit disturbingly—shifts towards the King, quivering and defenceless, in its jar.

Jérémie's desire "to grab what the caterpillar had become and deliberately crush it" (186-87) not only turns his initial intrigue with the King into disgust, but also marks a dangerous and potential return to his previous ant-crushing self, which, if acted upon, would undo the progress he has achieved thus far in his maturation and developing awareness and relationship with nature. Ultimately, however, Jérémie does not crush the King, as he is halted by a vision of "the austere face of SS [Sorcerer Szach] loom[ing] up in his mind like a dire warning" (187). Hers is an image that "in the best, most powerful sense" (Rogers and Dufault 72) reminds Jérémie of the power he possesses in the mediation between the human and the non-human.

Jérémie continues to grow closer to Lila, accompanying her as they forage in the woods for their dinners, and eventually they share the personal traumas that have led them to seek a nurturing strength from the surrounding environment and the humans who have chosen to become a part of it. Young Jérémie perceives Lila (and by extension, the natural world) as a safe place to release his feelings about the fire, his parents, and

his near-death experience. Lila, conversely, indicates that she feels similarly by responding to an innocent but startling observation Jérémie makes after seeing a photo of her deceased husband (194-96). Proulx, however, does not let her readers become lulled into assuming that Jérémie has finally achieved the idyllic state in nature that promotes the "child as innocence as well as nature embodied" (Dobrin and Kidd 6). Rather, with a startling dream that sends Jérémie running through the forest at dawn towards the jarred butterfly he has forgotten at Simon's cabin during his stay with Lila, Proulx has her young protagonist fall into a deep crevice and break his leg.

For all the "celebrations of nature's largesse" (Soderstrom n. pag.) between child and environment, Jérémie's predicament demonstrates that nature is also fundamentally indifferent to humans and their affairs. The view of nature as harsh and oppressive, expressed by Margaret Atwood in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* over four decades ago, was commonly found in Canadian prose and poetry as a predominant theme and a central distinguishing feature of the nation's literature. But, as Dobrin and Kidd aptly state, "close contact with nature can be dangerous, but so, too, can our evasion and denial of it" (2). Scared and injured by a nature he has been learning to be more empathetic towards, Jérémie has one final chance to abandon his apprenticeship as a future caretaker of nature—to see nature as an unforgiving and hostile place—or to maintain the idea that nature is a constructive place of balance between both literal and metaphoric growth and decay. Proulx ultimately chooses the latter for her character, with positive results: Jérémie's accident not only rejuvenates his relationship with Marco,[7] but protects him from viewing himself as a victim.

Jérémie's Final Act: Conservation

While the end of August finds Jérémie in a city hospital bed, September brings him back on crutches to Lila, Simon, and Goose Lake to mend. While it is implied that, in his return, Jérémie's coming of age through nature will continue to positively influence his attitude towards self and place, it is the coda—which is set in the distant future—that fully confirms the successful completion of his apprenticeship and the results of a child educated into a deeper and different awareness of nature.

Now a content and fulfilled adult who shares his childhood place of nature with his wife, children, and friends, Jérémie is able to reflect not only upon a childhood that has benefited from an adult's (Lila's) cultivating guidance, but also on what he can do for the environment now that he has achieved

the knowledge and empathy needed to enact responsible change. Making his way up alone to the top of the cliff that Lila used to frequent before her death, Jérémie recounts how lucky he was to have "come upon good fortune at an early age" (314), especially now with news of "[t]he world . . . going badly . . . slicing down like the blade of an apocalyptic guillotine" (314). He attempts to do his part—"to compensate" for the torment he feels towards the current state of the environment by giving back "to the world" (314)—and his decision to make Melissa Clémont of Sustainable Development[8] the next caretaker of the land Lila has left him upon her death becomes the pinnacle act(ion) of conservation in his mature role as a caretaker of nature.

While Jérémie's desire to transform Goose Lake into an officially protected park is selfless (as it was for years with Lila, Jérémie receives dazzling monetary offers for the land), it can also be said that there is a yearning to additionally conserve his childhood self and place of nature in as pristine a way as possible. The troubling fact about the act of conservation is that, while it is meant to be a positive way to protect the environment, it is also—in some ways—dependent on subjective ideas about the nature to be protected. For Jérémie, it is his childhood place of nature with "real wild animals that fled instead of beg[ged] for food, plants so healthy they were green in their banality, century-old pines threatened only by insects or lightning, [and] a crystalline lake that had never seen an algae bloom" (Proulx 316). The fleeting figure of a child Jérémie thinks he sees just before reaching the summit once more plays with the view of childhood nature through adult eyes as a prelapsarian time and place that haunts, but also valuably reminds one of their responsibility within the caretaker role.

Conclusion

Jérémie's journey from learning to be a child of nature to becoming a responsible, empathetic adult shapes not only his sense of self, but also what Ursula Heise describes as a "sense of place and sense of planet" (3) within a contemporary time. Proulx's comment that "[c]hildhood is a cold room in which are stored the seeds of all that will eventually sprout and spread leaves" (71) is, in one sense, an idyllic one in its equation of prelapsarian nature (the stored "seeds") in childhood with a positively charged, environmentally active adult life (the "leaves"). However, Proulx also uses Jérémie to challenge that ideal through the urban/rural and nature/human binaries, which complicate an early determination of his ecological morality.

Applying a bioregional lens to both Jérémie and the regional landscape he explores creates an evolving perspective on the character's formative experiences: he not only becomes increasingly aware and thoughtful of the Laurentian wilderness around him, but he is also allowed to continually rethink how he fits within the bioregion as a "life-place" (Thayer 3). In an echo of Suzuki's "[s]olutions are in our nature," Proulx demonstrates that the Canadian child figure can be and is a crucial part and reflection of a greater need to empower environmental change.

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NOTES

1 Proulx uses the following lines from Friedrich Hölderlin as an epigraph to *Wildlives*: "Though deserving, / man must live poetically / upon the earth."
2 Besides the child characters, the adults also have their own encounters with the environment, which opens *Wildlives* to a wider examination of the representation of nature in Québécois literature. See Stephanie Posthumus and Élise Salaün's "'Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver': Literary Representations of Nature and Ecocritical Thought in Quebec" for an analysis of Québécois ecocritical thought and broader literary movement.
3 "If I did not have a place in the countryside . . . I would not have the desire to write." Translation mine.
4 "very connected to nature." Translation mine.
5 "I find that we are in a period of collective distress, not only in Quebec, and this place [the forest], for me, is a place of healing and wonder." Translation mine.
6 Marco's encounter with the Laurentian wilderness upon his arrival reveals that his sensibilities with respect to nature are the opposite of Lila and Simon's (81).
7 In Jérémie's eyes, Marco makes a complete transformation during the rescue into a Superman/Spider-Man figure as he ingeniously throws together a hoist (despite knowing nothing about slings and ropes) and makes his way down into the hole (251-53). It is a complete contrast to an earlier scene between them where Jérémie assumes the adult role of saviour and comforter when Marco, scared of a bat that gets trapped in his room, becomes hysterical (87-89).
8 As the daughter and granddaughter of men who endlessly pursued Lila to sell them Goose Lake in order to make it one of the biggest recreation centres in the Laurentians, Melissa Clémont and her work in sustainable development allow her to fall within the same category as Jérémie in terms of the effect one's youth in nature has upon future environmental acts. However, while Proulx does not give us much on Melissa's personal life, she does hint through Jérémie that Melissa's eagerness for the land is to be taken with some unease (317).

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