
From Eden to Suburbia: Perspectives on the Natural World in Children's Literature

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Books with a focus on the natural world are written for young readers with a variety of purposes, but broadly speaking constitute a spectrum measured by the degree of emphasis and/or explicitness falling on information or advocacy. At any point along the spectrum, therefore, the positionality of children, whether as participant characters and/or as implied audience, is a key concern of text. Children are apt to be thought of as nature-associated, both because they seem more overtly to display organic embeddedness than do adults, and because they are commonly attributed with an affinity with nature-associated, indigenous peoples pursuing traditional lifestyles. Historically, moreover, the child body has been deemed 'irrational', lacking in discipline and uncontrolled, and hence it is constructed as being much closer to nature. By seeking to invert, or at least evade, the culture-nature hierarchy of Western rationality, nature writing has the potential, through form and function, to valorize the situating of (or the 'already situatedness' of) those bodies within pro-environment discourses. But because the natural world has been coded very differently in the past, other possibilities still exist. As Richard T. Twine reminds us, the intersection between the mastery of nature and nature-associated peoples takes place in organically embedded bodies (Twine 2001, p.32).

By the 1980s, textual representations of the natural world in children's literature could draw upon one of three ideologically grounded perspectives. The first of these continues to promote mastery over nature, whereby the natural world exists for the benefit of humanity and must be subordinated to its desires and needs. The second assumes or promotes an attitude of caring, wonder and understanding of the natural world, or an awareness of environmental issues. There is only a limited degree of embeddedness, however, and humans are positioned as outside of nature and as the source of value and meaning. The third perspective draws on a nature-associated position which has affinities with deep ecology: intrinsic value is ascribed to all living beings, and human beings are not attributed with any kind of privileged status. An ideal text of this kind might entirely efface a human presence, but in practice this is impossible, as ecocriticism concedes. Kate Rigby expresses the position precisely: 'An acknowledgement of the centrality of the human actant, however contingent, contextualized, and

decentered she might be in herself, is also a necessary condition for there to be such a thing as literature' (2004, p.427). The possibility of a position that is 'contingent, contextualized, and decentered' itself becomes slighter in children's literature because of the almost universal focus on narratives of human subjectivity and growth, with the concomitant demands of characterization, events, and narrative point of view.

Most children's texts dealing with the environment or ecology fall within the second ideological perspective identified here, and that will be the main focus of this paper. The first position, however, still largely dominates Western thought because it is a tenet underlying Christian and post-Christian societies, and informs the ideology of liberal democracies grounded on an individualist model which conceives of social and political governance in terms of accommodating an aggregation of self-interested desires. The more overtly political aspect of this position is glanced at in children's literature, as in, say, the close of Jeannie Baker's *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*, where the threat to wilderness comes from the aggregated interests of land speculation, service industries, tourism, and the desire for holidays in 'natural' but comfortable places.

The ideology of mastery of nature, or human domination, is very clearly reproduced in Norman Messenger's *The Creation Story* (2001), a Dorling Kindersley book which, according to the dust jacket, 'celebrates the origins of our abundant planet'. The modern translation of the Bible used as the text (*Holy Bible*. New Living Translation, 1996) denotes a world of unlimited fecundity:

"Let the land burst forth with every sort of grass and seed-bearing plant"

"Let the waters swarm with fish and other life"

"Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind"

"God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to reproduce more of its own kind."

This is not just a celebration of fecundity, but a guarantee of infinite resources. When human beings are created, the mission given to them is, "Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters over the fish and birds and all the



animals”. And so it was.’ The illustration of this moment places Adam and Eve standing in an open space at the centre of the scene — their rightful place, of course — with all other creatures either looking at them or oriented in that direction, and a text box containing the mission-statement is superimposed upon the scene. The next and final illustration depicts this mastery, as animals gather around Adam and Eve in a domestic scene: the operation of mastery is benign, its subjects are willing. A further message of domination is, needless to say, the representation of the first people as white Europeans. This abundant earth is infinitely exploitable on behalf of certain people, and this kind of implicit racial assumption about who the masters of the world are feeds liberal democracy’s capacity to produce inequality and to tolerate ecoharm when it’s happening somewhere else, to other people.

The second ideological positioning at work in this literature assumes and often promotes a concern for environmental issues, but still positions humans as outside of nature and as the source of value and meaning. Several assumptions underpin these books: a represented landscape must include either humans to perceive it, or animals attributed with often anthropomorphic perception; a landscape must be the site for some kind of narrative; and human participants will grow and develop through contact with nature. These assumptions are readily evident in Jean Craighead George’s *One Day in the Desert* (1983), a narrative set in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. George has a life-long reputation as a naturalist, and her comments about nature writing on her website indicate that she sees human subjectivity and narrative as prerequisites for the process. The Sonoran Desert is frequently used as a site for nature and ecology writing about arid region environments, and a simple contrast is afforded by John Alcock’s roughly contemporary nature writing for adults, *Sonoran Desert Spring* (1985). The covers of the two books suggest an immediate difference: the cover of *Sonoran Desert Spring* depicts only flora — Mexican poppies, lupines, and other plants growing in the skeleton of a dead cactus: it is palpably not a book seeking a pre-adult readership. The cover of *One Day in the Desert* is a collage incorporating some of the creatures that appear in the book and some iconic desert flora — prickly pear and saguaro cactus. While the details are

rendered in high modality, there is no attempt to produce a high modality *scene*, and the objects simply occupy the same space. If we track visually into the centre of the picture, we find two human figures, and hence an implied narrative. The opening sentence of the book immediately develops this narrative, supplying a setting in time and place, participants, and action:

At daybreak on July 10th a mountain lion limped toward a Papago Indian hut, a small structure of grass and sticks on the bank of a dry river in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona.”
(p.1)

While George doesn’t always restrict human participants to nature-associated indigenous people, she does access the capacity of indigenous concepts of environment to critique the anthropocentrism of Western attitudes and Western spirituality. These humans, unlike the lion, will survive the rigours of unusually intense heat followed by flash flooding, and this will confirm their ecological connectedness to their environment. They perceive the environment as an agential giver of meaning (cf. Plumwood, 225 ff.), an agent which preserved them from the flooding riverbed through the lion’s appearance at their hut and their consequent flight.

I want to put the humans aside, however, and concentrate on how some of the minor players in the drama are represented, a herd of peccaries:

The roadrunner passed a family of seven peccaries, piglike animals with coarse coats, tusks and almost no tails. They stay alive in the dry desert by eating the water-storing prickly pear cactus, spines and all.

They were now lying in the cool of the paloverde trees that grow in thickets. Like the pencil-straight ocotillo and almost all the desert leafy plants, the paloverdes drop their leaves when the desert is extremely hot and dry. On July 10th they began falling faster and faster.

The scent of the lion reached the old boar. He lifted his head and watched the great beast. The lion turned away from the peccary family and limped toward the Indian hut. All the pigs, big and little, watched him.

Although it is crammed with information, *One Day in the Desert* doesn't linger over particular examples of flora or fauna. The peccaries here have a walk-on role within a dramatic narrative which involves, in the context of a day of unusually high temperature, followed by a storm and flash flood, a mountain lion wounded by poachers and struggling to survive, and the Papago Indian [sic] family of mother and child. Like numerous other creatures, the peccaries' role is to endure the heat and the flood: the book's opening chapter tells that, 'Bird Wing, her mother, the lion and many of the animals ... would be affected by July 10th. Some would survive and some would not, for the desert is ruthless' (p. 5). George's anthropocentric approach to nature is again evident here, both in the progression from the specific humans to the unspecified animals and in the way that 'Some would survive and some would not, for the desert is ruthless' both invokes the narrative of struggle against the odds and, in the choice of the metaphoric term *ruthless*, implicitly attributes a Westernised motivation to a landscape because it is a term with moral implications. If the term *impartial* replaced *ruthless* here, the text would be relying much more on the notion of contingency, or on how the world is constituted by whatever happens.

The family of peccaries are drawn into this mode of representation. The naturalist's narrative involves more description than the average adventure story book: we read something about the peccaries' social habits, appearance and diet. We learn how some of the flora has adapted to the desert climate, although the detail about the trees dropping their leaves is used to help build suspense. Suspense is further developed by the muted confrontation of lion and peccaries, by the lion's change of direction, and by the peccaries continued gaze. On a second reading of the book, a reader may see a foreshadowing of the lion's later death in the flood. Some key explanatory material seems omitted here, presumably to maintain focus on the unfolding drama. Thus in *Sonoran Desert Spring* (1985), Alcock writes:

Peccaries do well in Sonoran habitats. In part their success may stem from the economy of their diets. Despite their relationship to pigs, their bodies are wiry, thin, and laterally compressed, all backbone and muscle and not a trace of slovenly fat. On

thin legs, they fastidiously pick their way among the cholla cactus and dried brittlebush, stopping here and there to feed leisurely on the red fruits of hedgehog cactus and the pads of prickly pear. Broken cactus spines, implanted during earlier meals, project from their soft and sensitive-looking snouts. To sustain itself solely on prickly pear, an adult needs to consume about three pounds per day, an amount easily secured in many places.

Readers must infer from George's text some information Alcock offers in his comments on 'the extreme sociality' (p.63) of peccaries, which band together in fixed groups of five to fifteen members. This also enables them to repel predators and protect infants. Alcock's account is not attitude free, and this surfaces in language such as 'slovenly', 'fastidiously' or 'leisurely', and the faintly humorous reference to the cactus spines sticking out from their snouts, and this might remind us how difficult it is to efface the voice which is the source of discourse, or to maintain a contingent or decentered stance. Alcock does position himself as a close observer of the fauna and flora, comments on his own encounters with desert creatures, and remarks on the supposed ferocity of peccaries, suggesting this is exaggerated by people who wish to justify hunting them.

The lion in George's *One Day in the Desert* does not survive because it has been weakened and disabled by the effects of a poacher's bullet. Alcock points to a wider ecological threat: hunting for sport, destruction of habitat either for housing or to bring water to houses, removal of creatures to make them into pets. There are many children's books in which the poacher seems to be a metonym for ecological threat, no doubt because of the difficulty in giving other forms to the ideology of liberal democracy: for example, depicting a model of environmental concern which satisfies as many private interests as possible, or weighing ecological harm against economic benefit. Where Alcock almost dispassionately registers the harms that humans do to a fragile ecosystem, George admits only indigenous humans, who in their nature-associated status are themselves part of the fauna, as it were: Birdwing thinks the environment saved her as well as threatening her, and offers a prayer of thanks 'facing the mountain'.

The impact humans have upon the environment prompts another form of awareness-raising in children's literature: advocacy of direct and positive human engagement with ecosystems. The positioning of humans as the source of value and meaning now goes beyond perceptive engagement to more practical action: texts commonly engage in overt advocacy, whereby nature, the environment, earth itself, are seen as endangered and in need of appropriate management. Two principal textual focuses for this theme are ecological relationships in small-scale communities — home, street, or suburb — and narratives about large-scale destruction of pristine wilderness, such as destruction of areas of Amazon rain forest. In practice, the positioning of children as audience for an appeal to 'help save the rain forests' is rather meaningless in itself, apart from whatever consciousness-raising effect it might have, whereas small-scale community narratives can both raise consciousness and offer avenues for practical action available to children as well as adults: you can help supply the food requirements of native birds in your suburb by planting a grevillia (or you can kill Rainbow Lorikeets by putting out bread and honey for them). In other words, the positive and negative impacts on environment caused by ways of inhabiting it can be very transparent in small-scale ecologies, and hence people can be motivated to interact with ecology on the basis of sound ecological decisions.

Narratives about large-scale destruction of pristine wilderness would require a paper in themselves, so here I will simply point to a couple of symptomatic examples. In another of Jean Craighead George's 'One Day' books, the human element is an indigenous youth and a botanist, racing against a line of advancing bulldozers to save the forest: the strategy — and this is something of a trope in similar environmental books — is to discover a unique creature:

If Dr. Rivero could find a nameless butterfly, a wealthy industrialist would buy the Tropical Rain Forest of the Macaw, name the butterfly for his daughter, and save the forest from the bulldozers and chain sawyers.

(One Day in the Tropical Rain Forest, 1990, p. 18)

Lynne Cherry's *The Great Kapok Tree* (1990) — widely used in U.S. classrooms and supported by a dedicated activities booklet (DiDominicis 1997) — is less pragmatic, more mystical, in its account of how a dreaming logger absorbs value and meaning from nature, rather than being the source of meaning. Both books develop micro-scale stories as a strategy for dealing with a massive ecological issue, and their message may ultimately seem rather trite because of such issues of scale and the absurdly utopian demand on children to 'help save the rain forests'.

In contrast, good examples of small-scale community narratives such as Jeannie Baker's paired texts, *Window* (1991) and *Belonging* (2004), offer attainable visions. *Window* maps the transformation within a single generation of wilderness to urban dystopia. The book opens and closes with a parent holding a newborn child and looking out at wilderness, suggesting a cycle of environmental destruction. *Belonging* offers a utopian model of environmental concern, envisaging an ordinary urban life in which human subjectivity becomes shaped and enriched by the production of a local ecosystem. The book is again framed by the birth of a child, but instead of the solitary parent-and-child dyad of *Window*, *Belonging* presents figures in a landscape. In the first opening, a couple hold their newborn child. They stand in the back corner of a waste-land suburban backyard of broken concrete and rusted corrugated iron. The major vectors place them at a right angle to the alternative possibilities for the community. A card placed in the lower right-hand foreground offers the beginning of a viewing path, from where the perceiving eye will travel to the mother's yellow dress and then choose one of two viewing paths: it may continue to what lies behind, or alternatively follow a lateral line established by a fence which cuts at right angles across the first line.

The vector that leads deep into the right-hand discloses dystopia in a bundle of clichés: three wrecked cars and, to either side, casualties of urban life, a world of drugs, alcoholism, homelessness. The vector that takes the eye to the left bottom corner discloses an alternative cliché: an old 'greeny', with floppy hat and full beard, planting something in rich earth. As the baby (Tracy) grows, she responds to the ecological awareness of her neighbour, and the good practices she learns spread to childhood friends

and boyfriend. Human subjectivity is central to this process, but constructed as an intersubjectivity with an environment that includes flora and fauna as well as other humans. In one of the book's most interesting openings, the desires and concerns of a growing girl exist in conjunction with a living ecosystem: the principal character, Tracy, stands at the window, which overlooks abundant greenery, lorikeets in grevilleas, people inhabiting an inner city environment in a healthy way, and a street that has been closed to traffic. Where the first opening depicted an alcoholic 'bag lady' there is now a bench and cup of tea. Tracy's back is to the viewer, but her face is fully visible in a make-up mirror propped on the window sill. The pretexts for this foreground scene are the myriad 'Venus with Mirror' paintings in which the viewer's voyeuristic relationship with the female figure, totally absorbed in her own beauty, is mediated by the mirror (see, for example, the paintings by Titian, Velasquez, or Rubens). In these paintings, the absence of any significant background other than luxuriant hangings produces a shallow depth of field, enclosing the figure within the gaze. Baker, on the other hand, creates substantial depth of field. Tracy's blouse is bright red, setting up a red-green contrast with the luxuriant growth outside the window, and, in contrast to the famous paintings, constructs a powerful transfer of value from body to embedding landscape. By the time Tracy grows up, has her baby, and opens a shop selling native plants, she inhabits an urban Eden.

The third possibility for representing the natural world, a nature-associated position with affinities with deep ecology, would ascribe intrinsic value to all living things and refuse to attribute any kind of privileged status to human beings. In such texts, human perspectives do become contingent, contextualized, and decentred, and human figures might be absent, as in Jane Yolen & Laura Regan's picture book about the Sonoran Desert, *Welcome to the Sea of Sand* (1996). Yolen's text is in verse, which formally signals that this might not be narrative, or only minimally so, and hence it might be free of plot, characterization and intersocial events. However, it does contain a decentred human actant, a speaker whose register is often celebratory and who on two occasions employs second person address ('you') to the audience (and thereby connects the text to the genre of illustrated information book, frequently marked by second

person address). The illustrations of *Welcome to the Sea of Sand* include no human figures, and only one page on which one of the creatures (a rattle snake) engages viewers in a reciprocal gaze. Human presence could thus be minimal, especially where the text is a list:

*[this sandscape is]
A cache of kangaroo rats busy in their burrows
A scuttle of tarantulas
A muddle of centipedes*

However, the text is not up to the challenge of finding a language that is both poetic and free of anthropocentrism: the series 'cache...scuttle...muddle' culminates in a human perspective, in that the intrinsic state of being of a gathering of centipedes is not 'a muddle'. That is a human way of seeing and judging.

Finally, how might it be possible to depict a non-human entity in a situation which may entail direct intervention because of an attitude of caring? An interesting attempt is Schaefer and Swiatkowska's *Arrowhawk* (2004), which depicts human action from the perspective of an injured hawk, captured, healed and released again, and is highly successful in depicting that human intervention in a way that is in all ways contingent, contextualized, and decentred:

*... darkness surrounded him. The fight was over:
Every muscle relaxed as Hawk's head was covered
and he was taken away in a warm box. Later, gloved
hands held him high and he again beat his wings,
struggling for freedom. But a firm grasp carried
Hawk inside a building where an anesthetic helped
him slip into sleep.*

*When he awoke the arrow was gone and his
wounds were bandaged. Weak and sore, he perched
motionless, watching songbirds dart in the distance.
Later a tray of food and a bowl of fresh water were
set within his reach. Hawk ate and drank. Day by
day he grew stronger.*

While no fragment of a human body appears in the illustrations, human presence is marked by artefacts (the hawk wears a bandage; the food left for him is on a plate), and as agents in the text within passive grammatical constructions ('he was taken away') or objectified actions ('gloved hands held him'). The human presence is both contextualized and rendered contingent by a visual

isomorphism of the hawk's face and the dish, where two pieces of meat on the dish mirror the hawk's eye and beak. Strategies have thus been found to minimize the operation of human subjectivity, without making the impossible attempt to erase it.

Arrowhawk is, I suggest, an exemplary environmental book, but because of the very discourses of children's literature — whether linguistic or narrative — I find it unsurprising that books seeking to engage imaginatively with environment or ecology will mostly be a variation of the second type I identified at the beginning, engaging with environmental issues from the perspective of humans positioned outside of nature and as the source of value and meaning. Baker's *Belonging* is a quintessential example.



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