

Kylee Auten

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Waves of Friendship: Posthumanism in *Jules VS. the Ocean* and *Swashby and the Sea*

I discovered *Jules VS. the Ocean*, written and illustrated in 2020 by Jesse Sima, and *Swashby and the Sea*, written by Beth Ferry and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal, also in 2020, while I was preparing an ocean themed storytime for preschoolers and toddlers at the public library. As I read through these books, I was fascinated by the sea and the ocean acting as active characters throughout the stories. At the suggestion of Dr. Karen Coats, I read Zoe Jaques's book chapter, "Water," in her 2014 book *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* and Veronica Strang's chapter, "Conceptual Relations: Water, Ideologies, and Theoretical Subversions" from the 2013 book *Thinking With Water* to become more familiar with posthuman ideologies and how they might be used to analyze these two picture books. While I don't have time to share my storytime with you today, we are going to spend the next several minutes examining how we can use a posthuman framework to read water as a gathering force despite the presence of power struggles.

Before we take a look at the picture books, I'd like to discuss how I will be using posthumanism as a framework for my analysis. In the words of Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden, natureculture is a "synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially informed" (1). The concept of natureculture is crucial to understanding how human culture and nature are intertwined in deep, often unknown or unknowable ways. Despite this sense of the unknown, there are, however, three observable ways in which to understand natureculture relationships within *Jules VS. the Ocean* and *Swashby and the Sea*.

First, naturecultures rely on power struggles between humanity and nature. For instance, Jaques writes about how “unruly watery spaces in literature for young readers afford posthuman and ecocritical readings that are attuned to material agency and destabilize human control” (Jaques 144). This power struggle has also been conceived of as a battle for resources, which is something Strang mentions in her writing. So, as we examine these picture books, I will point out how the creators utilize power struggles and which characters participate in them.

Second, the beaches within these two picture books act as liminal gathering places where the characters within the books can meet in a neutral space to not only grapple with power imbalances, but work to further human relationships. Jaques states the beach “quite obviously, operates as a liminal frontier between land and sea” (162). She takes this a step further, too, when she writes of beaches as places of possibility since parties from both nature and humanity can utilize these liminal spaces. Strang writes of beaches as being re-creational—places not only of relaxation, but of re-generation (202). As we will see shortly, the characters in *Jules* and *Swashby* reap the benefits of re-creation when they are on the beach.

Finally, Jaques’s posthuman thinking posits water as a cleansing agent for human characters, but that is not the only impact water can have. Water does not just, or even always, perform acts of cleansing—it also performs acts of gathering. *Jules* and *Swashby* both demonstrate this through their plots, words, and illustrations. So, though the notion of water affecting human characters comes from posthumanism, this can be extended to understand how friendships and familial ties are also a part of naturecultures.

Let’s look at *Jules VS. the Ocean* first. Jules’s goal is “to make the BIGGEST... FANCIEST... MOST EXCELLENT castle that has ever been built” (Sima n.p.). She spends most of the book building this castle by herself, though her goal is to impress her sister. Jules

starts out the day optimistic that the Ocean will help out with her castle building endeavors, but it is clear from the very beginning that the Ocean has ulterior motives when it comes to Jules's castle building. As Jules proudly uses her bucket to begin her work, Sima depicts an ocean wave that specifically targets the castle. Jules's closed eyes keep her from seeing the Ocean's intentions, but the seagull on the page seems to be eyeing the Ocean, indicating that at least one character recognizes how purposeful the Ocean is being. This book plays into Jaques's posthuman notions of power imbalances most clearly when Jules plants her feet in the ground and crosses her arms while the narrator declares, "Not today, Ocean. Enough is enough. Jules will NOT be pushed around. She will stand her ground." (ibid.) This scene demonstrates two points. First, Jules's struggle with the ocean *is* about dominance and control. She wants to control whether the Ocean can destroy her creation. However, aligning with the posthuman thinking that Strang writes about, this power struggle is not about possession because she is not trying to obtain water for herself. Second, Jules does not fear the ocean, which further coincides with Jaques's writings as she analyzes different texts for young readers that encourage letting go of fear. Jules faces the ocean head-on, sharing her thoughts, feelings, and demands outright. In both of these ways, Sima sets up a posthuman, natureculture relationship to the water for her young protagonist.

This natureculture relationship is fostered by the liminal meeting space that is the beach, with the shifting sands representing how power and control shifts between the two parties that occupy the space. Though Jules stands her ground, the liminal nature of the space allows the beach to manipulate the sand as well. On one page about half-way through the book, the waves wash onto the sand, tickling Jules's toes, before rolling back out and burying her feet slightly (Sima n.p.). Again, the Ocean crashes into Jules and buries her feet even deeper. The sands serve

as the meeting ground where human and nature quite literally touch and interact, which is necessary for the Ocean to affect Jules's human relationship with her sister.

Without this space to meet, the Ocean would not be able to enact its plan, which is to get Jules and her sister to work together to build a castle, ultimately resulting in their relationship strengthening. After her sister joins in on the building endeavors, the Ocean gradually recedes from the illustrations across a spread where Sima shows a progression of the two girls building their castle (Sima n.p.). In fact, once the sisters make physical contact, the Ocean is no longer in frame. This absence of the Ocean implies that its intervention is no longer needed, at least at this moment. After they have completed their castle, though, the Ocean sends one giant wave that destroys the castle, but as this image shows, the sisters are now united, as seen by how they are holding hands when the water washes away from them (ibid). The Ocean uses its autonomy to deepen a human relationship, highlighting how the moral of this story is not about fearing the Ocean, but rather, leaning into its re-generative, gathering capabilities.

Now, we'll transition to examining how *Swashby and the Sea* plays with power imbalances, liminal meeting spaces, and human relationships. Swashby is a retired captain who lives on a quiet beach that is "Salty. And sandy. And serene" (Ferry n.p.). *Swashby and the Sea* takes the posthuman thinking presented by Jaques and Strang a step further than *Jules* by presenting a human interacting with the sea in an equal, communicative way. Swashby lives peacefully by the sea, with the text claiming that they loved each other (Ferry n.p.). His peace ends, and the conflict begins, when a young, unnamed girl and her grandmother move in across the walkway. More so than *Jules*, it is clear that the negotiation and power imbalance is between the human characters. The sea, rather, serves as a go-between for the human parties. Swashby attempts to communicate with the young girl by writing in the sand, but the sea, as moderator,

changes the messages, so the girl reads something different than what Swashby wrote. Swashby first writes, “NO TRESPASSING,” but the Sea “fiddles” with it, so it reads “SING.” (Ferry n.p.) This happens twice more, with “NOW VANISH” becoming “WISH,” and “PLEASE GO AWAY” becoming “PLAY” (ibid.). Ferry and Martinez-Neal craft a calm negotiation that aligns with posthuman calls for less fear and more flexibility when interacting with water.

Swashby lives on the beach, so his constant contact with the sea further deepens the possibilities inherent within the liminal space. The malleable nature of the sand creates opportunities for human and nature to interact. This is obvious with how the Swashby and the sea communicate. However, the sands also serve as a mediator for human characters as well. Swashby and the young girl come in contact with each other on the beach, and this is aided by the proximity to and influence from the sea. Further, like Jules and her sister, Swashby and the young girl end up building a sandcastle together, which nuances how sand is a productive, and, in in Strang’s words, “re-creative” substance.

However, this “fiddling” in the sand is not enough to cause Swashby to fully accept human friendship. As a last attempt to get Swashby to engage with the young girl, the sea draws her out to sea with a wave that is not threatening (Ferry n.p.). It is safe—it wraps the girl up in a way that is playful and almost comforting. The girl laughs and is obviously not in danger. Despite the wave’s non-threatening appearance, Swashby still dives in to rescue the girl. This action is the final step in the sea’s plan to get Swashby to leave behind his solitary life and unite himself with other humans. Ferry and Martinez-Neal use their text and illustrations to encourage reliance on nature to deepen human relationship.

Jules VS. the Ocean and *Swashby and the Sea* both use, whether knowingly or unknowingly, posthuman thinking that encourages a deep, interwoven understanding of nature

and humanity. Ferry and Martinez-Neal and Sima do this by crafting text and pictures that simultaneously convey water as having agency of its own but using that agency to help humans instead of hurting them. I would like to propose that, while building sandcastles and building relationships take center stage in these picture books, these texts can also be examined as opportunities to encourage child readers to feel more connected with the nature around them. Roxanne Harde, in her article on ecocitizenship in children's novels, analyzes how readers are asked to be attentive to nature in certain texts, claiming "attentiveness matters because it can transform everyday experience and consciousness into a revelatory and selfless state that recognizes the nonhuman environment as a subject with rights" (328). *Swashby* and *Jules* are two picture books that call on young readers, and their caregivers, to think about how water impacts their lives. By creating books where naturecultures are front and center, the authors ask their readers to be attentive of their own place within nature. Additionally, by depicting bodies of water that care about humans and their interpersonal relationships, the books also invite readers to care about water's relationship to humans. The closing pages of *Swashby* demonstrates this rather poignantly: as Swashby prepares to join his neighbors for tea, he leaves one final message in the sand. When he writes, "THANK YE, FRIEND" (Ferry n.p.), his message is intended for the sea herself and not the young girl. He cares for the sea, and she cares for him. These two picture books lean into posthuman notions that we should not fear the unknown, watery depths of the ocean. Instead, we should think about how our relationship with nature can foster positive natureculture interactions that benefit humans and nature alike.

Works Cited

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