



*A review of*  
**Landscape in  
Children's Literature**

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**L***andscape in Children's Literature* is an ambitious attempt to theorise an entire new area of children's literary studies. Jane Suzanne Carroll notes that both geography and literary theory employed formalist paradigms in the 1920s and argues that geographic and literary landscapes can be studied using similar tools. Carroll identifies 'topoi', or pure, irreducible, and unchanging components of meaning, as the most potent tool common to geography and literature. A 'topoanalytical' approach considers both place and the actions that occur there; according to Carroll it enables scholars to consider both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects of meaning. Carroll suggests that fictional landscapes ought to be understood through their 'intertextual provenances' as layers that form a 'continuous cultural tradition' (Introduction, 4), just as physical landscapes are understood as layered records in space of events in time. Arguing that the Anglo-Saxon meanings of 'landscape' conceive it as both natural and cultural, Carroll contends that depictions of land from Anglo-Saxon literature to the present can illuminate understanding of its presence in modern children's fantasy (5).

Carroll's case study is Susan Cooper's *Dark Is Rising Sequence* (1965-77), a work deeply concerned with history, myth and the land. Cooper's sequence was part of a wave of fantasies during the 1960s and 70s set in or making use of Dark-Age Britain, a trend that included Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain* chronicles (1964-8), Alan Garner's *Owl Service* (1967), Mary Stewart's *Merlin* trilogy (1970-9), and many others too numerous to name.

*Landscape in Children's Literature* identifies four topoi employed by Cooper, rooted in Anglo-Saxon literature and its successors, and concerned with space and the actions that take place there. They are 'the sanctuary, the green space, the roadway, and the lapsed space' (13). Carroll's 'topoanalysis' presumes continuity between 'the methodologies used to decipher the meaning of the physical landscape' and 'the production and understanding of literary landscapes' (13). In each chapter, the morphological features of the topoi are discussed; classical and pagan sources for these features are identified; the results are applied to canonical children's texts; and finally they are used to analyse landscapes and geographical features of Cooper's *Dark Is Rising Sequence*. The final chapter proposes 'topoanalysis as a rich critical method for the study and understanding of children's literature' (15) by applying it to three other children's books set in England.

Accompanied by photographs she took of Cornish and Welsh landscape features, Carroll's analysis works as a study of a set of distinctively English archetypes. An example of the method can

be found in Carroll's first chapter, 'Sanctuary', which combines discussion of sacred and domestic spaces. Carroll argues that both consecrated buildings and houses are sacred and share similar structural and symbolic attributes. All employ a vertical axis, have pronounced boundaries, and possess a central space which functions as the 'heart' of the structure (17-18). Carroll shows how Beowulf's Hall, Mole's hole in *The Wind and the Willows*, Neolithic stone circles, mountain-tops, Will Stanton's bedroom or his parish church, are all concerned with boundaries, interfaces between the known and the unknown, and actions of trespassing, guarding, or distinguishing one space from another. Carroll's wide reading in literature from Anglo-Saxon to the present enriches the frame of reference. English children's literature seems particularly fitted for this analysis because of the UK's rich and above all visible heritage of historical sites and structures.

Carroll's topoanalytical approach shares much with archetypal or myth criticism in its insistence upon stable, recurrent, and resonant meaning inhering in manmade or natural objects. The green topos, for example, recalls Annis Pratt's *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981), where this archetype plays an important role in women's narratives of development. Such an approach has advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is a sense of continuity and tradition, a sense that microcosm and macrocosm reflect and enhance one another – something valued by many of the authors Carroll discusses, and which Cooper's work stresses, especially in its English and Welsh contexts. (That Cooper wrote the *Sequence* in her homesickness after moving to America adds poignancy to her depiction of the many features of English and Welsh landscape and life absent from the US.) A disadvantage is a temptation to read those motifs paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically. Both advantages and liabilities are on display in *Landscape in Children's Literature*. The discussion provides a sense of the rich conglomerate of past and present in British landscape and architecture, but though the book cites and works from a wide range of historical texts, notions of historical movement and change are understated, probably because of the mythic and archetypal focus.

Analysing the use and meaning of human and natural landscapes is a fruitful area of study, and many children's texts deeply ponder geographical meaning. But making universal claims about the shape and function of sacred spaces, domestic ones, roadways, or even the 'lapsed topos' of 'caves, graves, and ruins' (133) is fraught with difficulty. In North America, the interaction between environment, history, and the individual is told quite differently in survival novels such as Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves*, Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*; or in the historical fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Mildred Taylor and Louise Erdrich. But it would be difficult to claim that Carroll's topoi fit an American context. Not all literary traditions, architectures or landscapes convey the same meanings Carroll describes. Carroll's chief accomplishment in *Landscape in Children's Literature* is to offer stimulus for further combinations of geographical and literary study.

Author: Jane Suzanne Carroll.  
Routledge (London, 2011), 242pp.

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