

CHASING LAKES

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ABSTRACT

Chasing Lakes is an adventure-thriller novel that takes place in the Great Lakes region. Following the lives of two protagonists decades apart, *Chasing Lakes* explores the human relationship with the environment and the complex, interwoven nature of our existence. The novel emphasizes setting and place, with its characters taking part in separate but connected adventures through Canada's natural and unnatural landscapes—storylines that parallel and interact with each other across time.

Chasing Lakes explores the historical human impact on the Great Lakes region, as well as the spectacular beauty that remains there. The novel follows the stories of Michel and his grandfather Joseph, two men who share similar lives, despite having never met each other. After a series of gambling losses, Michel flees his home in Montreal with a stranger, embarking on an adventure that takes him through the entire Great Lakes region. As Michel travels, he encounters characters and obstacles that test his spirit and courage, finding passions for music and sleight of hand along the way. Framed for arson, Michel is forced to go on the run, and a series of decisions lead him toward Thunder Bay, the Lakehead.

Generations earlier, Michel's grandfather Joseph is arriving in Montreal as a new immigrant. Joseph takes a job on board a lake freighter, sending him on a parallel journey through the Great Lakes, where he must navigate the dangerous world of smuggling. A newcomer to the hostile and masculinized lives of sailors, Joseph struggles to find his place, his voyage taking a similar route through each Great Lake, from Montreal toward Thunder Bay.

With an emphasis on the power of story, imagination and memory, *Chasing Lakes* presents the Canadian Landscape in the style of an adventure-thriller. Using dense prose, *Chasing Lakes* blends excitement with literary substance, an effort to find the space between popular and poetic writing that reaches a broad audience.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Chasing Lakes is a novel grounded in ecology and the complex human relationship with the environment. Setting and place are central to the novel, the Great Lakes region and its ecosystem playing an important role from start to finish. The characters in *Chasing Lakes* move through the entire Great Lakes area, exploring those natural and unnatural spaces, but also interacting with them in unique ways. Within a story that spans generations, *Chasing Lakes* utilizes a mix of ordinary and literary language in order to more effectively impart the human connection to the physical world and beyond.

My novel came from a lifelong and deeply personal attachment to the region where I was raised. *Chasing Lakes* is equal parts imagination, experience, and historical research. While creating this novel I endeavoured to express and understand my own story as much as my characters.

Chasing Lakes follows Michel, a gambling addict who leaves his home in Montreal having suffering a lengthy string of losses. After stealing from his family, Michel flees town with a new acquaintance, setting off an exciting and perilous adventure that leads him through the Great Lakes region, the landscape of my childhood. Michel must navigate innumerable obstacles that befall him as he searches for meaning in the world, and tries to understand his own identity.

My novel also follows the story of Joseph, Michel's grandfather, who embarks on a similar journey fifty years earlier, an adventure that runs parallel to his grandson's. A new immigrant from Northern Ireland (loosely based on my own grandfather), Joseph takes a job as a deckhand onboard a lake freighter departing from Montreal, and soon finds himself engaged in the dangerous world of smuggling, as the freighter moves cargo throughout the Great Lakes. Like his grandson, Joseph must try to find meaning in places far from home, struggling to understand himself as a new immigrant, a new father, and a criminal.

The characters in *Chasing Lakes* are pitted against the wilderness, but they must also face Canadian landscapes that are overdeveloped and heavily urbanized. While my novel emphasizes the value and beauty of a pristine natural environment, *Chasing Lakes* features a more contemporary version of the Canadian landscape as well, often depicting the immense cities that have spread throughout the Great Lakes, and the highways that connect them. Places and settings that are emblematic of human harm and excess are also prominent, like the St. Lawrence Seaway, power plants, and casinos. I wanted to not only explore the natural parts of the region, but also the places where wilderness has become unrecognizable due to industry and urban sprawl.

In the similar fashion, my intent was for the language in the novel to embody a balance of wildness and refinement; a style that is readable, but one that demonstrates rhetorical flourish in places that are unexpected. The novel is meant to walk the line between popular and literary writing, using an ecological lens to explore the Canadian landscape. The result is something a little bit different, but writing that I believe captures a modern-day sensibility inside of a traditional framework—the novel takes the form of a popular adventure-thriller, but with unwavering attention to the fine details of the prose, the sound and quality of the words on a basic level.

Chasing Lakes emphasizes human impact on fragile ecosystems. Half of the novel takes place in the early 1960's on board a lake freighter, immediately after the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. This massive development of fragile regions allowed ships to transit between all of the Great Lakes, contributing dramatically to their industrialization, and degradation. As Laurel MacDowell explains in her book, *An Environmental History of Canada*, "Building the St. Lawrence Seaway changed the St. Lawrence River-Great Lakes system forever...[It] opened up the region to new, alien species of plants and animals" (202). The Seaway is mentioned frequently in my novel and shown in great detail, as Joseph must learn to navigate this strange environment, as well as the social constraints of being a newcomer.

As Joseph tries to find his place on board the freighter in a new country, he involves himself in behaviours that are self-polluting, like smuggling. My novel blends the characters into the environment as much as possible, their behaviours as damaging to their own bodies as they are to the bodies of water they are surrounded by. In this sense, my novel is grounded within Barry Commoner's first law of ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else" (Glotfelty xix). This sense of cohesion is furthered by the closely linked journeys of Michel and Joseph, an effort to emphasize the connectedness of all things, even across time—human stories repeated throughout history.

At certain points in the novel, the lives of these two related protagonists impossibly overlap each other, an effort to capture the spirit of this universal connectivity through subtle, mystical expressions. My intention was for my novel to depict a world that is occasionally magical, while maintaining its relevancy for a contemporary audience—a story grounded in reality, interspersed with moments of unearthly wonder.

I was inspired by Canadian authors like Robertson Davies, who layered novels like *Fifth Business* with mystical moments. I also engage with the theme of magic in my novel, through characters like Karlsson Silver, a larger-than-life casino magician, a ghostly magnetic hill, and Michel's obsession with sleight of hand.

The dense prose that my story sometimes utilizes was inspired in part by authors like Michael Ondaatje, novels such as *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*—a style that can be melodic and elegant. Sina Queyras's book of poetry *Expressway* was also influential for me, her rich, lyrical storytelling, and her emphasis on the human relationship with the earth. While writing *Chasing Lakes*, I sought to create the feelings of environmental suffering and loss that I experienced while reading her work.

Less traditional thrillers also played a role the development of my novel, specifically stories that feature naval adventures, like *Moby Dick* or Terry Jordan's *Been in The Storm So Long*. My novel follows the conventions of these naval adventure-thrillers, where big personalities and egos must learn to work together within the confines of a ship, each day fraught with peril and mystery. Joseph's experiences on board the lake freighter depict the highly masculinized, competitive world of sailors, material well-suited for an adventure-thriller.

The naval adventure novels of my childhood also bore an influence on *Chasing Lakes*, like *Treasure Island*, and J. Meade Falkner's *Moonfleet*, particularly themes like loneliness at sea, smuggling, and crime. *Chasing Lakes* follows in the footsteps of these novels, but creates a naval adventure that is uniquely Canadian, depicting a variety of Canadian cities along the way

that have historically impacted the Great Lakes ecosystem, like Hamilton, Niagara Falls, and Nanticoke.

Chasing Lakes also alludes to Thoreau's *Walden*, a book canonical to environmental literature. On the run and looking for a hideaway, Michel spends time living in an isolated cabin in Northern Ontario. Unlike Thoreau, however, he is unable to separate himself from the trappings of modern society, and fails to achieve any kind of peace there.

The novel I've created blends genres, an adventure-thriller that offers an intimate, literary perspective of our relationship with the environment. Part of Michel's journey in *Chasing Lakes* takes place in the wilderness, and these natural spaces play a key role in Michel's development as a character. Rich poetic diction is utilized to create the sense that human bodies and the natural world are deeply intertwined. "Poetic Diction" is described by The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms as "specialized language peculiar to poetry in that it employs words or figures not commonly found in speech or prose" ("Poetic Diction"). At certain key moments in the novel (often when the protagonists are moving from one Great Lake to the next), an omniscient narrator enters the story temporarily in order to provide a more detailed perspective of the scene. This narrator often focuses on the setting or environment, and these parts of the novel utilize poetic prose exclusively. For example, at the beginning of chapter nineteen, the protagonists are entering Lake Huron for the first time, and the omniscient narrator appears momentarily:

Now the lake spouts colour, filtering transparent belts of light, twisting luminosity. In the west, where the sun sets over a horizon born in water, sails ride ridges, billowed in the wind while freighters pound the surface in the distance, rusted hulls drooped and glistening, bent invisibly under their own weight, like men burdened with pain.

Another example of this omniscient, poetic presence is from Chapter Seventeen: "*Conquest* slips upstream into the Detroit River as a mist falls around the freighter. In May the air thickens, the early mornings permeated and wet. The fog reaches through the trees, pushes into small spaces and beads moisture on bullrush stalks, shimmering. It hides inside the forest like breath in a lung."

The inclusion of this second narrative presence allowed for greater flexibility in my writing style, and gave me more opportunities to experiment with poetic language when describing the environment. This omniscient narrator can also be interpreted as a spiritual voice—an all-seeing entity that communicates the connectedness of all things. In Gary Snyder's book, *The Practice of the Wild*, he emphasizes the relationship between human beings and wilderness: "To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness" (173). Snyder's assertion is that this "wholeness" of all things extends to a spiritual level, and he believes that "the world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us...The depths of the mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas" (176). Snyder views the interior realms of our unconscious as an internal wilderness, and it is from this ethereal place that the poetic language in *Chasing Lakes* emerged. In this way and others, my novel seeks to bring the reader into a space where the words themselves have grown organically—a natural world.

The idea that the language in my novel arose from an inner wilderness is not outlandish. Snyder explains that "like imagination and the body, language rises unbidden. It is of a

complexity that eludes our rational intellectual capacities” (177). Poetic language not only allows the reader to experience a surreal connection with nature, the words themselves are representative of growth and wildness.

The tendency for *Chasing Lakes* to personify the environment is an example of the kind of spiritual connectedness that my poetic diction works to evoke. In Scott Slovic’s book *Going Away to Think*, he discusses ecologist Garrett Hardin and his suspicion “about literary language as a means of articulating environmental ideals” (153). Slovic makes it clear though, that this kind of language is actually well suited to bring more people into a relationship with ecology: “Hardin seems to worry that contemporary writers, working in the subtle guise of poetic prose, will undermine rational thinking about the environment. However, much of what we think and feel about our relationship to nature *should* not, and perhaps *cannot*, be expressed in wholly rational terms” (153-154). *Chasing Lakes* seizes upon this kind of abstraction, bringing the reader and its characters as emotionally close as possible to nature, something perhaps even creative works cannot fully achieve. The moments in my novel that are mystical or surreal are sometimes expressed with language that is itself not “wholly rational”.

I wanted *Chasing Lakes* to impart my own deep-rooted connection with the physical places that I’m representing, and the poetic diction in my novel allows for this to be clearly expressed. In Jonathan Bate’s essay “Poetry and Biodiversity,” he discusses Heidegger’s role in ecology, and his opinion that poetry helps define the human place within nature. “Poetry,” Heidegger says, “is the primal form of building...Poetry is the original admission of dwelling.” According to Heidegger, poetry can give us a window into the “being” of the environment that we occupy, and enter us into what Heidegger calls the “simple oneness” of “divinities and mortals” (Bate 55). Bate explains that in this sense, poetry is “a form of being” (55). The poetic language in *Chasing Lakes* constructs the physical world, but also gives its characters what Heidegger would call “authentic being” that is grounded in the “oneness” of all things.

The emotional attachment to the environment that I want my novel to convey, or evoke in the reader, is also underscored by Scott Slovic. He emphasizes how environmental literature allows for an attachment to form between human beings and the world around us: “Close attention to environmental literature and art draws us inevitably into the realm of sensory ecology—an appreciation of our own presence in the physical world and our connections with other beings” (137). *Chasing Lakes* invites the reader into this ecological “realm,” and the poetic diction in my novel consistently appeals to the senses in order to do so. Slovic believes that the sensory details in literature can make our everyday lives richer and more connected to nature: “I believe we need literature—or art more generally—to help us use our senses more fully and intensely...writers in general—and I find this particularly true of environmental writers—serve as extensions of our own nerve endings (137). For Slovic, writers and artists are essential to bring ecological appreciation to a broad audience, codifying sensory details and emotions that help to form connections to our natural world. He emphasizes the importance of sensory detail in creative works like my novel: “How many of us go through our lives...aware of how our senses are connecting us moment by moment to the rest of the world? It’s the purpose of most if not all of the people we call environmental writers to do just that—to help us overcome the idea of ecological connectedness as an arid abstraction and to feel it as a vivid, visceral reality” (137).

Chasing Lakes consistently appeals to the senses, and connects the reader to the physical world as vividly as possible with its poetic diction.

This physical world, the Great Lakes region, is an area that consists of several different bioregions. Unlike modern political boundaries, bioregions can be determined by watersheds, wildlife, and landforms, among other things (Snyder 192). In Deborah Slicer's essay "The Body as Bioregion," she argues that the human body is its own bioregion, not a container for a soul or spirit, but itself something spiritual and subjective: "I'm not just repeating here the old adage about your body being your temple. I'm saying that your body is the sacred itself. Seek no further: you've found divinity in your toenails" (113). While Slicer does not agree that we are the same as the environment that surrounds us, she does see an inherent spirit of flesh which is its own entity. My novel depicts the bodies of its characters as their own bioregions, liable to the same damage and polluting behaviours that impact nature. Michel, the gambling addict, experiments with drugs and finds little emotional respite from the material lifestyle he creates for himself. His grandfather Joseph pollutes his body as well by engaging in smuggling, drinking and gambling on board the lake freighter. Slicer understands that the choices we make affect our own bodies as much as the environment around us: "Most Westernized men and women stand in a similar confused relationship to both their bodies and the earth, and what we do to both, with frequency, is sacrilege" (113).

As my characters move from one Great Lake to another, the situations that confront them change, along with their behaviour. My intention was for the protagonists to mirror the water quality of the Great Lake that they occupy at any given time. In other words, the most polluted lakes (Ontario and Erie) are the setting for the majority of the behaviour that is damaging or pollutive to my protagonists, whereas the lakes that are relatively cleaner (Northern Lake Huron, and Superior) serve as the setting for their behaviour that is generally more redemptive. Though my characters' bodies can be seen as separate bioregions subject to pollution, they are still a part of a larger spiritual whole, an interconnectedness grounded in bioregionalism. In his essay "Critical Utopianism and Bioregional Ecocriticism," David Barnhill explains how "[Bioregionalism] assumes an interweaving of humans and nature, emphasizing the value of nature while also emphasizing human life within nature...It has a profound psychological and spiritual dimension" (212). *Chasing Lakes* seeks to depict the "value of nature" as well as emphasize the lives of the characters that exist within those spaces.

The history of the places and bioregions that my characters occupy are investigated as frequently as their own personal histories, again blurring the distinction between them and the environment. My novel uses memories, flashbacks and sometimes the secondary, omniscient narrator. These narrative shifts rely on poetic language to reach backward in time toward the history of a particular place. In his essay "Teaching Bioregional Perception—at a Distance," Laird Christensen explains how "Bioregional perception also requires an expanded sense of time...Knowing where we live includes knowing what happened there before" (381). *Chasing Lakes* expresses this "expanded sense of time" as much as possible, and both protagonists consistently encounter their own pasts as well as the history of the environments they occupy.

In "Restoring Imagination of Place," Serenella Iovino expresses support for place-based stories like my novel, arguing for their importance inside of ecological discourse: "Visualizing the ecological connection of people and place through place-based stories is a way to remember

a dismembered unity, to enliven our cultural and ecological potentialities—to reanimate the world” (106). When I consider novels like Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* that have inspired me and my writing, I do not believe Iovino overstates the power of creative works to reanimate the world. I want *Chasing Lakes* to reach and entertain a broad audience, but I also want to affect the reader’s relationship with nature. “By inspiring awareness,” Iovino says, “narrations can be a *creative* form of ethical responsibility, and the object of the story can be turned into a (moral and therefore political) project” (106). My novel developed from a personal connection to the Great Lakes region where I was raised. The protagonists in *Chasing Lakes* have lives that parallel, and occasionally interact with each other across time. *Chasing Lakes* is an adventure-thriller written with literary prose and grounded in ecology, a novel that emphasizes place and blends its settings into the lives and stories of its characters.

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DEDICATION

For my grandfather

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