

## CONCLUSION

### CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE GROW UP: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND THE CHESAPEAKE IN MEMOIR

*Across the quiet cove I waded,  
Squeezing the minnows from the moss,  
The eel grass fondled my toes.  
There I saw a soft crab,  
Tinted brightly, modestly withdrawn...  
Feebly she raised her claws,  
Challenging the world to battle,  
Like a tender hearted river man  
Trying to bluff the inevitable...*

*Where fish-hawks dive and buzzards soar  
There was a bomber, silver in the sun.  
I pressed myself into the sand,  
Molding my being with this land.*

*How long can we alone survive?  
They cannot see our eyes.*

- Gilbert Byron, "How Long" from *These Chesapeake Men*, 1943

The Chesapeake Bay is in crisis. According to the 2007 State of the Bay Report, which gives the Bay an annual health rating according to pollution levels, habitat health, and fishery sustainability, the Bay rated at a mere 28 out of a possible 100 (CBF back cover, 3). The Bay's conditions rated at F or "critical" in six out of twelve health categories including nitrogen and phosphorous levels, dissolved oxygen, underwater grasses, oysters, and shad (CBF 3). Only in one area, in rockfish numbers, did the Chesapeake rate at the level of A, or "excellent." President of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation William C. Baker comments upon this 2007 report: "Since CBF began measuring the *State of the Bay* in 1998, the net improvement to Bay health has been slight....The lessons are clear. We must all voice our outrage so that those with the power to effect change...do more to implement the known solutions" (CBF 2).

Demonstrating the depressing findings of the 2007 State of the Bay report in a different medium is the June 2009 *Washington Post Magazine* feature on the Chesapeake Bay, which demonstrates both the estuary's "kinetic energy and vastness of water" as well as "the bay's vulnerability and the fragility of its future" (Farenthold 13-14). The stunning aerial photos of the Bay in this feature reveal the profound human impact on the ecosystem, whether in the depiction of a scored farmland or sprawling urban developments (Fahrenthold 13-14). Whether through shocking statistics, as utilized by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, or by evocative photographs, individuals and organizations are spreading the news, for the Bay's condition is urgent. In the words of Maryland's governor Michael O'Malley, "The time for action has passed. The time to catch up is now" (CBF 10).

At a local level, newspapers circulate news of the deepening crisis and the political upheavals that surround the "Save the Bay" movement. *The Capital*, an Annapolis-based newspaper, reported on the Department of Natural Resource's new plan to reduce further losses of the oyster population by sectioning the Bay into three areas to prevent overharvesting in October 2010 (Wood, "Watermen" A5). In the summer of 2010, *Washington Post* columnist Petula Dvorak wrote about the Bay's water quality, explaining to readers that "In some places after it's rained, the Chesapeake Bay is six times dirtier than the unflushed john" (Dvorak B1). Besides these depressing articles, there is hopeful news, too: a September 2010 *Capital* article explains a recent movement of the federal government to protect the Bay by "creating a 'pollution diet' that will limit pollution entering the waterways that feed the Bay" (Wood, "Activists" A5). This "pollution diet" would be supported by initiatives to reduce runoff, prevent septic system leaks, and rethink agricultural methods to be more Bay-friendly (Wood, "Activists" A5). On a very local level, a recent report on the Severn River, the tributary of the

Chesapeake Bay upon which I grew up, demonstrated that the river's health has grown better from 2001 to 2010—but still remains in critical condition (Mak).

The Chesapeake's environmental crisis, and the social upheavals that surround the Bay, are regular topics in the newspapers and magazines of the region. There is no simple solution to the crisis, and personal responsibility and initiative must be matched by government protections for meaningful progress to be made. However, without these recurring outcries for action, whether from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's annual *State of the Bay* reports or the local newspapers' coverage of recent Department of Natural Resources decisions, many of these changes would go unnoticed by the general public. This void is where I feel children's and young adult literature of the Bay has the opportunity to make their largest didactic impact. Young people, colored only by their own explorations of the Bay estuary, are a prime target for environmental teaching. Given the knowledgeable ambassadors to the Bay's complexities, whether they are the anthropomorphized aquatic creatures of the younger children's books, or the teenage Bay-enthusiast protagonists of young adult novels, children are granted an intimate relationship to the beauties and crises of the struggling estuary. With environmental messages inserted into children's and young adult books, young people are made aware of the challenges facing the Bay—just as adults are confronted with these dire messages every time they open the newspaper. Chesapeake children's and young adult literature encourage an environmental awareness that spans all generations.

Gruner discusses this didactic purpose of children's literature in her article, "Teach the Children: Education and Knowledge in Recent Children's Fantasy." As she explains, "at least one origin of children's literature is in didacticism. . . learning and pedagogy continue to be important in much of literature we provide for children today" (Gruner 216). The term

“pedagogy” is striking here: for the word holds connotations of educational theory, beyond the charge of simply informing an audience (*OED Online*). I feel that many of the children’s and young adult books that I encountered while writing this essay are more pedagogical than instructional in nature. The works did not simply share information about the Bay’s environment and its resources—instead, they utilized personified creatures or the knowledgeable young Bay-savvy protagonists to personally familiarize their readers with the Bay, creating an intimate connection that may lead to loyalty and care for the declining ecosystem. A distinct method of teaching is apparent here. David Rudd explains that children’s literature epitomizes “the tension between instruction and entertainment” (qtd. in Gruner 216). Given the wildly creative world of Priscilla Cummings’ *Chadwick the Crab* series for children, or Margaret Meacham’s *The Secret of Heron Creek* for older youth, this “tension” can create amusing tales for children that are also pedagogical at their core—not simply sharing information with their readers, but subtly encouraging a refined way of life for their audiences.

Bay children’s and young adult literature are not the only genres that create literary pedagogical space to express the Bay’s history and degradation. Beyond the scope of my project are the powerful memoirs of Gilbert Byron and Elizabeth Hodges, who were both profoundly shaped by their childhood and adolescence along the shores of the Bay and its estuaries. Byron’s semi-autobiographical memoir recounts the adventures of Noah, a fictionalized version of Byron, who grows up at the son of a waterman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Critic Gerald Walker explains that the protagonist constitutes a Chesapeake Bay Tom Sawyer figure—constantly getting in trouble as he explores his Bay surroundings (qtd. in Byron, back cover). In addition to playful accounts of these childhood adventures, Byron also reflects the conflict between watermen’s rights and government regulations of the Bay’s waters. Byron

recalls a conversation between his mother and waterman father, as his father defends his actions when taking oysters off-season: “They ain’t never put the law on a person for taking enough to eat. Them the Lord’s oysters, the good Lord put them in the river for folks like us ones” (5). One of Noah’s father’s waterman friends explains this historic fear of the government regulations, “They’re taking away our freedom, little by little. You’ll live to see the day when people will be punching time clocks on the Chesapeake” (Byron 308). The conflict between watermen’s needs for economic survival and the ecological needs of the Bay are still hotly debated. Given this current debate, Byron’s accounts of this antiquated attitude of the Bay’s endless bounty seem like a relic of a long-lost era—especially when readers consider the modern oyster population hovering at just 1% of the levels in historic times (Walker 59). This historical idea of the Bay’s plenty and a privileged attitude towards the Chesapeake’s resources provides a stark contrast with the environmental stewardship of modern children’s and young adult Bay books.

A more modern counterpart to Byron’s reflections on growing up with the Bay is Elizabeth Hodges’ *What The River Means*, which recounts Hodges’ childhood and adolescence on the shores of the Severn River, a tributary of the Bay, in the 1960s and early 1970s. To Hodges, the river is more than a simple backdrop to her childhood’s pains and triumphs—it is an essential playmate and spiritual part of her. As she recalls: “The river and the land along it was me, and I was it. I really needed no other companion” (241). Given its more modern setting, Hodges’ accounts of the river reflect the environmental changes in the tributary she loves so dearly. She recalls swimming in the Severn: “By the mid-sixties, pollution threatened the river’s health and that of all who swam within it” (Hodges 233). Hodges traces these impacts to humans:

But the old appliances and tires from people too lazy to find the proper dumps, the sewer runoff and waste oil, the gasoline from boats, the fertilizers and lawncare toxins from the manicuring of golf courses and rich people's grounds—these altered the river's natural chemistry in dismal ways, too. Some water life has no doubt died out completely. Toward the end of our life there, I could not swim without developing large scaly patches that at times were red, and at times ran clear fluids. (Hodges 233)

Through observation and her own intimate relationship with the Severn River, Hodges shares her own understanding that the health of the Chesapeake is in extreme peril—and is changing in irrevocable ways. So upset is Hodges by the current state of the river that she cannot currently bring herself to return to her beloved Severn (236-237). Hodges feels that upon returning, urban sprawl will have rendered the place of her childhood alien, as she imagines: “I would find my inner map erased by multiple lanes and traffic lights, by packs of houses and their necessary strip malls” (Hodges 240). Hodges' ironic use of the word “necessary” exposes the ravenous nature of urban development that so deeply troubles her and so wholly affects her beloved Severn River, and indeed, the larger Bay itself.

I view Byron's and Hodges' memoirs as examples of what happens when didactic Bay children's literature grows up. Instead of writing for a young audience, these authors construct their memories of childhood as wholly shaped by their natural Chesapeake surroundings—whether through episodic humor as in Byron's *The Lord's Oysters* or through Hodges's memoir, which provides an introspective tour of soul and water. For older readers, these works are more subtly didactic than the children's and young adult literature that I have discussed in this essay. Byron's memoir portrays a charming period of innocence along the river, when environmental degradation could be ignored, and the waters fished for the bounty they contained with little

thought of impact. For readers, Byron's work provides a stark contrast to the current state of the Bay, highlighting the pressing modern needs in a more extreme light. Hodges' work encourages readers to consider their own personal relationship to the environment of the Bay and displays the profound environmental declines that have taken place in a few short decades. The differences between Hodges' and Byron's memoirs demonstrate the progression from an attitude of entitlement towards the Bay's resources to a spirit of stewardship for the Chesapeake environment—a torch of individual responsibility that children's and young adult writers would seize and carry through their own works in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond.

In her speech delivered at the ASLE Conference in 1999, Susan Cohen, a scholar focusing on Chesapeake Bay literature, gives an eloquent name for the process of translating the Bay's environmental degradation into powerful written works. Cohen asks, "What does it take to give words to water? What does it take to fight back from almost four hundred years of environmental abuse and decline?" (2). This art of "giv[ing] words to water" forms the very title of Cohen's speech, "Water and Words: Giving Voice to the Chesapeake Bay". The sense of "giving voice" to the Bay's waters, which cannot speak, reminds me of Dr. Seuss's masterpiece *The Lorax*, in which the curious steward of nature proclaims, "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues" (23). Cohen's focus is not on children's literature, however; instead she discusses the works of William Warner, Tom Horton, and John Barth, notable writers for adult audiences about watermen's lifestyles and the fragile nature of the Bay's ecosystem. In order to develop a sense of stewardship in their readers, these authors build an intimate familiarity among their audiences with the complexities of the Bay. Cohen reflects upon this strategy, most notably utilized by William Warner in *Beautiful Swimmers*:

It is important to the effectiveness of this book that readers can recite the roles, names, and places so that the issues of the Bay become more personal. Ultimately, that is what wins the reader of the text, because the book contains no extended metaphors, no recurring symbols, little poetic language; it is the book's simple philosophy that makes it so effective: William Warner seems to be saying, make the problems of the Bay intimate, local and then the problems can be understood. (Cohen 4)

I feel that the children's and young adult writers that I have discussed also ascribe to this pedagogical ideal: make the Bay's resources and needs emotionally proximal to the audience, and this familiarity will create a base for future environmental curiosity and action. The literary craft of making the Bay an intimate and relatable other for children and young adults is quite different from this same aim in adult literature. Personifying Bay creatures and creating teenaged ambassadors to the Chesapeake are the main methods utilized by children's and young adult writers, while exhaustive journalistic interviews with watermen and accounts of time spent on the Bay usher the adult reader to a more complete understanding of the challenges facing the watershed. Both children's and adult authors want to help their readers relate on a personal level to the worsening condition of the Chesapeake.

Given these authors for audiences of all ages who utilize the Bay for didactic purposes, what renders the Chesapeake Bay a locus for this sort of pedagogy—in other words, what makes the Bay such a profoundly “teachable medium”? Though I have hinted at this question in my previous chapters, I hope to expand the discussion by incorporating several interviews I have had the privilege to conduct with current elementary school educators at Shady Side School, which sits just next to the Bay in Maryland. Lori Evans, the daughter of a waterman and a fourth-grade

teacher at Shady Side, answered my question about whether or not the Bay is a teachable medium with the following:

[I] absolutely, absolutely...believe it is a completely teachable medium. You can teach science, you can teach ecosystems through the Bay...I teach math, I teach everything through the Bay [in my classroom]...if there is one thing kids can relate to it's the environment and animals. If you can hook them that way, they can learn other things. The kids really do care; it's a natural hook to get them to do these [academic] things. (Evans Interview 14 November 2010)

The age of the youth involved is a key piece of utilizing the Bay in the classroom—there is something about children and their connection to the environment that is organic—a natural “hook” that Ms. Evans uses to draw her kids into the academic lesson at hand. Perhaps the combination of childhood innocence and passion for nature renders the Bay an especially “teachable medium” for this age group. Katie Maloney, a talent development teacher at Shady Side Elementary, also reflected the personal connection that young people feel to their surroundings in her own response to my question: “I think it is...the kids grew up here, so they are surrounded by it [the Bay]. I think if we teach them what is here they will have more of an appreciation for it and value it more, and see when they get older the importance of preserving what they have” (Maloney Interview 8 November 2010). Ms. Maloney utilizes her students’ already-forged connection to the Chesapeake as a baseline in order to further instruct about the Bay during school hours, in the hopes that a lifelong environmental citizen will be born.

However effective the Bay serves as a “teachable medium”, how promising are the structural methods and results of these environmental education efforts? The article most often cited by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to support their renowned environmental education

efforts is entitled “Changing Learner Behavior Through Environmental Education” by Hungerford and Volk (1990). At the beginning of their article, Hungerford and Volk assert, “the ultimate aim of education is shaping human behavior” (8). They also outline the aims of environmental education, which include awareness, sensitivity, attitudes, skills, and participation (Hungerford and Volk 8-9). In their paper, Hungerford and Volk explore several models of environmental education and display how some of the older and most previously respected models, such as the Behavioral Change System, actually do not always produce the best results (9). Although this model of a progressive system of knowledge leading to awareness leading to motivation to take action has been criticized, the researchers point out that “before an individual can act intentionally on a particular environmental problem, that individual must be cognizant of the existence of the [environmental issue]. Thus, knowledge of the [environmental issue] appears to be a prerequisite to action” (Hungerford and Volk 10). Although understanding the Bay’s resources and the challenges facing the Chesapeake will not necessarily lead directly to a child taking action, this knowledge is still necessary background for children to be equipped to take action if they so choose.

Several of Hungerford and Volk’s findings support the aims of the children’s and young adult authors I have considered in this essay. For instance, when discussing the different aspects of behavior that affects environmental stewardship activities, Hungerford and Volk indicate that “environmental sensitivity,” or an “empathetic perspective towards the environment,” is highly correlated with citizenship behavior (11). The children’s and young adult books I have considered all build an “empathetic perspective” among their readers towards the Bay, either by utilizing a Bay-privileged teenage protagonist or by personifying Bay creatures so that young children can relate more personally to the environmental issues at stake. Similarly, “personal

investment in issues and the environment” are also cited by the authors to be “major variables” in the appearance of citizenship behaviors (Hungerford and Volk 11). By building an intimate personal familiarity with the Bay through fiction for young people of all ages, the authors I have discussed in my essay by relation encourage “personal investment” of their readers in the Chesapeake. For instance, if children become attached to the character of Chadwick in Cummings’ *Chadwick the Crab* series, they will likely develop a more “empathetic perspective” towards the Atlantic blue crab. This “empathetic perspective” could lead to “personal investment” in the issue of crabs health and numbers in the Bay, and a concerned young Bay citizen is born.

A fascinating new trend among children’s and young adult literature of the Bay is instances of young people writing their own works about the Chesapeake to inform others about this dynamic ecosystem. I feel this satisfies Hungerford and Volk’s concern that environmental education efforts lead to a “sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘empowerment’ so that they are fully invested in an environmental sense and prompted to become responsible, active citizens (Hungerford and Volk 17). Beyond simply creating an “empathetic perspective” among young people towards the Bay, writing about the Bay themselves demonstrates a “personal investment” in the environment, but beyond this, an “empowering” example of action that may better the health of the Bay by spreading awareness. *Charms of the Chesapeake*, a book written by Katie Maloney’s talent development class at Shady Side Elementary School in 2009-2010, is an example of this type of stewardship-focused writing. To create the book, each child chose a Bay animal, either aquatic or land-dwelling, to study (Maloney Interview 8 November 2010). After researching the animal thoroughly and presenting an informational poster to their classmates, the children wrote poems, utilizing Ms. Maloney’s instruction on effective literary techniques, about

their animal. In conjunction with the art teacher Sarah Sheckells, the children also created a visual of their animal utilizing a torn-paper technique (Maloney Interview 8 November 2010). The book was a great success, finishing as second runner-up in Scholastic's yearly contest entitled "Kids are Authors" (Stephenson A6). Several of the children's poems in this anthology reflect environmental concerns. For instance, the child who wrote the poem on the blue crab includes in her poem the following line: "I [the blue crab] often die from low oxygen levels" (Dennis 13). Another poem encourages people to be more aware of Bay creatures when they themselves enjoy the bay environment, "So the next time you take a swim in the sea, / Remember how beautiful the flounder can be" (Hudson 7). By encouraging children to research independently, write creatively, and illustrate effectively to bring the complexities of Bay life alive for readers, Ms. Maloney and Ms. Sheckells empowered their students to become more effective stewards of the Bay environment<sup>1</sup>.

Chesapeake Bay children's and young adult literature are a key foundation of the larger array of efforts aimed at creating Chesapeake-conscious citizens in the next generation. From the very first interactions a child might have with reading, as in Priscilla Cumming's *Chesapeake ABC*, to the most thematically mature reflection on morality and the Bay in Susan Sharpe's *Waterman's Boy*, a child in the Bay region could literally grow up with these messages of environmental stewardship, which progress to meet their development at each stage. Through didactic writing, children have the choice of becoming simply informed citizens, or active citizens taking charge to rectify the Bay's environmental crisis. In reaction to the Bay's decline,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, a group of high school students at Severn School in Severna Park, Maryland wrote a play entitled *Chesapeake Gold* under direction of Sharie Lacey Valerio. This play focused on the social and environmental history of the Bay. A similar play was also performed at the McDonough School in Maryland, entitled *Chesapeake Dream* (Stein).

these authors took practical action to empower the next generation. Cummings reflected on her own hopes for her readers in an interview I conducted in August 2010:

I am very inspired by the Chesapeake Bay and I know the future caretakers of the Bay are the readers that I have now, the young people I have now. So why not hook ‘em, teach ‘em a little bit about these animals so that they will always care and always pay attention as they grow older. And I’ve had some wonderful letters from kids who have...loved Chadwick when they were little and they grew up and became environmental...[for example] environmental science majors at college.

Beyond the scope of the Chesapeake Bay, books like Cummings’ will at the least heighten their young audience’s awareness of environmental degradation throughout the world, in whatever local environment these children and young adults come to call home later in life. In a sense, these children’s and young adult authors seek to create Loraxes in their readers—genuine stewards of the planet. Not every child who reads their works will become an environmental scientist or a lobbyist for Bay issues, but each of these readers will have the awareness to become a better caretaker of the Earth, our precious resource in peril.