

Seas, trees and responsibilities in the novels of Mildred Taylor and Cynthia Voigt

In Cynthia Voigt's 1981 novel *Homecoming*, Dicey Tillerman reflects: "Maybe life was like a sea, and all the people were like boats." (p.244) Almost immediately she corrects herself, noting that she cannot be a boat floating freely at sea because she is bound by responsibility to her siblings, a responsibility later symbolised by the heavily wired mulberry tree on her grandmother's farm. The implication is that individuals long to be free of all ties, and must be forcibly held together, through either coercion or will, an idea that comes into conflict with Dicey and other characters' love of the open water. Similarly in Mildred Taylor's Logan series, both water and trees reflect issues related to the relationships between individuals and communities. The Rosa Lee creek represents the childhood innocence of white and black friends playing together, the well on the Logan farm is depicted as a contentious community resource polluted by racism, and the Logan trees are intimately connected to Cassie Logan's ideas of place, ownership and belonging. Furthermore, in both series water is linked with health and cleanliness in ways that reflect America's complex history of associating sickness and contagion with marginalised groups.

The themes represented by the land, trees and water sources in the novels are reflected in the social support structures depicted by both authors. Both series represent barriers to healthcare, critiques of formal and informal welfare systems, and concerns about how to meet everyone's needs without becoming dependent on others.

In this roundtable discussion, I will draw on my comparative study of Taylor and Voigt to show how ecological and socioeconomic networks in children's literature highlight tensions between access/ownership, freedom/security, cleanliness/contagion and individualism/responsibility.