



Environmental Writing for Children: A Selected Reconnaissance of Heritages, Emphases, Horizons

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Environmental Writing for Children:
A Selected Reconnaissance of Heritages, Emphases, Horizons
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Stories for children about encounters with the physical environment surely long predate the invention of childhood itself as a distinct life-stage in the post-Enlightenment west, judging from what can be pieced together about ancient storytelling practices. In the twenty-first century, oral storytelling cultures continue to thrive worldwide, in (sub)urban bourgeois families as well as more traditional cultures, but they have been supplemented increasingly by print and other media. The field is so vast that no one can pretend to know more than a fraction of it. For ecocriticism the challenge is compounded by the glaring asymmetry between the inherent importance and richness of the archive and the movement's overwhelming emphasis thus far on for-adult genres. Happily the prospect looks much brighter than it did a dozen years ago (*e.g.* Dobrin and Kidd, Gaard, Leznik-Oberstein, Sigler, Wagner-Lawlor, among others); but the archive as a whole is still largely *terra incognita*.

The broad-brushstrokes reconnaissance attempted here falls into two unequal parts. The first and longer section identifies selected representative topoi or traditions emanating from the so-called golden age of children's writing in the late Victorian era. Then follows a briefer review of trend-lines during the past half-century or so.

As an admittedly schematic but I hope sufficiently flexible way of charting in short form the rise of modern (western) environmentally-oriented children's literature, this section focuses on the permutations of two overlapping topoi that have served as carriers of environmental concern since the late nineteenth-century. That my examples are almost exclusively Anglophone is, I hope, more a comment on the limits of my expertise than an overstatement of the pervasiveness of the formations described.

The first body of writing I'll discuss purports to imagine nonhuman life-worlds from the standpoint of the creatures themselves, generally not as a realm of absolute difference but as a parallel universe reflecting back upon the human, often featuring interaction with human actors. Such writing leans heavily on the ancient talking animal convention and other stratagems that semi-anthropomorphize its fictive nonhumans but in the process also at least implicitly chides human insouciance and cruelty toward other creatures, lodging thereby a moral extensionist claim that humans should take the interests and welfare of other creatures more greatly into account, sometimes to the point of envisioning human (children) themselves as fellow animals (v. Lesnik-Oberstein, Morgenstern). Well-known examples include Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty* (1877)—the “Uncle Tom's Cabin of the horse” as it was called in its own day (Dingley 290); Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902); Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (1908); Felix Salten's *Bambi* (1923) and the Disney films thereof; E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952); and Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972).

The second body of writing I'll take up constellates around the discovery or construction of special, often hidden outdoor places by children that are shown to have catalytic significance in bonding them to the natural environment and beyond that, by implication at least, in identity-formation over the long run, such that natural environment comes to feel a catalytic agent and crucial ingredient of personal being. Early examples include Ernest Thompson Seton's *Two Little Savages* (1903), whose lonely immigrant boy protagonist, first alone and then with a companion, becomes increasingly at home and proficient in woodsy ways, in tandem with which the episodic plot is made to do double duty as a kind of ancillary Boy Scout manual, with lessons in camping and woodcraft that include illustrated directions on how to build, hunt, recognize species, prepare food, etc. (Seton was a co-founder of the movement who eventually resigned in protest against its increasingly paramilitary character.) More enduringly famous have been the Mowgli stories in Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), Romulus-and-Remus tales about a lad nurtured as a wolf-cub, indeed perhaps the single most influential text of the Euro-colonial era in transposing Enlightenment-era fascination with the figure of the "wild child" to the imperial periphery; and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, in which the *hortis conclusis* tradition—the enclosed garden as sacred and/or amatory space—meets the Brontë sisters, as it were. (Two unloved and deeply neurotic young cousins achieve psychic and physical healing through the delights of discovering and helping to regenerate the walled garden on a lonely Yorkshire estate locked up for a decade after the boy's

mother's death, partly through the kindly ministrations of a local third child, an innocently Pan-like liminal figure with uncanny powers of rapport with wildlife and plants.) Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), which transports little Max from bedroom tantrum to an exotic jungly setting for a "wild rumpus" with a troupe of ferocious-looking but convivial beasties whom he subdues, seems a direct descendant of *The Jungle Book* and other colonial era narrative sorties into faraway places. Two latter-day descendants of *The Secret Garden*—also including poignant themes of trauma and grieving for death of loved ones—are Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1978), which turns on a young boy and girl creating a Narnia-like kingdom in the woods near home, and Bev Doolittle/Elise Maclay's *The Earth Is My Mother* (2000), a more explicitly environmental-ist fiction in which an 11-year old girl helps to preserve from being developed into a resort her own special place, which was also her late mother's special place, a pristine nearby canyon.

By singling out these two constellations or topoi, I do not mean to suggest that they are hermetically self-contained or homogenous or that they provide a comprehensive taxonomy of the juvenile environmental imaginary during the century in question. The whole expanse of literature for children with some sort of environmental tinge to it is more accurately conceived in terms of multiple projects with porous borders that allow for interpenetration more often than not. Nor is this whole domain more amenable to tidy demarcation *qua* "children's writing" than the categories of "juvenile" and "adult"

literature in general. Ever since its 1884 publication, readers have debated whether Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* should be thought of as a book for children; and such texts as Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* written for the adult market later became for a long time mainly devoured by youth, only to become *de facto* reclassified again as they became *passé* for the common reader and fell increasingly to the custody of literary academics. Indeed even the vast body of literature unmistakably targeted to juvenile readership criss-crosses generational lines in being adult-world refractions of what grownups suppose children are, want, need, as Jacqueline Rose has shown in *The Case of Peter Pan*, whose various excerptings and retellings make it an especially tangled *exemplum* of both authorial intent and readerly desire.

At all events, the two constellations here identified may make a serviceable base of operations for closer examination of some key emphases in more or less environmentally-oriented children's writing in its early modern stages of development in the Europhone west, and all the more so because of the ostensible contrast they showcase between texts featuring animal protagonists and texts featuring human ones.

These hedging qualifiers "more or less environmentally-oriented" and "ostensible contrast" are chosen advisedly in order to anticipate two complications. First, few of these books pursue overtly environmentalist agendas as primary concerns; and, relatedly, the other-than-human domains most of them conjure up are easily read as allegories of the human estate—indeed quite understandably so, to the extent that all of them, like the great

majority of all expressive art directed at children both modern and ancient, have strong didactic thrusts. Consider those two rabbit books. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is transparently construable as a bad boy story in animal drag, and as such a slightly more indulgent avatar of Mother Goose ditties like “The Three Little Kittens”—a droll affectionate-cautionary tale about the mishaps that befall wayward children who stray from the dictates of maternal prudence. Potter’s illustrations, which show Peter in his panicky escape from Mr. McGregor’s garden having to shed his human clothes and revert, as it were, to the bestial state, reinforce the suspicion that this story isn’t really about animals but rather an animal fable: that the prototype for Peter is the boy who naughtily goes feral. If animal stories have been a staple of children’s eco-writing partly in reflection of adult propensity to see little children as animal-like, then one might expect them also to build in takeaway warnings against being or remaining too much so. So understood, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* recalls the dictum of Canadian animal-story writer Charles G. D. Roberts that such stories appeal to interest in “the field of animal psychology” to the end of freeing readers from “the mean tenement of self of which we do well to grow weary” without “requiring that we at the same time return to barbarism” (28, 29). Roberts here presupposes an *adult* audience, of course, but that he commends literary enlistment of scientific empiricism in such a way as to re-draw the line of separation between human and animal “barbarism” is telling for Potter as well. Both her barnyard tales and his *Kindred of the Wild* (1902) follow Charles Darwin’s analyses of

human-animal kinship in *The Descent of Man* and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* so as partially to compensate for *Origin of Species*'s unsettling deliquescence of species borderlines, by contending both for the presence of emotion and cognition among higher animals and for the superiority of even the least advanced human races (Crist 11-50).

Our other rabbit saga, Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, offers a fuller immersion in lapine natural history than Potter's short-form cottage-garden yarn. Although she had far and away the more rigorous formal training in natural science than he, Adams makes much more of a show of documenting—however accurately--rabbit sociology at ground level: how they feed; how they negotiate darkness, rain, cold, animal predators and human encroachments; how they oscillate between passive and aggressive, between focus and feckless distraction; their sense of distance and perspective, and so forth. Yet it also makes perfect sense that critics have tended to treat the ordeal of the fugitive rabbit band's trek from its soon-to-be-destroyed original warren through the ordeal of establishing a new, safer and thriving one less as an attempted rendition of the life-world of rabbitry than as Tolkeinesque fantasy and/or morphed rendition of traditional epic or saga (e.g. Kitchell, Bridgman). In many ways, the novel positively begs to be read allegorically: through its chapter epigraphs—most of them from canonical literature, philosophy, and religion; then by scripting the plot as quest narrative, in which the score of main actors all have proper names and highly individuated personalities; and by endowing rabbit culture with a sense

of cultural tradition, complete with a complex body of myth and legend that several of the band are adept at spinning into trickster tales at crucial points.

But none of the anthropomorphizing in either rabbit tale, keeps either from successfully creating a counter-space for dramatizing the threat posed to animals by human incursion. As such, even *Peter Rabbit*, though *Watership Down* to a much greater extent, reads like an anticipatory response to nature writer Barry Lopez's call in 1983 to "renegotiat[e] the contracts" between modern humankind and animals. Lopez not only mourns the attenuation of existential contact between modern westerners and animals that historian Keith Thomas chronicles in *Man and the Natural World* but also argues further that such loss of intimacy has diminished the horizon of human possibility itself, by which he means both the sense of "awe and mystery that animals excite" and the sense of the plurality of other life-worlds beyond just the human that coexist "as part of a coherent and shared landscape" and might—if only modern humans again paid proper attention and respect to their complexities—help to "revive us as a species" (Lopez 384, 386). The increasingly respectful attention paid during the quarter century since this essay appeared to the significance of the mental and also ethical capacities of animals in a range of fields from primatology and philosophy shows that "Renegotiating the Contracts" was much more than the pipe dream of one solitary free-lance literary neoprimitivist.

The counter-model Lopez specifically had in mind is first peoples' greater existential proximity to animal worlds and how that sense of coexistence and reciprocity

enriches their vision of what it means to exist humanly, as shown in their place-based storytelling practices. So arguably the neo-aboriginal children's writing of which I take brief note in section 2—drawing *inter alia* upon the Afro-diasporic tales of trickster rabbits that Joel Chandler Harris pilfered for his Uncle Remus tales (v. Mungoshi 7-25)—makes a better fit for his diagnostic than the two books I have been discussing. But it's all the more important on that account not to stint the import of even nominal attempts like *Peter Rabbit* to renegotiate the human-animal contract by table-turning. *Bambi* makes a particularly striking analogue. Both the Felix Salten novel and the Disney film adaptations rest on egregiously *faux* natural history. Yet *Bambi's* melodrama of creatures of the forest as noble savages besieged by human predator-destroyers has made an impact on the western cultural imaginary hardly short of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Mittman). Witness the phobic reaction of the sport-hunting industry, which in the mid-20th century and maybe still today looks on *Bambi* as the worst disaster that ever befell it (Cartmill).

Among the early literature that keeps its eye most resolutely on the issue of animal ethics even as it makes free use of fantasy elements is Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty*. This is the first enduring classic of "humanitarian" reform, which gave rise to the Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals and other like organizations, and as such is a forerunner both of contemporary animal rights advocacy and the pro-animal fictions of which J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* stand out as perhaps

the most-discussed texts in world literature today. *Black Beauty* is a shrewd rewriting of the then-fashionable declensionary plot of Zola-esque naturalist fiction à la Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Frank Norris' *Vandover and the Brute*, which turns on the fall of a precariously secure person or family into a vortex of animal misery usually leading to death. *Black Beauty* undertakes the analogous thought experiment of imagining how literal beasts might experience their own bestialization as they become exploited as playthings or work slaves. Admittedly, this early chapter of animal rights history involved some distinctly problematic ideologically compromises. The good faith of the whole Victorian humanitarian movement itself has been questioned by historians who read it as a displacement of gentry-class fears about the much more socially explosive immiseration of human underclasses that often involved a blame-the-victim strategy in the form of stigmatizing drovers and other working class abusers of domestic animals as uncivilized brutes (Turner). *Black Beauty* exemplifies this in its longish section deploring abusive hackney drivers. Yet it offsets this classism both by putting rich and poor humans pretty much on the same level overall in respect to sensitivity or lack thereof to equine feelings and welfare, and by subjecting class hierarchies themselves to intermittent critique, as by having the noblest of all the book's working poor killed off by his own generosity toward an unworthy patron—thereby consigning Black Beauty to a series of increasingly worse masters who nearly do him in as well.

What clinches a secure and happy ending for him is especially telling in present

context. The mentee of the groom previously established as the human character who best understands horses just happens to cross paths with Black Beauty and recognize him despite his almost-fatally degraded condition. As a plot device, it's the flimsiest of Dickensian coincidences, but as a thematization of how intimate knowledge of and acculturation to the lives of animals can pay off crucially at the level of environmental memory it showcases the promise of renegotiating the contracts, in Lopez's phrase, across species lines. The now-grown-up little Joe Green, who as an inexperienced stable boy had mistreated Black Beauty at first, now confirms his mature humanity through this scene of recognition. The act of recognition is the outward sign of the fruits of an adult lifetime of commitment to grasping the ways of horses so as to be able to distinguish even after many years and despite drastically changed appearances the individual creature from the rest of the species. Just as with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Black Beauty* seeks to enlist its readers as secondary witness to the protagonist's trauma narrative, so as to instill in them by force of sympathy a kind of surrogate memory of how animals experience suffering.

The redemption of little Joe Green anticipates our second constellation, literature that turns on crucial episodes of children bonding to cherished outdoor niches. Books of such kind highlight a type of experience that developmental psychologists have found to be formative of adult identity. Edith Cobb's *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), which argued for a correlation between exceptional adult creativity and reported experiences of having bonded to special outdoor play-spaces during middle childhood

(between infancy and adolescence), has been broadly if not uniformly confirmed by the more empirical research of such recent psychologists as Louise Chawla (Chawla 1986, 1990) and Peter Kahn, Jr. Kahn's fieldwork is additionally remarkable for its discovery of broadly similar biophilic receptivity across different habitats and cultures: African American kids in Houston, Lusophone kids both in Lisbon and the Brazilian outback, white middle-class children in the U. S.. The vast archive of post-romantic autobiographical literature for adults from Wordsworth to Thoreau to Mary Austin and John Muir down to latter-day fiction and life-writing by men and women across color and country lines further testifies to this, even in cases where the special place in question is far from pristine but, on the contrary, almost overshadowed by urban encroachment or even toxified.

Children's literature of this kind maps almost perfectly onto both the canonical-literary and the psychological archives. David Sobel's *Children's Special Places: Exploring the Role of Forts, Dens, and Bush Houses in Middle Childhood* (1993) makes no mention of Ernest Thompson Seton, but it provides an uncannily precise retrospective gloss on the delight shown by Yan and (later on) also his friend Sam in sleuthing out, camping, and building huts and wigwams in secret outdoor near-home niches.

As with our first constellation, it's possible to read this literature in less environment-centric terms than I propose here, as incipient *Bildungsromane*, such that the

dimension of environmental bonding seems ancillary to the main business of growing up and presumably away from the intense bonding-with-nature phase. Even though the plot of *The Secret Garden* centers on the discovery of the garden and the transformative delight and healing (both physical and psychic) that accrues to the children through their connection with it, it can be read as directed rather in the long run more toward the socialization of Mary and Colin into proper Victorian/Imperial gentlefolk, especially as Colin emerges toward the end of the novel to assert his place as inheritor of the estate (v. Phillips). From this standpoint, the garden diminishes into a symbolic transitional object that brings Mary, Colin, and his equally wounded father together in family solidarity *via* their mutual bond around the memory of the lost mother whose own favorite place this was. Garden cultivation equals retrieval of the lost mother-figure. All this comports with earlier eighteenth and nineteenth century moral tales for children where gardens figure prominently as scenes of instruction (Smith), tales that typify more broadly the difference between the (even) more strongly didactic, often tractarian, cast of pre-Romantic writing for children—much more committed than the texts this essay discusses to conceiving children as adults-to-be than in childhood as a distinct life-stage with its own special claims and privileges. So too the most explicitly environmentalist text named so far: *The Earth Is My Mother*. It goes way beyond *The Secret Garden* in identifying 11-year old Sarah Stewart's late mother flatly with Mother Earth and culminates in her receiving the first-ever presidential "Eco-Hero" award for efforts on behalf of wilderness protection.

Yet *The Earth* scripts the president's message at the award ceremony not as a call to save the earth but rather as a much more generalized tribute to heroic persistence: individual people, including kids "can make a difference" and that it's "important not to give up" in the face of "failure and disappointments" (Doolittle & MacKay 174-175).

On the other hand, the story also makes it quite clear that Sarah's takeaway is much more place-connected than the president's. So we side at our peril with his version—and with a generic *Bildungsroman* reading of the book as a whole. The same claim might be lodged in different measure for the other books in this constellation as well. If you try to read through or against the emphasis on environmental construction of personal identity, you do so at peril. To return to *The Secret Garden*, the garden's uncanny charisma cannot be reduced to the ghost of the missing mother, or to some generic theory of the lure of secrecy or uncanniness, or to a symbolic inner sanctum of class privilege that unlocks Colin's realization of what it means to be the Young Rajah. Whether you take environment as the decisive factor or as part of an eclectic mix, *Secret Garden* is irrepressibly a book about biophilia—the power of active interaction with the living earth (birds, flowers, trees, and animals) to reshape human being, particularly at the impressionable life-stage of the two cousins, both aged ten. This gets dramatized not only by the sheer delight they take in the garden and its effect of that on their mental and physical health, but by showing them upfront in a pre-garden default stage of ecophobic hostility to the landscape of the Yorkshire moors that's symptomatic of their extreme

self-centeredness, and then later on by putting them both—especially Mary—in fascinated awe of the slightly older local lad, Dickon, who models a magically intimate relation with the natural world, as if he were “a sort of robin without beak or feathers” (Burnett 152).

Burnett’s *ex cathedra* pronouncements suggest that the novel congealed from an array of different biographical strands that included mourning for a son who died young, flirtation with the mind-cure doctrines of Christian Science, and a Dickon-like personal experience of summertime rapport with a particular English robin. Especially salient, however, was a lifelong passion for gardens that began, tellingly, in her own middle childhood with “a small bed in the centre of the few yards of iron-railed front garden before a house in an old square in the ugliest, smokiest factory town to be found anywhere in all the North of England” (Burnett 209).

The juvenile literature of middle childhood encounters with special outdoor places is too diverse to permit unitary generalization about the degree of importance accorded the E-factor in their relative conceptions of child development. Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* implies that if little Max is not to be eaten up by those wild beasties that love him so they must eventually be exorcised. As such it reads almost like a textbook exemplification of Freud’s theory of the relation between poesis and daydreaming: through the vicarity of imagination you can indulge, as in dreams, the lure of the impossible, the dangerous, the forbidden, but in a harmless fashion that leaves you in your

armchair and concealed from public view. Kipling's composition of the Mowgli stories for the *Jungle Book* performed the obverse, in that the author's vision for the boy-protagonist evidently began with an earlier tale about him being absorbed as a young man into colonial society. "As Kipling wrote his way 'backward' into Mowgli's infancy and development," notes one scholar, the trope of the wild child takes over and "steers the narrative toward disruption" of that anterior closure (Hotchkiss 436). In *Two Little Savages*, the episodes, yarns, and woodcraft lore keep accumulating and the boys never do mature. But such divergences--only to be expected from individual tales that build from a very general template--hardly undermine these stories' aggregate testimony to the generative, or regenerative, impact of imagined contact with outdoor places in the fashioning of personal identity.

With ever-larger percentages of earthlings dwelling in metropolitan areas and with increasingly strict controls being put--for middle class children, anyhow--on foraging at will in the outdoors, an increasing concern being voiced in public discourse is fear of what environmental journalist Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder," or malformation of adult identity arising from curtailment of children's roaming about and exploration of wild places, such as this author and his peers allegedly did with much greater freedom.

Literature for children that turns on the crucial impact of bonding to outdoor places in middle childhood, presents itself as an anticipatory response to such concern by providing

a kind of “prosthetic memory” (*cf.* Landsberg) that might partway offset the effects of what Peter Kahn, Jr., terms “generational environmental amnesia” (Kahn 2002: 113 and *passim*). Conceivably this mordant diagnosis of generational slippage under the regime of industrial modernity—each generation starts with more diminished expectations of environmental salubrity that become the new normal—may be skewed by a certain nostalgia factor, such as Raymond Williams identifies at the start of *The Country and the City*, *i.e.* the chronic assumption that the last generation lived closer to nature than the one before, traced by Williams all the way back to the time of the Norman conquest. Nor, so far as I know, have experimental psychologists thus far empirically measured the long-term impact of outdoor contact on a child’s psychic development as precisely as (for example) it *has* been empirically demonstrated that convalescence from illness or surgery is facilitated by contact with nature, or even images thereof (Ulrich, Sternberg). But the evidence for biophilia, *i.e.* human responsiveness to nonhuman beings, and for middle childhood’s susceptibility to this and to place imprints generally, does seem increasingly probable (Kellert), suggesting that the persistence of the theme in children’s environmental writing is no fluke. So there would seem to be truth as well as poetry to Wallace Stegner insistence that if you “expose a child to a particular environment” between the ages of five and twelve and “he will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies” (Stegner 21).

To dwell so long on two chosen constellations of practice and to treat them as persisting over time is to risk legitimate objection to my own ethics of critical practice. I threaten to leave a false impression that the basic structural templates for children's environmental literature were permanently forged by western (specifically Anglo-American) writers over a century ago and to misrepresent the variegation and internal dissonances of practice and of environmental(ist) ideology, especially during the past half-century. The next, briefer section will briefly try to redress that imbalance.

2

Any impression given above of sustained ideological homogeneity, even within Europhone children's environmental literature, will be quickly dispelled with another pair of well-known examples: Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) –like *The Secret Garden* a text of the Edwardian era–and *The Lorax* (1970) by Theodore Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), the first significant expression in children's literature of the radicalization of the U. S. environmentalist agenda in the 1960s.

Both books broadly share a common project: to confront the disruptions of industrial modernization and attendant seductions of consumer culture at their respective historical moments. That said, their executions of that project starkly differ. For *Wind in the Willows*, published at the dawn of the automotive age, the disruptions take the form of the seriocomic mishaps of Mr. Toad's motor mania and his capricious, out-of-control

spendthrift propensities as unworthy scion and heir. *The Lorax* does so far more soberly, through the Once-ler's rueful story of his rapacious deforestation and pollution of what once was a pristine environment, and moralistic denunciations by the Lorax, who looms up as a far more monitorial superego than his closest counterpart in *Wind in the Willows*, Mr. Badger. The telltale mark of the stark contrast between the Edwardian and post-Rachel Carsonish *epistèmes* is of course that *Wind in the Willows* can see its way toward the unambiguous restitution of an even more idyllic order than it evokes at the start by keeping runaway modernization at bay on the one side and on the other side the threat to the appealingly civil animal protagonists posed by the more feral denizens of the wildwood. The "simple pastoral" myth of an unruffled middle landscape of countryside nestled between city and wilderness gets unequivocally reaffirmed (Marx). *The Lorax*, by contrast, offers no more than the faintest ray of hope that the devastation of *its* once-idyllic landscape can be reversed. The rhetoric of *Willows* works to gratify the desire for a felicitous space into which the reader can settle snugly, like Mole delightedly rediscovering his old burrow with the aid of Rat's ministrations. *The Lorax* really sticks it to its readers, especially in the final twist of having the Once-ler throw the burden entirely on the child-listener to solve the world's environmental problems by planting the very last Truffula seed in existence.

This rhetorical shift might be construed in part merely as a more extreme than

average variation to be expected within modern children's writing generally between entertainment and instruction. (Both books have been chided for going to extremes, Grahame for complacent embrace of a classist *status quo*, Seuss for gratuitous doom-crying) (v. Grahame, Lerer introduction; Marshall). But *The Lorax*'s militant environmentalism, though atypical of Seuss—it's by far the most preachy of his books—is also historically symptomatic in auguring a greater pervasiveness of overt environmentalism in subsequent children's writing, especially during the past two decades. "New and increasingly activist books that reflect environmental concerns are published yearly," one critic noted in 1994 (Sigler 151), probably by no coincidence on the eve of the first major conference (1995) of the then-new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Today, children's literature are looking greener than ever. Since 2005, for instance, the Newton Marasco Foundation has been issuing annual "Green Earth Book Award"s in three categories: picture book, children's fiction (middle childhood) and young adult (<http://www.newtonmarascofoundation.org>). 2010 winners include S. Terrell French's novel *Operation Redwood*--in which an urban biracial (Chinese/American) boy and his Chicano friend team up with the daughter from a backcountry farming family to conduct a (successful) children's tree-sitting campaign to save the neighboring grove that his nasty businessman uncle has targeted for clear-cutting; and Saci Lloyd's *Carbon Diaries: 2015*, a London-based global warming fiction featuring

a teenage girl's struggles to cope with the extreme weather and draconian carbon rationing regime that threaten to destroy her dysfunctional family and unstable neighborhood.

The surge of new environmentally-concerned writing for children would take a book in itself even to itemize, let alone appraise. Yet some generalizations can be ventured. First, environmental(ist) agenda by no means automatically equates to counter-hegemonic position-taking across the board. *Operation Redwood* for instance invokes the memory of Earth First! And condones lawbreaking in selected circumstances; but closure comes when Julian's granny, the fairy-godmother like alpha-matriarch parent of the evil uncle, intervenes to forestall and reengineer the board of directors' fateful plan. An environmentalist agenda, whether traditionally preservationist as here, or futurologically apocalyptic as in *Carbon Diaries 2015*, or responsive to (say) animal rights or environmental justice concerns as in Dav Pilkey's kids-save-the-turkeys picture book *'Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving* (1990) and Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac's Trail-of-Tears novel *The Journal of Jesse Smoke: A Cherokee Boy* (2001), will often incorporate quite conventional elements, such as affirmation of heteronormative family values (first three books especially, despite salience of a major gay character *Carbon Diaries* and "blended"-family tension in *Operation Redwood*) or the virtues of individual striving and gumption (books one, two, and four). Second, and relatedly, the sense of urgency surrounding eco-didactic agendas of whatever sort in recent children's literature

may be contained by such pleasurable elements as adventuresome plotlines, enticing illustrations, upbeat closure, and so forth. In taking note of such matters, ecocritics have by turns deplored the containment of ecocritique within normalizing constraints (*e.g.* Sturgeon) and taken a more hopeful view of the positive potential of its progressive elements for a positive “ecopedagogy” (*e.g.* Gaard). Both the characteristically strong didactic cast of much children’s literature, environmental or otherwise, and differences of critical opinion about what both environmental and ecocritical agendas should be, we may expect such divergent assessments to continue indefinitely.

Third, the likelihood that some tempering of non-normative eco-dissidence in children’s literature will continue to persist seems confirmed by another development that deserves far more discussion than I can give it here: the rise of what might be called cultural survival literature for children around the theme of intimacy between humans and the natural world by first peoples and other postcolonial worldwide: *e.g.* the late Oodgeroo Noonukul’s *Dreamtime* (1972), a collection of Australian aboriginal stories by one of the major figures in the contemporary aboriginal literary renaissance; *The Girl Who Married the Moon: Tales from Native North America* (1994), a collaboration between Bruchac and Cherokee storyteller Gayle Ross; *The Story of Colors (La Historia de los Colores)* by Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos; Zimbabwean Charles Mungoshi’s *One Day, Long Ago: More Stories from a Shona Childhood* (1991); and *The People Who Hugged Trees* (1990),

by Deborah Lee Rose, an adaptation of the Indian folktale that stands behind the Chipko movement instigated by Indian environmental activists in modern times, women especially (v. Platt). All these texts in one way or another both seek to displace the baleful legacy of the Eurocentric speaking-for-the-native tradition in which several of the texts discussed in section one are complicit. The potential difference such emergent writing can sometimes make is made clear by such works of comparative diagnostic appraisal as Clare Bradford's and *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (2007) and Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin's *A Broken Flute* (2005). Seale and Spapin offer a cornucopia of meticulous and pointed reviews of recent texts about Native American experience by both white and Native writers emphasizing in no uncertain terms that Native-written works have generally addressed specific episodes in the shocking history of genocide, displacement, forced assimilation, and the like much more candidly and accurately (29-83 and *passim*).

Yet contemporary indigenous and other postcolonial children's writing is by no means a protest literature unequivocally. In the aforementioned works by Oogderoo, Marcos, and Mungoshi, enchanting stories of animal agents and traditional human lives led close to nature combine with enticing illustrations to produce neoprimalist effects that cater to exoticist wish-fulfilment more than they unsettle. In these and many other books like them, the demands of the global book market together with a predictable

prudence about immersing juvenile readers in too many gory details make for considerably more euphemized presentations than, say, the *Märchen* sanitized in the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm (which later retellings tend to euphemize further for polite consumption).

Finally, as the contrast between the landscapes of *The Wind and the Willows* and *The Lorax* indicates, the continued evocation of premodern community and relatively natural landscapes in children's literature by first worlders and first peoples alike must also be understood against the background of the accelerating (sub)urbanization during the past hundred years, as the majority of the world's human inhabitants have come to live in metropolitan areas. This has left its own mark on the represented environment(s) of children's literature, tilting it in a more urbanized and increasingly also downright pro-urban direction. This story begins with urban sprawl books of the mid-twentieth century, such as Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House* (1942), in which a cute little cottage in the country that gradually gets engulfed by the encroaching city but at the end gets happily moved back into the country again. This kind of story is still being reprised, e.g. Jeannie Baker's Australian counterpart, *Window* (1991), which features a family driven to relocate to a more rustic spot after their countrified dwelling gets engulfed, only to find the whole process starting over again. But arguably more fitting for the twenty-first century are texts like *Popville*, by Anouck Boisbert and Louis Rigaud (2010),

a pop-up book that tracks urban growth in an inviting reader-friendly manner; or Christoph Niemann's *Subway* (2010), another book for the very young designed make the potentially scary experience of underground travel appealing to kids. Altogether, children's literature of the future seems at least as likely to treat cityscape as liveable habitat as in the dystopian terms of *Carbon Diaries 2015* and its still more frightening sequel *Carbon Diaries 2017*. At the same time, it seems no less certain that the proportion of future eco-writing for children, whatever its tradeoffs between anodyne soothing and provocative eco-consciousness-raising, will continue to build upon the intensified self-consciousness of the expanding menu of contemporary environmental *problems* that such books as *The Little House* and especially *The Lorax* first sought to bring to consciousness.¹

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