3
Shamanism and the Pull of the North

A shaman is someone who is capable of entering into trance and journeying in spirit to other realms, returning with knowledge beneficial to the community. The trance can be induced by various means: ‘music, song, dance, pain, traditional hallucinogenics and stillness’ (Maclellan 1995: 140). The soul-journeying shaman is accompanied by, works with, and can even transform into, a ‘power animal’. Becoming a shaman involves an initiatory crisis of psychic death, dismemberment and reconstitution. The popular cultural currency of shamanism is demonstrated by the scene in The Simpsons Movie (2007) in which Homer arrives at an epiphany under the ministrations of an Alaskan Inuit woman. She gives him a bubbling liquid, throat sings with him (the chant and Homer’s dance moves are more likely derived from stereotypes of Plains Indians than Inuit practices), and breathes into his mouth to facilitate soul-journeying, represented as psychological through the ballooning of Homer’s head and the back of it opening up. Through mental landscapes of frozen staircases and speaking totem poles, Homer arrives among trees with twiggy hands which dismember him and only reassemble him once he gets his epiphany: ‘In order to save myself, I have to save Springfield! That’s it, isn’t it?’... though the notion of personal salvation is an imposition on shamanism.

A whole book could be written about shamanism in children’s fiction, so for manageability and focus this chapter will have to be selective. As the term ‘shaman’ is Siberian in origin, and as it can be argued that ‘circumpolar culture [...] has been a continuous whole, not only with regard to historical content, but also for its ecological integration of culture and religion’ (Hultkrantz 1991: 10), I shall concentrate on stories set in North Eurasia and a few that cross between Europe and North America. The essential argument of this chapter is that
representations of shamanism in children's fiction make significant interventions in current controversies about shamanism over issues such as decontextualisation, personal development, cultural integrity, and gender – debates which will now be outlined.

One criticism of some contemporary neo-shamanism is that it is just too casual and easy. This could be the reaction to Nevill Drury observing that ‘within an hour or so of drumming, ordinary city folk are able to tap extraordinary mythic realities that they have never dreamed of’ (Drury 2000: 9). However, others emphasise that shamanism is a perilous calling: it ‘is not merely a weekend of entertainment […]’. Rather, it is a very powerful and dangerous practice to which one is called, at times against one’s own desires’ (Versluis 1993: 52). Children’s fiction featuring shamanism does often show the toughness of a shamanic vocation. In The Bearwood Witch by Susan Price (2001a), the practices of the eponymous shaman in present-day Birmingham have ‘nothing to do with pretty crystals or scented candles’ (that is, the New Age); rather, ‘A shaman’s way was often cruel and ugly, and it took courage to follow. Those who weren’t strong enough often turned back in disgust and fright’ (Price 2001a: 156). Examples discussed later in this chapter frequently show shamanism to be an unbidden, even resisted, and harrowing calling.

Modern Western Pagan shamans are different from historical shamans – ‘more individualistic […]. They have chosen to experiment with “techniques of ecstasy” mediated by anthropologists, rather than being compelled by a powerful initiatory experience’ (Harvey 1997: 111, original italics). Such individualistic shamanism can amount to ‘a self-conscious, counter-cultural, reversal of attitudes dominant in western societies’ (Hutton 2001: 159). Against the elective individualism of neo-shamanism, prominent contemporary shamans stress the shaman’s role in the community: Geo Cameron maintains that ‘the social role of the shaman is to use the spiritual power he [or she] gains to help the community’ (Cameron 1997), and Gordon Maclellan believes that ‘the shaman is empowered to act by the community […] Shamans belong to their people’ (Maclellan 1995: 142).

These oppositions – compulsion and choice, individualism and community, conformity and subversion – are very much the concerns of young adult fiction and literary criticism of it. Shamanism in the stories analysed in this chapter is the focal point for adolescent characters’ self-realisation as individual subjects and agents in society, in heightened tension with the compulsions of shamanic vocation and apprenticeship. Shamanism’s subversive and countercultural potential is realised,