



Enriched and empowered: nature's influence on the psyche in two Afrikaans youth novels

S. Meyer
Faculty of Education Sciences
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
POTCHEFSTROOM
E-mail: susan.meyer@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

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In this article two Afrikaans youth novels are analysed in order to determine to what extent nature and elements of the natural environment can influence a child's experience and view of life. In "Gamkab" (Betsie van Niekerk) and "Om 'n kerie te keer" (Pieter Pieterse) their natural surroundings expose the characters to challenges and adventures which form a context in which their ways of thinking are challenged and stimulated. This develops their ability to make decisions and solve problems, thereby broadening their life experience and developing their life skills. Theories on reader identification are used to argue that stories like these have the potential to expand and develop reader consciousness. These novels are of importance to the South African child of today, because they introduce various contemporary issues, such as entrepreneurship, social responsibility and multicultural interaction. In identifying with the characters, the reader is confronted with pertinent topics such as peer pressure, teenage insecurities and fears, and problematic family relationships. From the analysis of the novels, which focuses on the enriching and reinforcing contribution of nature, it is apparent that through nature's challenges the characters are empowered to overcome their problems and improve their personal circumstances. This foreshadows the potential empowerment of the reader.

Opsomming

Verryk en bemagtig: die invloed van die natuur op die gees en denke in twee Afrikaanse jeugromans

Hierdie artikel ondersoek twee Afrikaanse jeugromans met die doel om vas te stel watter rol die natuur en elemente van die natuurlike omgewing kan speel in die verruiming van die kind se lewenservaring en -uitkyk. In "Gamkab" (Betsie van Niekerk) en "Om 'n kiere te keer" (Pieter Pieterse) bied die natuurlike omgewing uitdaging en avontuur aan die karakters, maar ook 'n uitdagende en stimulerende konteks vir ontwikkeling op die vlakke van denke, besluitneming en probleemoplossing, vir die wysiging en verbreding van karakters se denkwyse en lewensinsig, en vir die inskerp van praktiese lewensbeginsels en -vaardighede. Teorie oor leseridentifisering word betrek om te argumenteer dat verhale soos hierdie die potensiaal het om ook die lesersbewussyn te verruim. Hierdie verhale is van aktuele belang vir die Suid-Afrikaanse kind van vandag, aangesien die jong leser bekendgestel word aan beginsels soos entrepreneurskap, sosiale verantwoordelikheid en multikulturele interaksie. Die leser word, via die proses van identifisering met die verhaalkarakters, gekonfronteer met algemeen relevante kwesies soos groepsdruk, tienervrese en problematiese gesinsverhoudings. Uit die verhaalanalise, met die fokus op die invloed van die natuur op 'n verrykte denk- en ervaringswêreld, blyk ook die bemagtiging van die karakters om probleme te oorkom en hulle lewensomstandighede te verbeter. Die potensiele bemagtiging van die leser word hiermee geïmpliseer.

1. Focus on people and nature

Recent Afrikaans literature demonstrates an abiding interest in the theme of the significance of the relationship between people and nature. This is, inter alia, the result of a concern with identity issues, which have occupied a central position among many other areas of uncertainty and postcolonial angst during recent times. The focus on people and nature can be regarded as part of an approach to creating identity in response to the question: Where do I find myself? Roos (2006:87-88) interprets the ecological perspective in contemporary Afrikaans texts as a literary confirmation of the concern with the natural environment in modern times, and our critical view of the relation between people and their physical surroundings. She refers to the World Summit on Sustainability that was held in South Africa in 2002, and the potential contributions this conference has made locally to raising awareness about the vital yet delicate balance between people and the natural environment.

Several Afrikaans authors, including Dalene Matthee,¹ Piet van Rooyen,² Pieter Pieterse,³ Johann Botha,⁴ Christiaan Bakkes⁵ and M.C. Botha⁶ reflect a holistic view in their works, showing that all living things and organisms are interdependent and interactively related. These texts form part of a long-standing tradition in Afrikaans literature: Roos (1998:28-31) refers to the animal stories by the Hobson brothers, P.J. Schoeman and Eugene Marais, as well as a large collection of regional and remembrance literature, travel ac-

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- 1 In Matthee's forest novels a particular sensitivity to ecology is revealed. Jooste (1998:675) refers to the influence of these novels in spreading an awareness of ecological issues.
 - 2 Van Rooyen depicts the human's relation to and intense experience of nature with the repeated motif of characters tracking animals, for example in his Bushmen *oeuvre*, which includes *Die spoorshyer* (1994) (*The tracker*), *Agter 'n eland aan* (1995) (*In pursuit of an eland/antelope*), *Die olifantjagters* (1997) (*The elephant hunters*) and *Gif* (2001) (*Poison*). This is clearly in continuation of Jan J. van der Post's series of "*Duine-boeke*". These were books set against the backdrop of the dunes of Namibia, then called "Suidwes" [South West Africa], which were read equally keenly by both children and adults (Combrink, 1966: 197). In Van der Post's stories different San characters and the various sides of the life of the San people are centrally placed, in order to portray these people's extraordinary knowledge of the veld and animals, of hunting and survival in extreme conditions in the open desert. Van der Post wrote, among others, *Agarob, kind van die duine* (1963) (*Agarob, child of the dunes*), *Jagter van die duine* (1963) (*Hunter of the dunes*), *Witman van die duine* (1965) (*White man of the dunes*), *Kwai, vegter van die duine* (1966) (*Kwai, fighter of the dunes*), *Ngnô, renoster van die duine* (1967) (*Ngnô, rhino of the dunes*) and *Toordokter van die duine* (1986) (*Medicine-man of the dunes*).
 - 3 Pieterse's *oeuvre* consists mainly of novels, youth novels and "*werfjoernale*" (*yard journals*) containing stories set in the Bushveld, on the Skeleton Coast and on the West Coast. The stories are characterised by the portrayal of human co-existence with nature.
 - 4 In Botha's collection *Groot vyf: spoor van 'n dekade* (1997) (*Big five: tracks/trace of a decade*) the focus is on the role of humans in nature, nature conservation and animal life.
 - 5 Bakkes presents his works from the perspective of an ecologically sensitive nature conservationist and scrutinises the relationship between nature and civilisation in the Southern African context, as can be seen in *Die lang pad van Stoffel Mathysen* (1998) (*The long road of Stoffel Mathysen*), *Stoffel in die wildernis* (2000) (*Stoffel in the wild*), *Skuilplek* (2002) (*Place of refuge*) and *Stoffel by die afdraaipad* (2004) (*Stoffel at the crossroad*).
 - 6 M.C. Botha's third novel, *Ons en die maan* (2007) [*The moon and us*], is subtitled "natuurroman" (*nature-novel*), thereby declaring nature to be a central focus of the novel. Several short stories and a travel account, *Zambezi* (1998), add to the collection of works in which he examines the relationship between people and nature.

counts, farm novels and rewritings of many farm novels necessitated by the stereotypical views of patriarchy, land ownership and racial relationships expressed in the original novels. Jenkins (2004:108) also discusses the role of nature in books for children and young teens stating that wildlife and the natural environment have very often provided the backdrop to such books and have frequently been the focus of attention in these books.

The portrayal of the delicate balance between people and their natural environment is a well-established theme in Afrikaans literature, and increasingly, the focus on people and nature is being expanded to interconnections between natural surroundings and people's psyches. This corresponds with ecocriticism's efforts to resist views propounding a culture-nature duality, by increasingly focusing on links between natural surroundings, on the one hand, and human identity or other cultural aspects, on the other, as presented in the literature. Armbruster and Wallace (2001:4) argue that an understanding of the manner in which nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to informed ecocriticism. They suggest that ecocriticism should therefore widen its range of topics to include the role of nature in texts mainly concerned with cultures.

Afrikaans prose offers interesting possibilities for research into the portrayal of connections between human identity and nature. However, thus far, little research has been conducted in this field. F.A. Venter's autobiography *Kambro-kind* (1979) (*Child of the Kambro*) and W.D. Kotzé's collections, *Voetspore in die Kalahari* (1992) (*Footprints in the Kalahari*), *Kalahari-kind* (2003) (*Child of the Kalahari*) and *Kalaharijoernaal* (2006) (*Journal of the Kalahari*), are examples of the literary confirmation of nature's impact on the identity of people and communities (cf. Meyer, 2008). The influence of rivers on human life and identity are clearly demonstrated in the memoirs of Engela van Rooyen's childhood entitled *Met 'n eie siekspens* (1994) (*With my own sixpence coin*), as well as in Pieter Pieterse's novel *Manaka: plek van die horings* (2005) (*Manaka: place of the horns*) (cf. Meyer, 2006b:51-77). People's personal response to exposure to natural disasters or the forces of nature can be traced in Chris Barnard's *Boendoe* (1999) (an Afrikaans word for a remote, undeveloped or isolated place; akin to wilderness) and Christoffel Coetzee's *Toewaaissand* (2003) (sand that is blown by the wind and covers everything) (cf. Meyer, 2006a: 57-77).

This article examines nature's impact on children's experience of their world and their views of life. Two Afrikaans youth novels are

analysed in order to determine the role played by the natural spaces in which the protagonists find themselves, and the ways in which the elements of nature affect the lives of the young characters. The article focuses particularly on how the environment and natural elements may change or broaden the characters' way(s) of thinking, their insight and experience of life, thereby helping and at times forcing them to develop life skills. In the first part of the article, theories on reader identification are used to develop the argument that stories of this kind may expand and develop reader consciousness. Based on this argument, it is deduced that the reader's involvement in the story, and thus engagement with the characters, may result in the reader gaining knowledge of life and life skills along with the characters. This knowledge does not necessarily translate into real and practised skills, but it is likely to be of advantage to the readers, should they be placed in a situation where such skills are applicable, particularly in comparison with readers who did not have the opportunity to gain such knowledge.

This focus on the impact nature can have on young lives, can be linked to Wylie's model for "ecologically-oriented criticism", which Jenkins (2004:109, 120) identifies as helpful in providing an approach to children's books that deal with nature and the environment. Wylie (2001:83) considers it important that literature in which the environment is a focal point is placed in social context and subjected to stylistic and aesthetic criticism, as with any other works of literature. Furthermore, he states that "ecologically-oriented criticism" must include taking an ethical standpoint that is not disengaged from the real world effects of the literary works (Wylie, 2001:83). This last point, Jenkins (2004:109) regards as pertinent to children's literature, since "this literature is intended for young, unformed readers and it has, at least in part, a didactic intention".

2. Enriched and better equipped: story, character and reader

Gamkab (1996) (Betsie van Niekerk) and *Om 'n kerie te keer* (*To fend off a kerie/walking stick*) (1997) (Pieter Pieterse) were chosen for this study, because in these novels the natural environment depicted skilfully as a setting in which the characters can grow in knowledge, opinions and experience of life. An analysis of these two novels reveals that nature forms a *locus* of challenge and adventure, through which the characters are stimulated to grow emotionally and intellectually, enriching their knowledge of life and better equipping them with life skills. This is achieved without the novels becoming

deliberately and explicitly didactic. In the debate on the nature of literature for children and teens, there are strong proponents of a didactic⁷ function, while equally strong opinions have called for the genre to be a source of entertainment instead. Creany (1994:21) is a proponent of the view, also held by Townsend, Lukens, Russell and Rosenblatt (cf. Greenway, 1994:146), that teen literature and children's fiction and fantasy should not be overshadowed by any explicit messages that writers feel compelled to impart. Creany (1994:21) argues that didacticism annoys readers of all ages and robs them of the opportunity to experience a genuine and personal response to the work.

*Gamkab*⁸ (Van Niekerk, 1996) is a tale of a fourteen year-old boy, Louis. Much against the boy's will he accompanies his father on a canoe trip on the Orange River. Father and son have become estranged for various reasons, such as Louis's involvement in theft under the apparent influence of "bad" friends (Frans Nortjé and his gang). Louis feels rejected and inferior. When his father, the leading rower, is injured even before they reach the most notorious rapid in the river, Louis, who is still inexperienced, is obliged to take over the position of the leader. What initially seems like an impossible task for him, eventually boosts his self-esteem and heals his relationship with his father. In the process, he also discovers the strength to resist peer pressure.

Om 'n kierie te keer (Pieterse, 1997) deals with a struggle against poverty by a boy, Tuba, from the Mafwe tribe in the Caprivi, Namibia. Tuba begins as a dealer in fishing line and uses his grandmother's chickens as venture capital, but his trading activities turn out disastrously. Then a new friend, Rusty, arrives from the city and helps Tuba by directing his entrepreneurial attempts. In this story, the *kierie*, a walking stick or a battle stick of wood, is a symbol of problems that have to be overcome: elephants that destroy the fields at night, crocodiles that catch cattle, and incomprehensible economic concepts that Tuba is confronted with in the entrepreneurial environment. The partnership between Tuba and Rusty brings about economic progress for Tuba and the Mafwe tribe; Tuba also emerges from a series of adventures a wiser and richer person. The natu-

7 For the purposes of the article, *didacticism* in literature is defined as the overt voice of the author clearly teaching within the narrative, as typically found in Victorian children's literature (Gray, 1992:87; Van Gorp, 1993:101).

8 Winner of the Sanlam Prize for Afrikaans youth novels in 1996.

ral surroundings and rich natural resources of the Caprivi are central to these enriching experiences.

In order to understand the young characters being open to the influence of nature in these novels, particularly with regard to obtaining new skills and fresh mental attitudes, one has to consider Wagner-Lawlor's (1996:144, 148) comments on the tendency in environmentalist children's literature to make nature the "advocate" and the "speaker" for its own case. She points out how easily children find this "voice" trustworthy, and argues that they identify with the "case" of nature, perhaps because the narrative strategy of allowing nature to speak "in its own right" is appealing to a particular and unique aspect of a child's experience – fear of superior power. Wagner-Lawlor (1996:148) emphasises that children instinctively show empathy for the endangered natural environment and natural things, arguing that allowing nature to voice its fears of powerlessness may appeal to a child's own need for nurturing and protection from what is dangerous in his/her own environment. The easy and seemingly natural process of identification between child and nature encourages openness towards nature and its voice. In the remaining sections of the current article, it is argued that the characters in *Gamkab* and *Om 'n kierie te keer* increasingly place their trust in their natural surroundings, rather than in authority figures, to guide and "support" them in risking taking on new skills and new ways of thinking.

This article proposes that, through a process of identification with the characters in the books, readers are able to use the potential of nature as a context for empowerment and enrichment. Van Assche (1989:62) describes the concept of identification as a largely unconscious process through which the reader identifies him-/herself wholly or partially with the character(s) in a text, with their thoughts, feelings and experiences and the associated situations and problems. Identification affords the reader the opportunity to move through time and space without the normal constraints, allowing adopting a variety of roles, and gaining and sharing of knowledge and experience (Tucker, 1981:187). According to Greyling (2005:102-108), the inclination to identify with the characters in the text is an integral part of a young reader's reading process.

When identification is discussed, the function and functioning of literature are natural extensions to the discussion. Ghesquiere (1982: 118) links the function of literature to the purpose of the text and possible effects on the reader. Greyling (2005:103) suggests that the functioning of literature, in other words, the effect it exercises on the knowledge, understanding and behaviour of the individual rea-

der, cannot be determined with certainty; yet, research by Andringa (2004:216) on identification tendencies in the reading of autobiographies indicates that individual readers are aware of being affected by their reading experiences and identification patterns. The hypothesis that readers are influenced by their reading material underlies various perspectives pertaining to children's and young adult literature (Greyling, 2005:103). Lohann (1986:50) argues that children are much more influenced by what they read than adults, because of their stage of personal development⁹ and the intensity with which they read.

Several effects of identification through reading are pertinent. For example, Andringa (2004: 220) distinguishes between direct emotional effects during and after the reading experience, external effects on behaviour, cognitive effects on the reader's ideas and reflection, and effects on the reader's life and life conditions. According to Ghesquire (1982), Stephens (1992) and Hancock (1993) the formative function of identification relates to the individual's personal development; particularly to the formation of an individual's own identity and the understanding of others, the self and the individual's own situation. It is postulated that when a young reader experiences the story as if he/she were the characters portrayed in the text, this reader becomes aware of differences between people, while recognition of the familiar contributes to self-understanding (Ghesquiere, 1982:118-120; Stephens, 1992:81; Hancock, 1993: 42). The social function of identification refers to an individual gaining knowledge and skills to be applied within a group, community or cultural society (Hynds, 1985:392).

This article does not aim to discuss the possible techniques that can be used to create identification possibilities for readers in the texts.

9 There are consensus among theories on the development phases of the child (an area in which, among others, Jean Piaget, Charlotte Bühler and Heinz Rempelin laid strong foundations), on the effects of the development of critical thought, which commences in the early school years. Children's curiosity and eagerness to learn results in an intense interest in their world and themselves. They wish to know not only what something (or themselves) is like, but also why it (or themselves) is like that (Lohan, 1986:13). This shift of interest from surface matters to a deeper level of observation in the older child phase, determines the manner of reading and the reading needs in this phase: children from around the age of nine want reading matter that will convey knowledge about themselves and their immediate reality. The absorption in a book offering these types of answers, and their being drawn into the events in such a book, is exceptionally intense, causing children to be more influenced by certain types of books than adults would be (Lohan, 1986:52).

Rather, the aim is to apply the researched effects of reader identification to the analysis of *Om 'n kierie te keer* and *Gamkab*, in order to determine the role of nature and the influence of the natural surroundings on the characters as portrayed in the texts. This is done with particular reference to the broadening of both the characters' and the readers' ways of thinking and improving their lives. The essential point is that reader identification provides a stepping stone upon which the reader can enter the characters' worlds of thought and emotion, and the effects of this identification, according to the theories mentioned above, may include personal development and improvement in the lives of the readers.

A discussion of these theories would be incomplete without some reference to the arguments against identification. Identification with characters is often claimed to be one of the requirements for a successful novel for children or teens (Steenberg, 1988:170; De Beer, 1991:6-7; Woolley, 1990:41). There is, however, some strong opposition to texts and reading strategies that encourage reader identification (Nodelman, 1981:177-185; Stephens, 1992:198). According to Nodelman (1981:181) emphasis on identification may lead to a limited or restricted reading experience and the exclusion of alternative experiences. Stephens (1992:68) is concerned about possible intellectual manipulation to which the reader in a subject position could be exposed. He suggests techniques that would contribute to dissociation from characters. However, Greyling (2005:110) argues that it is debatable whether the average reader would enjoy a story in which identification is discouraged, especially as identification can be regarded as a process of reading development that contributes to an enjoyable reading experience.

An analysis of the novels, focusing on the enriching and reinforcing influence of nature and the natural environment, shows that the characters become better equipped to overcome problems and improve their personal circumstances. With this, the potential personal development and empowerment of the reader is implied.

3. *Gamkab*

The familiar theme of conflict between parent and child is presented in this story, from the point of view that an experience in and of nature is therapeutic for those involved in damaged human relationships (Snyman, 1997:8). Louis's mother arranged the canoe trip in an attempt to restore the relationship between Louis and his father. However, the unfamiliarity of the environment and being forced to participate in the trip make Louis rebellious and make him believe

that the river and its banks are hostile towards him (p. 12).¹⁰ Louis sullenly observes the hard, unapproachable ridges (p. 7); the river looks muddy and unfriendly and the wind is blowing fiercely (p. 8). His negative attitude is a result of Louis's sense of being stripped of certainty. He does not know what it feels like to be on the river or whether he can row the canoe (p. 8). The river scenery intensifies his inner uncertainties: he has been punishing himself because he has not been assertive enough to turn his back on Frans Nortjé and his gang (p. 22, 27), and he loathes himself for not being able to be as strong and confident as he perceives his father to be (p. 18).

The multi-sensory experience of canoeing in a dangerous space forces him to assimilate the new experiences and thereby adopt a different perspective. It seems to him that he and his father are sitting in a movie with two large screens on either side of them, on which cliffs, hills, rocks, trees and reeds slowly drift by. Louis finds that he is looking at the river in quite a different way, from the inside out, not from the riverbank as he usually does (p. 13).

Once they are on the water, the river forces Louis to keep his eyes on his father's oars in order to match their rhythm and pace (p. 10). Whereas Louis has previously focused on his own sense of injury – he mopes about feeling out of place at the river, and is grumpy about leaving things at home (p. 7, 8) – there is now a shift of emphasis away from himself and his own preferences to the task he is performing. As a result, his negativity towards the natural surroundings he now finds himself in is replaced by a greater awareness of birds, *bloukoppoggelmanders* (rock lizards) (p. 27), *bleshoenders* (African coots) and a *likkewaan* (leguan) (p. 29).

From the start, the river creates a setting in which conflict can be both internalised and externalised. This conflict is firstly caused by Louis's own fears and lack of self-confidence, as a result of which he yielded to peer pressure; and secondly is caused by his father, to whom he thinks he is a disappointment (p. 9, 55). Louis does not feel capable of managing the canoeing experience, and, unfortunately, there are many rapids ahead. The most dangerous of these is Gamkab, where the water of the wide river rushes through a narrow strait only approximately three metres wide (p. 12). The first rapid, Long Tom, evokes clear memories of Frans Nortjé's insults

10 References in Section 3 consisting of only a page number refers to Van Niekerk (1996).

that Louis is “chicken” – a coward (p. 22). T.S. Eliot’s notion of an objective correlative¹¹ seems meaningful here: nature is clearly the objective correlative that evokes intense emotions. The adrenaline rush as they shoot the rapid adds to Louis’s sensory and intellectual awareness.

This first, frightening confrontation with the river causes a surprising sensation. It feels to Louis as though the nose of the canoe cuts right through all the confusing things in his head. It is as if everything breaks open and all the parts, falling to the left and right, land exactly in their places (p. 23). This rapid demonstrates to Louis that success on the river depends on working together as a team. He has to admit with shame how badly he has cooperated up to this point, how stubborn and wilful he has often been, doing things contrary to the way his father likes, and how his negative attitude has driven them apart (p. 25). The handclasp his father offers him after Long Tom initiates spontaneous conversation, and a more positive experience for Louis of the adult with whom it has been so difficult to communicate (p. 24, 25). Louis receives an equally big reward in his discovery that the river is a friendlier place – he develops a sense of belonging in nature (p. 29). He responds to this new awareness with appreciation, begins looking at his surroundings more attentively, and sees small movements everywhere: *dassies* (rock-rabbits), *grondeekhorinkies* (ground squirrels), *blouapies* (vervet monkeys) and aquatic birds (p. 44).

Louis has barely gained confidence in rowing with a teammate when the accident at Heksetand requires him having to take charge. Despite his feelings of panic and helplessness, he realises that the challenges that the river has forced him to conquer up to this point have equipped him with the skills he requires to manage the crisis (p. 52). Because he has learned to adapt to the supporting role in the canoe and to take his father’s pace in rowing, he is able to be supportive and assist his injured father from the scene of the accident to the campsite (p. 49). Because he has learned to focus on the task at hand, he is able to set his emotions aside for the time

11 The term *objective correlative* comes from Eliot’s essay *Hamlet and his problems* (1919), in which Eliot focuses on ways of expressing emotion in literature. In the essay, the objective correlative is used to describe a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events that become the formula for a particular emotion. This is done in such a manner that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked, as defined by Gray (1992:201).

being and focus on priorities with regard to caring for his father: the bleeding must be stopped and wood must be found before dark (p. 50, 52).

With nightfall, Louis fully realises the opportunity to explore his new-found values and attitudes, gained through the experience of nature. In the setting of the river in front of him, the dark hills behind him – through which there is no access to the river – and the dense bush on both sides, he is left to his own devices (p. 54). He has no choice but to confront his fears and responsibilities. Late at night, Louis vividly relives the world of crime into which he was drawn, and how he was repeatedly condemned by “friends” whom he “disappointed”. This intensifies his anxiety and sense of worthlessness (p. 55).

The Bigfoot man, an old goatherd whose shelter is near the canoeists' campsite, is integrated into the story as a symbol of wild nature and as mentor. He is the colour of the rocks around him, lives in a shelter made of river reeds, and lives off the veld and the river (p. 66, 67). He tells Louis that one can learn much from the way in which animals make careful observations in nature. The Bigfoot man refers to his staying alone in the veld, using words like *ken* (knowing), *mooi kyk* (looking carefully) and *oplet* (watching) (p. 69), in order to make Louis understand that fear can be warded off with knowledge. When Louis asks about Gamkab, the frightening experience that awaits him on the river, the Bigfoot man provides him with a very detailed description of the rapid and its eddies and whirlpools (p. 71). Empowered by this information, Louis has the courage to do what he has feared, to take on the role of lead rower in the canoe the next day (p. 72).

The first challenge Louis has to confront in the lead position is to make good decisions continually and quickly (p. 74). For him, responsible decision-making recalls the dilemmas he was faced with, when he was confronted with peer pressure. Louis discovers that in some situations in life one does not feel in charge of one's own “canoe”, because of other people's influence (p. 75). The approaching confrontation with Gamkab will be a confrontation with himself, in order to establish the measure of truth in his “friends'” accusations that he is “chicken!”

In the clash with Gamkab, the river is metaphorically portrayed as a monster: it has a mane and fangs, makes gulping and spitting sounds, has a tail and growls like a wounded animal (p. 85, 86). Louis is fighting at two levels: the external and the internal level, where he simultaneously fights the brutality of the waves as well as

the accusations that he is a thief, a villain and “chicken” (p. 86). The victory in his canoe is akin to a discovery of himself and his abilities; and afterwards he feels content with himself, for the first time in a long time (p. 88). The process of replacing self-loathing with self-value and self-confidence then appears to be complete. Louis finds confirmation of his true identity in the surface of the water. The words *Jy’s goed* (“You’re good”) are drawn by the blade of his oar by his side (p. 78). The intensity of Louis’s experience brings about a strong feeling of connectedness with the surrounding environment, where these positive changes in self-esteem were initiated. He no longer feels like a spectator; instead, he feels like part of the river, part of the singing reeds and the murmuring water (p. 94).

At the level of human relationships, the trip on the river offers a valuable experience as well. Louis discovers a kind of conversation with his father that does not need many words; their oars do the talking all day long (p. 46). Nature opens up possibilities of shared experiences and emotions for them (p. 24, 32, 79). It presents them with the opportunity to see each other clearly and truly for the first time (p. 53), to recognise each other’s positive characteristics (p. 25, 87) and to reveal themselves to one another. After the accident, Louis’s apparently “perfect” father displays a tenderness and fallibility that has a healing effect on their relationship. Louis marvels at how easy communication can be, like oars pulling together, like the two of them going through a rapid and arriving in calm pools without fear of capsizing (p. 57). Louis manages to “pick up” and confront his feelings one by one, like big, shiny pebbles on the black river sand, and to show them to his father: his fear, his loneliness at school, all the negative emotions he previously experienced (p. 57). The images of nature that are used in portraying the mending of their relationship are significant indicators of the role played by nature in the mending.

While they are on the river, Louis is forced to exchange vicarious ways of escaping personal and interpersonal challenges, such as playing his computer games, reading comics and listening to tapes (p. 8), for a more active approach to solving these problems in the “real world”. Being challenged at a physical and spiritual level, and at the same time surrounded by encouraging and guiding messages from nature, Louis learns to view himself and his life from a new perspective. At home, it was dreadful to see himself in a mirror, but in the watery mirror of the Orange River he looks a lot better to himself (p. 61). Having discovered his personal determination and perseverance, Louis also realises that self-worth is in no way linked

to approval by others (p. 92). This lesson implies a new independence: he does not need to fly in a flock like a weaver does (p. 80). This also gives Louis the will to resist peer pressure and to survive during times of a crisis. He now knows that even in difficult times one can go on rowing, no matter how tired one is or how endless the river seems to be; that the end *will* and *can* be reached (p. 92).

At the close of the story, Louis adds his stone to the stone beacon at Skerpioensberg (p. 95). The completion of canoeing on the river is accompanied by other victories: he solves depressing personal issues and gains important skills for coping with life and relationships. These victories emerge spontaneously from the action and adventure of the canoe trip.

As a result of the identification process, which is a natural process, according to Coplan (2004:142), the reader positions himself within the framework of time and space in the narrative – a position which is based on that of the protagonist. Therefore, the reader feels part of the story and experiences the river surroundings with various senses. Like Louis, the reader feels small against the cliffs, enjoys the sun and the water and hears the African coots scramble into the reeds (p. 94). Consequently, the reader also feels part of the process of being equipped with positive attitudes and valuable life skills.

4. *Om 'n kierie te keer*

The cover design of this youth novel features an African boy with a wide smile and a young, pleased-looking Western boy. This gives the reader a hint of the positive cross-cultural experiences that are to follow in the story. Pieterse gained first-hand experience of the lifestyle and traditions of the Mafwe boy he writes about during a long stay in the Caprivi; he is also an honorary member of the Mafwe (Van der Walt, 1998:2; Van der Westhuizen, 2005:366).

The most prominent fact in *Om 'n kierie te keer* is that of poverty in Africa, where tradition and progress are in opposition to each other. Tuba Matibe is trying to make ends meet by “borrowing” his grandmother’s chickens and exchanging them at the local shop for fishing line which he plans to sell at a profit. The shopkeeper scolds him for pretending to be an entrepreneur, as Tuba does not even know economic principles such as profit margins, securities or capital layout

(p. 52).¹² Tuba does not fear his grandmother's *kierie*, with which he is all too familiar, but he fears the unfamiliar *kieries* of the principles of entrepreneurship (p. 79). As with *Gamkab*, the motif of fear resulting from ignorance is apparent.

The stranger with the long red hair from Windhoek, who comes to buy thatching grass, is ignorant about the local customs of the Mafwe tribe, where the word of the *indoena* and *khuta* is the law. However, Rusty knows a lot about the principles of entrepreneurship. They agree to cooperate, and the Kwando river and surrounding country becomes the third "partner" to the agreement, in a range of enriching experiences. Nature provides the training arena and situations for the characters to improve their skills and broaden their range of experience. It further offers opportunities to practise various principles of economics and of life.

Tuba comes up with the idea of making a profit from selling fishing line when he catches a fish in the river and sells it to Joseph, who cleverly divides the fish into smaller parts and sells them at a profit (p. 22). Tuba laments the benefit the shopkeeper got from the fish for which he, Tuba, had to wait at night among the hippos (p. 22). Shortly after this, Tuba's line breaks and a fish gets away, so he has to learn a second, and expensive, lesson: his equipment is insufficient to realise his profit expectations. Rusty educates him on infrastructure – the things one needs to start a business (p. 82) – and Tuba manages to pull out an enormous fish, by using a double line. He proudly exclaims that his infrastructure is right this time, so this is a *kierie* he can fend off (p. 151).

When Rusty begins investigating the quality of the thatching grass in the Caprivi, Tuba becomes aware of the economic possibilities that grass sales have for the whole community with its abundance of grass. Getting buyers may allow the local people to all have enough money to buy food (p. 62). The economic principle Tuba has mastered at the riverside, of selling smaller pieces of fish to ensure a bigger profit, is soon applied again. Rusty considers the grass bundles of two dollars, the standard size in the Caprivi, as too big for his company's requirements and Tuba begins making a number of calculations. He argues that if the price is fifty cents for each small bundle, and if there are six small bundles in each big bundle, then

12 References in Section 4 consisting of only a page number refers to Pieterse (1997).

the price of a big bundle is actually three dollars instead of two dollars (p. 62). The resources that nature provides offer a useful opportunity to practise an important economic principle.

Loading the grass often takes a long time, because the rope made from twisted tree bark breaks easily, resulting in the bundles needing to be tied again, but this time with Rusty's expensive agricultural rope. This interference in his plans, through nature, introduces Tuba to another economic principle: calculating the monetary value of a product in terms of labour time. He calculates that chopping trees and twisting rope for a heap of grass takes a day or two – much more time than is needed for cutting two bundles of grass – but he can buy a large amount of agricultural rope for the price of two grass bundles (p. 103). Understanding the importance of this principle fills Tuba with great excitement.

Soon Tuba is confronted with the inevitable highs and lows of business. While he is in school, his grandmother's cow breaks through the wall of his house and eats the bag of maize flour that Rusty brought him to sell in small quantities (p. 123). Tuba realises that the walls were not strong enough to protect his merchandise: he has to admit that his infrastructure was not quite right (p. 160). And thus, through the setback that nature has dealt him, Tuba learns a good lesson. When Rusty visits again and brings ten bags of maize flour as an advance, on the condition that the price for it will be deducted from the first thatching grass that will be loaded in the new season, he stores it on poles in a reinforced hut, so that damp from the floor cannot spoil the maize flour (p. 163).

The concepts *rente* (interest) and *sekuriteit* (security), which Tuba looks up in Rusty's textbook on business principles, have practical meaning for him only in terms of the local and natural environment. Grandmother Mabaso runs up debt at Joseph's shop during hard times, which Tuba is allowed to repay by protecting the shopkeeper's maize field against elephants and hippos at night. The only security they could offer Joseph for the debt was the *bwato*, the canoe that they use to transport them across the river. However, because Tuba could not protect the maize against the destruction by the elephants, the debt is called in. He forfeits the security and Joseph threatens to confiscate the *bwato* (p. 133). Tuba has learned to rely on the calculations he makes in the sandy soil of the Caprivi (p. 112), and is able to calculate that the interest rate Joseph is charging on their debt is unfair (p. 148). When this is brought to the attention of the *khuta*, Tuba and his grandmother are awarded interest relief (p. 154). That interest can have a positive effect as well

becomes clear to Tuba in nature's classroom, when he catches a fish and gets back the hook with which the fish previously escaped. Tuba realises that this is his capital, and that he has received it back with interest (p. 152).

Tuba uses the opportunities that come his way to the advantage of the whole community. He knows that the community has cash flow problems (p. 166); therefore, the maize flour that he receives as an advance on his first delivery of grass is at first not sold, but rather exchanged for grass. The income the women make by cutting grass soon dispels the melancholy of poverty; their laughter and chattering can be heard even into the night (p. 168). The older women also receive an opportunity to make an income, as Tuba has them tie the big bundles that come from the veld into smaller bundles (p. 169). This demonstrates the principle that people should look after each other, a motif that runs through the whole story, and that is also summarised in the old African proverb, referring to the principle of Ubuntu, on the back page of the book: "n Mens is 'n mens deur ander mense" (People are people through others).

In Tuba's interaction with the natural surroundings and available natural resources, the emphasis is on his skill in applying and modifying business principles within his own environment. Because of this ability to apply theory in practice, Tuba's self-confidence and self-respect rapidly increase. In an ironic role reversal, the shop-keeper approaches Tuba for a loan, to which Tuba answers that if the security is good, credit can be considered, thereby confidently relying on his own experience (p. 167). In acknowledgement of his entrepreneurial skills, Tuba erects a board on which he proudly inscribes: *Mister Tuba Matibe & Family – Grass Merchants* (p. 167).

The characters of Rusty in *Om 'n kierie te keer* and the Bigfoot man in *Gamkab* display a number of similarities with regard to mentoring. These characters provide information that equips Tuba and Louis for the tasks each of them are required to complete. Their mentoring role is limited, however, because Louis and Tuba must make the theoretical knowledge they have been given their own in an independent way and translate this knowledge into practical skills themselves. When Tuba asks for Rusty's help in dealing with new production ideas, such as the price of purchased line and in calculating how many small grass bundles can be made from one big bundle, he is informed that a good businessman must do this kind of thinking for himself (p. 82). When Rusty has departed for the city, Tuba experiences a season of setbacks (p. 130-135), which includes the loss of the bag of maize flour. In these hard times, Tuba

has to rely on his own calculations and practical skills, in order to survive, by using the only natural resource available to him: fish from the river.

The natural surroundings and elements of nature play a much bigger role than any human mentor in the processes of empowerment the protagonists are involved in, for they provide challenges and create scenarios for problem solving and the development of life skills, such as overcoming limitations and turning problems into challenges. Tuba learns about purposeful planning when nature challenges him – he begins building scaffolding, so that rain water cannot cause the grass to rot (p. 83, 168). He gains first-hand experience in empowering people and witnesses the positive results of getting involved in the needs of the community, with regard to the community's quality of life. This results from being open towards making practical use of the training school, the resources and opportunities he finds in nature, to create a trade enterprise the Mafwe tribe as a whole can benefit from.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it may be argued that the mind-broadening potential of nature in *Gamkab* and *Om 'n kierie te keer* is relevant and important to South African children today. Through nature in these novels young readers are introduced to principles of entrepreneurship, social responsibility and multi-cultural interaction (*Om 'n kierie te keer*) or teenage issues, human relationships and responsibility (*Gamkab*). In *Om 'n kierie te keer*, readers are also brought close to the culture of an indigenous group in Africa. The theme of empowerment is generally relevant to children; the reader is confronted by metaphorical *kieries* that they will probably have to fend off at some point: issues such as peer pressure, teenage fears, problematic family relations or poverty in their community. It may be argued that through the process of reader-identification with the stories' characters, readers may also benefit from the knowledge that result from the characters' experiences of fun and adventure. However, because the process of identification has not been demonstrated, for example, through case study research, using reader response methodologies, this argument is proffered as a theoretical proposi-

tion.¹³ The possibility of further future research has to be considered and may well reveal significant results.

In these stories, the characters' natural surroundings form gripping and stimulating contexts for thinking, reasoning and decision-making. Nature offers situations for experimenting with and developing new and positive attitudes; it provides challenges and creates exciting scenarios for problem-solving, and it offers opportunities to practise important life principles. The skilful use of surrounding natural spaces and elements of nature conceals "lessons" about cultural understanding, economic empowerment and self-assertion; and through this the reader is drawn into experiences that fascinate, enrich and empower them emotionally and intellectually.

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13 A complete reader response study was beyond the scope of this study; yet a subsequent empirical study is considered to be the next step of the research reported in this article.

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Pieterse, Pieter: *Om 'n kerie te keer*

Van Niekerk, Betsie: *Gamkab*

