Neo-Paganism for Teens

—Catherine Tosenberger

Bramwell, Peter. *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction: Green Man, Shamanism, Earth Mysteries*. London: Palgrave, 2009. 256 pp. $80.00 hc. ISBN 978-0230218390. Print.

Drawson, Blair, and Anne Marie Drawson. *Witches in the Kitchen: A Year in the Life of a Junior Witch*. Toronto: Puffin, 2006. 48 pp. $21.00 hc. ISBN 978-0670064823. Print.

Johnston, Hannah E., and Peg Aloi, eds. *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 188 pp. $89.95 hc. ISBN 978-0754657842. Print.

Pattison, Caroline Rennie. *The Law of Three: A Sarah Martin Mystery*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2007. 232 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 978-1550027334. Print.

Neo-Pagan religions are among the fastest growing faiths in North America today, particularly among young people. Since the 1990s, an increasing number of literary and media texts aimed at teenagers have depicted Neo-Pagan religions not as primitive eccentricities or Satanism in disguise, but as viable spiritual paths, appealing especially to young people with environmentalist and feminist leanings. Alongside the mainstreaming of the Internet, interest in Neo-Pagan religions has become even more widespread. Teenaged religious seekers, who may not have had access to practising worship groups or to bookstores that sell relevant materials, suddenly have become a visible contingent in the general Neo-Pagan scene.

The best-known Neo-Pagan religion today, the one most commonly represented in texts for teens, is Wicca, a duotheistic, nature-based tradition of religious witchcraft that was created in Great Britain by Gerald Gardner in the 1940s. The most comprehensive history of Wicca and its many offshoots is Ronald Hutton's *The*

... *The New Generation Witches* ... includes not just academic studies of teen Neo-Pagan practices but also the voices of young Neo-Pagans themselves.

Triumph of the Moon, which articulates how Wicca shifted from a hierarchical, coven-based system to a more accessible and more solitary religious practice. The latter form of Wicca is the one that teenagers are likely to encounter. Television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* depict smart, savvy, capable young women whose Wiccan beliefs empower them to defeat the forces of evil, and films such as *The Craft* attempt to frame Wiccan practice in terms of its internal religious ethics. Neo-Paganism for a teen audience is not just found in fantasy media, however, but also in a number of non-fiction how-to books designed to introduce young seekers to the basics of Neo-Pagan faiths—but again, the focus is primarily upon Wicca. Silver RavenWolf's *Teen Witch* was the first such text, but hardly the last: more recently, *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard* (2004) and *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard* (2006), both by well-known Neo-Pagan author Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, even promise to teach young fans about the real magical traditions behind J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books.

There have been several scholarly forays into teens and Neo-Paganism, including a few essays in Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan's excellent collection *Religion Online*, which addresses young people and Neo-Pagan religions. Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloi's *The New Generation Witches* is the first book devoted exclusively to the topic, and the collection includes not just academic studies of teen Neo-Pagan practices but also the voices of young Neo-Pagans themselves. Likewise, while there have been numerous discussions of Pagan and Neo-Pagan themes in texts for young people, Peter Bramwell's *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction* is the first book-length literary study

that is grounded in scholarship on historical as well as contemporary Pagan belief systems. In addition, this essay discusses Caroline Rennie Pattison's *The Law of Three* and Blair Drawson and Anne Marie Drawson's *Witches in the Kitchen*, which are recent Canadian texts aimed at young readers who are curious about Wicca.

Before going further, some clarification of terms is necessary because the definitions of Paganism and Neo-Paganism are quite nebulous, as Johnston and Aloi note in the introduction to their book (4–5). Most of us are familiar with historical religions typically labeled "Pagan," such as the religious traditions of ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, but what does the term "Pagan" mean in reference to modern religious movements? First, while "Paganism" can apply either to historical religions or to modern religions, "Neo-Paganism," as might seem obvious, refers to modern revivals, recreations, reconstructions, reinterpretations, or revisionings of historical Pagan religions. Modern practitioners tend to use "Paganism" and "Neo-Paganism" interchangeably when referring to contemporary practices. "Paganism" is the broader term, and there have been a number of tentative definitions that have met with varying levels of success among modern scholars and practitioners. *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*, one of the largest and best-known Neo-Pagan message boards on the Internet, includes a "Pagan Primer" that seeks to qualify the simplistic notion that Pagan/Neo-Pagan religions are "earth-based": "This is certainly true of Wicca and some other Pagan religions, but many Pagan religions are only 'Earth-based' in the sense that their adherents live on the planet Earth." Wicca is by far the best-known Neo-Pagan religion, and unfortunately this has led many Neo-Pagans and scholars of Neo-Paganism to apply the beliefs and practices of Wicca to Neo-Paganism as a whole. A further site of dissension is whether non-Western religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Shinto, and indigenous tribal religions, should fall under the "Pagan" umbrella. Scholar Michael Strmiska argues that the term "Pagan" has strong European connotations and, moreover, strong *colonial* connotations when applied to non-European religions, a stance I support. Therefore, in his view, "Paganism" should be reserved for religions springing from Europe and the pre-monotheistic Near East (11). It is for this reason, for instance, that practitioners of African-derived religious systems often prefer the terms "African Traditional Religions" and "African Diasporic Religions," which accurately designate the religions without subsuming them under a European rubric.

The definition that seems to function best and that causes the fewest number of problems is the one espoused by *The Cauldron*'s "Pagan Primer": "A Pagan religion is a religion that is not Jewish, Christian, or Islamic and self-identifies as Pagan." This definition sidesteps many of the problems inherent in

attempting to define Pagan religions in terms of shared belief systems, including the risk of flattening out the enormous diversity of belief within both historical and contemporary Paganisms—not all Pagan religions are necessarily "polytheistic," for example. Also, through the self-identification clause, this definition does not impose a Western, colonialist term upon non-Western religions.

Moreover, the definition in the "Pagan Primer" recognizes that contemporary Neo-Paganism is, in the eyes of many adherents, not one religion with a variety of "denominations," but many different religions. There are vast differences between Wicca and "reconstructionist" religions, for example; reconstructionism is, as its name implies, a methodology that attempts to "reconstruct" the historical practice of a specific culture. Examples of reconstructionist religions include Asatru (Norse/Germanic), Religio Romana (Roman), Hellenismos (Greek), and Kemeticism (Egyptian). Reconstructionists, supported by reconstructionist-influenced scholars such as Strmiska, Jenny Blain, and Robert Wallis, are adamant that these religions, while falling under the "Neo-Pagan" umbrella (indeed, the historical manifestations of these religions are what most people think of when they hear the term "Pagan"), are intrinsically different from one another and from other Neo-Pagan religions such as Wicca.

Articulation of these issues is necessary because they underpin my primary complaint about Bramwell's fascinating but flawed discussion of Pagan religions in texts for young people. Bramwell's focus is on contemporary British fantasy, and the Pagan/Neo-Pagan themes invoked in these works most often represent the syncretism of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian myth and folk belief peculiar to the British Isles. It is this folkloric stew, combined with the anthropological theories of British scholars J. G. Frazer and Margaret Murray, that formed the raw materials for Gardner's invention of Wicca. Because Gardner located his new religion so firmly within British myth, folklore, and popular anthropological thought of the time, many were prepared to accept his claim that Wicca was indeed the "Old Religion" of the British Isles. Therefore, in many of the texts Bramwell discusses, the understanding of Paganism is distinctly British and often Wiccish, as opposed to the Greek and Roman models that are more familiar in literature for adults. Bramwell remarks that, in texts for young people, "the most common language of Paganism I find is not classical but one that exalts native spirituality" (19). This is not in itself a problem, and while I wish that Bramwell had devoted a bit more time to depictions of classical Paganisms, particularly given the recent upsurge of interest in Greek and Roman mythology in texts for young people (most famously in Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series, beginning with *The Lightning Thief*), his arguments concerning the shift in emphasis

in children's books throughout the twentieth century from classical divinities (such as the Greco-Roman Pan) to native-born spirits (such as Herne the Hunter) are illuminating.

However, Bramwell falls into one of the major traps that plague writers on Neo-Paganism: the temptation to conflate Neo-Paganism as a whole with the particular iterations with which the writer is most familiar. Bramwell is certainly aware of a variety of Neo-Pagan religions, as his brief discussion of Greek and Roman traditions indicates, and he often asserts that contemporary Paganism is extremely diverse. But even so, throughout the book, he projects the norms of the Northwestern European paths, particularly Wicca, onto Paganism/Neo-Paganism as a whole. Thus, he refers constantly to the so-called "Pagan Wheel of the Year," a festival cycle limited to Wicca and other syncretic Celtic/Germanic Pagan religions, even though "Wheel of the Year" festivals such as Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Yule are irrelevant within historical and contemporary Pagan religions that originate in, say, Mediterranean or Eastern European regions. In a particularly frustrating passage, Bramwell critiques writer Richard Rudgley for conflating Germanic and Scandinavian Paganisms (often referred to as Heathenism) with Paganism as a whole (26–27); however, Bramwell's scarcely wider frame of reference undermines the general usefulness of his arguments.

Misleading and reductive terminology aside, Bramwell nonetheless articulates some crucially important points about the linkage between understandings of Paganism and understandings of childhood. Specifically, he argues that "a clear similarity can be discerned between a Pagan view of childhood and the construction in children's literature of the child as primitive, connected with nature and the past" (29). As Bramwell points out, cultural-evolutionary discourses that equate Pagan religions with "childish" belief systems infest children's books that deal with such themes, even when both childhood and Paganism are valorized as more compassionate, tolerant, and environmentally aware than patriarchal monotheisms. Concentrating primarily on texts for children produced in the years since the Neo-Pagan revival, Bramwell makes a compelling link between contemporary fantasies about childhood and contemporary fantasies about the Pagan past, noting that both are invoked in support of a utopian future, free from environmental degradation and gender inequality. Especially trenchant are his arguments concerning the aforementioned Herne the Hunter and the more popular modern invention of the Green Man (a symbolic name applied to the gargoyle-like carvings of foliate heads often found in churches) as avatars for environmental concerns in texts for young people. By concentrating on Pagan and Neo-Pagan themes, Bramwell illuminates overlooked aspects of classics such as Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* and its

sequels, and Alan Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*, as well as recent, understudied gems such as Geraldine McCaughrean's *The Stones Are Hatching* and Catherine Fisher's *Darkhenge*.

Depictions of Shamanic practices often shade into cultural appropriation and patronizing colonialist discourses that link indigenous beliefs with the "childlike."

Of particular interest is his discussion of the fantasized, romanticized cultures and beliefs of the far Northern regions of Scandinavia and Russia, a phenomenon that he calls "Borealism." He argues that "representations of Heathenism in contemporary children's fiction make positive interventions in fraught areas of Borealism" (20), including the glorification of violence and racial exclusivity that has historically plagued the Germanic and Scandinavian Neo-Paganisms through their association with Nazi ideology. Bramwell also discusses the problematic uses of Shamanism, a term that is correctly limited to native Siberian practices, in texts for young people. Depictions of Shamanic practices often shade into cultural appropriation and patronizing colonialist discourses that link indigenous beliefs with the "childlike." Bramwell continues this line of reasoning into his chapter on witchcraft and the romance of prehistory, and critiques the manner in which "modern Wiccan beliefs and practices are retrojected into historical or time-slip narratives and antiquity is conferred upon them by association with prehistoric monuments" (145). His taxonomic breakdown of the various uses of standing stones in children's novels is an interesting contribution to the discourse of the representation of history in texts for young people.

As may be surmised, the representation of history, particularly that of Wicca, is a point of contention not just in fiction for young people, but within the community of young Neo-Pagans, also. As many of the contributors to Johnston and Aloi's collection

argue, young people are often attracted to Neo-Pagan religions because of a fascination with past religions that, in popular Neo-Pagan texts, are often figured as more welcoming of women as religious equals than in patriarchal monotheisms. This is especially prevalent in North American iterations of Wicca, which crossed the pond in the 1960s and have been growing ever since. For example, Hutton identifies "America's most distinctive single contribution to [Wicca as] its assimilation to the women's spirituality movement" (341). North American forms of Wicca took on a decidedly feminist slant and adopted the well-established theory, at the time most famously posited by Marija Gimbutas, that prehistoric civilization was matriarchal and focused upon worship of a Great Mother Goddess. Even after this theory was debunked in the 1970s and 1980s, Wicca retained a strong emphasis upon female faces of divinity as well as on female religious experiences. American writers such as Starhawk and Z. Budapest developed systems of feminist religious witchcraft that were related to, but not identical, with British Wicca.

Along with injecting a more self-consciously feminist strain into Wicca, North American forms of the religion gradually shifted from a hierarchical, coven-based tradition into a solitary path focused upon personal growth, fueled by books and, later, by the Internet; these iterations of Wicca are sometimes called "Neo-Wicca" to differentiate from the more formalized British traditions. Teenagers, who as Johnston and Aloi note were frequently denied access to and training in these often adult-only traditions (6), embraced Neo-Wicca in droves. It is this landscape with which the contributors to *The New Generation Witches* are concerned.

As the title implies, Aloi and Johnston are dealing exclusively with a cluster of religious witchcraft traditions that consist mainly of Wicca, Neo-Wicca, and their offshoots. While they acknowledge the fuzziness of the terms Pagan, Neo-Pagan, Wicca, and witchcraft early on, the terminology issue is not as problematic as in Bramwell since they are concerned with a fairly narrow range of closely related religions and practices. Moreover, because of their focus on contemporary practices, gender is a central issue: the vast majority of the Wiccans and witches under discussion are women, many of whom were attracted to these religions because of the potential for equal or greater religious participation and for the integration of feminist, environmentalist, and queer-positive politics with religious experience.

Like many essay collections, the contributions are uneven. The strongest articles are Douglas Ezzy and Helen Berger's study of conversion narratives among teen witches and Denise Cush's discussion of media and literary influences upon young seekers. These authors rely extensively upon teen self-reporting and contextualize this ethnographic data in productive

ways. The young women in these essays come across as intellectually curious and politically aware, not the ignorant dupes often presented in hostile accounts of rising interest in "the occult" among teenagers. Likewise, James R. Lewis provides some much-needed hard statistics concerning the rise of Neo-Pagan beliefs and practices among the general and youth populations.

While there is a romantic interlude between Byron and Sarah, it seems to come out of nowhere and lacks heat completely.

Other highlights of the collection are two short essays by practising teen witches Heather Jenkins and Morboriel Parthenos, who discuss how they came to their beliefs. It is a nice affirmation of the importance of teens' own voices, which are too often ignored within the discourse of teen religious experience. Parthenos's article is especially interesting, since she is an African American who is drawn to Wicca and European Paganisms. Her recounting of the negotiations that she has had to make between her African American heritage and the Christianity that she calls "compulsory in the black community" (92), the sometimes baffled or hostile response from Neo-Pagans of other backgrounds who want to know why she isn't following the traditions of "her" people, and the cultural appropriations of African and African diasporic practices by white Neo-Pagans makes for illuminating reading. Less successful is Peg Aloi's rambling discussion of the boom in witch-themed media in the 1990s and how it influenced teen interest in religious witchcraft and Neo-Paganism; while she makes some excellent points about the impact of films like *The Craft*—which Aloi names as "the single greatest influence on the growth of teen Witchcraft in America" (118)—and television series such as *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the essay is meandering and

unfocused. As well, Stephanie Martin's defence of the widely reviled books by Neo-Wiccan author Silver RavenWolf is unconvincing. Overall, however, this book constitutes a much-needed study of teen Neo-Paganism and is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of young people's spirituality.

A key difficulty for teenagers interested in Neo-Pagan beliefs is the sometimes hostile response from families and communities. The right to practise one's beliefs free from harassment is a central theme of Pattison's novel *The Law of Three*, the second installment in the Sarah Martin teen mystery series. Sarah, the narrator and an insatiably curious detective, becomes involved with the "mystery" revolving around class freaks Byron and his sister Garnet. Sarah rather amusingly investigates and dismisses the possibilities that they're in the Mafia or in Witness Protection before finding out the truth: they're Wiccans. Garnet is a belligerent, bullying Goth, while Byron is silent and withdrawn; the behaviour of both students is linked to religious persecution, which occurred in the wake of the death of Garnet's boyfriend, Will. Will's brother has ever since been on a revenge campaign against Garnet, whom he blames, insisting that she and her family worship Satan and cast evil spells.

The novel doesn't really hang together. Sarah's investigations result in a bullet-pointed list of factoids about Wicca, in the style of an informational manual. There is not much sense of Wicca as a living, breathing religion, or how it functions in a specifically Canadian context. This is perhaps understandable, given Sarah's outsider perspective, but it does tend to turn the book into a generic plea for tolerance. The characters are not very fleshed out; Byron, the object of Sarah's curiosity, does not seem compelling enough to warrant it. While there is a romantic interlude between Byron and Sarah, it seems to come out of nowhere and lacks heat completely. The happy ending seems a little too pat, with the primary "villain" contritely admitting his mistake and all being forgiven.

However, Pattison does have a sharp eye for the nuanced social dynamics among teenage girls: the sections detailing Sarah's fraught relationship with her friends Mindi, Stacey, and Cori, especially after she starts taking an interest in outcast Byron, ring very true. Also, while Byron is given an informational speech explaining Wiccan ethics, there is a nice, subtle affirmation of the legitimacy of Wiccan codes concerning love spells embedded within a key plot point, and the title refers to a common Wiccan belief that whatever one sends out into the world will return to the sender three times over (an intensification of "what goes around comes around"). Pattison clearly did her homework, and while this book is probably not substantial enough to satisfy an informed reader, it will likely be enjoyed by those who, like Sarah, have just heard about the religion of Wicca and find themselves curious.

Drawson and Drawson's *Witches in the Kitchen* also has elements of an informational text, even more so than Pattison's novel. There isn't really a narrative, per se; rather, the information is conveyed within a fantasy context that invokes the popular image of the Halloween witch (with characters named "Aunt Nettle" and "Aunt Thistle" who fly on broomsticks). While their book is ostensibly aimed at younger readers, teenagers and adults may well find much to enjoy here. Drawson and Drawson present a particular strain of Wicca focused upon cooking and herblore, which sometimes goes under the name Kitchen Witchery. The book takes the form of an illustrated "grimoire" created by Ivy, a junior witch in training, and discusses such witchy topics as familiars, plant folklore, and Wiccan seasonal festivals. While I think there was a missed opportunity to include some simple recipes and spells, the illustrations are charming and there is some practical advice on celebrating holidays such as Midsummer.

Between literary texts, non-fiction books, and the Internet, young people have more options for exploring Neo-Paganism than ever before. Pattison, Drawson and Drawson, and the novels discussed by Bramwell all offer creative engagements with Neo-Pagan beliefs, and Aloi and Johnston have provided a necessary window into the beliefs and practices of young Neo-Pagans themselves. Perhaps in the future, a more diverse range of Neo-Pagan options will become visible and accessible to young people; when that happens, the current discussions of Neo-Paganism and young people will prove to be invaluable foundations for future understanding.

Works Cited

Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003. Television.

Blain, Jenny, and Robert Wallis. *Sacred Sites: Contested Rites/Rights*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic P, 2007. Print.

Budapest, Z. *The Grandmother of Time: A Woman's Book of Celebrations, Spells, and Sacred Objects for Every Month of the Year*. New York: HarperOne, 1989. Print.

Charmed. The WB, 1998–2006. Television.

Cooper, Susan. *The Dark Is Rising*. New York: McElderry, 2007. Print.

The Craft. Dir. Andrew Fleming. Columbia Pictures, 1996. Film.

Dawson, Lorne L., and Douglas E. Cowan, eds. *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Fisher, Catherine. *Darkhenge*. New York: Eos, 2006. Print.

Garner, Alan. *The Stone Book Quartet*. New York: Flamingo, 1999. Print.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

McCaughrean, Geraldine. *The Stones Are Hatching*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004. Print.

"A Pagan Primer—For Those New to Paganism." *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*. Web. 30 Aug. 2010.

RavenWolf, Silver. *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1998. Print.

Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. New York: Hyperion, 2006. Print.

Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*. 20th anniversary ed. New York: HarperOne, 1999. Print.

Strmiska, Michael F. "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives." Introduction. *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Michael F. Strmiska. Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2005. 1–55. Print.

Zell-Ravenheart, Oberon. *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard*. New York: New Page, 2006. Print.

---. *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard*. New York: New Page, 2004. Print.

Catherine Tosenberger is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. Her research interests include folklore, fandom studies, literature and cultures of childhood and adolescence, and erotic literature. She has published articles on Harry Potter fan fiction, the fandom for the television series *Supernatural*, and the Grimms' tales.