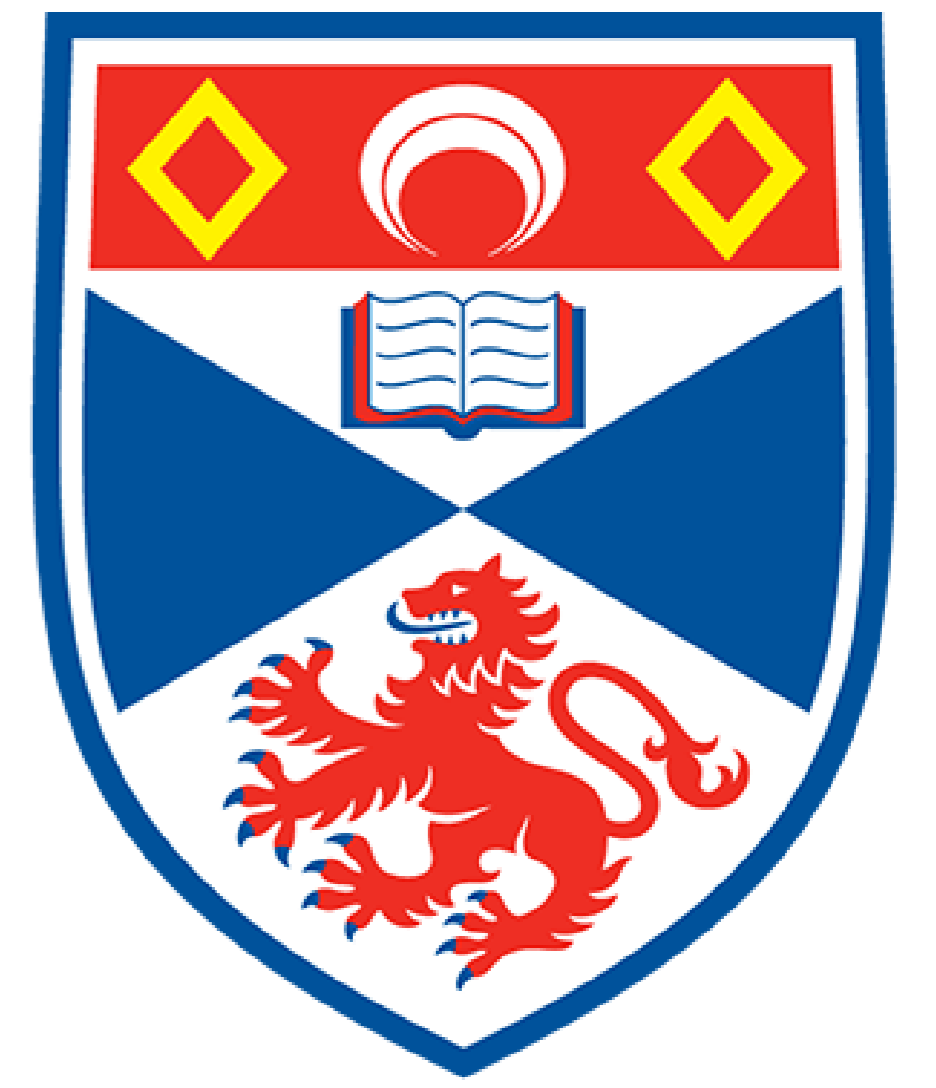


SHAPING ENVIRONMENTAL EMPATHY THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Laidlaw Scholarship Programme in Research and Leadership
Anna Bajerska, supervised by Dr Emily Finer
The School of Modern Languages



INTRODUCTION

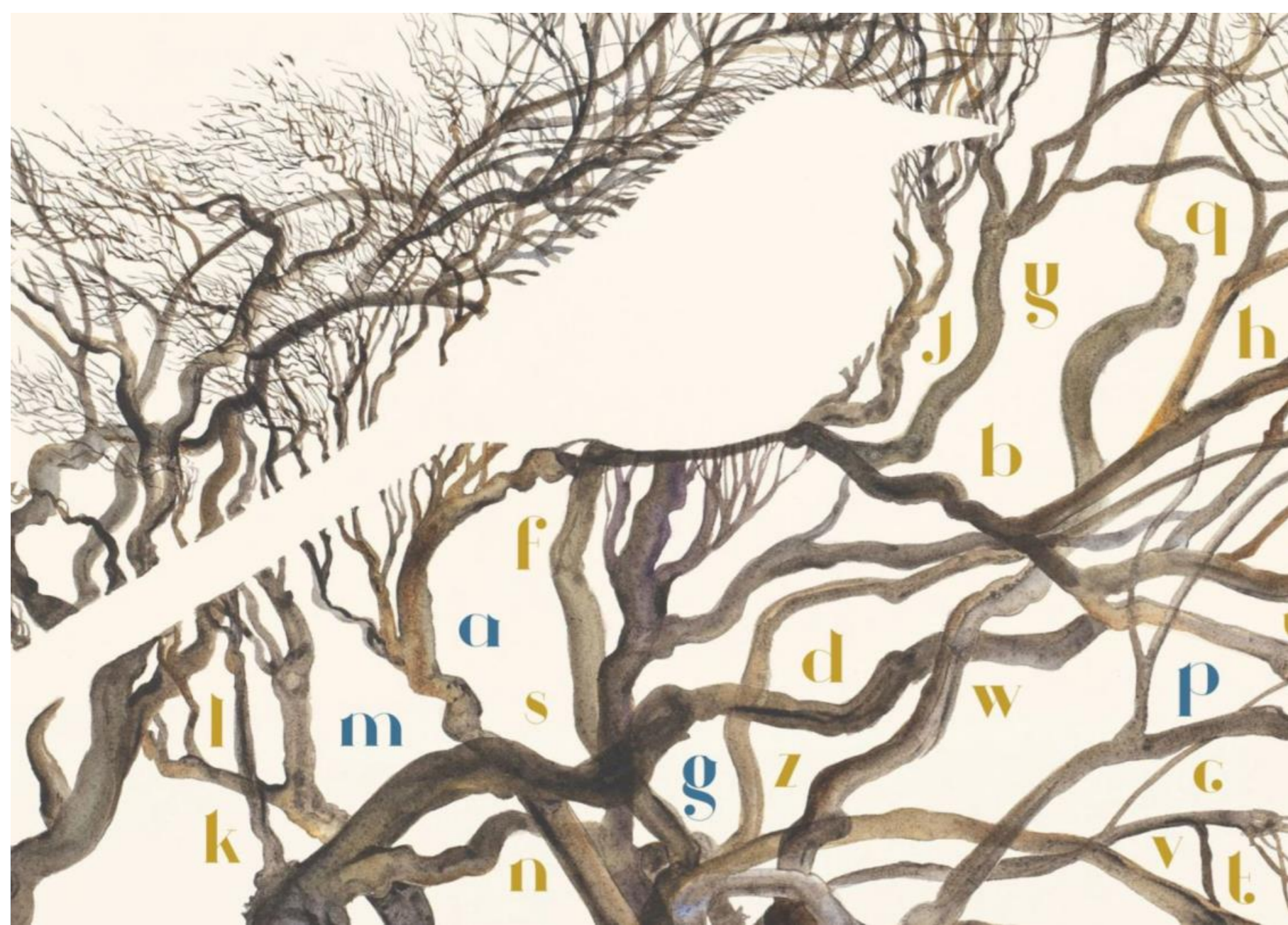
Over the past few decades the definition of childhood has been transformed dramatically. In a single generation the area around home considered safe for play declined by almost 90%¹, limiting the opportunities for children to explore their neighbourhoods and contributing to the consolidation of a new, sedentary lifestyle.

Insufficient contact with the outside world quickly resulted in the wide range of physical and emotional ailments, defined in 2005 as **Nature Deficit Disorder**². Further research suggested emergence of "ecophobia", that is association of the wilderness only with uncertainty and danger³.

THE AIM of this projects is to define the aspects of children's literature that might reverse this process and bring children back to nature.

Recent study by National Trust Survey⁴ estimates that half of the children cannot distinguish bee from wasp and only a small minority is able to name three common species of trees. Robert Macfarlane, recognizing the need for filling this enormous gap in children's language created the project "Lost Words" and clearly linked the problem of disappearing nature with a parallel extinction of the vocabulary that helps to describe it⁵. He suggested that the literature can be an important medium of communication with the youngest generation. Below I present some of the tools that the authors use to deepen the bond between children and the wilderness.

90% OF PARENTS DECLARE THAT THEY WANT THEIR CHILDREN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT COMMON BRITISH WILDLIFE⁶



WAYS OF KNOWING

Although many works still show a traditional approach to nature based on empirical experience, more recent publications explore the emotional connection which arises between the reader and the environment around him. The new paradigm is based on the premise that nature can be experienced even when physically far away from it. The most important cognitive tools are the mind and vivid imagination.



PROTAGONISTS

In order to increase the comfort of the reader, many stories are narrated through the children's point of view. This stylistic choice increases the sense of familiarity and allows the author to simplify natural phenomena for the young audience. The child remains in the center of the story, which emphasizes that he is not an intruder but a part of the explored environment.



PRO-ECOLOGICAL EXAMPLE

Over the last decade, there has been a visible change in the way environmental problems are presented in children's literature. Authors show more straightforward images of littered beaches, polluted cities and deforested hills, at the same time they describe simple pro-ecological behaviours that the child can adapt. Such action-oriented narratives inspire young people and help to develop good habits from an early age.

EDUCATION

Literature is a great educational medium, fulfilling the role of entertainment as well as coherent information transfer. Nevertheless, as of now environmental education lacks clear guidance from regulating bodies, such as UNESCO, which results in fragmentation and oversimplification of the subject. New, more holistic approach must be developed, where rediscovering nature would gradually turn into the feeling of responsibility for our planet.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a great potential for "fostering environmental empathy"⁷ through the literature addressed to the youngest. Through the choice of protagonists, emotional sensitivity and actionable example, the authors express different ways in which one can connect with the wild. However, there is a significant gap that needs filling in environmental education that would transform initial curiosity and playfulness into deep understanding of the mechanics of our planet and the responsibility we share for it. If the current loss of environmental literacy is not stopped in the near future, it will be hard to meet any of the sustainability ambitions, as the decisions that the young generation will make will be based largely on their willingness to live in harmony with nature.

I wish to express my gratitude to Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Team at the University of St Andrews and my supervisor, Dr Emily Finer, without whom this project would not have been possible.



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IMAGES (FROM THE LEFT)

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