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# Builders and wanderers: How two tomboys escape gender conformity in Katherine Paterson's Newbery-winning novels

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Builders and Wanderers:  
How Two Tomboys Escape Gender Conformity  
In Katherine Paterson's Newbery-winning Novels  
Laura J. Fly

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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English

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*Dedication*

To Patrick and Joshua:

Thank you for allowing me to slip quietly away from bath time, story time, and hours of building blocks to work on this project.

I promise, I'll make it all up.

*Acknowledgments*

A special thank you to the following:

To my husband, family, and friends.

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To my committee readers, Dr. Marina Favila, Dr. Mary Thompson, and Dr. Joan Kindig.

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## *Abstract*

This paper looks at the importance of tomboy characters in children's literature, specifically focusing on Katherine Paterson's Newbery-winning novels, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved*. Though much of the children's literature arena remains dominated by "boy books," the use of tomboy characters in literature offers an opportunity for teachers and parents to push aside the gender conventions and stereotypes that are reinforced through trite and redundant curriculum. The strong tomboy transcends masculine-feminine roles and develops identity outside of their restrictions. She is an ideal for young females working toward gender equality while allowing young males to safely explore "girl books."

A close analytical reading of each text provides numerous examples of tomboys breaking gender conventions in order to establish true identity. In both novels, the tomboys (Leslie Burke in *Bridge to Terabithia*; Sara Louise Bradshaw in *Jacob Have I Loved*) struggle with the rules of gender convention in the face of adolescence, peer pressure, love, and death. Readers of Paterson's books easily relate to the characters, sharing in their triumphs and sorrows and learning from their experiences.

If true change is to take place in society regarding gender roles, then it must begin in the classroom. Katherine Paterson's novels and tomboy characters offer students the opportunity to push beyond gender conformity, as well as encourage them on their quest of self-identity. Such literature should be incorporated into the general Reading curriculum.

## Introduction

Vaulting over fences and dangling from tree limbs. Torn hems and dirty fingernails. Dresses stuffed beneath overalls. Such images recall the tomboy in her glorious and natural state of play. Unladylike, unusual, and unnatural, she embodies rebellion and nonconformity; yet her importance to children's literature must not be overlooked as she threatens our strictest gender and cultural codes. According to Anne Scott MacLeod in her book, *American Childhood*, "The literature we write for children is inevitably permeated by our fundamental emotional attitudes toward ourselves, toward our society, and, of course, toward childhood" (ix-x). To gain clear insight into the ideas of gender our society espouses, we must look at what our children are reading.

Traditionally, new attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles have been met with apprehension, and the role of the tomboy is no different. According to Linda Levstik in her article, "'I am no lady!': The Tomboy in Children's Fiction," during the 1920's and 1930's, ". . . the tomboy symbolized an awareness that the traditional sphere was often restrictive and dull. The tomboy protested giving up the relative freedom of youth for the narrow world of action granted a lady. Tomboys also represented an argument for health as opposed to the image of female debility so often connected with literary ladies" (16).

Simply put, tomboys buck the system. These small seeds of rebellion—planted in famous tomboy characters such as Jo March, Laura Ingalls, and Scout Finch—provide girls with a glimpse beyond gender restrictions, as well as hope for all children that identity can be hand-crafted, not machine-made. Although the character examples above eventually succumb to a more traditional feminine role as adulthood encroaches, their

experiences are not abandoned, making them stronger, more colorful, and more realistic characters.

Unfortunately, many readers remain ignorant of tomboys and gender-diversified texts. According to Hadar Dubowsky Ma'ayan in "Masculine Female Adolescents at School," little consideration is given in presenting gender beyond the "traditional sphere":

The texts on girls and education leave no room for imagining gender diversity. Girls are seen as female-bodied and feminine-gendered.

Masculine girls simply do not exist in these texts. Girls are seen as a monolithic group, rather than the reality, in which girls present gender in many ways, including being ultra-feminine, androgynous, masculine, or somewhere in between. (126)

Belinda Louie, in her article "Why Gender Stereotypes Still Persist in Contemporary Children's Literature," wrote that with the early development of gender knowledge, the opportunity to move girls beyond a monolithic grouping must not be lost; therefore, a balanced selection of literature is essential within the classroom (142). Unfortunately, the reality is far from the ideal. Louie gives two explanations for why gender imbalance has occurred: 1) "Males have been represented more than females in books" (142); 2) "Although the number of females in books has increased over the years, they are portrayed with similar stereotypical behaviors . . . girls are often portrayed as demure, weak, dependent, problem causers, passive, and followers" (142-43). Louie also finds that, "The agents of change to reduce gender biases should be authors, illustrators, publishers, and teachers" (143).



Our opportunities to educate children about gender roles through literature decrease every day. The language arts classroom is under a subtle yet aggressive attack; the surge of video games, cellular technology, and online social networking erodes literacy. Male students are considered most at-risk in terms of reading, resulting in an advance of teachers pushing “boy books.” Louie, advocating for a balanced presentation in literature, highlights the importance the tomboy character can play in developing a literate and gender-aware society:

Children learn the gender norms through storytelling and book-sharing experiences at an early age. In order to help children develop their full potential as human beings, it is only logical to introduce balanced gender roles in their reading materials. Therefore, some educators have urged the publication of more books with strong and positive portrayals of female characters. However, many parents and teachers are concerned with reluctant male readers who need much enticement and encouragement to get them to read. They keep requesting more adventurous books for boys to motivate these reluctant readers. Temple wonders “how much is the cause of girls’ empowerment being forfeited for the sake of stimulating reluctant boys to read?” (144, sic)

Jane M. Agee, in her article “Mothers and Daughters: Gender-Role Socialization in Two Newbery Award Books,” agrees, asking, “What kinds of values, beliefs, images, and models do stories offer to young readers, especially to young female readers?” (165). It seems that if girls are to have access to female characters within the classroom, then their heroines need to be more like boys. Tomboy literature, such as Katherine Paterson’s

Newbery-winning novels, offers an opportunity for students to have access to both. Allowing the tomboy into the classroom transforms the educational setting into an epicenter of change. Not only is the tomboy's presence in literature undeniable, her power to "reduce gender biases" while simultaneously offering up new gender images must not be overlooked. In J.D. Stahl's edited *Crosscurrents of Children's Literature: An Anthology of Texts and Criticism*, the point is made that through recognition and absorption of the tomboy into curriculum, "The corresponding hope is that, shown active role models of courageous and intelligent girls, female readers will be inspired to emulate their heroines and fulfill their human potential" (507). Not only do tomboys inspire female readers, the androgynous quality of tomboys makes reading a "girl book" acceptable for males.

The tomboy character also offers important lessons to young readers as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The strength and tenacity that tomboys develop through resistance of gender boundaries allows them to survive difficult circumstances. The strong tomboy is an ideal for young females working toward gender equality; she transcends masculine-feminine roles and develops identity outside of their restrictions. By taking charge of her own existence, the tomboy eliminates the need to conform to social roles. These tenets of tomboyism are deeply adhered to in Katherine Paterson's Newbery-winning protagonists: Leslie Burke in *Bridge to Terabithia* and Sara Louise Bradshaw in *Jacob Have I Loved*. Both tomboy heroines bridge the gender divide. They create identities apart from patterns of conformity, though each follows a different approach. Leslie moves quite comfortably in her own skin, using conflicts as a venue to

teach and pass on her courage against gender bias to others; Sara Louise clashes against gender restrictions, though ultimately reconciles the feminine and tomboy within.

*Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* offer readers the chance to observe the trials and struggles of girls as they move toward adolescence and face the challenge of social conformity. According to Katherine Paterson in her book *The Invisible Child: On Reading and Writing Books for Children*, “Children do not go to novels looking for role models. . . . When they go to a serious novel they expect to find truth, and everyone knows that role models are ideals, not realities. They want hope rooted in reality, not wishful thinking” (140). These two extraordinary tomboys offer just that—truth and reality. Readers easily relate to the characters’ experiences, mistakes, and emotional responses because they are authentic.

Katherine Paterson was born in 1932 to missionary parents in China. After spending most of her childhood in the Orient, she and her family returned to America, refugees of the Chinese infighting and skirmishes of World War II; the loss of her earliest home and culture would impact her work further on. For many years, Paterson’s family moved frequently around the southern part of the United States. As an adult, she worked as a teacher and a Japanese missionary before marrying her husband. In subsequent years, she worked in the Christian Education field and as a writer while raising their four children. In 1966 her first book was published. *Bridge to Terabithia*, published in 1977, won the Newbery Award in 1978; *Jacob Have I Loved* followed with its publication in 1980, winning the Newbery Award in 1981. According to Gary D. Schmidt in *Katherine Paterson*, “Paterson’s stories come out of her experience and her immediate concerns” (2). *Bridge to Terabithia* specifically has its roots in family trauma as it is largely based

on her son David and the tragic death of his best friend, Lisa Hill, who was killed by lightning (2). Overall, some of the biggest influences on her body of work include her life growing up in China, living in the American South, and her Presbyterian faith (2). Common themes include loneliness, isolation, exclusion, redemption, family, and hope. Much of the loneliness and exclusion characters face, such as Sara Louise and Jess, likely stem from her refugee status as a girl: “It is perhaps not too large a leap of the imagination to see in Paterson’s early sense of separateness many of the dilemmas of her characters, who see themselves as separate” (6). Paterson remembers the pain and triumphs of childhood and transfers these emotions to her characters, instilling a reality that draws children to her stories again and again. In January 2010, the Library of Congress appointed Paterson as the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature (Horning).

Paterson’s books are counterculture without the underground vibe. She beams hope through her writing, a virtue largely absent from television shows, video games, Internet social networks, and the other virtual distractions parents use in child rearing. Paterson’s books—these two in particular—are real. The problems are real. She purposefully neglects the adult ideals of what childhood should be, instead turning to her own memories of its cold, and sometimes lonely, reality. The struggles, confusion, and conflicts faced in childhood are universal and timeless. Some children don’t have friends; jealous sibling rivalry dates as far back as, well, Cain and Abel. Out of these images, Paterson captures the emotional angst of adolescence and childhood. Her blend of hope and stark reality reaches children, teaching them without patronizing. Her tomboys force consideration of traditional gender roles through experiences in which

children can relate. For this purpose, educators and parents must encourage the inclusion of such multi-faceted characters into the children's literature canon. Without them, the literature arena continues with a cast of flat, bland, stereotypical females. Tomboys bring the necessary texture, color, and dynamic life to this art, bridging the chasm so others may cross over.

## *Bridge to Terabithia*

Leslie Burke, the tomboy in *Bridge to Terabithia*, bridges the divide between genders. The story follows a lonely, sensitive boy, Jess, and his growing friendship with his new neighbor, Leslie. Told in the third person and from Jess's perspective, it follows these two social misfits as they work and grow together in creating an imaginary land where escape from gender restrictions becomes possible. While the emphasis of the story rests on Jess and the impact Leslie has on his life, there are still lessons to gather about gender roles. *Bridge to Terabithia* criss-crosses gender lines, from Jess's perception of male expectations to Leslie's defiance of female behavior in the 1970's. In the end, *Terabithia* emulates a resolution to the battle of the sexes.

Life for Jesse (Jess) Oliver Aarons, Jr. proves difficult on a financially strapped farm. His mother fails to cope well with the stress of raising five children and running a household almost single-handedly. His emotionally distant father, who commutes daily to Washington D.C., rarely appears. His two older sisters, Ellie and Brenda, represent teenage misery and conformity at its worst. Whether they are truly spoiled or just desperate for attention, Jess finds their conduct revolting as they use femininity in manipulative fashion to achieve their desires: fewer chores, more clothes, and special treatment. Jess's two younger sisters, May Belle and Joyce Ann, are favored because they are little. He feels lost in a sea of estrogen, especially at a time when he wants to prove himself to the world. Jess's one reprieve is the hero worship he receives from May Belle.

Jess nurses two secret ambitions: to be the fastest kid in the fifth grade and to be an artist. Rising early every morning during the summer, he trains for the school races by

sprinting around the cow field, driven by the desire to make his dad proud (2). If he could be successful, Jess reasons, “. . . [his dad would] forget all about how tired he was from the long drive back and forth to Washington and the digging and hauling all day. He would get right down on the floor and wrestle, the way they used to. Old Dad would be surprised at how strong he’d gotten in the last couple of years” (5-6). Gender roles and expectations are strenuous in the Aarons household, and for Jess that means acting like a man at an early age. However, as the book progresses, Jess discovers an alternate gender perception through his friendship with Leslie.

Jess’s older sisters drive him to exhaustion. Whether they are on a shopping trip, gabbing about boys, or complaining about his smell around the house, they exemplify the stereotypical adolescent female who never thinks and only conforms. Because of their self-centeredness, Jess spends most of his energy working on their share of chores. Commanded by his mother to “get your lazy self off that bench,” a typical day for Jess includes milking the cow, assisting in canning his picked beans, and fixing dinner for his little sisters (9-11). The moments he has to himself are used to nurture his great talent and vehicle of escape—drawing—that he hides because of how it might be perceived by his father:

He would like to show his drawings to his dad, but he didn’t dare. When he was in first grade, he had told his dad that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. He’d thought his dad would be pleased. He wasn’t. “What are they teaching in that damn school?” he had asked. “Bunch of old ladies turning my only son into some kind of a –” He had stopped on

the word, but Jess had gotten the message. It was one you didn't forget, even after four years (14).

Jess finds that, "Sometimes he felt so lonely among all these females—even the one rooster had died, and they hadn't yet gotten another" (18). He hungers not just for male companionship: "With his father gone from sunup until well past dark, who was there to know how he felt?" (18). Jess needs a friend. May Belle's attempts to fill the lonesome gap in her brother's life fall short, but Leslie Burke's tomboy qualities enable a platonic friendship with Jess to emerge; her defiance of gender and cultural conventions cast a lonely aura around Leslie as well.

Before Leslie's entrance, Jess's world operates within two unspoken codes of behavior. Within his family structure, females are portrayed as shallow, shrill, and overbearing. The stoic, superior males serve as the primary breadwinners. These expected gender roles are inescapable for Jess; even school recess is limited by gender structures. The older boys rule the upper field with ball games and the lower grade boys take over the lower field with running races; all the girls group together in the top section (4). Their recess time is limited to passive activities, such as hopscotch, jump rope, and talking. With no separation between age groups, the older and younger girls are equals; in this imbalanced culture, little consideration is given to the evolution of girls into young ladies—at least from Jess's point of view. In his mind, girls are monotonous and flat, devoid of personality, interests, and hobbies. Such an attitude may be common for a henpecked boy, squashed among four sisters, who just wants to be the best runner in school. And yet his mindset is also indicative of the long dominant cultural view: men are in charge, women watch from the sidelines. Thank goodness for Leslie Burke and her



colorful defiance of gender norms, even in elementary school. Only one other character threatens the gender code of the time: Miss Edmunds, the music teacher. Despite limited visits to Jess's school, the impact she has on him resonates throughout the novel. She becomes his muse and focus of his schoolboy crush. Her interest in his artwork and encouragement of his talent make him feel that ". . . he was the best. It was not the kind of best that counted either at school or at home, but it was a genuine kind of best" (14-15). She also defies gender conventions of the day through her dress and teaching style. Jess describes Miss Edmunds as a "wild beauty . . . in tight jeans with makeup all over her eyes but none on her mouth" (16-17). Though a minor character, Miss Edmunds' bold qualities offer a counter feminine figure to Mrs. Aarons and her daughters.

While other characters make much about Leslie's nonconformity, little is made of Jess's own gender neutrality. Jess himself is incredulous when he meets his future friend during his morning run:

"If you're so afraid of the cow," the voice said, "why don't you just climb the fence?"

He paused in midair like a stop-action TV shot and turned, almost losing his balance, to face the questioner, who was sitting on the fence nearest the old Perkins place, dangling bare brown legs. The person had jaggedy brown hair cut close to its face and wore one of these blue under-shirtlike tops with faded jeans cut off above the knees. He couldn't honestly tell whether it was a girl or a boy.

"Hi," he or she said, jerking his or her head toward the Perkins place. "We just moved in."

Jess stood where he was, staring.

The person slid off the fence and came toward him. “I thought we might as well be friends,” it said. “There’s no one else close by.”

Girl, he decided. Definitely a girl, but he couldn’t have said why he was suddenly sure. She was about his height—not quite though, he was pleased to realize as she came nearer.

“My name’s Leslie Burke.”

She even had one of those dumb names that could go either way, but he was sure now that he was right. (21-22)

Jess’s powers of observation bring him to a correct conclusion, but perhaps he misses the point. His own name and actions could “go either way” as well. Jess works outside on the farm (masculine) and within the house (feminine). He shares a room with his two little sisters, May Belle and Joyce Ann (1). His sensitive nature and love of art are a paradox to the macho behavior expected of him. Outwardly signs of affection are forbidden amongst men; when his father returns from work one evening, Jess watches longingly as May Belle runs and greets him: “Durn lucky kid. She could run after him and grab him and kiss him. It made Jess ache inside to watch his dad grab the little ones to his shoulder, or lean down and hug them. It seemed to him that he had been thought too big for that since the day he was born” (19-20). Jess’s struggle between gender expectations and natural instinct create his isolation. Leslie, however, shatters his gender preconceptions, the initial step of a transformation leading to self-acceptance and a strengthening of familial ties.

Although neighbors, Jess and Leslie's first real interaction takes place at school. Jess manages to ignore her after meeting in the cow field until she turns up in his fifth grade classroom. Even on this important occasion—the *first* day of school—Leslie dresses in cutoff shorts and a blue undershirt, wearing sneakers with no socks. Everyone else is “. . . primly dressed in their spring Sunday best,” yet Leslie remains unembarrassed by her appearance (24). Her courage to remain true to self reverberates through the novel. Unfortunately, children are cruel and Leslie's new female classmates use her outlandish dress and the fact that she eats yogurt as a basis for judgment, dismissing her entirely (29). Her behavior at recess, though, begins the transformation of Jess's gender assumptions. Breaking away from the other girls, she defies the unspoken code of a separated recess by joining the boys. Jess disregards her when she approaches him, hoping “. . . she would go back to the upper field where she belonged” (32). This was the day to prove himself in the races and become, he hoped, the fastest kid in the fifth grade, if not the school. Yet when his nemesis, Fulcher, denies Leslie the chance to complete, Jess takes up for her:

Fulcher glared first at Jess and then at Leslie Burke. “Next thing,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “next thing you're gonna want to let some *girl* run.”

Jess's face went hot. “Sure,” he said recklessly. “Why not?” He turned deliberately toward Leslie. “Wanna run?” he asked.

“Sure.” She was grinning. “Why not?”

“You ain't scared to let a girl race are you, Fulcher?” (33)

Jess's defense of Leslie indicates receptiveness to new ideas surrounding gender, though he does not know it. After winning her heat and qualifying for finals, the boys are visibly "stunned" by this upset of events. Fulcher, taking charge of the races, tries to rebalance the gender restrictions:

"OK, you guys. You can line up for the finals." He walked over to Leslie. "OK, you had your fun. You can run on up to the hopscotch now."

"But I won the heat," she said.

Gary lowered his head like a bull. "Girls aren't supposed to play on the lower field. Better get up there before one of the teachers sees you."

"I want to run," she said quietly.

"You already did."

"Whatsa matter, Fulcher?" All Jess's anger was bubbling out. He couldn't seem to stop the flow. "Whatsa matter? Scared to race her?"

Fulcher's fists went up. But Jess walked away from it. Fulcher would have to let her run now, he knew. And Fulcher did, angrily and grudgingly. (35)

The deliberate "you guys" excludes Leslie, who does not belong with either the girls or the boys. Leslie wins the finals, but because she does not know her place, she loses potential friends. Even Jess, who took up for her, blames her for the trouble and hard feelings caused with Gary Fulcher. Though she tries to thank him, he shrugs her off the rest of the day; as he sees it, ". . . the girl had no notion of what you did and didn't do" (36). As the week and the races continue, the boys eliminated from the competition

move out of the scene to play “King of the Mountain.” The game parallels Leslie’s athletic success as victory in the footrace comes with the title of unofficial king of the school. However, Leslie changes that; instead of a king, the school has a queen. The tomboy’s inclusion, a break of gender convention, ruins the game: “Running wasn’t fun anymore. And it was all Leslie’s fault” (37).

Despite his sour grapes resentment, Jess manages to look beyond gender stereotypes, freeing him to start a friendship with Leslie. During music class with Miss Edmunds and “caught in the pure delight” of singing “Free To Be . . . You and Me,” Jess decides to smile at Leslie: “What the heck? There wasn’t any reason he couldn’t. What was he scared of anyhow? . . . He felt there in the teachers’ lounge that it was the beginning of a new season in his life, and he chose deliberately to make it so” (39-40). As he learns more about Leslie, his preconceived gender notions are slowly unraveled. Financial security has allowed Leslie to cultivate different interests and hobbies from the other students in her class, such as a love of scuba diving, which she eloquently describes in a class essay. Yet even teachers cannot escape the gender divide entirely. The teacher, Mrs. Myers, reads the essay out loud to the class because “. . . it tells about an unusual hobby—for a girl” (42). As Mrs. Myers reads, Jess, caught up in the description of life underwater, is astounded by Leslie’s courage, “That she wasn’t scared of going deep, deep down in a world of no air and little light” (43). The same could be said of Leslie’s emergence as a tomboy in the small community of Millsburg. While gender nonconformity affords little air and light, still she metaphorically “swims” toward the very place (gender neutrality) that endangers social/cultural survival. While Jess reflects on his cowardice—he whose father “. . . expected him to be a man. And here he was

letting some girl who wasn't even ten yet scare the liver out of him by just telling what it was like to sight-see underwater"—he remains unaware of how Leslie's symbolic dive will impact him (43).

The genuine friendship between Jess and Leslie supersedes the traditional gender structure Jess is taught at home; their relationship enables him to cross the gap between social conformity and rigid male-female roles to self-identity and freedom. However, this transformation can only occur away from social influences, and so the children retreat to the woods—a symbolic Garden of Eden—where Leslie and Jess can simply exist apart from such expectations. After school, Leslie and Jess use an old rope swing to sail over a dry gully and explore. Leslie begins the discussion: “‘We need a place,’ she said, ‘just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it . . . It might be a whole secret country,’ she continued, ‘and you and I would be the rulers of it’” (49-50). The woods offer the protection necessary for such a secret to exist, though Jess finds fear in this logic: “There were parts of the woods that Jess did not like. Dark places where it was almost like being underwater, but he didn't say so” (50). Again, Paterson presents a contrast between Jess and Leslie: Jess, fearful of the unknown/unchallenged, does not like to stray from the so-called “beaten path.” Leslie, meanwhile, plunges toward the dark and foreboding without fear; whether scuba diving or combing the woods for an imaginary land, her explorations liberate her to seek and gain a new understanding of self apart from gender conformity. In doing so, she becomes a bridge builder, laying the footwork for others (like Jess) to follow in their own quest for identity away from gender issues.

Ever the leader, she decides on a name for this secret land: Terabithia. It will embody the ideas set forward by Miss Edmunds when she had the children sing earlier, “Free To Be . . . You and Me”:

I see a land bright and clear  
 And the time’s coming near  
 When we’ll live in this land  
 You and me, hand in hand . . . (39)

Terabithia will be a sanctuary for the children, a land of grace far from a world weary with judgment, anger, hurt, and confusion. Heavily influenced by C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Leslie begins the construction of a fantastic, secretive Elysium:

Leslie named their secret land ‘Terabithia,’ and she loaned Jess all of her books about Narnia, so he would know how things went in a magic kingdom—how the animals and the trees must be protected and how a ruler must behave. That was the hard part. When Leslie spoke, the words rolling out so regally, you knew she was a proper queen. He could hardly manage English, much less the poetic language of a king. (51)

In essence, she teaches Jess how to build an existence for himself apart from the daily expectations and failures in his life: “Between the two of them they owned the world and no enemy, . . . Jess’s own fears and insufficiencies, nor any of the foes whom Leslie imagined attacking Terabithia, could ever really defeat them” (52). Jess especially finds solace in his new kingdom. As the novel progresses, he moves from a young boy fearful of people and ashamed of his true talent as an artist to a purposeful and confident young

man. Sadly, for Jess and Leslie, being free to be themselves can only exist in an imagined world.

The trouble with having a girl as a best friend, Jess will find, is everyone assumes it is just a cover for a romantic relationship. The idea of a platonic friendship existing between members of the opposite sex overwhelms not only their classmates but also his family members. Leslie is called Jess's "...*girl* friend...he knew that a *girl* friend was somebody who chased you on the playground and tried to grab you and kiss you. He could no more imagine Leslie chasing a boy than he could imagine Mrs. Double-Chinned Myers [his slightly overweight fifth grade teacher] shinnying up the flagpole" (55). His older sister also chimes in with the fifth graders in labeling Leslie as "*girl* friend" (58). Mrs. Aarons takes no pains in disguising her displeasure of Leslie's appearance:

His mother acted stiff and funny just the way she did when she had to go up to school about something. Later she would refer to Leslie's "tacky" clothes. Leslie always wore pants, even to school. Her hair was "shorter than a boy's" . . . she was sure [his father] was fretting that his only son did nothing but play with girls, and they both were worried about what would become of it. (59)

Jess's struggle with the household's fierce gender expectations creates conflict and tension; Leslie does not fit into the Aarons family's understanding of male-female roles. Mrs. Aarons's response to Jess's friendship with Leslie, coupled with his artistic abilities, expose an underlying fear in Mr. and Mrs. Aarons that their son may be in danger of some type of homosexual deviancy. Their son feels quite differently. "For the first time in his life," Paterson writes, "he got up every morning with something to look forward to.



Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond” (59). These “worlds beyond” are not governed by male-female expectations. Rather, it represents a return to the Garden of Eden, before men were cursed to work the ground and women to serve their husbands. In Terabithia, the Creation—male and female—can return to its original purpose and design of equality and community.

Leslie and Jess both exhibit qualities of gender role reversal; their transposing of male-female roles neutralizes gender, stripping it of its exclusive isolation. One example can be found in their separate approaches to conflict. When Janice Avery, the school bully, steals May Belle’s precious Twinkies, she comes to Jess demanding revenge:

“She stole my Twinkies!”

Jess sighed. “May Belle, didn’t I tell you?”

“You gotta kill Janice Avery. Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

“*Shhh*,” Leslie said, stroking May Belle’s head, but May Belle didn’t want comfort, she wanted revenge.

“You gotta beat her up into a million pieces!”

He’d sooner tangle with Mrs. Godzilla herself. “Fighting ain’t gonna get back nothing, May Belle. Them Twinkies is well on the way to padding Janice Avery’s bottom by now.”

Leslie snickered, but May Belle was not to be distracted. “You’re just yeller, Jesse Aarons. If you wasn’t yeller, you’d beat somebody up if they took your little sister’s Twinkies.” She broke into a fresh round of sobbing.

Jess stiffened. He avoided Leslie's eyes. Lord, there was no escape.

He'd have to fight the female gorilla now. (62-63)

As family peacemaker and mediator, Jess helps his mother with chores when no one else will. He avoids conflict with his sisters and his parents. Jess does not want to fight this bully of a seventh grader, but with his six-year old sister's declaration—"You're just yeller"—Jess has to rise to the masculine expectation of an older brother and defend May Belle's honor. It is a role he does not relish. Leslie, however, uses the double standards of sexism to help Jess wriggle out from his familial responsibility:

"Look, May Belle," Leslie was saying. "If Jess picks a fight with Janice Avery, you know perfectly well what will happen."

May Belle wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "She'll beat him up."

"Nooooo. *He'll* get kicked out of school for fighting a girl. You know how Mr. Turner is about boys who pick on girls." (63)

Leslie does not allow Jess to fall prey to the double standard that sees obese, mean Janice Avery as a victim of scrawny, sensitive Jess Aarons. By calling attention to it, she takes the pressure away from Jess to exact revenge and steers him toward the use of logic over physical might. However, that does not mean May Belle will not be avenged. Leslie, of course, leads the charge with a plan to humiliate the bully. With her insider knowledge of the female mind, she turns Janice's femininity against her. Together they write a love letter to Janice under the guise of Willard Hughes, the most sought after boy in the seventh grade. Jess transcribes the notes as Leslie, taking on the role of storyteller,

dictates. Leslie vaults across gender divide, assuming the male voice of Willard Hughes and using such phrases as “Dearest Janice . . . I love you” (65). When Jess doubts the effectiveness of such a tactic, she reassures him: “Believe me, Jess. She’ll eat it up . . . Girls like Janice Avery believe just what they want to in this kind of situation” (65-66). After the note is completed, Leslie tells Jess the story of *Hamlet*. Once again she is the storyteller, this time taking on the patriarchal voice of Shakespeare. Gender roles are interchangeable in Terabithia, demonstrated through Leslie’s use of the male voice and aggressive role, while Jess plays the more passive, feminine role of bystander. Though working cooperatively with Jess, Leslie’s leadership in this situation grant her status as May Belle’s defender; she takes on the reluctant role of big brother-protector.

When they return to school the next morning to plant the forged note in Janice’s desk, the children take extra precautions: “Mr. Turner [the principal] was death on boys and girls he caught sneaking around the halls together” (68). Although close friends, they cannot escape the sexual implications that being found alone together might bring. Another example of gender role reversal emerges from their responses to Janice Avery’s subsequent embarrassment. After successfully humiliating their bully, Leslie crows triumphantly about the prank while Jess seems more sympathetic for Janice. Leslie enjoys the conquest (masculine), while Jess cares about the people (feminine). Leslie’s gender neutrality liberates the ensnared male (Jess) from prescribed expectations. Her masculine proclivities and actions allow Jess to explore a less traditional, albeit more feminine, role.

Jess does not have to look far for examples of traditional gender roles gone awry. Christmastime in the Aarons household brings stress and discord as Ellie and Brenda

bicker; both girls want to buy presents for their boyfriends, which “. . . was cause of endless speculation and fights” (72). For these young ladies, a relationship with the opposite sex must result first in some benefit to self. Jess’s concern lies in finding the perfect gift for Leslie (75). His family provides little help, instead taunting him about her looks:

“What are you giving your girl friend, Jess?” Brenda screwed her face up in that ugly way she had. He tried to ignore her. He was reading one of Leslie’s books, and the adventures of an assistant pig keeper were far more important to him than Brenda’s sauce.

“Don’t you know, Brenda?” Ellie joined in. “Jess ain’t got no *girl* friend.”

“Well, you’re right for once. Nobody with any sense would call that stick a *girl*.” Brenda pushed her face right into his and grinned the word “girl” through her big painted lips. Something huge and hot swelled right up inside of him, and if he hadn’t jumped out of the chair and walked away, he would have smacked her. (72-73)

He needs to give his best friend a Christmas present “. . . as much as he needed to eat when he was hungry. . . . for his own sake he had to give her something that he could be proud of” (74-75). This pride derives from the masculine expectation of provider, as a man’s sense of worth traditionally comes from his occupation and paycheck. The lack of both drives Jess to contemplate his worthlessness as Leslie’s friend. Fortunately, a solution arises with a road sign advertising free puppies, one of which Jess gives to Leslie

on Christmas Eve. Prince Terrien (or P.T., as the pup is called) becomes the guardian of Terabithia.

Jess's gender neutrality extends beyond his time with Leslie in Terabithia. Reflecting that May Belle "needed something special" this year for Christmas, he chips in with Brenda and Ellie to buy her a Barbie doll (74). Such a striking sensitivity toward his six-year old sister from a fifth grade boy represents Jess's transition to gender-role neutrality. He sacrifices not only money but also his masculine pride as he spends Christmas morning helping May Belle repeatedly dress her new doll (80). In contrast, he finds it difficult to operate his Christmas present—an electric racing-car set. His play attempts are really to please his father; no doubt Jess would rather work with his new paint set from Leslie. However, he is Jesse Oliver Aarons, *Jr.*, and he has an image to maintain in the house. To make his father happy, he must abandon his own traits and qualities. Despite his best efforts, Jess finds he still cannot meet his father's expectations. When Mrs. Aarons yells for Jess to milk the cow, "[He] jumped up, pleased for an excuse to leave the track which he couldn't make work to his dad's satisfaction" (81).

If the Aarons family represents traditional gender roles, the Burkes symbolize the breaking of those conventions. In unconventional tomboy style, Leslie calls them by their first names, Bill and Judy. The conversations they share reflect a peer-peer relationship instead of parent-child. Bill has a constant presence in the story as he works on painting walls and refinishing floors, firmly entrenched in the domestic sphere. His wife Judy, however, is rarely present; she hovers just outside the story line, her absence explained by her job as a writer. At one point in the novel, Judy emerges from her

workroom, disoriented and suffering from writer's block. Her conversation with her daughter reveals how much Leslie does indeed parent herself:

“What are you kids doing?” It was the same words that Jess's mother might have used, but it didn't come out the same way. Judy's eyes were kind of fuzzed over as she spoke, and her voice sounded as though it were being broadcast from miles away.

“We didn't mean to bother you, Judy.”

“That's all right, I'm stuck right now. I might as well stop. Have you had any lunch?”

“S'all right, Judy. We can get something ourselves.” (111)

Instead of playing a typical mom (think June Cleaver and her constant hovering), Judy relies on Leslie to be self-sufficient. Judy and Bill Burke have established a home where gender roles are overlooked or discarded altogether, and children of all ages are “free to be you and me.” Leslie's gender neutral home is an extension—and maybe even the source—of Terabithia.

Typical of most tomboys, Leslie has a closer relationship with her father. Bill begins home repairs after Christmas when he finishes writing a book. With Judy still working on her project, Leslie and Bill tackle the improvements together. Leslie's time with her father takes away from Jess, and he becomes jealous (83). His loneliness increases. Time spent at home becomes riddled with a constant stream of chores from his mother. The little girls torment him through requests to play Barbie as well as the never-ending physical punishment little sisters inflict on big brothers; Joyce Ann in particular gets “. . . a devilish delight out of sitting smack down on his rump when he was stretched

out working [painting]" (85). When he retreats to Terabithia alone, he laments that the magic in Terabithia does not work without Leslie (83). Leslie, meanwhile, revels in the time spent with her father. Like Sara Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved*, "[Leslie] loved being needed by her father" and tells Jess she is "... learning ... to 'understand' her father" (86). Again, traditional masculine expectations get in the way as Jess's jealousy imitates that of a spurned lover; it seems he wants to keep Leslie to himself (86). Leslie refuses to be owned and confronts Jess, asking him, "Why don't you like Bill?" (86). His answer—"You're always busy"—reeks of self-pity, but she sees right through it. She dismisses his excuse for staying away by suggesting he offer to help with the home improvements (87). Though it takes a while for Jess to feel completely comfortable in his inclusion, he gains confidence when he realizes his knowledge of the house and construction surpasses Mr. Burke's. Bill takes on the job of a father in Jess's life by offering positive encouragement and attention. In the Burke household, Jess shrugs off his standard roles of worker bee and weird little brother. The recognition he receives stems from his traits and abilities, not expected gender roles.

Leslie's sexless behavior allows her to move between different roles typically reserved as masculine. When Leslie and Jess return together to their own Terabithian palace, Leslie assumes the voice of storyteller, weaving a tale of invading, hostile savages to explain their long absence from the kingdom. As she swings across the gully, she transforms into a brave warrior; giving commands to Jess, they "drive out" the invisible enemy (91). Victory secure, she transitions into priest/priestess as they visit the sacred pine grove and give thanks to the Spirits (91). Leslie's role as leader in the kingdom remains undisputed; however, while before a passive bystander, Jess is no longer content

to watch quietly from the side, he interjects his own phrase into her prayer: “Thy right arm hast given us the victory” (91).

At times it becomes necessary for Leslie to conform, at least temporarily, to feminine expectations. When Leslie discovers their arch nemesis, Janice Avery, crying in the girls’ bathroom, she turns to Jess for advice. In his sympathy for Janice, he encourages Leslie to talk with her. At first reluctant, his comment—“You ain’t scared of her, are you Leslie?”—pushes her on to do the unthinkable (93). Jess’s prompting, a mimicry of May Belle’s earlier declaration, reveals once again his sympathetic and sensitive nature, traditionally uncharacteristic for a fifth grader and unexpected from a boy. Feeling too proud to turn down a dare from her best friend, she takes on Janice Avery, not as a warrior of Terabithia but as a female friend. Leslie returns from her conversation with Janice “. . . looking as pleased with herself as a motorcycle rider who’s just made it over fourteen trucks” (95). Jess moves to an outsider position as he waits outside of the girls’ bathroom, shut out from the circle of femininity within (94). Back in Terabithia Leslie moves back into a gender-neutral role discarding the exclusive femininity from before. Jess and Leslie combined become models of gender equality as each take on characteristics and qualities traditionally reserved for those of the opposite sex. Together, they become teachers and learners of building friendships outside gender restrictions.

In church, gender lines are firmly set. Easter draws near, and in the Aarons household Brenda and Ellie are dying to have new clothes for their annual church visit. Unfortunately, the loss of their father’s job and family income means no new Easter outfits. Within this context emerges the feminine idea of great pride or shame lost and



won based on appearance. The girls pout: “A wail went up from Ellie and Brenda like two sirens going to a fire. ‘You can’t make me go to church,’ Brenda said. ‘I ain’t got nothing to wear, and you know it’”(101). The girls are oblivious to the grave economic concern their family faces, evidenced by Ellie’s suggestion: “Why can’t we charge some things?” Brenda in turn advocates for returning newly bought clothes after they have been worn. The manipulative sisters are the antithesis of Leslie, for whom money and appearance are neither a problem nor a focus. As Jess shares his sisters’ gripes with Leslie, she unexpectedly starts asking Jess about church. Never having attended, she would like to go because, “It would be a new experience for me” (103). Incredulous, Jess tries to talk her out of it:

“You’d hate it.”

“Why?”

“It’s boring.”

“Well, I’d just like to see for myself. Do you think your parents would let me go with you?”

“You can’t wear pants.”

“I’ve got some dresses, Jess Aarons.” Would wonders never cease? (103)

Leslie recognizes the social importance of staying within some cultural gender boundaries. If that means abandoning her true self, at least for a morning, then so be it. Jess uses Leslie’s change in fashion as his own manipulative device against his mother in a successful bid to allow Leslie to join them. Ironically, Mrs. Aarons, who demands that Leslie look decent, allows one of her daughters to wear a see-through blouse to Easter Sunday. Jess observes that, “In comparison to Leslie, Brenda and Ellie looked like a pair

of peacocks with fake tail feathers” (105). Leslie’s dress and manner are simple for the occasion:

Leslie looked decent. Her hair was kind of slicked down, and she wore a navy-blue jumper over a blouse with tiny old-fashioned-looking flowers. At the bottom of her red knee socks were a pair of shiny brown leather shoes that Jess had never seen before as Leslie always wore sneakers like the rest of the kids in Lark Creek. Even her manner was decent. Her usual sparkle was toned way down, and she said “Yes’m” and “No’m” to his mother just as though she were aware of Mrs. Aaron’s dread of disrespect. Jess knew how hard Leslie must be trying, for Leslie didn’t say “ma’am” naturally. (105)

It is the type of Sunday best one might expect from a tomboy: no frills, lace, or fuss.

Though they arrive late to church, Brenda and Ellie continue their masquerade by parading to the front pew: “. . . they got to flounce down the entire length of the aisle to the first pew, making sure that every eye in the church was on them, and every expression of every eye a jealous one. Lord, they were disgusting” (106). Clearly, Brenda and Ellie are invested in their female gender roles. They understand the rules of the game and use them to their advantage. Whether they want new clothes or school supplies, these girls endorse the role of young women as being silly, mindless, greedy, and self-absorbed. Leslie Burke provides a refreshing contrast and new role model for Jess, as well as the younger sisters. Through his friendship with Leslie, Jess gains a different perspective on what it is to be a boy or a girl, a man or a woman.

Although dressed up, Leslie still breaks convention. Incredibly to Jess, she actually likes church and finds beauty in the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. Jess and May Belle, on the other hand, find it horrifying. Objecting to their visitor's observation, the two begin their recitation with the exclamation, "It's because we're all vile sinners God made Jesus die" (108). Leslie wonders at the irony of the situation: "It's crazy, isn't it . . . you have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it, and I think it's beautiful" (108). May Belle, flabbergasted that Leslie does not believe the Bible, informs her ". . . if you don't believe the Bible . . . God'll damn you to hell when you die" (109). Leslie rejects the notion that ". . . God goes around damning people to hell" (109). May Belle, concerned about Leslie's soul, asks her, "What if you *die*? What's going to happen to you if you *die*?" (109). Her eerie foreshadowing sets the tone for a darker twist in the story's plot.

Heavy rains settle into the area after Easter. The dry creek bed, which had once sealed Terabithia from the outside world, changes to a roaring creek that acts as a barrier for Jess and Leslie. Water carries strong symbolism for Leslie throughout the novel. As a scuba diver she has undertaken challenges against the natural order, existing outside a human's natural habitat. The creek, described as, ". . . the hungry waters licking and sometimes leaping the banks, daring them to try to confine it," parallels Leslie's life (113). She too dares others to try and confine her to mere gender roles, instead leaping and eroding the banks of her prison. Jess expresses reluctance at crossing the creek, just as he had been disinclined to go against gender expectations. Yet Leslie charges ahead, taking P.T. with her as she swings over the stream—now the gender line—into the safe haven of Terabithia. Jess follows with a heavy heart after nagging Leslie to be careful.

While Leslie lands safely on the other side, Jess “fall[s] awkwardly” into Terabithia (114). Although he has crossed over the stream and the gender line many times, he realizes the danger of a swollen, raging creek, as well as the precarious position of those who live outside of society’s definition of “normal.” His physical clumsiness also illustrates his own immersion and struggle into gender neutrality; he has “fallen” into it, though not without some discomfort.

Jess’s fear of the rising water, which he associates with cowardice, grows through the week as rain continues to fall. Though he swallows his terror and follows Leslie on the rope swing, “. . . his mind hung back, wanting to cling to the crab apple tree the way Joyce Ann might cling to Momma’s skirt” (115). Jess cannot let go entirely of his gender role upbringing, classifying fear as a worthless girly quality to be despised; on the other hand, Leslie’s bravery demonstrates once again a reversal in gender expectations. Finally, Jess comes to the conclusion that his consuming fear makes him “unworthy” to be the King of Terabithia: “It was as though he had been made with a great piece missing—one of May Belle’s puzzles with this huge gap where somebody’s eye and cheek and jaw should have been. Lord, it would be better to be born without an arm than to go through life with no guts” (119). Desperate to step back from the danger of drowning, Jess wonders how he can continue with so much fear. Despite Jess’s reluctance to cross the creek, he does realize he can ask Leslie to teach him how to swim. What a subtle realization: Jess is not afraid to learn from a girl. His transformation, then, continues as he moves from a staunchly defined gender role to male-female gender neutrality. The catalyst and courage to do so is Leslie Burke, tomboy extraordinaire.

Of course, everything changes after the next day. Early in the morning, Jess receives a phone call from Miss Edmunds inviting him to visit the National Gallery in Washington D.C. with her. Jess secures permission from his half-asleep mother and slips away from the house quietly. In the solitary company of his teacher, Jess temporarily steps into a man's role; he notices, "Men would stare at her instead of the pictures, and [he] felt they must be jealous of him for being with her" (127). Her insistence on treating him to lunch—"I'm a liberated woman, Jess Aarons. When I invite a man out, I pay"—mortifies him (128). It is strange that Miss Edmunds has to assert her liberation, even with a 10 year-old boy, while neither Jess nor Leslie broach the subject. Their friendship, stripped of gender restrictions, remains unique throughout the novel. Even Miss Edmunds cannot separate herself completely from this gender-obsessed society, though through her and the National Gallery, Jess is able to find Terabithia apart from the woods: "Entering the gallery was like stepping inside the pine grove—the huge vaulted marble, the cool splash of the fountain, and the green growing all around. Two little children had pulled away from their mothers and were running about, screaming to each other. It was all Jess could do not to grab them and tell them to behave in so obviously a sacred place" (127).

Jess's "perfect day" ends with calamity. Upon returning home, he finds his family in stiff mourning; Brenda announces to him, "Your girl friend's dead, and Momma thought you was dead, too" (130). In a cruel twist, Leslie drowned crossing into Terabithia, hitting her head on a rock when the rope swing broke. Mr. Aarons's language returns Jess from his temporary role as man with Miss Edmunds to child, as well as installs gender structures upon the tragic situation: "They found the *Burke girl* this

morning down in the creek. . . . That old rope *you kids* been swinging on broke. . . . I'm real sorry, *boy*" (131, emphasis mine). Yet despite the lapse into old structures, Leslie's death brings a type of reconciliation between Jess and his father. Jess, in denial about his friend's death, runs away from the house, with his father close behind him in the pick-up. Mr. Aarons catches up to him, ". . . picked Jess up in his arms as though he were a baby" and carries him back to the truck (132). Unexpectedly, Mr. Aarons becomes a maternal, nurturing figure. Both parents worry about the impact of Leslie's death on young Jess, though Mr. Aarons expresses this concern in more outright affectionate terms. After completing Jess's chores, he touches his shoulder as he passes through the kitchen. He initiates the idea of paying respects to Leslie's family: "I think it would be fitting for you to come, too. . . . Seeing's you was the one that really knowed the little girl" (139). When Jess asks out of denial, "What little girl?" it is Mr. Aarons who reaches over to hold his hand, willing him to understand Leslie's death (139).

Jess slips back into his old gender role. As they visit with Leslie's family, Jess finds false consolation in holding back his emotions, which continues when Bill hugs him. He reflects on Leslie's appearance in death, concerned that she be buried in a dress, not blue jeans: "People might snicker at the blue jeans, and he didn't want anyone to snicker at Leslie when she was dead" (143). When he discovers there will be no burial—that Leslie has been cremated—Jess becomes angry:

*Cremated.* Something clicked inside Jess's head. That meant Leslie was gone. Turned to ashes. He would never see her again. Not even dead. Never. How could they dare? Leslie belonged to him. More to him than anyone in the world. No one had even asked him. . . . He, Jess, was

the only one who really cared for Leslie. But Leslie had failed him. She went and died just when he needed her the most. . . . She had tricked him. She had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world, and then before he was really at home in it but too late to go back, she had left him stranded there—like an astronaut wandering about on the moon.

Alone. (145-146)

Jess cannot return to his old world with its rigid gender expectations and bland conformity. He has tasted Shakespeare and Hemingway through Leslie's storytelling. He glimpsed the power of the imagination through their adventures in Terabithia. He found himself, the inner Jess that can only be known and developed apart from gender roles. He is a young man who really did find the land where he was free to be himself. How can he return?

Once again, Jess runs to escape his sorrow. Bolting out of the Burke's house, he flies home where May Belle greets him with, "Did you see her laid out?" (146). His reply is a mighty belt across her face. His use of violence, arguably a masculine trait, nearly pushes him over the edge. Grabbing the paint set Leslie gave him for Christmas, he returns to the creek and ". . . flung the papers and paints into the dirty brown water" (146-7). Just as Leslie, who had brought color into his life, was taken by the water, so too is his artwork. Comfort for Jess again flows from his father, who follows him to the creek. Not only does Mr. Aarons help Jess navigate the waters of tragic loss, he also provides a moment of recognition for Jess's artistic gift, telling him as the paints and paper float away, "That was a damn fool thing to do" (147). Schmidt described this as a reconciliatory moment between father and son: "It is as though he is willing to affirm

Jess's gifts" (59). When Jess breaks down, voicing a hate for Leslie he does not feel, his father ". . . pulled Jess over on his lap as though he were Joyce Ann," offering few words: "'Hell, ain't it?' It was the kind of thing Jess could hear his father saying to another man. He found it strangely comforting, and it made him bold" (*Terabithia* 147). Mr. Aarons provides an unlikely model of one straddling the gender divide. His actions reflect both masculine and feminine qualities, allowing him to reconnect with his son. Paterson's use of this hybrid suggests the breaking down of gender barriers throughout the whole novel, not just within *Terabithia*.

The final chapter of the novel focuses on the passing of the Terabithian torch. Feeling the magic in *Terabithia* has left with Leslie's death, Jess wonders if *Terabithia* can be entered without the rope swing as he crosses into its borders by way of broken tree branch. Although his mode for crossing the gender line—Leslie—is gone, there are still ways for Jess to bridge the gaps between male and female social roles. As King of *Terabithia*, he commemorates Leslie's death with a woven wreath placed within the sacred pine grove. The silence, however, is pierced by the screams of May Belle, who becomes stuck on the makeshift bridge after secretly following Jess. As she totters above the creek waters that claimed Leslie's life, Jess must find the courage to save her. While gently coaxing her off the branch, she admits her fear; he replies, "Course you're scared. Anybody'd be scared" (154). This simple admission reveals the change in Jess's mindset: boys can be afraid, too. As he and May Belle reach the shore safely, he again reminds her, "Everybody gets scared sometimes, May Belle. You don't have to be ashamed" (156). He realizes even the audacious Leslie faced fear without letting it consume her life. Jess no longer classifies the world in terms of gender, but rather, terms



of humanity. The true gift Leslie has given him is the ability to see beyond social restrictions and to embrace one's true self:

He thought about it all day, how before Leslie came, he had been a nothing—a stupid, weird little kid who drew funny pictures and chased around a cow field trying to act big—trying to hide a whole mob of foolish little fears running riot inside his gut.

It was Leslie who had taken him from the cow pasture into Terabithia and turned him into a king. He had thought that was it. Wasn't king the best you could be? Now it occurred to him that perhaps Terabithia was like a castle where you came to be knighted. After you stayed for a while and grew strong you had to move on. For hadn't Leslie, even in Terabithia, tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world—huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile? (Handle with care—everything—even the predators.) (160-61)

Jess builds a permanent bridge across the gully and leads May Belle across, introducing her to Terabithia as perhaps the new queen. There is also the implied promise Joyce Ann will follow in May Belle's footsteps someday. The changes Leslie brings into Jess's life are the permanent inheritance of his little sisters. While Brenda and Ellie showcase the results of social and gender conformity, Joyce Ann and May Belle have Jess's and Leslie's gender impartiality to model themselves after.

*Jacob Have I Loved*

*Jacob Have I Loved*, told in the first-person by Sara Louise Bradshaw, a Rass Island native of the Chesapeake Bay, centers on her awkward adolescent development in her talented twin sister's shadow. With flashback narration provided by an older Sara Louise, the story looks back on her early life on the island and its subsequent continuation in the mountains. Sara Louise takes on the man's role early in life, continuing well after the death of her father. At the beginning of the novel, an elder Sara Louise anticipates the "fetch[ing]" of her widowed mother by taking the ferry to the island Rass: ". . . climbing down into the cabin where the women always ride, but after forty minutes of sitting on the hard cabin bench, I'll stand up to peer out of the high forward windows, straining for the first sight of my island" (*Jacob* 1). Metaphorically, Sara Louise has always started out the journey by sitting with the women but eventually moving into the masculine role; whether peering out the high windows or working on a fishing boat, Sara Louise's capacity to maneuver around gender roles grants her an accessibility while at the same time spotlighting her solitude. Escaped conformity, in the wrong hands, descends to loneliness.

*Jacob's* conflict is driven by Sara Louise's jealousy and rejection of her feminine sister, Caroline, and the gender expectations she embodies. The story flashes back to the summer of 1941. Lonesome 13-year old Sara Louise has a single friend, Call, a young man rejected by social peers because of his weight, nearsightedness and unfortunate economic situation (5). "Call and I made quite a pair," she says. "At thirteen I was tall and large boned, with delusions of beauty and romance. He, at fourteen, was pudgy, bespectacled, and totally unsentimental" (5). Sara Louise longs for escape and freedom

from the stifling closeness of Rass: one ferry is the sole method of transportation to the mainland; she lives in a small house shared with her hated sister and petulant grandmother; the high school has one teacher for all the students; the island shrinks each storm season; religious Methodist fanaticism encroaches into daily life through the rantings of her grandmother. Sara Louise finds relief through her friendship with the Captain, an elderly gentleman—“an islander who had escaped”—who returns to Rass after decades away (105). Yet her tomboy life provides the greatest sense of freedom. Roberta Trites, in her article, “Feminist Dialogics in Katherine Paterson’s Novels,” writes that while Caroline stays within the domestic sphere, “. . . represent[ing] traditional femininity as it is perceived in their Chesapeake island hometown,” Sara Louise moves around the island, working and dressing as a man (47). For Sara Louise, the summer of 1941 marks the beginning of a difficult journey into adolescence as she transitions from her free and tomboyish childhood to a restrictive and confusing (feminine) adult role.

From the moment of birth, Sara Louise’s life has been tainted with envy toward her sister. A sickly infant, Caroline received much more care and worry while Sara Louise, healthy and plump, never gave her mother “a minute’s worry” (*Jacob* 21). Considered the son her father never had, Sara Louise works to assist the family financially; her contributions to the family finances help pay for her sister Caroline’s music lessons on the main land. Caroline has a beautiful voice, and while Sara Louise, the oldest twin, is proud of her sister’s talents, there also resides in her a deep jealousy. Next to the beautiful Caroline, Sara Louise feels awkward and ugly. It does not help when her semi-demented grandmother taunts her with quotes from the Bible about “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,” presenting Sara Louise with the idea that even God

hates her (193). Sara Louise's fierce independence stems partly from her jealousy for Caroline. In an effort to find something that belongs only to her in the island's limited space, Sara Louise stakes her claim on the water and leaves Caroline the domestic sphere, a choice evidenced by Sara Louise's manner of dress; while crabbing, Sara Louise wears overalls over her oldest dress. Though her exterior matches a man's, underneath she struggles to understand how to behave like a young woman.

In 1966, Barbara Welter revolutionized women's studies with her article, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," in which she outlined four pervasive characteristics all good women strived for in the nineteenth century: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. Women who ascribed to and maintained such qualities were honored as "true women." These qualities became indispensable to society; women of all ages were judged on their appearance within the confines of these four virtues. As reflected in nineteenth-century literature, such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, growing up and donning the true woman garb meant a loss of autonomy for young women. Sara Louise fears such a change as she experiences the turmoil and misery that characterizes puberty. Her loss of independence, spurred by geographical, biological, and emotional isolation, restricts her dreams of a bigger life for many years. The added complication of adolescence forces her to shed her "tomboy skin" much like a molting female crab sheds her shell. With an onslaught of biological changes, such as menstruation, comes the transition in gender expectations.

On the Bay water with her skiff, Sara Louise's confidence in her abilities disappears in the presence of Caroline. Acutely aware of her physical appearance throughout the novel—from her "nearly flat chest" to her rough and dirty hands—Sara

Louise finds no kindness for herself in comparison with her sister (38). In Sara Louise's mind, Caroline's superiority erupts from her talent, personality, and delicate appearance. She describes Caroline in meticulous detail, from the light blue scarf tied around her hair to the length of her fingernails (157-160). Physical beauty marks the beginning of Sara Louise's jealousies for her sister. She becomes frustrated by her role as provider for Caroline's music lessons, feeling an acute sense of judgment from her sister:

I would come in from a day of propping for crab, sweating and filthy. Caroline would remark mildly that my fingernails were dirty. How could they be anything else but dirty? But instead of simply acknowledging the fact, I would fly into a wounded rage. How dare she call me dirty? How dare she try to make me feel inferior to her own pure, clear beauty? It wasn't my fingernails she was concerned with, that I was sure of. She was using my fingernails to indict my soul. Wasn't she content to be golden perfection without cutting away at me? Was she to allow me no virtue—no shard of pride or decency? (79-80)

In this instance, Sara Louise associates femininity with spiritual purity, another throwback to the nineteenth-century and the cult of the true woman. Sara Louise steps out of these feminine and spiritual boundaries, not only through appearance but also emotion. The unladylike hatred that emerges from Sara Louise becomes ingrained in her subconscious, resulting in a murderous dream in which she beats Caroline to death with her skiff pole. The source of such violence is debatable. One reading suggests Sara Louise's strong desire as the self-described underdog trying to gain dominance over the leader in the family pack. Another interpretation could be the takeover of the strong,

masculine female (Sara Louise) against her counterpart, the weak, feminine child (Caroline). Perhaps it could even be read as her inner struggle with identity and social expectations in her transition from tomboy to young lady. Sara Louise responds to her dream with an obsessive search through the Bible for a hint of salvation, hoping that although she views herself as physically, emotionally, and psychologically unnatural, she can escape damnation. Finding no relief from her mad jealousy in scripture, she turns to the water and work to assuage her guilt; in doing so, she develops the unique qualities that will serve her later as a nurse in the mountains.

An important part of Sara Louise's tomboy life is her friendships with the Captain and Call. When Caroline offers to help the trio clean the elderly Trudy Braxton's house, Sara Louise hopes her feminine weakness will be exposed. The house, occupied by Trudy and her sixteen cats, needs to be cleaned while she recovers in the hospital from a stroke. Sara Louise watches Caroline as they enter the house, “. . . want[ing] to see some sign of weakness” (*Jacob* 121). Her disappointment grows, however, when not only does Caroline fail to gag at the house's urine odor but also the Captain and Call eagerly take Caroline in as a friend, complicating Sara Louise's life. The tomboy, who spends her time doing a man's work, begins to feel out of place with the men once Caroline enters the scene. While the three laugh and joke, Sara Louise says, “. . . I felt as I always did when someone told the story of my birth” (124). Her sense of ownership of this small group is threatened one day by Caroline's invitation to Sara Louise to join her at the Captain's:

Who did she think she was, inviting me to go see the Captain? As if she owned both him and Call. Call, who had always belonged to me because

nobody else besides his mother and grandmother would have him, and the Captain, who finally through all our troubles and misunderstandings had become mine as well . . . she thought she could snatch them both for herself. (126-127)

Despite Sara Louise's conflict with her sister, she begins to understand that feminine conformity is not an inescapable fate. By accepting and embracing the qualities that define her apart from Caroline, she can find reconciliation between her two selves—the external tomboy and the feminine within. Though she cannot entirely squelch the emerging feminine, Sara Louise must hold on to the tomboy qualities that will see her through sexism in the twentieth century: her stubbornness, her independence, and her self-reliance. In the end, the resilient tomboy makes a stronger woman.

In Levstik's exploration of the tomboy in children's literature, she found, "The freedom [tomboys] do enjoy is not the result of adult women trying to provide them what their own lives lacked. Frequently, it is a male who offers freedom" (18). Sara Louise's relationship with her father is largely based on a mutual understanding of hard work and a love for the water, both of which offer her freedom. Sara Louise does a man's work because she does not have a brother: "He needed a son and I would have given anything to be that son, but on Rass in those days, men's work and women's work were sharply divided, and a waterman's boat was not the place for a girl" (22). Always the healthier twin, this vitality in Sara Louise places her on a more masculine plane and allows a closer relationship with her father to thrive: "I suppose my father was used to treating me with a certain roughness, not quite as he would have treated a son, but certainly differently from the way he treated Caroline" (22). Health represents masculinity for Sara Louise, while

weakness and daintiness embody femininity. Yet it is not just her father's love or approval that calls Sara Louise to a life outside of the domestic sphere. She loves the water and considers learning how to pole her own skiff a "consolation" to not working on her father's boat, the *Portia Sue* (22-23). The skiff serves as metaphor for Sara Louise's future as it becomes necessary for her to "pole" around the obstacles—gender restrictions, familial jealousy, and sexism—that lie in her path. She also recognizes her limitations on Rass Island, especially in the 1940's; however, she finds ways to maneuver the sharp gender-cultural divides. Although early on she ". . . kept praying to turn into a boy . . ." later in the novel Sara goes so far as to drop out of the local high school and work full time on her father's boat (23). Her strong, independent nature allows her to bridge the divide between the lifestyle she wants (tomboy) and what is socially expected (feminine):

The women of my island were not supposed to love the water. Water was the wild, untamed kingdom of our men . . . the women resisted its power over their lives as a wife might pretend to ignore the existence of her husband's mistress. For the men of the island . . . the Bay was an all-consuming passion. It ruled their waking hours, sapped their bodily strength, and from time to tragic time claimed their mortal flesh.

I suppose I knew that there was no future for me on Rass. How could I face a lifetime of passive waiting? Waiting for the boats to come in of an afternoon, waiting in a crab house for the crabs to shed, waiting at home for children to be born, waiting for them to grow up, waiting, at last, for the Lord to take me home. (46-7)



Her passion for the environment around her betrays her sex; good women do not love the water. Sara Louise's paradox—the problem for all tomboys—is the question, “Where do I belong?” The domestic sphere and its gender confines have little value to Sara Louise. Yet as the novel continues, Sara Louise will come to feel trapped by what she loves the most.

In the midst of heavy hurricane winds one dark night, Mr. Bradshaw's dependence on his tomboy daughter fully emerges. He wakes her with news that due to rough winds, he will sink his fishing boat to protect it from the storm. Sara Louise realizes the extremity of such an action and assumes she has been wakened to help him (128). Though he does not need her assistance, he does ask her to venture into the storm and bring the Captain back to the house. Sara Louise quickly dresses, advised by her father to “. . . take care and be quick” (129). Her reply of “You, too, Daddy,” illuminates the realization of the dangerous situation each will enter. Mr. Bradshaw calls on Sara Louise because of her trustworthiness and intelligence in matters of the natural/masculine world. He trusts her to move bravely through the strong winds to the Captain's house without fearing for her safety or survival. He underestimates the storm; Sara Louise describes the power of the wind as being something that “. . . might lift me off my feet and deposit me in the Bay . . . the wind seemed too powerful now to tempt with my upright body” (129). Forced to crawl on her hands and knees to reach the Captain's house, she does not turn aside from her mission and battles the wind back to safety with the Captain. Once inside the house, Sara Louise is enfolded once again into the smothering domestic sphere. Huddled upstairs with her parents, the Captain, her grandmother, and a sleeping Caroline, the eye of the storm passes through.

Suddenly there was silence. “What happened?” Though as soon as I asked, I knew. It was the eye. We were in the quiet eye of the storm. Daddy got up, took the flashlight, and went to the stairs. The Captain rose, pulled the bathrobe together, and followed him. I started to get up, too, but Momma put her arm across my lap.

“You can’t tell how long it will last,” she said. “Just let the men go.”

(133-134)

While Mrs. Bradshaw may be trying to protect her daughter, one wonders where her concern was earlier when Sara Louise was sent into the wind to retrieve an old seasoned fisherman. Sara Louise again sits in between two worlds: the external, where she can freely develop her independent nature, and the internal, where gender restrictions dog her every step. This conflict is brought into sharper focus when, after the storm, the flooding of her home blends the Bay water and outdoor environment (the tomboy within) with the domestic stage (feminine expectations). Against this backdrop, Sara Louise takes another step into the feminine world with an unexpected sexual awakening.

The return of Captain Hiram Wallace, the islander who escaped Rass, becomes a catalyst for Sara Louise’s adolescent sexuality. Her sense of femininity, still tangled in the tomboy persona, emerges in his male presence. Old enough to be her grandfather, the Captain unintentionally sparks an adolescent sexual fire in Sara Louise. Infatuated with his kind attention, Sara Louise describes the morning after the storm as “. . . a perfect day” had she not been able to see the destruction left in its wake (137). As she watches debris float in the water past her front porch, the hardy island tomboy (who battled hurricane winds) grabs the Captain’s arm in *faux* feminine fear as she watches a coffin

float past (137). The close physical presence and touch of the Captain awakens a flicker of sexual desire in Sara Louise, drawing her attention to her unkempt, tomboy appearance. Despite the inner feminine's rousing, Sara Louise continues as tomboy, helping the Captain in the aftermath of the storm. Using the skiff, the two pole around the island to where the Captain's place once stood, now vanished, swallowed by the hurricane. Sara Louise describes her reaction to the Captain's loss:

I was terrified that I might actually see tears in his eyes and so to avoid that sight more than anything else, I slipped off the thwart, crossed the narrow space between us on my knees, and put my arms around him. The rough shirt scraped my chin, and I was aware of the pressure of his knees against my stomach.

Then, suddenly, something happened. I can't explain it . . . I had only meant to comfort him, but as I smelled his sweat and felt the spring of his beard against my cheek, an alarm began to clang inside my body. I went hot all over, and I could hear my heart banging to be let out of my chest. "Let go, stupid," part of me was saying, while another voice I hardly recognized was urging me to hold him tighter. (143)

Sara Louise's sexual desire awakens. Hardly recognizing the inner feminine, Sara Louise's struggle with identity intensifies, her sole focus the Captain's hands:

The fingers of his right hand were nervously tapping his knee. I had never noticed how long his fingers were. His nails were large, rounded at the bottom and blunt and neat at the tips. He had the cleanest fingernails of any man I'd ever seen . . . Why had I never noticed before how beautiful

his hands were? I wanted to hold one in both of my hands and kiss the fingertips. Oh, my blessed, I was going crazy. Just looking at his hands was doing the same wild things to the secret places of my body that holding him had done. (144)

Whether the Captain notices Sara Louise's sexual awakening, the reader cannot know for certain. If so, he does not respond. Shamed and confused by these sudden feelings, Sara Louise stifles her emotions, sharing them with no one.

The ultimate betrayal for Sara Louise occurs when the Captain and old Trudy Braxton marry. The Captain's need for a place to live after the storm, as well as the necessity for Trudy to have a caregiver in her ill health, not to mention their relationship as childhood sweethearts, makes the arrangement practical, attractive, and convenient for almost all involved. That the idea comes from Caroline is nearly too much for Sara Louise to bear. When she sees the Captain return to the island via ferry with his bride, ". . . my body felt all over again how it was to be crushed against the rough material of his clothes, his heart beating straight through my backbone" (173). As Call and Caroline push to greet the couple, she stands aloof ". . . shivering, my arms crossed, my hands hooked up under my arms and pressed against my breasts" (174). This last action suggests a repression in Sara Louise of her budding femininity. Her heart broken by the Captain's marriage, she yearns to return to an innocent childhood without the complications of throbbing sexuality and unrequited love.

Sara Louise's loneliness and isolation intensify after the Captain's marriage as her male friendships deteriorate. She pulls away from Call and the Captain, just as Caroline begins associating with them more. She looks for escape in books, identifying with

Uncas of *The Last of the Mohicans* and his solitary station in the world. Her identity struggle continues as she searches for her own unique talent. Finding nothing, she labels herself merely as “. . . Caroline Bradshaw’s twin sister” (176-77). What she fails to realize is her gender defiance places her on a separate playing field apart from the other island girls. Who else would be jealous of Call when he drops out of school to work full-time on the *Portia Sue* to cull oysters? As he grows tanner, thinner, and more muscular from working on the Bay, she painfully sees the gender division between them: “. . . the very things that made him stronger and more attractive were taking him deep into the world of men—a place I could never hope to enter” (188). Eventually, Call joins the military and goes away to fight in the war. While she gains acceptance and respect as an able-bodied fisherman, she can never cross completely into the masculine world and must accept that fact; the *how*, though, escapes her.

Sara Louise’s reality shrinks, both literally and metaphorically. The hurricane carries off more of the island, including Sara Louise’s point of refuge, the tip of the marsh (150). The driftwood stump where she would sit and think and dream vanishes, as does her escape from womanhood. The emergence of her sexual desire serves as warning that the inescapable—the laying down of tomboy-derived freedom and picking up restrictive femininity—is upon her; her only hope of salvation lies in conformity. One day, in a desperate moment, Sara Louise concludes her nails are in terrible shape and declares to herself, “A man with strong clean hands would never look at me in love. No man would” (155). Feeling forsaken by God and men, she desperately attempts to improve her outward appearance, deciding to “. . . change my luckless life by changing my hands” (160). Carefully investing her hard-earned money on Jergen’s lotion and

orange sticks, Sara Louise hides her purchases until Caroline unthinkingly uses them (161-62). Even this small corner of the domestic market cannot be kept away from her competition. Sara Louise's resulting tantrum causes Caroline to question her sister's lucidity, but for Sara Louise the idea of insanity provides nothing but freedom: "I could crab like a man if I chose. Crazy people who are judged to be harmless are allowed an enormous amount of freedom ordinary people are denied. Thus as long as I left everyone alone, I could do as I pleased. Thinking about myself as a crazy, independent old woman made me feel almost happy" (164). As Trites observed, "In Sara Louise's mind, only crazy women have unrestricted gender roles. Only crazy women are autonomous because only crazy women can work outside the home" (47). Her opportunities limited, Sara Louise sees two choices for her future: domestication (feminine) or insanity (tomboy). Unforeseen, though, is the impact of the tomboy on the feminine and how the two will blend together for Sara Louise.

Sara Louise's relationship with her sister continues down its destructive path. After Call's disappearance into the world of men, Sara Louise spends more time with Caroline and the Captain. They visit him together after Trudy's death because, "It wouldn't have been proper for either of us to go alone" (*Jacob* 188). Propriety, though, is tossed aside as he teaches them to play poker, the consummate sin for Rass Methodists. During these visits, the Captain offers to pay Caroline's tuition to a mainland music school. Sara Louise's jealousy secretly burns; returning home, Grandma picks up on her granddaughter's inner turmoil and taunts Sara Louise with scripture: "Romans nine thirteen . . . 'as it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated'" (193). Sara Louise falls into a sense of utter abandonment when she realizes God spoke these lines in

the Bible. There are myriad parallels between the Bradshaw sisters and the Biblical story. Esau, the parallel to Sara Louise, was a man of the outdoors. He was favored by his father, Isaac, and was a skilled hunter just as Sara Louise shares a close relationship with her father and succeeds in her work on the Bay. He was described at birth as hairy and red, but like Sara Louise was full of health and life. Jacob, on the other hand, was described as being slender and of a more delicate constitution. Like Caroline, he was favored by his mother and spent his time in the domestic circle of the women. Sara Louise feels Caroline has stolen her birthright as the elder twin by going to the mainland to study while Sara Louise has worked hard to support her. Like Esau, Sara Louise must choose a different path and find a way to separate herself from her twin. Though God is quoted as saying He “hated” Esau, He does bless him in the Old Testament. Likewise, Sara Louise will forge ahead and find her own blessing in life.

Initially though, while Caroline pursues an education in music, Sara Louise has only a dark grudge against her family, the Captain, and their “favoritism” toward her sister. With the departure of Call and Caroline, Sara Louise waits bereft, an island within an island. Like a crab, she pulls into a hardened shell of isolation. Seeking solace from the hurt and loneliness within, she immerses herself in helping her father with the crab float. Although her fishing skills are seen as unnatural for a young woman in the twentieth-century, she tells that, “I knew almost as much about blue crabs as a seasoned waterman” (199). Her sympathy for the crab and its shedding process is also a self-realization of her present circumstances:

Shedding its shell is a long and painful business for a big Jimmy, but for a she-crab, turning into a sook, it seemed somehow worse. I’d watch

them there in the float, knowing once they shed that last time and turned into grown-up lady crabs there was nothing left for them. They hadn't even had a Jimmy make love to them. Poor sooks. They'd never take a trip down the Bay to lay their eggs before they died. The fact that there wasn't much future for the Jimmies once they were packed in eelgrass didn't bother me so much. Males, I thought, always have a chance to live no matter how short their lives, but females, ordinary, ungifted ones, just get soft and die. (199-200)

Sara Louise identifies with the sooks. Unable to change her gender or culture and seeing nothing extraordinary in herself, she tries to accept that there is no "Jimmy" for her and that she too will become soft and die. Apart from her tomboy persona, Sara Louise cannot envision a happy future on the island; the lack of a feminine spirit becomes a death sentence inflicted, she feels, by a god who created her as an "unnatural" creature out of spite. Her reluctance to see beyond Rass's boundaries and explore opportunities outside of fishing leaves her trapped; she comes to represent all tomboys who must choose between the liberties of childhood and the restriction of the adult domestic circle. At the age of fifteen, Sara Louise enters a period of hibernation, using work as a means of simple survival: "It made me feel less helpless to be a girl of fifteen doing what many regarded as a man's job. When school started in the fall, I, like every boy on Rass over twelve, was simply too busy to think of enrolling" (200). Sara Louise quits life, dropping attendance to church and high school. When Call drops out of high school to support his mother and grandmother, no objections are made. Sara Louise, on the other hand, works hard to convince her mother to home school her rather than return to high school.



Viewed perhaps as acceptable life choices for men but not young ladies, Sara Louise contemplates her actions as helping to create a frightening view of herself in the minds of the islanders: “I suppose people were a little afraid of me. I must have been a strange sight, always dressed in men’s work clothes, my hands as rough and weathered as the sides of the crab house where I worked” (202). One morning when she arrives at the breakfast table at 2 a.m., dressed to go on the boat with her father to harvest oysters full-time, “No one said anything about my not being a man—maybe they’d forgotten” (203). Yet with this full rejection of the domestic sphere, the inner rage and conflict that has defined nearly her whole life dissipates. By moving onto the Bay with her father, Sara finds peace as the tomboy takes charge; Sara Louise feels “. . . deeply content with what life was giving me” as she fully steps into the role of a son (203).

Moving away from society’s expectations, Sara Louise gives the tomboy full rein; Sarah Smedman, in her article, “‘A Good Oyster’: Story and Meaning in *Jacob Have I Loved*,” describes this winter spent on the boat as “Louise’s spiritual sojourn in the desert” (11). She cultivates her strength and endurance. Nature, she realizes, offers space and time for identity to mature. She comes to see herself in terms of the natural world: “I was a good oyster in those days. Not even the presence at Christmastime of a radiant, grown-up Caroline could get under my shell” (205-06). She learns while harvesting with her father that “. . . every oyster clings to its bed until the culling hammer forces a separation” (*Jacob* 205). Sara Louise clings to her own bed—the island of Rass, her tomboy existence. Whether describing herself as a crab or an oyster, she has developed a protective shell for herself; her rough exterior and mannish ways shelter and

hide the woman underneath. However, the return of Call acts as the culling hammer, forcing Sara Louise to consider a life away from Rass and the Bay she loves.

One of the saddest casualties of maturity is the loss of childhood friends.

Although Sara Louise rejects the feminine, the tomboy cannot sustain her friendship with Call. Downplayed in the novel, her concern for his safety while fighting in the war cause her hands to tremble when she receives a letter from him (211). Call's admittance to—and return from—the outside world awakens a prospect for escape in Sara Louise; as she anticipates his arrival, she feels her state of “hibernation” has ended (213). What this means, she cannot say. Suddenly, though, hope emerges—if not for a courtship from Call, at least for a chance to leave the island on her own:

Perhaps when Call came home—perhaps—well, at the very least when he came I could turn over my tasks to him. My father would be overjoyed to have a man to help him. And I—what was it I wanted? I could leave the island, if I wished. I could see the mountains. I could even take a job in Washington or Baltimore if I wanted to. If I chose to leave—there was something cold about the idea, but I shook it away. (213)

Call changes, much to Sara Louise's surprise. No longer her pudgy, four-eyed companion, he returns a war veteran with plans to leave the island. Unlike Sara Louise, he accepts its eventual death from the ebbing Bay and has his sights fixed elsewhere. His presence brings out a nervousness in Sara Louise not seen since the hurricane and her sexual awakening. Though once her best friend, she does not hug him when he arrives, instead keenly “. . . aware of his clean, masculine smell and at the same time of the smell of salt water and crab, which was my only perfume” (218). Likewise Call ignores her

tomboy persona, helping her into the skiff “. . . as if I were a lady” (219). If the Captain ignited Sara Louise’s sexuality, Call makes her finally feel like a young woman. She admires his physicality while becoming painfully aware of her own appearance. Before visiting the Captain with Call, she asks to change out of her work clothes, resulting in an embarrassing moment for both the reader and Sara Louise:

When I put on my Sunday dress, which I hadn’t worn for almost two years, it *strained* across my breasts and shoulder. I could hardly bring myself to look in the mirror, first at my brown face and then at my sun-scorched hair. I dampened it with water and *tried to coax* it into a few waves about my forehead. I *slopped* hand lotion all over my hands and then on my face and legs, even my arms and elbows. It had a *cheap* fragrance, which I tried to fool myself would cover the essence of crab. (222, emphasis mine).

Sara Louise’s clumsy attempt at feminine immersion fails, a futile exercise at stepping into the role she has always denied. She tries to “coax” her body into fitting an unfamiliar form; uncomfortable in her own skin, she describes it in terms such as “slop,” “strain,” and “cheap” (222). Despite her appearance, however, her manner does not change. When Call offers his admiration at her “improvement” in appearance, she “. . . grab[s] Call’s elbow and shove[s] him toward the door” (222). Her mortification and subsequent behavior reflect an awkward mixture of the tomboy and the feminine.

Call’s announced engagement to Caroline is unexpected for Sara Louise. She refers to it as “my own doom” (225). Her first comment, surprisingly, expresses concern for Caroline’s age, followed by the realization that Call will not cull with Truitt in the

winter. Sara Louise's escape plan with Call, either through a romantic courtship or as a substitute son for her father, has been pinched off. Distraught, Sara Louise flees to her place of solace—the crab shack—where she ruins her dress working the floats. The destruction of her dress becomes symbolic of her last endeavor to embrace the feminine side; to the end, Sara Louise no longer looks to change her appearance. Rather, she wraps herself in work, bitterness, and blind envy.

Stunted by jealousy toward her sister's new happiness, Sara Louise does not attend the wedding; rather, she stays home and cares for her grandmother while her parents go up for the nuptials. For a limited time Sara Louise enters the domestic sphere, on her own terms no less; despite cooking the Christmas meal and playing host to the Captain, she also whittles a cane for her grandmother inside the house (230). During this time, Sara Louise learns of Grandma Bradshaw's infatuation as a girl for the then young Captain Hiram Wallace and invites him to Christmas dinner. After the meal, her conversation with the Captain turns toward her loneliness; reminiscent of Esau and the lost birthright, Sara Louise receives her first blessing:

“I thank you,” he said. And then, “It's hard for you, isn't it?”

I sat down on the couch near his chair. There was no need to pretend, I knew. “I had hoped when Call came home—”

He shook his head. “Sara Louise. You were never meant to be a woman on this island. A man, perhaps. Never a woman.”

“I don't even know if I wanted to marry him,” I said. “But I wanted something.” I looked at my hands. “I know I have no place here. But there's no escape.”

“Pish.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe I’d heard him correctly.

“Pish. Rubbish. You can do anything you want to. I’ve known that from the first day I met you—at the other end of my periscope.”

“But—”

“What is it you really want to do?”

I was totally blank. What was it I really wanted to do?

“Don’t know?” It was almost a taunt. I was fidgeting under his gaze.

“Your sister knew what she wanted, so when the chance came, she could take it.”

I opened my mouth, but he waved me quiet. “You, Sara Louise.

Don’t tell me no one ever gave you a chance. You don’t need anything given to you. You can make your own chances. But first you have to know what you’re after, my dear.” (236-37)

With one swoop, the Captain brings her life into sharp focus as she realizes she does not need to abandon the tomboy completely. Her independent, self-reliant nature, formed by the tomboy within, provides a path of escape for Sara Louise. Throughout the novel, Sara Louise struggled with becoming someone she was not and leaving behind all that she had known. It takes the Captain to help her realize that the self she has cultivated will provide the ability to make her own chances. And suddenly, Sara Louise can dream of a life outside of the island. Not one to dodge from challenges, she vocalizes her aspirations to become a doctor, an atypical career for many females during the 1940’s. Having proved herself with strong exam grades and hard work on the Bay, Sara Louise

decides, “Without God, or a man, I could still conquer a small corner of the world—if I wanted to” (213).

However, she has not cleared all her hurdles; she offers up the excuse that she cannot leave her parents, despite the offers of help they have given her to start out on her own. After his return from the wedding, Truitt Bradshaw releases her from obligation to stay and take care of the family:

“Well, Louise, what will you do now?”

“Do?” Was he trying to get rid of me?

“Yes,” he said. “You’re a young woman now. I can’t keep you on as a hand much longer.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “I like the water.”

“I mind,” he said quietly. “But I’m grateful to have had you with me.” (217)

Truitt knows there is no life for his daughter on the water. While her childhood allowed her to take on the role of son, the natural course of life—and to an extent, gender—must take precedent. Truitt understands the social backlash Sara Louise could face if she chooses to live her life as a man. She needs to be released from familial duty; her independence must have a chance to break free or life on the restricted island will smother her.

Susan Bradshaw’s relationship with her eldest daughter appears calm on the surface; her interactions with Sara Louise are out of a gentle spirit. The reader can sense her appreciation and love for the daughter who acts as the son she never had. Yet despite her silence, Susan’s sense of worry for her daughter grows as the novel progresses. After

Caroline's enrollment in Baltimore's music school, Susan's gaze focuses on Sara Louise and the direction her life will take. Once a teacher, now a homemaker, she is quietly aware of the limitations her daughter will face outside the island community of Rass; Sara Louise can hide underneath her tomboy persona on the Bay, but the mainland reality will be altogether different. After the Bradshaws accept the Captain's offer to help Caroline, Susan approaches her eldest with the idea of sending her to Crisfield, another mainland boarding school. While desperate for her own independence, giving up the cherished role of "son" becomes a loaded topic for Sara Louise. Feeling her mother and God both hate her, she dramatically and contemptuously rejects her mother's offer, revealing a sense of overwhelming rebellion and frustration. As Susan points out, Sara Louise serves as a key figure in the family's survival: "I worry about you, Louise . . . Your father and I are grateful, indeed. I hardly know what we'd have done without you. But—" (207). The last word signifies Susan's intent: while she loves her daughter and the sacrifices she has made, the situation cannot exist forever. Seeking the best for her daughter, she urges her to return to school; if not for her education, then to alleviate her loneliness. At her mother's prompting, Sara Louise agrees to home schooling, allowing her to complete coursework for her high school diploma.

The contrast between Susan and Sara Louise seem insurmountable. Susan fits the mold of the cult of true woman's "angel in the house." After Caroline's wedding, when senile Grandma Bradshaw tries to provoke Susan, quoting Biblical passages about the evils of whores, Sara Louise becomes furious with how her mother reacts. She sees her lack of aggression and anger as weakness and submission. Instead of lashing out at her mother-in-law, Susan escapes to the outdoors to wash the windows (242). Sara Louise

assists, but the conversation turns into confrontation as she struggles to understand her mother's decisions. She learns that her college-educated mother had, at one point, planned on going to France to write. Susan's plans, however, never materialized. Instead, Susan built a life on the island of Rass, first as a schoolteacher, then as a wife and mother. Sara Louise calls it a "stupid waste" and demands to know, "Why did you throw yourself away?" (245). For Sara Louise, a life lived wholly within the domestic sphere has no value. Susan, however, sees things very differently: "But I am what I wanted to be . . . I chose. No one made me become what I am . . . I'm not ashamed of what I have made of my life" (246). Caroline, pursuing a music career as a young war bride, follows in her mother's footsteps. Yet, as Susan demonstrates, the weakness Sara Louise attributes to the domestic sphere and the feminine spirit is a different kind of strength, quiet and steady as the tide. Though Sara Louise asserts, "Well, just don't try to make me like you are," she has already inherited from her mother the ability to make her own life, despite limitations (246). It is the final lesson Sara Louise needs in her quest for self. Her mother gives her the choice to decide whom she wants to be aside from cultural and gender restrictions. While Susan may worry about what her eldest daughter will do, she does not doubt that Sara Louise has strength to achieve. She offers Sara Louise the final blessing in the book when she declares she will miss Sara Louise "more" than she misses Caroline (247). With that one word, Sara Louise finds herself able, ". . . at last to leave the island and begin to build myself as a soul, separate from the long, long shadow of my twin" (247).

Sara Louise describes her new start on the mainland as, "Shiny as a new crab pot, all set to capture the world" (248). Enrolling in the pre-med program at the University of



Maryland and excelling in her studies, her first sexist snag occurs when her advisor calls her to his office. He begins their session with a condescending verbal pat, surprised at her choice of study: “You’re serious about this? I would think that a good-looking young woman like you—” (250). Sara Louise cuts him off, reasserting her intent. Though he recognizes her intelligence and her grades are commendable, he recommends she “. . . switch to nursing . . .” to give returning war veterans their duly earned place in the medicine programs (250). The tomboy steps in. Sara Louise draws upon her experience on the water and makes a bold, life-changing decision:

. . . I decided that if you can’t catch crabs where you are, you move your pots. I transferred to the University of Kentucky and into the nursing school, which had a good course in midwifery. I would become a nurse-midwife, spend a few years in the mountains where doctors were scarce, and then use my experience to persuade the government to send me to medical school on a public health scholarship. (250)

She makes it sound so easy, as though it is an everyday task to take on the government and years of sexist bureaucracy, on top of the wild closeness of the Appalachian Mountains. Her first assignment is Truitt, a small mountain community that shares her father’s name. Despite the severe isolation within the mountains and a two hour drive to the nearest hospital, “It seemed exactly the place for me to work for two or three years, see all the mountains I ever wanted to see, and then, armed with a bit of money and a lot of experience, to batter my way into medical school” (251). Critics describe Sara Louise’s decision as “giving up” or “settling.” In Susan Lehr’s edited book, *Beauty*,

*Brains, and Brawn: The Construction of Gender in Children's Literature*, Paterson disagrees:

No matter how much a writer believes in equality of the sexes, she can't rewrite history. Sara Louise, in *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), was, in effect, a doctor. She wasn't allowed to have the title because of the time in which she lived, but she wasn't stopped from being a doctor, because there was no one else to do the work. So she was more of a doctor than most doctors we know. They are specialists. Louise was doing everything. (25)

Sara Louise's move to the mountains transfers her from one island to another. Paterson's description provides a claustrophobic glimpse of the "mountain-locked valley" with its narrow roads and lack of proper transportation (*Jacob* 251). Sara Louise's role as healer goes beyond taking care of people; she serves as veterinarian as well. She tends to a mixed and stubborn population of Polish, Lithuanian, and Scotch-Irish miners and farmers. Heavy drinking and wife beating are common. She opines that perhaps the mountains add to this illness due to their isolating effect by ". . . delaying sunrise and hastening the night" (252). Yet despite their menacing grandeur, Sara Louise loves the peaks:

They are as awesome and beautiful as the open water, but the valley people do not seem to notice. Nor are they grateful for the game and timber that the mountains so generously provide. Most of them only see the ungiving soil from which a man must wrestle his subsistence and the barriers that shut him out from the world. These men struggle against

their mountains. On Rass men followed the water. There is a difference.

(252-53)

Sara Louise has struggled against her own mountains in her quest for identity. For much of her adolescence, she could only see the barriers in front of her: Caroline's beauty, her extreme loneliness and physical awkwardness, the sneers of a demented grandmother, the confusion of desire. Yet these same barriers provide her with the strength, independence, and wisdom needed to survive in the mountains. Heralding back to her girlhood when she poled around obstacles in her skiff, Sara Louise continues to skirt that which stands in her way. The success of her entrance into a post-WWII society, with gender discrimination still very much in place, depends on the tomboy qualities learned on the water— independence, self-reliance, patience, and stubbornness—and allows her to carve her own destined path in life. No longer consumed with an inferiority complex, Sara Louise can focus on her calling as healer. Instead of struggling against her unavoidable circumstances, she learns to move with them. She follows the mountains, much like the men on Rass follow the water. For Sara Louise, a truce has been made with her past and herself. She has come to accept the tomboy within.

Joseph Wojtkiewicz, a widower, brings a different interpretation to Sara Louise's journey of self-discovery. After tending to his sick son, she visits with Joseph and, with his prompting, shares with him her memories of life on Rass. After she apologizes for monopolizing the conversation, he replies:

“No, no,” he said. “I asked because I wanted to know. I knew there was something different about you. I kept wondering ever since you came.

Why would a woman like you, who could have anything she wanted,

come to a place like this? Now I understand . . . God in heaven's been raising you for this valley from the day you were born." (256)

Joseph neither knew Sara Louise as the awkward adolescent, nor was he dazzled by Caroline's beauty and vocal talents. Instead, he is awed by the strength of the woman who has come to care for his son, the same woman who serves the rough community in the middle of the mountains, a woman who chose to take on a life of isolation and thrives on its challenges. He sees the woman shaped by the tomboy persona.

It seems Joseph's understanding and appreciation for Sara Louise's character helps win her hand, but it is his smile—"For when he smiled, he looked like the kind of man who would sing to the oysters"—that wins her heart (256). She marries him and becomes pregnant. Unfortunately, during her ninth month her father unexpectedly dies. Unable to make the funeral because of her advanced pregnancy, she sends Joseph in her place while Caroline and Call also attend. Sara Louise describes herself as "unreasonably irritated" at the circumstances: "It seemed wrong that she should be able to go and not me. I was the child who had fished his crab floats and culled his oysters . . ." (258).

Born in October, Sara Louise names her newborn son Truitt. The once awkward tomboy who wore dresses underneath overalls relishes her maternal role, bearing the first male Bradshaw heir. At a time when women were moved out of the munitions plants and back into the kitchens, she continues her unconventional focus on medicine as a working mom. She even serves as priest. By November Sara Louise is working again, caring for two pregnant women. The birth of twins—one healthy, one sickly—brings her story full circle as she gains a new perspective on her entrance into the world. In her article, "In God's Delightful Company': Katherine Paterson's Feminist Theology," M. Sarah

Smedman observed, “Not able to find God when she lived like a son and jealous sibling on Rass, through her experiences as wife, mid-wife, and nursing mother—all feminine images of God—Louise finally comes to know God’s love for her and the ways in which it has been operative in all the disappointments and tragedies of her microcosm” (213). Born breech and blue, Sara Louise revives the smaller twin with CPR. She places the child in the open door of a warm stove amidst a bundle of towels and dishrags, allowing the warmth to safely revive the infant girl. When the family shows concern about the girl’s life and asks to send for the priest, she impatiently baptizes the child, even choosing her name, Susan: “Susan was the name of a saint, wasn’t it?” (262). The memory of her parents is given new life through the births of Truitt and Susan, suggesting a circle of continuance in the future. She bids the new father to take the healthy twin and, “Hold him as much as you can” in an effort to reverse her experience as the forgotten twin (263). And then she nurses little Susan: “My own breasts were swollen with milk for Truitt. I knew his father would bring him to me soon, but there was plenty. I took my baby out of the oven and held her mouth to catch the milk, which began to flow of its own accord” (263). My baby. As a new mother, she becomes an all-encompassing maternal figure. The tomboy who once tried to stunt the growth of her breasts now lifts children to them for nourishment. The children of the mountains are her babies. After a lifetime of wandering, it is through her motherhood that Sara Louise can finally bring together the tomboy and the feminine spirit within.

## Conclusion

MacLeod wrote, “The one certainty is that children’s books are peculiarly revealing about some of the deepest currents of a society’s life” (ix). Paterson’s novels reveal the tight restrictions placed on children, particularly the “deep current” of gender roles. Sometimes the limitations remain invisible until an especially bold person rattles them with enough force. As builders and wanderers, Sara Louise and Leslie provide a hope and path for adolescents. As Paterson demonstrates with May Belle’s crossing into Terabithia and Sara Louise’s self-reconciliation, children are never too young or old to learn about love and friendship. Lois Stover wrote in *Teaching the Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*:

. . . *Bridge to Terabithia* demonstrates for young readers what it means to take the risks involved in forming bonds of friendship across gender lines, in learning to love and lose a loved one, and in finding ways to share the secrets of these insights with others. . . . Middle school students, through reading it, can explore . . . the relevance of these topics for themselves as they come of age in a world in which transience and uncertainty is a way of life for so many of us. (9)

Tomboy characters offer hope to adolescent outsiders who see themselves as islands in a sea of conformity. Readers gain courage to “take the risks” necessary to resist gender expectations in the name of self-awareness.

As a middle school teacher, I have not had the opportunity to teach either of Paterson’s novels; it is a simple question of logistics, really, as our school does not own enough copies to use with a class of students. However, I push the copies we do have

into the hands of my students every chance I get. The classroom novels that are available to us, unfortunately, tend to fit into the gender bias curve explored at the beginning of this paper. Of the six novels I have taught in class, three had female tomboy protagonists. (The rest were purely “boy books.”) When I allow students to choose which class novels they want to read, girls dominate the selection of tomboy books. Most of the time boys groan when I hand them a book with a girl’s name on it. But sometimes I am surprised. Sometimes a bright young man will pick up the *Little House* series and read it from beginning to end. Sometimes a clever young woman will become totally engrossed in the outdoor adventure genre, dominated by such names as Gary Paulsen and Will Hobbs. And that’s the beauty of childhood. As grown-ups, we can never be completely accurate in our assumptions or predictions about their behavior or attitudes. Children, even adolescents, are still growing and processing what they see in everyday culture. As educators and parents, it is our responsibility to provide choices by offering a variety of literature and characters for them to consider.

Above all in Paterson’s work is the search for and establishment of identity. That she focuses on the plight, struggle, and eventual victory of the social/gender outcast is simply a testament to the power of our common experiences. Everyone has been left out or left behind; such remembrances shape our identity construction. Within the hallways of middle school, students push for acceptance and conformity; they don’t want to stand alone. Yet by offering models of gender neutrality and nonconformity, Paterson gently exposes the futility of such a stance. Her stories give readers permission to break free, accept their individual and exceptional qualities, and move forward.

Despite the shift in our technology-driven culture, Paterson's novels retain value among twenty-first century children. Paterson published *Terabithia* in 1977 and *Jacob Have I Loved* in 1980. If these novels had been set or published in the new millennium, their characters would still resonate the same chords. Loneliness does not discriminate or become obsolete. Even the most talented children feel awkward and insecure. It is these lessons—and how Leslie and Sara Louise triumph and persevere—that students need. The fact that they are tomboys should, if anything, allow boys to read Paterson's novels without feeling they are “girly books.” Paterson says of her work, “When I look at the books I have written, the first thing that I see is the outcast child searching for a place to stand. But the next thing that I see is the promise of such a place” (*The Invisible Child* 179). Schmidt wrote, “Few would affirm Sir Philip Sidney's dictum that literature is meant to delight and—here is the sticking point—teach. For Paterson, this is an appropriate description. She wants her novels to bring good news to the downtrodden, to proclaim the possibility of hope” (viii). For adolescents, hope lies in acceptance and affirmation, which Sara Louise and Leslie come to possess. The courage and strength of Sara Louise and Leslie, outcasts themselves, prepare the way for others to follow.



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