

Jennings, Rosalind Maria. *Disappearance in Deceptive Landscapes: Borderlines of Identity in the Canadian Wilderness with Particular Reference to Selected Works by Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Aritha Van Herk*. (DPhil [English]), The University of York (United Kingdom). Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 1997. (Publication No. C823465)

Abstract

This dissertation explores why much contemporary Canadian literature features protagonists who disappear in the wilderness. This boundless region serves as a powerful metaphor for a country that feels its internal and external borders are insecure. The nation is not only divided provincially between Anglophone and Francophone communities, it also uneasily defines itself against the frontier with the United States. Through the study of four Canadian writers, I explain why these divisions have made national subjectivity difficult to delineate.

The 1970s saw the first comprehensive articulation of why the wilderness was prominent in Canadian literature. Chapter One considers the work of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, whose thematic criticism discusses the Canadian landscape in relation to a national search for self.

Chapter Two shows how the feminist writer, Aritha van Herk, overturns some of the negative impressions that previous authors have given to the wilderness. Drawing a comparison with selected works by Atwood, this chapter looks at how women disappear into the Canadian wilderness to rebuild their lives.

By way of contrast, Chapter Three investigates Kroetsch's challenging exploration of the prairie West from a masculine point of view. His work depicts how the Canadian man often discovers himself lost in a deceptive landscape that confounds traditional heroic ideals.

Chapter Four examines Ondaatje's idiosyncratic wildernesses, which at first glance appear not to be Canadian. I consider how foreign deserts, bushlands, and jungle that feature in his oeuvre revise the established trope of the wilderness in Canadian writing. In charting these vast landscapes, Ondaatje represents identity through an alien 'Other'. His perspective on the wilderness relates to his immigrant background as a Ceylonese-born Canadian subject.

To show how far the wilderness expands in recent Canadian literature, the dissertation concludes with a brief discussion about group disappearance in the work of Native writers.