

A River Becomes a Stream: Twain, Scrimger, and the Fate of the River Narrative in Contemporary Suburbia

Water narratives have figured prominently in Canadian children's literature dating back to Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes: A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains* (1852). One of the most engaging recent examples of the genre is Richard Scrimger's *Into the Ravine* (2007), a middle-grade novel that has attracted little academic attention (Cheryl Cowdy's 2013 article is a notable exception). Scrimger's novel tells the story of three adolescent boys who spend a day rafting from their homes in suburban Scarborough to the shore of Lake Ontario. Patterned in part on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the story takes the thirteen-year-old narrator Jules and his friends through a multicultural and economically diverse suburban landscape inhabited mainly by marginalized figures. The journey leaves Jules with an increased awareness of the social injustices afflicting contemporary Canadian society as well as a heightened sense of his own identity. In feeling his way toward a mode of communicating his insights to his friends, Jules undertakes a metafictional tour-de-force combining oral history, various popular genres, a high degree of self-referentiality, and an acute awareness of the physicality of books. Jules' preferred storytelling form, the episodic river narrative that binds together these disparate elements, is well recognized as a vehicle for social criticism (Wieck, 2000; Bieber, 2014), but its potential for representing the processes of identity formation in writing for the young has been less well explored. This paper, then, will examine how two key elements of river narratives, the raft and the creek, function partly as vehicle, partly as prison, and partly as protective space, allowing Jules to refine his sense of who he is against a backdrop of social, racial, and sexual inequality.