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Conversations in the Wildwood: Narrators, Readers and the Rise of the Ecological Self

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Conversations in the Wildwood: Narrators, Readers and the Rise of the Ecological Self

Abstract: New nature writing has been gaining popularity in the English-speaking world. Using participant observation of a book group, this paper finds that reading such ecological writing can facilitate reader shifts in perceptions and the valuing of non-human organisms and the more-than-human world. Shifts are enabled when readers experience reading as an imagined conversation with knowledgeable, friendly author/narrators. Readers construct representations of author/narrators using textual and extra-textual information. Evaluative, narrative and aesthetic feelings, alongside inferences about author/narrators' abilities to provide accurate natural history information, evoke intellectual pleasure in readers which can transform difficult emotions. By modelling a self that values nature and brings together science and poetic language, author/narrators of ecological writing offer an alternative vision of the self that challenges problematic dualisms in society. Such a sense of self was adopted and developed upon within book group discussions, highlighting the importance of aesthetic, emotional and relational contexts for using ecological literature in environmental education.

Keywords: reading; selfhood; book clubs; psychonarratology; non-fiction; literature

Introduction

In the context of facilitating individual and social transformations towards environmental sustainability, reading matters. Reading environmental literature contributes to the adoption of environmentally-friendly behaviours (Sia et al 1986, Mobley et al. 2010) and to people becoming environmental teachers and activists (Tanner 1980, Palmer and Suggate 1996, Chawla 1998 and 1999). In children, reading environmental books and magazines has been shown to promote the development of concern for the environment and the welfare of animals, particularly when it happens within families that value and discuss environmental issues (Eagles and Demers 1999).

Amongst secondary school pupils, graphic novels can enable shifts in worldviews and sense of self in relation to nature (Willis and Schmidt, 2018).

While such studies have identified broad trends linking reading environmental literature to environmental values, worldviews and behaviours, little work has been done to unravel the processes by which these effects are produced. This paper contributes towards filling this gap by presenting a subset of findings from a qualitative study of a 'green' book group. Here I draw on a narrative understanding of identity and ethics (Polkinghorne 1988, Willis 2012) along with insights from empirical studies of reading in the social sciences (Oatley 1992) and psychonarratology (Bortolussi and Dixon, 2003) to explore the ways in which reading ecological writing can lead to the adoption of a new model of the self.

Arguing for a key role for literature in changing cultural notions of self is not new. For example, Oatley (1992) has presented the publication and popularity of Freud's case study of Dora as the literary event that marked the end of the Victorian novel and the beginning of the modern one, with its psychological understanding of the self. One of my interests here is in the question of whether the post-1980 surge in popularity of what Schauffler (2003) labels 'ecological writing' (Sauer, 1989) is marking a shift towards a more ecological sense of self in the West.

Schauffler, who traces the contemporary genre of ecological writing back to Romantic writers such as Thoreau, argues that ecological writing has a role to play in dissolving the human-nature dualism, by acting at the scale of the self:

> Because nature writers have traditionally focused primarily on the external environment, those who describe the dynamic interplay between inner and outer ecology are more accurately termed ecological writers, which suggests an integration of human and natural realms and helps dissolve the traditional divide

> between them...The reflective personal accounts of ecological writers can best be seen as a form of natural autobiography, a memoir of their evolving relation to the more-than-human world (Schauffler, 2003: 11-13).

Rather than focussing on authors and texts as Schauffler and other eco-critics do, as a social researcher my focus is on readers and on the context in which reading takes place. My aim in this particular paper is to elucidate how experiences and selves are given meaning and identity in the social setting of a book group, particularly in relation to the more-than-human world.

Convening a Green Book Club

Because of my interest in reading's potential to stimulate and support social change, I approached the practice in an ethnographic manner, studying readers in one of their 'natural' habitats (Swann and Allington, 2009). During the same period that has seen the dramatic decline in reading for pleasure across a number of countries in the Western world (see for example Knulst and van den Broek 2003), book groups have emerged as a widespread social phenomenon (Swann and Allington, 2009).

Participants in the 'green' book group were initially recruited through my own network of acquaintances, particularly through my involvement in the Transition Towns movement. The group was then increased through original recruits inviting friends along. In total, there were twelve participants, although three dropped out part way through the eight months, and no more than seven were ever in attendance at any one time. Participants ranged in age from their 30s to their 60s. In terms of education and occupation, their backgrounds were varied. Some had studied social sciences, some biology, and a couple had studied across the sciences and humanities. One participant came from a performance arts background. Only two were men, reflecting the largely female membership of book groups in general. Only one person had been in a book

group previously. All came to the group with enough interest in nature and the environment for the topic to appeal to them.

Book discussions were not facilitated. I acted as a book group participant-observer, contributing to discussions when appropriate, but minimising my interventions[1]. We met in my living-room. In general, the person who had suggested the book that had been read over the previous month initiated the discussion, followed by each person talking in turn around the circle. This slowly evolved into a more informal conversation. With the informed consent of participants, I recorded our initial meeting as well as seven subsequent book discussions. Transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti, developed for use with Grounded Theory, which facilitates a close coding of the text and the visualisation and querying of emerging relationships between codes.

At the first meeting, participants brought suggestions of books for the group, taking turns making 'sales pitches' for their favourites. At the end of this evening, participants voted on which books they would discuss as a group. The only stipulation I brought to the group was that all books read had to have some connection to nature and/or environmentalism. Participants themselves chose to read works that were predominantly narrative rather than expository. While works of fiction stimulated some interesting discussion2, the group's favourite books were all creative non-fiction: Walden by Thoreau (2004[1854]), Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees by Roger Deakin (2007),

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[1] For example, none of the transcribed material in this article is attributable to the author.

[2] The fictional works chosen by the group were Skellig by David Almond (1998), Starhawk's Fifth Sacred Thing (1993), Jay Griffiths' Anarchipelago (2007) and Ishmael by Daniel Quinn (1992).

Gathering Moss by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003), and Findings by Kathleen Jamie (2005). Each essay in Wildwood, Findings and Gathering Moss contained an illustration, a photograph or drawing of an element (i.e. not of a scene). However, these illustrations were never mentioned by readers. All of these books fall into the genre of ecological writing as identified by Schauffler (2003). As mentioned above, Schauffler cites Walden, one of the books chosen, as a key precursor to this genre and its rise. I have focussed this paper on the discussion of the ecological memoirs, because these appeared to have a more powerful impact on readers than the fiction did.

In his introduction to an early collection of essays from one of the pioneer publishers of ecological writing, Orion Magazine, Sauer (1989) cites 1980 as a pivotal year both in Western societies' understanding of their relationship to nature and in the growth of this genre of writing. While similar writing existed before this period, Murphy (1995) has characterised it as more protoecological than self-consciously ecological. British interest in this genre seems to have built up more slowly, gaining ground more recently in the early twenty-first century.

The book club at the centre of this piece of research was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, and all participants were British. Wildwood and Findings are collections of creative non-fiction essays by British authors, published in the early twenty-first century. Since its publication in 2007, Wildwood has sold more than 120,000 copies in the UK alone (email from Hermione Thompson of PenguinRandomhouse, 5 September 2018).

Both Deakin and Jamie bring aspects of their domestic and personal lives into their essays and write directly about their relationships to place and to the plants and animals they encounter, locating their work within the genre of ecological memoir.

In Deakin's own words, '<u>Wildwood</u> is about the element of wood, as it exists in nature, in our souls, in our culture and in our lives' (ix-x). <u>Findings</u> is in some ways more domestic and more eclectic, with essays ranging from peregrine falcons to collections of old body parts in anatomy museums. <u>Gathering Moss</u> is part of the American tradition, written by Robin Wall Kimmerer who is a professor of bryology. It is a collection of essays about mosses. It is angled a little bit more towards natural history than the others, but still contains enough personal detail about the author, her family and cultural background to put it within the genre of ecological writing.The central finding to emerge from my analysis of the book discussion was an observed shift in participants' understandings of what it might mean to be human in relation to the more-than-human world. This paper shares my analysis of the elements and processes that facilitated the development of a consensus around a model of an ecological self in one, local group of readers.

Storying Selves through Conversations with Narrators

> The others were already there as I approached the shadow island of the grove in the dusk. Out in the meadow near the wood's edge, in a little pool of pure white light, four men and a girl knelt in the grass around an outspread white sheet and a powerful mercury lamp. In their intense concentration on the little arena inside the halo of light, there was the unmistakable air of theatre. Clearly, they were at their devotions before some blinding vision, some deity. Closer up, as my eyes adjusted to the brilliance, I perceived that the dazzling aura was filled with the fluttering of a dozen or more moths, most of them small, with insubstantial papery wings. I took my place in the circle quietly, and we introduced ourselves. (Deakin, 2007: 59)

<u>Wildwood</u> (quoted above) was unanimously chosen as the first book to be read and discussed. While a few people had heard of the book, what convinced the group to

choose it was Peter's[3] pitch for it. In this pitch he referred to the aesthetic beauty and scientific content of the book as well as the attributes of the author:

> It is beautiful.
> It's got a sort of lovely and quite novel turn of phrase.
> And it's all about trees and about wood.
> So he talks about dashboards of Jaguar cars
>   and jaguars in the Amazon jungle
>   and he draws these beautiful analogies
>   and circles and circles.
>
> He's a botanist and a film-maker
>   and so it is quite scientifically based
>   and technically--an awful lot about the life-cycle of trees and the uses of wood.
>
> It is a gorgeous journey through the world,
>   based around trees and wood.
> It's sort of poetry,
>   it's scientific poetry,
>   or poetic science.[4]

This coming together of aesthetic pleasure and scientific knowledge through virtual conversations with narrators proved to be key to how ecological writing contributed to transformations in group understandings of what it is possible for selves to be and to do.

Conversing with Narrators

During his pitch, Peter had moved smoothly from telling a story about Wildwood, to constructing a story about Roger Deakin. After selecting the book, group

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[3] Pseudonyms are used for participants.

[4] A modified version of Gee's poetic transcription methods (1991) have been used to better convey the rhythm of the spoken language in the quotations throughout this paper.

members then read Wildwood on their own. At the subsequent meeting, one month later, Peter began by confirming that who Deakin was and how he felt about him were central to his experience of reading:

> I was also somewhat entranced,
>   and felt sort of love for the guy himself,
>   Roger Deakin.
>
> So that was a quite an important element of the book for me:
>   Him.

Later in this discussion, Peter said that reading Wildwood was like 'sitting next to a friend who's so knowledgeable and sees everything' and then he continued,

> I really didn't want to finish
>
> It's like having a friend,
>   for a couple of weeks.
> Very impressive,
>   powerful new friend.
>
> So I bought another book by him.

The idea of readers having conversations with narrators is core to psychonarratology (Bortolussi and Dixon, 2003). Bortolussi and Dixon theorise that at the heart of reading is 'the essential communicative transaction between the narrator and the reader' (2003: 69).

In the quotation above, Peter provides a beautiful illustration of what Oatley (2011) has observed through his own research, which is that when readers infer things about the narrator from the text--representing the narrator as a close friend and imagining reading as an intimate conversation--this enables the reader to create a strong mental model of

the narrator. Through their ongoing construction of an understanding of the narrator, the reader then 'extend[s] [their] relationship with that friend' (Oatley 2011: 331).

Author/narrators and the world beyond the text

Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) conceive of the narrator and the author as remaining distinct and separate in readers' experiences of reading. They hypothesise that readers form representations of the *author*--inferring things about him or her from the text, and occasionally from extra-textual information—and that representations of authors may overlap with representations of narrators. However, they insist that it is through their imaginary conversations with the *narrator alone* that readers engage with the text.

In memoirs, which involve writers writing about themselves, authors and narrators are difficult to disentangle. In the case of the green book group, the credentials of the author were also central to the experience of reading. In making his pitch for <u>Wildwood</u>, Peter emphasised the qualities and credentials of Roger Deakin the author, demonstrating that he felt these aspects of the work were important, not only to his own experience of reading, but also to its potential appeal to others. Another book group member, a biologist by training, routinely searched for authors on the internet to find out about their background.

While it is possible that reader conversations with narrators alone was the norm at one point in reading history, there is evidence that this is changing more generally. The significance of the extra-textual public arena that authors inhabit has grown in the 21st century through the internet and social media. Dawson (2012) has argued that this growth along with the way in which some literary fiction authors have responded to it, challenges the division between authors and narrators that typically has been made by

researchers and critics. Ecological memoirs also challenge this division.

In part, participants used extra-textual ‘background checks’ to assure themselves of the authority of the author/narrator in providing accurate information on natural history (something I will explore further below). However, finding out more about the backgrounds of authors was also used to inform interpretations of author/narrators’ intentions.

Drawing on conversation dynamics, Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) suggest that making inferences about the intentions, knowledge and background of a narrator is essential in developing a representation of the narrator. Dominant within Peter's representation of Deakin is the idea that his intentions in writing the book were to communicate his love of the places, the people, and the non-human organisms that he wrote about. However, Peter further developed his conceptualisation of these intentions by drawing on what he knew about the author from outside this text, in particular his relatively recent death from cancer (which is never alluded to in the book):

> It's such a sort of strong evocation of life,
> and the glory of nature,
> and the glory of wood.
>
> There is a thread of poignancy running through,
> and a sort of sadness,
> and obviously he talks about the loss of forests
> and the loss of woods
> and the loss of the trades
> and the skills
> and the relationships
> and the slow life
> and everything.

Realizing that presumably he did know he was coming to the end of his life,
that's a very beautiful sort of poignant aspect to it.

Events in a story need to be motivated in order for the reader to make sense of them (Miall 1988). Treating Wildwood as a coherent whole, Peter found in the author's impending death, the motivation behind the author/narrator's words.

Mullins and Dixon (2007) observe that readers use narrators' attitudes as a marker of what is important in the story being told. Book group members clearly did this while reading ecological memoirs, but it is important to note that they then took these cues about what is important beyond the pages of the book. For example, through reading Gathering Moss, participants reported developing a new appreciation for moss in the real world. One participant reported that she actually noticed moss in her immediate environment much more than she had before. Importantly, this not only shifted her perceptions of the everyday places in her external world, but also shifted her conception of herself from someone for whom moss held no interest to someone who was fascinated by moss:

I was quite sceptical.
I thought, 'Oh I'm not going to be interested.'

But then the same thing happened.
I couldn't put it down.
I was like 'what's going to be in the next chapter?'

And I can't stop looking at mosses,
everywhere.
There's more in the Grassmarket
than I ever believed there would be.

This quotation provides evidence that cues from author/narrators about what is

important are taken out of the immediate reading experience into the more-than-human world. This observation is an important one in providing a link between reading and transformations in environmental worldviews, values and behaviours,

Another key observation in relation to shifting values and behaviours, was that readers brought events and experiences from their own lives to the conversations they had with author/narrators, as the following discussion of Walden demonstrates:

> Rachel:
> He's a wonderful observation on life
> and he really makes you question and think about things, actually.
> It's made me say, 'oh yes, I live like that,'
> and other things I'm like, 'Actually why do I live like that?
> Why do I do that?'
>
> So I think it's brilliant for that.
>
> Peter:
> I liked the thing about books.
> The power of the written word.
> The power of books.
>
> It is a bit like he's coming out of the book and grabbing you by the throat:
> 'have you thought about this?'
> You know it's brilliant, amazing,
> that people can communicate across time so strongly.

If our selves are comprised of the stories we tell about our experiences and the stories others tell about us in dialogue, as many contemporary social theorists assert (Willis, 2012), then the conversations readers have with narrators matter. The readers quoted above are engaged in telling stories about author/narrators, but through these imagined dialogues, they also experience the author/narrators as telling stories about them. In the

imagined conversations between the narrators of ecological memoirs and their readers lies the potential for shifts in how readers perceive themselves and the everyday places they dwell within.

Transformation through Intellectual Feelings

From the discussion of the book group material above, it is already apparent that feelings play an important part in imagined conversations between readers and author/narrators and that discussing their emotional responses was one of the topics group members returned to often. Miall and Kuiken (2002) have studied the role of emotions in reading fictional literature, concluding that feelings evoked by reading may modify readers' self-understandings. They propose a typology of feelings readers may experience while engaging with texts (see also Kuiken et al 2004):

- Evaluative feelings in response to the text as a whole. These include feelings of satisfaction or pleasure in reading the book and are what keep readers reading.
- Aesthetic feelings in response to formal elements of the text. Often experienced by readers as a sense of heightened interest or focus.
- Narrative feelings, which draw on sympathy--response to characters--or empathy--shared with characters, including the narrator.
- Self-modifying feelings in response to readers' reflexive engagement of their own experiences with the text.

These four types of feelings are inter-related and feed into each other. For example, without experiencing at least one of the other types of feelings, it is unlikely that anyone will enjoy or take satisfaction in reading a book (evaluative feelings).

As highlighted in the previous section, book group participants were similar to fiction

readers in their desire to develop a clear picture of a narrator's background and knowledge. However, in the context of ecological writing, an essential part of this involved establishing authors' background and knowledge in relation to natural history and environmental sciences. I suggest the importance to 'green' book group participants of such author/narrator attributes lies in a fifth type of emotion: *intellectual feelings*, or the pleasures and satisfactions evoked by learning something.

Intellectual feelings in reading appear to depend upon the knowledgeability, trustworthiness and sincerity of the author/narrator. While Deakin's knowledge and credentials were frequently cited as positive attributes of Wildwood, one participant reported that she did not like Findings because the author, Kathleen Jamie, represented herself as knowing little about the natural world. In this way, the desire for intellectual feelings fed into the reader's negative evaluative feelings.

When scientific information was 'beautifully written', readers interpreted the act of writing to be an act of care on the part of the author/narrator. Peter spoke of this directly in discussing Wildwood, and of how it affected his own aesthetic, narrative and intellectual feelings:

> The subject matter:
>   he's really sort of inspiring
>   and he's sort of fallen in love with the trees
>   and with wood,
>   and the people
>   and the landscapes he describes
>   and everything.
> It's really heart-warming
>   and strong
>   and colourful.

It is useful to contrast this with responses to another book, which did not provide

aesthetic pleasure to everyone: Walden. While Elaine engaged intellectually with the parts of Walden she thought beautiful, she had difficulty getting through his 'rants':

> So there was some really beautiful writing in it
> here and there
> but I found myself ploughing through the rest
> and dredging through it
>
> There was so much ranting in it.
>
> I get bored with hearing people rant.

I suggest that readers enjoyed reading beautifully written stories, rather than exposition or 'rants' because narrative and aesthetic feelings contributed to the evocation of intellectual feelings. Without the pleasure in the author/narrator's feelings or in the use of language, there was little intellectual enjoyment in the reading either.

Moments of heightened aesthetic attention were taken as cues that what was in the text at that moment was particularly important to the author/narrator (Mullins and Dixon, 2007). When that aesthetic attention was applied to communicating scientific knowledge, the importance of and pleasure from learning was reinforced for readers. In the discussion of Gathering Moss—a book that all participants agreed gave them aesthetic pleasure--Kim reported that she read the book more slowly than she normally would because she wanted to get into the author's way of seeing the world, thus linking aesthetic and narrative feelings:

> For me it was kind of wanting to get into her space.
> I couldn't do that if I was going very quickly.
>
> I didn't just want the information,
> I wanted to be in her head
> and feel her way of expressing it

as opposed to something else
    where I may just want the content.

For Kim, the intellectual pleasure she derived from the 'information' was inseparable from her desire to feel what the narrator was feeling (narrative feelings) and the beauty she found in the formal elements of the text (aesthetic feelings). Readers received pleasure through learning, in part because author/narrators themselves expressed pleasure in knowing and communicating that knowledge.

The focus of this paper is on how reading may contribute to shifts in the meanings given to experiences and even in a readers' sense of identity in relation to the more-than-human world. Miall and Kuiken's (2002) research into emotions and reading has shown that when reader, text and context all align, reading may help readers to recontextualise their own feelings. Kuiken et al. (2004) observe that aesthetic and narrative feelings are necessary before such self-modifying feelings are evoked. In her initial contribution to the discussion about Wildwood, Rachel mentioned that "the moths bit" was one of her favourite parts (evaluative feelings); towards the end of the book group discussion she explained why:

It made me like moths,
    from having never liked them.

When I was a child,
I grew up on a farm
    and there was a bran tin that had been left
    and nobody had looked in it,
    and my memory is that it was enormous
And I lifted the lid
    and obviously all these caterpillars and things had been in there.
And the conditions were that when I lifted the lid
this just, Whoa!

flew into my face.

And you know the thing where you're sure someone is chasing you?
well I ran
and I had this fear of the moths,
and they were probably just fluttering around and all.
And from then on I had this terrible fear of moths.

And yet when I read this chapter,
I was thinking: ‘oh, right, interesting.’

The word ‘interesting’ indicates the arousal of intellectual feelings through her imagined conversation about moths with author/narrator Deakins. The intellectual feelings evoked by Deakins’ story about watching moths enabled Rachel to transform her understanding of moths as something to be feared to something that could be the subject of enjoyable intellectual investigation and a shift in her sense of self from someone afraid of moths to someone who finds them interesting.

While Rachel's story about moths represents a rather classic tale of the transformation of troubling emotions through reading, ecological memoirs also enabled readers to experience other types of transformations. When aesthetic, narrative and intellectual feelings all came together, readers sometimes experienced a re-enchantment of the world and their lives:

Peter [referring to Gathering Moss]:
Beautifully written,
like Roger Deakin.

Yeah it was fantastic this whole little world.
Mind you she talks about
the world that we live in is normally gorgeous enough
and you start looking
and there's beauty all around.

Amazing universe.

Readers of ecological writing expressed pleasure in learning about the more-than-human world from engaged, knowledgeable, caring narrators. The pleasure of learning helped them to transform difficult emotions and to re-experience the world in all of its wonder.

Divided Subjects, Divided Selves: A Group Discussion

Thus far, this paper has mostly reported on what individual readers said about their own, independent conversations with books. However, interpretations of Wildwood, Walden and Gathering Moss, were co-constructed not just between readers and author/narrators but also between readers in the book group context.

Besides intentions, knowledge, and background, Bortollusi and Dixon (2003) also suggest that in engaging with a text, readers seek to understand narrators' models of self. As already discussed, in ecological writing the author/narrator's self is positioned in relation to the more-than-human world in significantly different ways than for narrators in more traditional natural history writing and in relation to most fiction (Schauffler 2003). By presenting what might be termed an ‘ecological self’ these books invite readers to rethink the damaging dualisms that separate humans from the rest of nature. By paying attention to the range of feelings evoked by a text, including intellectual ones, other dualisms that underlie Western discourses are also challenged.

In his initial pitch, Peter described Wildwood as ‘scientific poetry or poetic science’. By the end of the subsequent discussion about Wildwood, this idea of science and poetry had become central to participants' co-creation of the model of self that they believed Deakin exemplifies.

Peter started off this line of discussion by saying,

> He puts life in it.
> He reflects life in everything
>   cause you could just write it cold
>   and boring
>   and scientific,
> but his care is spontaneous
> so it's infectious
> isn't it?

This was met with a chorus of agreement. Kim went on to say:

> it's interesting that you say that,
> because I am a scientist
>   and I loved the science
>   but I did wonder if it would be too much for people who weren't.
> So I'm intrigued.
>
> Peter: right
>
> Kim: I presume you're not a scientist
>
> Peter: No.
>
> Kim: So that's interesting to hear you say that
> because I thought,
>   'I bet some people hate it.'

Both Peter and Kim, who come from different disciplinary backgrounds, articulate their surprise that scientific knowledge can be conveyed in a way that invokes feelings of pleasure in readers. Sharon (another non-scientist) responded to both of them by saying, 'this is the best, to combine scientific writing and heart and poetry,' explicitly linking intellectual feelings, narrative feelings and aesthetic feelings to her evaluative feelings.

Linda chimed in next, with a slip of the tongue that explicitly points out that the model of the self Deakin presents challenges dominant social narratives:

> But it does remind me of the split up we've been
>   between science and poetry.
> That we're so surprised when someone does this.
> That he has a scientific mind,
>   and poetry in his soul,
>   that that's a surprise.

Linda's observation was met by another chorus of agreement. She then widened this model of the self to apply beyond Deakin, by saying:

> It's in all of us.

The discussion of Wildwood started with Peter's representation of it. This was then built upon participant by participant, culminating in the co-construction of a representation of it as scientific poetry or poetic science. That group members were from varied backgrounds including the arts and the sciences was referenced in the discussion, playing a part in the development of a model of the self that brings together poetry and science. Participants' representations of each other, therefore, made up part of the interpretive process (Swann and Allington, 2009).

Over time, the group developed its own local culture, as has been observed in other book groups (Swann and Allington, 2009). Wildwood became a key part of that culture and was referenced many times in subsequent meetings as a touchstone against which other books were compared. The way in which it brought together science and poetry in the self of the author/narrator was central to its ongoing value to the group.

The split between science and poetry is reflected in academic publishing related to reading and the relative neglect of reading in environmental education research. Empirical studies of reading continue to focus on literary fiction, and to contrast this to non-fiction, the latter generally being elided with 'cold and boring' expository prose.

Ecological writing and its reception by this group of readers demonstrates that such generalizations about non-fiction are false and limit understandings of how literary writing can impact on values, identity and even behaviours. Conversely, the aversion to empirical studies of literature in ecocriticism and the tendency by some environmental advocates to discount reading is equally problematic (Estok, 2015).

The self that ecological writers model may not be a new one—Thoreau wrote Walden over 150 years ago—but that self remains largely hidden in the gap left by the continuing divide between science and poetry. Encounters with and acknowledgement of the self modelled by narrators of ecological writing, particularly in diverse but committed groups of readers, challenges this divide. In the context of such an emergent worldview, writers like Deakin are archetypal figures, as Peter explained:

> He had such a love for the things doesn't he,
> the objects
> and the birds
> and the wood.
> That sort of love that is like the essence of native life of the universe,
> it's speaking through him.
>
> Roger partly was an archetypal figure in a way,
> this is life speaking through him,
> this is magical.

Through entering into conversations and empathizing with author/narrators who model an ecological self in which heart, science and poetry meet, readers were able to recognize and challenge dominant societal discourses and open up new possibilities of who they too might become.

Implications for the Field of Environmental Education

Joyce:
I read [Walden] when I was in my teens,
  and I completely fell in love with it.

And I thought:
  Right this is the way I want to live.
And I didn't.

  [General laughter]

It formed a lot of my mental attitudes.
And I haven't read it for yeeeaarrs.
  So it was really intriguing reading it again.
And I loved it just as much.

As Joyce articulates, transformations enabled by reading may not be dramatically life altering, easily apparent nor clearly attributable to a particular text, but the imagined conversations that readers have with knowledgeable and caring author/narrators who write in aesthetically pleasing ways and model an ecological type of self can change people's perceptions and attitudes. Reading can be part of the journey individuals, communities and societies take towards resolving environmental issues.

Fortunately, there is an ever growing catalogue of ecological writing that engages an ecological model of the self which individuals, groups and classes can read and converse with. The findings from this book group can help educators select from this catalogue, by pointing towards the importance of friendly and knowledgeable author/narrators whose texts have the potential to evoke aesthetic, narrative, intellectual, evaluative and self-modifying feelings in readers.

The findings from this book group also add to the growing call to integrate learning

across traditional disciplinary divides, bringing together 'scientific writing and heart and poetry'. This would include opening up opportunities for teaching related to the environment in a range of disciplines not normally associated with the subject area, such as literature; as well as embracing the role creative writing, narrative and aesthetics can play in helping students learn in associated STEM subjects

[5]. Finally, this study highlights the crucial role that aesthetic, emotional and relational contexts play in enabling people to make shifts in their perceptions, attitudes and even their identities in relation to the more-than-human world.

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[5] For a discussion of how to include reading in outdoor education see Willis (2011). Willis (forthcoming) provides specific activities that can be used in a science communication classroom to help students engage with and produce ecological writing as both readers and authors.

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