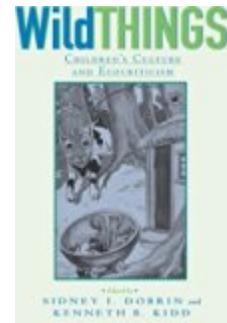


Sidney I. Dobrin, Kenneth B. Kidd, eds. *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-3028-9.

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Taking Children's Culture Seriously

As adults it is often difficult for us to remember our childhood, a time of infinite innocence and insatiable curiosity. We often do not realize that there is an intricate connection between what we have experienced as children and what we have ultimately become. Why is this? The concept seems simple enough. Perhaps one reason for this disconnect is that children's culture is often dismissed as somewhat inferior. Not many people will argue that such children's classics as E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* or Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* deserve as much recognition and acclaim as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Interestingly enough, however, if one compares these works, a host of similarities emerge. Not only do they all raise important issues, but they also entertain. As Horace once wrote, "He gets every vote who combines the useful with the pleasant, and who, at the same time he pleases the reader, also instructs him." [1] Perhaps the best approach an author can take is to weave the two approaches together. The reader does not need to be hit over the head with morals in order to learn. One is reminded of the words of Mark Twain in his opening Notice in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." [2]

If one is to raise ecologically aware children one must provide them with the tools to become so. *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* explores and analyzes

those materials that contribute to the ongoing environmental education of children. As the introduction states, the collection of essays is really about "the interplay of children's texts—literary, multimedia, cultural—and children's environmental experience" (p. 1). The contributing authors do an exceptional job discussing this interplay and asking their audience to consider its importance. For those readers who do not know what "ecocriticism" is, editors Dobrin and Kidd draw on Cheryll Glotfelty's definition, taking ecocriticism to mean the study of the relationship between literature and the environment (p. 3). While the relationship between children and nature has long been debated by those who believe in the more Victorian notion that children have a privileged relationship to nature, and those who believe children need to be educated about nature, Dobrin and Kidd clearly state that "The essays included here underscore the consensus belief across narrative genres that even if the child has a privileged relationship with nature, he or she must be educated into a deeper—or at least different—awareness" (p. 7).

The essays are well organized, grouped according to period and genre, and cover literature that ranges from the nineteenth century to the present. Later essays address other forms of children's culture such as music and television. While it is impossible for me to adequately critique all sixteen essays within the scope of this review, a brief summary of those that are most engaging seems appropriate.

The first essay, “‘He Made Us Very Much Like the Flowers’: Human/Nature in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Children’s Literature,” by Maude Hines, explores the depiction of plants as feeling, sentient creatures. I found this essay to be stimulating, especially for someone like myself who is very sensitive to the feelings of animals, but has not seriously considered the feelings of plants before. Hines discusses nineteenth-century botanical children’s literature, stating that it “connects two of the primary obsessions of the preceding romantic period: nature and children” (p. 17). She also explores nineteenth-century reform literature’s ability to evoke sympathy, and its relationship to children’s literature. Essentially, nineteenth-century reform literature encouraged a social consciousness of kindness by depicting victims such as children, convicts, and the insane in pain. “The violence and ambivalence of reform literature directed at adults made its way into children’s literature, transformed into representations of the relationships between children and plants or insects. Stories of plants in pain appealed to sympathy in children—themselves a target of humanitarian reform literature and low on the social order—in much the same way as stories of the pain of children and other human groups appealed to adult readers” (pp. 21-22).

I find Marion Copeland’s essay, “The Wild and Wild Animal Characters in the Ecofeminist Novels of Beatrix Potter and Gene Stratton-Porter” to be quite complementary to Hines’s essay in that it deals with human sympathy and attitudes to the nonhuman world. Copeland delves into the world of ecofeminism, which links the oppression of women to the domination of nature. The concept of ecofeminism is itself an important one to understand since it is so integral to ecocriticism. In examining the works of Gene Stratton-Porter and Beatrix Potter, Copeland recognizes that both authors “have, by bringing generations of readers into this kind of intimate relationship with nature, had immeasurable influence on the developing attitudes toward conservation of land and animals in the twentieth century” (p. 79). In fact, what might be most interesting about Copeland’s analysis is that she recognizes animals as important entities within ecocriticism. Oftentimes in ecocritical writings the animal perspective is subjugated to that of the environment and land, and it is important that this not always be the case. In recognizing nonhuman animals as beings of significance, the capacity for human compassion grows and nonhuman animals will consequently be treated with more respect.

“E. B. White’s Paean to Life: The Environmental

Imagination of *Charlotte’s Web*,” Lynn Overholt Wake’s discussion of E. B. White and *Charlotte’s Web*, is perhaps one of the most entertaining of the collection as it speaks to all those who have read *Charlotte’s Web* and enjoyed doing so. Wake does a wonderful job pointing out the things that truly make this story so great. She suggests that “The barn in *Charlotte’s Web* functions as its own ecosystem” (p. 101). Not only do many different animals, humans, and a spider converge at this place, but the barn represents a crossroads of human culture and biological nature (p. 110). Also quite interesting is that E. B. White, while understanding that children’s literature can both instruct and delight, also understood that there is a third function—essentially to keep children company. I believe this point is crucial to understanding children’s education, especially since children often treat their favorite books as they would their best friends. How often do you come across a child who asks to be read a certain book over and over again, never tiring of the same words and phrases? There is a reason for this: books comfort children.

Books not only comfort but enlighten children, provided the right questions are asked. In “Playing Seriously with Dr. Seuss: A Pedagogical Response to *The Lorax*,” Bob Henderson, Merle Kennedy, and Chuck Chamberlin explore effective environmental teaching, focusing solely on Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*. This story essentially lays the foundation for literary environmentalism. Most readers believe they understand the major themes of the story, and yet as Henderson, Kennedy, and Chamberlin suggest, there are in fact more questions to be raised and much more discussion to be had. While all of the essays in this collection are of marked value in emphasizing the importance of environmental literature, this essay does a wonderful job of providing educators with the direction needed to lead their students in intelligent discussion. They advocate close attention to the text and its implications. Part of this close attention to the text involves active reading, which encourages asking questions. As they state “We hope to interject into the book and video version of the story a dialogue that is not there but should be if ‘our’ *Lorax* is to be an effective environmental advocate” (pp. 130-131). Also quite useful is their list of texts that can be used in the classroom to supplement the teaching of *The Lorax*.

The last four chapters of the book address other media forms, such as music and television. If Dobrin and Kidd had left these pieces out of their collection of essays it would have been a shame indeed. In today’s modern world the influence of multimedia is crucial, and more

and more children are learning from music, television, and movies than ever before. In “‘It’s Not Easy Being Green’: Jim Henson, the Muppets, and Ecological Literacy,” Sidney I. Dobrin tackles the work of one of the most beloved men of all time, Jim Henson. Often only extolled for their ability to entertain and humor us, the Muppets are vitally important to children’s understanding of the environment. As Dobrin states “In many ways, Jim Henson and the Muppets have taken on an explicit agenda of ecological literacy promotion” (p. 234). By examining such shows as *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock*, Dobrin demonstrates the ecological literacy involved. Dobrin also amusingly suggests a need for more detailed research, perhaps culminating in a book of Muppet criticism, or “Muppeticism” (p. 235). Dobrin reminds us that education comes in many forms.

Because all of the essays in *Wild Things* are so engaging and diverse, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to pick up this book and not find something of in-

terest. This collection is both thought-provoking and enjoyable, like the children’s literature it explores. Not only does *Wild Things* stress the importance of early childhood environmental education, but it also suggests that the sympathy that we as a society are trying to instill in our children is in fact already there to some degree. All we have to do is nurture what has already begun to blossom. There is, as all of the authors suggest, much to explore about the literary and cultural world of children if we only allow ourselves to do so. This exploration, in turn, will only lead to a more compassionate generation of children, and an environment in which the land and animals are truly appreciated.

Notes [1]. Horace, “Ars Poetica,” in *Horace for Students of Literature: The ‘Ars Poetica’ and Its Tradition*, trans. Leon Golden (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1995), lines 333-346. [2]. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1959).

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