

# Swamp Gum

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

## **Abstract**

This submission is divided into two components: the thesis itself – *Swamp Gum* – and the exegesis. *Swamp Gum* is a seventy five thousand word creative work, designed to be read before the exegesis. It is a fast paced, multiple point of view ecothriller set during spring in the temperate rainforests of contemporary southern Australia. The principal goal of the work is to entertain, but it also aims to impart information as well as a critical message pertaining to the clear felling practices that threaten those forests. *Swamp Gum* follows a classic three-act structure and prescribes to the principal of rising action. Many of the passages are written in a colloquial Australian brogue, with the goal of enhancing the authenticity of the language. The exegesis – designed to be read after the novel – aims to complement *Swamp Gum* by discussing the work from an academic approach. The exegesis supplies a synopsis of the work, contextualises it within the ecothriller genre, provides the background information on which the thesis is based, and explores how the work operates as an ecocritical text.

# Exegesis

## Introduction

*Swamp Gum* is a fast-pace ecothriller, with much of the action taking place in Australia's temperate rainforest. A group of young environmental activists discover a dead girl in the Australian rainforest. The group disagrees about what to do. Jane, a determined and sometimes stubborn armature photographer, insists on investigating it herself. The group splits; some remain at their camp, while Jane and two others head to the city. With the help of her friends, Jane discovers that the dead girl was an underage prostitute, working at a high class gentleman's club. Jane visits a psychic and begins to have peculiar visions that take her back to the colonial period; she believes they offer a clue the girl's death. The group that remained in the forest go back to look for the body but it has disappeared. A beautiful young journalist visits the camp. Loggers attack the blockade; everybody becomes stranded there after a confrontation in the forest. A young spy leaks the details of Jane's investigation and she is forced to go into hiding. She connects with Salt, an ex-army man and the dead girl's father.

Jane and Salt make an unlikely and volatile partnership. Together they raid the club, and follow the girl's trail to house of a wealthy client where they discover a notebook. The notebook reveal kickbacks to local politicians, including payments to secure the forestry contracts that the activists oppose. Salt and Jane take refuge in the wilderness. Jane fears what Salt's real intentions may be. The client, with the support of local politicians, hire a group of mercenaries to track down the fugitives. Jane's friends arrive back at the camp. Conflict emerges between the two groups. The logger who remains stranded confesses his role in unknowingly dumping the body; he decides to join the activists. Details of daily life in the forest blockade flesh out this section. The journalist and one of the activists develop feelings for each other. The police superintendent orders the camp's removal. A trio of festival goers arrive at the camp, bringing with them a large quantity of LSD. Jane has more visions. Jane and Salt evade the mercenaries and also make their way to the camp. Jane questions two key witnesses and begins to piece together the story of the girl's murder. The journalist offers to help leak the documents. Jane feels on the verge of success. The mercenaries arrive in the bush close to the camp.

The police, private security, logging contractors, and the chief villain (an industry lobbyist and club member) arrive. The police confront the activists, who use tree sits and lock-ons to stop the logging; many are arrested. The contractors clear fell an area of forest. The mercenaries shoot and injure Salt. A spy reveals herself; she forces Jane at gunpoint to destroy the notebook and the murder evidence. Jane escapes but feels that all is lost. The remaining activists regroup. The journalist spikes the police and contractors' coffee with LSD; chaos ensues. Jane confronts the sergeant in charge, and he listens to her statement. Jane reveals the facts behind the murder. Simultaneously, Salt abducts the lobbyist. Salt and the mercenary captain shoot each other; the lobbyist is caught in the crossfire. Jane and the police sergeant hear the shots, and discover the bodies. The police sergeant calls off the bust. An activist discovers some pages of the notebook were not destroyed. Jane has a final vision, and sees that the girl's body was eaten by Tasmanian devils on the night it was discovered.

On a personal level *Swamp Gum* is a tribute to the time I spent in Australia, specifically Victoria and Tasmania. During the two years I spent in these regions I was employed as a fundraiser by the *Wilderness Society*, and through my work, had the opportunity to visit many wild places, and areas of significant environmental destruction. I was actively involved with Camp Florentine, a forestry blockade in Tasmania, and political organising in Melbourne. It was also part of my job to talk to just about everybody I encountered about environmental issues, allowing me an insight into Australian attitudes. As I shall discuss in this exegesis *Swamp Gum* aims to inform on, and raise awareness of, a range of environmental issues in Southern Australia. This was a powerful motivation in writing the novel. I wanted to show people what it was like to walk in a logged coupe, to show them what life was like in an activist camp and get the word out on the corruption that saturates Australian environmental management. I wanted to write a book with a broad appeal to a wide range of potential readers. I wanted it to be thrilling in some parts, humorous in others, and I wanted it to impart a critical message about the relationship between Australians and Australia.

This exegesis is divided into three sections. The first section explores how *Swamp Gum* is located within the genre of the ecothriller, and also operates as an ecocritical text. The idea here is that the ecothriller itself is an analytical tool that uses a fictional framework to discuss ecological issues, and, by example, expresses a form through which literature and ecology interact. I will then examine other works in the genre to exemplify the concept of the ecocritical text and identify how *Swamp Gum* fits

within the ecocritical model. The second section discusses the expository elements of *Swamp Gum*, identifying how it aims to inform on a range of cultural, political and ecological realities in Australia, and explaining how they are structurally integral to the narrative, as well as the way this information functions in the novel. The final section will move to an investigation of the critical and social messages embedded in the text and evaluating how well the novel functions in terms of delivering its ecocritical message.

### **The ecothriller genre as an ecocritical text**

The ecothriller is an emerging genre that combines elements of the thriller with contemporary ecological issues. Perhaps the simplest definition of the genre is given by Sambuchino (2009) who, in his guide to finding literary agents, describes an ecothriller as “a story in which the hero battles some ecological calamity – and often has to fight the people responsible for that calamity” (p. 62) Other commentators such as Gabriele Dürbeck (2012) and Ryan Elias (2010) provide more elaborate parameters for the genre, principally arguing that a defining trait of an ecothriller is that it informs the reader of the reality surrounding an ecological phenomenon, and that the text is discursive, in that it is ideologically underpinned. This is the ecocritical approach to the genre, and the approach that has guided the development of *Swamp Gum*. The ecocritical approach facilitates a particular way of reading of the text. In emphasising this particular approach I aim to show how awareness of *Swamp Gum*'s ecological message has shaped the construction of the narrative and some of the creative choices in the novel.

Dürbeck, for example, in her analysis of Frank Schätzing's (2004) *The Swarm*, approaches the ecothriller from an ecocritical framework. Drawing from the work of Zapf (2010) and Clark (2011) Dürbeck makes a strong case for analysing literary texts, and specifically ecothrillers, as essentially political texts, located in a distinctly Habermasian notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1984). In her words, “the capacity of literary texts to reflect and criticize oppressive structures in the cultural system and to articulate alternative discourses, thereby condensing and transforming the public discourse” (p.22). Using this interpretative framework Dürbeck assumes, not unreasonably, that it is the function of an ecothriller to provide a critical message, and scientific information about contemporary ecological issues. She goes on to analyse *The*

*Swarm*, as being indicative of the genre, particularly in the context of how well it achieves this goal. The approach adopted by Dürbeck is important to the construction of this exegesis as it provides the theoretical foundation of my own discussion.

In her analysis, Dürbeck (2012), points out that *The Swarm* condenses a range of scientific knowledge such as deep-sea research, environmental science, microbiology, genetics, network theories, behavior research and knowledge about nature from indigenous peoples. It does this both through an omniscient narrator and characters that have that specialised knowledge. Dürbeck describes this as a “science-in-fiction” (p. 22) approach. She points out that reviews of the novel fall into two camps. Positive reviews hold that the novel, “astutely popularises ecological knowledge, illuminates scientific phenomena in an action packed narrative and warns the public about environmental destruction,” (p.22). Negative reviews deny the book this function. Dürbeck concludes that, “The problem with *The Swarm* is that the fantastic and mythical tendencies tend to overwhelm the more enlightened and critical elements,” (p. 28). She then, perhaps unfairly, extends her conclusion to a sweeping criticism of the genre as a whole.

As a vehicle for eco-critical thinking, ecothrillers may suffer from an intrinsic dilemma: either to provide sufficient suspense in line with readers’ expectations or to convey plausible explanations for the causes of the ecological crisis and more sustainable practices. (Dürbeck, 2012, p. 28)

Whether or not Dürbeck’s view that sufficient suspense is mutually opposed to plausible explanations is accurate – an issue that I will return to – her discussion provides an interesting starting point to pinning down a definition for the genre. Most importantly she analyzes *The Swarm* as an ecocritical text in its own right. Because, as Dana Philips (1999) argues, an ecocritical approach treats the notion, prevalent in literary theory, that nature and the environment are culturally constructed concepts with suspicion, ecocritical texts are imbued with a realism, or even positivism, which ascribes intrinsic value to the environment and environmental knowledge. According to Philips, the approach holds that texts that deal with the environment should be read not only within the context of their accuracy but also within an ethical paradigm in which environmental issues are paramount. If Dürbeck is correct in treating ecothrillers as ecocritical texts, then their treatment of the environment really matters. They should

inform the reader about an environmental issue, or at least an aspect of it, and be accurate in the information they impart, which would mean that certain works, historically viewed as belonging to the eco-thriller genre, such as Micheal Chrichton's (2004) *State of Fear*, would need to be reclassified. As noted by Philips, ecocritical texts should also impart a critical message regarding human relationships with nature. Dürbeck pointed out that reviews of Schätzing's novel were divided into those that praised its critical message and its ability to impart scientific information and those that were critical of it. This suggests that the perceived role of an ecothriller to inform, and the debate over its ability to do so, is clearly part of the public discourse and effects the way works in the genre are received.

Ryan Elias (2010) in his discussion on the genre strengthens the notion that ecothrillers are ecocritical texts by emphasising their informative and ideological elements. He notes that, "dealing as it does with real or projected ecological issues, the genre often embraces sophisticated scientific exposition," (p. 5). As an example Elias notes that *The Darkening Archipelago*, a Canadian novel by Stephen Legault (2010), "has more to say about sea lice than most readers will ever have thought to know as it explains the dangers of fish farming in the Pacific Northwest" (p. 5). Elias's first rule for identifying an ecothriller is that, "nature is central to the novel, but not the villain. Authors use environmental obstacles to make broader points about the relationship between humanity and the planet in a fictional, entertainment-driven frame" (p. 5). This, he points out, is why *Jaws* is not an ecothriller. Elias also views the genre as overtly ideological, grounded in a, "profound concern for the welfare of the planet." (p. 5) Elias's definition of an ecothriller fits with the treatment of ecothrillers as ecocritical texts: they impart useful information about the real world, nature is treated with appropriate reverence – not as an adversary – and they impart a critical, indeed, ideological message.

Through this discussion the peculiar nature of an ecothriller emerges; that is unlike the thriller whose goal may simply be to thrill, the ecothriller informs, and, tentatively, attempts to contribute to a changing global consciousness. Dürbeck (2012) and Elias (2010) placed a specific emphasis on science as the area of knowledge that defines the ecothriller's expository element, this may, however, be limiting as ecological issues are, after all, areas of cross-disciplinary interest, and as demonstrated below, authors bring their own knowledge base and interests to the table when constructing their narratives. I will now discuss some major works in the genre with the

goal of strengthening the case for viewing them as ecocritical works. I aim to pay particular attention to the type of knowledge they impart and the critical/ideological message they contain, as well as the strategies they use to deliver these.

Award winning Nigerian writer, Helon Habila, in his 2010 ecothriller, *Oil On Water*, focuses the expository element of his book on the social impact of oil drilling in the Niger Delta. The novel follows the journey of two journalists up the Niger River on the trail of the kidnapped wife of a diplomat. During their journey they are faced with the brutal human and environmental costs of drilling. The stark realism of the text, combined with a journalistic writing style, leave the reader in no doubt that what they are reading is an accurate description of a very real ecological catastrophe. During a public lecture on the work in Berlin, Habila, (2013) specified that his intention in writing the novel was to highlight the social and political complexity surrounding the ongoing crisis in the delta. Both in his delivery and his stated goal Habila's work clearly fulfills the goal of an ecocritical text, as it informs about and raises awareness of an ecological issue. This is strengthened by a minimal use of fantastic or unbelievable elements in the plot. Ideologically, the work carries a strong message about the impact of greed on nature and community.

Best selling author, Carl Hiaasen, a well-established name in the ecothriller genre, focuses the expository power of his works on the mechanisms of corruption and corporate negligence in the state of Florida. In his 2000 work, *Sick Puppy*, Hiaasen tells the story of an eco-terrorist and the wife of a lobbyist who cooperate to foil the plans of the lobbyist and a corrupt politician who plan to turn a pristine Island in Florida's Everglades into a holiday resort. The book uses satire to raise ecological issues, including game reserves, the illegal wild life trade, pollution and development of wilderness areas. What Habila achieves through realism, Hiaasen achieves through satire. The use of comedy allows Hiaasen to expose and explore serious ecological issues without being preachy. The work informs the reader both about the specific ecology of the everglades and the mechanisms of Floridian corruption. Despite being very different works, the ideological tone in *Sick Puppy* is similar to *Oil On Water*: greed is destroying nature.

Sarah Moss's 2009 ecothriller, *Cold Earth*, follows the story of a group of researchers working in Greenland, while a global, apocalyptic environmental crisis unfolds in the wider world, conveyed to the characters through their radio. The informative element of the work is principally archeological, providing large amounts

of information, through the specialist knowledge of the characters, about the collapse of the Greenland Norse society in the fifteenth century. The strategy that Moss uses to impart a critical environmental message is metaphor; the collapse of the Greenland Norse society becomes a microcosm through which the ecological dangers faced by modern globalised society can be understood. Its ideological message could be interpreted to relate to the fragility of human societies in the face of climate change, ecological collapse, and resource boundaries.

Mathew Glass's work, *Ultimatum* (2009), concentrates its explanatory power on the mechanisms of international diplomacy and global economics. The book takes the point of view of people in power as climate change causes an economic and diplomatic crisis, ending in a nuclear stand off. Because of his work with human rights groups, Glass, as a reviewer for *The Economist* points out, "is familiar with the corridors and committee-rooms of power. He is good at portraying diplomatic brinkmanship and political in-fighting, and knows how policy gets made" (*The Economist*, June 2009, p. 4). The same reviewer noted how well the book fulfills the ideological function of an ecothriller when he wrote, "*Ultimatum* does a better job of convincing the reader about the price the world will pay for its complacency about global warming than any international grandstanding or dry scientific reports," (p. 4). The strategy that Glass uses to present his message is dramatisation. He has taken something that already exists – there is indeed a diplomatic and economic crisis brought about by climate change – and exaggerated it into an extreme scenario. His strategy is therefore almost the reverse of Habila's. Where Habila relies on the obvious truth of his narrative to keep the reader hooked, Glass pushes his firmly into the world of alternative reality in order to add necessary urgency to a narrative that some reviewers still see as being too dry.

*Echoes In The Blue*, a 2006 New Zealand ecothriller by C. George Muller, a biologist, fits well with Dürbeck (2012) and Elias's (2010) emphasis on science, providing a range of scientific information on oceans and whales, but it also provides information on whaling practices, the mechanisms of the International Whaling Commission and the strategies employed by maritime activists. Philippa Jameison (2006) in her review for the Herald explains how the novel admirably succeeds as an eco-critical work, stating that it has, "enough freshness and momentum that the reader can handle the ecological declamations and the massive amount of information being imparted." Jameison noted that the work succeeded in its ideological message and

contemporary relevance, stating that:

In an uncanny real-life parallel, while I was reading, news bulletins kept updating progress on the disabled, fire-damaged Japanese “factory ship” (read: floating whale slaughterhouse) in Antarctic waters. It highlighted the book’s themes of the ongoing international conflict over these noble and endangered creatures, and the clash between greed and conservation (Jameison, 2006).

Though the novel may contain traces of a Habla style realism, one strategy used by the author to deliver his message, as pointed out by Jameison, is the likeability of the protagonist – everybody loves a bumbler.

These summaries demonstrate the ways in which some eco-thrillers achieve their goals as ecocritical texts. They provide knowledge about ecological issues such as politics, archeology, sociology and science. They contain embedded critical/ideological messages about the environment, such as highlighting the impact of greed on people and nature, or the fragility of human civilization. They employ a range of strategies to convey both the information and critical message: humor, realism, metaphor, exaggeration, and, by definition, a thrilling plot. In my own attempt to write an eco-thriller, which has an ecocritical focus, I have drawn upon these characteristics as a framework.

### **The ecological information presented in *Swamp Gum* and its importance to the narrative.**

*Swamp Gum* is based on a range of information, which can be roughly organized into four categories: the forest itself, deforestation, corruption, and activist culture. Scientific descriptions of ecology provide readers with an understanding of old-growth mixed eucalypt/rainforest found in parts of Victoria and Tasmania, and deforestation occurring in those forests, and, despite limited information, reveals government and industry corruption behind those practices. Finally, the novel also provides information regarding police and activist tactics, such as those used by *Still Wild Still Threatened* in Tasmania. This information forms the context, basis and backdrop of the narrative and provide the central elements of the novel’s plot, story and imagery. Here I will here provide some background to the first three categories, and then move to a discussion

on how each of these categories were integral to the construction of *Swamp Gum*.

The descriptions of nature in the Balloong valley, for example, are specifically based on the ecological zones I observed during the months that I spent in the Florentine Valley during the spring of 2010. The Florentine valley is an area of mixed eucalyptus regnans with temperate, Gondwana-style rainforest – similar to New Zealand’s temperate rainforest (Gilbert, 1959). The eucalyptus regnans, locally referred to as swamp gums or mountain ash, are the second tallest trees on Earth and the tallest hardwood trees found anywhere, frequently growing up to ninety metres high (McCarthy1998). The region contains a range of endemic plant and animal species, and the type of forest is very similar to other regions in Tasmania, such as the North East, and parts of Victoria, notably the Central Highlands and East Gibbshland (McCarthy1998).

Deforestation in Tasmania and Victoria is a well documented and highly controversial practice. In his article for *The Monthly* Richard Flanagan (2007) noted that over 85% of Tasmania's old-growth *regnans* forests had been felled and of the 13, 000 hectares remaining almost half were scheduled to be clear felled. Logging in these high conservation forests has continued into 2013 (Jabour, 2013), and similar clear felling practices threaten the last old-growth eucalyptus regnans and temperate rainforest in Victoria (Arup, 2013). All the rainforest trees in a logging coupe are left on the ground while the eucalypts are removed to wood-chipping plants (Flanagan, 2007). The coupe is then subjected to a high intensity burn, to prepare the ground for plantation planting (Flanagan 2007).

Luke Chamberlain (2010), campaign manager for *The Wilderness Society*, argued that corrupt practices underpinned this deforestation. In the Victorian example the logging of old-growth forests made a considerable loss and were heavily subsidised by the state government, who awarded the contracts to private companies. The government subsidies allowed the contractors to sell the timber at extraordinarily low rates to wood-chipping company Midway Ltd. Having chipped the wood at their plant in Geelong, Midway would then sell the chips to international paper and pulp companies for a considerable profit. Essentially, it was a direct transfer of public money to Midway via the logging subsidies (Chamberlain 2010).<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain’s view was

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<sup>1</sup> For the Wilderness Society’s write up on the issue see this article published on their website, “Baillieu: Subsidising Extinction With Your Taxes”  
[p://www.wilderness.org.au/articles/baillieu-subsidising-extinction-your-taxes](http://www.wilderness.org.au/articles/baillieu-subsidising-extinction-your-taxes)

that this arrangement was allowed to continue because of kickbacks provided by Midway to elected state officials. The situation is mirrored in Tasmania, and historically has been far worse, where corruption, and the revolving door between Gunns Ltd and the Tasmanian state government is well documented (Flanagan 2007).

The specific environment of these forests is central to the novel. The first three paragraphs of *Swamp Gum* are a description of this ecological zone, seen through the eyes of Jane, who, as a wild life photographer, has a particular eye for nature. Much of the action in the novel takes place in this environment, and descriptions of its ecology form a recurring motif. Even the title, *Swamp Gum*, reinforces the importance of the forest to the narrative. Through emphasising the ecological richness of the region I aim to give the reader a sense of the forest's value. This is important, as it is central to the readers' enjoyment of the work that they are emotionally invested in the forest and are therefore able to empathise with the activists, who fight for its protection, and share in their horror at its destruction. The forest is central to the plot and story, as it is invested with value and stands to be lost. Aside from these functions I aimed to imbue the forest with an archetypal symbolism – the untouched wilderness. Lui's internal monologue, for example, at the beginning of chapter three, compares the wild nature of the Balloong valley to his experience of wilderness in Europe. The functions of the forest in the narrative illustrate my conscious attempt to write ecocritically – nature is central but not the villain; the work aims to inform, yet also create an emotional connection to the environment.

In symmetry to the descriptions of nature are the passages which detail deforestation, and it serves a number of functions in *Swamp Gum*. Firstly the threat of clear felling adds urgency to the plot. The threat is introduced in chapter one in the sequence in which Jane, Lui, Nails, and Lauren investigate the logging coupe. The threat remains throughout the novel as the reader is reminded of it through descriptions and dialogue, such as Lui and Jeanette watching a burn-off, chapter four, or Chris's discussion with the young punks at the end of chapter nine. The threat ultimately becomes a reality as *Swamp Gum* climaxes in chapters eleven and twelve, and the Balloong Valley is partially logged. Because deforestation could potentially be an abstract threat, it is after all easier to identify with a whale being slaughtered than a tree being cut down, I attempted to show throughout the novel how the Balloong valley was the home of the activists. By doing this I aimed to attribute to the forest a very human value, which should give the issue of clear felling more narrative weight. Deforestation

also connects the multiple points of view in the narrative. What, for instance, connects Jane, Lui, Nails, Warwick and Johnno? It is deforestation, and their differing attitudes to it allow the reader to appraise their character. Aesthetically the images of destruction create a counter balance to the potentially idealised descriptions of nature.

Corruption is likewise a major focus of the novel – exemplified by the lobbyist character, David Johnston – and the desire to suppress/expose evidence of this corruption forms the crux of the story. Because, from an ecocritical perspective, corrupt practices are something that the novel itself aims to reveal, it was important to create a credible representation of those practices, however, my lack of understanding of how underhand deals might operate in practice presented me with a representational problem. I solved this by fusing what information I did know with creative invention. The meeting between Johnston, the police commissioner and the premier in chapter seven would be an example of creative invention, while the dialogue between Nails and Jane in chapter two would be an example of relaying verifiable information.

Because the mechanisms through which Gunns and Midway provide kickbacks to politicians are not in the public domain, I used a proxy: the corruption crisis in Spain this year. The Spanish crisis had a key parallel with Tasmanian and Victorian corruption in that it involved significant payments from private companies to elected politicians in exchange for awarding government contracts to those companies (Burgen 2013). There were two key features of the Spanish crisis that I imported into my narrative. Firstly the companies operated through a slush fund allowing them to keep their identity hidden. Secondly, the only evidence of the payments were in the form of hand written receipts, kept by the government treasurer because electronic information was perceived to be less safe (Burgen 2013). These elements from the Spanish crisis helped me create a representation of how corruption could operate, and how it could be exposed. I significantly departed from what I knew, using creative licence, in the creation of the “Vittoria Club” – in which I fused the idea of a high class gentlemen’s club with the functions of a shadowy slush fund. This allowed me to create a representation of evil that drew together the death of the underage prostitute with the corruption scandal to maximise plot tension while providing coherence to the different strands of the story. I used similar creative licence in the construction of the villain, Johnston, who conflates a number of roles which in reality would be filled by different people with different employers – lobbyist, spy master, and industry representative on the ground.

Before concluding this section on the information which *Swamp Gum* is based,

I would like to draw attention to the details of activist, and industry tactics, as well as activist culture, that the novel references. These snippets of information may be important to the plot. For example Lauren pouring sugar in the fuel-tank of contractor's jeep means that they become stranded at Camp Balloong – an important plot twist. But most of this kind of information serves a different purpose. It offers a window into a different way of life, showing the reader a different way that some people live and fight. For example there is no great plot or story importance to the way in which Lui takes a bush shower, or Lauren's conversation with the contractors over how to "shit in the bush," rather these details provide relief from the plot and give the characters and situation an authentic touch. In the first climax, chapter six, as well as the final climax in chapters twelve and thirteen, the tactics of police and activists take centre stage – tree-sits, lock-ons, ditches, etc – showing the way in which hard power is exercised on the ground. In writing these details I did import some things from outside the Australia. Black bloc, a tactic, where activists aim to turn peaceful protests violent, is something more commonly seen in southern Europe and South America than in Australia (Davies 2013). To my knowledge no industry spies have been discovered in Australian direct action groups, and, in the construction of the character Warwick I imported an example from New Zealand, where a young spy, working for a private spying agency hired by the interested company (Solid Energy) infiltrated direct action group, *Save Happy Valley Coalition* (Brooker, 2007).

To summarise *Swamp Gum* attempts to fulfil its role as an ecocritical text by informing on a range of issues as well as imparting a critical message regarding human relationships with nature. It informs the reader about the local ecology, clear felling practices, the corruption behind those practices, and, finally the tactics and strategies used by activists, police and industry. This information essentially formed the elements from which *Swamp Gum* was constructed and firmly contextualises the novel within contemporary Australian politics.

### **The critical message of the novel and its success as an ecocritical text**

This section of the exegesis is not meant to supply an authoritative interpretation of *Swamp Gum*, and I leave it up to the reader to draw their own meaning from the text, rather this section provides information on some messages that I consciously raised in the work and how they affected my narrative and aesthetic choices. I will assess the

success of *Swamp Gum* as an ecocritical text, first by discussing Dürbeck's (2012) argument that "sufficient suspense," detracts from the ability ecothrillers to be ecocritical. I will give an intuitive counter argument, moving outside the genre to use the example of an eco-themed science fiction. I will then return to my work discussing two elements of the narrative, which locate *Swamp Gum* away from realism, using them as counter examples to Dürbeck's position, arguing that they enhance *Swamp Gum's* success as an ecocritical text. I will conclude with a short summary of what thrillers generally may bring to the table when promoting ecological awareness.

One of the major critical messages that the novel aims to impart is, as indicated through my discussion on the genre, a familiar one: the destructive qualities of greed. *Swamp Gum* conveys this overtly, through the descriptions of forest destruction and the characterisation of corporate and government characters whose greedy attitudes are embellished to the point of satire – a technique inspired by Hiaasen (2000). More subtly the novel aims to deliver this message through metaphor: the murder of the young girl and the visions experienced by Jane. The girl whose body turns up in the logging coupe, chapter one, can be seen as reflecting the logging itself. Where her body is broken and dead so is the forest around her. While she is discarded like a piece of rubbish so are the rainforest trees. She, like the forest, is innocent, and, the apathetic attitudes of people in power toward her death are similarly analogous to environmental destruction. The vision sequence, in which Jane sees the subjugation and rape of an indigenous Palawa woman, contextualises the clear felling of the forest within the broader history and pattern of colonial abuse. Thus the murder, deforestation and vision come together in what I hope is a fairly dark representation of white Australia's relationship with the land.

*Swamp Gum* also aims to raise important questions regarding the anonymity of evil and the dissemination of corporate responsibility. Johnston, for example, is the principal villain, but he is after all just another corporate employee – just doing his job – and the novel ends without any true identification or exposure of the people behind the murder, while the press makes no mention of it in the final chapter. This aspect of *Swamp Gum's* message is particularly emphasised in chapter eight, in which Lui, during a conversation with Nails articulates the very point that no one person can be held responsible for either the murder or the destruction of the forest. It is, as Lui describes it, "the faceless machine" (p. 94). Nails argues against Lui, claiming that individuals can and will be held responsible. The narrative then moves to a section in which

Johnston meets a nameless man in a private strip club who orders Johnston to keep the situation under wraps. The debate between Lui and Nails is not resolved in *Swamp Gum*.

Thirdly, *Swamp Gum* imparts a positive message: the capacity of people working cooperatively to stand up to corporate interests and make a real difference, ultimately achieving their goal. The novel depicts the activists as an eclectic group of people with often conflicting views of how to achieve forest protection. Tom the anarchist for example tends to advocate more violent approaches, while Goldy tends toward a more compassionate position. In the face of violence and destruction, particularly in the climax, this diverse range of people come together, each having a particular role to play in defending the Balloong Valley. Ultimately they triumph. Given that the recent agreement in Tasmania, protecting tens of thousands of hectares of high conservation forest, was largely brought about by the ongoing campaigns of local activists (Jabour, 2013), the positive message imparted by *Swamp Gum* reflects the real potential of community groups to make a difference.

Thus *Swamp Gum* aims to impart a critical message regarding the relationship between people and the environment, raise questions about corporate responsibility, and provide an uplifting message about the power of communities to achieve ecological protection. In her analysis of *The Swarm*, however, Dürbeck (2012) argued that ecot thrillers suffered from an intrinsic dilemma as a vehicle for ecocritical thought – that the plot elements designed to provide sufficient suspense could detract from the critical message – something that Dürbeck saw as a serious problem with the genre. Her argument could be condensed to the notion that the less realistic an ecot thriller, the less successful it is as an ecocritical text. As an example of an ecot thriller *Swamp Gum* contains many plot elements and devices that serve purely to increase suspense: the murder, the ransacking of Jane's house, the burning down of the old house on North Side, the kidnapping of Sky, the employment of the ASIS, the gunfights, Jane's spiritual visions, Holly's blackmail, etc.

It is questionable that the deployment of such devices does, as Dürbeck claims, detract from the ability of the work to function ecocritically. The issue, as I see it, is one of consistency – as long as the work is consistent in the areas it intends to inform about, the author is free to be as outrageous as he or she wishes in the areas that do not concern that message or information. As an example, I recently read an ecological themed science fiction, *The Windup Girl*. The novel, written by Paolo Bacigalupi

(2009) a specialist in Asian studies was set in a futuristic Thailand. The novel included a large amount of information about Thai society and even borrowed some vocabulary from the language. The novel also included some very bizarre elements such as giant genetically engineered elephants and invisible cats. It was clear to the reader, in this case me, that the information about Thai culture was based on the author's experience or knowledge, while the G. E elephants and invisible cats were imaginative plot devices. Thus in reading *The Windup Girl* I could expect to learn something about Thai culture but not about contemporary breakthroughs in genetic engineering. *Swamp Gum* does not contain such fantastic devices as invisible cats, and is located much closer to realism than *The Windup Girl*, but it does include a series of events which though not implausible when taken together would be highly unlikely. The reader should therefore be able to discern the difference between a plot device such as the murder and the realistic setting of those plot devices, which inform about deforestation. Had *Swamp Gum* been set in a science fiction future reality then the reader might not expect to learn about deforestation in contemporary Australia.

There are, however, two particular features of *Swamp Gum* that locate the text away from realism: the fictionalised setting and the vision sequences. Here I will provide a discussion of those two features arguing that they actually enhance the work's success as an ecocritical text. The most obvious departure from realism in *Swamp Gum* is the fictionalised world in which it is set – Port Town and the Balloong Valley are not real places. In generating this very mild alternative reality *Swamp Gum* departs from the kind of realism that makes *Oil On Water* (2010) so convincing, and even gives Hiaasen's work (2000) a strong contemporary relevance. The question is then raised, would *Swamp Gum* be more convincing if it was set in the Florentine Valley and Hobart, as opposed to the Balloong Valley and Port Town? My first and greatest consideration for giving *Swamp Gum* a fictional setting was ethical. The activist community in Tasmania is fairly small and close knit, and despite the fact that no characters in the novel are based on real people, locating *Swamp Gum* in the real location of Tasmanian activism would make it too close to the bone. In the first draft of the novel the alternative reality was much more outrageous for this reason, and, I deliberately played up aspects of the fictionalised world in order to distance myself from the Tasmanian reality. The work was set further in the future and *Swamp Gum* bordered on science fiction. On the advice of a friend I moved the work in the direction of the ecothriller stripping out the science fiction elements and giving the work a clear

contemporary context. Ultimately, the Balloong Valley and Port Town are a compromise, comfortably distant from the Tasmanian reality, while still being clearly set somewhere in contemporary southern Australia. The fictional setting enhances *Swamp Gum* as an ecocritical text because it allows it to explore a local issue without breaching important ethical barriers.

Another fictional element that locates *Swamp Gum* away from realism are the vision sequences experienced by Jane. I recently gave *Swamp Gum* to a friend to read and to receive some feedback. He enjoyed the work but felt disappointed that the vision sequences didn't have more direct relevance to the story (he's hoped that the story was more fantastic) – in the early draft of the novel they did. On a surface level my friend is correct; the vision sequences don't affect the way the central narrative plays out, and their inclusion may appear to distract from the other messages in the narrative. In defence of the vision sequences, I would argue that they add a layer of depth to Jane's character. In this sense their function is psychological, and the fact that Jane experiences these recurring visions aim to make her a more intriguing character. The vision sequences also provide relief from a narrative that is quite fast pace and rich in colloquialism, the historic setting of the visions give the narrative a different flavour, one which is more visual and poetic. Incidentally the vision sequences are the only part of the novel that locate it in Tasmania through the reference to Palawa peoples, the name applied to indigenous Tasmanians. Thirdly the visions as mentioned earlier actually work to enhance the ecocritical message of the novel – they contextualise the environmental destruction by showing the continuity of colonial behaviour. Where the central story denies the reader an ultimate villain the vision sequences provide one in the form of Jeremy Blackwood. Where the central story provides a happy ending in the form of a qualified victory for the protagonists, the story in the vision sequences ends in death and failure. Thus the vision sequences provide a layer of meaning against which the critical messages in the central story can be read. Far from detracting from an ecocritical message the vision sequences aim to enforce it.

*Swamp Gum* through the consistency of the realistic setting succeeds as an ecocritical text, imparting a range of information, while the elements of the narrative that locate it away from realism assist in presenting the critical message of the work. Fiction, and in particular thrillers, have a range of features that may, in some cases, make them more suitable vehicles for eco-critical thinking than more conventional academic works. They are more accessible. They have the potential to reach a wider

audience. They can make more effective use of creative devices, such as metaphor or humour to create empathy and understanding, or raise an issue, in ways that academic writing may struggle to achieve.

## **Conclusion**

In this exegesis I have clearly located *Swamp Gum* into the genre of the ecothriller. I have presented the argument of some scholars that the genre can and should be read as an ecocritical text, informing about an ecological issue and providing a critique of human relationships with the environment. I have applied this reading to some major works in the genre, and highlighted the strategies that they use to impart an ecocritical message. I have applied this framework to my own work, discussing the background to the information that it conveys and its importance to *Swamp Gum's* construction. I have provided an overview of the conscious critical messages in *Swamp Gum* and how they affected my narrative choices. I have offered an assessment of how the more fictional elements in the work may inhibit *Swamp Gum's* ability to operate as an ecocritical text, arguing that they actually enhance it.

In some ways the discussion offered in this exegesis has been broad, covering genre, plot, story, process and description, but in one crucial respect its focus has been very narrow; I have restricted it to a discussion on *Swamp Gum's* textual relationship with ecocriticism. There were a number of reasons why I restricted the discussion in this way. Firstly it gave me an interpretive framework through which I could approach my own work critically from a comfortable distance. Secondly, this focus allowed me to clarify how and to what extent *Swamp Gum* fitted with the Australian reality. Thirdly the framework allowed me to investigate *Swamp Gum* contextually with published works in the same genre.

I would, however, like to conclude by emphasising that the ecocritical approach is only one possible way of reading the text, and one that excludes other important elements of the narrative. *Swamp Gum* is not simply a message about deforestation dressed up with fast plot and littered with information. It is also a novel about people. It was the love of the characters, the landscape and the desire to tell the story that got me through the two years it took me to complete *Swamp Gum*. During the period I spent in Australia I built up a repertoire of landscapes and characters that I felt compelled to write about. Whenever I sat down to write, the memories of my time there would seep

back into my mind. I would hear the voices of old friends, smell the smells, and feel their anger, as well as their love. *Swamp Gum* is a novel about people and places. They inspired me to start it and compelled me to finish it.

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