

CHAPTER 2

STEWARDSHIP AMBASSADORS: YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE OF THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

He imagined the [oil] seep, spreading little by little, day by day, eating another acre and another acre of marsh, then consuming the bay, little by little. The idea of it almost made him sick...Maybe the bay was doomed.

– Susan Sharpe, *Waterman's Boy*

A growing body of Chesapeake Bay literature is written for young adults, an audience which is particularly receptive to environmental themes. These adolescent readers are simultaneously old enough to grasp the environmental challenges facing the Bay, while also young enough to empathetically relate to these issues on a personal level. A common strategy used by these young adult authors is to create mentally strong, physically daring, and unusually competent adolescent characters. These protagonists draw the young readers closer to understanding the issues of environmental degradation and other challenges to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Other young adult novels present a less explicitly environmental agenda to readers. In these place-based environmental works, the authors focus instead upon helping readers connect to the beauty of the Bay's resources, either in modern day or in historical times, in order to develop a respect for the Chesapeake Bay among their young audiences. In both of these cases the young characters become trusted ambassadors to the adolescent reader—ushering them into a more intimate relationship with the Bay and its tributaries.

Perhaps the most didactic of these young adult characters is Ben in Susan Sharpe's *Waterman's Boy*. Yearning to be separate from the demands of his life helping run the family inn on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Ben jumps at any opportunity to escape to the Bay and explore the waters. The Bay is a place of freedom, separate from the endless chores of the family inn and the constraints of the land. The protagonist Ben and his best friend Matt spend a great

deal of time engaging with the Bay. Indeed, at the novel's opening, the two boys are caulking and patching an old skiff, hoping to expand the scope of their adventures in the Bay (Sharpe 13-15). Ben has a distinct goal in mind for when the boat is fixed; he aims to "catch crabs" like his father and grandfather, who were both watermen (Sharpe 15). However, early in the novel, readers learn through Ben's young eyes that the Chesapeake Bay is not an endless source of plenty. For instance, Ben's waterman father comes home with a small catch one day, and Ben inquires why this is happening. His father responds, "Some say it's the pollution. Some say it's the hard winter. Some say it's the hot summer. Tell you what I say, Ben my boy, I say follow your brother Eddie to that college so you won't have to worry about the water" (Sharpe 27). Though it is Ben's dream to grow up and become a waterman, his father finds this dream unrealistic given the difficulties he has supporting his own family from the Bay's dwindling bounty. Despite Duke Warren's pessimistic views of the future, he values the help of his son. Displaying a great deal of skill, Ben assists his father in choosing which crabs are about to molt and which need more time. His father praises the boy, "Ben is a good boy, knows his crabs. He doesn't make mistakes" (29). Through exposure to his father's knowledge and perspective, Ben grows to understand the limitations and complexities of the Bay's resources.

Ben's capabilities on the water and understanding of his natural surroundings impresses Mr. Watchman, the aptly-named environmental scientist who stays at the Warren family inn and tests the local Eastern Shore waters for pollutants and other signs of degradation. Mr. Watchman befriends Ben and gently shows the boy that he still has much to learn about the Bay's health. For instance, when Ben asks Mr. Watchman what he hopes to catch that day in the Bay, the young scientist replies, "plankton" (23). Ben is surprised that he has not heard of plankton, "Having spent his entire life on the Chesapeake, he thought he had learned about all the birds, all

the fish, all the animals...but he had never heard of plankton” (Sharpe 23). Here, Mr. Watchman subtly pushes Ben to realize that though his knowledge of the Bay is extensive, it is incomplete. Accompanying Mr. Watchman on one of his data-gathering expeditions, Ben learns firsthand about the importance of underwater grasses, and the delicate balance of pH, water temperature, and salinity that identify Bay water health or degradation (Sharpe 67-69). As Ben learns about the science behind the declining health of the Bay, he begins to match this new knowledge to his existing experiences with the Bay. For instance, Ben illustrates Mr. Watchman’s discussion of oyster population shrinkages and tainted oyster harvests with his own observations, “[He] knew that this was true. Several oyster beds and clamming spots nearby had been closed for the summer. Signs said ‘CONTAMINATED AREAS. NO FISHING OR CLAMMING’” (Sharpe 71). Ben’s experiences on Mr. Watchman’s boat inform readers about the varied environmental challenges facing the Bay.

Despite the knowledge that Ben gains from his time spent with Mr. Watchman, Ben’s father is suspicious of the young scientist. He explains his reservations to his son: “Those are the fellas that go up to Annapolis and tell ’em we can’t go out on the water anymore” (Sharpe 30). Indeed, Mr. Watchman openly confronts a group of watermen as they complain about stricter government regulations of the Bay (Sharpe 57-58). Though the watermen complain that they cannot maintain their way of life with the increasingly stringent laws, Mr. Watchman approaches the issue from a different perspective, “You can’t keep food on the table if the bay is sick, either...I’m finding some oil in your local water right now” (Sharpe 59). As his father’s son and Mr. Watchman’s student, Ben is positioned between the needs of watermen and the scientific realities of the Bay’s environmental degradation.

Situated between the worlds of science and watermen, Ben becomes a teacher to his father, sharing his newfound environmental knowledge as he assists Duke Warren on his crabbing boat. One day, as they approach another set of Mr. Warren's crab pots, the water becomes clouded with algae (87). Ben informs his father, "I know what happened. It's because of fertilizer running off of farms and lawns. See, Dad, the fertilizer runs into the water, and it feeds the algae. So you get millions more algae than normal" (Sharpe 87). Though his father suspects the source of Ben's knowledge, and accuses the boy, "You've been talking to that scientist?", Mr. Warren also admits, "Well, I reckon he's got the right of it this time. I just wonder when he's going to figure out what to do about it" (Sharpe 88). The enduring clash between watermen's needs to maintain their livelihood and scientists' needs to establish regulations to protect the health of the Bay—an ideological conflict which defines Bay politics in Maryland—is well-expressed in this passage^{1 2}. Indeed, the algae bloom is devastating; the water "...smelled of rot", and "all fifty pots on the second line were full of dead crabs" (Sharpe 88-89). Here Ben experiences a collision of his two conflicting sets of facts—his father's waterman opinions and knowledge, and Mr. Watchman's scientific data. As father and son leave the failed site of crabbing and see a once-endangered osprey, Duke Warren admits to Ben that scientists have been right in the past about the Bay's health: "It was DDT...The government made them stop using DDT. Now the birds are back" (Sharpe 90). In the face of such clear signs of environmental degradation, such as the extensive algae bloom that damages Mr. Warren's livelihood, the seasoned waterman begins to see that Mr. Watchman, though an outsider, may have pertinent information about the Bay's protection.

¹ Warner's *Beautiful Swimmers* discusses this ideological conflict between watermen and scientifically influenced government officials at length.

² I am grateful to Leah Nagel for her editorial help with this chapter.

However influenced by the world of adults, Sharpe's knowledgeable protagonist must discover the true horrors of the Bay's environmental degradation for himself. One day while searching for clams in a nearby marsh with his friend Matt, Ben happens upon an environmental disaster:

Suddenly, in a large patch all around them, the marsh was dead...the air was heavy with a sickening smell. There were little oily rainbows on top of the water, and where a tump of cordgrass stood high, a dead fish lay on it. The silence here was different. It made you aware that a good marsh was full of tiny sounds, of birds and insects and windblown grass. In this place only the flies seemed to survive. (Sharpe 120-121)

Though he discovers this center of environmental decay with a peer, Ben's first thought is to tell a knowledgeable adult, Mr. Watchman (Sharpe 121). However, Ben still grasps the larger picture of this small-scale disaster: "He imagined the seep, spreading little by little, day by day, eating another acre and another acre of marsh, then consuming the bay, little by little. The idea of it almost made him sick" (Sharpe 123). Sharpe's young protagonist reacts viscerally to the damage wrought upon the Bay, the resource he so deeply cherishes and serves as the focal point of his freedom. Ben's physical reaction to the marsh's condition provides a model for young readers—they too should be deeply upset at the degraded condition of the Chesapeake. While authors of children's literature often anthropomorphize Bay creatures to generate this powerful reaction of concern among young readers, here we see a peer—knowledgeable about the Bay and learning about environmental issues—demonstrate this impassioned response.

After Ben informs David Watchman about the oil spill and visits the disaster area with him, the scientist makes the boys promise to stay away from the site and wait for the slow

process of local law to act upon the perpetrators. However, Ben feels deep sense of urgency about the oil spill:

But that [the process of law] could take months...in the meantime, maybe more barrels would come, and the oil would keep oozing. And the bay would keep dying, and his father would keep getting discouraged. Finally, there would be no future as a waterman for Ben Warren...Wasn't it time for someone to really do something? (Sharpe 135)

His own knowledge of the Bay's intricacies combined with his newfound scientific information gives Ben a distinctly future-oriented perspective towards the immediate oil disaster. He sees the chain effect of local environmental degradation—how threats to a small area can quickly spread to destroy a larger geographic region. As an ambassador to the Bay for young readers, Ben encourages young people to consider the long-term effects of small environmental problems. Ben's urgency in this situation encourages proactive environmental action among *Waterman's Boy* readers.

Though Ben and his friend Matt immediately contact Mr. Watchman for help in the situation, they do not wait for the adult world to rectify the oil spill. These adolescents are determined to take ownership of the disaster they discover, and against the explicit instructions of Mr. Watchman, the boys decide to speed up the process by spying upon the perpetrators. At great personal risk, the two boys hide near the marsh late at night and copy down the license plate numbers of the oil barrel dumpers—thus greatly accelerating both the legal process and the marsh's return to health (Sharpe 138-145). Though Matt initially asks Ben why they don't just ask the police to intervene, Ben responds, "Because...David says they can't do much about it. And, besides, they wouldn't listen to us kids" (Sharpe 139). Thus, Ben and Matt must prove their suspicions by uncovering some evidence before they contact the adult world for further help, for

they rightly feel that their age diminishes their believability in the public realm. The boys' proactive response to the marsh crisis provides a contrast with the environmental talk of the rest of the book. While David Watchman tests the waters, and the watermen debate the new fishing regulations, only the youngest generation takes direct action to protect the Bay's health. To accomplish this mission, the boys must sneak out of their homes at night and spy on dangerous lawbreakers—without adult companions, lacking adult permission, and against express adult wishes. Ironically, as a result of their daring adventure, the boys are treated as adults. For instance, Ben and Matt are interviewed at the police station to record their evidence and treated as heroes by many in the community (Sharpe 149-153).

Once Ben has proven his capability as a young person, he gains the respect of his community on issues of Bay conservation. At the town meeting that results from the boys' discovery, Ben speaks to the agitated crowd and declares:

It's the bay that matters! I don't care about the town growing or not growing. But if the bay gets polluted to where the fish can't live, the oysters can't live, the birds can't live, then you've got no watermen. And if the marshes get filled up with a lot of stinking oil, there aren't going to be any tourists either. So you can have as many gas stations as you want, but *first* you've got to figure out where you're going to dump the old oil or the sewage or anything else that's bad for the bay. Because the bay is where we live. (Sharpe 161)

Here, Ben serves as a voice of reason for the town's bickering masses. Ben's perspective cuts through the myriad adult concerns about profits and tourism as he highlights the heart of the matter—that none of this industry would be possible without the Bay's resources, which must be protected. As a result of Ben's impassioned defense of the Bay, the mayor forms a committee of

community members to monitor the effects of the expanding town and to protect the Bay from the negative effects of development (Sharpe 167). In Sharpe's novel, an adolescent and his friend make lasting change in a community—inspiring older citizens to take responsibility for the precious resource that is the Chesapeake Bay. A lover of the water, of crabbing, and of the waterman's lifestyle, Ben becomes a trusted ambassador for young readers to the intricacies of Bay culture, the conflicts of watermen and scientists, and the environmental issues that present a daily challenge to the Bay. Sharpe creates a model Bay citizen in the character of Ben. His love of the Bay's waters, desire to learn more about the Bay's ecological health, and ultimately, his uncompromising direct action to protect the marsh provide an example to readers. Through courageous and passionate Ben, readers learn that they too can become teachers to their communities and inspire greater environmental awareness.

Margaret Meacham develops a similar environmental awareness in her readers through the independent young character of William in *The Secret of Heron Creek*, though she accomplishes this with a whimsical tone, unlike the sombre one of *Waterman's Boy*. As William befriends Chesapeake Chessie, the Bay region's legendary sea monster, he learns the importance of protecting endangered marine wildlife from the greed of others—in this case, a wealthy man who hopes to trap Chessie and sell her to moviemakers. Unlike Ben in *Waterman's Boy*, William is not the son of a waterman; instead, he lives near the water and spends a great deal of his time exploring the creek by boat strictly for pleasure (Meacham 13). His skills and comfort on the water make him a trusted ambassador to the Bay's resources for young readers. Indeed, when he happens upon Chessie for the first time, he is completing his typical daily row around his creek, engaging freely in a world separate from adults. After introducing the monster to his friend Tommy, William decides to find out as much about sea monsters as possible (Meacham 42-43).

Instead of consulting an adult for this information, the boys head to the local library—displaying an independent and capable spirit in the face of a bizarre discovery.

The boys discover warning signs when they realize all of the books on sea monsters have already been checked out of the library by Mr. Harrington, the wealthy and evil man who lives up the creek from William (Meacham 54,13). By spying on Mr. Harrington, the boys discover that he has received a large amount of lumber and wire fencing, which they correctly guess Mr. Harrington intends to use to trap Chessie, and then make money off of the novelty (Meacham 68-69). Emboldened by the apparent danger to his sea monster friend, William becomes even more daring in his familiar environment of the creek. For instance, William sneaks out of his home and rows around the creek at night to investigate an unlit boat heading to Mr. Harrington's house. William feels the urgency of the situation, “[He] had to know what was going on. He ran down to his boat and pushed it quickly into the water. As he rowed towards Blackthorn he wondered what his parents would do if they woke up and found him gone” (Meacham 71). William understands that his attempts to protect Chessie must remain separate from the adult world of his family, even while he recognizes the impact his daring explorations might have upon his parents.

Faced with the imminent entrapment and doom of Chessie, William leaps into action to save his beloved sea creature friend. When his friend Tommy questions, “But how? How can two kids like us stop him?...maybe we should tell somebody—your parents, or my parents...Or the police, even. Maybe we need help” (Meacham 79-80). This conversation directly mirrors the exchange between Ben and Matt in *Waterman's Boy*, as one friend asks why they can't ask for help from the law or the adult world in a pressing situation. However, William outlines the impossibility of gathering support from adults or even the law:

First of all, who's gonna believe us? You have to see her to believe her. You can't explain her to anyone. And even if we did manage to get, say, our parents to believe us, or to come and see her, what can they do besides go to the police? And if we go to the police, everyone will find out about her. She'll end up being studied in some biology lab somewhere. No, we've got to handle this by ourselves. (Meacham 80)

Because of their position as adolescents, William understands that they have to operate outside of the adult world in order to save Chessie. He realizes they must rely on their own skills on the water to protect the friendly monster. William has a sense of urgency about this project, similar to Ben's rush to address the oil disaster in *Waterman's Boy*. William explains his panic to Tommy: "We can't just sit here and watch...How long do you think she'd last in a pen?" (Meacham 79-80). William inspires his hesitant friend, and both boys plan and execute a daring nighttime rescue of Chessie. They utilize teamwork, physical strength, and mental cunning to free the trapped sea creature, while simultaneously dodging bullets from Harrington's gun. Later, as William bids a heartfelt goodbye to his newly-freed sea monster friend, Meacham seems to encourage communion and understanding between the creatures of the Chesapeake and humans. Although the friendship between William and the mythical Chessie is whimsical and extraordinary, the idea of befriending and protecting Bay wildlife is one approach to environmental awareness and education. Indeed, many of the children's books I discussed in the previous chapter utilize anthropomorphism of Bay creatures to help children have a sense of unity with Bay wildlife. By becoming more intimately connected with Chesapeake life, young adults are more likely to take the necessary steps to protect these creatures from degradation. Though more whimsical than Sharpe's novel, Meacham's tale encourages a similar spirit of personal responsibility, initiative, and bravery in response to threats to the Bay. In this classic

tale of good versus evil, re-cast in the light of the Chesapeake, the younger generation becomes a powerful force—imbued with knowledge of the Bay’s resources and demonstrating true stewardship towards the estuary.

In both *Waterman’s Boy* and *The Secret of Heron Creek*, the young protagonists are agents of good for the Chesapeake. However, in Priscilla Cummings’ much darker novel *Red Kayak*, the young are also a source of evil on the Bay. *Red Kayak*, perhaps the most mature young adult novel I encountered, documents a moral dilemma among three thirteen-year-old boys who prove partly responsible for the drowning of a wealthy newcomer’s son in the Bay. Like the character of Ben in *Waterman’s Boy* and William in *The Secret of Heron Creek*, the protagonist Brady is a capable boater and displays competence on the water. As his new neighbor goes out in his kayak on a dangerous day, Brady thinks about warning him: “I was sure that Mr. DiAngelo didn’t know about how the wind picked up once you left our creek and hit the open water. Not to mention the spring tides. Sometimes they were so strong they’d suck the crab-pot buoys under” (Cummings 10). Growing up close to the Bay and as a waterman’s son, Brady, like Ben from *Waterman’s Boy*, has a unique understanding of the intricacies and dangers of the Chesapeake.

Brady’s boating skill is widely known in the community, and thus he is enlisted to help with rescue attempts for Mrs. DiAngelo and her young son Ben, who were paddling the ill-fated kayak when they go missing on the water. Called away from school to help, Ben searches the creeks of the river by himself, eventually finding the DiAngelos’ young son, rescuing him, and performing CPR while steering the boat towards the waiting ambulance (Cummings 27-33). In a newspaper article about the rescue, entitled “Boy Rescues Toddler from River”, Brady’s father comments on his son’s skills, “I figured Brady knew those waters as well as anybody”

(Cummings 45). A neighborhood hero, Brady is admired for his bravery, even after the toddler dies in the hospital after the rescue. However, Brady feels a deep sense of guilt following the accident because he did not warn Mrs. DiAngelo about the tides when he saw her leave that morning, “I should have tried...at least then she would have been alerted to the danger—and maybe she would have come back before it was too late” (Cummings 51).

Distraught, Brady heads out to the water on his boat, looking for solace. He explains the liberation the river usually grants him: “Usually, being out there on the water made me feel free. Whenever things at school bothered me, I went out in the water to shake it off. But that day all it did was make me sick to my stomach” (Cummings 52). A place of refuge for Brady has turned into a place of torture after his failure to save Ben DiAngelo’s life. Brady explains his change in attitude about the river later in the novel: “I knew I couldn’t go back out on the water...it was because of an overwhelming sadness that came over me being near the water. In the hazy morning air, all I could see was a red kayak, sunk in the river, and Ben’s half-closed eyes and blue lips” (Cummings 79). The river is replete with memories for Brady—an intimate other that reflects his inner turmoil as he considers his own position in the death of Ben DiAngelo. The river, the locus of Brady’s most competent display of heroism, also reflects Brady’s most shameful sense of guilt.

Brady’s capabilities on the water, along with those of his friends Digger and J.T., lead the boys into trouble. This is a construct that is not present in the other Bay-oriented young adult novels, in which adolescents’ skills on the Chesapeake lead only to a healthier Bay and a more environmentally-aware public. Besides failing to warn Mrs. DiAngelo about the dangerous currents with which Ben was intimately familiar, the three boys are more seriously responsible for the death of Ben DiAngelo. The DiAngelo family bought Digger’s grandfather’s land, a place

the boys used to explore and enjoy immensely. This subplot relates to the larger trend in bayside communities, which are gradually filling with wealthy vacationers, who build large homes and are seen to disrupt the traditional way of life. Relieving their anger against the DiAngelos, the boys joke about getting back at the family. It was Brady's own suggestion to, "...get my father's drill and put a few holes in her hull", referring to the DiAngelo's sailboat. Brady even describes how they can cover up the damage until Mr. DiAngelo would be far out in the river—"fill the holes back in with this water-based glue my dad has in the workshop, mixed in with some of the residue from what you drilled so no one can tell" (Cummings 98). Though Brady was only joking, and the boys only intended for Mr. DiAngelo to be forced to swim home, Digger and J.T. take Brady's musings to heart and drill holes in the red kayak instead. In the conflict between newcomers and veteran residents of the Eastern Shore, the boys took this anger one step too far. The boys' knowledge of the river allows them to play the unintentionally disastrous trick on Mrs. DiAngelo and Ben.

Brady's familiarity with the water is more than just a plot element of Cummings' novel—it creates the boys' culpability in Ben's death. In addition, Brady's intimate knowledge of the Bay, given his relationship with his waterman father, allows Cummings to share details of the environmental degradation of the Bay's resources with her readers through the voice of Brady. One day while crabbing with his son, Brady's father shares his worries about the lower crab counts he has been gathering recently, "[there] was a time when I'd have twice as many crabs here for the work we done this mornin'" (Cummings 61). As the son of a waterman, just like Ben in Susan Sharpe's *Waterman's Boy*, Brady gives readers privileged interior information about the challenges facing modern Chesapeake Bay watermen. Brady's character also relates information about the loss of underwater grasses—a major threat to the current health of the Chesapeake Bay

(*Bay History*) Brady recalls, “Mr. DiAngelo didn’t believe Dad when he told him the underwater grasses were so thick when Dad was a boy that he once dragged a box spring through the creek to clear a channel for the boat” (Cummings 82). Hailing from a waterman’s family, Brady has a much larger view of the past and current threats to the Bay than a newcomer like Mr. DiAngelo. Brady becomes the vessel of two generations’ Bay knowledge—information that is transferred to young adult readers through Cummings’ novel.

Brady’s father also highlights the conflict between watermen and government regulations, a theme that also defines *Waterman’s Boy*. Early in the novel, Brady highlights the recent conservationist legislation which lowered the number of hours watermen could work in a day, and shortened the harvest seasons, both of which hurt Brady’s family financially (Cummings 8). At the time, Brady’s father was livid about the new regulations: “They’re blaming the wrong people! Pollution and development—that’s what’s killin’ us. Bay be right smart of crabs if it weren’t for all the damned condo-*minions* going up!” (Cummings 8). However, Brady develops a different opinion after a scientist visits his school and claims that overfishing is also a major problem for the Bay’s health (Cummings 8). Later in the novel, when Brady asks his father whether he is joining the protest several watermen are planning for the politicians attending the Crisfield crab feast, his father replies, “There’s no doubt it would be far easier for me to go along with the other fellers...Raise hell with the governor for clampin’ down on us. And keep crabbin’ these waters till they ain’t nothin’ left!” (Cummings 163). Brady’s father exhibits a change of heart: through his intimate connection to the Bay, he knows that the new regulations are necessary, though devastating to himself and his fellow watermen. Brady’s father attributes his change in position in part to his son’s report on what the scientist said at school, “But you said it yourself, Brady, we have to respect the Bay’s balance. Take the long

look. Live more sensitively...That scientist is right! And I've known it all along" (Cummings 163). Just like Ben in *Waterman's Boy*, Brady becomes a teacher through this novel—widening his own father's view of the Chesapeake and the threats that challenge it daily. Brady's position as a teacher of his father—like Ben's role in *Waterman's Boy*—demonstrates that the younger generation is more receptive to environmental messages, while the older generation tends to doubt these issues. In these Bay-oriented young adult novels like *Waterman's Boy*, *The Secret of Heron Creek*, and *Red Kayak*, the young are the voices of change, awareness, and progress.

Cummings' complex novel *Red Kayak* provides a conservationist agenda through the competent and Bay-knowledgeable character of Brady, and through the relationship to his father. However, Cummings' novel is not a one-sided call to abandon all but environmental concerns, distinguishing itself from the didactic end to Sharpe's *Waterman's Boy*. Through the relationship of Brady to his waterman father and his watermen's community, readers grasp the profound conflict of interests present in government regulations for commercial crabbing and fishing. With the regulations, these men experience extreme difficulty in providing for their families, but without them, the waters would be overfished to an extent that they could not support the watermen in any form. Though clearly regulations are needed to protect the crab and oyster populations of the Bay, Cummings' novel illustrates the watermen's perspective, giving a human face to the implications of science.

In addition, Cummings' novel displays a young man navigating a tragedy, literally and figuratively, through the coves and peninsulas of his beloved river. Brady must face his own human darkness and deepest moral conflicts in the landscape of the river, which reflects both the most heroic and the most shameful aspects of his capabilities. Cummings' novel is profoundly

place-based literature—the attempted rescue, kayak tragedy, and waterman’s conservation issues would not be possible in a setting other than the Chesapeake Bay.

Brady and his young counterparts in *Waterman’s Boy* and *The Secret of Heron Creek* present explicit environmental lessons to readers through their knowledgeable vision as young people intimately connected to the waters of the Bay. Other young adult novels constitute place-based literature, and more subtly encourage conservation in their audiences by exposing readers to the intricacies of the Bay, either in modern or in historical times. Though less explicit in their scope of environmental concerns, the authors of *Oyster Moon*, *Jacob Have I Loved*, *Dacey’s Song*, and *The Boy on the Beach* foster a sense of respect and wonder towards the Bay through the use of similarly competent young protagonists.

Margaret Meacham’s place-based historical young adult novel *Oyster Moon* tells the story of Anna, a teenager growing up in a waterman’s family during the Oyster Wars of the late 1800s. Anna, just like the protagonists in the more stridently environmental young adult novels, displays an impressive confidence on the Bay. When her restless brother Toby runs away from home to join an oyster dredging ship run by an evil man, Anna herself saves her twin, without the aid of her parents or other adults. In her brother’s time of extreme need, Anna reflects upon her responsibility to save him single-handedly: “Toby was in trouble. That was all she knew, except that it was desperate and there was no one else to help him but her” (Meacham 82). Involving a nighttime rowboat journey and dangerous long-distance night swim, the rescue is extremely taxing. Anna draws on her confidence as she becomes afraid during the rescue, “She knew she could make it. After all, she was the best swimmer in Heron’s Harbor” (83). After beating away a drunk oyster dredger and taking her near-dead brother back to shore, Anna has formidably faced great danger and has saved her brother’s life.

Anna's strengths—athleticism, practicality, and self-confidence—were all nurtured by the Bay environment in which she grew up. Indeed, the Bay gave Anna more freedom than a typical young woman of her era. Anna's daring rescue widens her worldview even further, when her family at last allows her to attend school in Baltimore—a prospect that her traditional waterman father had previously refused. However, Chesapeake life is not simply a means for young adults to gain freedom; the water can also prove a trap to their dreams. As Anna describes her need to leave Heron's Harbor: "Finally she understood why Toby had done what he had done. There was no other way. She loved her father, but she had to get away from him, and she saw that Toby had no choice either. If they wanted to have their own life, they had to leave" (Meacham 79). In contrast to Ben in *Waterman's Boy*, Anna's dreams of continuing her education are circumscribed by the Bay and the waterman's life. Indeed, only by leaving, by completely separating herself from the culture and environment of the Bay, can Anna feel that her life is moving forward. Meacham's novel does not provide explicit environmental lessons to readers, although the story does introduce readers to a specific era in Bay history when oysters were first overfished. Through the eyes of Anna, a confident, knowledgeable trusted ambassador to this historical Chesapeake landscape, young readers can grasp the frenzy of oyster dredgers and tongers who fought over this resource—one that is deeply endangered today. Meacham's novel constitutes an example of place-based environmental literature.

Like Anna in *Oyster Moon*, Sara Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved* introduces readers to a specific region of the Bay and details the historical lives of watermen and the generational conflicts that occur in their families. Paterson herself admits an environmental thematic overlay to her novel in the acknowledgements, where she states: "The impetus for this book came from reading William W. Warner's *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay*."

However, there are no specific references to environmentalism in the novel, since its 1940s setting predates the environmental movement. Like the other young adult novels explored in this chapter, the novel's protagonist, Sara Louise, displays an impressive confidence on the Bay. From an early age, Sara Louise is free to explore the Bay on her own skiff (Paterson 21). Later, Sara Louise takes on even more responsibility on the water, utilizing her Bay-nurtured skills to take a large load off of her father's watermen responsibilities: "I knew almost as much about blue crabs as a seasoned waterman. One look at a crab's swimming leg and I could tell almost to the hour when the critter was going to shed...It made me feel less helpless to be a girl of fifteen doing what many regarded as a man's job" (Paterson 183-184,185). Due to her relentless work equal to that of an adult, Sara Louise knows her Bay—and the creatures that live within it—intimately. The Bay in turn provides Sara Louise with the opportunity of becoming "unsexed" in an era of gender biases and gender role prescription. Completing "a man's job" and eventually becoming her father's crucial deckhand on his boat, Sara Louise reflects that the community members of Rass Island eventually accepted her role: "No one said anything about my not being a man—maybe they'd forgotten" (Paterson 187).

Just as in Meacham's *Oyster Moon*, Paterson's novel outlines the inter-generational conflict between a waterman and his children, who feel a desperate need to leave the community of Rass Island in order to have ownership of their lives. The protagonist Sara Louise wants to leave the island community. Unlike Anna, however, she does not know how she can accomplish this goal: "I know I have no place here. But there's no escape" (Paterson 216). Indeed, Sara Louise is intimately connected to her family and to her hard work on the Chesapeake that supports her mother, father, and sister. However, unlike Anna in *Oyster Moon*, Louise's waterman father and mother do not forbid her from leaving. Indeed, one day when Louise

explodes at her mother about leaving the island, her mother responds, “Of course you may leave. You never said before you wanted to leave” (Paterson 227). Indeed, her parents have always pushed Louise to continue her schooling, though she continued helping her father in his crabbing boat instead (Paterson 188). As more and more people are leaving Rass Island to pursue better-paid and more stable jobs on the mainland, Louise’s parents understand that life on Rass Island no longer holds an enticing or promising future for young people.

Paterson’s place-based literature does have subtle environmental undertones. By exposing readers to a historical era of the Bay, Paterson’s novel widens its audiences’ understanding of the Chesapeake and may encourage curiosity about the current state of the Bay’s health. In short, the placed-based novel develops familiarity between readers and the Chesapeake—a familiarity that may inspire stewardship of the estuary. In the final two young adult novels I examine in this chapter, the Bay also forms an important backdrop, though it does not take a primary role in the story. Cynthia Voigt’s *Dacey’s Song* tells the story of four abandoned children, who make their home with their grandmother living in Crisfield, Maryland. The sounds, sights, and smells of the Bay resonate with a sense of home for Dacey, the eldest of the children, who had finally found a reliable adult to care for them. As Dacey reflects upon Crisfield, “Home for Dacey, too, was the Bay—the Chesapeake Bay, quiet with little waves and long tides—the Bay just out of sight, with this grandmother whose character had sharp corners and unexpected turns” (Voigt 2). For an adolescent who shoulders a great deal of responsibility to care for her abandoned siblings, the Chesapeake also represents a medium for freedom and self-direction, as Dacey describes the sailboat she wishes to restore: “Imagining how it would feel when the little boat rode on the water, how it would respond to the wind in its sails, to the waves sliding by, to her hand on the tiller” (Voigt 7). To be on the Bay in her own vessel would

allow Dicey a measure of independence that has not been possible until she and her siblings settled in Crisfield. The Bay itself shapes the people who inhabit its shores into strong, confident people; for instance, Dicey's Gram is reliant, independent, strong, and composed—much like Dicey herself. Further, in times of deep emotional need for the family, the Bay seems to reflect their mourning, much as the river mirrors Brady's guilt in *Red Kayak*. For instance, the Bay frames the funeral scene at the close of the novel, when the children bury their mother's ashes along the shore, "Dicey knew that the surface of the Bay would look under this early winter sunset, like cloth-of-gold" (Voigt 352). Not only does the Bay's background influence shape the independence of Dicey and her grandmother, the Bay also seems to respond almost mythically to the emotions of the struggling family.

The Chesapeake similarly provides a defining backdrop to Margaret Meacham's novel *The Boy on the Beach*. The tale describes the story of Jessie, a modern middle school girl, who discovers Reuben, a time-traveling teen from the Oyster Wars of the late 19th Century, injured on the shores of the river. Indeed, the Bay provides the impetus for the story—the time-traveling teen was knocked out due to a storm while working on an oyster boat during the late 1800s. The Bay also provides a background of normalcy for Jessie during the supernatural experience of meeting a time-traveling teen from the 1800s. As she reflects on the evening when she discovers the historical teen, Jessie recalls:

By this time it was past six. The sun was getting ready to sink into the river, and I could tell there was going to be a great sunset. The clouds were feathery and fringing the horizon...As I walked up the beach I watched an osprey as it circled and dove into the river after a fish. For a minute it seemed like an ordinary evening, but when I came to the

spot where he [the time-traveling teen] lay I knew it was no ordinary evening. (Meacham, 11)

The river, a part of the Bay's ecosystem, provides beauty and normalcy to Jessie as she encounters an extraordinary event. Similarly to the competence displayed by other young adults and teens growing up on the shores of the Bay, Jessie solves the puzzle of helping Reuben get back to his own time period without the aid of adults. The environment of the Bay seems to nurture independence and self-reliance in local teens throughout this genre of Bay environmental young adult literature.

As I read these works, I was curious whether the authors consciously created the competencies of these young adult characters. When I interviewed Margaret Meacham this summer, she elaborated further upon the specific competencies of her protagonists: "...My books are often about that moment of childhood when you have to step up and be a grown-up, and take a risk" (Meacham Personal Interview 23 June 2010). Indeed, in *The Secret of Heron Creek*, *Oyster Moon*, and *The Boy on the Beach*, Meacham's young protagonists do make bold decisions and take responsibility for their own actions—perhaps inspired by the independence and confidence-building opportunities that freedom on the Chesapeake provides. When I asked Meacham to describe the role of the Bay in developing self-reliance in young people, she responded:

I'm glad you picked up on that, because it's a very important theme for me...children being self-reliant and...not just being dependent of adults. In all children's literature to make good stories we...get the parents out of the way so the kids can have some adventures...and certainly the Bay [as a location for these adventures] because it is a pretty benign body of water. (Meacham Personal Interview 23 June 2010)

Meacham’s insight indicates that she self-consciously placed her teenage and young adult protagonists in positions of independence and competence on the Bay. To Meacham, the relative safety of the Bay waters and rivers allows this independence from adult influence and control to be possible. Even in the young adult novels that do not present an explicit conservationist message, the protagonist is always a young, confident, and resourceful preteen or teen. These appealing and inspiring characters usher their readers into a more nuanced understanding of the Bay’s history, creatures, and beauty—inspiring their readers to cherish the Chesapeake treasure.

As I researched I also became curious about the genre of young adult literature itself—when did this style of work emerge, and how did the authors feel about contributing to this genre? Meacham feels that the appeal of young adult literature is that it gives teenage readers a literature of their own:

This was thirty-some years ago, and young adult literature was just kind of...coming into its own...it is a very young literature...you know, fifty years ago there wasn’t a term “young adult literature”. I saw the kids coming into the libraries, borrowing those books—so happy that they had their own literature, books that really spoke to them and them alone...these books were so meaningful to them. (Meacham Interview, 23 June 2010)

Margaret Meacham demonstrates a sense of purpose and pride in writing for young adults—a relatively new genre that appeals to the reading needs of a specific generation. The sense that young adults are at a particularly impressionable³ age, where they can consider and accept new points of view, makes the young adult genre a particularly valuable one for environmental education. Meacham also reflected upon the didactic elements of her works in the context of environmental education and awareness:

³ My thanks to Leah Nagel for her suggestion of the word “impressionable” here.

I...am a lay environmentalist...I have no claim to any knowledge of real environmental issues, but I certainly would advocate just by my love for the Bay that we do everything we can do...to clear it up and protect it...and I try to get that across [in my writing]. I would say [my books are] not so much environmental advocacy, but I would like to think that my books would inspire kids to get outside...to be...[in] nature. (Meacham Personal Interview 23 June 2010)

Meacham shares a love of the Bay with her readers through her young adult novels, with the explicit hope that her young readers become “inspired” to adopt a conservationist spirit. By the very nature of encouraging her readers to “get outside”, Meacham encourages a subtle environmentalism—for children to enjoy their natural environments, grow to love them, and in turn, protect them from harm.

The role of the young protagonist as a trusted ambassador to adolescent readers is key to the mission of these authors to develop Bay awareness in their readers. In the children’s books that I explored in the previous chapter, many authors provided their readers with anthropomorphized Bay creatures as protagonists, who introduced their literary audience to the environmental challenges facing the Chesapeake from an imaginary firsthand perspective. However, for the older reader, the same-aged counterpart as protagonist is a more powerful medium for generating understanding of the Bay’s resources. These preteen and teenage protagonists are learners themselves in the novels—already familiar with the Bay’s resources, but also gathering more nuanced information about Bay health and complicating their previous views. As the protagonists reconsider their own knowledge about the Bay, they usher their readers to a more thorough understanding of the Chesapeake. Some of the protagonists, like Ben in *Waterman’s Boy* and William in *The Secret of Heron Creek*, constitute Loraxes for an older

generation of readers—providing an example of proactive effort to protect the Bay’s precious resources and valuable wildlife. Many of the other protagonists do not instill specific environmental dogma in their readers, but through their explorations, questions, and adventures, help develop a deeper appreciation—and by relation, care—for the Bay among their readers. As a result of these protagonists, the young audiences of these books are informed, inspired, and encouraged to cherish the Chesapeake.