

Editors' note: This review was originally published in issue 27(3). We are republishing it here with responses from two of the three authors.

The Promise

Nicola Davies, illustrated by Laura Carlin (2014)
Somerville: Candlewick Press, 32 pages
\$16.99 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-0763666330

The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp

Kathi Appelt (2013)
New York: Atheneum, 352 pages
\$8.99 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1442421080

Washashore

Suzanne Goldsmith (2013)
Lucky Marble Books, 282 pages
\$3.99 (eBook); ISBN: 294-0148371076

Environmental fiction is available to children of all ages and in various formats. Educators would do well to remember that a “story can be remembered when instruction is forgotten,” so fiction can be a useful tool when teaching any subject—not just language arts (Bigger, 2010, p. 411). When fiction is not used, the facts students cram for tests will likely just as easily be crammed out when the test is over because they have made no real connection with the knowledge they have gained. Providing students with

realistic fiction, with its lifelike settings, characters, and situations [allows students to] easily relate to the books.... The books can promote empathy and allow readers to see a world beyond their own. [These books] not only convey information to readers, but also encourage children to develop responsibility toward living things (Fleming, 2005, p. 37).

The added advantage to using fiction in a learning environment is that children will receive information from different angles, including facts as well as the characters' dilemmas, enabling the students to “learn information from multiple sources written at a variety of reading levels and in a variety of formats” (Fleming, 2005, p. 36). For educators who want to move in this direction, there are numerous books from which to choose, about many topics.

A review of one book for each of the major age groups follows. The first book, a picture book example for children ages 5 to 7, shows how a child transforms a gray, unfriendly city into a joyful place by planting seeds and growing things. The second book, for readers ages 8 to 12, focuses on the preservation of wild land and protection for native species. The last book, for teenaged readers, is concerned with human destruction of environments, specifically through physical and chemical pollution.

Picture Books

Nicola Davies' *The Promise*, illustrated by Laura Carlin, is a picture book that uses both language and color to convey its message to young readers. The city where the story takes place, the narrator, and the environment are linked together—none of them can be fruitful without the others. Davies binds the characters to the world around them simply and beautifully: "Nothing grew. Everything was broken. No one ever smiled" (Davies, 2014, p. 5). As the story continues, the narrator begins to plant acorns around the city. Although she had stolen the seeds, she realized that she "held a forest in [her] arms, and [her] heart was changed" (Davies, 2014, p. 13). With beautiful language—"I pushed aside the mean and hard and ugly, and I planted, planted, planted"—Davies shows that in order to make other things beautiful, the narrator must get rid of the ugly in herself (Davies, 2014, p. 21).

When the story turns from ugly and barren to joyful, the illustrations change from the drab grays, browns, and blues that depicted the city into a kaleidoscope of colors. The narrator observes this, noticing poetically that "green spread through the city like a song, breathing to the sky, drawing down the rain like a blessing" (Davies, 2014, p. 29). *The Promise* is an excellent book that could be used to introduce children to the magic of trees and the satisfaction of planting them yourself, as well as the power nature has to change hearts and minds so that a hard, mean city can become a place of kindness. Because the illustrations effectively support the point of the text, this book enables even very young children to make the connection between trees and goodness.

Middle Grade

For middle-grade readers, including children aged 8 to 12, the 2013 National Book Award Finalist *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp* by Kathi Appelt is a wonderful example of a book that is engaging, entertaining, realistic, magical, and delightfully environmental. In one book, children will find a human character with whom they can connect, animal characters they can root for and against, mystery, danger, and a sense of preservation.

The Sugar Man Swamp was once home to the possibly extinct Ivory Billed Woodpecker, and is still home to many other creatures, but the owner of the bayou land sees the profit he could make by allowing the swamp to be developed. In frank language, Appelt informs her readers that turning the Sugar Man Swamp into the Gator World Wrestling Arena and Theme Park "would require taking down several hundred old trees to clear the space for the stadium [and filling] in at least two thousand acres of marsh to make a parking lot for the millions of people who [would visit]" (Appelt, 2013, p. 38). The author never decides for her readers what is right and what is wrong. Instead, she shows them people and animals who live in the bayou and care for it, as well as the humans who want to build on the land, so that the reader can decide, based on the characters, whether the swamp should be saved.

In order to portray the current swamp owner as the enemy of the environment in a way that kids can perceive, Appelt works into the plot a contract signed by the

owner's ancestor stating, "I, Alouicious Beaucoup, and all of my heirs hereafter, solemnly promise to protect the swamp, and all of its critters, forever" (Appelt, 2013, p. 42). Children can make up their own minds between right and wrong based on Alouicious' descendant's decision to break this promise. Appelt also works in the danger that swamp critters face because it is not clear in the book whether or not the Ivory Billed Woodpecker is truly extinct. With the destruction of the bayou, the woodpecker would almost certainly lose any chance of a revived population. Children are led to care for the swamp critters by Appelt's deft ability to connect the critters with human beings. Our human protagonist, Chap, has recently lost his grandfather, who loved the swamp very much. Appelt ties this loss of a family member to species loss by adding Chap's grandpa to the end of a lost species list: "There were so many gone now. The passenger pigeons. The black painters. The Carolina parakeets.... Audie Brayburn" (Appelt, 2013, p. 46). Children likely know what it feels like to lose a loved one, and by transferring those feelings to endangered or extinct animal species, they can understand why it is so important for the animals that remain to keep their home.

In the same way, Appelt connects the humans who want to destroy the swamp to animals who are not native to the swamp and have negative impacts on the ecosystem. A minor character reflects on bad things that have happened to the bayou, like "the invasion of the hogs, for example. *Yet another introduced species*, thought Coyoteman Jim. And that included those other introduced species: Sonny Boy and Jaeger" (Appelt, 2013, p. 127). Sonny Boy is, of course, the owner of the swamp. This simple line organically introduces children to the idea that humans do not always make a wild place better; rather, sometimes they do not belong there and can make it quite a bit worse. While the environment is front and center in *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp*, children are not sitting in on an environmental sermon. The nature of the subject is inherent to the plot of the story, but the story comes first. Appelt's book would be a great starting point for discussions about conservation and the damage humans can cause to a natural environment.

Young Adult

In young-adult books, for students aged 13-18, the environment seems to take a backseat, but a few good exceptions exist. *Washashore* by Suzanne Goldsmith is a historical, young-adult novel set during the 1970s on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. As an historical novel, this book is great because it shows that when humans do something that damages the environment, it takes a long time for them to stop doing it—and even then, stopping whatever it is does not automatically mean that the problem is solved. Some damage will already be done. In *Washashore*, the problem is the chemical *dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane* (DDT), which is legally prohibited in the United States. Even though by the 1970s the chemical was no longer used, protagonist Clementine is still able to see its negative effects. Although the osprey is now a species of Least Concern in the ranking of endangerment, in the 1970s the osprey population in the U.S. had decreased significantly. Protagonist Clementine spends time in a bird sanctuary and learns about the damaging effects of DDT, a pesticide that was intended to kill mosquitoes in the 1950s and '60s. The ranger at the sanctuary explains to Clementine and the

reader that “the problem is that fish eat mosquitoes.... then each bird eats hundreds, maybe thousands of fish.... The DDT made the female birds lay eggs with very thin shells. Then, when the mother birds tried to sit on the eggs, they broke” (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 57). As an historical novel, *Washashore* looks back at past environmental impacts and encourages readers to look forward with the sustainability education mindset that development today must not undermine the development and environment needs of present and future generations (McKeown, 2002).

Through Clementine’s experience of discovering osprey and sympathizing with their plight, readers can learn to care for endangered birds, too. When Clementine finds a dead bird on the beach, she “crouched down and touched the bird’s soft, white breast. The wet feathers felt cold but silky smooth. She wasn’t disgusted. Instead, Clem felt her heart go out to the bird. It was beautiful and strong, even in death” (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 24). The language used here can allow readers, unfamiliar with birds or uncomfortable with death, to realize that they can see such destruction as sad, instead of gross. Goldsmith also weaves a sense of sadness into passages concerning the broader economic picture. When Clementine visits beaches on the shores of Martha’s Vineyard, she finds garbage and destruction of the kind only humans can cause. Poignantly, Goldsmith allows Clementine to reflect on the damage humans cause to the wilderness:

Clem knew that the children who let those balloons float away into the sky never thought about what happened after that, but what about the adults who tossed bottles and cans and garbage into the water? She felt a wash of sadness. Things were perfect once. Why couldn’t people just let them stay that way? (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 122).

Readers will be organically introduced to the responsibility humans have, as creators of plastic—in each of the forms that can be seen on a littered roadside—to recycle our waste and otherwise dispose of it properly.

Another credit to *Washashore* is Goldsmith’s inclusion of references to the literary works of Rachel Carson, especially the 1962 novel *Silent Spring*. Clementine’s teacher tells her of *Silent Spring*, “This is the book that got DDT banned in the U.S. ... After she published this, pesticide companies tried to ruin her. But she stood up to them” (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 81). Not only does this refer interested readers to the larger body of literary work on its same subject, but it shows the power literature can have to change people’s minds, drive them to action, and save the environment.

It should be noted to *Washashore*’s detriment, however, that the effects of DDT have been widely disputed since the 1970s, and many now believe that it was far less dangerous to the environment than Rachel Carson proposed. DDT was primarily celebrated because it almost entirely eliminated the threat of malaria. As soon as DDT was banned, malaria returned in full force. In her book and on her author website, Goldsmith presents the chemical as solely harmful, and she never mentions this alternate, widely accepted viewpoint. DDT is even beginning to be

used again today (Edwards, 2004). *Washashore*, as an historical novel, is a good book for a classroom looking at this issue and seeking to instigate further discussion.

Conclusion

The Promise, *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp*, and *Washashore* are evidence that books that focus on environmentalism are available to teachers and readers. But are they accessible enough? Are there enough of them? *Washashore*, for instance, is available only as an eBook or on Amazon.com, so the majority of readers are not exposed to the book or aware that they should read it—illustrating some of the biggest problems with environmental children’s books: availability and awareness. Experts advise educators to use multiple sources from varying reading levels to meet any student’s learning needs when tackling environmental issues (Fleming, 2005, 38). However, both of these suggestions pose nearly impossible tasks for teachers. Whatever subject they are talking about in class, it would be fortunate for them to find even one environmental text for children on their specific subject, let alone a text for each reading level or texts from opposing points of view. Other guidelines from environmental educators include

examine[ing] both their students’ interests and the literary value of the books when selecting environmental texts. These books should be free of stereotypes and inaccuracies, promote scientific thinking, and clearly identify what information is fact or fiction (Fleming, 2005, p. 37).

This is a tall order, and many of the environmental children’s books that are available could not easily meet all of these standards.

The three books reviewed here address a wide range of readership including interested individuals, parents, teachers, and environmental educators. The topics in the books serve the purpose of introducing multiple environmental issues in the context of relatable characters and story. However, if implemented in school lessons, fiction should be substantially embedded within comprehensive lessons that deal with the topic extensively. For both purposes, I can recommend these books to parents buying and reading with their children as well as teachers and professional pedagogical practitioners on environmental education, as they serve a multi-perspective approach in teaching environmental education. If children are taught to engage with books like these, they might develop the skills necessary to engage with stories in a critical way so they can “examine community, environment and place and... to identify and readjust their own attitudes and behaviors” (Bigger, 2010, p. 410). But in order for this to happen, fiction of the kind recommended by Fleming needs to be produced and distributed on a much larger scale than it is now (Bigger, 2010). Thus, there is a great deal of room for the existing body of environmental children’s literature to grow, enabling educators to follow the advice of environmental experts and present children with stories representing the given topic from multiple angles and for all reading levels. Books such as these—fictional stories with environmental topics—can help children not only to learn about the world, but to develop empathy and realize its precious, fragile nature.

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Review by Emily Vander Ark

Emily Vander Ark holds an MFA in writing, specifically for children and young adults, from Spalding University. She is a full-time lecturer at Lake Michigan College, located in the southwest corner of the Lower Peninsula. She believes that children should be instilled with a love of nature from an early age so that when they are grown they will guide the future in ways that preserve the Earth for generations to come.

Author's Response by Nicola Davies

The book was inspired by another fictional story about the environment, one that was in its time very influential: "The Man Who Planted Trees," published more than 60 years ago at the start of the environmental movement. I wanted to retell the story for a modern audience, replicating the message of the importance of environmental awareness and also that of individual responsibility and power. I had become aware of the importance of trees in urban environments whilst researching a book about climate change; I was thinking about how they change local climate, reducing the need for energy-guzzling air conditioning, but also changing the emotional and psychological climate. I read a great deal about the influence that contact with nature in cities has on children's behavior, and on the health and healing of people of all ages. So that was in my mind as I came to write the story. It all cooked in my head for ages, but I had no idea how to begin. One morning after being on holiday in the run up to surgery on my shoulder, I simply sat at my desk and the story came down my arm and onto the page. In two hours it was finished. I had never had an experience like that before of words arriving as if alighting from space. I rang my editor, read it down the phone and realized the silence at the end was due to her crying.

I wanted the story to speak to children who were having a hard time to offer them hope and a vision of a future they might have the power to influence. And it seems to work on those children. I could tell you many stories about responses from children experiencing difficulties in their lives but here is one: I was reading in an inner-city school in a tough district of Boston. A child came in with four minders, dropped to his hands and knees and crawled around the library. As I finished reading the story he had made his way to my feet and leaned against my legs. He pulled my hand and said, "that story is about me." Yes, darling I thought, you are dead right, it is.

When *The Promise* was published I set up a little website for it, linked to the conservation charity for which I am a trustee, The World Land Trust. My other hope for the book is that it will raise environmental awareness and prompt people to care a little more for our beautiful planet.

For further information please visit:

<http://www.lauracarlin.com/>
<http://www.nicola-davies.com/>
<http://www.worldlandtrust.org/>

Author's Response by Suzanne Goldsmith

I was thrilled to read Emily Vander Ark's warm review of three works of environmentally themed fiction for young people, including my own upper middle-grade novel, *Washashore*. At a time when great emphasis in schools is being placed on nonfiction reading, Ms. Vander Ark makes an important point about the role of fiction in learning. "Educators would do well to remember that a 'story can be remembered when instruction is forgotten,'" she writes, quoting Bigger and Webb. Well-told stories can evoke strong feelings—which in turn can sometimes imprint ideas more firmly in the minds of readers than information alone. The emotions stories evoke can also play a role in the development of caring young citizens, an especially desirable outcome in the case of the environment.

I am grateful, with respect to *Washashore*, which is set in 1976, that Vander Ark envisioned young readers identifying with character Clem Harper as she learns the story of the then-threatened ospreys. "Through Clementine's experience of discovering osprey and sympathizing with their plight, readers can learn to care for endangered birds, too," she writes.

Ms. Vander Ark makes a good point, too, when she suggests that, in light of the role Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* plays in educating *Washashore's* Clem, I should have included in the book, perhaps in the epilogue, a reference to the highly politicized debate that has lately arisen around the pesticide DDT and Carson herself. Such a reference might have been helpful in generating thoughtful and provocative conversations about the ethical issues that are involved when human interests and those of other species appear to be in conflict. It might also encourage students to think about the politicization of science.

I would note that the central environmental story in the book concerns not DDT (which had already been banned in the U.S. at the time the story begins), but habitat loss. Shoreline development and the removal of the tall bare pines the birds favor for nesting is leaving them vulnerable. That's when humans step in with a new intervention: building nesting platforms. This is the intervention *Washashore's* Clementine joins, and it's one that real people like those described in the book carried out with great success. By telling this true story through fictional characters Clem and Daniel, I hope to show young readers that through purposeful action, humans can sometimes make a difference for threatened species—as they did for the ospreys.

Many thanks to Ms. Vander Ark and to *Children, Youth and Environments* for the thoughtful article. I agree with Ms. Vander Ark that “fictional stories with environmental topics... can help children not only to learn about the world, but to develop empathy and realize its precious, fragile nature.”

A free discussion guide and grade-level teacher's guides for *Washashore* are available online at <http://www.luckymarblebooks.com/teachers-guides/>.