



# antlers

a graphic novel exploring the connections  
between human, animal, and landscape

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“We are all capable of extraordinary transformations. In myth and story these changes are animal-to-human, human-to-animal, animal-to-animal, or even farther leaps.”

- Gary Snyder from “The Etiquette of Freedom”

*Antlers* is a short graphic novel that centers around the experiences of a young girl named Enid who undergoes an incredible transformation when moves to Alaska and develops relationships with the animals she finds there. The storyline explores how her fate is intertwined with a herd of Alaskan caribou. In addition to a storyline that intersects with the caribou, Enid is linked to the animals through her empathy for the animals and her own growth of a pair of antlers. Learning to cope with her newly discovered identity and her new surroundings, Enid must play the role of intermediary between a separated animal world and human world in conflict, in order to redefine and restore the roles that both humans and animals fulfill within one environment.

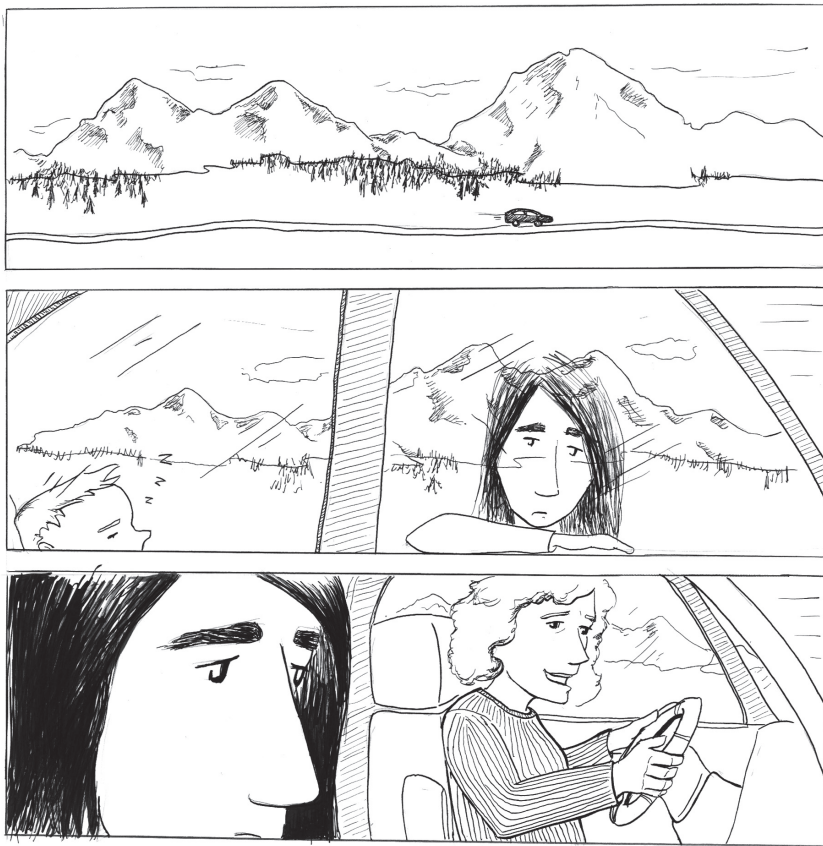
Writing and illustrating this fictional story has been the synthesis of many factors that have influenced me including recent cultural movements, smaller personal experiences, and the work of other creative individuals- both authors and artists. The story’s goal is to evoke a sense of wonder, curiosity, mystery, magic, and most of all, empathy for the characters. Through comparing and connecting themselves with the story’s landscapes and animals, I want the readers reflect on what it means to be human or animal today. I want the reader to think about what separates us and more importantly, what connects us.

I have always been a lover of narratives. During my childhood, my brother and I spent countless hours creating elaborate make-believe worlds complete with characters, background stories, and of course, villains. An avid reader from an early age, I read everything and anything I could get my hands on: Nancy Drew, Misty of Chincoteague, The Chronicles of Narnia- the list is endless. This love for narrative carried itself throughout the rest of my life and is apparent in my academic work where I have pursued Illustration within the realm visual arts and English Literature within the written arts.

I was initially driven to pursue an environmental theme due to the recent surge in the American environmental movement, which includes issues of sustainability, conservation, and energy usage. However, I needed to find my niche within this very broad movement as I pursued this project. Several semesters ago at the University of Michigan I took an English class that studied various forms of environmental literature including poems, prose fiction, and essays. I became particularly interested in issues of animal habitat destruction and the preservation of natural landscapes, particularly national parks. One of the issues presented in the class was the ongoing Arctic National Wildlife Refuge drilling controversy. The issue was framed within the context of how drilling for oil in ANWR could affect a specific herd of caribou. Named after the Porcupine River in northwestern Alaska – a river that the herd crosses each year to journey to their calving grounds in ANWR - the Porcupine Caribou herd is entirely dependant upon the refuge for their reproduction. I had previously been aware of the issue, but framing it with the caribou as the focus allowed me to empathize with a group of creatures. In my story, *Antlers*, I used the caribou herd and the drilling controversy as one of the main points of conflict within the storyline. The villains in the story are attempting to remove the caribou from the landscape completely, so that they can access the financial benefits inherent in drilling for oil.

This ANWR controversy is very unsettling, and a very large issue. To transform the

matter into a narrative from my own perspective required me to draw upon my personal experiences with animals, landscape, and people. In the suburban metro-Detroit where I grew up, most people are rather separated from the physical environment. In fact, the idea of “landscape” is not often present in the daily visual vocabulary of the average citizen. Green spaces are either entirely absent or are maintained and manicured to eliminate any aspect of wildness. Interaction with wildlife is often limited to squirrels, blue jays, raccoons, perhaps the occasional stray dog or cat. Thus, my own experience with the physical environment has been limited. The inherent question of creating my book was how could I accurately depict a story that entirely takes place in Alaska- a place that I have only viewed through documentaries, stories, and pictures.



My response to this struggle was to make the protagonist, Enid, something of an outsider to the landscape of Alaska, very much in the same way that I as the author/illustrator am merely an empathetic outsider. In the above image, the reader is first introduced to Enid who



is riding with her mother and brother through the Brooks Mountain range of North-Central Alaska. Enid and her family move to this location because they have nowhere to go after the death of her father and their only living relative, an Uncle, is located in Alaska. In this image I have attempted to display Enid's connection to the landscape through the reflection of the mountains onto the car window. However, the physical separation created by the window also emphasizes her apprehension and desire to distance herself from the daunting foreign land. The majority of the book is illustrated with the use of simple clean lines in the above manner. The style is somewhat reminiscent of Hergé's *ligne claire* style of comics in which the background and the characters are given equal presence in each frame. Place is incredibly integral to the plot of *Antlers*. I wanted the landscape itself to be somewhat of a character in the story and share equal importance with the animal and human characters.



page from *Antlers*



*The Adventures of TinTin* by Hergé  
demonstrating the *ligne claire* style

The view of Alaska I have presented is undoubtedly idealized to some extent. I have shown Alaska as the last American frontier, the most expansively wild place left in this country. The idealized nature of my drawings is undoubtedly influenced by the landscapes of Henri Rousseau. Much like myself, Rousseau also created landscapes that he wasn't entirely familiar with. Rousseau, a self-taught painter, created exotic jungle landscapes based entirely upon images he had seen in museums of jungle plants and animals. Additionally, he drew upon the stories of others who had been to the jungle.



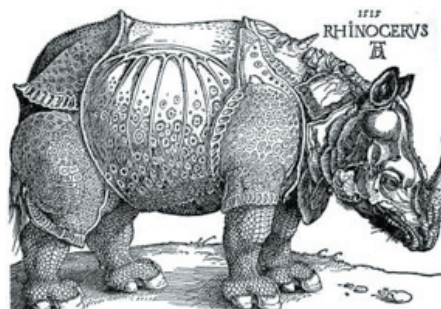
Henri Rousseau, Tropical Forest with Monkeys, 1910, National Gallery of Art

The result is a very exaggerated, fantastical view of the jungle. His paintings are almost collage-like in appearance, as the different elements separate from each other in terms of perspective like flat layers. Also, the shapes that Rousseau uses are often very geometric. In my own work, I like to exaggerate the shapes I see in animals and make them slightly unrealistic to emphasize their exotic nature.

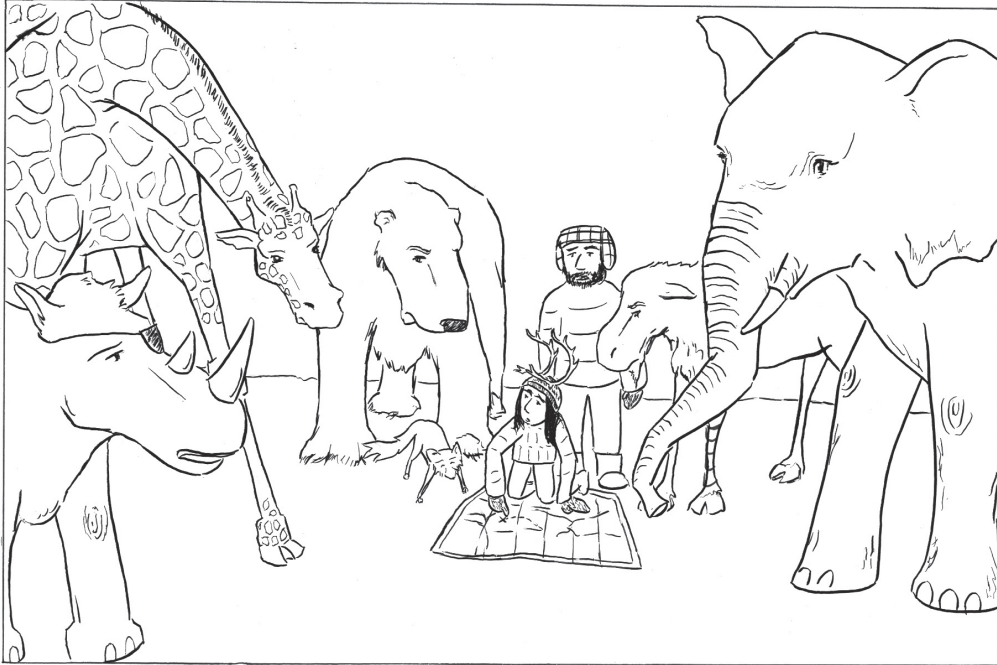


In this image, which is a scene in which Enid is talking to the exotic animals that live in her uncle's house you can see how I have slightly geometricized the animals. The elephant's head is square and its trunk is contorted at unrealistic angles. The giraffe's jaw is emphasized to look blockier.

Another influential artist in my work is the work of German painter and engraver Albrecht Durer. Durer's work often deals with religious imagery and illustrations of animals and nature. I particularly connected with this rhinoceros drawing of Durer's because of his incredible use of detail to create texture and for its exaggerated nature. Durer created the drawing below based on the stories of others who had seen the rhinoceros.



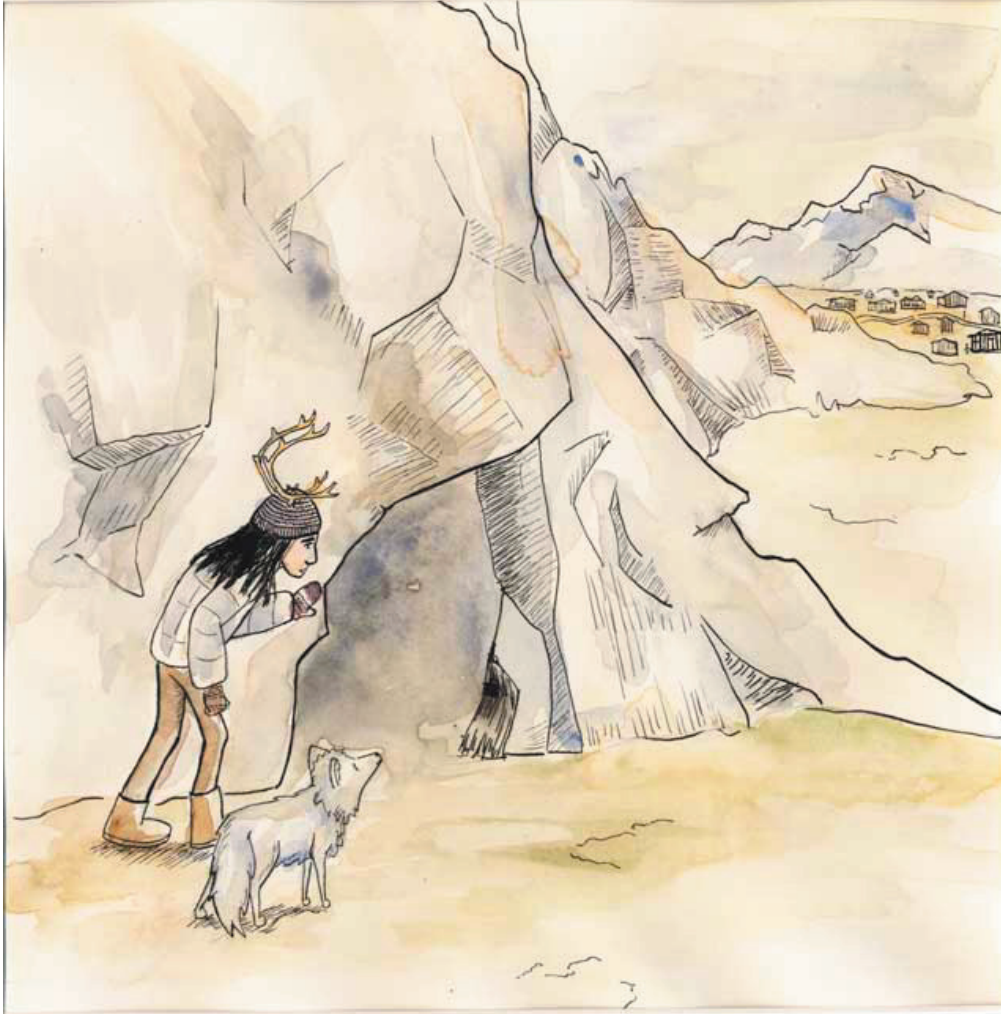




The animals I have presented within the story are fantastical, exotic, even unreal. I am not suggesting that people should make giraffes and caribou their pets to forge a link between humans and animals. Instead the anthropomorphized characters communicating with Enid allow readers, especially children, to relate to them. For instance, I have created very strong parental-child connections between both Enid and her family and Clyde the caribou and his family. This parallel uses the most essential relationship in a child's life to evoke a sense of connection. The reader relates to Enid, who in turn relates to Clyde. The hope is that the voice I have given the animals from Enid's perspective allows them to command a mutual respect from the reader, a respect that is often lacking when habitats are destroyed.

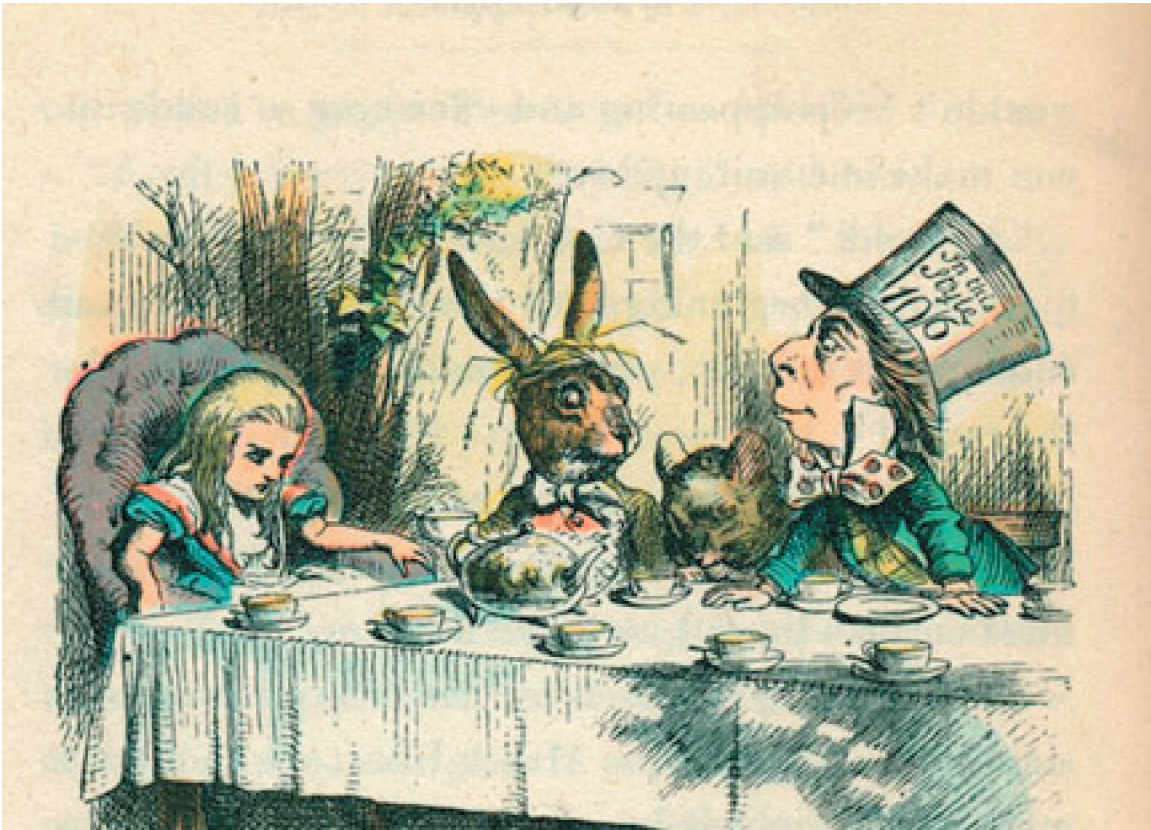
In the story, Enid finds herself initially unconcerned with the future of her new environment and is very reluctant to forge relationships with both human and animal characters, particularly the other main character in the story, a caribou named Clyde. However, Enid is an explorer. Enid discovers the threat to the caribou herd accidentally in her own exploration of the landscape. She finds a cave in the side of a mountain near her Uncle's home and discovers a hidden warehouse where the caribou are being held hostage.





In the color illustrations that appear at the beginning of each chapter of my book, I combined the clean line work present throughout the rest of the book with washes of faint watercolor. I didn't want the color to outshine the intricate linework, but I also didn't want the watercolor to be confined to the boundaries that the lines create. In a way the washes of watercolor bleeding across the page can serve as a metaphor for Enid's role in the story. She is a character who negotiates between the boundary of a closed, industrial human society and the dwindling expanse of the natural landscape. Enid's curiosity towards the landscape is derived from my own exploration of the natural world. As an artist, I have found that, for me, the best place to find new ideas often comes from exploring and reuniting with the natural landscape around me.

This sense of curiosity and discovery that I desired to add to my work was influenced by stories that I grew up with such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. There are many similarities between my Enid and Carroll's Alice. Both are young girls struggling with the reality of having to grow up, and both are transported to a world with which they are entirely unfamiliar. Alice follows the white rabbit into Wonderland, a fictitious location filled with fantastical creatures and strange rules. Enid, on the other hand is forced to move to Alaska, a real location that I have interpreted from other's experiences. Thus, my Alaska deals with real issues of today while at the same time creating fantasy with a world where animals can talk to a little girl.



John Tenniel, *The Mad Tea Party* from *Alice in Wonderland*.



In the scene shown above, Enid chases Mika, the artic fox, who is chasing a white snowshoe hare. Mika then leads Enid to the cave where further discoveries are revealed. This chase parallels alice's pursuit of the white rabbit who unknowingly leads her into wonderland. Here the white fox chasing the white rabbit serves as the impetus for Enid's curiosity regarding the daunting landscape.

This fascination with the nonsensical was further influenced by Max Ernst. What attracted me to Ernst was mainly the bizarre and reconstructive themes that are strung throughout his work. His collages are no doubt very strange, but create a sort of dreamlike re-

ality, often morphing animal heads with human bodies and still creating beautiful pieces. One way I suppose I can relate to Ernst is the fact that my work often has a fantastical or psychological undertone. For example in my story, Enid, grows antlers that are only visible to her and other animals. The work of his that I find most compelling is one of his books of narrative etchings, *Une Semaine de Bonte*, in which the etchings combine humans and animals in strange ways. The resulting tone is psychological and even disturbing that creates a compelling yet eerie tension. Even though Ernst was not likely addressing environmental issues as I am, he is calling into question what it means to be human, which I am also doing in my own work.



Max Ernst, Illustration from *Une Semaine de Bonte*





This image above I thought best shows the surreal influence of Ernst on my work. The page is from a dream sequence early in the story when Enid first begins to see her antlers. In the dream I not only gave Enid her antlers, but also gave her the body of a caribou. The curves of the trees in the forest backdrop were added to create an other-worldly atmosphere because much of the illustration throughout the rest of the story is very geometric. Additionally, the curves of the trees branches echo the curves of Enid's antlers. In this scene, particularly in the fourth panel, Enid is engulfed by the daunting connection she now has to the antlers.

Enid experiences this daunting realization of the natural world when she moves to Alaska and is exposed to a disturbing plot that threatens that natural world. My intention in creating my book, is not to condemn people based on their own ecological background, but rather to raise awareness for the controversy in ANWR and other related environmental concerns for a new generation. Antlers' aim is not to overwhelm the reader with threatening discourse, but to evoke empathy from them and create a seed of interest regarding environmental issues. The hope is that this seed would eventually lead the readers to continue educating themselves in regard to the subject matter. The story strives to achieve the ideal within an environmental standpoint, but Enid herself is an idealistic child struggling with the changes of growing into an adult and discovering her own identity within a new and threatening context. I don't want people to read the story and become frustrated and feel hopeless about the future of the environment. What I am more interested in is asking people to consider how they view themselves within the context of their landscape and in relationship to other creatures.

One of my favorite nature writers, Gary Snyder writes, "Narratives are one sort of trace we leave in the world. All our literatures are leavings- of the same order as the myths of the wilderness peoples, who leave behind only stories and a few stone tools. Other orders of beings have their own literatures. Narrative in the deer world is a track of scents that is passed on from deer to deer with an art of interpretation that is instinctive. (Snyder, 120). I think that the connection Snyder makes to our human narratives and the narrative of scent in the animal world demonstrates the sort of visceral connection between humans and animals that I am attempting to emphasize in my story. Antlers is my leaving in the world, a modern-day myth that I hope future generations will both learn from and enjoy.

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