

Relationship, Empathy and Activism: What Children's Books Can Do to Promote Ecological Empathy

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For me, books matter most in children's lives because they provide invitations to social worlds that might otherwise be unavailable to them. When children read, they are drawn into those storied worlds as vicarious participants, using imagination to feel what it is like to be someone else, to know and care about the new people they encounter as well as the worlds they inhabit. The power of children's literature to transport readers into new and different realities and transform the way they see the world is a theme that took hold in the children's literature class I taught at Purdue University in the spring of 2019. As a class, we recognized the potential of children's literature to help address the immense challenges facing our global society, including the challenges facing our environment.

Schools often promote awareness regarding the needs of our planet and the natural world by involving students in project and place-based learning, and rightly so. Students' engagement in sustainability-related activity is irreplaceable. Yet as literacy researchers and educators, we believe that children's literature can play a significant role in developing a sense of ecological empathy by providing children with vicarious spaces in which to explore the beauty and promise of the natural world, as well as their role in caring for it. Books can inspire children to ask questions, imagine possibilities, think critically, and promote activism.

In this issue, students from the children's literature class review four children's books that provoke curiosity, inspire agency and prompt empathic response as readers encounter events, problems and creatures in the natural world. While some of the books reviewed here are clearly aimed at prompting action, others are focused on provoking ecological sensitivities by putting young readers in relationship with the natural world in personal ways, furthering their sense of connection to, and caring for, their world.

The first book *10 Things I Can Do to Help My World* by Melanie Walsh, and reviewed by Kathy Martin and Kimberly Fredenburg, is written for preschoolers. Walsh's book takes on environmental concerns directly and suggests ways that young children can contribute to solving them.

Next, *Bee & Me* by Alison Jay, and reviewed by Mengying Xue, is a wordless narrative about a young girl's relationship with a bee. Written for children preschool to grade two, *Bee & Me*, introduces children to the world of bees as they follow a young girl's changing relationship with a bee and feel their growing friendship.

The third book, *Follow the Moon: A Tale of One Idea, Twenty Kids and A Hundred Sea Turtles*, written by Philippe Cousteau and Deborah Hopkinson, and reviewed by Rong Zhang shows what a group of children can do in the face of potentially disastrous ecological conditions for the turtles that live near them. Working with their teacher, a class of children plans and implements a way to save the turtles.

Finally, Fay Mentzer and Christina Martini, review *Heartbeat* by Evan Turk. This award-winning author-illustrator takes readers through a poignant and powerful history of humans' relationship with whales, drawing readers into a caring and hopeful stance towards these magnificent creatures.

The reviews in this issue take a slightly different format than is typical for *First Opinion/Second Reactions*. Each reviewer or pair of reviewers has written both the *First Opinion* and the *Second Reaction*. Kathy and Kimberly's ground their *Second Opinion* essay upon preschool and kindergarten children's responses to the book during a teacher-led read aloud. Fay Mentzer, who authors the *Second Opinion* for *Heartbeat*, shares her perspective as a reader as well as her own children's responses to her story as she read it to them. Both Rong Zhang and Mengying Xue hypothesize readers' reactions to the books and discuss potential from that perspective, including the challenges and opportunities these books offer in terms of reading comprehension and the development of self. We hope you find the variety of perspectives interesting and provocative.