

An Ecocritical Journey Through the Narrative of the Canadian Novelist Alissa York: How Literature Explores Environmental Problems

Adriana Cerminara

Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Alissa York was born to Australian immigrant parents in Northern Alberta, Canada, in 1970. Her family moved to Canada (Athabasca, Alberta) from Australia. Experiencing nature through outdoor activities, along with numerous stories she heard from her father about wildlife in Australia and its national mythology, played an essential role in her early life. York's family moved to Victoria, Vancouver Island, in 1977 and after graduating from high school, she moved to Montreal, Quebec, where she studied English Literature at McGill University. She studied there for two years, yet she did not complete her degree. Some years later, York decided to attend a master's degree in creative writing. York became full-time faculty at Humber's celebrated School for Writers in the fall of 2017. She has been teaching and mentoring writers since 2007. York's interest in our relations with our surroundings, with our fellow human beings, with the natural world, and all creatures that live together on this planet permeates her writing. Alissa York's internationally acclaimed novels include *Mercy* (2008), *Effigy* (2009), *Fauna* (2011) and *The Naturalist* (2016). York is also the author of the short fiction collection, *Any Given Power* (1999). The present interview focuses mainly on her personal and professional background and her two most recent novels *The Naturalist* and *Fauna*.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Submitted
Published

2020-07-22
2020-12-22

Open access

© 2020 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Cerminara, A. (2020). "An Ecocritical Journey Through the Narrative of the Canadian Novelist Alissa York: How Literature Explores Environmental Problems". *Il Tolomeo*, 22, 343-348.

DOI 10.30687/ToI/2499-5975/2020/01/037

ADRIANA CERMINARA How does your narrative work relate to your personal life? When did you start feeling close to the themes that you develop in your novels?

ALISSA YORK Although my father was teaching several things, one of them was the so-called *outdoor education*. We spent a lot of time outdoor: camping, fishing, canoeing, hiking. That combined with a lot of stories that we heard about wildlife in Australia, which is very different from the one in Canada, but it is also quite an important part of the national mythology of that country. Added to that, we always had pets in the home (cats, dogs). I love animals still in the way that children do. A lot of my early memories involve animals, whether they might be pets or wild animals. I was always very attuned to that element of life. Nevertheless, I mostly lived in cities as I grew up.

A.C. Reading your novels, I found it difficult to identify your writing style as belonging to just one literary movement. How would you define yourself as an author? Which literary movement do you feel you belong to?

A.Y. I consider myself a writer in Realism, although people have commented that my works have a kind of, what they call, Northern Gothic influence which I can relate too. There are also elements of extreme realism, Naturalism, that makes into my works at times. There are elements of Ecocriticism. I must say, none of them is deliberately chosen. It is all reflexion of my concerns, of my world view and most importantly it is what the characters of each novel require. What gives me the idea to begin a novel is always a character that I have in mind and I try to build the stories around it, inserting other characters with their own personal stories. I am always following the story and the characters and never imposing any kind of traditions, theoretically, although all of these things make their way in through one's world view, beliefs, what you notice, what you focus on.

A.C. I have found the mixing of different narrative forms in your novels very compelling: i.e. the notebook in *The Naturalist* and the blog in *Fauna*. How do these narrative forms influence the storytelling?

A.Y. In those cases, that usually happens because a first-person voice has asserted itself in one way or another. For example, in *The Naturalist*, Walter's notebook grew out of a couple of directions; I was becoming aware that I wanted Walter's voice, or better, Walter's voice was beginning to take shape by itself in relation to the research I was doing. In other words, I was reading about this XIX Century naturalist who had gone to the Amazon, so in that kind of tradition, in that context that fits with the character and, at the same time, I became fascinated with the field of notebooks as a form of writing itself. It only made sense

to me, also exciting and funny, to write my own field notebook from the XIX Century. Of course, the kind of voice that comes about it has to be responsive to all the parameters: he is male, he is from a certain time, he is of a certain age, he is of a certain background, he has various concerns, he has different personality traits and all of that has to be reflected in the voice, otherwise it is not genuine. The same can be said for the letters or blog posts, I am always trying to reflect many aspects of the characters to make an immersive experience for the reader, where they can fully believe that this voice belongs to that character. Some of the story would present itself as third-person.

A.C. Your stories are stories of *love*. What role does *love* play in your novels?

A.Y. I believe my novels are always about love. Various characters try to love and be loved and very often failing as we do. However, we still try. Love is such an essential driving force for almost all humans.

A.C. When writing or before writing, is there a particular message that you want to communicate to your readers?

A.Y. No, it never starts that way. I don't have a particular message that I want to communicate to my readers before starting writing. This is one of the interesting things when you are discussing your work, when it already has a life and it has become something. You cannot quite describe what it actually is because what it actually is, it begins with something that grows. All the research that one does, it does not go directly into the novel, but it is all part of that process of imagining that world sufficiently to be able to get down on the page. The message makes itself. I truly believe that when people want to write literary fiction and think they are in the driver's seat in terms of the message, they tend to write a piece that is not strong as it could be. Because it is not a direct form. Art itself is not a direct form. It's done through 'the showing' rather than 'the telling', which is something that we do over and over in creative writing. You must do the work to show it rather than just tell about it. That is the moment in which the mysterious happens.

A.C. The leading question here is which role does literature play in environmental discourse and in shaping human beings' behaviour towards nature and other creatures. In your opinion, which role does literature play in the whole discourse?

A.Y. Literature plays a central role. Reading literary fiction increases empathy. I knew this to be true long before; most leaders of literary fiction know that. They know it in their blood, in their bones. It's one of the things that they require from literature, it's that deep sense of connection. It often applies to our

fellow human beings but depending on the literature it can connect to much more.

A.C. Do you believe your novels can be read from an ecocritical point of view and they can contribute to the environmental discourse?

A.Y. Yes! I know that people already do, and it is wonderful to think of that going on for various reasons. One of which is the joy to be read closely and carefully after all the work that goes into a book. It is so wonderful to think of people reading it so closely and carefully and with such a consideration. I feel that the Arts in general have a huge role to play in addressing a number of these huge issues that we have to deal with.

A.C. While reading, one has the feeling that your stories are perfectly intertwined; they include flora, fauna, and the human world. Although sitting on my chair, I found myself travelling among new landscapes, stories, and fantastic creatures that I did not know were existing in this world. [About *The Naturalist*.] Writing about the Brazilian Amazon rainforest is, somehow, a call to the world of the beauty we are losing day by day?

A.Y. The novel ended up absolutely being a novel that is seen as a call to the world to become aware of the landscapes that we are losing, and the wildlife that during the XIX Century were still there. However, it came more from other ways. I was applying for a fellowship and that fellowship asked that you developed yourself and your practice as an artist. So, it wasn't so much projected as it developed. I asked myself: "What can develop myself?". The answer came back right away: The Amazon. I have always been fascinated by it and it was a huge topic, a huge setting, utterly overwhelming. Of course, what comes through, the more you learn about it, you just have a sense of it being a centre of a life force in the world. When you are reading about it and you also go there, that sense feels palpable. So, the fact that we are disregarding the value of that place along with so many other wild places in the world is potentially even more upsetting. This is because, if not there, if we not value there, where then? I don't know the answer to that, but, again, that is how it found its way naturally. There are great concerns that find their way in the novel, but they are also in the air. With such an intertwined setting, it was very challenging to write it. This is how it works: you take the reader into that particular world.

A.C. Within *The Naturalist*, anthropology plays an essential role. In your opinion, to what extent can the killing of animals be justified by anthropological reasons?

A.Y. In many cultures the killing of animals can either be in balance or not in balance. When capitalism comes to the max, usually after not very long that goes out of balance. What you kill

and for what reasons, how much, when and how you do it, whether there is any element of sacredness or understanding of the sacredness of life sustained with the process or not. If all those questions around the practice do not lead to any sense of the sacredness of life, it becomes compartmentalized.

A.C. [About *Fauna*] Since architecture is shaping and determining the future of some species, what role does urban planning play in the novel?

A.Y. The building of cities is dangerous for so many animals. There are a few species to thrive to find their way across the city. I admire animals that can manage to survive in the face of what we do to the landscape. For example, Toronto is on a major bird migration path, a significant amount of those birds that migrate are killed due to those buildings. The numbers are over 1mln birds per year. On the other hand, some of those wild birds have become sufficiently compromised to become extinct and there will be more. People fight to turn off the lights at night that draw nightflyer birds, but they still resist. They want to keep all those lights on, burning energy and killing birds through the night for no reason. I suppose because of what those building mean to them, they are symbols of permanence or power. So, what is that you want? A space that is devoid of life except for human life? It's really important that we change how we think. People who don't care about ruining a certain landscape do not value the land but do not value first the lives of people who may live there, and second that plenty of creatures live there.

A.C. I saw Guy Howell in *Fauna* as an open-minded person who fears neither people nor animals. He embraces people's wrecked stories and rescues animals in his sanctuary. Do you think that having more people like Guy would make the world a better place?

A.Y. Yes, I do. Guy is the kind of hero in the book. The book focuses on all their lives, but he is a kind of centre. He runs a place that is basically a sanctuary for human beings and for animals. Maybe he is not concretely touching any lives, but the way he moves through the world is exemplary. In addition, the role that literature plays in his life as well it is an essential component to the shaping of this character. He evolved through the sanctuary where he lived. With many thanks to the author for her generosity. Adriana Cerminara's *Interview* was included in her MA thesis on an ecocritical reading of the works of Alissa York, University of Turin.

Bibliography

- York, A. (2010). *Fauna*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, Random House Canada.
- York, A. (2016). *The Naturalist*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, Random House Canada.