

Ecological Empathy and the Land Ethic in Louis Sachar's *Holes*

Louis Sachar's *Holes* opens with a tale of environmental devastation: "There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There was once a large lake here.... Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland." Similar to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and other examples of what Lawrence Buell calls "toxic discourse," *Holes* is about a contaminated environment and the dangerous effects on the people exposed to it. Camp Green Lake, a juvenile correctional camp, is not built on an actual toxic waste dump, but on a metaphorical one: Green Lake had withered into a wasteland because of a hate crime committed in the late-1800s, and the toxic residue of that crime still haunts the landscape.

In this paper, I examine how empathy and environmentalism intersect in the magical realist world of *Holes*, where a poisonous human action can have a poisonous effect on the environment, and an act of empathy toward a fellow human can renew the land. This interconnectedness reflects ecologist Aldo Leopold's concept of the "land ethic," the idea that humans are part of one shared community with everything on our planet, and therefore must "change" our role "from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." On the 20th anniversary of its Newbery Award, as we face both climate crisis and what psychologist Niobe Way calls "crisis of connection" in our human communities, *Holes* reminds us that to be good stewards of the land we must also be good stewards of our fellow human beings.

Key terms: empathy; environmentalism; toxic discourse; land ethic; ecocriticism

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