



## Talking with Aimée Bissonette about *North Woods Girl*

“A walk in the woods or a day at the beach is science and art and movement all in one.”

**Question:** What is at the core of *North Woods Girl* for you?

**Answer:** I wanted to write about the things that are important to me: relationships (in this case, between a grandchild and a grandparent), trusting yourself, and nature.

**Question:** There’s been a lot of discussion about Richard Louv’s concept of “nature deficit disorder,” linked to how little time today’s children spend outdoors. Was that in your mind as you wrote the story?

**Answer:** Yes, the need to get out and drink in nature is so important. I believe in the research – and I have experienced the benefits myself. The natural world is rejuvenating. It is never the same experience twice. A walk in the woods or a day at the beach is science and art and movement all in one.

Research also shows that older people benefit from experiencing natural surroundings – something as small as an outdoor seating area by a fountain or pond can positively affect nursing home patients’ mood and cognitive function. It’s good for all of us.

**Question:** What is it like to “walk in the woods” of Claudia McGehee’s illustrations?

**Answer:** I am overwhelmed by Claudia’s talent, patience, and attention to detail. Her art is extraordinary, and it makes this story so much more meaningful. I especially love all the little additions: Grandma’s cat (Claudia’s idea), the tiny woodland birds in the trees, the dragonflies. I love the fox in the winter scene. I love the owl tucked in the tree by the pond. My dogs love the fat squirrel on the stump!

**Question:** In *North Woods Girl* you repeat the line: “She is not like other grandmas, it’s true.” Why is that an important message for young readers?

**Answer:** Children need to believe in possibilities and options. No one should think there is one “right” way to look, act, think, dream – particularly not children. How dull would this world be if we were all alike?



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**Question:** Did you mean for the story to also hold a “girl power” – or perhaps a “Grandma power” – message?

**Answer:** We need girls to believe they can be whatever they want to be. We need smart girls, strong girls, athletic girls, artistic girls. I was blessed with several wonderful mentors growing up. They supported me – in some cases, they blazed trails for me.

**Question:** A Brigham Young University study showed that there are notable benefits for children who feel close to at least one grandparent. Did you have a relationship like that?

**Answer:** I have only a few memories of my own grandparents. But I “adopted” several grandparents over the years! My husband had two terrific grandmothers he shared with me. I also have a dear, older friend (she’s 95) who my daughters “adopted” as a grandmother.

The relationship between the characters in this book is grandmother / granddaughter, but the grandmother could just as easily have been an aunt, a neighbor, a family friend – anyone who wants to share their love of nature and sense of independence with a child. Older adults have experiences and knowledge and a view of the world to share with all of us – especially children.

**Question:** We’ve touched on how *North Woods Girl* is about a child building a relationship with a grandparent from season to season and year to year. It is also about building that kind of deep relationship with a place. Did you have a place like that that as a child?

**Answer:** My family moved many times, so there was no one place I returned to year after year, but I did seek out a similar type of place wherever I lived. It was Barnhart Island in New York State, a nearby wooded area in Texas, camping trips in Washington and Oregon, trail rides in Colorado, beaches and bird sanctuaries in Florida. Any place outdoors!

**Question:** Do you have that relationship with a special place now?

**Answer:** I return again and again to Lake Superior. I take trips to Minnesota’s North Shore and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula several times each year. The lake is wild, cold, and beautiful. I can spend hours on its shores picking rocks, hiking, and bird watching.

There is also this fabulous nature center within walking distance of my house in Minneapolis. There are deer, foxes, muskrats, raccoons, and turtles, and in the spring, migrating ducks and warblers make it one of the best birding places in the state. Like the grandma and granddaughter in *North Woods Girl*, I always carry binoculars!