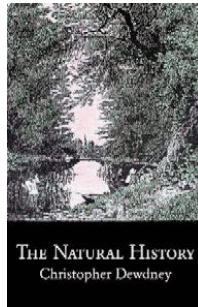


# The Natural History

Dewdney, Christopher.  
2002. Toronto: ECW Press.  
102pp. \$16.95  
(softcover)



Reviewed by Jenny Kerber

The publication of *The Natural History* marks the culmination of twenty years of work produced by Toronto poet and artist Christopher Dewdney. An accomplished interdisciplinary, Dewdney has ranged into fields as diverse as visual art, literary theory, electronic media, geology, and molecular biology. This volume unites the four interlocking sections of “The Natural History of Southwestern Ontario,” each of which has been published in earlier texts, often in slightly different forms accompanied by anecdotes and illustrations.

The pleasures of this long poem yield themselves more easily when one gains familiarity with Dewdney’s previous work. For example, although the final section in *The Natural History* is simply titled “Permugenesis,” the 1987 volume of the same name is followed by the subtitle “A Recombinant Text.” This provides important clues into why Dewdney subjects certain words and phrases to continual modification that echo and haunt the landscape of the poem. For example, the opening line, “August’s amniotic haze is our dream aether, our lens of distance” mutates and resurfaces near the end of the book as “August a haze amniotic our darkness rarely witnessed” (3, 84). If the word is a unit of information analogous to a strand of DNA, then Dewdney is a kind of scientist-poet who combines and recombines the poetic code to create new variations in meaning, often with unpredictable and wildly creative results. Instead of laying out the building blocks of poetry as a periodic ‘memory table,’ as he has done in earlier work, here Dewdney includes a “Bibliography of Creatures” outlining the flora, fauna, microclimate, and topography which contribute to the natural history of his chosen locale.

As the recombinant texts continually erupt within the main text, the surfacing of earlier forms alludes to another of Dewdney’s central concerns, namely the geological and paleontological structures of the Escarpment region of Southwestern Ontario. The limestone corridors of the Escarpment are frequently referred to as “stone libraries,”(3) repositories of paleontological memory preserved in the text of fossils. Elsewhere, the Escarpment is called an “ancient museum” where “[s]pace solidifies into limestone each time the entire perceptual memory of a life becomes trapped in the sediments” (7). The recombinant structure of the text is thus repeated in the continual process of submersion and resurfacing of history as encap-

sulated within natural cycles, resulting in untidy layerings of both geological strata and memory. Humanity also leaves its own traces on the landscape, and Dewdney is careful not to excise culture from his version of natural history. At one point, “Cenozoic bivalves forage under the waves” of Lake Erie, illuminated by the “[f]ar red glow of smelters and factories to the north” (29). To interpret such a passage as an environmental lament, however, would be both limiting and misleading, for Dewdney has posited elsewhere that “there is no division between nature, culture and technology. Vinyl is as natural as lichen” (Foreward, *The Secular Grail*).<sup>1</sup> While at times the integration of technological language seems forced (witness the description of water that “glistens digitally in the computer sunlight” (8)), at other points it is spellbinding, as in the following description of cumulonimbus thunderheads: “Billowing like convoluted foreheads of brooding fetuses, their water-brains filled with grotesque electric thought impulses and thunder. Their silence raining on the land” (28).

In spite of the extreme precision of the scientific terminology employed throughout the work, there is also an erotic and lush sensuality to this poem that leads the reader to feel slightly drugged, lingering in a hazy dream-like state that mirrors the thick Ontario summer heat. The hermaphroditic persona frequently participates in the humid fecundity Dewdney conjures up, and the text is full of dreamy couplings that sometimes border on self-indulgence. Who knew there was so much sex going on in the wilds of Southern Ontario? Notably, the perils of sharp branches, boulders, and above all, winter are left out of the equation. Dewdney has softened the edges here considerably, leaving the reader with two options: one can either get incensed by the incomplete experience of nature, or sit back, mix up a tall cool drink, and savour it.

In response to queries about why he would devote so much poetic energy to one small region of Canada, Dewdney’s answer might best be found in a line from the poem itself: “Because of its mathematical precision at the infinite disposal of curiosity” (77). I cannot think of a more convincing justification for the preservation of a rare landscape, nor a more eloquent statement about the continuing necessity of poetry. This volume should appeal to those interested in gaining a deeper poetic and ecological appreciation of the Escarpment region of Southwestern Ontario, and is a must-read for aspiring nature poets hoping to follow the lead of one of Canada’s most adept wordsmiths.

## note

1 Christopher Dewdney, *The Secular Grail* (Toronto: Somerville, 1993): foreward.

## The Arbutus/Madrone Files

Laurie Ricou. *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*. Edmonton, NeWest Press, 2002, 239 pp.



Reviewed by Catriona Sandilands

In between finishing Ricou's delightful Files and starting to write this review, I took a walk around the Victoria neighborhood that used to be (and possibly still is) my home. The grey shades of the early winter sky were, of course, framed by famous West Coast greens: fir, rhododendrons, cedars, the odd incongruous palm tree. And blackberries. No matter where you walk around here, there are blackberry bushes: dense, knotted, ugly clumps that throw out long, sharp branches to snare unwary winter pedestrians like me (although I think they prefer, sadistically, the thinly tee-shirted pickers of the late summer). Blackberries aren't native to the Pacific Northwest but they are so much part of my sense of the landscape that it's hard to imagine, say, my parents' Garry Oak yard without its feral berry hedge, or an August without its rituals of scratches and jam.

Blackberries are possibly second only to broom on the *Southern Island Native Plant Gardeners' List of Demon Species*, but there they are, a significant element in the vocabulary of the place. They are part of the functional lore of the West Coast; they are also part its storytelling and literature. So it is no surprise that they have prompted writers like Tom Robbins to think blackberries metonymically: "the aggression, speed, roughness, and nervy upward mobility of blackberries symbolized ... everything they disliked about America, especially its frontier" (*Still Life With Woodpecker*, 129). Now, over twenty years after he wrote that memorable passage, one can even smell a sort of Starbucks' aroma in Robbins' blackberries, along the lines of a brambly cyber-network of vines and connections working at caffeinated speed.

Ricou has written *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* to explore these sorts of imaginative leaps of Pacific Northwest place. His book, as he describes it, is about writing and reading "the Arbutus/Madrone region, a region sharing a biogeoclimatic zone, and flora and fauna, and icons of place, yet bisected by an international boundary, and, hence, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, by differing histories, different needs and aspirations, and differing 'languages'"(1). The organizing trope of the book thus indicates doubleness, the fact that the region is both one place and two nations. More accurately, however, like the tree of the title, the region is organized by and embeds cultural multiplicity. What is an Arbutus in BC is a Madrone in Oregon, but even that distinction leaves out (for example) the array of names the tree has worn among the

many First Nations whose languages produce and reflect different ideas of place altogether. I would say, then, that Ricou wants to write of a doubled region, but ends up doing so in a way that reflects the region's multiple locations in different languages and histories, different movements and scales, different perceptions and currents.

The book is cleverly divided into twelve different "files", each of which discusses a significant thread that Ricou pulls through the literature of the region, and twelve subsequent "afterfiles" that function as part bibliographic essay, part rebuttal to each file. There is no particular symmetry among the files, and no singular texture or coherence to any of the conversations between or among them. The result of all of this polyphony is a richly textured compilation of stories, analyses, connections and revelations organized in such files as (obviously) "Raven", "Salmon" and "Rain" and (less obviously) "Kuroshio" (for the Japan Current), "Great Blue Heron" and "Sasquatch". The uneven and overlapping filing system is clearly intentional. Ricou encourages us to "think of these files as winding and stringing: spin the salmon thread, pull the logging thread until it touches the raven thread"(2) in order to find, in the literary landscapes of the Arbutus/Madrone region, an uneven and overlapping sense of place. The best metaphor I can come up with for the book's central argument is thus a sort of bug's eye regionalism: the cultural and biogeographic terrain clearly influences writing and speaking about this place, but the terrain is also multiply perceived and itself moving.

Some of the individual files allow me to nod with satisfaction. Ricou's treatment of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, for example, is particularly beautiful; he describes, in its dense layerings of exile and silence, a "Northwest that is so pacific it has no voice"(76). Here, Ricou dares an overt Canada-U.S. comparison; John Okada's *No-No Boy* prompts him to note that there were, in fact, national differences to the treatment of Japanese Canadians and US-Americans during and after the war (Canada was the more racist). Here also, Ricou places the writings of non-Anglo authors at the center of the thematic organization and writing of "place"; this Kuroshio Pacific Rim, this exile and banishment, this racism, is as constitutive of the region as rain and salal. Indeed, throughout the *Files* Ricou has clearly included a range of interactions among the racialized cultures of the region, and gives a central place to First Nations languages, practices and texts.

Ricou also wants to keep us on our (national, political, literary) toes. In places, he deliberately chooses some fairly obscure Canadian and US-American texts to prompt in both nations of readers a renewed sense of conversation across borders; his "findings" allow new readings of old canons, new insights and comparisons. In other places, he chooses to make some



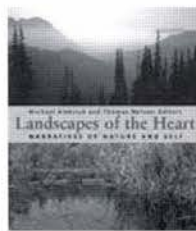
very sharp political points. In his “Salmon” file, for example, he plays with the fish as a metaphor for homing, attachment, quest and transformation, but he also describes the literature of a salmon economy, revealing that the historical transformations of fishing cultures are, in so many ways, dependent on migration and return. Indeed, between his “Woodswords” and “Anasayú”<sup>1</sup> files he is able to touch some of the profound ambivalences and tensions that the Pacific Northwest embodies (and writes) about trees, forests and regional economic resource dependence; the poetry of logging sits, poignantly, against the possibility of thinking from the place of the tree.

To be sure, Ricou’s themes and literary choices are idiosyncratic. I’m sure anyone familiar with either Canadian or US-American literature could list significant absences (the one that dismays me is Jane Rule, whose keen sense of Vancouver and the Islands as places of political asylum might not quite fit with Ricou’s tendency to emphasize fluidity over national identity). I’m also sure that anyone would be able to come up with other files, other processes that constitute the place (Ricou opens this door himself, noting such possibilities as a Gold Rush File, a Wobblies File, and a Whale File, and I think I would particularly add an Odd Intentional Communities File). But Ricou makes no claim to summary or survey. He offers the particularity of his choices with great pleasure and dares us, in his refusal to define the place, to read and compose our own files: cedars, shades of grey, blackberries. This is, after all, a region that is not one, a place “whose marker is the arbutus/madrone, a tree with paper-thin bark, which seems sometimes to have no bark at all” (154).

<sup>1</sup> Anasayu means “arbutus” in Kesh, a language from Ursula Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*. Borrowing from (fictional) Kesh and (traditional) Kwakwaka’wakw root-meanings, Ricou suggests that the word can signify “learning with”; this is the closing thought in his final file, perhaps the closest he gets to a normative vision for the religion.

## Landscapes of the Heart: Narratives of Nature and Self

Michael Aleksiuik & Thomas Nelson,  
Editors. Edmonton: NeWest Press.  
2002, 238 pp.



Reviewed by Mark Dickinson

Can colonists and newcomers ever become “indigenous” in some form, accepting ecosystems and their original inhabitants on their own terms? Can the settler arrive at a peaceful relationship with landscape, and join the web of complex interrelationships that characterize healthy ecologies? This new anthology from NeWest Press probes these controversial questions, and offers some evidence that this transition is taking place along the margins of mainstream society.

To some degree or another, all the stories in this collection of

personal narratives feature the same recurring theme – of people and place inextricably woven together into an organic skein, like figures in a Huichol yarn painting. In the context of this book, the transition from settler to native seems to occur within those individuals who have planted themselves down in a particular stand of forest, or on the banks of a certain river, ocean or grassy plain, and over the years and decades have become attuned to the subtle changes in the ebb and flow of larger natural processes.

There is a strong conversational feel to many of the stories in this volume, giving the book as a whole the feeling of sitting on a couch with the authors and hearing them recount their experiences over a friendly cup of tea. Stories by Lisa Lynch, Richard Pickard, and Michael M’Gonigle worked particularly well. All writers were effective in summoning up a palpable sense of place, and their own connection to its mysteries. This is comfortable, polished, and engaging reading. However every once in a while the personal touch becomes a bit too intimate, self absorbed, or intrusive, and backfires – case in point one author who compares the sweat worked up while hiking in his favorite tract of forest to the sweat of lovemaking.

Eco-psychology bears a heavy stamp on this anthology, as many entries focus to some degree on the therapeutic and healing aspects of human contact with the unspoiled natural world. Because of this, these entries occasionally place themselves on thin ice: by focusing on nature as a place of healing, they run the risk of replacing the psychologist with the forest, the forest as shrink, and in the process turning the non-human into yet another separate and distant Other, though this time as a benevolent dispenser of peace and tranquility.

The second to last essay by the veteran Arctic anthropologist and activist Robert G. Williamson offers a fresh point of reference to the discussion, and in effect brings this collection back down to earth. In more than four decades of research and community involvement with the Inuit, Williamson learned that every geographic feature in the Inuit landscape is known not by the points of a map and compass, but through a centuries-old symbolization of the collective experience of the community. This is a ‘namescape’ drenched in memory and dream, in birth and death, an ecological theatre for the community where a great round of living and dying and sharing the land with its other inhabitants over countless generations have produced a richly layered narrative and experiential web. The traditions of the Inuit, and of indigenous peoples the world over whom at present struggle to hang onto the places they have lived and loved over successive generations, serve as a gentle reminder that our own fledgling marriages with our surroundings are still in their infancy.