

“Lost Laughter”: Mental Health through Nature Connectedness in *Magic for Marigold*

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Ecopsychology and its praxis, ecotherapy, are gaining ground in the counselling world as valid and important therapeutic modalities for recovering human mental, physical, and emotional health through reconnecting with the natural world. L.M. Montgomery’s *Magic for Marigold* illustrates what happens to a child’s mental health when her relationship with the outdoors is first curtailed and then reinstated by an adult who does not share the same fantastic and highly imaginative capabilities as the child has.

Introduction

On 1 June 1927, L.M. Montgomery recorded in her journal that she had begun to “work on a new book about a new heroine—Marigold.” Montgomery sandwiches her reference to beginning the novel between descriptions of springtime in Norval,

Ontario. "I've been gardening," she writes. "Norval is so beautiful now in its June blush. The views up and down the river are entirely delightful and satisfying." Montgomery concludes the entry with, "Tonight Norval seems misted everywhere with wild blossom. I can never believe in June that the world is millions of years old." ¹Montgomery's placement of these descriptions and the way they encompass her reference to Marigold immediately draw attention to her own deep love of the natural world and foreshadow the importance of connectedness with the nonhuman environment that emerges throughout *Magic for Marigold*. Of particular note is that the novel's opening scenes are laid during springtime, with a landscape "green and golden now, spilled over with blossoms, and the orchard ... an exquisite perfumed world by itself," ² similar in appearance to the Norval landscape surrounding Montgomery as she began developing the novel. The novel, eventually published in 1929, has a chapter titled "Lost Laughter" that explores what happens to a child's mental health when her relationship with the outdoors is curtailed by an adult who does not share the child's imaginative capabilities. However, the novel also illustrates how reconnection with the natural world results in immediate positive mental-health benefits. Reading this novel through a critical lens derived from ecopsychology and ecotherapy can generate a deeper understanding of the human relationship with the natural world, as the novel's fantastical elements, particularly the presentation of Sylvia as a magical playmate in Marigold's everyday experience, engage us, as readers, in reimagining the world and recognizing the capacity of the nonhuman for personality, emotion, and rational, sentient thought. As a result, reading literature such as *Magic for Marigold* with magical elements may itself be a "recollective" practice that can help us, as humans, better understand our intimate and inherent connection to our ecosystem. Such readings may also encourage us to participate in outdoor "recollective" practices, which practising ecopsychologists encourage as beneficial to human mental health and well-being.

Therapeutic Benefits of "Recollective Practices"

Ecopsychology is a "theory of human-nature relationship" ³ that derives from Robert Greenway's work in the mid-twentieth century, in which he carefully examines "the dramatic change people go through during extended (and carefully structured) stays" in what he calls the wilderness. ⁴ Andy Fisher, whose work *Radical*

Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life provides one of the most detailed and comprehensive discussions of the theories and philosophies of ecopsychology, extends ecopsychology from the examination of the human-nature relationship to a field “about revealing or disclosing the world itself as ensouled or animate in some fashion.” He explains that in “ecopsychology, the human psyche has outsideness, and the more-than-human world has insideness (soul, invisibility, depth, creativity, agency).”⁵ Based on these principles, ecotherapy is a therapeutic modality in which therapists actively seek to engage the natural environment as a co-practitioner in helping clients to overcome emotional, psychological, spiritual, and even physical distress. Howard Clinebell, one of the earliest practitioners to identify himself as an ecotherapist, explains that the “central premise of ecotherapy is that our early relationships with the natural world have a profound shaping impact on the development of a grounded sense of identity for our whole body-mind-spirit organism” and that human “identity formation is influenced at a deep, pre-verbal level by ... early experiences in nature” as well as by “culture’s views of the natural world.”⁶

Fisher clarifies that ecopsychologists and ecotherapists focus on guiding clients to “recollect” their place in the environment. “Recollective practices,” he says, “are those activities that aim more directly at recalling how our human psyches are embedded in and nurtured by the larger psyche of nature and at relearning the essentially human art of revering, giving back to, and maintaining reciprocal relations with an animate natural world.”⁷ This emphasis on recollective practices, which can range from looking out a window at a natural landscape, to time spent in a local park, to weekend- or even months-long wilderness experiences, is a response to the deep psychological trauma human beings have suffered due to, among other factors, the ever-increasing experience of separation from the nonhuman, non-built environment.⁸ The intersections of ecopsychology, ecotherapy, and children’s literature suggest that reading highly imaginative or fantastic children’s literature may provide both child and adult readers with ways to reimagine or “recollect” their relationship to the many facets of the natural world and so encourage them to engage in recollective and psychologically therapeutic experiences in the environment, ultimately improving human mental health.⁹

Such recollective practices may be more- or less-structured activities. For instance, an evaluation conducted by Gary P. Nabhan's research team and published in *Ecopsychology* in 2020 of youth programs designed to help adolescents from racially, culturally, and economically diverse backgrounds strengthen mental and physical well-being shows these youth improving in their "sense of community and social responsibility" as they participated in "hands-on restoration work." In other words, these young people were not simply receiving benefits from being outside and engaged with the natural environment but were actively giving back to the environment in mutually beneficial activities.¹⁰ This study demonstrates that improvement of mental health is not the only benefit of "recollecting," in Fisher's sense, our intricate connectedness with the other-than-human. As we engage in activities in the green and blue sectors of the world that improve human well-being, the connections made with the natural world encourage a more caring attitude in our human treatment of the environment. Further research conducted by Sandra Waxman's research team, which evaluated young children's reading of picture books that had either anthropomorphized or naturally portrayed animals represented therein, suggests that connections to nature can be made through children's literature and that children's introduction to animal characters in natural habitats enhances their ability to see similarities between humans and the other-than-human world.¹¹ The idea that the nonhuman, non-built environment can receive as well as confer benefit encourages children and adults to think in terms of other-than-humans as subjects with agency to act, not just to be acted upon.

In the seventh chapter of *Magic for Marigold*, "Lost Laughter," these concepts of recognizing a connection with the nonhuman and that connection's impact on a child's mental and physical well-being intersect. An ecopsychological reading of this chapter in the context of the rest of the novel and other Montgomery works demonstrates the emotionally devastating experience of a child's separation from imaginative play and the natural world and the therapeutic and healing benefits of repairing and recollecting that relationship. It illustrates the potential of children's fantasy narratives to "defamiliarize" the natural world; that is, as David S. Miall and Don Kuiken observe, to "[overcome] the barriers of customary perception, and [enable] us to see some aspect of the world freshly or even for the first time."¹² This reimagining of the other-than-human invites Montgomery's readers to reconsider the subjecthood and agency of Marigold's playmates, particularly

“Sylvia,” the little plum-bough girl with whom Marigold develops a deep and lasting companionship and whose forced separation plunges her into psychological trauma. Such a fresh perspective has potential to bring Montgomery’s readers into a different kind of relationship with the environment, one that reveals how reimagining their connection with nonhuman beings can improve their own mental health.

Fantasy and Imaginative Play

Many scholars have discussed that *Magic for Marigold* explores not only the human relationship to the natural world but also the intersection of the fantastic/imaginative and the real, both of which were probably heavily influenced by new theories of child development and education emerging at the time Montgomery was developing Marigold as a character.¹³ Of particular note are Elizabeth Waterston’s discussions, which detail Montgomery’s specific interest in Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Friedrich Froebel, psychologists and educators whom Montgomery was reading or likely knew about. Waterston directs attention to Froebel’s role in developing the concept of kindergarten and his emphasis on the individual child developing in natural spaces. She suggests Montgomery may have favoured Froebel’s theories, evidenced, for instance, by her naming of the main child character in *Magic for Marigold* after a flower.¹⁴ The doctor who saves Marigold’s life at the beginning of the novel is also named Marigold and becomes a beloved aunt, whom Lesley D. Clement calls a “very alive and life-giving woman” because enabling Marigold to “survive infancy”¹⁵ and whose healing *modus operandi* is recommending “some drastic things about diet and sleeping,” including “order[ing] the child’s cradle moved out on the veranda,” presumably for fresh air and direct exposure to the natural environment.¹⁶ Naming the child “Marigold” after both a flower and a medical professional who clearly believes that human health is connected to the natural world emphasizes the attention to and love for the natural world and foreshadows the impact it will have on the child’s mental health.

From the opening of the novel, Marigold Lesley is established as a child actively engaged in fantasy and imaginative play. A full chapter, "April Promise," is devoted to showing how the little girl fits the pattern that, as Waterston says, seems to have been drawn from Froebel's educational theories about kindergarten.¹⁷ According to these theories, children develop because of "mother-love"; while being taught by the "dear gardener," or teacher, who "call[s] them her plants and flowers"; and through games and play in Nature.¹⁸ In addition to being named after a flower, which binds her closely to Nature, Marigold is "always making magic of some kind," and the world of fancy she creates for herself is very much embedded in the natural environment. She imagines personalities for the plants, animals, and landscapes around her, thinking of them as her friends, and thus ascribing agency to these nonhuman entities. The important adults in Marigold's life—Mother, Aunt Marigold, and Uncle Klon—encourage her in this creativity and enjoyment of the world she has imagined. For instance, Uncle Klon helps her see a "row of funny little hemlocks" as "a row of old-maid school-teachers with their fingers up admonishing a class of naughty little boys." Aunt Marigold and Uncle Klon take her with them to the seashore, where she learns that some natural forces, such as the sea, are much vaster and more powerful than she is. Mother walks with her up the hill near their home, where Marigold finds a spring and imagines that her own reflection is the "Little Girl who [lives] in the spring."¹⁹ Most of the personalities she imagines in the nonhuman, non-built world represent forms of wild nature, rather than tame nature; that is, they naturally occur in the environment, rather than being placed there by humans or, if they have been placed or planted by humans at some time in the past, they have since become wild. Although the personalities that Marigold imbues in some of those nonhuman others are extensions of herself, such as the Little Girl who lived in the spring and, eventually, Sylvia, Marigold views them as very real players in her outdoor life, reflecting that she sees what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls "an immanent or incipient significance in the living body" that can be expanded "to the whole sensible world" and that allows Marigold to "discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."²⁰ In her discovery of this "miracle of expression" in the embodied nonhuman Other, Marigold accepts that her other-than-human companions have their own agency and soul.

This discovery of expression in nonhuman others is perhaps most noticeable in Marigold's imagined—yet real—companionship with Sylvia. In one of her evening

explorations, Marigold sees, “beckoning to her from a copse—a Little White Girl” in a grove of spruce near her home. As she returns the girl’s waves, Marigold realizes “it was only a branch of wild, white plum-blossom, wind-shaken.” Yet she refuses to leave the plum tree in the margins of her world. She remembers and thinks about it until, a year later, she is convinced it “*couldn’t* have been a plum-bough,” but that instead, it really was a little girl whom Marigold hopes to see again.²¹ These are Marigold’s first encounters with the plum tree from which she eventually creates a friend called “Sylvia,” an appropriate name with its roots in the Latin for woods or forest. Marigold’s psychological well-being is dependent on the relationship she develops with Sylvia, highlighting the importance of her unstructured natural play and her ability to engage with the nonhuman. A growing body of research in the field of ecopsychology and ecotherapy demonstrates that this kind of recreational time in nature has statistically significant positive benefits for mental health and can even improve physical health outcomes, reinforcing our understanding of the intimate and important connection between the mind-body relationship and the human-nature relationship for both adults and children. For instance, much ecotherapy research demonstrates that loosely structured or unstructured time in nature reduces stress and increases empathy in both children and adults. This includes studies completed by both Yuuki Iwata’s and Kalevi Korpela’s research teams showing that simply walking in rural areas benefits mental health. This enhances previous work Richard Louv has done, which concludes that many children dislike highly structured outdoor activities, such as organized sports. Instead, particularly in the case of children, unscheduled, unplanned, or loosely structured outdoor play has been determined to stimulate creativity,²² as when Marigold develops elaborate adventure activities and games to play with Sylvia.

Marigold’s imaginative engagement with Sylvia demonstrates the importance not only of fantasy and imagination for the human ability to develop health-bringing relationships with the nonhuman but also of nature connectedness as a component of mental health. Importantly, work done by Dean Fido and Miles Richardson shows that “nature connectedness has been positively associated with agreeableness, perspective-taking, and empathic concern.”²³ While critics or readers may argue that Sylvia is an imaginative extension of Marigold, whose feelings, actions, and “interpersonal” connections might therefore be described as Marigold’s own, Marigold does not perceive Sylvia in this way. To her, Sylvia is a very real friend,

who has individuality, likes, dislikes, and a separate life that takes place behind the “Magic Door.” One ostensibly insignificant incident in her relationship with Sylvia highlights her developing thoughtfulness and affinity. While Marigold is planning a picnic/birthday lunch for Sylvia, she asks her mother to make treats—“little frosted cakes,” “one gorgeous big cake,” and jam tarts. Her mother asks a seemingly trivial question—whether she wants plum or gooseberry jam in her tarts—but Marigold’s thought-process and answer are important. She “like[s] gooseberry best, but—‘Oh, plum, Mother. Sylvia likes plum.’”²⁴ Despite that Marigold will be the only one who actually eats these treats, she carefully considers what Sylvia likes and makes her choice based on the wants of a being she considers to be separate from herself. Her bond with the natural world, as represented by the plum-bough girl, Sylvia, enables her to develop what Helen Riess observes is “an emotional bridge that promotes prosocial behavior” and “enables us to perceive the emotions of others, [to] resonate with them emotionally and cognitively, to take in the perspective of others, and to distinguish between [her] own and others’ emotions.”²⁵ This episode also depicts Sylvia’s agency in this friendship. Because Marigold’s choice of plum tarts depends on her belief that Sylvia, like her human companions, has articulated her likes and dislikes to Marigold, Marigold exhibits “prosocial behavior” through her treatment of her environment, again represented by Sylvia, and the respect she has for Sylvia’s choices and interests. Riess shows that such prosocial thinking and action “reduces our own distress,”²⁶ an example of the mental-health benefits of interconnection with others, both human and nonhuman. Marigold’s attitudes and behaviour draw attention to how that aspect of mental health is bound up with our relationship to and treatment of the natural world and demonstrate that human interaction with the nonhuman improves children’s mental health, aligning with Sage Winter Rian and Kenneth M. Coll’s assessment that in primary-school-aged children, even “spending one extra class period outdoors per week significantly reduced anxiety ... during a time when anxiety was peaking for other students.”²⁷ Similarly, Miles Richardson and colleagues studied how “active sensory engagement with nature while in green spaces rather than simply being passively exposed to it” was an important factor in “boosting nature connectedness.”²⁸ Marigold’s attitudes and behaviour toward Sylvia therefore illustrate how increased nature connectedness encourages us to be more environmentally aware and proactive in caring for the Earth, as has been found by Katri Savolainen’s study of preschoolers who “spent more time in unbuilt nature during the preschool year.”²⁹

Emotional, Psychological, and Physical Damage

Such fantastic play and the development of this beneficial relationship between human and non-human are clearly grounded in reality—the plum-blossom bough is a valid living object that not only Marigold but other children and adults in her world can see if they visit the edge of the orchard where the wild plum tree grows. And the games and activities Marigold imagines for herself and Sylvia are such as might be expected from any child interacting with friends. They have picnics and birthday parties and go wandering through the family property looking for explanations to the world around them, such as “going to find the echo that lives ‘way ‘way back in the hilly land.”³⁰ Marigold’s mother actively defends Marigold’s right to play with Sylvia, encouraging her to find the key to the Magic Door when she needs it, baking for Sylvia’s birthday, and supporting her daughter’s imaginative engagement with Sylvia as crucial to her psychological development. Marigold’s grandmother, however, cannot comprehend the importance of a child’s fantasy world for her psychological, emotional, and physical health, apparently lacking any kinship other than biological with Marigold and, by extension, with Sylvia. When Marigold’s mother is away from home for an extended rest cure and cannot defend her daughter’s fantasy play with Sylvia, Grandmother confiscates the key to the Magic Door, which Marigold has imagined as the portal to connect with Sylvia.

Unable to unlock this side door which she has imagined is magic, Marigold experiences what ecopsychologists refer to as splitting from the natural world, which occurs when humans are no longer able to join the physical experience of nature with the emotional or psychological experience, or to see others, including the nonhuman, as performative subjects rather than as objects.³¹ Such splitting is usually manifest across a period of time for children and, according to counselling and occupational therapists such as Angela Hanscom and researchers such as Louv who are engaged with ecopsychology research and practice for children, is exhibited, over time, as an increase in disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and in aggressive behaviour; in lack of balance, strength, and coordination; and in emotional dysregulation.³² Grandmother attempts to control Marigold’s play, to structure and regulate it in unnatural ways. She appears to subscribe to what ecopsychologist Robert Greenway describes as the

belief that because “we [as humans] are above natural processes rather than immersed in them,” we try to control nature and natural processes. Such control, however, causes damage.³³ For Marigold, this damage is evident as soon as Grandmother confiscates the key to the Magic Door and Marigold leaves “with eyes that were stripped of laughter.”³⁴

This image of a joyless Marigold is indicative of the deep psychological wounding that occurs when the bond between the human and the nonhuman is broken. Because laughter is a physical act, the reference to both laughing and stripping laughter from Marigold’s eyes highlights that the psychological impact of Grandmother’s action in separating Marigold from the environment manifests itself in physical repercussions as well. After just two weeks, Grandmother finally begins to notice that “[a]ll was not well with the child. She was growing thin and pale.” After a month of no Sylvia, Grandmother describes Marigold as “going to skin and bone.” She has no appetite, and anything she eats fails to physically nourish her. Her weight loss is accompanied by fatigue and listlessness, and while Marigold would usually be actively playing outside or running or dancing around the house, she instead sits alone and quiet on a chair, “looking out on the harbour, with a smileless little face.”³⁵ She shows all the physical symptoms of severe clinical depression, defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as persistent symptoms lasting “for at least 2 weeks that typically interfere with one’s ability to work, sleep, study, and eat,”³⁶ and begins to show upsetting signs of her emotional and psychological distress.

The combination of Marigold’s psychological and physical distress over being restricted from her imaginative play in the natural world culminates in a frightening and dark moment when Marigold begins to show signs that her distress has brought her nearly to death. She welcomes the idea of death as a means of breaking free from her feelings of loneliness and isolation. When Grandmother tries to persuade Marigold that she must not think and act as if she is going to die, she replies, “I don’t want to be all right. ... When I die I can go through The Magic Door without any key.”³⁷ This moment highlights how severely disconnected Marigold now is from her natural surroundings and how such a severe disconnection can lead to physical illness and even death.

The physical and psychological damage caused by Marigold's split from Sylvia is perpetuated by Grandmother throughout the weeks in which she refuses to give Marigold the key for the Magic Door, although Grandmother thinks she is being reasonable and helpful to Marigold. She considers Marigold's relationship with Sylvia to be "nonsense," but does try to find ways to compensate for separating Marigold from her imaginative play with Sylvia. For example, she provides Marigold with gifts and toys, including a lovely doll. She allows Marigold to help with household tasks such as baking, which Marigold usually loves but is not often permitted to do. Grandmother also mistakenly consoles herself with the argument that Marigold's illness is a result of hot weather.³⁸ While the structure Grandmother imposes seems that it would benefit a child, Louv's research indicates that children define such structured recreational activities as being "more like work." Instead, children benefit more from time for unstructured outdoor play. Despite this attitude espoused by the children with whom Louv spoke, adults continue to try to "containerize" children, to keep them in small spaces and restrict their unstructured outdoor play time.³⁹ Grandmother seems blinded in this same way. She grants "Marigold her own way about everything—except the one thing that really mattered. But Grandmother did not for a moment suppose *that* mattered at all. And she certainly wasn't going to give in about a thing that didn't matter."⁴⁰ The material goods and practical activities to structure Marigold's play and "containerize her" serve as indicators of Grandmother's lack of understanding for Marigold's need for imaginative, unstructured play in the natural world.

"Recollecting" Sylvia

"The one thing that really mattered" becomes the focal point of Marigold's recovery from the physical and psychological trauma she has faced through Grandmother's actions. In an unusual move, rather than calling on a medical doctor (many of Montgomery's novels have medical doctors on hand to solve problems⁴¹), a psychologist is brought in instead. Dr. Adam Clow, Waterston points out, "speak[s] in favour of fancy, imagination," allowing this novel to "[ratify Montgomery's] own glorification of the imagination" through his praise of Marigold's pretend play out-of-

doors.⁴² Dr. Clow is quite different from Grandmother, not just because of his approach to a child's imagination but because of his own interactions with the world around him. While Grandmother has focused on trying to encourage Marigold to participate in alternative activities that Grandmother herself finds useful or appropriate, Dr. Clow's focus is, like Marigold's, on the natural environment, on a kinship with the nonhuman world. For instance, while he speaks with Grandmother, he is "looking out into a blue dimness that was the harbour but which to him, just now, was a fair, uncharted land where he might find all his lost Aprils." He visits Prince Edward Island regularly to immerse himself in relationships and engagement with both the human and the nonhuman: listening to Grandmother or to fiddlers playing, and to the trees, the sea, and the wind. Like Marigold, he can imagine and feel in nature what Grandmother seems incapable of feeling. He even engages in imaginative play when envisioning a fairyland wherein he might find his past. The words describing Clow's experience of nature—for instance, "whisper of friendly trees," "moan of the surf," "sigh of the wind"—attribute sentience to the embodiments of nature.⁴³

Dr. Clow's ability to perceive personality in and attribute sentience to the environment suggests that he, like Marigold and unlike Grandmother, has a deeply developed sense of connectedness to others within his sphere, drawn in part from his connection to nature. His mental descriptions of the world around him, for instance, calling trees "friendly," suggest a fellow-feeling for the things he sees, and they for him. He tries to imagine what "the world [might] look like to a cat." "Know what he might about psychology he did not know that," Dr. Clow muses.⁴⁴ While attributing perception to cats, Dr. Clow does not mistakenly assume that a cat's mind and thoughts are like his own. Instead, he respects their differences and acknowledges the complex relationship between himself and the natural world. These character attributes suggest that he can see what ecopsychologists and ecotherapists describe as the *anima mundi*, or soul of the world, a universal psyche shared between and across both living and nonliving elements of the environment.⁴⁵ At the same time, he is an adult, like Grandmother, and although he has Marigold's gifts for imagining and relating to, while simultaneously respecting the differences in, the world around him, he also demonstrates a connection with Grandmother, showing what Riess refers to as "humane respect and concern for the other."⁴⁶ He thinks of Grandmother as beautiful and queenly, "a woman who had

grown old gracefully.” She appreciates that he still “call[s] her Marian” and “remember[s] her ‘as one of the handsome Blaisdell girls.’” This helps Grandmother feel good about herself, and she acknowledges his admiration, “complacently” answering, “Oh well, I haven’t got to wheel-chairs and gruel yet.” She also respects him, and his interest in sharing memories and jokes with her leads her to feel he is someone she can trust and talk to about her life.⁴⁷ The compassion he has for Grandmother links to the kinship he feels for Marigold and for the natural world because it exhibits his ability to relate to several very different beings.

Consequently, Dr. Clow is ideally positioned to reverse Grandmother’s uncompromising decisions about Marigold and Sylvia. His ability to imagine and feel in the natural world what Grandmother seems incapable of feeling and certainly refuses to imagine, combined with his status as an adult whom Grandmother respects, allows him to bridge the emotional divide between Marigold and Grandmother. When Grandmother reveals what she has done, he immediately states, “A wounded spirit who can bear?” and then establishes that he believes Marigold “is dying of a broken heart.” He comprehends her suffering and psychological damage due to her enforced separation from her imaginative play in the natural world and convinces Grandmother that this psychological trauma is bound up with the physical distress Marigold is experiencing. He thus simultaneously validates both Marigold’s pain as real and the importance of imagination and a strong relationship with the environment. He rejects Grandmother’s attitude that Marigold’s friendship with Sylvia is characterized by “pretenses” and “falsehoods,” instead recognizing that Marigold “sees things invisible to us” and “has the wonderful gift of creation in an unusual degree.”⁴⁸ Dr. Clow’s responses to Grandmother therefore establish a connection between the fantastic and the real and reinforce the notion that what is imagined must always be grounded in the everyday, or it becomes, not invisible to us, but unbelievable. Reality has many different facets. It is not limited to Grandmother’s expectations that it must be only the tangible, material, or practical pursuits. It also includes that which we cannot understand until we reimagine our relationship with the world around us.

Because Dr. Clow sees and senses the natural world in a way that allows him to relate to Marigold, he convinces Grandmother to give her the key to the Magic Door,

allowing Marigold to return to her play with the imagined Sylvia *cum* plum bough. Marigold is immediately “transfigured. Her face was as blithe as the day. It was as if a little shower of joy had rained down upon her out of the sky.” Grandmother hears “a sound not heard in the orchard for a long time—the sound of Marigold’s laughter as she waved good-night to Sylvia over the Green Gate.”⁴⁹ Marigold’s rapid improvement in mental, emotional, and physical health after reconnecting with her natural environment is a consequence of spending time outdoors. Jean Mitchell points out that Montgomery herself began suffering mental and physical breakdowns as early as 1910.⁵⁰ These breakdowns resemble Marigold’s situation, and the solutions promoted by professionals of the time were similar. “Neurasthenia,” they believed, could be cured, for men at least, by spending time in nature. Mitchell highlights that for Montgomery’s female characters, nature is a curative, which contrasted with the popular view at the time that women should remain indoors as a cure from mental illness. As a result, many of Montgomery’s women readers were given models of turning to the natural environment for help “at a time when society and the treatment of neurasthenia often kept them indoors.”⁵¹ Marigold’s immediate improvement upon reconnecting with Sylvia depicts the benefits of nature as a restorative for children’s physical and mental health, not just for adults. Mitchell briefly discusses *The Blue Castle*, published three years before *Magic for Marigold*, as an example of nature and the wilderness for restoring health to Valancy (Sterling) Snaith, indicating Montgomery’s continued interest in the physical, emotional, and psychological restorative potential of nature.⁵²

The immediate improvement in Marigold’s psychological and physical state must also be recognized as important in bringing this event into the realms of ecopsychology and ecotherapy. Although these immediate results may seem unrealistic, such a quick change for the better is supported in research conducted on ecotherapy interventions and methods. For instance, in the previously mentioned research conducted by Iwata and colleagues, simply going for a walk in a natural setting had immediate and long-term positive effects on participants’ mental health, while a study by Rachel M. Yerbury and William E. Boyd demonstrates that, after interaction with the environment (dolphins in this case), participants reported an immediate and “enduring” increase in positive emotions.⁵³ Marigold’s improved state provides a literary example of the benefits to the human mind, emotions, and psyche through our experiencing and then reimagining for instance, “recollecting,”

the sentience and aliveness of the world.

Fantasy, Imagination, and Growing Up to Nature

Closely examining this episode in *Magic for Marigold* through a critical lens designed from ecopsychology and ecotherapy illuminates the roles of both the natural environment in alleviating mental-health problems and fantasy and highly imaginative literature in allowing us, as readers, to explore that experience in our own lives. Leading fantasy scholars such as Brian Attebery, Tzvetan Todorov, and Farah Mendlesohn have established that fantasy and imaginative literatures must engage with reality to be believable to the reader. Montgomery's readers are given the opportunity to reimagine what constitutes reality and to accept the possibility that Marigold can see and engage with a plum-tree bough as a real little girl. This direct link between the fantastic and the real contributes to making fantasy literature a poignant tool for drawing readers into new relationships with human and nonhuman others both inside and outside the book. This is a marked contrast to Theodore F. Sheckels's argument that the fantasy elements of *Magic for Marigold*, including Marigold's friendship with Sylvia, are a trap for Marigold and consequently for readers because they are simply a form of escapism and do not represent reality in any way. Although Sheckels concedes that Marigold's relationship to the natural world is bound up tightly with her mental health and that the outdoor space of her imaginative play "does then seem to exert a powerful influence on the girl's physical and psychological health," he fails to acknowledge that her imagined relationship with the outdoor world might have any positive benefits for her or for readers. Instead, his emphasis on Cloud of Spruce and Sylvia as traps for Marigold, as evidence that women and girls in Montgomery's writing have "nothing but stasis: They wait; they wait on ground that seems quite confined,"⁵⁴ discounts the deepened, more mature relationship that has formed between Marigold and the natural world as a direct result of her imaginative play and her creation of Sylvia.

Dismissing Marigold's fantasy world and her relationship with Sylvia as an entrapment that she cannot escape ignores the end of the novel. Certainly, Marigold

reaches a point in her life when she can no longer “find” Sylvia and when she realizes that she may have “suddenly grown too old and wise for fairyland.” However, emerging from a childhood fairyland does not necessarily mean that imagination and fantasy are or were childish. Nor does it mean that the natural fading of a childhood imaginary friend presupposes losing the feeling of connection to the natural world. Instead, despite the loss of Sylvia, Marigold is still deeply immersed in her environment. In one of the final paragraphs of the novel, after Marigold has begun to reconcile herself to losing the ability to imagine Sylvia into life, she is enamoured of a new kitten, enjoys the feel and smell of the wind and the evening appearance of marigolds, and watches the stars and moon come out and reflect in the harbour. The “old magic [may be] gone forever,”⁵⁵ but this new engagement with the environment is a new kind of magic, something that will allow Marigold to continue to develop connectedness with others, both human and nonhuman, and that will continue to enhance her mental health throughout her adolescence and adulthood.

Long-Term Mental Health

What we are missing is a sequel specific to Marigold, in which we might see how Marigold continues to develop and rely on her love for the natural environment. However, we do have many other Montgomery novels that follow adolescents and adults through various iterations of growing up to, rather than away from, nature. Consequently, we have multiple examples of (especially) girls, young women, and adult women finding solace and emotional, psychological, and physical health and strength through their love of the natural world. For instance, Anne Shirley has an extremely fertile imagination and fantasy worlds in which she lives throughout *Anne of Green Gables*. She talks about the imaginary friends she had as a child before coming to Green Gables, Katie Maurice, the bookcase-door girl, and Violetta, whom Anne imagines from an echo, similarly to how Marigold imagines Sylvia from the plum tree. Anne also imbues the natural places around Green Gables—some tame and some wild nature—with personalities. She names them—Bonny the geranium, the Lake of Shining Waters, the White Way of Delight, Lovers Lane, the Snow Queen. The relationships she imagines with these aspects of her environment help her to feel the love and acceptance she needs as she navigates the mental and emotional

distress of feeling unwanted and unloved by other humans. Thus, while we do not see Marigold grow up, we do get to watch Anne mature through adolescence into adulthood. Just as Marigold eventually loses the ability to find Sylvia, so too does Anne eventually move away from imaginary friends. However, we see that the natural world continues to play a role in Anne's mental and emotional health throughout her life, as for example when Anne's newborn child dies in *Anne's House of Dreams*. Baby Joyce lives for only one day, and Anne is devastated emotionally and physically by this loss. While healing comes slowly, it is helped by Anne's engagement with the natural world. Her doctor husband, Gilbert, advises her to "keep in the open air"[56](#) to aid in her recovery. Eventually, she begins to laugh again as she processes her grief. Twenty-five years later, during the First World War, Anne experiences the death of a second child, Walter, and the lengthy absences of Jem and Shirley. Anne misses the beauty of the mayflowers her sons would bring her in the spring. But Bruce Meredith comes "to Ingleside one twilight with his hands full of delicate pink sprays," which he presents to Anne. Her emotional reaction to this gesture from the little boy illustrates that, as a mature woman, she still derives comfort from her close relationship with the environment.[57](#) She has not grown away from nature in order to mature, as Sheckels suggests. Instead, maturity enhances, and is enhanced by, the relationship.

This same pattern, of a dream-like or imaginative relationship to the world as a child that deepens into a mature love for her natural surroundings is also present in Montgomery's *Emily* series, in which Emily Byrd Starr imagines life and personality into her environment and, as she grows older, still feels the beauty and peace of the outdoor world, and in *Jane of Lantern Hill*, one of Montgomery's standalone books, in which Jane Stuart has a dream world in the moon, which slowly fades as she engages in the natural world during the summers she spends with her father in Prince Edward Island. These examples demonstrate a pattern of young characters growing toward a deepened relationship with the natural environment, which proves beneficial to the characters' physical and emotional health across time. Imagining life and personality into the elements of the natural world is not a trap for these characters, as Sheckels claims, but a vehicle for developing a mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy lifestyle.

Nowhere in Montgomery's canon are the affect and effect of nature on physical and mental health more apparent than in *The Blue Castle*. Just as Marigold's, Anne's, Emily's, and Jane's stories portray, Valancy's life, albeit as a woman in her late twenties and early thirties, follows that pattern of growing up toward a mature relationship with the natural world. Valancy has a magical dream-world, a blue castle in which she imagines handsome knights and suitors rather than Marigold's plum-bough girl or Emily's Wind Woman. She suffers depression brought on by the oppression of her family and has what she thinks is a serious heart problem—a mistaken diagnosis. She ultimately finds her "blue castle" in a cabin on an island in Muskoka, Ontario. The Waldenesque location and her marriage to Barney Snaith, whose nationally renowned nature writing "saved [her] soul alive,"⁵⁸ lead her to a deep and abiding love for and relationship to the natural world. The joy she finds in both this human-interpersonal relationship and the human-nonhuman relationship with the world around her results in her physical and emotional healing.

Literature, Ecotherapy, and the Twenty-First-Century Reader

Observing these patterns in Montgomery's youngest titular character and connecting them to other more mature characters in her canon invites consideration about how *Magic for Marigold* can be relevant to the modern reader and the significance to human well-being of a relationship with nature. Readers can certainly recognize the importance of fantasy and imaginative play in the process of developing such a relationship through their reading of this text. Reading engages the mind and attention in a similar way and opens the reader to new perspectives on others both in and out of the book. Education researchers David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano report that "reading fiction increases self-reported empathy" and "our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them." These skills, which are part of the "capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states" known as Theory of Mind, are viewed as essential to the "successful navigation of complex social relationships and [help] to support the empathic responses that maintain them." Kidd and Castano state, "We submit that fiction affects [Theory of Mind] practices because it forces us to engage in mind-reading and character construction." They argue that reading "defamiliarizes" and has the "capacity ... to unsettle readers' expectations and challenge their thinking," which

then leads readers to focus on “presupposition (a focus on implicit meanings), subjectification, ... and multiple perspectives,” all features of engagement with fiction that “mimic those of [Theory of Mind].”⁵⁹ Kidd and Castano’s claims align with important earlier research on children’s literature undertaken by Rudine Sims Bishop, later expounded on by Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman, which points toward the ways in which reading children’s books can invite the reader to see through windows and pass through doors into new worlds and a new understanding of others, as well as allowing an affirmative perspective of the self.⁶⁰ In gaining such insights on themselves and other humans through their books, readers gain similar perspective and insight on the nonhuman characters and environment in fantastic and imaginative literature for children. They can then reimagine their relationship with the natural world. They learn to see how and why such a relationship can be mutually beneficial as they see both the care and respect fictional human characters have for the nonhuman and the ways in which that care and respect are reflected back to the human characters in the form of psychological well-being. What if, then, based on this connection, reading fantastic or imaginative literature—such as Montgomery’s—becomes Bishop’s sliding glass door into Fisher’s “recollective” practices, engaging in which subsequently leads to “supportive or therapeutic” practices?⁶¹ These therapeutic practices can include what researchers Christopher Wolsko and Kreg Lindberg call “appreciative outdoor recreational activities,” such as hiking, walking, outdoor meditation, swimming, gardening, caring for animals, and other gently paced activities in which the participants have opportunities to observe the world around them and, in turn, to develop a strong connection to the natural world, which when pursued as a therapeutic modality have demonstrable positive effects on mental health and well-being.⁶²

Experiencing the traumatic impact of damaging a relationship with the natural world, as well as the benefits of re-engaging that relationship, is a concept which emerges in Montgomery’s other fiction as well. It is specifically explored in *The Blue Castle*. Valancy’s imaginative engagement with her surroundings and her eventual return to health follow the same pattern as Marigold’s experience with Sylvia. However, before Valancy leaves for “up back” with Barney Snaith, reading is her only opportunity to receive benefit from nature. She states, “John Foster’s [Barney’s *nom de plume*] books were all that saved my soul alive the past five years,” indicating how her mental and emotional health have been positively impacted by

reading about a poignant relationship with the natural world. Even after Valancy defies social expectations and leaves her family, first to work as a caregiver for “poor, unhappy, disgraced little Cissy Gay, ill and helpless ... without a soul to help or comfort her,” and then eventually to marry Barney, she continues to read John Foster’s books.⁶³ Her reading relationship with the natural world deepens her connections to it when she begins to develop a real relationship with it. Reading has been a “recollective” practice for her, reminding her that she has an inherent place in the natural world and then leading her to nurture that relationship both physically and psychologically.

Marigold’s traumatic experience of separation from Sylvia and her return to health following reconnection with her natural playmate align with the experiences of Montgomery’s more mature characters, who continue to deepen their relationships with the natural world. Readers also see how to use reading as one method for beginning to “recollect” that relationship, affirming the relevance these texts continue to have for modern readers. Fantasy and imagination are not a dead end, an impasse, as Sheckels suggests, but are instead a step in the journey to understanding and connecting with the world around us. In *Magic for Marigold*, we, as readers, can imagine Sylvia with Marigold and can thus change our perspective on the tree outside the window. Perhaps we can imagine a soul in that tree and change how we act toward it. In these small forward steps, we also learn how the ecosystem we inhabit has a therapeutic benefit for our mental health. Perhaps, as we mature from children into adults, we, like Marigold, do grow “too old and wise for fairyland”—we may no longer be able to engage with imaginary friends and immerse ourselves in their worlds. However, we can, in the words of pioneering ecotherapist Clinebell, be “nurtured by nature” through “flinging wide our inner windows of grateful awareness for these gifts of life and deepening our intimate interaction with the natural world in ways that are both healing and enlivening.”⁶⁴ Reading about fantasy and the imagination and exploring the natural world lead to imagining what the world might be like for a tree bough, a cat, a cloud. This encourages us to grow up to a meaningful engagement with the world around us, rather than growing out of this connection. Reading thus bolsters our ability to open those windows and become more aware of the world around us. The evidence from research is there: Conscious and thoughtful relationships with the natural world increase human mental, emotional, and psychological well-being. Reading fantastic and imaginative

literature can inspire us to fling up the window shades, push open the sliding glass doors, and walk into a new world where we, like Marigold, find renewed emotional and mental health in our connection to the natural world.

About the Author: Heidi A. Lawrence studies the intersections of children’s literature with ecopsychology and its praxis, ecotherapy, with special interest in imaginative and fantastic literature. She considers the ways in which reading these literatures may allow audiences to reimagine their connections and develop mutually beneficial relationships with the nonhuman, leading to a greater degree of mental, physical, and emotional well-being. She has published on Montgomery’s influence on Madeleine L’Engle. She has participated in international literature conferences, including those of the L.M. Montgomery Institute, MLA, IRSCL, ChLA, SSAWW, ALA, and ASLE, presenting on Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, L’Engle, and other authors of children’s literature. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature (University of Glasgow, UK), M.A. degrees in English (Brigham Young University) and Medieval Studies (University of Leeds, UK), and an M.Phil. in English Literature (University of York, UK). She works at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah).


- [1](#) Montgomery, *CJ* 6 (1 June 1927): 128.
- [2](#) Montgomery, *MM* 6.
- [3](#) Hasbach, “Ecotherapy” 117.
- [4](#) Greenway, “The Wilderness Effect” 124.
- [5](#) Fisher, “What Is Ecopsychology?” 82, 83.
- [6](#) Clinebell, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves* 27.
- [7](#) Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology* 13
- [8](#) Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology* 52; Glendinning, “Technology, Trauma, and the Wild” 42, 44–45.
- [9](#) Lawrence, *Continuums*.
- [10](#) Nabhan et al., “Hands-On Ecological Restoration” 198.
- [11](#) Waxman et al., “Humans (Really) Are Animals.”

- [12](#) Miall and Kuiken, “Foregrounding” 391.
- [13](#) For examples, Epperly, *Fragrance* 243; Epperly, *Through Lover’s Lane* 87, 90; Litster, “The Golden Road” 313; McKenzie and Ledwell, Introduction 11; Nolan, “Learning with Anne”; Waterston, *Magic*; Waterston, “Marigold.”
- [14](#) Waterston, *Magic* 153, 156–58; Waterston, “Marigold” 156.
- [15](#) Clement, “L.M. Montgomery’s Precocious Children” 62.
- [16](#) Montgomery, *MM* 23–25.
- [17](#) Waterston, *Magic* 153.
- [18](#) Froebel, *Friedrich Froebel’s Pedagogics* 65–66, 147, 323–34.
- [19](#) Montgomery, *MM* 26–35.
- [20](#) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 197.
- [21](#) Montgomery, *MM* 34–35 (emphasis in original).
- [22](#) Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* 88, 92.
- [23](#) Fido and Richardson, “Empathy Mediates the Relationship” 131; see also Zhang et al., “An Occasion for Unselfing” 64
- [24](#) Montgomery, *MM* 90, 92.
- [25](#) Riess, “The Science of Empathy” 74
- [26](#) Riess 74.
- [27](#) Rian and Coll, “Increased Exposure to Nature” 262.
- [28](#) Richardson et al., “Actively Noticing Nature” 12–13.
- [29](#) Savolainen, “More Time” 269–71.
- [30](#) Montgomery, *MM* 90.
- [31](#) Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology* 58–59; Greenway 130–31.
- [32](#) See Louv; Hanscom, *Balanced and Barefoot*.
- [33](#) Greenway 134.
- [34](#) Montgomery, *MM* 92.
- [35](#) Montgomery, *MM* 93–94, 26, 95.
- [36](#) NIMH “Overview.”
- [37](#) Montgomery, *MM* 94.
- [38](#) Montgomery, *MM* 92–94.
- [39](#) Louv 117–18, 35.
- [40](#) Montgomery, *MM* 94 (emphasis in original).
- [41](#) For instance, Aunt Marigold in *Magic for Marigold*, Gilbert Blythe in the *Anne* series, and Roger Penhallow in *A Tangled Web*.
- [42](#) Waterston, “Marigold” 163.
- [43](#) Montgomery, *MM* 95–96.
- [44](#) Montgomery, *MM* 95

- [45](#) Roszak, “Where Psyche Meets Gaia” 16; Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth* 320–21
- [46](#) Riess 75.
- [47](#) Montgomery, *MM* 95–96.
- [48](#) Montgomery, *MM* 97.
- [49](#) Montgomery, *MM* 98.
- [50](#) Mitchell, “L.M. Montgomery’s Neurasthenia” 112.
- [51](#) Mitchell 124, 127.
- [52](#) Mitchell 124.
- [53](#) Iwata et al.; Yerbury and Boyd, “Dolphins and Human Flourishing.”
- [54](#) Sheckels, *The Island Motif* 144–47.
- [55](#) Montgomery, *MM* 269, 273.
- [56](#) Montgomery, *AHD* 120.
- [57](#) Montgomery, *RI* 266–67.
- [58](#) Montgomery, *BC* 163.
- [59](#) Kidd and Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction” 377–78.
- [60](#) Bishop, “Mirrors”; Botelho and Rudman, *Critical Multicultural Analysis* 1–2, 17.
- [61](#) Bishop; Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology* 13.
- [62](#) Wolsko and Lindberg, “Experiencing Connection with Nature” 87–88; see also, Delaney, *Nature Is Nurture*.
- [63](#) Montgomery, *BC* 163, 78, 95, 195–96.
- [64](#) Clinebell 8.

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