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From Housewife to Hermit: Fleeing the Feminine Mystique in Joan Barfoot's Gaining Ground

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

The link between Canadian women's novels of self-development and notions of "wilderness" has become exceptionally strong over the past few decades. Despite this, Joan Barfoot's feminist wilderness novel, Gaining Ground, has garnered little critical attention. However, Barfoot's modification of Frye's garrison mentality in an expressly feminist context is worthy of consideration. Also of note are the ways in which Barfoot's narrative deals with Atwood's notions of the archaeological, as outlined in Survival, as well as the manners in which Barfoot's writing is clearly informed by Friedan's The Feminine Mystique. A close reading of Gaining Ground in these contexts suggests that the reasons for the disjuncture between the strongly feminist content of the novel and the lack of critical attention paid it might lie in its presentations of separation and the abandonment of children: the ease of which creates a real sense of discomfort and highlights the charges against the feminist movement that it has failed to outline a place for children.

FROM HOUSEWIFE TO HERMIT: FLEEING THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE IN JOAN BARFOOT'S *GAINING GROUND*

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

The link between the "wilderness" and Canadian women writers' novels of female development has become so well established that as early as 1982 an American novelist, Gail Godwin, wrote a scene in which her main protagonist threw a Canadian book across the room in disgust, complaining, "'I'm getting tired of novels about women who go off to the woods to find themselves" (449). Indeed, many Canadian women writers of the 1970s and 1980s did capitalize on a form of feminism which sought to locate woman's essential nature in the wilderness, away from the Culture which came to represent patriarchy. Given the scholarly interest in such a connection from both a feminist and a Canadian Studies position, it seems remarkable that a text which bears all the hallmarks of a Canadian escape from the "feminine mystique" should remain relatively unexamined. Yet that is the fate of Joan Barfoot's *Gaining Ground*, originally published as *Abra* (1978).

Barfoot's book traces the life story of an intriguing and unsettling protagonist, Abra Phillips, who escapes from the socially-accepted role of housewife and mother in order to take on the role of hermit, located outside the social order. Moreover, she is at least partially successful in her escape from the everyday life associated with the feminine mystique, if one considers Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's definition of everyday life, or paramount reality (a concept, indeed, much under discussion in the 1990s). Berger and Luckmann insist that everyday life is predicated on social contact and temporal structure (42-43). Abra is able, through the convenient inheritance she hoards, to keep social contact to a minimum, and by doing so, put herself out of the temporal sequence that defines society. Though aware of seasons, she is not aware of years, much less the hours or minutes that

once defined her married life. It is only when she is confronted by her eighteen-year-old daughter Katie that Abra has to confront "reality" and herself, or the "self" mirrored by her daughter's sudden and somehow unexpected appearance.

Barfoot, whom The Women's Press describes as an "internationally acclaimed novelist" in the blurb which accompanies the British paperback edition, has actually received surprisingly little critical attention in the form of scholarly articles, considering the fact that her novels are expressly feminist. Her protagonists are constructed as overly dependent on men, with tragic results, or only marginally associated with them, often more happily. She explores the lives of widows, divorcées, and single women, moulding her narratives around contemporary concerns, from escaping family roles to the loneliness of single life. Each of her six novels revolves around the lives of women—some intricately entwined with others, some on their own, to greater or lesser degrees of happiness.[1]

The relative paucity of critical articles on *Gaining Ground* itself may be indicative of the difficulty of accepting a plot predicated on the abandonment of children. The narrator's refusal of the domestic sphere and the feminine role necessarily leads to refusal of the mother-role; Barfoot attempts a sympathetic picture of an absconding mother, but critical reactions (primarily limited to book reviews) have been mixed. R. P. Bilan is perplexed that "this narrowing down of human possibility is offered to us as Abra's 'fulfilment,'" contending that the main premise of the novel remains "oddly hollow" (318). Miriam Waddington judges the character Abra harshly, remarking that "she somehow lacks the energy, discipline, or brains, to find satisfying work of her own" (103). Victoria Musmann takes a less critical approach and argues that the novel has "the stark simplicity of a myth" (2005). However, she also concedes, "This undiluted dose of feminist ideology may be too strong for readers used to the conventional blend of characters and plot" (2005). Indeed, another critic cannot decide if the novel is "an expression of selfishness in women's liberation or the diary of a perfect housewife's crackup" (Bannon 65). Catherine McLay insists that the novel is a "dramatization of every woman's fantasy, the desire to get away from the daily ritual and demanding relationships to total freedom" (137).

The fact that this fantasy is taken to its extreme—complete abandonment of almost every "feminine" role (though Abra actually takes up needlepoint and sketching while cocooned in the cabin)—is intellectually accepted but emotionally rejected by most

critics. Perhaps this is why, despite the fact that Barfoot won a *Books in Canada* award for *Gaining Ground*, she received little critical attention for the novel. At best, it seems to be given passing mention in feminist or Canadian studies texts.[2]

Abra escapes from the world of suburbia to the world of wilderness, or "pseudo-wilderness," as Heather Murray calls it: "Wilderness in Canada is where you make it, or where you imagine it to be. It is not a place, but a category, defined as much by absences and contrasts as by positives and characteristics" (75). Indeed, other critics stress the fact that wilderness can be found both in nature as a whole and in the individual's identity (New 79). This, Murray believes, is "distinctively Canadian," and the fact that women writers explore these themes assists their entrance into the Canadian canon (75). Yet, it is more the manipulation of these themes than the adherence to them which creates specifically female versions. For this reason, Barfoot's modification of the garrison mentality is singularly important.

Northrop Frye first formulated, quite tentatively, the idea of the garrison mentality in his conclusion to the 1965 volume *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Carl F. Klinck (Frye 830). Even though Frye expressly noted the provisionality of his categorization (830), his idea was taken up almost immediately by other critics. Frye notes that a garrison is "a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable" (830). The inability to question the garrison makes it seem inevitable and indeed links it to the "feminine mystique," which also promotes the "unquestionability" of the "feminine" role in relation to society. The novel which dares to question the garrison and indeed envisions breaking free from it is important for the feminist movement in that it breaks down the ideology which secures the "naturalness" of the situation. Berger and Luckmann note that more important, almost, than keeping outsiders out of a particular society is the need to keep insiders in, or take from them "the temptation to escape" (105). Thus, reification is an important tool for any threatened way of life. For early writers, the wilderness was threatening, and the need to create a community meant that individual efforts could only be channelled into action that would protect that community.

This defence against nature becomes problematic in the

hands of contemporary women writers, for whom the wilderness is not only "silencing" but also "inspirational," primarily because "civilization" has traditionally been linked for women with "restraints to expression" (Murray 76). Northrop Frye postulates that the garrison mentality changes according to its setting, and in fact notes that it may become, not a defence of, but "an attack on what society accepts as conventional standards" (834). However, he does not link this with gender conventions, as do many women writers. For many Canadian women writers of the 1970s and 1980s, the garrison mentality is a response to the city or the suburb, not the prairie. That is, these authors work with the idea that the unnatural garrison of the city is the thing which must be resisted, not wilderness. Nature becomes a release from the barricaded self for Lou in Engel's *Bear*, for the unnamed protagonist in Atwood's *Surfacing*, and for Abra in *Gaining Ground*. The garrison, then, originally seen as necessary to protect society from the wilderness, becomes a prison from which characters need to attempt escape in order to reaffirm their own ties to nature and "selfhood."

Rita Felski notes that the connection between women and nature is one fostered by cultural feminists. Indeed, this branch of feminism seeks to reclaim the notion of an organic link between the two as a way of shrugging off false social roles propagated by patriarchy (76). However, there are problems with this return to nature, for it can be seen as regressive. As Maureen Devine remarks, "The use of gender symbols in metaphor, especially in depicting the environment or natural elements, remains astonishingly traditional. . . " (148). In addition, Murray poses the important question of whether pseudo-wilderness is, in women's fiction, "a ground for liberation, or a ghetto" (77). Certainly, while solitude can be spiritually freeing, it is also politically ineffective. As a feminist tactic, it leaves unanswered larger social questions and can only be used in a personal rather than a political way.

Abra's escape into the wilderness is indeed a personal one and one that does not, to the reader's dismay, seem to warrant any explanation. Abra nowhere justifies herself with long, intricate explanations. Rather, she relies on simple statements:

> "And I swear I loved them all, and I did the best I could. And then I left them, left all of it. Nothing in particular, but something began to happen, and it ended in the spring I came here. . . . I have snapshots in my mind, but there are no answers . . ." (27)

Abra is aware that her own experience cannot be adequately articulated to another (Berger and Luckmann 44). With the implicit knowledge that no story she tells will ever be enough, she chooses not to tell at all, but simply be, and simply accept. Her daughter, the budding archaelogist, finds this silence unacceptable.

Interestingly, in her 1972 study of Canadian thematics, *Survival*, Margaret Atwood argues that Canadian literature is infused with archeological images, with "unearthing the buried and forgotten past" (112). Also of some importance is the fact that the physical digging the daughter Katie does do is destructive, in that when attempting to help her mother in the garden, she actually sets about to destroy it (Barfoot 173). The links to the wider situation, that of "unearthing" her mother (quite literally, as in removing her from the earth she cherishes) and constructing from fragments a unified whole, are explicit. The fact that there are necessary gaps in the knowledge of an archeologist is ignored in the search for a continuous past. The knowledge of how such fragments came into existence, or who were responsible for them, can never be finally known, and this is the lesson Katie has yet to learn. The "answers" that Katie—and the reader—seek are nonexistent, stemming as they do from the very inarticulability of the "problem with no name" depicted in Betty Friedan's classic feminist text *The Feminine Mystique*, a book often cited as the catalyst for the feminist movement in North America.

Barfoot's construction of Abra is clearly informed by an awareness of the feminine mystique. She marries young and does not continue her education past high school. Her husband encourages her to quit work once he makes a liveable salary, and their answer to the restlessness she feels as a result of her "freedom" is to have a baby. Yet, this is not a choice that Abra freely makes: "Somehow without discussing it, we must have agreed on an answer. Within a couple of months I was pregnant, the decision had been made, and everything was settled and full again" (42-43). After the birth of their son, Abra and Stephen are both "convinced of the mystique of mother and child" (45). Indeed, the overwhelming symbiosis which Barfoot represents in the relationship which Abra forges with her infant son reflects not only the type of relationship firmly criticized in Friedan's text, but also provides a complete antithesis of the separation which Abra eventually pursues. This early symbiosis—deemed unhealthy by the protagonist's husband—is broken through patriarchally-enforced separation. Stephen, Abra's husband, demands a wife and a hostess, pitting

these female roles against the role of mother. Through forcing this separation, Stephen ironically precipitates Abra's eventual escape from the restrictive bonds of motherhood.

When Abra flees her suburban life, she leaves behind the trappings of it, including any reminder of false appearance or "man-made" time (Barfoot 103). While Abra has suggested that her abandonment of mirrors, for example, is a way to disregard the superficial, it is also a way to avoid looking at her actions. Roy F. Baumeister suggests that "[w]hen events cast the self in an unpleasant light, people avoid anything that makes them think about themselves, such as a mirror" (24). Abra's rejection of the mirror, then, could reflect not only a wish to disregard "man-made" aspects of society, but also the wish to keep from exposing herself—even to herself—as an abandoning mother, since there are no "good" images of such a person.

Abra's abandonment of time indicators is less problematic, for she begins to live through her own rhythms and those of nature. Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, sociologists who are sceptical of the ability to escape fully from "paramount reality," note that by disposing of physical reminders of time, such as clocks and watches, those who wish to escape time can have the illusion of doing so (161). This requires a complete "glorification of the present—the here-and-now experience" (161). For Abra, the leaving behind of time indicators changes her relationship to the concept. Time, which had been "huge, vast, a wasteland" (Barfoot 66) for Abra when she was playing the role of suburban mother, melts away so completely that when faced by the evidence of its passing in the form of her nearly-adult daughter, she is inarticulate, and unable to comprehend it fully: "Time wasn't the way it had been before. It was no escaping, no fighting. It was rhythm. It could be whatever I wanted" (141).

Abra is living according to what Paul Fraisse terms "primarity," which is the ability to find "special resonance" in the present (187). In this way she is contrasted implicitly to her daughter Katie, who lives a life in attachment to the past, which Fraisse terms secondarity (187), and to her son Elliott, who looks to the future for security. Interestingly, for a novel which attempts to refute time, the noun itself is presented with startling frequency in the text, as if confirming some of Cohen and Taylor's suspicions.

Joanne Frye observes that the way in which time is revealed in a first-person narrative, especially in the intermingling of past and present, is a way of showing that character is "process" rather

than "product" (69). It is this process which is particularly important to Barfoot, as she constructs, and deconstructs, Abra's character and social identity. Furthermore, the character herself stresses process; the product, the "vegetables of her labour," are important only so far as they allow the process of identity release and life at the cabin to continue.

The process of deconstructing and reconstructing Abra's character is not confined to tampering with time, however, and is clearly linked to what Berger and Luckmann call the "social construction of reality." For them, reality is "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish them away')" (13). For Abra, reinscription into reality comes at the moment she realizes that she has no choice regarding what her daughter does, and that Katie's presence will constantly force her to remember. The reader is thus confronted with Abra in the process of her reinscription, and never really sees her as outside time or reality, since depiction of that ideal space would be virtually impossible. The reader finds, in the present tense sections of the novel, a self-conscious Abra, one who is aware of being watched.

This awareness is typical of the face-to-face situation, a situation which Abra has actively resisted in her chosen lifestyle. It is the face-to-face confrontation with her daughter which prompts Abra to reconsider her secluded situation, and, ultimately, to consider leaving it. According to Berger and Luckmann, it is the presence of an Other which causes personal reflection, and, consequently, self-consciousness: "To make it [what I am] available requires that I stop, arrest the continuous spontaneity of my experience, and deliberately turn my attention back upon myself" (44). Abra has to contend not only with Katie's intrusions, then, but also with her own, which she believed she had long since banished:

> Still, I could be startled by a self separated from the experiencing, so that, startled, I would find myself watching myself and know that something new was happening. It was like a visit from the old Abra, those moments. (And that is what I feel is happening now. Eventually the visits stopped, but in the beginning it was the way it is now, a watching, an assessing). (117-18)

In between these early moments and the present of the text, a nine-years' gap, the reader is supposed to accept that Abra does not question and does not assess, but merely exists. This is a clear

example of what Roy F. Baumeister terms the "escape from the self." Baumeister argues that escaping from the self

> requires finding a way to stop the mind from its habit of meaningful thought. The mind must be directed to stop at the level of sensations and impressions, or just to observe events without exploring all the implications for the self. (19)

By focusing only on the present moment and one's surroundings, one escapes "from identity into body" (17). The self, Baumeister argues, "consists of a physical body and a set of definitions" (3); getting rid of those definitions, however, has the effect of reducing one's train of thought to the "banal" (65). Indeed, this is one difficulty of the text—showing the completeness of Abra's life without exploring deeper resonances and motivations. Abra has learned to "believe in a moment, and finally to lose belief and have just the moment" (Barfoot 76), but this ego-loss—defined by Cohen and Taylor as "the sudden moment when your past identity falls from you as a cloak" (161)—is difficult to portray. For Abra, this process is effected through the initial confrontation with madness: "It was how I began to lose my name, my memory, the labels I'd used, and so my sense of all words. It happened over a long time, all the time here, but it began then" (140). This explanation comes more than half-way through the book and serves, in a small way, to explain the beginning of the novel, where the protagonist is forced back into everyday reality and the use of her name.

Abra's escape from the feminine mystique and everyday reality is predicated on separatism. Separatism in literature is made possible by a belief that stepping outside of ideology, impossible in the world of the reader's reality, is permissible, indeed honourable, in the fictional world. This need for separation is often induced by what Rita Felski calls a "disjunctive moment" (144). This moment marks a "shift from one mode of being into a radically altered one" and "reveals a discontinuous model of experience which evokes an explicit contrast between alienation and authenticity" (144). For Abra, the disjunctive moment is plural, as if reflecting the various splits her identity undergoes throughout the narrative.

The first disjunctive moment occurs after three non-consecutive evenings of separation from her infant son. The break is signalled, as T.S. Eliot would have it, softly: "Three nights later, at the dinner party, the end came, quietly, oddly and finally. I found

myself watching the people and listening, and it seemed too remote for me to take a part in it" (50). Then, at home, the feeling is reinforced when she looks at the small body of her infant son: "Such a small moment snapped in me, I saw clearly, and it felt just then like a loss and I wanted to cry a little for it, but could not" (50). This disjunctive moment initiates, however imperfectly at this point, an awareness of female identity unconstrained by maternity.

Abra's first sight of the cabin which becomes her own signals a second disjunctive moment:

> This was the ending, here [at the cabin]. Like driving head-on into a brick wall, knowing it was over, reduced to the core of a person that does not think or know, no chance given for regret or sorrow or second thoughts, in the brilliant last moment. The landscape whirled and beckoned and I was whirling too, light-headed and out of myself, and Abra was dying then, although she did not know it. (86)

While sorrow is allowed in the first break, in this subsequent one it is banished. In addition, this is the first passage in which the reader is exposed to the idea of multiple identities which exist alongside of each other, at least initially. This split in identity becomes important later when one considers the final disjunctive moment, expressed as rebirth, which occurs after the encounter and renunciation of madness and as snow works its way around her cabin for the first time. Often an image of death, snow in Barfoot's tale becomes linked with the womb, and Abra becomes a product of nature's soft cushioning: "I became an infant and a child, unborn and born, sometimes going out into [the snow] to catch the flakes joyfully on my tongue. . . or throwing myself into it" (140). Here Abra believes she sheds completely the former Abra, noting that even the "observing part" of herself is no longer watching or judging (140-1).

This series of disjunctive moments highlights the process of separation and identity quest, which ultimately leads to an abandonment of ego and identity for a fuller connection with nature. For Barfoot's text as for others of the identity-through-wilderness genre, it is this "psychological transformation" which is the focus of the text—the character's process of self-discovery rather than societal ramifications which forms the basis of the literature (Felski 133). Barry Cameron notes that there is no place outside of the symbolic order (140); this "no place" is easily linked to the utopic.

Abra's separatism is eutopic not only because, as Bilan notes, "There are no snakes in *this* Eden" (317, author's italics), but also because Abra conveniently has the financial backing to afford her escape. Thus, Abra's escape into a eutopic space in the pseudo-wilderness is effected through patriarchal ideology rather than because of it. Abra is handed the capital investment necessary for her escape quite neatly in Barfoot's narrative—perhaps too neatly: "When I turned twenty-one, we became rich, thanks to my grandmother who died when I was thirteen" (40), Abra relates. The inheritance is set alongside the picture of an upwardly-mobile young couple, perhaps to bury its significance, but Abra's insistent refusal to invest the money causes the reader to ponder the subject, since this reaction is at odds with her characterization. The fact that Abra has this money, this "cushion in [her] mind" (40), immediately provides the opportunity for escape which would not be possible without it. Marxist critics especially would have difficulty with this solution, which works within and because of capitalism. Can one truly step outside patriarchy if one is still dependent on capitalism, a system so closely linked to it? This capital investment links Barfoot's novel quite clearly with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* which has also been criticized as an escape effected through capitalism.[3] Unlike the character she so resembles, however, Abra resists rather than pursues rescue, preferring instead life on the edge, tending her eutopic, paradisiacal garden, which never floods nor becomes infested with insect life nor dries up under an unforgiving sun.[4]

This self-sustaining garden, a combined image of female knowledge, fertility and sexuality (for Abra, it becomes her "passion" [135]), is juxtaposed in Barfoot's novel with the garden of sterility tended by the ill-fated couple who owned the cabin twenty years before Abra and who were the last people in full-time residence in the isolated area (126). Their escape from the workaday world is not solitary, and the fruit of their sexuality seems to portend their tragic end. They are not trying, as Abra is, simply to live off the land, but to make a profit from it. Their bond to the land becomes one of desperation and debt.

Abra insists that her knowledge of the McAllisters is "inadvertent" (16), despite the fact that she actively encourages the recital of their tragic tale. Bilan argues that "[t]his harrowing tale of defeat and suicide brings in an awareness of the emotional obstacles Abra has to confront" (317), but there are more compelling reasons for its inclusion in the narrative. Although Abra shuns all

human connections, she forges one with the old man behind the counter of a hardware store where she has gone to by coal oil in a rare romantic, nostalgic moment. Listening to the story connects her with another displaced person, for the older man, once owner, is now in the shadow of the new owner, his son. Perhaps more importantly, however, hearing the story sets up Abra's *distance* from the past events in the cabin. The fact that her knowledge of the cabin's history does not sully the escape of her "home" seems to indicate that she regards the cabin's past like her own past—unconnected to her present situation.

Yet the reader does make connections. In the interpolated story, the father, not the mother, destroys the family. This acts as a foil for Abra's own story, and perhaps a validation of it. Abra is willing to listen to and then record the story of a family destroyed through active male violence. In relation, Abra's mere walking away can be depicted as less harmful, as, in fact, a good thing. Moreover, the air of regret that surrounds the interpolated story—not unlike the regret found in Susan Glaspell's "Trifles"— indicates sorrow on the part of the townspeople for their failure to act on behalf of the trapped woman. In Abra's larger story, the townspeople also do nothing; the nothingness of Abra's suburban life is a hidden story experienced across the suburb but left unmentioned.

Yet in many ways, Belle McAllister is the antithesis of Abra. Her name, Belle, encompasses both the notion of beauty and the alarm that her appearance stirs in the women who see her after the first winter. Though Abra also goes from socially accepted beauty to an uncaring attitude towards her appearance, her experience makes her strong, not frail. As wife or appendage, Belle accompanies her husband on his escape; as mother, she is unable to discover her own escape. Abra, on the other hand, is unencumbered; her escape to the cabin and away from her family prevents the emotional death she was experiencing in suburbia from claiming her completely.

As mother (in the past tense sections of the novel), Abra is in constant need of escape. She is not able to see beyond her routinized life, nor is she able to embrace the "freedom" that eventually comes when the children are in school. More and more, she turns to the escape of sleep, the temporary abdication of reality:

> How do you tell children that you couldn't think of anything else to do, so you fell asleep? That sort of thing doesn't happen to a child, there are dozens of reasons why they don't

> want to sleep, and it must be incomprehensible to them that one would deliberately choose to do it; although it would be harder still to explain to them that a deliberate choice was not part of my life at that moment. (70)

Abra idly contemplates suicide and renewed social contacts, but none of these options works because these escapes are only temporary and do nothing to alter her world and therefore her need to be free of it. Interestingly, in the cabin these escapes take on new meanings. Routine becomes process and a way of letting go of self, sleep becomes what it is meant to be—the rejuvenation necessary for an active and productive day—and death is seen as a natural ending she may one day choose if her strength fails her (166). In other words, the escape of exiting from her suburban life and with it paramount reality makes further escapes unnecessary. Her annual illness, the only thing which might be viewed as an escape,[5] is actually a period of renewal:

> Each year the sickness comes; perhaps I even make it happen. Because for all the pain and discomfort, it is important at times to see things too clearly, to hear things too strongly, to feel things too harshly. Surely that must be why. (168)

Later, these things are experienced again as Katie forces a reappraisal of the escape. When Abra hears too strongly and feels too painfully, she asks again for solitude—and spends the first of her precious three days in bed, an old escape (190). This sinking back into old patterns seems to indicate that Abra's larger escape, which precludes all other little ones, is no longer possible after the arrival of her daughter, at least, not *unconsciously* so. That is, the unthinking way Abra has lived her life is only marginally possible after the arrival of an observer. As Abra begins to be conscious of her actions, her expressions, and her appearance, her escape from paramount reality slips away. With this slippage comes recognition once more of the "madness" of her situation and thus of the need to rectify it—through reintegration into society.

There is a falsity about this initially-assumed ending—return to the outside world—which the reader fights almost as much as Abra does herself. The reader applauds Abra's final strength, but for the most part remains at a distance from Abra. Because Abra continues to occupy the position of an unconverted hermit and an abandoning mother, her story remains an unsettling one.

Gaining Ground is a novel many feminist academics read but

fail to study. The reasons for this discrepancy are perhaps apparent: it is difficult to analyse this text without falling into character analysis, for Abra and her refusal to explain her separatism loom large; the ease with which children are abandoned in the text provides a measure of discomfort—and a recognition that the feminist movement itself has been charged with failing to provide a vision for the place of children (except in state-run crêches); it is "just another woman-in-the-wilderness story." Yet Barfoot's *Gaining Ground* remains a vital text, commenting on the 1970s and challenging the feminists of the 1990s. It is a text which attempts—successfully or unsuccessfully—to depict a sphere outside of patriarchy while not abandoning the realist mode; as such, *Gaining Ground* merits more critical attention than it has thus far garnered.

NOTES

[1] Barfoot's other novels are *Dancing in the Dark* (1982), *Duet for Three* (1986), *Family News* (1990), *Plain Jane (1992), and Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch (1994).*

[2] Rita Felski does address the novel in her text *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, but Coral Ann Howells chooses instead to focus on Barfoot's *Dancing in the Dark* rather than *Gaining Ground* in her text *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s.*

[3] See Ian Watt, *The Rise of The Novel* (66-103) for a discussion of Crusoe as a capitalist. Other similarities between Abra and Crusoe include their journal writing, the visions each has while encountering death, and each character's uncanny ability to make whatever implement is needed, if crudely. Furthermore, Abra resembles Alexander Selkirk, the sailor upon whom Defoe based *Robinson Crusoe;* after only four years on his own, Selkirk forgets how to speak.

[4] Abra tends her garden by hand, using only those implements which she engineers. However, she is not entirely dependent on the earth, as her car—parked significantly at a distance from her garden—indicates. Leo Marx argues that writers depict "the machine as invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity" (29). Barfoot shows this to a certain extent by keeping both Abra's and Katie's cars away from Abra's special places.

[5] See Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, 123.

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