

Invitations into the Natural World: An Author's Viewpoint

by: Beverley Brenna

What do finding a boyfriend, interpreting the absurdist plays of Harold Pinter, and looking for wild orchids in Prince Albert National Park have to do with growing up? They are all both possible and necessary, according to Taylor Jane Simon, an eighteen-year-old with a perplexing mother, a difficult transition into a summer at the lake, and a future on the edge of a cliff. My young adult novel *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005), the first installation in a trilogy of the same name, offers a nod to existentialism through its characterization of a young woman with autism. A key aspect of the book is the presentation of Taylor's first-person perspective as she narrates a high-stakes quest for independence in a strikingly beautiful northern Saskatchewan setting. In this context, the outside world operates as a metaphor for this character and also becomes the motivation she needs to achieve independence.

My intent in writing *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005) involved, first of all, telling a good story. Other even loftier goals involved a celebration of the differences among us as well as the universals we share. I hoped that *Wild Orchid* would offer a vantage point on a character who was, at the time of publication, relatively new in literature for young people. Since the book came into print in 2005, we've seen a number of other narrators with autism who bring forward diverse perspectives, continuing to fill a gap in fiction that relates to protagonists who are differently abled. Yet the inception of Taylor's story had nothing to do with autism, nor even the coming-of-age journey that became a sturdy plot thread through all three novels in the series. In the beginning, it was the story's setting that set my writing gears in motion.

Prince Albert National Park encompasses 3,874 square kilometres, about a million acres, in central Saskatchewan, Canada and is located by car three hours north of Saskatoon. It is a breathtakingly lovely place, where sweeping prairies meet parkland and boreal forest. At night you can hear a wolf pack alerting others to its territory, and on a summer's day the call of the loon

carries across Waskesiu Lake through intricate variations of tremolo, wail, yodel and hoot. But one of the most captivating things about the park is its flora, including, most intriguing to me (and Taylor), its orchid population.

As a young teen, with older parents recently retired, I spent many hours combing the forest trails seeking and finding a variety of rare plants including the Yellow Ladyslipper, the Venus's Slipper, and the Sparrow's Egg Ladyslipper (featured on the cover of *Wild Orchid* [Brenna, 2005] with an image of Taylor looking uncannily like me at that age). While I enjoyed the cool northern lake and sandy beaches — they were always well attended by visitors — I was consistently surprised by how few people actually walked the trails in the area. I was also surprised that the people who could be found on the trails were not very interested in the natural flora. And I was concerned about more than human indifference to nature; Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* was a book I discovered through a teacher and it haunted me.

My initial drafts of *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005) followed a girl who spent a lot of time in Waskesiu's woods. Eventually, after exploring various possibilities, it became a book about a girl with high functioning autism for whom wild orchids become important. When Taylor recounts her newfound knowledge of orchids, she relates that "...to thrive, they require a balance of heredity and environment. The seed must fall on a special kind of fungus that allows it to germinate. Orchids have a reputation for being difficult to grow — they are unusually discerning plants that need a home devoted to their unique needs" (p. 36).

The connection between Taylor and orchids is established more firmly later in the novel, as she speaks with Paul, a possible but unattainable love interest. Taylor says that "you get born with Asperger's Syndrome if there's the right balance of heredity and environment." Paul replies softly, "Like orchids" (Brenna, 2005, p. 90).

By offering detailed descriptions of the park's natural setting, I wanted to encourage people unaware of such



beauty to take notice, people who didn't have the mentors that I had, two white-haired guides equipped with flower identification manuals, a zest for hiking, and a seemingly bottomless thermos of hot chocolate. Because teens are the main audience for my Wild Orchid series, I wanted messages about the importance of our natural world to be engaging yet subtle. Taylor notices how much the forest around her is like a church, a place where she can think and breathe. She begins to identify all sorts of local plants, gaining confidence in herself through outdoor activity. She encounters a black bear with three cubs, an experience that catalyzes her first and only swimming expedition, humorously crafted around a similar swimming exploit I experienced a few years ago with my sister-in-law in order to avoid a real family of bears. *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005) could not have been written without this particular setting, just as Taylor could not, in any other place, have evolved into the person she becomes. We are all affected, for better or worse, by our environmental limits.

My writing for younger children, some of which introduces sustainability and appreciation of our natural world, is more direct in its messages. *The Keeper of the Trees* (Brenna, 1999), for example, is a fantasy novel where the symbiotic relationship is at risk between creatures from the Otherworld and London's ancient Horse Chestnut Trees, the air quality decreasing while a young boy's asthma rages out of control. As a writer, it's impossible to *not* consider environmental themes as I listen to the news and read the research on global warming. I believe that writers have a particular responsibility to communicate important messages responsive to the world around us... as long as a good story is the vehicle for these messages and they are offered in an age-appropriate manner.

My newest title *Fox Magic* (Brenna, 2017) deals with a twelve-year-old who is drowning in loss and guilt. Two of Chance Devlin's friends have committed suicide and she wonders if following them is the best remedy for her pain. A connection to a mysterious red fox named Janet Johnson helps Chance come to terms with the future, illuminating new understandings of courage and the power of dreams. In this story, nature becomes a rich context for healing as Chance awakens to its fundamental power.

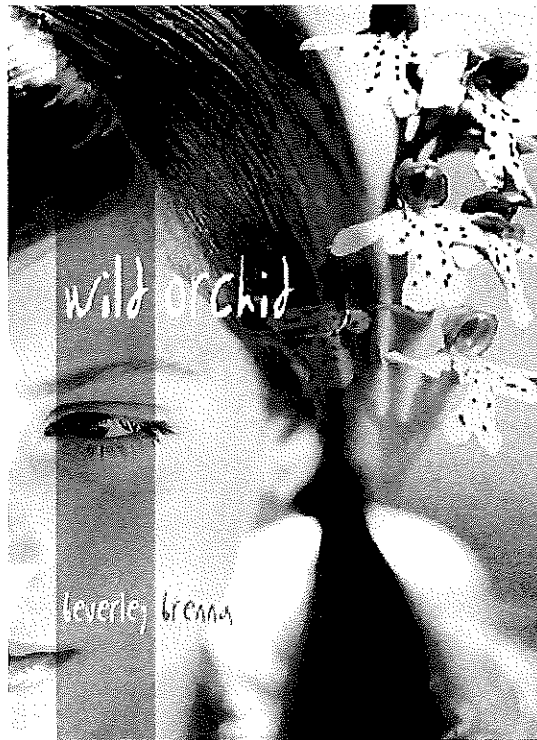
The natural world in *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005), however, required a more subtle introduction. Taylor's

affinity for nature, and her representation through the orchid motif, demonstrates her connectedness to the outside world. In addition, searching for rare orchids becomes the motivation for action towards the adult life that awaits. The converse is also available in an understated warning: as humans, when we're stuck within ourselves, we can't mature.

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In all of my work, I see the inclusion of nature in children's and young adult literature as presenting readers with an invitation. When I was an elementary teacher, I wanted to extend repeated invitations to my students so that they might see and feel the importance of the natural world around them. As a parent, I conveyed these invitations, through books and outdoor activity, to help my sons understand that their lives were connected to our environment in many important ways. And as a teacher-educator who now works with preservice teachers in a Bachelor of Education program, I want to prepare new teachers to invite their own students into relationships with our living earth to preserve as well as appreciate its bounty.

I write with a deep faith that our younger generations might succeed where mine has failed. The world our children will inherit isn't the one I had hoped it would be, yet my admiration for the skills and confidence I see in our youth is hopeful. Reading, as an invitation to consider the importance of the living earth around us, can serve a salient purpose, but it requires more than one book, more than one call to action. Through repeated experiences real and vicarious, I believe that our young people will develop the passion that is required to save our planet.



References

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