

From Representation to Intra-action: Performing Natureculture in Children's Visual Narratives

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Declaration

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Glossary of Terms

Children's Literature

In this dissertation, the terms *children's literature* and *children's visual narratives* are used as inclusive designations encompassing both children's and young adult literature. These abbreviated forms – used widely by scholars in the field to refer to both children's and young adult literature – are employed for the sake of brevity and stylistic consistency, while acknowledging the conceptual and developmental distinctions between these closely related categories of literary study. The analysis focuses on five primary sources that collectively reflect this spectrum of readership: some are most clearly directed toward younger readers, others toward young adults, and a few operate as crossover works that speak to both audiences.

Intra-action

The term *intra-action* (as opposed to *interaction*), arising from Karen Barad's theory of agential realism (2007), is frequently referenced in this dissertation to emphasise entangled, mutually constitutive phenomena, including the entanglements of text and image and the performative interconnections between reader and book.

Natureculture / Naturalcultural

Adopting Donna Haraway's terminology (2003, 2008), this dissertation uses '*natureculture*' and '*naturalcultural*' to describe the intra-active entanglements of nature and culture, rejecting their binary separation while acknowledging that certain distinctions remain.

Nonhuman

The term 'nonhuman' in this dissertation refers to any entity that is not human. This applies not only to animals, but also to natural entities such as seas and mountains, and any form of sentient or non-sentient matter.

Performativity

My references to 'performativity' understand the act of reading as an event. This subscribes to the idea that words and images are not simply representational of reality, but that the book-as-object has both ontological and epistemological status, and is possessed of a generative dynamism that enables it to communicate something of itself to the reader and vice-versa.

The Reader

As this dissertation is non-empirical, references to ‘the reader’ should understand the reader as a theoretical construct rather than an empirically verifiable subject. The analysis considers how the visual narratives invite or position a reader within the book, rather than how actual readers respond in practice. The various possible interpretations and receptions of the literature by a potential readership that is itself complex, entangled, diverse and difficult to quantify in a non-empirical study are acknowledged. My own subjectivity as ‘reader’, researcher and producer of the text in this analysis is also recognised.

Visual Narrative

An umbrella term encompassing literary works in which image and text collaborate to construct meaning – including picturebooks, comics, graphic novels, illustrated novellas, and illustrated anthologies. Following Lars Elleström’s concept of intermediality (2010), visual narratives engage multiple media modalities – linguistic, visual, and material – to generate what he describes as ‘intermodal transference,’ where narrative meaning arises through the interplay between modes rather than within one alone. This term foregrounds the multimodal and material nature of storytelling central to contemporary literary-visual forms.

Picturebook

A narrative form in which words and images are interdependent, combining to create meaning through a synergistic relationship between visual and verbal signs. Although often associated with children’s literature, picturebooks frequently engage complex aesthetic and philosophical themes accessible to wider audiences.

Comic

A visual narrative form that combines sequences of images and text – typically arranged in panels – to convey meaning through their interaction. Meaning frequently emerges in the spaces between frames. Within the broader category of *visual narrative*, the comic exemplifies how storytelling arises from the dynamic interplay of image, language, and spatial design.

Graphic Novel

A long-form comic narrative that employs sequential art and written language within framed panels to construct story and meaning. The reader’s interpretation frequently occurs in the space between images where visual and textual cues coalesce. The form accommodates mature and experimental storytelling that extends beyond traditional comics.

Illustrated Novella

An illustrated prose narrative of medium length where images and text operate together to deepen atmosphere, theme, or characterisation. Unlike other forms of visual narration, such as graphic novels or picture books, the illustrated novella typically features a greater density of prose, yet its images play an integral role in shaping interpretation, atmosphere, and emotional depth.

Illustrated Anthology

A curated collection of short narratives, unified through accompanying imagery that establishes thematic or tonal continuity. The illustrations serve an aesthetic and interpretive role – reinforcing, juxtaposing, or extending the written word – and may shape the reader’s navigation of the anthology as a cohesive visual-textual field.

Notes

Material from Chapter Two, Part Two on *The Fate of Fausto* has been published in:

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From Representation to Intra-action: Performing Natureculture in Children's Visual Narratives

Mairéad Jordan

Abstract

As children's literature increasingly engages with ecological concerns in the context of the climate crisis, ecocritical scholarship – including scholarship on visual narratives – has expanded over the past two decades. Much of this research has focused on interpretative analyses of representations of nature and the nonhuman in children's literature. This dissertation builds on these approaches by adopting a post-representational perspective, examining entanglements of materiality, aesthetics, and paratextuality across five diverse visual narratives.

Drawing on principles of material ecocriticism and intermediality, this dissertation emphasises the dynamic relations between culture and nature, mind and matter, and narrative and life in both the creation and reception of visual narratives. It argues that visual narratives have unique potential to challenge human exceptionalism, encouraging young readers to perceive humans as part of the material, naturalcultural world. Here, 'nature' is not a passive backdrop or victim of human dominance, but is mutually constitutive with the subject.

This dissertation further contends that visual narratives are performative phenomena, presenting a material-discursive space in which creators, processes, books, and readers intra-act. These intra-actions are revealed through an integrated analysis of both narrative representations and the paratextual and material elements of the book. The aesthetic and material affordances of the visual narrative are shown to have disruptive potential in how they might shape young readers' perceptions of materiality, the nonhuman, and natureculture.

By highlighting the power of complex, multimodal literature to develop and challenge understandings of nature and culture, this dissertation addresses a gap in current scholarship. The findings have implications not only for literary research but also for children's literature publishing, particularly at a time when social and ecological challenges demand a reconceptualisation of nature, culture, and agency.

Introduction

The space and place for environmental understanding is not the wilderness...coming out of the woods is the best way to find your place in nature.

Clint Jones, *Apocalyptic Ecology in the Graphic Novel* (2020, 156).

If nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality.

Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures, Science, Environment and the Material Self* (2010, 2).

i. *Thesis and Significance of the Research*

This dissertation investigates how visual narratives for young readers perform ecological meaning through their material, aesthetic, and intermedial features. It asks how material and paratextual elements contribute to ecological understanding and challenge anthropocentric perspectives; how theories of material ecocriticism and intermediality illuminate entanglements of nature and culture, mind and matter; and how the performative relations between creator, book, and reader model ecological interdependence in an age of environmental crisis. Combining material ecocriticism and intermediality offers a productive framework because both emphasise relational processes over fixed meanings. Material ecocriticism highlights the agency of matter in shaping ecological meaning, while intermediality attends to the interplay of media and sensory modes. Together, they reveal how visual narratives *enact* – rather than simply represent – ecological interconnection.

Climate change has been described as ‘the defining crisis of our time’ (United Nations, 2020) and as climate issues dominate world discourse, and conceptions and representations of ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ are increasingly discussed and debated, environmentally themed children’s literature publication, particularly within the category of visual literature, has vastly increased. Children’s literature, it is argued, ‘is a vital element in the social narrative

regarding the future of the planet' (Pavlik, 2011, 420). For many authors, illustrators and publishers, literature for children and young adults that focuses on ideas of 'nature' or 'environment' is an explicit endeavour to communicate environmental issues to a young audience¹. This may be motivated by a desire to inspire hope for the future, raise awareness of the human's responsibility to care for the planet, romanticise nature, or instil fear regarding what might happen if humans do not change their attitudes and actions. While such literature may have admirable intentions, in many cases more ideologically driven narratives for young readers tend to demonstrate the promotion of dogma over inquiry, the villainisation of human activity, the prioritisation of activism over understanding and, at times, emotional manipulation that provokes fear, guilt or shame, leading to misguided notions of guardianship or ecophobia. Fundamentally, many environmentally themed books for young readers present an oversimplification of the complexity of the nature-culture relationship, reinforcing the deeply ingrained worldview that the human is separate from nature; that nature and the nonhuman are 'other', entities to be 'admired', 'protected', 'saved' or 'feared'. This dissertation argues for the transformative potential of visual literature that rejects the notion of 'nature' as merely an aesthetic or mysterious backdrop to human activity, or as a passive object of human domination and instead posits that the world and the subject are co-constituted – emerging through their relational entanglement as mutually formative entities. Donna Haraway's term 'natureculture' (2003, 2008) encapsulates this, emphasising the intertwined and co-constitutive relations of nature and culture. Haraway positions this understanding against the enduring notion of 'nature' and 'culture' as separate, opposing domains, revealing instead their continual mutual shaping. The fundamental arguments of this dissertation do not, however, seek to dissolve the distinction between nature and culture.

¹ Recently published examples of visual narratives that meet this description include *My Time Machine* (2024) by Carol Lay, *Global* (2023) by Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin and Giovanni Rigano, *Greta and the Giants* (2019) by Zoë Tucker and Zoe Persico, *Where the River Runs Gold* (2019) by Sita Brahmachari.

Rather, nature and culture are seen as two distinct but interdependent spheres in a dynamic relationship. Hubert Zapf's theory of cultural ecology builds on ecological and systems thinking to describe literature as an ecological force within culture – one that renews, critiques, and balances cultural systems. Cultural ecology bridges – but does not erase – the boundary between nature and culture, and for the purposes of this dissertation, cultural ecology also acts as the bridge between material ecocriticism and intermediality. The conceptual framework for this study, further outlined in the subsequent section of this chapter, seeks to illuminate how children's visual narratives can be key sites where cultural understandings of human–nonhuman relations and planetary futures are materially and imaginatively negotiated. Beyond a pedagogical role that depends on explicit instruction, moral guidance, or didactic intent, visual narratives can participate in shaping the worldviews through which societies conceptualise the interdependence of life on Earth, thereby contributing to the cultural processes that influence how ecological ideas take form and gain meaning.

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of multidisciplinary academic research that explores children's literature – including visual literature – through an ecocritical framework considering concepts of 'nature' and 'childhood' and the complex, intricate relationship between the two (Favretti, 2023; Goga et al., 2018; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2011; Gaard, 2009; Dobrin and Kidd, 2004). Much of this research adopts interpretative approaches, considering, for example, how 'nature', 'environment', or the nonhuman are represented *within* children's texts. What has been somewhat neglected in research, however, is a more comprehensive focus on the entanglement of aesthetics, materiality, creativity and narrative representation; an exploration of the book as a physical artefact, that takes into account the complexity of the creative process and the specific features of the book beyond the narrative that encourage performative engagement.

This dissertation proposes that, by virtue of its very particular and specific affordances, the visual narrative has significant potential to reconfigure young readers' perceptions of the world – of nature, of culture, of what constitutes 'agency' and 'actor', and of the intricate entanglements of being. It is argued that complex and sophisticated visual literature for young readers that does not demonstrate an explicit ideological agenda can more effectively challenge ideas of human exceptionalism, and instead develop an understanding of humans as part of the material world, or as articulated by feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad, as 'part of the nature that we seek to understand' (2007, 26). This understanding sees 'nature' not as a pretty and mysterious backdrop for human activity, or a non-agentic victim of human domination, but instead recognises that 'world and subject are constituted in relation to and as part of one another' (Siffrinn and Coda, 2024, 3). Furthermore, this dissertation argues that interpretative analyses that focus on representation alone are limiting. An understanding of the world as entangled and mutually constituted should be paralleled by an understanding of the book as part of this entangled world: an aesthetic and material artefact that is created and received by humans with distinct social, cultural and natural experiences, influences, motivations and interpretations. In order to reveal the full potential of the visual narrative, a *post*-representational analysis is presented here that does not discount the importance of narrative representation, but contemplates it in tandem with the multifarious features of the book as a whole, including its materiality, creation and reception.

The oft-debated, enduring binary of instruction vs. delight in children's literature becomes especially significant in the context of climate crises, where children are viewed as future agents of change and literature is increasingly seen as a tool for shaping environmental awareness and responsibility. However, the value of complex, multimodal literature in communicating ideas of nature, culture, agency and materiality has not been thoroughly explored in research to date. This research contends that the potential for children's visual

literature to challenge the perceptions of young readers and be a catalyst for change is revealed by a material ecocritical/intermedial analysis. It further examines how this potential operates in relation to underlying or overt ideologies – such as forms of ‘environmental awareness’ that may, paradoxically, reinforce boundaries between nature and culture. Developing this discourse, at a time when the ‘greening’ of both fiction and non-fiction for children continues apace, is more pertinent, and indeed more urgent, than ever. This dissertation argues that visual narratives not only invite imaginative engagement with the material world but also function as ‘material instantiations’ (Sullivan, 2020, 27) in their own right, whose agency emerges through the performative intra-actions they foster with young readers.

The conceptual framework for this study combines the theoretical approaches of performative material ecocriticism and intermediality. A justification for the selection of these approaches is provided in part ii.

ii. *Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Approaches*

The conceptual framework for this dissertation integrates the theoretical approach of material ecocriticism, the conceptual tool of intermediality and elements of cultural ecology to develop a model specific to my research. This combined approach has not hitherto been adopted in the field of visual narrative scholarship. This dissertation demonstrates that these theories and concepts are themselves entangled, complementing each other in how they transgress borders between disciplines and mediate between binaries.

Ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary study of ‘the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (Glotfelty, 1996, xviii). Ecocriticism explores ‘the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the culture artifacts of language and literature... it

negotiates between the human and the nonhuman' (ibid., xix). Material ecocriticism is a strand of ecocritical theory that directly emerges from and contributes to the broader material turn in the humanities and social sciences. Both material ecocriticism and the material turn share a fundamental shift in focus: from viewing matter as passive or inert to understanding it as active, agentic, and entangled with human and nonhuman processes. Material ecocriticism thus emphasises the materiality of the naturalcultural world; the agentic capacity of nonhuman entities and phenomena in performative, intra-active relationships; the hybrid mesh of naturecultures; the corporeal body as a site of material interchanges; and matter as a site of narrativity. It is rooted in the principles of earlier ecocritical thought, which rejected the nature/culture dichotomy, the rural/urban dichotomy, and human exceptionalism, and aims to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human. Material ecocriticism recognises the intersectional relationship between environmental degradation and issues of social justice, including race, gender and postcolonialism, but seeks to decentre the human subject in its exploration of these issues, to instead consider social justice concerns in the context of the mutually constitutive, co-evolving world and subject. It aligns closely with the traditions and practices of many Indigenous cultures that understand matter as a site of narrativity, and believe in the interconnectedness of all entities – human and nonhuman.

The material turn critiques the contention of structuralism and post-structuralism that all of reality is culturally constructed, a contention that distances humanity from the material realities that surround us. Materialists instead highlight the porous boundary between ontology and epistemology. Karen Barad's theory of agential realism argues for the mutually evolving and co-constituted nature of material-discursive phenomena. A key concept of agential realism is performative materialism, which highlights how we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world and observing it, but because we are *of* the world – an understanding that distributes agency across diverse bodies. This understanding

challenges the primacy of representationalism and interpretation in ecocritical and literary studies. It instead proposes a post-representational approach that recognises book, text and image as material elements of this world that produce and participate in processes and relationships involving the human and the nonhuman. This post-representational approach reveals the potential performative intra-actions between the human creator, the human reader and the nonhuman literary work.

If material ecocriticism attunes itself to the naturalcultural world that includes the human but is not overtly human-centred, it is important to clarify how this is reconciled with a study of the visual narrative as a media product that is, as media theorist Lars Elleström explains, ‘the intermediate entity that makes communication among human minds possible’ (2021, xi). The unique perceptual space created by the multimodal nature of visual narratives calls, therefore, for a supporting conceptual approach that attends to its creative, material and aesthetic complexity as a communicative form. Intermediality is proposed as an effective approach to the analysis of verbal and visual interaction, materiality, and sensory perception, which has been under-utilised in studies of visual narratives for young readers. I contend that intermediality offers original insights into the complexity of visual narration that cannot adequately be addressed by more commonly applied approaches that focus predominantly on picturebooks² alone (for example, picturebook theory). Intermediality is a conceptual tool that analyses the relations between form and content in media and recognises ‘media’ as both interconnected and omnipresent. Intermediality also aligns with the material ecocritical understanding of mutually constitutive agencies and blurred boundaries, and allows for an analysis of the visual narrative within the context of its natural and socio-cultural entanglements. An intermedial analysis can therefore efficiently enable an exploration of how the visual narrative can complicate and challenge perceptions.

² See Glossary of Terms.

This dissertation adopts Elleström's concept of intermedial multimodality and Irina Rajewsky's concept of narrow intermediality to demonstrate that communication is equally dependent on the material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic modalities of the visual narrative, and to identify media combinations, medial transpositions and intermedial and intertextual references that engage the reader with the text and highlight its intra-acting modalities. Both concepts foreground the processual and relational nature of media communication. When read together, they offer a strong foundation for a performative reading of visual literature – one that understands books not as fixed artefacts but as dynamic events of mediation, enacted through material, sensory, and semiotic intra-action. This aligns with Barad's understanding of the term 'performative', which accounts for the entangled ontology of the book as a material-discursive phenomenon. This performative understanding highlights not only the aesthetic and material qualities of the book, but also delves deeper to consider epitextual elements such as authorial background and inspiration, and the social, cultural and temporal setting within which the book is created and received. A designation of reading as performative also implies the significant role of the reader and their intra-action with the book. Intermediality allows for a multi-faceted analysis of the affordances of visual literature in engaging the reader and provoking diverse interpretations.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent paradox that exists in reconciling discourse with the proposal of material ecocriticism that the world is composed of semiotic-material entanglements that are not always discursive, or that do not respond to the human logics of analysis. As Stacy Alaimo contends 'Even as we attempt to formulate new understandings that do not isolate the human from the flesh or from nonhuman nature, we need to mark the limits of our own ability to render the material world with language' (2010, 42). Material ecocriticism faces the challenge of highlighting the entanglement of nature and culture without reverting to idealised notions of harmony or collapsing culture into nature, as some

deep ecological approaches do. Zapf's theory of cultural ecology helps to resolve this tension by proposing a non-hierarchical model of natural-cultural interrelation, and recognising that performative material ecocriticism should not preclude an acknowledgement of the significance of cultural discourse. It thus provides a productive link between this study's two main frameworks – material ecocriticism and intermediality – by bringing natural and cultural ecologies together 'without reducing them to each other' (Zapf, 2016, 4). Cultural ecology proposes that literature mediates the human-nonhuman relationship, functioning as an ecological agent within culture that reconnects symbolic and natural worlds.

This dissertation presents a combined hermeneutic and post-representational analysis. Firstly, it delivers an interpretative exploration of how these narratives reflect upon, represent and elaborate on agency, matter, and human and nonhuman intra-actions. Secondly, moving beyond representation, it is an effort to read the 'storied matter' of the world *as* a text. This research thus aims to demonstrate how the transformative potential of visual literature in challenging world perceptions lies not only in its *representations* of natural-cultural entanglements, but also in the salient material, paratextual and intertextual features of the literature that transcend a limited representational analysis. It is argued that visual narratives enable the young reader to become more attuned to the vibrant, entangled complexity of the world, which has the potential to alter an ethical stance from one of fear, awe, control or guardianship, to one that recognises a mutual sense of obligation.

Five diverse visual narratives have been selected for this dissertation. The subsequent section identifies these books and provides a justification for their selection.

iii. *Primary Sources*

This dissertation examines a diverse range of what might be termed genre- and form-defying literature. I use the term ‘visual narratives’ to denote a basic categorisation, as all the books feature illustrated narratives; however, much of this primary source literature defies rudimentary nomenclature and aligns with Janet Evans’ description of ‘fusion texts’:

‘[literature that] blur[s] the boundaries, blending the characteristics of visual texts to create a category that is a synthesis of aspects of all of them’ (2015, 97). Throughout this study, however, I refer to the literature as ‘books’ as opposed to ‘texts’, in order to emphasise the ‘book-as-object’ (Drucker, 2004): an enmeshment of its materiality, aestheticism, text and illustration. This understands that ‘a text is not a book, a book is more than its pages, and a page is more than image and text’ (Bremer, 2020, 352). The selected books are *Tales from the Inner City* (2018) by Shaun Tan; *The Fate of Fausto* (2019) by Oliver Jeffers; *The Savage* (2008) written by David Almond and illustrated by Dave McKean; *Den om Rufus* (2021) written and illustrated by Thorbjørn Petersen, Herman Ditte and Mårdøn Smet; and *Parable of the Sower: Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2020) written by Octavia E. Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy and illustrated by John Jennings.

The selected timeframe of 2008 to 2021 reflects a period of significant evolution in both the creative and critical landscapes relevant to this study. Since the first decade of the 21st century, there has been a marked expansion in the production of children’s and young adult visual narratives that engage explicitly with environmental themes, ecological consciousness, and posthuman perspectives (Favretti, 2023; van der Beek, 2018) – concerns that align closely with the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism. This period also coincides with a growing scholarly and cultural awareness of the Anthropocene, the continued development of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field of study, and the increasing prominence of multimodal and intermedial storytelling forms, facilitated by digital publishing

technologies and shifting reading practices. Limiting the corpus to books published up to 2021 allows for the inclusion of contemporary works while providing sufficient distance for critical reflection on recent creative trends and theoretical developments.

The vast majority of research on visual narratives for children and young adults over the past three decades has focused on picturebooks; considerably less scholarship has taken other forms of visual literature as its source material. This study aims to address this gap by broadening its focus to a more diverse selection of forms of visual narration. *Tales from the Inner City* can most accurately be described as an illustrated short story anthology; *The Fate of Fausto* and *Den om Rufus* more closely align with the form of the typical picturebook, although both books also demonstrate distinctive features that are not common to picturebooks; *The Savage* can be categorised as an illustrated novella; and *Parable of the Sower* is a graphic novel. The affordances of these varied and diverse forms of visual narration are examined in the context of the central thesis. Many of the books explored in this dissertation appeal to crossover audiences, including children, young adults, and adults, allowing an exploration of how visual literature can transcend age categories, blur literary boundaries, and navigate issues of censorship or the protection of young readers.

The selected books have either been under-explored or have not been explored at all in ecocritical research. The books have no obvious, explicit environmental agenda (although this research reveals evidence of a moralistic ideology in some cases). Books without overt ‘green’ messaging were purposefully chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, these works allow for an exploration of how subtle visual cues and narrative structures can *implicitly* convey ideas about nature and culture. They also facilitate an investigation of how aesthetic, imaginative and multimodal experiences foster engagement with nature in non-prescriptive ways. This dissertation also aims to challenge the assumption that only ‘eco-literature’ is relevant to ecological understanding; on the contrary, it is demonstrated that the

nature/culture dichotomy is challenged – perhaps even unintentionally in some cases – by diverse and sometimes subversive examples of visual narration. Finally, it is argued that visual literature with less explicitly ‘environmental’ intentions more effectively invites young readers to construct their own meanings, potentially resulting in more reflective and personal engagements with the work. In this post-representational study, the selection of texts facilitates a shift in focus from analysing content alone to examining the dynamic entanglement of content, form, and readerly experience.

These books encompass a variety of cultural backgrounds, and authorial voices. I argue that the cultural diversity of the authors and illustrators enables a nuanced understanding of nature/culture and demonstrates how cultural contexts shape artistic expression. The authors and illustrators are Australian (Tan), Northern Irish (Jeffers), British (Almond and McKean), Danish (Peterson, Smet, and Ditte), and American (Butler, Duffy, and Jennings). The inclusion of the Danish-language text *Den om Rufus* addresses the relative scarcity of research on non-Anglophone children’s literature in the Anglosphere and foregrounds the transnational dimensions of material ecocriticism and intermediality. As Holmes notes, ‘a failure to consult literature in other languages often leads parochial Anglophones to produce impoverished and distorted scholarship’ (2023, 315). Danish picturebooks are known for their aesthetic restraint and nuanced interplay of word and image, and *Den om Rufus* exemplifies this through its muted palette, spare text, and quiet attention to the natural world. Its depiction of human–animal relations and ecological sensitivity offers a distinct cultural perspective on the material and intermedial dynamics central to this dissertation. Examining a Danish work thus offers a valuable comparative lens, highlighting how intermedial storytelling embodies local aesthetic and cultural ecologies.

It is acknowledged that the majority of the primary texts examined in this dissertation are authored or illustrated by men. This reflects broader publishing trends in children’s visual

literature rather than an intentional exclusion of female voices. Selection was guided primarily by the texts' capacity to support a post-representational, material ecocritical analysis, highlighting entanglements of materiality, aesthetics, and paratextuality. The inclusion of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* ensures engagement with female authorship. Although gender representation among the authors and illustrators of the primary sources is limited, the analysis engages comprehensively with ecofeminist theory and the long-established parallels between gender and nature, which are traced throughout the dissertation. Moreover, the critical framework is informed by a substantial body of female-authored scholarship, and future research could extend this approach to a broader range of female-authored visual narratives.

This dissertation is supported by the insightful commentary of the authors and illustrators on their work and creative processes. The rationale for the inclusion of this commentary is explained in greater detail in Chapter One, Part Two. Many of the creators have active websites and have given several interviews, which are referenced and discussed. The exceptions to this are the Danish authors/illustrators of *Den om Rufus*, who have a considerably lower profile, in Anglophone countries at least, than their counterparts in this research study. For this reason, I contacted all three directly, and two of the authors/illustrators were very generous with their time in answering my questions and providing insight into their creative and collaborative processes. Their comments are cited as p.c. (personal communication) in Chapter Three.

All of the authors and illustrators of the primary source material for this dissertation have been recognised for the literary or illustrative merit of their work; among them, some have been bestowed with the highest honours for children's literature, the details of which are outlined in subsequent chapters. However, I am wary to make judgements on the value of a book based on awards or literary recognition alone. Such recognition is frequently influenced

by subjective opinions and trends, and a book's popularity or critical acclaim does not necessarily correlate with whether it will resonate personally with an individual reader. Accordingly, this dissertation does not argue for the exceptionality of these five works as uniquely vibrant and agential; rather, it proposes that these five diverse examples illustrate the potentiality of the visual narrative for a performative material analysis.

The selected books yield a compelling interplay between text, image and material form, particularly suited to material ecocritical and intermedial inquiry. While not categorised as ecoliterature, the works experiment with visual narrative and form to explore the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies, subtly challenge anthropocentric perspectives and evoke ecological and multispecies relationality. Through material, aesthetic, and intermedial strategies, the books highlight the distribution of agency across species, objects, and ecological systems, destabilising conventional hierarchies. In doing so, these books provoke readers to reconsider notions of control, stewardship, and relational responsibility within the naturalcultural world. The narratives thus interrogate ownership and hierarchy, and, as explored in subsequent chapters, they elicit contemplations of urban ecologies, reflect on embodied vulnerability and ecological alienation, and disrupt boundaries of nature/culture, order/chaos, and civilised/wild. The material form of the books is diverse, and this dissertation analyses material features such as paper texture, covers, typeface, mixed media approaches and visual narrative conventions to reflect on how the materialities of the works enact ecocritical concerns. While the distinctiveness of each work is highlighted and explored, it is demonstrated that they share an investment in naturalcultural entanglement and narrative materiality, rendering them particularly apt for analysis within a material ecocritical/intermedial framework.

iv. *Chapter Overview/Structure of the Argument*

Chapter One provides the theoretical foundations for the study, emphasising the significance of a performative material ecocritical/ intermedial study of visual narratives. It provides a review of the literature on ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, performativity, intermediality, and ideology in visual literature for young readers. The development of ecocriticism is traced from its origins as the study of nature writing, to its expanded focus today, including its intersections with issues of social justice and its attention to materiality and naturalcultural entanglement. Relevant tenets of material ecocriticism are examined, particularly Barad's theory of performative materialism and diffractive intra-actions, and Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality. The links between material ecocriticism and Indigenous practice and understandings are explored. Cultural ecology is examined as a point of connection between performative material ecocriticism and intermediality. Part Two of Chapter One outlines the theory of intermediality, with a particular focus on concepts relevant this study: Elleström's concept of 'intermedial multimodality' and Rajewsky's concept of narrow intermediality. The concepts of 'authorship', 'readership' and the 'paratext' are examined in the context of outlining the entangled nature of the creative process, the book and the reading performance. Part Three of Chapter One more closely examines questions of ideology in children's literature and the implied transmission of ideological values to children through adult-created media, including narrative fiction. It more specifically addresses how the intermedial aestheticism of visual narratives may support or impede such ideological intent.

Chapter Two examines *Tales from the Inner City* and *The Fate of Fausto*, focusing on both narrative representation and post-representational elements. It argues that these narratives facilitate a multifaceted portrayal of nonhuman agency, material corporeality and the limitations of human language and understanding. This chapter illustrates how the books are

material, performative ensembles that empower the reader to actively participate in the construction of meaning and discusses how paratextual features of both visual narratives directly impact on reader engagement. The authors'/illustrators' use of metafictional self-reflexivity, intertextuality and anthropomorphism are examined. This chapter also explores the tensions between moralistic didacticism and the subversive aestheticism of the books, and the extent to which an overt or covert ideological moralism can affect the reader's engagement with the visual narrative.

Chapter Three focuses on *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus*. It argues that rather than 'civilising' the young reader by teaching them the 'right' and 'correct' way to think, both books 'unsafely' remove the reader from their comfortable position of observation and actively engage the reader in ordered chaos. The 'unsafe' contention refers specifically to the research of Ellen Spitz (1999), who contrasts 'safe' art, which comforts and entertains, with 'unsafe' art, which challenges young readers to question dominant narratives and expand their perceptions of reality. Chapter Three explores concepts of 'wild', 'civilised' 'order' and 'chaos' and examines the capacity of the narratives to challenge or sustain predominant gender stereotypes and binaries, which parallel binaries of nature and culture, in the context of conceptions of 'wild' masculinity. Chapter Three also discusses the unusual aesthetic hybridity of both books, and proposes that the creative processes of writing, illustrating and reading are themselves acts of wildness in how they nurture and cultivate alternative perspectives and a hybrid compound of meanings.

Chapter Four explores the affordances of the graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Sower* in revealing intersections between the material body, the landscape and society, including the debilitating effects of capitalist culture. It argues that an understanding of 'nature' as powerful, peopled, forceful and material is communicated in this book. It is

demonstrated that *Parable of the Sower* stages encounters between diverse human and nonhuman entities that afford agency to the other, which troubles grand narratives of progressivism, cultural dominance and religious redemptionism. The intersections of race, body, gender and the natural landscape are scrutinised. Applying Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, Chapter Four identifies *Parable of the Sower* as a material memoir that incorporates the protagonist's personal experience, observations, scientific knowledge and spiritual beliefs, thus emphasising the porous entanglements of mind, body and physical environment. It develops the argument that paratextual elements specific to the medial transposition of novel to graphic novel affect performativity, mediation and signification.

The concluding chapter of this study brings together the key arguments, emphasising the capacity of visual narratives to provoke inquiry, unsettle assumptions, and 'imagine new ways of being in the world' (Alaimo, in interview with Kuznetski, 2020, 141). It evaluates how these narratives can cultivate awareness of interconnection and responsiveness, prompting readers to envision their place within the shared fabric of the naturalcultural world.

The concluding chapter also reflects on the value of bringing material ecocriticism and intermediality into dialogue, highlighting how this combined approach opens new ways of understanding the agency of form, medium, and materiality in ecological representation. It suggests that such a framework offers fertile ground for future scholarship, inviting further exploration of how multimodal and materially expressive texts can shape evolving ecological imaginaries across genres, audiences, and media.

Chapter One

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, that 'Everything is connected to everything else,' we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996, xix).

Introduction

This chapter comprises three parts, which comprise an outline of the conceptual framework for this dissertation (see Fig. 1) and a review of the relevant literature to support this approach. Part One of this chapter establishes the theoretical foundations for the study, tracing the development of material ecocriticism and its relevance to visual narratives for children and young adults. It examines how matter, agency, and relationality have been reconceptualised within new materialist thought, drawing connections to the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as to related frameworks such as agential realism and performative materiality. The discussion considers how these ideas inform understandings of narrative agency, transcorporeality, and ethical response-ability, while also engaging with ecofeminist and material feminist perspectives that foreground embodiment and interdependence. Further sections address the intersections of the rural and urban, human and nonhuman, and cultural and ecological systems, extending the inquiry to issues of race, colonialism, and Indigenous materialities, and interrogate the literary technique of anthropomorphism in visual narratives through a material ecocritical lens. Finally, cultural ecology is explored as a bridging framework that connects the theoretical concerns of material ecocriticism with those of intermediality.

Part Two explores intermediality as a conceptual tool that analyses the relations between form and content in media. This choice is justified with an analysis of its intersections with both ecocriticism and children’s visual narratives. Elleström’s concept of multimodality and Rajewsky’s concept of narrow intermediality are discussed in detail, with a focus on why and how they are particularly relevant to this dissertation. Within the framework of intermediality, Part Two also explores Genette’s concept of the paratext, and explains the significance of authorship and implied readership to the central argument of the dissertation.

Part Three examines the complex relationship between aesthetics and ideology in children’s literature and considers the transformative potential of children’s literature and the visual narrative, more specifically. Research on ideology in children’s books, and specifically in children’s visual narratives, is cited and analysed to determine the extent to which aesthetics and ideology are often entangled in the visual narrative, and how this entanglement potentially impacts upon the reader’s engagement with the book.

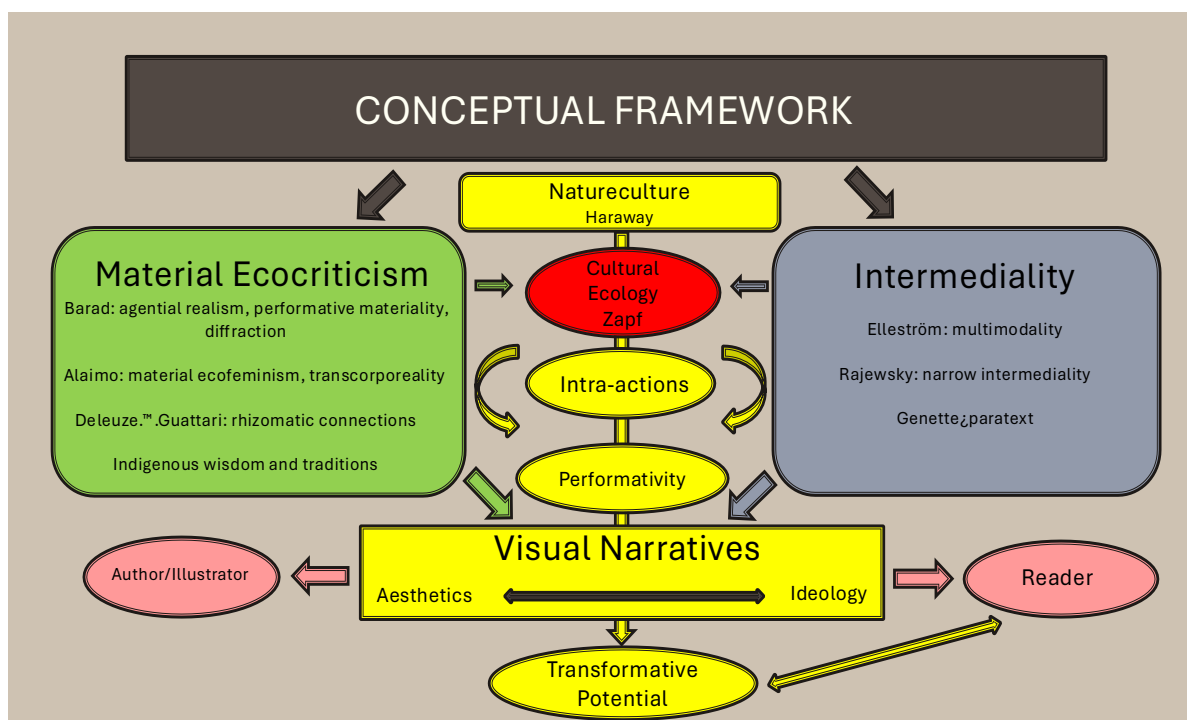


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

1.1. Material Ecocriticism

1.1.i. *The Origins and Development of Material Ecocriticism*

Ecocriticism traces its origins back to mid-twentieth-century American environmental discourse. The emergence of the modern environmental movement is often credited to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)³, which raised public awareness in the United States of the fact that nature was vulnerable to, and threatened by, human intervention. However, it was sixteen years later before the term 'ecocriticism' was coined by critic William Rueckert in his essay 'Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism' (1978). The term lay dormant for a further decade until it was reportedly revived by Cheryll Burgess [Glotfelty] in 1989. Speaking at a meeting of the Western Literature Association (WLA) in Idaho, USA, she is said to have urged the adoption of the term to describe the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing' (cited in Dobrin and Kidd, 2004, 2). Although this moment is anecdotally attested rather than documented in published form, it is widely regarded as a key catalyst in the subsequent flourishing of ecocritical thought and scholarship.

Ecocriticism emerged as a significant critical field of study in the 1990s. During that period, two major studies in ecocriticism were published: Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 and Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, in 1996. These collections explored issues such as environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of Western thought, nature's silencing, the green tradition in American nature writing, devotion to place, and the personification of the nonhuman. These works are widely acknowledged to have established ecocriticism as a legitimate area of

³ *Silent Spring* is an environmental science book documenting the adverse environmental effects caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides. You might add a sentence here on the significance of the word 'silent' in the title in terms of the silencing of birds and animals.

scholarship, providing the foundations for the innovative and dynamic field of literary study that it has become today.

Buell (2005) categorises the evolution of ecocriticism in ‘waves’⁴. First-wave ecocriticism, which generally spanned the last decade of the twentieth century, tended to focus solely on ‘nature’ literature, nature fiction and poetry and factual nature writing. Theorists and critics adopted ecocentric positions, which rejected the belief that nature exists to serve the needs and interests of human, and celebrated nature for nature’s sake. Clark argues that a belief in the ‘messianic essentialism’ (2014, 89) of nature typified first-wave ecocriticism; a belief that would seem to find its roots in the Romantic era, conceptions of ‘the child’ and ‘nature’, and the literary pastoral. The pastoral tradition, originating with Theocritus and Virgil and later revitalised in Renaissance and Romantic literature, idealises rural life and the natural world as sites of purity, simplicity, and moral restoration, often positioning them in nostalgic contrast to the corruption and complexity of urban or industrial existence. In this sense, the pastoral constructs nature as a redemptive realm, a vision that profoundly shaped Romantic and early ecocritical imaginings of human–environment relations. Second-wave ecocriticism, established in the late 1990s/early 2000s and developed over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, broadened its focus to include a more nuanced understanding of the concept of nature and its relationship to culture. Second-wave theorists and critics, while continuing to hold ecocentric positions that rejected the hierarchical status of the human, also began to interrogate the validity of sharp nature/culture binaries and explore the idea that all life forms are interconnected, and that ‘what affects one, affects all’ (Røskeland, 2018, 35). Second-wave ecocritics also critiqued and challenged the rural/urban distinction and,

⁴ Although a general timeline is provided here for each ‘wave’, it is important to note that there are many points of overlap between the waves, and each wave cannot be neatly and tidily confined within temporal boundaries. Buell himself considered ‘palimpsest’ a better metaphor than wave, but nonetheless persisted with his somewhat catchier watery metaphor.

furthermore, in their exploration of ideas of interconnectedness, developed more sociocentric concerns: namely, exploring the intersectional relationship between environmental degradation and issues of social justice, including race, gender and postcolonialism.

Many scholars and critics (Buell, 2011; Clark, 2014; Garrard, 2014; Iovino and Oppermann, 2014; Gaard, 2018; Goga et al., 2018) have pointed to what they see as third and fourth waves in ecocriticism over the course of the past two decades. As the field of ecocriticism has developed, critics have increasingly questioned anthropocentric assumptions, turning attention from nature as backdrop to nature as active participant. Many of the aforementioned ecocritics identify the entrenched division between nature and culture as central to environmental crisis. Rooted in Cartesian and Newtonian thought, this nature–culture binary establishes a hierarchical worldview that privileges the human as a rational agent above inert matter, thereby legitimising exploitative systems ranging from colonialism to capitalism (Gaard, 2018). The Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch⁵ in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping the Earth’s climate, ecosystems, and geology, extends this logic in complex ways. As a contested term, it foregrounds human responsibility for planetary change while simultaneously reinforcing human exceptionalism by positioning humanity as both the destroyer and the potential saviour of the Earth (Kirby, 2017). This dual role is echoed in children’s visual literature, where narratives of ‘saving the planet’ often privilege human mastery while overlooking nonhuman agency (Røskeland, 2018).

Historically, this opposition has been reinforced by pastoral traditions that idealise nature as simple, harmonious, and separate from culture – a mode evident in the ‘Golden Age’ of children’s literature and beyond. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s concept of *backgrounding*

⁵ While the Anthropocene is often associated with the mid-twentieth century ‘Great Acceleration’, its proposed onset ranges from early agricultural societies to the Industrial Revolution, reflecting ongoing debate about when humanity’s geological impact truly began.

(1993) further illuminates this dynamic, capturing how dominant systems conceal their dependence on what they subordinate, rendering that dependence natural or invisible – a mechanism central to both patriarchy and anthropocentrism. This underscores how landscapes in children’s texts often serve merely as backdrops for human endeavour, while inviting consideration of how such works might instead acknowledge the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds. Terry Gifford’s notion of the post-pastoral (2012) challenges idealised separations of nature and culture, advocating representations that acknowledge complexity, interdependence, and mutual vulnerability. The post-pastoral anticipates the concerns of material ecocriticism by dismantling the human/nature binary and foregrounding relationality and mutual agency, though material ecocriticism advances these ideas through a theoretical turn toward the agency of matter itself. The emergence of the post-pastoral is one marked ecocriticism’s ongoing shift from representational to relational models of inquiry – an approach increasingly attuned to materiality, agency, and the complex interdependencies that define ecological thought and one that also embraces interdisciplinary ‘cross-fertilisation’ with many related disciplines beyond those of literary studies and ecology, such as history, philosophy, art, education and the sciences.

Emerging from this trans-disciplinary landscape, and informed by new materialism/‘the material turn’, is material ecocriticism, the central theoretical underpinning of this dissertation. The foundational premise of the material turn, the ‘turn to matter’, emphasises the materiality of the world and everything – social and natural – within it. Arising from this understanding, material ecocriticism explores matter both *in* text and *as* a text. Its central principle is that matter possesses agency, which is no longer exclusively associated with humans, but is ‘a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter as part and parcel of a generative dynamism’ (ibid, 3). Thus, material ecocriticism recognises the world’s vibrant materiality as a ‘web, teeming with meanings’ (Wheeler, 2011, 270). Nature and culture are not juxtaposed

but become a hybrid compound or ‘mesh’ (Morton, 2010, 15), a dense network of agencies; what Donna Haraway terms ‘naturecultures’ (2003, 2008). Such tangles, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann contend, are sites of narrativity, which ‘can be unravelled only by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world’ (2014, 6). In moving beyond the nature/culture dualism, material ecocriticism ‘opens the space of the hyphen between nature-culture’, as anthropologist Eduardo Kohn articulates it, revealing a ‘semiosis [that is] always embodied in some way or another, and it is always entangled, to a greater or lesser degree, with material processes’ (2007, 5). Based on this understanding, humans are not a separate entity from nature but are, as Alaimo contends, ‘the very stuff of the material, emergent world’ (2010, 11).

Material ecocriticism counters the myth of human exceptionalism, rejects a dichotomous configuration of the world, and embraces a more complex and relational perspective of art, literature, politics and other elements of lived experience. It suggests a multidisciplinary entanglement of the natural, the linguistic, the social, the biological and the political. Thus, all that physically affects our world is in turn affecting everything else in it – our bodies, our homes, our environments, our interactions, our political ideologies and our cultural and intellectual productions. This understanding of naturalcultural enmeshment distributes agency across diverse bodies, recognising the active participation of matter in the continual formation of the world.

Materialist critics argue that in literary theory, structuralist and post-structuralist thinking has dismissed materiality and “dematerialized” the world into linguistic and social constructions’ (Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, 76). Material ecocritics argue that humanity has been distanced from the material realities that surround us. As Simon Estok maintains, ‘the business of coping with [the] material agency of the world is the business of maintaining boundaries and, indeed, of maintaining discursive control’ (2014, 133). Similarly, Plumwood

(2002) laments the predominance of dualistic discourses of human exceptionalism. Such discourses, she argues, elevate language and reason above the material realm of nature, occluding the recognition of our own naturalness. Iovino refers to this tendency as ‘misreading the text of the world’. This, she argues, ‘happens all the times we believe that the boundaries between ‘the outside’ and ‘the inside’ are firm and solid; it happens when we think of the ‘world outside’ as inert matter and we imagine it as unrelated to the ‘world inside’ (2016, 364). In contrast, material ecocriticism seeks to emphasise the entanglements of the internal with the external, the corporeal with the natural and the physical.

1.1.ii. *Material Ecocriticism, the Child, and Visual Narratives*

Ecocriticism’s intersections with children’s literature and culture were not widely explored until the publication of *Wild Things*, edited by Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd in 2004. Dobrin and Kidd highlight that ‘classic children’s literature has long been preoccupied with natural history, ecology and human-animal interaction’ (2004, 4) and examine ‘the ways in which literature, media and other cultural forms for young people address but are also shaped by nature, place, and ecology’ (ibid., 14). Over two decades later, as a proliferation of environmentally themed children’s literature dominates shelves in bookshops, libraries and schools, most notably in the category of visual literature, ecocriticism has become an increasingly relevant theoretical approach in children’s literature studies, as ecocritics are prompted to explore representations of nature and ideologically driven and/or didactic content in this literature. Ecocriticism presents a framework within which issues of environmental ideology, eco-pedagogy, representation and praxis can be examined as they pertain to children’s literature. Material ecocriticism expands upon these, to explore nonhuman agency, naturalcultural entanglements, and books ‘as a source of cultural-ecological knowledge in their own right’ (Zapf, 2016, 144). Material ecocriticism subscribes

to the belief that we can alter our currently unsustainable path ‘if we can reshape ...our very *perception* of the world and not just understandings of it’ (Sullivan, 2014, 90). Understanding matter as a site of narrativity, and that human and nonhuman agency are inextricably enmeshed, allows for a potentially transformative discourse that has particular implications for a study of children’s literature. If matter itself participates in storytelling, then the narratives through which humans learn to interpret the world – such as those found in children’s literature – become crucial sites for examining how material and cultural meanings coalesce.

The intersections of ecocriticism and children’s literature reveal how conceptions of nature are deeply entwined with cultural constructions of childhood. Both fields engage with questions of innocence, development, and humanity’s relationship to the more-than-human world, often reflecting or challenging inherited binaries of nature and culture. Within this context, the historical alignment of the child with the natural – showing how both have been idealised as pure, innocent, and unspoiled states – becomes especially significant. Classical thinkers like John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) profoundly shaped Western conceptions of childhood: Locke framed the child as a blank slate to be filled through experience (1690), while Rousseau (*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, 1755; *Emile, or On Education*, 1762) celebrated the child’s natural innocence and viewed society as a corrupting force. These ideas established enduring associations between the child and an idealised natural state, reflected in Anglophone literary traditions where immersion in nature fosters growth and moral development.

More recently, scholars such as Peter Hunt (1996) and Zoe Jaques (2015) have highlighted the instability of ‘the child’ as both a biological and cultural construct, mirroring the fluidity of the nature/culture divide. This, argues Jaques, means that children’s fiction has the capacity to be more than a playful and nostalgic make-believe space; rather, ‘its potent

complications of the lines that demarcate one form of being from another can seep into relations with, and thoughts on, the real as well as the fictional world' (2015, 19). Jaques considers how the defining lines that delineate children's literature are as unstable as dichotomies of nature and culture. Children, Jaques maintains, are 'distinctive creatures' who can contemplate the mutability and instability of clearly defined boundaries, demonstrating 'an ability to accept (and enjoy) the possible and reject the absolute' (ibid.).

This openness to fluidity and transformation resonates strongly with material ecocritical thought, which likewise challenges fixed boundaries between humans and the more-than-human world. Through the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism, the study of visual narratives for children and young adults becomes a means of exploring literature's potential to reconfigure perceptions of the world – of nature, culture, agency, and the intricate entanglements of being. A material ecocritical approach also presents an opportunity to consider how the visual narrative, by virtue of its multimodal nature and often subversive structure, as well as its aestheticism as a material object, is itself 'storied matter' and a 'hybrid compound' or 'mesh' of 'meanings, properties, and processes' (Iovino and Oppermann, 2 - 3). The visual narrative, it is argued, is therefore uniquely suited to a material ecocritical study.

Ecocritic Greg Garrard argues against ecocriticism as an 'enlightening discourse of nature', emphasising instead 'a more effective rhetoric of transformation and assuagement' (2012, 72). Accordingly, this study aims to provide a potentially transformative ecocritical discourse: one that transcends a reflective, interpretative approach, which examines how literary texts *mirror* the ecologies of the outside world, to also explore how the matter of the world itself is read as a text; to examine the connections between the physical world and the book as a material artefact; and to reflect on how comparative connections can be drawn between this matter and its literary representations. Foregrounding the transformative

potential of the visual narrative, this study is an interrogation of Iovino's assertion that 'when world and literature combine... the whole expressiveness of reality is enhanced and we are able to see more' (2016, 350).

1.1.iii. *Entanglements with Posthumanism and the Philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari*

In its concern with the nonhuman, the material turn is closely aligned with posthumanism. Theorists such as Haraway (1991), N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) interrogate the humanist subject in and through the nonhuman, exploring the porous boundaries between machine-human-animal and analysing how the critical posthuman subject is situated within hierarchies of gender, race and class. Within children's literature and culture studies, Jaques (2015) adopts a posthumanist approach to explore the intersections of human identity, gender, ecology and technology in both canonical children's texts such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *Pinocchio* (1883) and the *Alice* books (1865, 1871), and more recent transmedial output, including literary publications and film, such as *Toy Story* (1995). Cross-disciplinary research within the paradigm has also referred to such scientific techniques as cloning to illustrate that the boundaries between nature and the continuous spectrum of the biological are increasingly porous. Oppermann refers to 'the multi-sited cartography of posthumanism: from nonhuman and often deviant material agencies to unknown forms of life lodged in newly visible territories' (2016, 287). Posthumanism's affinities to material ecocriticism are clear. Both theories reject traditional notions of subjectivity and human exceptionalism, posit a non-dualistic understanding of nature and culture, and extend agentic capacities to the nonhuman. However, while posthumanism tends to focus on the entanglement of humans with technology, animals, and other life forms, the material turn gives greater attention to the vitality and expressivity of the material world itself. My approach combines representational and post-representational

perspectives, exploring intermediality, materiality, and paratextual features to examine how meaning emerges through both human and nonhuman agencies. Material ecocriticism proves the most productive approach for this research, as it enables an analysis of how visual narratives for children and young adults render matter as active and meaningful. However, my approach acknowledges the points of convergence between posthumanism and material ecocriticism – particularly in my analysis of *The Savage* in Chapter Three – in considering how blurred boundaries between the human and nonhuman reimagine identity and creativity.

The philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 2004 [1987]) are perhaps most closely aligned to the material turn. Deleuze and Guattari reject placement of categories into binaries (subject-object) and delineate an open system, to allow free flow of process and interactions. They argue against the interiority of the subject and the arborescent conception of knowledge based on totalising, binary and dualistic principles. They propose a rhizomatic model, which breaks down dichotomies by producing differences and multiplicities and making new connections. Most relevant to this dissertation, Deleuze and Guattari challenge the old idea that a book simply reflects the world like a mirror. Instead, they see a book and the world as interconnected and constantly influencing each other, like co-constitutive elements of a network:

Contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can) (2004, 12).

The rhizomorphic line passes between points; it is not hierarchical or linear. Just as the rhizome has multiple connections in many different directions, so too does the book intra-act with the world in many ways, disrupting the world (deterritorialization), while the world also reshapes the book, giving it new meaning based on its context (reterritorialization). This

back-and-forth creates a dynamic, evolving relationship: the book changes the world, the world changes the book, and both are in constant motion. Thus, the book is not just a static object reflecting reality – rather, it is part of an ongoing conversation with the world, constantly giving and taking influence.

Oppermann outlines how the rhizomic process works to ‘dehierarchize our conceptual categories that structure dualisms and determine our oppressive social, cultural and practical practices’ (Oppermann, 2013, 67). The understandings of Deleuze and Guattari are relevant to this dissertation, as it is concerned with identifying the entanglements of literary representation with post-representational, paratextual factors and the performativity of the reading experience. It is argued that the transformative potential of literature transcends representation alone, and that the young reader’s engagement with the book is an ongoing process of differentiation and individuation that is constantly unfolding.

Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic conception informs an ecocritical inquiry attentive to the porous boundary between ontology and epistemology. They argue that understanding the world changes it, and *being* in the world shapes how knowledge is formed (my emphasis). Reality is not a fixed structure waiting to be mapped; it is dynamic, relational, and interconnected. Knowledge, Benson notes, ‘is seen by new materialism as a dynamic reflection of the particular arrangements of matter...ontology and epistemology are not two separate things...there are no binaries; there are ongoing, dynamic relations’ (2019, 255). Siffrinn and Coda articulate this succinctly: ‘to know is to be part of the world’s continual construction’ (2024, 3). Researchers in children’s literature have acknowledged that the possibility of effecting a strict separation between ontology and epistemology ‘is not an easy matter’ (Crane and Farkas, 2004, 61) and that ‘boundaries can be crossed’ (Sainsbury, 2021, 9). Sainsbury refutes a complete dissolution of the binary however, contending that ‘it is

important that an awareness of distinctions remains in place' (ibid). Material ecocriticism does not seek to dissolve these significant distinctions; it does, however, develop new understandings of the points of convergence between ontology and epistemology, which are relevant to this dissertation. Recognising the overlap between ontology and epistemology supports the proposition that visual narratives are not just representations of the world, but are active participants in shaping ideas and challenging perceptions, showing the world as entangled, dynamic, and alive and encouraging the reader to both constitute ecological relations in the imagination, and to produce knowledge through engagement.

1.1.iv. *Agential Realism and Performative Materiality*

Extending this reflection on the interrelation of ontology and epistemology, Barad's theory of agential realism holds that 'relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific *intra-actions* [my emphasis]' (2007, 140) of material and discursive practices and agencies. Barad's concept of *intra-action* differs from the concept of *interaction*: the latter suggests, as Glotfelty notes, 'the old idea that objects, observers and observations are discrete and separate entities' (2014, 223), whereas the former proposes the new idea that 'these phenomena are always already entangled, mutually constitutive and co-evolving' (ibid.). Barad argues that

the world isn't naturally broken up into social and scientific realms that get made separately. There isn't one set of material practices that makes science, and another disjunct set that makes social relations; one kind of matter on the inside, and another on the outside. The social and the scientific are co-constituted...they are ongoing, open-ended material practices. The goal is therefore to understand which specific material practices matter and how they matter' (2007, 168).

Barad contends that 'it is through specific agential *intra-actions* that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific *intra-actions* that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word' (ibid., 140). Barad stresses the nonhuman aspect of agency and, drawing on their training in quantum physics,

contends that ‘agential intra-actions are causal enactments’ (176) and therefore ‘agency’ is not attributable to the person but is rather the process of cause and effect in ‘enactment’. This idea of ‘distributive agency’ departs from the standpoint of the human as a separate and superior entity, to instead understand the human as part of an interconnected, complex and dynamic web of materiality. Barad’s fundamental premise, therefore, is that ‘*we are a part of the nature that we seek to understand*’ (26, emphasis in the original). This ontological inseparability is not to suggest, as Jane Bennett explains, ‘that there are no differences between humans and [for example] bones, only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex’ (2010, 11).

Barad argues that representationalism focuses on entities as static and fixed, while a performative materiality, mindful of the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, accounts for their becoming, and for the entangled ontology of material-discursive phenomena. This ‘performative materiality’ differs from other forms of new materialism, such as Bennett’s concept of vital materialism (2010), which holds that matter possesses a vital, vibrant force *before* entering into performative connection. By contrast, performative materiality contends that ‘[a]gency and vitality...simply do not exist apart from particular intra-active performances’ (Gamble et al., 2014, 123). A performative understanding of nonhuman agency, therefore, contends that ‘what makes something alive is not what it *is*, but what it *does*...if doing is the life principle, matter, organic or synthetically engineered, emerges as the enactment of its ongoing materialization’ (Oppermann, 2016, 287, emphasis in original). Thus, matter, including such diverse entities as bodies, dirt, toxins, soil, cells, stones, sand, water, air, fire, viruses and bacteria – the list is non-exhaustive – has agency, but only in its performative intra-active relations with other matter. As contended by Barad, ‘Matter is

produced and productive, generated and generative...[it] is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things' (2007, 137).

Critics of Barad's theory (Barber, 2017; Nealon, 2016; Norris, 2012) have expressed scepticism towards its metaphysical tendencies. They argue that Barad's articulation risks idealising matter, attributing to it a quasi-spiritual vitality that abstracts materialism into a form of speculative metaphysics. From this perspective, Barad's agential realism appears to replace empirical description with a diffuse ontology of entangled agencies, blurring the line between physical process and philosophical projection. However, this critique overlooks the precision of Barad's intervention. Barad's argument is not that matter possesses mystical life, but that it participates in the ongoing production of meaning through intra-action, in which agency is distributed across human and nonhuman relations. Far from reviving Platonic idealism, Barad reframes materiality as active, dynamic, and co-constitutive, grounding her theory in quantum physics rather than abstraction. Within material ecocriticism, this offers a powerful corrective to anthropocentric models of authorship and interpretation, repositioning the book as a site of material engagement rather than detached representation.

Relevant to this dissertation, Baradian understanding recognises the visual narrative as more than just 'derivative material for demonstrating the truth-claims of theories' (Zapf, 2016, 144) and challenges the primacy of representationalism in ecocritical studies on visual literature for children and young adults. Rather, the visual narrative is treated as an agent in its own right, and its agentic effects emerge through the performative processes outlined by Barad. Derek Attridge argues that 'literary work exists only in performance' and that the linguistic event is comprehended 'in its eventness' (2017, 148), comprising 'the reader's performance of it – and its performance of the reader' (ibid.,156). Research is also performative. Barad argues that '[o]ur ability to understand the world hinges on our taking

account of the fact that our knowledge-making practices are material enactments that contribute to, and are part of, the phenomena we describe' (247).

The recognition of this mutual involvement requires a diffractive - as opposed to a reflective - analysis. Barad highlights the difference between these two optic concepts: 'reflection' is a contemplation of the world 'from the outside', whereas 'diffraction' 'record[s] the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference' and is 'a way of understanding the world from within and part of it' (71; 89). A diffractive reading of the discursive and the material, the cultural and the natural, departs from a literary 'preoccupation with interpretation and representation' (García-González and Deszsz-Tryhubczak, 2018, 2). It is instead post-representational: recognising text and image as material elements of this world that produce and participate in processes and relationships involving the human and the nonhuman.

This diffractive, post-representational understanding holds that

the meaning of texts does not result only from the traditional sense-making of the discursive layer, but also from a materiality surplus to language that is manifested in the form of "intensities" as well as 'forces, flows, and desires', which themselves are part of relationalities involving readers, texts, and the world around them (ibid.)

A post-representational reading recognises the book as a material element of this world and also recognises the performative intra-actions between the human creator, the human reader and the nonhuman literary work. It focuses not solely on interpretative analysis, but also on the paratextual and material elements of the book, and how the material and the representational intra-act. As Iovino and Oppermann contend, 'this involves a reconceptualization of both the idea of text (as distinct from other nontextual material formations) and the idea of world (as the "outside of text"). According to this [diffractive] vision, text and world can be read as "circulating references"' (2014, 10).

1.1.v. *Narrative agency, transcorporeality and ethical response-ability*

Fundamental to the idea of the entanglement of nature and culture, matter and discourse is the basic principle of material ecocriticism that all matter is ‘storied matter’. Alaimo contends that ‘nature can speak back to culture, not only shaping but helping to generate the stories we tell’ (2000, 159). Matter’s ‘generative dynamism’ is therefore composed of *narrative* agencies, where all beings ‘have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings’ (Abram, 2010, 172). ‘Matter’ and ‘meaning’ are not separated, but rather, theorised through each other as ‘material-discursive’ practices (Barad, 2007, 25).

This presents what Iovino and Oppermann refer to as an ‘ecophenomenological vision’ of ‘a storied world’ (2014, 5), which emphasises the entanglements of human and nonhuman life. It is argued that every living creature ‘tells evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization’ and that ‘whether perceived or interpreted by the human mind or not, these stories shape trajectories that have a formative, enactive power’ (ibid., 7). Cosmologist Brian Swimme eloquently describes this ‘ever-unfolding story’ of the world in which ‘rocks, soils, waves [and] stars...tell their story in 10,000 languages throughout the planet’ (2011, 56). In a similar vein, material feminist Vicki Kirby (2011) poses compelling questions such as ‘can energy remember?’ or ‘can blood see?’ and provides examples of the agency of storied matter in her descriptions of the capacity of bacteria to crack codes and the ‘awareness’ of lightning at its striking point. Thus, ‘story’ does not merely denote an aesthetic representation – biological, chemical and physical life is also each comprised of narratives. Such an understanding implies that matter is expressive, constructive and creative and that human agents co-exist and coevolve with matter in making the world knowable. The discursive and narrative implications are clear, articulated succinctly by Iovino and Oppermann:

If matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is 'telling', and therefore can be the object of critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays (2012, 79).

Opperman contends that this 'narrative agency' further dismantles deep-rooted dichotomies such as animate/inanimate, organic/inorganic, language/nonlanguage and material/discursive. Matter, as part of the material-discursive composition, is an integral domain of knowledge and being. The idea of narrative agency interrogates first-wave ecocriticism's preoccupation with 'advocacy for the other, which is felt to be unable to speak for itself' (Rigby, 2002, 163) and contends that, on the contrary, nature can speak in 'a myriad of tongues' and is possessed of 'an expressive, telluric power' (Abram, 2010, 172). This invites the question, if nature is speaking, who is listening?

'[L]isten[ing] to the world in the entirety of its voices', Iovino argues, is 'essential to the very project of being humans' (2012, 66). This idea of 'nature's voice' has been explored by ecocritic Christopher Manes, who argues that 'nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object' (1996, 17). He underlines the necessity to 'confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought, for it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished' (ibid, 16). Reminiscent of Carson's *Silent Spring*, Estok proposes that the human silencing of nature is borne out of the contempt and fear we feel for its agency. Unexpected forces that are beyond our control arouse fears of our own transience and 'the transience of our corporeal materiality' (2014, 131). Manes's contention resonates with the ecofeminist idea that 'in the beginning was not the word but silence' (Plumwood, 1993), which challenges patriarchal associations of authority with speech and language. Both perspectives critique the human-centred privileging of voice and meaning, reframing silence not as absence but as a space of

potential expression. In this light, nature's 'silence' becomes a site where alternative, material forms of communication and agency can be imagined.

Sainsbury emphasises the 'biospheric potential of children's literature to connect human and nonhuman beings with the world around them' (2021, 97). She states,

This *yet-to-comeness* of rhizomorphic expression connects with the childly potential of a poetics that dreams worlds and brings birch trees into existence. Deleuze and Guatarri's becoming is forward facing, allowing for the temporal currency embedded in Beauvais's concept of a mighty childhood⁶, which incorporates the future as an open space in which to act (ibid).

Such a commitment to rhizomorphic ontologies, Sainsbury argues, bypasses 'dominant configurations of pastoral childhood', dismantling the idea that children's literature can be traced to 'a prelapsarian root-book', emerging from an adult nostalgia for childhood as Arcadia or idyll. In analysing literature for its 'biospheric potential', one might ask, for example, how flowers, trees and shrubs breathe life into the worlds springing before them in visual narratives – what Sainsbury terms 'botanical inhalation' (2021, 103). Mindful of naturalcultural entanglements and performative intra-actions, one might also reflect upon how biospheric materialities intra-act with our own corporeal materiality.

Alaimo's concept of 'transcorporeality' emphasises the porosity of bodies, and represents a 'time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"' (2008, 238). This observation can be traced back to Carson's aforementioned *Silent Spring*, in which the author links 'the quality of soil, water, and air to animal and human physiology' (Nash, 2006, 157), blurring the boundary between the study of the human body and the study of the nonhuman environment. Building upon this, Alaimo

⁶ See Chapter One, Part 3

sees the body as a site of material interchanges, emphasising a lateral (as opposed to hierarchical) movement across sites and bodies. In this view, nature, once seen as separate from and outside to the body, ‘invades, pervades and constitutes’ the body, ‘such that bodies, moods and mind are fundamentally interconnected’ (Glotfelty, 2014, 223). Alaimo’s concept is, fundamentally, a recognition of the entanglements and performative intra-actions between internal and external matter. Ideas of transcorporeality have been previously explored in disciplines such as philosophy and theology. In an observation that is strikingly mindful of both Barad’s performative intra-action and Alaimo’s transcorporeality, but predates both by two decades, theologian Benedict Ashley wrote:

I exist and live as a body in a world of bodies. We bodies contact each other and by this contact, we create the world – space. To be a body, however, is to exist only in process: forming and decaying, appearing and disappearing, recurring and undergoing modification, development and growth’ (1985, 3)

Alaimo argues that ‘attention to the material transit across bodies and environments may render it more difficult to seek refuge within fantasies of transcendence or imperviousness’ (2010, 16). Clint Jones argues that many dystopian narratives for children and/or young adults such as apocalyptic graphic novels⁷, frequently depict scenarios in which the valiant, agentic human overcomes the conditions of a dystopian, post-apocalyptic future, and the world remains ‘stable, usable, and hospitable’ (2020, 20). Material ecocriticism rejects the arrogance of such narratives. As Sullivan argues, ‘[o]verlooking the impact of other species – bacteria and beyond – and matter skews our ability to perceive the significant engagement of all living things and energetic forces acting in the biosphere and on the cosmic scale more broadly’ (2020, 29). The concepts of narrative agency and transcorporeality allow for an

⁷ Some examples include *The Walking Dead* series (2003 – 2019) by Robert Kirkman, the *Once Upon a Time at the End of the World* series (2022 – 2024) by Jason Aaron, and *The Giver: The Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2019) by Lois Lowry and P. Craig Russell.

understanding whereby objects and phenomena, including complex corporeal material phenomena, are endowed with agency – understood as active participants in relational networks, producing effects and meaning through their intra-actions rather than being passive or inert. This profoundly challenges our perceptions of the world and has clear ethical implications. The context for ethics here is, as Alaimo contends, ‘not merely social but material – the emergent, ultimately unmappable landscapes of [intra-acting] biological, climatic economic, and political forces’ (2010, 2). Thus, as Barad argues, ‘we are responsible for the world in which we live, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping’ (2007, 203). Such a perspective does not minimise the moral accountability of the human agent; however, it avoids proportioning blame, or reinforcing narratives of control. Instead, if a child or young adult becomes more attuned to the ‘radical liveliness of the world’ (Oppermann, 2014, 35), it may alter their ethical stance from one of control and guardianship, to one that implies a mutual sense of obligation. As Barad observes, agency is less about responsibility as ‘response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response’ (2012, 55). ‘Mutual’ emphasises reciprocity: humans respond to nonhumans, nonhumans respond back (through their effects, constraints, or affordances), and meaning or action arises from these ongoing entanglements and intra-actions. In this regard, it is argued that, in its interrogation of the ‘natural order of the world’, material ecocriticism has revolutionary and disruptive qualities.

1.1.vi. *The Rural/Urban Dichotomy*

This disruption extends to the spatial and cultural hierarchies that underpin that order, particularly the long-standing opposition between nature and the city. The conception of urbanisation as a central problem of modernity has long reinforced the idea that nature cannot

exist within the ‘hostile’ city, establishing a problematic rural/urban – or nature/culture – divide. First-wave ecocriticism subscribed to this binary, valorising nature writing and the preservation of rural wilderness as sites of authenticity and renewal. By contrast, second-wave ecocriticism broadened its focus to what Buell describes as a ‘social ecocriticism’ that treats urban and degraded landscapes as equally worthy of attention (2005, 22). Rejecting the artificial separation between rural and urban spaces, it recognised that ‘the metropolitan landscape and the built environment generally must be considered as at least equally fruitful ground for ecocritical work’ (ibid., 93).

Clint Jones similarly challenges the persistent tendency to separate urban environments from ‘the environment,’ arguing that this habit sustains the illusion that humans exist ‘apart from’ rather than ‘a part of’ nature (2020, 160). Owain Jones extends this reconceptualisation, suggesting that ‘romantic spaces can open up in the urban,’ particularly in hybrid zones and derelict sites at the edges of cities, where ‘wild,’ subversive landscapes emerge (2002, 27). These spaces symbolically invite new understandings of childhood that move beyond the ideals of innocence and purity traditionally associated with rural nature. Both scholars question the assumption that rural and urban settings operate in opposition, proposing instead that environmental consciousness can thrive within the built environment.

In a similar vein, Malcolm Miles rejects ecological perspectives grounded in ‘anti-urbanism.’ He argues that nature should not be seen as a pure, self-regulating system, but rather as an evolving co-production of human and nonhuman forces – shaped through farming, dwelling, urbanisation, and political contestation, alongside geological processes (2014, 41). This view dismantles the narrative of urbanisation as nature’s adversary and reframes the modern city as a vital part of ecological continuity. As Jones observes, a ‘synergistic understanding’ of environment is urgently needed – one that moves beyond seeing nature as the ‘vague and ephemeral greenery filling in the background’ (2020, 157).

Yet, such reconceptualisations carry potential risks. Equating urban and natural processes too completely may normalise environmental degradation or obscure injustices that disproportionately affect marginalised communities. A balanced ecocritical perspective must therefore acknowledge co-production while retaining moral and ecological discernment – distinguishing creative from destructive forms of human participation in nature. Cities can thus be understood as ecological systems in their own right, composed of interdependent human, technological, animal, and vegetal networks. This approach neither demonises nor idealises the urban, but situates it within ecological ethics, inviting both children and adults to perceive the city as a living habitat where care and sustainability may be practised daily. Visual narratives, in turn, can illuminate the hidden ecologies of urban life, nurturing a sense of connection that overcomes the imagined divide between nature and culture.

1.1.vii. *Ecofeminism and Material Feminism*

Such an understanding anticipates ecofeminist perspectives, which identify the dualism between nature and culture as both ecological and gendered. Ecofeminism argues that the nature/culture dualism is gendered and sees an explicit connection between the environmental degradation and the subordination of women by patriarchal structures. In this regard, ‘men and masculinity are associated with culture and culture is valued, whereas women and femaleness are associated with nature and both are devalued’ (Gaard, 2010, 48). Prominent ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard and Plumwood see ‘the natural world’ as including women, minorities, Indigenous people and nonhumans and argue against the ‘standpoint of mastery’ – a reason/nature dualism in which this natural world is subordinated. This standpoint, Plumwood contends, grounds beliefs in the ‘domination’ of nature by humans and is associated with other social and political systems of oppression including but not limited to sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ablesism, ageism, capitalism and colonialism (1993).

Ecofeminism posits that patriarchal thought treats women as resources for men – for reproduction, labour, and care – rather than as autonomous beings.

Similarly, anthropocentric systems treat the natural world and nonhuman life as resources for human use – to be managed, exploited, or ‘developed.’ Both depend on objectification: seeing the ‘other’ not as a subject with intrinsic value, but as a means to an end.

Ecofeminism rejects the ‘hyperseparation’ between self and other. ‘Hyperseparation’ is a key concept posited by Plumwood (1993), referring to the structure of dominance that drives Western binaries, including nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, savage/civilised.

‘Hyperseparation’ accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination. Ecofeminists argue that dismantling patriarchy and addressing ecological destruction require the same ethical transformation: recognising interdependence rather than hierarchy; valuing care, nurture, and reciprocity as ecological and social principles; and seeing both women and nonhuman beings as agents with intrinsic worth, not passive matter. Ecofeminism also emphasises the urgency of political action: ‘healing alienated individuals, cultures, and systems...dismantling institutions of oppression and building egalitarian and ecocentric networks in their place’ (Gaard, 2009, 323).

Ecofeminism has expanded its interrogations and concerns in recent years, to focus on the material body. Prominent ecofeminists and material feminists such as Stacy Alaimo, Vicki Kirby and Susan Hekman understand the interrelatedness of humans, nonhumans and nature as having ‘dynamic patterns’, a central tenet of material ecocritical thought. In the context of material feminism, Alaimo and Hekman recognise the intersectional implications of the nature/culture dualism, as they observe how it has been ‘injurious – not only to nonhuman nature, but to various women, Third World peoples, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and other marked groups’ (2008, 4). While postmodern feminism draws aforementioned parallels between the domination of patriarchal structures and the dominant status of humans

over the nonhuman, material feminists go further in arguing for the positioning of the material reality of the body and the natural world at the forefront of feminist theory and practice. Alaimo and Hekman argue that the discursive model of materiality associated with the linguistic turn, while ‘enormously productive for feminism’, has also privileged ideology and representation at the cost of side-lining ‘lived experience, corporeal practice and biological substance’ (ibid.). Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality, previously discussed in this chapter, encapsulates her material feminist thought. In the context of this dissertation, material feminism entails moving beyond representation in visual narratives to examine material-semiotic processes – how images, bodies, and environments act and intra-act. It invites reflection on the ways visual and textual elements embody the agency of matter (including landscapes, weather, waste, technologies, and bodies) and on how material textures, colours, and spatial compositions enable readers to sense the presence and vitality of the nonhuman world. These ideas are explored in greater detail in Chapter Four.

1.1.viii. *Race, Colonialism, and Materiality in Indigenous Cultures*

Ecofeminism’s challenge to the gendered hierarchies embedded within the nature/culture dualism opened the way for broader critiques of how such binaries operate across other axes of power. Building on this expanded perspective, the research of second-, third- and fourth-wave ecocritics began to draw stronger connections between dualisms of nature/culture and white/non-white (Feldman and Hsu, 2007; Buell, 2005) and also recognise the important insights of Indigenous cultures into the explanatory power of the natural world (Uzendoski, 2009; Adamson, 2001). The lack of diversity of voices in ecocriticism was acknowledged, and this continues to be a concern today – particularly, the dearth of representation in the field from those in Indigenous communities. This is also particularly relevant to studies of

children's literature. Dobrin and Kidd describe children's texts as 'a crucial place in which to detect and combat cultural hegemony' (2004, 9).

Inextricably linked to issues of race and nature are those of colonisation and post-colonialism. Ecocritical discussions on nature and culture cannot disregard the history of colonisation and its ravaging effects on natural environments across the globe. Timothy Luke argues that both the public and the scientists (political and physical) of the Anthropocene 'mystify whiteness, wealth, and the West, whose racial violence, technical prowess, and environmental degradation make fossil fuel capitalism work' (2020, 143). Part of colonialism's complex legacy is the pervasive binary thinking of contemporary Western society. In dismantling these binaries, modern ecocritical and material ecocritical perspectives seek to establish connections, rather than divisions, whilst also acknowledging the wrongs of the past that continue to have a major impact on the world and on ecological discourse today.

The age of colonialism has had – and continues to have – a profound impact upon Indigenous cultures across the globe. As a result of colonialism, many Indigenous groups have been displaced from some or all of their ancestral lands. Second-, third- and fourth-wave ecocriticism has highlighted the colonial treatment of Indigenous peoples as passive objects to be dominated and has advocated for increased attention to Indigenous agency and culture. The roots of material ecocriticism can be found in Indigenous traditions and practices that understand matter as a site of narrativity. Indigenous peoples comprise diverse worldwide groups with an abundance of disparate cultures and traditions, but some sacred and traditional beliefs are common in many Indigenous cultures. One fundamental belief sacred to many Indigenous peoples is the concept of 'animism': the belief that all natural phenomena, including human beings, animals, and plants, but also nonhuman matter such as rocks, lakes, mountains, soil and weather all possess a vital, spiritual quality and energy. In *Braiding*

Sweetgrass (2013), Indigenous botanist and author writer Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi Nation, Oklahoma) integrates scientific and Indigenous epistemologies, portraying plants, materials, and ecological processes as communicative and agentic. Some Indigenous cultures extend this spiritual energy to words – many have an oral tradition that has been passed down for generations, at the centre of which are ‘creation’ stories that integrate a wealth of information, drawn from years of coexisting with the earth and its landscape. Joni Adamson notes how in the Indigenous cultures of the Americas, story cycles embodying these philosophies, whether oral or written, are regarded as ‘living books’ or ‘seeing instruments’ that offer ‘a complex navigational system’ for understanding relations among humans, stars, animals, soils, and planting cycles (2014, 261). As Michael Uzendoski observes, such stories are ‘less concerned with cultural boundaries than they are with natural ones’ (2009, xi), while Sasha Starovoitov describes how a story told by a revered elder becomes ‘an “object” that carries history, physical rituals, names, and language’ (2021, n.p.). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reminds us, however, Indigenous storytelling is not only a vehicle for cultural transmission but a mode of theorising in itself – a ‘practice of living relationally within the world’ (2017, 33). Simpson, an Indigenous scholar and writer (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, Ontario) argues that knowledge emerges through embodied engagement with land and more-than-human relations; her framework enacts an Indigenous form of theory grounded in resurgence and relational practice rather than in Western academic traditions. Similarly, Kimmerer foregrounds the reciprocity at the heart of Indigenous narrative traditions, where stories are forms of ‘ethical instruction’ that bind humans to the more-than-human world (2013, 347). Fundamentally, Indigenous epistemologies understand stories not as abstract linguistic constructions but as material, living presences – an understanding of narrative matter and materiality long preceding its recognition in ecocritical thought.

Today, there are ongoing efforts to develop a practice of unifying modern scientific research and the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples, as traditional Indigenous stories have been granted scientific credence and scientific research communities come to realise that there is much insight to be gained from such collaborations. String theory, for example, proposes that ‘the “stuff” of all matter and all forces is the same ...differences between strings arise because their respective strings undergo different resonant patterns...[t]he universe [is] composed of an enormous number of vibrating strings...a cosmic symphony’ (Greene, 1999, 146). This parallels with Spinozian belief in the ‘infinite substance’⁸ (2017 [1677], 6) and is also clearly aligned not only with the central tenets of material ecocriticism, but also, as Rosemary Johnston observes, with the Australian Aboriginal idea of the Dreaming: ‘ancestor beings made a noise, the noise became singing, and the singing created land, landforms and themselves as beings’ (2014, 20). Further unification of Indigenous wisdom and scientific research is, as Starovoitov notes, a ‘perilous race against time’(2021, web); Indigenous languages are at extreme risk of extinction and as these languages fade, a concept referred to as ‘language death’ (Crystal, 2000), so too do the stories they carry, which could lead to great losses of knowledge.

Some ecocritics caution against the romanticisation and ‘piety’ in some branches of ecocriticism towards Indigenous peoples (Krech, 1999: Garrard, 2012). Adamson refers to practices in some Indigenous cultures, such as the harvesting of dolphin organs, to illustrate that ‘association with an Indigenous community does not necessarily confer ethically responsible environmental behaviours’ (2014, 259). Similarly, some Indigenous beliefs reinforce hierarchical positioning of the human over the natural world. The Māori cultures of

⁸ Spinoza’s understanding of a single, infinite substance he referred to as ‘God’ or ‘Nature’ was first outlined in *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, originally published in 1677. Spinoza understood the infinite substance to encompass everything that exists. This substance is not a transcendent being, but rather the underlying reality of all things, possessing an infinite number of attributes, each expressing an eternal and infinite essence.

New Zealand, for example, subscribe to a belief in *kaitiakitanga*, a concept of guardianship which, although fundamentally based on the idea of mutual respect between the human and natural, situates the human as ‘protector’, rather than as a participant in a corresponding and mutually agentic relationship.

Notwithstanding these understandable calls for cautious approaches that avoid ‘over-valorising’ Indigenous culture, it is argued that there is much insight to be gained from the traditions of Indigenous storytelling for studies in material ecocriticism. The connections between material ecocriticism and the practices and beliefs of Indigenous cultures are further highlighted in subsequent chapters of this study, which demonstrate that the affordance of renewed attention to Indigenous wisdom on/regarding materiality and narrative agency would prove extremely productive for ecocritical studies of children’s literature.

1.1.ix. *Anthropomorphism*

Engaging with Indigenous conceptions of animism naturally draws attention to the literary device of anthropomorphism, highlighting the ways in which human and nonhuman agency are represented and interwoven. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a nonhuman entity. The technique of anthropomorphism is one that is used by authors/illustrators in many of the works analysed in this dissertation, and therefore demands interrogation in the context of a material ecocritical approach.

Anthropomorphism differs to Indigenous concepts of animism in that the latter is a belief in the existence of a vital, spiritual quality and energy in the nonhuman that is unrelated to the human, whereas anthropomorphism is more human-focused and human-centred in its tendency to mould the nonhuman into a human likeness. Nonetheless, Adamson notes that Indigenous ‘cosmological’ narratives about animals and plants with these quasi-human characteristics ‘continue to offer explanatory power to contemporary Indigenous and ethnic

minority groups throughout the contemporary world' (2014, 258). While animistic narratives foreground the agency of the nonhuman, anthropomorphism channels these qualities into forms and stories more recognisable to humans – a distinction that naturally leads to its widespread use as an artistic technique in children's literature.

Anthropomorphism has been discussed by numerous scholars and researchers in multidisciplinary fields over the past several decades (Sainsbury, 2021; Nodelman, 2015; Latour, 2010; Bennett, 2010). Calarco cautions against the 'narcissism' and 'exceptionalism' of anthropomorphism, arguing that it primarily constitutes 'a kind of incessant attention to and rotation around exclusively human existence' (2014, 416). Sainsbury similarly considers the 'limits of anthropomorphism', positioning it within an ontological/epistemological debate on whether human beings 'can ever render animals *real-ly* through artistic representation' (2021, 45). Many others, however, have proposed anthropomorphism as a dis-anthropocentric strategy, which, as argued by Bruno Latour, 'go[es] beyond the symbolic to raise questions about representation' (2010, 481). In direct contrast to Calarco's comments, Bennett argues that anthropomorphism 'counter[s] the narcissism of humans in charge of the world' (2010, xvii) and 'catalyse[s] a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings but with variously composed materialities that form confederations' (ibid, 97). Bennett proposes the concept of 'thing-power', the belief that inanimate things may possess an inexplicable, vital energy. While the idea that all matter contains energy due to its mass is a basic scientific principle, Bennett's concept develops this to emphasise the agency and vitality of objects, demonstrating how inanimate things can influence human and nonhuman systems. Bennett observes that thing-power calls to mind to 'a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not' (2010, 20). Anthropomorphism, according to Bennett, while first appearing as merely a way of seeing the world in our own image, can, in fact, '[reveal] similarities across

categorical divides and [light] up structural parallels between material forms in “nature” and those in “culture” (ibid., 99).

Lakoff and Johnson explore anthropomorphism through their concept of the ‘Great Chain Metaphor’: how the ancient concept of the Great Chain of Being – Gods over Humans over Animals over Plants over Objects – subconsciously drives ‘our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language’ (1980, 167) and ‘allows us to comprehend less well-understood aspects of the nature of animals and objects in terms of better-understood human characteristics’ (ibid.,172). It is this Great Chain Metaphor embedded in our thinking that leads us to anthropomorphise so unabashedly, they contend. Because humans occupy the ‘highest’ position, we instinctively interpret nonhuman life through human categories of thought and emotion. By deconstructing this metaphorical hierarchy, we can approach anthropomorphism more responsibly – recognising agency and meaning beyond the human and using the technique to explore interconnection rather than human dominance. Jaques concurs, arguing that ‘giving trees voice...both grants them subject status and makes them worthy of protection [and] also tends to encourage an attitude of stewardship that naturalizes a hierarchy of man over plant (and makes language the marker of value)’ (2015, 124). This understanding of anthropomorphism and hierarchical thinking informs a material ecocritical approach to visual narratives, highlighting how the representation of nonhuman agents – through both narrative and material form – can challenge human-centred perspectives and encourage readers to perceive agency, interconnection, and vitality beyond the human.

1.1.x. *Cultural Ecology*

While material ecocriticism offers valuable ways of reimagining the relationship between matter, agency, and meaning, it is important to avoid positioning it as a definitive ‘correction’ of the perceived errors of modernity or postmodernity. As Hannes Bergthaller claims,

‘material ecocriticism offers a *redescription* of the world’ and is ‘not about the replacement of a false ontology with a true one’ (2014, 49, emphasis in original). In this regard, an understanding of storied matter does not preclude an acknowledgement of the significance of cultural discourse, creativity and production. Returning to Barad’s concept of intra-action, discursive practices and material processes *co-exist* in how the world ‘articulates itself’.

The book is both a natural object, made from paper, and, as Neimanis asserts, ‘a quintessential cultural object, [which] the human writes or reads...in a deliberate act of human self-awareness’ (2017, 187). Visual storytelling involves a very particular creative craftsmanship, and the study of visual narratives through a post-representational, material ecocritical lens takes account of the human creativity that is engaged in visual storytelling, and in the creation of the distinct materiality and aestheticism of the visual narrative in its various forms. Ashley Barnwell asserts that

[t]o engage with the complexity of life, we might need to include the very things that will complicate our project; we must include ourselves and our intellectual inheritance, with all its awkward and conflicting desires and the values that inform, and are informed by, our social acts of self-observation (2017, 37).

As previously outlined, material ecocriticism does not aim to *dismantle* boundaries; rather, it seeks to *blur* them. While there is clearly an argument against certain dichotomies, it is fair to contend, as Bergthaller does, that ‘most forms of discourse function *only* on the basis of exclusions and clear distinctions’ (2014, 39). The conundrum for material ecocriticism, therefore, lies in its efforts to emphasise the entanglements of nature and culture while at the same time avoiding clichéd and idealised notions of universal harmony or tendencies, pervasive in some branches of deep ecology⁹, to dissolve culture into nature and disregard important distinctions and differences that exist in both the material and cultural worlds.

⁹ Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy and social movement founded by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, which drew a distinction between what Næss referred to as ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ environmentalism: the

Material ecocriticism, as a theory that explores complex entanglements, is itself a complex entanglement of cross-disciplinary understandings that is perhaps overburdened by laborious terminology. An outline of Zapf's theory of cultural ecology risks adding yet another conceptual term to the list; however, cultural ecology effectively addresses the quandary of non-hierarchical natural-cultural entanglement, and functions as a helpful point of connection between material ecocriticism and intermediality, in how it brings natural and cultural ecologies together 'without reducing them to each other' (Zapf, 2016, 4). It understands nonhuman nature as 'an active agent and co-evolutionary force that cannot be objectified as mere external material context of human civilization', but also recognises that it 'is intrinsically part and energetic source of [human civilization's] highest cultural developments' (ibid., 137). Cultural ecology reads this cultural dimension as 'an indispensable part of contemporary ecological knowledge landscapes', and maintains that 'the critical, explorative, and transformative contribution of literature, art, and other forms of cultural creativity is essential to the evolution of societies towards sustainable futures' (ibid, 3-4). As life has emerged from matter and cultural evolution has developed from natural evolution, the impact of the former stage of evolution (natural) on the later stage (cultural) must be acknowledged. 'Human culture and consciousness', Zapf argues, 'have evolved from but cannot be reduced to matter and bodily natures: they are matter or nature becoming self-aware' (2014, 55/6). Here, Zapf highlights that human minds and societies developed out of the material world and our physical bodies. However, they are not just physical manifestations – they represent nature becoming aware of itself. Thus, Zapf proposes that when humans think, create, and reflect, the natural world is expressing self-awareness through the human.

former recognising the inherent value of nature, which transcends human values, the latter focusing on human-centred practices and solutions within an industrialist, capitalist society.

The idea that human thought and creativity represent the natural world's self-awareness can be considered a metaphorical rather than an empirical understanding, which expresses a key tension within material ecocriticism. It underscores the continuity between human consciousness and the material processes from which it arises, suggesting that reflection and imagination are extensions of nature's vitality. This view blurs the boundaries between sentience and sapience, understanding both as points on a continuum of responsiveness, in which human, nonhuman, and material agencies co-create meaning and participate in the unfolding of the world. Critics may contest such an understanding for its potential anthropocentrism and its tendency to romanticise matter by implying a universal consciousness. However, ultimately, it offers a productive way of reimagining the human not as separate from but as continuous with the material world, foregrounding the co-constitutive relations through which life, thought, and creativity emerge.

This understanding of the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter signals how cultural ecology has evolved from material ecocriticism. Zapf reminds us that 'any narrative of matter is always also the cultural, textual construct of such a narrative' (ibid, 52); however, the attentiveness of material ecocriticism to the agency of matter remains crucial as it allows for perspectives on how the 'latent creativity of the human mind' corresponds to the 'presence of creativity in nature and the universe at large' (Bohm, 1998, i).

Iovino states that

when human creativity 'plays' together with the narrative agency of matter, intra-acting with it, it can generate stories and discourses that 'diffract' the complexity of our porous collective, producing narrative emergencies that amplify reality, also affecting our cognitive response to this reality. In ethical and political terms, this has a great potential for a practice of liberation. (2014, 112).

Human creativity is clearly, therefore, semiotic in nature, manifested, as Wendy Wheeler observes, 'in metaphor, metonym and story' (2014). Wheeler argues that our knowledge of

the world is ‘imperfect’ and ‘incomplete’. Our knowing, she claims, ‘is always framed by our ways of world-modelling, and, like all organisms, these modellings are constrained by the kinds of organisms-in-environments that we are’ (2016, 25). German biologist Jakob von Uexküll referred to the internal and external worlds of humans as *Umwelten* and *Innenwelten* (1957), the latter denoting the mind, the psyche and the cultural imagination, which, he claims are as much a part of human habitats as their external natural and material environments. As products of these *Innenwelten* of cultural imagination, art and literature offer a cultural ecosystem, in which ‘ever-renewable creative energy’ (Zapf, 2016, 149) can develop and flourish. Zapf maintains that

imaginative literature deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways, and ... produces an ‘ecological’ dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity (2016, 139).

Zapf contends that literature has ‘biosemiotic memory’ in its awareness of ‘the former stages of its own evolution and of the deep history of culture-nature-coevolution’ (2014, 57). It therefore acts as an ‘ecological force’ in the larger cultural system, overcoming the mind-body-dualism by ‘bringing together conceptual and perceptual dimensions, ideas and sensory experiences, reflective consciousness and the performative staging of complex dynamical life processes’ (Zapf, 2016, 141). Zapf’s complex and provocative contention here points to literature as a living archive, which carries within it the memory of its own artistic evolution (from myth to modern narrative forms), and the deep, intertwined history of how human culture has coevolved with the natural world. Literature, according to Zapf, ‘remembers’ both its cultural past and the biological, ecological foundations of human existence. Through its symbols, stories, and metaphors, it keeps alive the memory of our shared life with nature. Art, as matter, is implicitly self-reflexive. It stimulates contemplation of the world beyond the

frame or the page but also represents the complexities of human meaning-making. Morton's contention that 'art happens in the liminal spaces between things' (2014, 270) positions the aesthetic experience as a meeting point between the natural and the cultural, the *Umwelten* and the *Innenwelten*. Similarly, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty eloquently articulates aesthetic experiences as 'cultural crystallizations of experience and memory, sedimenting the past and reconnecting us with the "polymorphism of the wild Being" upon which culture rests' (1973, 253). Westling similarly refers to how a 'cultural eco-imaginary, the deeply-layered sedimentation of experience within the dynamically evolving ecosystem, can be reawakened by careful attention to particular literary texts' (2016, 73). From a material ecocritical perspective, these shared understandings of Zapf, Morton, Merleau-Ponty and Westling are applicable to visual narratives in how the visual narrative becomes a site where matter, image, and meaning interact. Its colours, textures, and visual metaphors embody the 'biosemiotic memory' Zapf describes – an awareness of earlier cultural forms (like myth, fable, and oral storytelling) and of our evolutionary co-relationship with the natural world. In this sense, the visual narrative can be read as an ecological archive that 'remembers' and reanimates the sensory, affective, and material dimensions of life. It bridges mind and body, thought and perception, encouraging the young reader to experience story as a dynamic exchange between human creativity and the more-than-human environment.

Applying this thinking to her study of children's literature, Sainsbury describes the 'looping doubleness' involved in this relationship between the biological world and language (2021, 213). Sainsbury identifies metaphor as 'having ontic presence', contending that 'it cannot be reduced to a substitute for that which is real; figurative language inheres in being and vice versa... it *is* being' (ibid). Indeed, as Zapf maintains, 'processes of creativity in life can be likened to the operation of metaphors on the level of language, discourse, and art. The 'metaphorical' reading of one form or pattern and its transference to another are at the core of

creative activity both in processes of life and in processes of art and literature' (2014, 53). Considering the material and discursive together does not therefore mean 'collapsing important differences between them,' but rather 'allowing any integral aspects to emerge' (Barad, 2007, 25); how may we account for the materiality of language without reducing it to the discursive.

Cultural ecology, in its acknowledgement of the entanglements of cultural and natural creativity, also recognises the enmeshment of order and chaos. In the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the Apollonian and the Dionysian represent two fundamental drives or principles within human nature and culture. The Apollonian embodies order, reason, and structure, while the Dionysian represents chaos, passion, and emotionality. For Nietzsche, the sublime is a creation of Western philosophy to distance itself from the brutal 'Dionysian' reality of nature. He sees 'rational thinking' as an Apollonian drive to impose order and structure, which has a tendency to 'individualise' and separate people and ideas. The Dionysian is the opposite of order and structure and blurs the boundaries between the self and nature. Enduring conceptions through time of the human as ordered and civilised, and nature as wild and chaotic, have reinforced sharp binaries, partly due to the (mis)understanding that order and chaos are mutually exclusive and incompatible. Nietzsche conversely emphasises the interconnection and intra-action of the two, seeing the apex of artistic creation as that which demonstrates the fusion of these two opposing forces (2014 [1901], 798). In her study of the relation between orderly disorder in contemporary literature and the sciences (1990), Hayles challenges the traditional opposition between order and disorder, arguing that they are interconnected and can coexist within complex systems. She points to evidence of this coexistence in scientific research¹⁰, and parallels these findings with an exploration of the

¹⁰ Hayles explores how the sciences of chaos and complexity in the late 20th century transformed our understanding of order and disorder. She argues that, rather than being opposites, they are mutually generative - that is, order can emerge from disorder, and disorder can sustain dynamic forms of order. In support of this

potential of literary disorder and complexity to generate new forms of order. For Hayles, Zapf, Nietzsche, and the material ecocritic, the link between natural life forms and cultural forms of life signifies both creativity and destructiveness, both order and chaos. The entanglements of these forces are further explored in Chapter Three of this study.

1.1.xi. *Part 1.1: Summation*

While material ecocriticism provides a robust framework for understanding the entanglement of human and nonhuman agents, as well as the ethical and affective dimensions of children's visual narratives, it primarily attends to ecological and material concerns rather than the specificities of media form. Given that visual narratives are inherently multimodal – combining verbal text, imagery, and other material elements – their study requires an additional conceptual lens capable of capturing the interplay between modes and the perceptual, aesthetic, and communicative effects they produce. Intermediality – an approach that remains underexplored in the context of the study of visual narratives – offers such a lens, enabling a nuanced analysis of how verbal, visual, material and paratextual elements co-construct meaning and mediate human and nonhuman perspectives. By integrating material ecocritical insights with an intermedial approach, this dissertation can account both for the ecological vitality embedded in the narrative world and the ways in which its multimodal forms shape readers' engagement with these worlds.

argument, she discusses chaos theory, fractal geometry, nonlinear dynamics and cybernetics, referencing the work of scientists such as Edward Lorenz, Benoît Mandelbrot, Ilya Prigogine and Claude Shannon.

1.2. Intermediality

1.2.i. *Outline of Intermediality*

Intermediality is based on the understanding that ‘communication necessarily involves material media types and that all media expressions are a priori mixed’ (Bruhn, 2021, 2010; Mitchell, 1994). It has historical roots in aesthetics, philosophy, semiotics, comparative literature, media studies and inter-art studies (Elleström, 2021; Clüver, 2019, 2007; Rajewsky, 2008). In tandem with new materialism, intermediality moves beyond a ‘representational’ and ‘interpretational’ approach to explore the materiality and sensuousness of semiotics and sign systems, and to ‘analyse material specificities, the relationships between media, the historical interplay between the media, culture and communication and the role media play in societies’ (Tabbi and Wutz, 1997). Intermediality is also concerned with troubling binaries, including how conflictual configurations of word and image give expression to alternative forms of seeing that destabilise the dichotomous logic of an active subject and a passive object (Neumann and Rippl, 2020, 20). Scholars such as Neumann (2015) and Herzogenrath (2012) describe the field of intermediality as ‘promising’, ‘vital’ and invigorating’. Researchers, including Karin Kukkonen (2011) and Neumann and Rippl (2020), have employed intermediality as an insightful approach in their explorations of how medium-specific features of visual narratives constrain as well as enable narrative practices. Kukkonen analyses how different media – such as comics, illustrated books, and digital narratives – afford or limit storytelling techniques, showing that visual and verbal modes shape plot, pacing, and reader interpretation in distinct ways. Neumann and Rippl examine how intermedial interactions between images, text, and material form influence narrative meaning, highlighting how medium-specific properties both constrain and enable creative expression. Together, these studies demonstrate that intermediality provides a framework for

understanding how the material and formal features of visual narratives actively participate in the construction of story and reader engagement.

1.2.ii. *Intermediality and Ecocriticism*

Several theorists of intermediality argue for analytical approaches to literature that merge the concepts and ideas of intermedial studies and ecocriticism (Bruhn and Schirmmacher, 2022; Bruhn, 2021). The ‘rich and deep insights of contemporary ecocritical thinking’ can, Jørgen Bruhn argues, ‘be combined productively with the analytical strengths of intermedial studies’ (2021, 140). Intermediality and material ecocriticism are both concerned with agency: material ecocriticism with the narrative agency of matter and the agency of the nonhuman, and intermediality with the agency of media in interconnecting the specific cultural and historical domains of aesthetics, society and technology (Johansson and Petersson, 2018). Echoing material ecocritical understandings of the omnipresence and narrative agency of matter, contemporary theorists recognise intermediality as a reconceptualisation of media: it is ‘an environment for living...based [not only] on the obvious fact that media are “everywhere”, from human bodies to newspapers, but also on the way it both conditions and makes experiencing and understanding possible’ (ibid, 10). Both intermediality and material ecocriticism are fields of research that transgress borders between disciplines and mediate between binaries. As Morton positions the aesthetic experience as a meeting point between the natural and the cultural (2014, 270), intermediality conceives of a medial object, such as a visual narrative, as ‘always a product of more than one medium’ and finds meaning in the ‘spaces of in-between-ness’ (Neumann and Rippl, 2020, 17) created by the representation of visual practices in narratives, allowing readers to ‘complicate their usual way of looking at things, to denaturalise cultural orthodoxies and to contemplate new aesthetic experiences’ (ibid.). Rippl argues that ‘the concept of intermediality, by opening up a space of semiotic

and material in-between-ness, may intervene in the social fabric of existing medial configurations, reworking them in a way that allows readers to experience, see and imagine the world differently' (2015, 15). Such insights resonate with the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, who contend that '[t]he only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo' (2004, 305). It is thus proposed that intermediality is understood as 'a practice of translation' (Neumann and Rippl, 2020, 37), which 'forego[es] the antagonistic understanding of verbal-visual configurations and...break[s] down the related binary oppositions between word vs image or us vs them' (ibid.). Intermediality counters discourses of power and provides a suitable framework to 'cut across the binary of self and other' (Jacobs, 2011, 10) that is typified in the nature/culture dichotomy. In *Watching Babylon*, Nicholas Mirzoeff acknowledges how visual framing, but specifically 'acts of watching', can confirm but also undo existing orders and structures of power (2005, 29). In the context of children's visual narratives, Mirzoeff's notion of 'acts of watching' highlights how illustrations and visual framing can shape young readers' perceptions of power, agency, and relationality. By carefully structuring what is seen – and how it is seen – visual narratives can either reinforce anthropocentric or hierarchical perspectives or, conversely, invite readers to recognise nonhuman agency, interconnection, and alternative ways of relating to the material world. Similarly, the application of intermedial ecocriticism by researchers such as David Kern foregrounds how its principles participate in a dynamic scholarly effort 'to dismantle structures of racism, speciesism, (neo)-coloniality, imperialism and related practices at the root of the so-called Anthropocene' (Kern, 2021, 19). In children's visual narratives, the multimodal interplay of text, image, and material form can enact the principles of intermedial ecocriticism, revealing nonhuman agency and relational entanglements. In doing so, these narratives introduce young readers to ethical and ecological perspectives that challenge anthropocentrism, speciesism, and other entrenched hierarchies.

1.2.iii. *Intermediality and Children's Visual Narrative Studies*

In a statement that can be extended to all visual narratives, Margaret Mackey contends that '[p]icturebooks inhabit a complex social, cultural, and intellectual ecology' (2018, 638), and posits a 'media studies approach' to picturebook studies that pays due attention to 'the conditions that led to their creation and distribution' (ibid.) and the complex intra-acting ecologies in which they are embedded. Nina Christensen concurs in her call for 'an analytical awareness that builds on many of the analytical strategies and concepts developed in picturebook studies during the last thirty years... [by] broaden[ing] perspectives and incorporat[ing] knowledge from adjacent fields, especially comic studies and media studies' (2019, 168). Intermediality is not commonly applied as an approach to visual narrative studies. This may be attributed to the fact that children's literature studies have historically developed within literary studies and education, while intermediality emerged from media studies and comparative arts. These disciplines have different vocabularies and research priorities; however, intermediality has occasionally been used effectively in studies on visual literature for children. In 'How Picture Books Work' (1998), for example, Lawrence Sipe describes picturebooks as 'synergistic' and uses transmediation to theorise reader engagement, employing musical terms – *counterpoint*, *tempo*, and *rhythm* – to show how words and images interact independently yet harmoniously, guiding interpretation and pacing (97–8). Intermediality is particularly useful for this study because it attends not only to verbal-visual interactions but also to materiality, performativity, sensory perception, and paratextuality. Intermediality thus aligns with the material ecocritical understanding of mutually constitutive agencies, and allows for an analysis of the visual narrative within the context of its natural and socio-cultural entanglements.

The books examined in this dissertation emphasise both convergences and divergences not only in content but also in form and medium, and match Evans' description of 'challenging,

often troubling texts in both their content and illustrative style' (Evans, 2015, 97). They are evidently similar in terms of their multimodal nature: the interaction of word and image, presented in codex format. However, these works diverge sharply in terms of style, representation, semiotic approach, author/illustrator motivation and technique, and materiality. Consequently, it is argued that intermediality, as a theoretical approach, offers deeper and more insightful analytical possibilities in addressing the central research questions of this dissertation than might be offered by more traditional theoretical approaches to visual narratives and multimodal literature, such as picturebook theory (Nodelman, 1988; Sipe, 2011; Evans, 2015), cognitive theory (Nikolajeva, 2015; Pantaleo, 2009) and reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1985; Evans, 2013; Arizpe and Hodges, 2018). That is not to in any way disregard these approaches; indeed, intermediality is informed and enriched by insights from a number of other theoretical frameworks traditionally applied to multimodal narratives, not least multimodality and semiotics, which both significantly inform certain aspects of this dissertation. However, intermediality expands upon these ideas to develop an understanding that art forms are composite, all media are mixed and diverse and the creation of meaning rests not only on the relation between text and image but also the 'convergence point of semiotics, the theory of signs and aesthetics, the theory of senses' (Mitchell, 2015, 47). Intermediality provides for a post-representational focus on how medium-specific features of the literature influence narration and the performative intra-actions of creator, artefact and reader that constitute the 'literary event' (Attridge, 2017, 148). As Henkel argues, 'children's literature should be seen in an intermedial culture' (2021, 4).

1.2.iv. *Multimodality and Narrow Intermediality*

The conceptual framework for this dissertation combines material ecocriticism with elements of two intermedial concepts: Elleström's multimodality and Rajewsky's narrow

intermediality. It is emphasised that these intermedial concepts complement each other in numerous ways and also complement the over-arching theoretical approach of this study, material ecocriticism.

Elleström subscribes to the idea of intermediality as the relationship between different forms of media. Applied to visual literature, this expands the understanding of ‘multimodality’ beyond the semiotic modality, incorporating the relationship between text and image, to also include three further intra-acting ‘modalities’ that enable mediation and signification.

Elleström identifies these four modalities as material modality, spatio-temporal modality, sensorial modality, and semiotic modality (2010, 2021). Elaborating on these, Elleström outlines how

for something to acquire the function of a media product, it must be *material* in some way, understood as a physical matter or phenomenon. Such a physical existence must be present in space and/or time for it to exist; it needs to have some sort of *spatiotemporal* extension. It must also be perceptible to at least one of our senses, which is to say that a media product has to be *sensorial*. Finally, it must create meaning through signs; it must be *semiotic* (2021, 46).

Elleström’s understanding of multimodality critiques efforts to understand the relationship between texts and images, which he claims are ‘doomed to fail, leaving us with nebulous and insufficient ideas of “mixtures” of text and image unless more fine-grained explanations are made’ (Elleström, 2021, 7). He also sees the ‘verbal’ vs ‘visual’ dichotomy as ‘inadequate’, ‘confusing’ and ‘counterproductive’ – he argues that ‘because being visual is a sensorial trait and being verbal is a semiotic trait, it is pointless to oppose the two’ (ibid.). Elleström argues that ‘all media are mixed in different ways: [e]very medium consists of a fusion of modes that are partly, and in different degrees of palpability, shared by other media. Every medium has the capacity of mediating only certain aspects of the total reality’ (2010, 24). Elleström states that three of the four modalities – material, spatiotemporal and sensorial – are presemiotic, which means that ‘they cover media modes that are involved in signification (the creation of cognitive import in the perceiver’s mind) although they are not semiotic qualities in

themselves' (2021, 47). The transformative power of a text, Elleström argues, is revealed through the combination of a semiotic frame of reference with a material perspective. Communication, he contends, is equally dependent on the material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic modalities (2021, 52). Elleström argues that 'multimodality is vital for mediality, and an intermedial perspective is essential for grasping the intricate field of mediality at large – because crossing media borders is the rule rather than the exception in communication' (2021, 85/6).

The multimodal and intermedial frameworks proposed by Elleström offer valuable tools for studying visual narratives. As Crispin Thurlow contends, the text is 'a composite or an ensemble. A gestalt' (2015, 620). He contends that literary scholars, for reasons of convenience or rigour, 'often bunker down around disciplinary investigations of... words, images, sounds or spaces. These academic exercises detach and abstract meaning-making practices from their patently multimodal realities' (ibid., 619). A multimodal approach, Thurlow argues, 'lift[s] analyses off the page, shifting attention from abstracted, disembedded print/text images to the situated, emplaced, embodied actions of these texts/images...turning from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional perspective' (ibid., 627). This three-dimensional perspective understands that the act of reading a visual narrative is more than simply engaging with the illustrations and the text. As Nathalie op de Beeck argues, 'to the child and to the experienced reader alike, the picturebook is a normative space that signals implied readership, explicit and implicit ideology, and historical and cultural contexts' (2018, 50). Thus, this dissertation explores how these four intra-acting modalities characterise the visual narrative, enabling mediation and signification. The intra-action of word and image are considered in the context of the semiotic modality. An analysis of the materiality and aestheticism of the literature attends to the sensorial and material modalities. Finally, the spatiotemporal modality is examined in the context of both the literature's creation and its

reception. A more detailed discussion of how each modality is relevant to this dissertation is provided in the next section.

Rajewsky's concept of narrow intermediality 'approaches intermediality as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations' (2005, 47).

The concept encompasses three subcategories, which are not mutually exclusive: *media combination*, in which 'intermediality is a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation' (ibid., 52); *medial transposition*, which delineates the 'transformation of a given media product or of its substratum into another medium' (ibid., 51) and *intermedial references*, which describe the references within one medium to another medium. The amalgamation of word and image in a visual narrative is an example of media combination. An example of medial transposition would be the adaptation of a novel into a film, the transposition of scientific information into narrative form (see *Tales from the Inner City*, Chapter Two), or the adaptation of a novel into a graphic novel (see *Parable of the Sower*, Chapter Four). Medial transposition is also concerned with the temporal process of transposition, aligning with Elleström's spatiotemporal modality. Examples of intermedial references include ekphrasis (the detailed description of a work of art in a literary work), or references to other media forms, such as broadcast media or film, within a literary work. Intermedial references are generally theorised through concepts of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980 [1969]). Intertextuality is the process by which texts either implicitly or explicitly draw upon other texts. As Graham Allen maintains, 'no text, in the light of intertextuality, stands alone; all texts have their existence and their meaning in relation to a practically infinite field of prior texts and prior significations' (2019, n.p.). Intertextuality understands the entangled nature of the text; as Allen contends, '[e]very text is made up of a large amount (perhaps an untraceably large amount) of *otherness*...No text can ever be mastered (fixed, totally described, understood), because no text is completely and

only itself' (2019, n.p., emphasis in original). Allen argues that intertextuality, far from elevating language and interpretation over authorial intentionality, as was argued by early poststructuralist thinking, conversely 'confronts the limits of interpretation itself' (2019, n.p.). Thus, every act of reading is shaped by other texts, traditions, and cultural contexts. In this way, intertextuality reminds us that interpretation always happens within certain boundaries – meaning is created through connection, but also shaped by constraint. Allen's understanding supports a material ecocritical view that meaning arises from the interplay between multiple media, materials, and interpretive systems – not from any single authorial or symbolic source. A significant number of intertextual and intermedial references can be identified in the children's literature explored in this dissertation, which demonstrate the significance of an entangled network of textual and medial relations in both the creation and reception of a literary work.

This dissertation demonstrates how Rajewsky's narrow intermediality can be traced across the literature, supporting a 'performative' reading of the visual narrative. It also demonstrates that Rajewsky's concept is compatible with Elleström's multimodality. Both concepts highlight how the construction of meaning is – in the spirit of material ecocritical thinking – a process that is affected by a hybrid mesh of intersecting intermedial connections that are reconfigured spatio-temporally, and which, as López-Varela Azcárate contends, 'work argumentatively by forcing re-evaluations of individual knowledge, beliefs and interpretations against a continually developing frame of reference which defies and complicates singularity, implicitly arguing for multiple perspectives on any issue' (2011, 19). It is argued that this potential to force re-evaluations, develop a fluid frame of reference, and establish new perspectives, reveals the potentially transformative power of the literature.

1.2.v. Closer Analysis of Elleström's Multimodality Concept

(a) The Semiotic Modality: Word and Image Intra-action

In studies of multimodality, Kristin Hallberg's concept of the 'iconotext' (1982) refers to the pictorial and textual elements of the visual narrative, and the intra-action between these elements; in the case of the 'iconotext', text and picture are interpreted as a 'whole'. The intra-action of word and image in an intermedial, multimodal text creates a unique perceptual space. If literary texts can not only write back but also 'stare back' at implied readers, is the impact more powerful somehow? Numerous researchers, including Neumann and Rippl, Kern (2021), Mirzoeff (2005) and Pantaleo (2018) contend that it is. As Evelyn Arizpe maintains, 'there is something about the way that both word and image are brought together that doubles the impact' (2015, xvii). It has been noted in research over the course of many decades that the montage of word and image requires the reader to exercise both visual and verbal interpretative skills and is therefore 'an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit' (Eisner, 1985, 2). Mitchell remarks that 'The 'otherness' we attribute to the image-text relationship [...] takes on the full range of possible social relations inscribed within the field of verbal and visual representation' (1994, 162).

This 'otherness', manifested in the intra-action of visual and verbal, defies the simple assertion that 'one explains the other'. As noted by numerous researchers on picturebooks, visual narratives are characterised by a 'narrative incompleteness...often highly elliptic in their representation of causal, local and temporal relations' (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014, 5). This requires work on the part of the reader to 'fill the gap' (Iser, 1974). Roland Barthes refers to 'writerly' texts, whereby 'a series of narrative segments...need to be brought together by the reader, who thereby becomes a producer of the text (1974, 71). While all forms of literature depend on the reader's active participation to construct meaning, visual

narratives foreground this process in distinctive ways. As Iser suggests, every narrative contains ‘gaps’ that the reader must fill to create coherence; yet, in visual narratives, this incompleteness is heightened by the interdependence of word and image. Meaning is distributed across two semiotic modes that each withhold information the other completes, compelling the reader to synthesise them. Moreover, sequences of images can produce ellipses in time, space, and causality – what happens in the ‘gaps’ between images must be inferred rather than described. Because images suggest rather than assert, visual storytelling often invites multiple interpretations, engaging readers not only cognitively but also perceptually and affectively. Thus, while narrative indeterminacy is a universal literary feature, visual narratives make it materially visible: they dramatise the reader’s role in bridging what is not said and what is not shown. Nikolajeva and Scott have pointed to the unique capacity of the visual narrative to empower the reader in this way, outlining the concept of the ‘counterpoint’, which describes the literary device of ‘words and images provid[ing] alternative information or contradict[ing] each other in some way (2006, 17). The dialogue between the visual and the verbal thus invites the reader to adopt diverse interpretations, take a critical stance and to become actively engaged in the construction of meaning. The aesthetics of the visual narrative comes into play here, perhaps more so than in any other medium. This study emphasises how the particular intra-actions of word and image in the selected texts create a semantic openness, which is supported by an aesthetic complexity, further manifested through the use of intermedial techniques. It is argued that these features of the work support the production of what Zapf refers to as an ‘ecological dimension of discourse’ (2016, 4).

(b) The Material Modality and the Sensorial Modality

In their study of cultural and cognitive aspects of materiality in German children's literature, Hartmut Hombrecher and Judith Wassiltschenko argue that 'to look at the relationship between the idea and the object means to understand the text together with its carrier [material medium/its physical form] as an artifact at which questions can be posed, which go beyond the scope of linguistic and philological aspects' (2020, 539). The concept of the iconotext has contributed important insight into picturebook scholarship; however, much of this research tends to focus solely on text and image, often at the expense of the materiality of the texts, which can be subsidiary and under-researched in the field of children's literature studies. Hayles contends that literary criticism has been concerned with the 'brain' of literature at the cost of its 'body', and accordingly, we should seek to develop an understanding of the 'embodiment' of literature (2002, 197). Recent years have seen some progress in the area: studies by Messerli (2005), Maziarczyk (2013) and Veryeri Alaca (2018), for example, have found that materiality contributes significantly to the construction of meaning and that materiality in picturebooks presents as 'a third narrative system, alongside text and images' (Veryeri Alaca, 2018, 111).

An argument for materiality must be founded on clear definitions of terms such as 'materiality' and 'medium' and their significance to an intermedial approach. Kieron Brown considers the concept of 'materiality' as 'an emergent phenomenon, generated by interaction with both an artefact's physical and signifying characteristics' (2018, n.p.). Therefore, as Brown maintains, 'materiality is dynamic and cannot be predicted' (ibid.). Taking comics as an example, Brown argues that 'they represent something far more complex than a simple merging of media in any of their variations' (ibid.). The visual and verbal elements of comics work interdependently to create effects of rhythm, pacing, and irony that neither could produce alone, forming a distinctive grammar of storytelling. Moreover, the materiality of the

comic – its layout, panel structure, page turns, and spatial organisation – actively shapes how the narrative unfolds, making the physical form itself an integral component of meaning rather than a neutral vessel. Hombrecher and Wassiltschenko (2020) define materiality as encompassing the physical and embodied conditions of literary creation and reception, including author, illustrator, and reader. They link this broad materiality to children’s literature’s boundary-dissolving nature and its ‘super-materiality,’ where rich visuals and textures challenge conventional notions of the book. Similarly, children’s literature scholar and critic Mitzi Myers emphasised the significance of a materialist study of children’s literature, which draws attention to ‘rips, dirt, spills, uncensored comments, drawings and scribbles, rude jokes and missing pages – in those “defacements” we discover the hidden history of childhood’ (1999, 232).

Myers’ notion of ‘defacements’ emphasises the intimate, sensorial contact between body and book, where traces of fingers, food, or bodily fluids mark the pages and attest to the transcorporeal entanglement of reader and artefact. This embodied interaction also gestures beyond the human, tracing the material life of the book itself: a page evokes paper, paper evokes wood, wood evokes trees, and trees evoke broader ecosystems. Books thus operate at the intersection of bodily, aesthetic, and ecological registers, where turning a page becomes not only an act of reading but an encounter with the material and environmental origins of the text. In this way, the sensorial experience of the artefact prompts recognition of our entanglement with nature, highlighting the ecological significance embedded in literary materiality.

Elleström notes that ‘[a]ll media products have sensorial properties in the sense that their materiality, somehow existing in time and space, must be perceived by one or more of our senses to reach the mind and trigger semiosis’ (2021, 49). For example, the pre-literate reader’s engagement with the book is most obviously a visual experience, but it can also be

tactile, auditory and olfactory. The particular materiality of each book, often emphasised in its peritextual features, allows the reader to experience the weight of the artefact, the scent and opacity of its pages, the hard edges of its cover softened by removable dust jackets, the grooves of indented cover designs, and the reverberations of moments of violence, disaster or surprise, emphasised in the onomatopoeic sound effects of comics and graphic novels. An exploration of these sensorial elements of the literature in this study emphasises that a book transcends mere representation and is itself composed of vibrant materialities, realised through the sensorial engagement of the reader with the physical literary work.

Further connections between body and book are highlighted by Alaimo's concept of 'material memoirs', which she describes as

autobiographies of people seeking to understand who they are through analysing the geographies and places they had lived, the various chemicals that had come through those places and through their bodies, and affected their psyches and minds, as well as their health...[which] challenge their readers to consider their own tangible, embodied and enplaced selves as material beings interconnected with substances and the world' (2020, 140).

Chapter Four examines *Parable of the Sower* as a material memoir, which incorporates the protagonist Lauren's personal experience, observations, scientific knowledge and quasi-religious passages in written and pictorial form. The material memoir is the character's attempt to understand herself, through her entanglement and interconnectedness with the world, which affects her perceptions of ethics, politics, communities, and relationships. It is demonstrated how the material memoir prompts readers to recognise their embodied existence as inseparable from the material and environmental contexts they inhabit.

Mieke Bal outlines how '[o]ne cannot understand intermediality without a sense of what a medium is' (2021, vi). 'Material' and 'medium' can be seen as inextricably linked, as 'medium' frequently refers to the material side of the sign, the aforementioned 'carrier'

(Hombrecher and Wassiltschenko, 2020). Thurlow refers to ‘medium/media’ as ‘the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used’ (2015, 623). However, concrete definitions of the term have been debated in research. Rippl (2015) observes that the earlier, narrow view of ‘medium’ as merely a technological or sociological category has become outdated. It has been replaced by a broader conception that examines how meaning emerges through cross-medial interactions, enabling systematic analysis of intermedial, multimodal, and transmedial relationships. This calls for an exploration of how the material dimension of signs or semiotic systems participates in the production of narrative meaning. It marks a shift away from the structuralist assumption of language as the dominant discourse across all media (Rippl, 2015, 7), acknowledging instead the challenges that arise when linguistic frameworks are applied to visual forms such as images.

This recognition aligns with Marie-Laure Ryan’s contention that media are not neutral channels for conveying content but material forms that actively shape meaning (2004). The medium itself influences what stories can be told, how they are presented, and how audiences experience them, making its material properties integral to narrative expression. Thus, an intermedial approach does not restrict its focus to a semiotic analysis of the iconotext; rather it compels us to ask ‘how th[e] material side of the sign/semiotic system is involved in the production of narrative meaning’ (Rippl and Etter, 2013, 193).

Bremer distinguishes between materiality *in* literature and the materiality *of* literature.

According to Bremer, the former, which has received more attention in research, ‘analyses the way “things that speak” are integrated in fictional and non-fictional texts’ (2020, 349).

The latter proposes a concept of literature ‘beyond the “pure text term”’ that seeks to resolve ‘the schism between textual and interpretative studies’ (McGann, 1983, 11). Analysing the materiality *of* literature requires reference to aspects such as book design, printing formats

and typography. In this sense, as Bremer notes, ‘the materiality of literature always means an aspect of its mediality’ (2020, 349).

It is important to note that such an analysis should avoid reducing texts to only their medial or material aspects or dismissing iconotextual narration or an interpretative approach as insignificant. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003) warns against replacing one intellectual monopoly with another, arguing that the humanities should resist privileging either meaning or materiality. Instead, he advocates maintaining a productive tension between sense and substance, allowing interpretation and material presence to coexist in dynamic interplay. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of this dissertation proposes to demonstrate how meaning is created across a variety of semiotic and medial modalities, taking into account both representation and post-representation and considering how the materiality supports, or, as Gumbrecht maintains, acts in ‘tension’ with the iconotext to produce one entire, integrated meaning.

(c) The Spatiotemporal Modality

Elleström notes that ‘[a]ll media products, like all objects and phenomena, are necessarily perceived in time and space before they create cognitive import in the perceiver’s mind’ (2021, 48). He continues:

some media types, such as visual, verbal (symbolic) signs on a flat but static surface (such as printed texts), are conventionally decoded in a fixed sequence, which makes them second-order temporal, so to speak: sequential but not actually temporal, because the physical matter of the media products does not change in time (ibid.).

Elleström draws comparisons between media forms such as songs, speeches and dance, which he sees as possessing salient temporal aspects because they are experienced in distinct

spatio-temporal dimensions, and the printed text, which he contends, possesses a more sequential ‘second-order’ temporal aspect as its physical matter does not change in time. Such a conception of the printed text is somewhat reductive, however. Reminiscent of Myers’ concept of materiality, the physical and material manifestation of a text can change distinctively over time; a well-worn book, read many times, manifests its reader’s appreciation of its yellowed, dog-eared pages, rendering it a different material object than it was when it was first published. Some readers highlight and mark texts as certain aspects draw their attention. Small fingers can leave grimy marks of appreciation on an image that particularly excites, delights or intrigues them, entangling their bodily matter with the matter of the page. Each copy of a book also carries traces of its production, circulation, and use – the wood pulp, printing chemicals, and handling by readers – linking it to broader temporal and environmental processes. This extends Elleström’s temporality to include material-historical time, not just cognitive sequence. By framing printed text as ‘second-order temporal’, Elleström risks privileging reading and interpretation over the material life of the book itself. Materiality shapes how texts are perceived and experienced; ignoring it reduces the text to a cognitive sequence rather than a living artefact with its own temporal trajectory.

The engagement of the reader with visual literature is also a more nuanced spatiotemporal experience than Elleström’s understanding suggests, as the reader often does not engage with visual literature in the same sequential, linear manner that they engage with a written text. Readers of a graphic novel may, for example, contemplate panels on a page in non-sequential order, may be drawn to larger or more evocative images first, or may engage with images before they read the text. In their study of space and time in graphic narrative, Dittmer and Latham explore space as a ‘performance’. This Deleuzian and Baradian understanding sees space as ‘a kind of becoming – space, and space-time as well, is emergent through the relations between different entities’ (2015, 431). Dittmer and Latham (2015) argue that the

narrative power of comics and graphic narratives arises from the reader's embodied movement through the page, where space becomes time. Meaning emerges through shifting 'relationalities' between panels, whose intensity is guided by visual design. Drawing on Deleuze's *movement-image* and *time-image*, they propose that narrative motion occurs through the reader's eye rather than the medium itself, producing a fluid, plurivectorial temporality. This embodied reading cultivates new sensory and cognitive habits that extend beyond the text. In a material ecocritical and intermedial context, such embodied engagement underscores how children's visual narratives intertwine material form, perception, and ecological sensibility, foregrounding the interdependence of body, medium, and environment in meaning-making.

As Attridge maintains 'we experience literary works...as events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same' (2017, 23). These diverse experiences are manifested in a number of ways, including material and sensorial engagement as highlighted above, but also including the spatio-temporal nature of both the reader's engagement with the book and the creative process that brought it into being. In addition to a contemplation of the reader's engagement with the book, an analysis of the authors'/illustrators' backgrounds, motivations and creative processes situates both the creation and the reception of each book within a particular space and time.

1.2.vi. *The Paratext*

Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext (1997) is relevant to Elleström's arguments on multimodality. 'Paratext' is the term used to describe the extra-textual elements of a visual narrative. Paratextual analysis is of significant relevance to this study, as the paratext represents both the material reality of the book as an artefact, and also the significance of the

book's position, and that of its author/illustrator, within broader cultural discourse. As such, the paratext represents a space of in-betweenness, or as Genette describes it, an 'undefined zone between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)' (1997, 2). Recent research has demonstrated that 'literary reading may not only depend on textual features of a narrative, but also on paratextual information' (Appel et al., 2021) and that 'readers' perception of and reaction to stories (i.e., literary quality, (self-reflection), narrative transportation and identification) were affected by paratextual information' (Schwerin et al., 2023).

The paratext incorporates both the epitext and the peritext. The former refers to 'any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space' (Genette, 1997, 344). Examples of this might include oral or written critiques of the work, including those provided by the author or publisher, interviews or lectures by the author/illustrator or reviews (Pantaleo, 2018, 111). The peritext connotes all the material and aesthetic elements outside the spectrum of the main text, but present in the volume, such as the cover, dust jacket, endpapers, frontispiece, full-title page, half-title page, dedication page, publishing details, typesetting style, choice of paper, table of contents, prefaces, intertitles, and footnotes. Research on the peritextual features of visual narratives has become more prevalent in recent years; however, there remains a dearth of research on *epitextual* concerns, and how they are enmeshed with the peritextual in a consideration of the materiality of the book. Thus, I consider 'embodiment' as constitutive of both the peritextual 'body' of the book and also its epitext, described by García-González and Deszsz-Tryhubczak as 'the recommendations or desires that made it possible [for the texts] to exist, and the reader as a bodymind that encounters these texts' (2020, 54). The analysis of the epitext in this study

focuses on the authors' and illustrators' backgrounds and creative inspirations, as outlined in interviews and commentary. This focus could potentially be expanded to include an analysis of distribution circuits, systems of recognition and awards; however, the focus is primarily on the creators' own commentaries in order to highlight the distinct intra-actions between these commentaries and my own analysis of the material, aesthetic, intertextual and peritextual aspects of the text. I contend that by highlighting these intra-actions, the agencies of various 'bodies' in the enactment of the literature's performativity is effectively demonstrated.

1.2.vii. *The Author, the Reader and the 'Inventive Event'*

Access to interviews and commentary by the artists and writers on their work provides striking insight/s into their possible motivations and thought processes. Such insight/s, however, can be a double-edged sword in literary analysis. In his seminal essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1967), Barthes argues for the primacy of the reader's interpretation of a work over authorial intention in determining its meaning. However, a more recent trend of 'a return to the author' (Simion, 1996; Burke, 2008; Berensmeyer et al., 2019) has contested the denial of authorship in literary criticism and contends that the attempt to abolish the author from their work is philosophically untenable. Coats acknowledges that the death of the author 'frees critics to examine how the texts speak for themselves' but also claims that 'it would be unethical to impose a reading on a text that violates its integrity by ignoring or interpreting certain textual elements in such a way that contorts them in the interest of conformity to a theoretical perspective' (2014, 69). Joosen, similarly, acknowledges the latter, but also recognises 'the danger that the relationship between life and narrative will be overrated, so that knowledge about an author's life is projected onto the story, limiting the multiplicity of meanings that the narrative can evoke' (2024, 13). Nonetheless, she concedes that 'it seems limiting to ignore this [autobiographical] dimension' (ibid.). Berensmeyer et. al. concur,

contending that '[t] is easier to dismiss authorship talk entirely from literary studies and just focus on texts or readers, as the New Criticism and reader-response criticism tended to do...but this neglect leaves out an essential aspect of literature – its creation' (2019, 2).

In its utilisation of material ecocriticism as its central theoretical approach, and mindful of Iovino and Oppermann's understanding of text and world as 'circulating references' (2014, 10), this dissertation subscribes to and emphasises the enmeshment of various physical, natural, social and cultural elements in the creation and reception of a literary work, and therefore should not disregard the significance of the author's or illustrator's background, motivations, inspirations and self-commentary. As Foucault asks, '[h]ow can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone?' ([1969], 1998, 207). Echoing Foucault, Buell contends that insofar as 'human beings are biocultural creatures constructing themselves in interaction with surroundings they cannot not inhabit, all their artifacts may be expected to bear traces of that' (2001, 2). Within the context of intermedial theory, I treat these 'traces' as 'contributing, unfolding texts, in an alert intertextuality' (Booth, 1991, 89). In my consideration of such issues of authorship and artisanship, I am alert to the risks of affording such issues too much interpretative significance, at the expense of the reader's freedom of interpretation. Consequently, in this dissertation, such autobiographical elements are considered as 'one thread in a text's intertextual web' (Joosen, 2024, 13), and although the significance of these elements is highlighted, care is taken that they do not obscure or discount all other interpretations. However, the interpretative approach is itself merely one thread in this analysis. As post-representational research that subscribes to the porous boundary between ontology and epistemology, the intrinsic and extrinsic elements that form the literature's creation are significant factors. As part of his attempt to revise the concept of authorship in 'The Death of the Author', Barthes highlighted the various processes that were invisible in the creation of a text, including collaboration, art design and editing. This study

addresses these processes where relevant, highlighting the collaborative processes between authors, illustrators and design and marketing teams.

Mindful of this porous boundary, it is argued that the visual narrative effectively demonstrates the capacity of fiction to ‘reflect on its own ontological status as an artifact, a construction’ (Silva-Díaz, 2018, 116). Many of the authors and illustrators of the literature explored in this study employ metafictional devices that self-consciously highlight the ontological status of fiction, the limitations of human language and the boundary between fiction and reality. This, as Silva-Díaz contends, ‘violates the canonical story, producing instability and turning the reader into a participant of the construction of the work’ (ibid.). My analysis of the use of metafictional devices in the literature highlights the spatiotemporal nature of the reading experience, in which the reader is frequently pulled between the fictive and the real world. Metafictional devices also emphasise the ontological status of both ‘book’ and ‘story’, and therefore, it is argued, contribute to the transformative potential of the literature in how they encourage the reader to challenge the nature of reality, and by association, the grand narratives of exclusively human agency, and nature as ‘other’.

The post-representational approach sees literature as a cultural product that cannot be fully contained by culture alone (Attridge, 2017, 28). It highlights the dynamic interplay between culture and nature, mind and matter, and text and life. From a performative perspective (Barad, 2007), both the book and its story are more than material objects: they are ‘inventive events’ (Attridge, 2017, 197) in which authorship, creative process, and materiality are entangled in systems, or ‘apparatuses,’ that reorganise time, space, and matter (Barad, 2007, 146, 208). In literary terms, this is understood as ‘potentiality’: a text comes alive through its repeated engagement in changing historical, social, and individual contexts (Zapf, 2016, 26). The interactions between creator, text, and reader generate performative relationships where agency emerges, and the reader’s experience of the work contributes to its meaning (Attridge,

2017, 156). While Barthes emphasised the reader's role in 'completing' the text, this dissertation argues that both authorship and readership are central, and that both are shaped by intertwined material, cultural, and ecological conditions.

The idea of the act of reading a book as a performative, agentic intra-action demands a consideration of the role of the reader and their response to the text. Wolfgang Iser's concept of 'the implied reader' (1974) refers to the hypothetical reader that the text presupposes and highlights the active role that the reader plays in the interpretation of literary texts. Iser's reader is a construct of the text itself, rather than an actual reader, and Iser's theory highlights the textual devices by which an implied reader is written into the text. Louise Rosenblatt's 'reader-response theory' (1978) argues that the act of reading is a transaction between reader and text. Rosenblatt distinguishes between *effere*nt and *aesthetic* reading transactions: the former denotes a more superficial, detached engagement with the book, while the latter designates a more intra-active experience: a dynamic, and dialogic process during which the reader brings their social, political, emotional, geographical, and personal context to the text. While Iser's 'implied reader' focuses on the text's influence on the reader, Rosenblatt's reader-response theory focuses on the reader's influence on the text, emphasising the unique, personal experience of reading. Rosenblatt argues that texts are always interpreted differently by different readers and that there may therefore be multiple interpretations of any given text; the idea of a book as an autonomous, discrete artefact is thus inaccurate.

This dissertation acknowledges the perspectives of both Iser and Rosenblatt, arguing that text and reader engage in a performative, mutually shaping relationship: the unique qualities of the visual narrative influence the reader, while the reader simultaneously brings their own intertwined experiences to the act of reading. Rosenblatt, while proposing the transactional nature of reading, also recognised 'the responsibility [of the reader] to attempt to be true to the text' (2007, 55). Iser's theory suggests that the authors and illustrators direct their output

to a reader that they conceive of in their minds as they create; however, explorations of the epitexts of the books in subsequent chapters reveal that many of the authors and illustrators do not subscribe to the notion of a singular, homogeneous young audience. In his alignment of both theories, John Stephens contends that ‘the being or meaning of the text is best characterised as ‘a dialectic between textual discourse (including its construction of an implied reader and a range of potential subject positions) and a reader’s disposition, familiarity with story conventions and experiential knowledge’ (1992, 59). Stephens also acknowledges the significance of intertextuality in children’s literature. The fundamental premise of this dissertation is that of naturalcultural enmeshment and the intricate entanglements of text and world. Therefore, in the same way that authorial intention and influence must not be disregarded, neither should the transaction between the reader and the book. It is argued that natural, social, cultural, political, aesthetic, and material factors all influence the reading experience, yet young readers’ limited exposure to the world means their interpretations are inevitably shaped by their emerging knowledge and experiences. Their developing understanding of the world also affects how they engage with its material form and paratextual features – such as illustrations, layout, typography, and other design elements – meaning that the act of reading is shaped by both cognitive and embodied encounters with the book. While this study draws on the work of Iser and Rosenblatt in referring to ‘the reader,’ it is not an empirical investigation and does not primarily adopt a reader-response approach. Instead, intermediality offers a more suitable conceptual framework, enabling a detailed examination of the visual narrative as a material artefact while also considering how its literary and visual modalities shape reader engagement.

1.2.viii. Part 1.2: Summation

This dissertation adopts an intermedial approach in an expanded sense, synthesising concepts from Elleström's concept of multimodality, Rajewsky's subcategories of 'narrow intermediality,' and Genette's theorisation of the paratext. Rather than treating these frameworks as discrete or competing, the study integrates them to explore the transformative potential of visual narratives within a material ecocritical, post-representational framework. Elleström's multimodality provides a basis for analysing how distinct modes interact within and across media forms; Rajewsky's intermediality foregrounds the ways in which visual narratives evoke, translate, or remediate other media; and Genette's concept of the paratext extends this analysis to the material and contextual thresholds through which mediation is framed and experienced. Taken together, these perspectives enable an examination of visual narratives not merely as representational artefacts but as mediating processes that perform and transform meaning across semiotic, material, and medial boundaries. Thus, the approach developed here situates intermediality as a dynamic and generative mode of analysis, responsive to the hybrid, performative, and transformative character of contemporary visual storytelling.

Building on the intermedial, post-representational framework, the analysis now turns to the interplay between aesthetics and ideology in children's literature, examining how formal, multimodal, and paratextual choices simultaneously shape imaginative engagement and communicate cultural meanings.

3. Aesthetics, Ideology and the Transformative Power of the Visual Narrative

Building on the intermedial, post-representational, and material ecocritical framework established here, the discussion now turns to the often-contested binary of instruction and delight in children's literature, exploring how visual narratives navigate, blur, and transform this conceptual divide. While the binary positions ideology and aestheticism as fundamentally opposed, ideology nonetheless operates, explicitly or implicitly, in ecocritical studies as well as in children's literature. In their ecocritical reading of canonical works of children's literature, Daniel Laliena and Rosa Taberero Sala identify in some of their selected picturebooks 'a message of environmental awareness that is... explicit and based mainly on problematizing the relationship between human beings and the environment' (2023, 5). This, they acknowledge, 'seems to be a recurring theme in recently published environmental children's books' (ibid., 5-6). Similarly, Stephens refers specifically to the domain of environmental sustainability, which he says has 'inspired self-consciously ideological texts ranging from the very subtle to the very heavy-handed' (2018, 299). Together, these studies underscore the prevalence of ideological content in contemporary environmental children's literature, illustrating how messages of instruction and awareness are frequently embedded within books that also seek to engage and delight young readers.

The power of literature to transform perceptions and be a catalyst for change has been debated for generations. Author Salman Rushdie has stated his opinion that literature should be an 'argument' with the world (*Imaginary Homelands*, 2012). Ecologist and writer Liam Heneghan notes that our capability as humans to use and interpret both artistic and linguistic symbols allows us to 'imagin [e] alternative futures that humans then have a hand in shaping. Humans have a sort of cognitive fluidity – an ability to manipulate symbols in a dynamic and novel way – that liberates us from the world as it is given to us' (2018, 112). Bill Ashcroft cautions that it is 'fanciful to think that literature will change the world' (2015, 2). In

agreement with Heneghan's contention however, Ashcroft asserts that what literature can do is 'imagine the future', which establishes 'a very deep and important connection between creativity and revolution' (ibid.). Martha C. Nussbaum argues that literature is 'subversive' in its potential to enact change. It 'tells its readers to notice this and not this, to be active in these and not those ways. It leads them into certain postures of the heart and mind and not others' (2000, 357). It is successfully subversive, Nussbaum claims, because of its aesthetic qualities: 'Literary works...requir[e] us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation' (ibid, 359). Collectively, these authors highlight literature's capacity to engage readers' imagination and ethical sensibilities, not simply as passive recipients but as active participants in meaning-making. In the context of visual narratives, this suggests that visual literature can similarly subvert norms, inspire alternative ways of thinking, and cultivate the imaginative and ethical faculties necessary for envisioning and engaging with possible futures.

A consideration of literature's potentially transformative power within an ecocritical context has particular implications and complications. One challenge for ecocritics, as noted by Garrard, is 'to keep one eye on the ways in which "nature" is always in some way culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse' (2012, 18). As Morton argues, 'Nature writing tries to "achieve escape velocity from writing itself" but founders on the irony that "the more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have"' (2007, 30). Such a conundrum is addressed by Shaun Tan when he outlines how 'fictional writing and painting [is] an internal dialogue that forever turns inward, but at least it tries to look outward too, at nonhuman things, the way a naturalist does' (2018, Comments on *Tales from the Inner City*). This raises questions such as, what is the role of fictional aesthetic experience/s of nature?

How does the reader develop their perceptions and conceptions of nature through engagement with the materiality and aestheticism of the visual narrative? How might the art contradict or negate the expectations of the reader? It also proposes a consideration of Buell's assertion that 'how we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct towards it, the conduct of nations as well as persons...Aesthetics can become a decisive force for or against environmental change' (cited by op de Beeck, 2019, 118).

Morton argues that the aesthetic is inseparable from human experience, continually reappearing in new forms and entwined with our perception of the environment. Rejecting the notion of 'Nature' as something apart from society, he calls for a new critical vocabulary to examine how art and literature construct 'environmentality' (2007, 11). He critiques idealised views of Nature as distant or transcendent, likening such admiration to patriarchal objectification. While the complete dissolution of the concept of Nature may be unrealistic – particularly in children's literature – Morton's arguments raise important questions about how artistic and literary portrayals of the natural world may reinforce ideological fixations. His insights invite reflection on how children's visual and multimodal narratives might move beyond stereotypical depictions toward more integrated and ecologically aware representations.

This reflection aligns with broader arguments that children's literature is never ideologically neutral; as Hunt maintains, 'children's literature and childhood do not exist outside ideology' (2006, 2). In some cases, this ideology might be explicit and perhaps didactic; in others, it is more subtle. Stephens notes that

ideology is implicit in the way the story an audience derives from a text is oriented towards the actual world: such orientation resides in the assumptions an author makes about the nature of the world, of good and evil, of what is valuable and desirable human experience, and of what kind of person a child should aspire to be (2018, 298).

The implications of ideology in children's literature are multifaceted and complex.

Didacticism is one such implication – the extent to which the literature might be, as Stephens puts it, 'heavy-handed' in its pursuit of ideological objectives. In her foreword for *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* (2015), Arizpe warns against the 'danger of encouraging a merely "functional" reading that ignores both the aesthetic and pleasurable experience of reading and the status of the picturebook as an aesthetic object' (2015, xix). An 'eco-aesthetic' reading of art proposes a balance between recognition of the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and an acknowledgement of both the imaginative and interruptive potential of art in its expression of truth and experience. Janet Evans addresses this when she states, 'books should not necessarily be understood but elicit a desire to understand' (2015, 3).

In more recent times, Nodelman has reflected on the tendency to take for granted 'what children's literature is and ought to be and what child readers are and ought to be' (2015, 47).

Elaborating on this, he notes the 'lack of alarm' in contemporary children's picturebooks, which is generally seen as a positive attribute; however, such books, Nodelman argues,

do not unsettle because they show us what we already take to be true... They express mainstream ideologies so widespread that most people seem to agree to them without even being aware of having made the choice of doing so... [they demonstrate] a deliberate refusal to engage honestly with the less savoury aspects both of children and the world they live in (ibid).

What could be more alarming than potential global catastrophe, and how should words and images about the environment be presented to young readers in ways that balance engagement with critical distance? Heneghan cautions against story-time becoming 'an occasion for a laborious tutorial on ecology' (2018, 11), finding that the essence of ecological thinking often emerges in texts not explicitly environmental, from *Where the Wild Things Are* to *The Hunger Games*. He critiques overly didactic messages in popular children's books,

arguing that while literature can elevate moral ideas, it should avoid being ‘high-pitched, shrill, sharpish or bossy’ (ibid., 272). Similarly, Gifford warns that overly didactic eco-literature risks losing its artistic power and becoming reductive propaganda or empty rhetoric (2020, 196). These perspectives underscore the importance of balancing ethical and ecological messaging with aesthetic and narrative engagement, suggesting that literature’s impact is strongest when it invites reflection rather than enforces instruction.

Current didactic trends are perhaps residual effects of a long history of didacticism within the category of children’s literature. Critics such as Julie Cross argue that, like ideology, elements of didacticism in children’s literature are ‘not only inevitable, but inescapable’ (2006, 55). Many picturebook scholars (op de Beeck, 2018; Stephens, 2018; Nodelman, 2012) maintain that due in part to its longstanding associations with teaching literacy, the picturebook possesses a distinct and implicit didacticism, as well as the potential to reinforce or subvert norms. Such literature is possibly most demonstrative of what Nodelman refers to as the literature of the adult: ‘[c]hildren’s literature is not so much what children read as what producers hope children will read’ (2008, 4). Indeed, it could be argued that many works produced for children are ultimately shaped by adult intentions and expectations. As Hunt observes,

Adults write, children read, and this means that, like it or not, adults are exercising power, and children are either being manipulated, or resisting manipulation: there is a tension between the reader implied by the writer, and the real readers. Children’s books are thus inevitably didactic in some way: even the most child-friendly is adopting some implicit attitudes (2009, 14).

In this regard, Miles considers how adult artists and writers have, in some instances, been conferred with a responsibility ‘to lead the people [children?] to a new society’ (2014, 28). Such thinking is flawed, because as Miles maintains, this ‘implies that artists and writers have a privileged knowledge of what form that society will take...to interpret the world for others

denies those others the agency of interpreting it for themselves' (ibid). Such a viewpoint promotes the Lockean notion of the child as 'an empty vessel, passively receiving values transmitted by adults in an asymmetrical power relationship' (Keyes and McGillicuddy, 2014, 10).

Contesting this Lockean perspective, many scholars and writers have emphasised children's capacity for curiosity, creativity, and ethical engagement with the world, challenging the notion of a passive, adult-shaped readership. Clémentine Beauvais, in *The Mighty Child* (2015), highlights children's imaginative power and their ability to question, reinterpret, and even subvert adult assumptions, presenting them as dynamic participants in cultural and literary life. Six decades ago, Rachel Carson similarly argued in *The Sense of Wonder* (1965) that children's encounters with nature foster attentive observation, emotional responsiveness, and ethical awareness, capacities that adults can guide but never fully dictate. These perspectives stress that children are active explorers, learners, and co-creators of meaning; they develop understanding through direct experience, play, and imaginative engagement, rather than through the unilateral transmission of knowledge. In this view, the adult's role is not to impose values or interpretations but to facilitate opportunities for discovery, reflection, and creative response, thereby decentering the asymmetrical power traditionally assumed in adult-child literary relationships.

Studies show that reading is most transformative when texts are open, multi-layered, and designed to expand knowledge while stimulating the reader's curiosity (Fialho, 2024; Loi et al., 2023). Many literary scholars and environmental pedagogists (Štrajn, 2019; Gaard, 2009; Garrard, 2007) argue that explicit didacticism or an 'moralising', 'instructive' – at the expense of 'constructive' – approach (Garrard, 2007) is less impactful than more subversive, 'untimely' art, which, although arguably retaining an implicit ideology, allows for greater autonomy in the reader and, in this regard, has greater visual potential. This dissertation

argues that the visual narrative possesses unique affordances that empower the reader to become a producer of the text, by virtue of its material, aesthetic, narrative and paratextual entanglements. Keyes and McGillicuddy contend that ‘the child reader can be encouraged to think in a more critical manner, engage and act upon what they have read, even if this may not always be in the way the author had originally intended’ (2014, 11). The visual narrative provides a greater degree of scope for its reader to develop their own meaning ‘by inserting themselves in gaps they find and negotiating the production of meaning’ (Laliena and Sala 2023, 6). Laliena and Sala’s research has also found that culturally specific contexts and keys of meaning-making do not prevent readers who are unfamiliar with these contexts from accessing visual literature meaningfully (ibid.). Jones contends that ‘there is no life to a book except what the reader gives it’ (2020, 16). This idea is particularly resonant in the context of visual narratives. Unlike purely verbal texts, multimodal works rely on the reader to bridge the spaces between image and word, actively constructing meaning through interpretation and inference. Meaning arises not from the text or image alone, but from the reader’s dynamic engagement with their interplay. In this sense, the visual narrative exists fully only in the act of reading – animated by the reader’s imagination, perception, and emotional response. It is in this potential departure from the intentionality of the author that the young reader acquires their agency.

An acceptance that ideology in children’s literature is inescapable raises questions on how ideology is mediated by aestheticism and whether the aestheticism of a text supports, or perhaps transcends, its overt, or covert, political and ideological intent. In their intermedial study, Neumann and Rippl claim that they see literature as a ‘performative medium, whose aesthetics and formal features are interlinked with socio-political issues, but cannot be reduced to them’ (2020, 24). The arts, in their view, structure the division between what is visible and what is invisible and, therefore, in producing visibility, ‘must be understood as

essentially political' (41). However, the 'strained relation between aesthetics and politics', and the susceptibility of the arts to 'political appropriation', is also acknowledged. In the view of Neumann and Rippl, this only increases the requirement for critics 'to negotiate [the arts'] institutionalised meanings, functions and effects in society over and over again and recognise the extent to which the arts partake in the maintenance or transformation of ideologies' (ibid.). Writing on aspects of sociopolitical transformation in children's literature, Beauvais considers the problem of categorising 'radical' children's literature thematically (including 'green' literature). She maintains that 'it prominently betrays a critical tendency to draw further dividing lines between socio-political struggles at the level of literary analysis, the better to reassert the relevance of such books only to their chosen injustices' (2014, 20). Beauvais considers such categorisation, along social and cultural thematic lines, as a practice that is 'impervious' to the 'aesthetic variations' of the literature. She argues that merging children's books into thematically homogenous groups 'risks drowning [their] many formal and aesthetic divergences' (21). Blanc et al. concur: their findings demonstrate that the aesthetic dimension of a literary text must be taken into account, and is often more significant than its theme in determining the text's so-called 'ecological value' (2008). Therefore, to categorise selected visual narratives as 'green' or 'environmental' literature, emphasises the political and ideological purpose of this literature over its material and aesthetic diversity and peculiarity. The literature selected for this study does not neatly fit into an 'environmental' category. Rather, this study proposes to demonstrate that the transformative potential of each work is revealed in its very particular intermedial and aesthetic features, not in its ideological categorisation as an environmental awareness-raising book for children. Nonetheless, implicit, and in some cases explicit, ideology is present in each narrative: it is 'inescapable', as Hunt has contended. It is demonstrated, however, that aesthetics and ideology can work in

tandem, particularly in visual narratives, and indeed they should, in order for the narrative to be successfully subversive and potentially transformative.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the conceptual framework for this dissertation, which integrates performative material ecocriticism with intermediality as a conceptual tool, drawing on cultural ecology as a connecting perspective that bridges the material and the medial. The framework is further enriched by related theories and concepts that intersect with these central approaches, reflecting the study's commitment to an integrated and dynamic mode of analysis.

The development of material ecocriticism has been traced from first-wave ecocritical thought to subsequent waves that emphasise the entanglements of ecocriticism with issues of social justice and the attentiveness of ecocriticism to the material vitality of the world and everything in it. Barad's theory of agential realism has been highlighted, emphasising how we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world and observing it, but that we know because we are of the world. This has provided a framework for a post-representational approach that recognises book, text and image as material elements of this world that produce and participate in processes and relationships involving the human and the nonhuman. This is informed by Zapf's theory of cultural ecology, which sees nature and culture as an intra-acting circulating system.

Visual narratives possess distinctive affordances that require a conceptual tool capable of examining not only the intra-action between verbal and visual modes but also, within the framework of material ecocriticism, the material and sensory dimensions of meaning-making. Intermediality serves this role by illuminating the relationships between form and content

across media and by recognising media as inherently interconnected and pervasive. The intersections between intermediality and ecocriticism further support its use as a productive analytical tool within this study. Elleström's concept of multimodality and Rajewsky's concept of narrow intermediality have been introduced to clarify how different medial modes intra-act within visual narratives and how these intra-actions are relevant to the aims of this dissertation. This discussion has also demonstrated the importance of the paratext and the intra-active relationship among creator, reader, and book, framing reading as a performative and inventive act.

In addition, this chapter has examined the complex interplay between aesthetics and ideology in children's literature, a relationship often perceived as antagonistic. This element of the discussion has considered how (ecological) ideology is transmitted – either explicitly or implicitly – in visual narratives, and how the intermedial aestheticism of the texts may support or impede such ideological intent.

Chapter One has laid the foundations for this dissertation, by exploring the relevant existing literature, clarifying the conceptual framework, and developing the central arguments in greater detail. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation explore the five selected visual narratives within this framework, demonstrating the potentiality of the visual narrative for a performative material analysis, which reveals its transformative power in challenging the young reader's perceptions of naturecultures, nonhuman agency, matter and materiality.

Chapter Two

‘The Liminal Space Between’: Performative Materiality and Nonhuman Agency in *Tales from the Inner City* and *The Fate of Fausto*

Art happens in the liminal spaces between things, in conversations between metal and sky, humans and metal, era and era, heaven and earth. Between human spines and smooth concrete.

Timothy Morton, ‘The Liminal Space Between Things: Epiphany and the Physical’ (2014, 270/1).

Introduction

This chapter examines two visual narratives: *Tales from the Inner City* (2018) written and illustrated by Shaun Tan, and *The Fate of Fausto* (2019), written and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. It is argued that the analysis of both books demonstrates the unique potential of visual narrative to communicate the complexity of natural-cultural entanglements. This potential arises for several reasons: the iconotexts enable a multifaceted depiction of nonhuman agency, material corporeality, and the limits of human language and understanding; the books themselves function as material, performative ensembles that invite readers to actively participate in constructing meaning; and the paratextual features of both visual narratives play a direct role in shaping reader engagement. Both narrative representation and post-representational elements of each book are discussed. Both creators’ use of techniques such as metafictional self-reflexivity, intertextuality and anthropomorphism are examined. It is contended that these visual narratives are performative phenomena that present a material discursive space that arises from intra-actions between creator, process, product and reader¹¹. This chapter also explores the tensions between moralistic didacticism and the subversive

¹¹ See note on ‘The Reader’ in the Glossary of Terms.

aestheticism of the books, and the extent to which an overt, ideological moralism can affect the reader's engagement with the visual narrative.

2.1. Tales from the Inner City

2.1.i. Overview of the Book

Tales from the Inner City (2018) (henceforth abbreviated to *Tales*) is an illustrated collection of twenty-five short stories by Australian author and illustrator Shaun Tan. This basic classification perhaps obscures the complexity of the work; some of the stories are presented in poetic form, and in most cases, as is typical of Tan's output, the stark, engaging illustrations both extend the written narrative and have stand-alone power themselves. The 'Acknowledgements' page at the end of the book informs the reader that seven of the stories have been either fully or partially published previously in various edited volumes or collections. The earliest of these publication dates is 2015, indicating that the work included in *Tales* was developed over several years. *Tales* was the winner of the prestigious Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration in 2020.

Tales marks a significant departure from Tan's previous output with regard to both form and content. Although his work is known for its defiance of definitive nomenclature, many of his previous publications have aligned with typical picturebook or graphic novel formats. *Tales* is quite different, both in terms of its materiality and its narrative structure. The book is smaller in size than a typical picturebook, but larger than a typical novel. It is weighty and comprises over two-hundred pages in total. Among the twenty-five narratives in the book, some span over thirty pages, others comprise fewer than three. The contents pages (Fig. 2.1) present an atypical list, depicted not in words but in images. It resembles a scientific taxonomy; a medial transposition of the scientific to the literary and artistic, consisting of

twenty-five images in silhouette, each one representing a narrative within the volume, the page number inscribed on each dark form. The silhouettes do not appear in sequential or numerical order, which is also unusual for a contents list. The silhouettes are of animals, birds, insects and fish, and amongst them all, so nondescript one might completely overlook it, is the silhouetted figure of the homosapien: no bigger or smaller than the rest, not afforded any precedence on the page. The narratives in the anthology have no written title; the opening page of each story features a reproduction of the silhouetted creature on the contents page as an indicator of each story's subject. The narrative subjects are (in the order they appear in the book): Crocodile, Butterfly, Dog, Snail, Shark, Cat, Horse, Pig, Moonfish, Rhinoceros, Owl, Frog, Sheep, Hippopotamus, Lungfish, Orca, Tiger, Parrot, Bear, Eagle, Fox, Pigeon, Bee, Yak, Human¹². It is notable that all of these are creatures that actually exist, with the exception of one: while the moonfish is a real marine species, Tan reimagines it in *Tales* as a fantastical, celestial creature – a 'night-fish' that drifts through the sky rather than the sea. Tan's tales feature out-of-the-ordinary, often dream-like settings, scenarios and story arcs, but the moonfish is the only supernatural nonhuman protagonist; a nod by the author/illustrator perhaps to the fantastical creatures that have frequently featured in his own works and various genres of children's and young adult literature through the ages.

¹² Although Tan does not give the narratives written titles, for organisational and referencing purposes I apply a written title from this list to each narrative.



Fig. 2.1. Contents pages

Several of the narratives comprise more illustrations than text; in other cases, the opposite applies, but none are entirely wordless. The text-heavy narratives, for example ‘Cat’ (pp. 70-77) which features five pages of dense text and two illustrations, or ‘Moonfish’ (pp. 90-103) with one illustration and ten pages of text, signify a departure for Tan, who is most widely known for an output that predominantly features sparse text and an abundance of imagery. Another distinct contrast to his previous work is the fact that the typeface is uniform throughout, although the amount of type on each page varies significantly. The book is typeset in Garamond (Fig. 2.2), a popular typeface in book printing that dates back to Renaissance times. This typeface choice lends a sense of historicism and elegance to the text, although its neatly consistent appearance is markedly different from Tan’s usual style of handcrafting his own fonts and often positioning the text haphazardly on the page. Consequently, *Tales* has a more structured and organised aesthetic feel, which stands in contrast to the subversive complexity of its narratives.

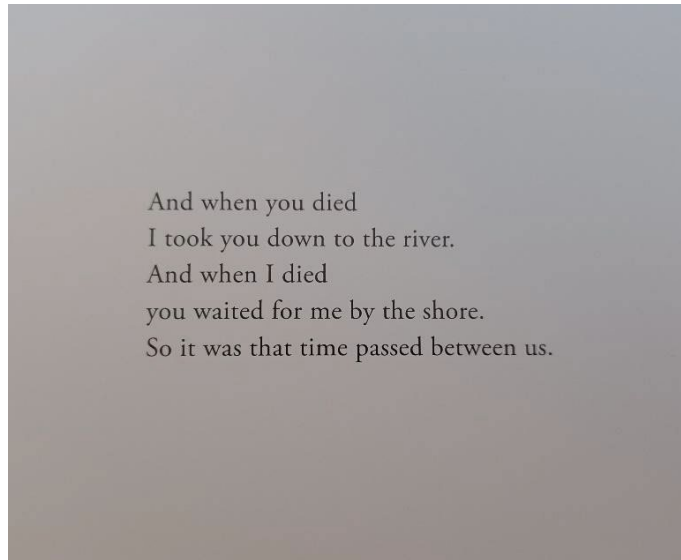


Fig. 2.2. Garamond typeface

Tales is a sister volume to Tan's earlier anthology *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) but significantly expands upon some of the ideas explored in that earlier publication. Its focus is predominantly on the relationships between humans and nonhumans, and these relationships are explored in urban settings throughout. Tan says that 'the basic premise I set for myself was quite simple: think about an animal in a city. Why is it there? How do people react to it? What meaning does it suggest?' (Notes on *Tales*, 2018). Reviewer Gary Wolfe interestingly theorises that the book's title refers 'not to the "inner city" of sociologists and economists, but rather to the hidden city in which nature survives in unexpected ways' (2019, n.p.). The ensuing analysis supports Wolfe's proposition but also demonstrates that Tan's focus on the troubling dimensions of urban existence sometimes works to the detriment of his narratives.

Each narrative in the volume is accompanied by at least one illustration over a double-page spread and some are accompanied by more than ten: 'Dog' (pp. 22-59), for example, features thirteen double-page spreads with sparse text – the story is told mostly through the illustrations. Unlike some of Tan's previous publications, in which he has used a variety of illustrative forms, the narrative illustrations in this volume are all in double-page spread

format. These images are more impactful as a result: the reader is forced to engage completely with a stand-alone image, without any distraction from multiple images or text on the pages. The neatly structured aesthetic design of the uniformly sized imagery is, again, uncharacteristic of Tan's work, and, as previously noted with the typeface, belies the work's complex intricacies. However, although the image size is uniform throughout (with the exception of the contents pages and corresponding title image), the style of the imagery is quite diverse: Tan utilises a range of artistic media and techniques, including pencil sketches, oils, digital photography, photographic collage, models and dioramas. He has discussed the materiality of the process of artistic creation in personal commentary on his website, stating that 'I like the direct materiality of tradition media, and enjoy being able to use whole-arm gestures for varied textural effects at this scale, using brushes, palette knives, pieces of cardboard and sometimes a shower squeegee to drag wet oil paint across a canvas in large swipes before resolving details' (*Notes*, 2018). The subject matter of Tan's illustrations is also noteworthy. Many defy explanation and the scenes the illustrations depict are not always directly alluded to in the accompanying text, providing a counterpoint to the text and thereby extending the narrative.

Several of Tan's tales are written in the form of news reports or articles and, as previously mentioned, some are poetic in structure; he plays with forms and genres. He infuses his stories with gritty materialism and terminology, demonstrating geological and anatomical knowledge, and transposes scientific fact seamlessly into many narratives. He is particularly adept at combining scientific and figurative language; the material and the symbolic in an entangled mesh, demonstrating a mastery of medial transposition that is explored in further detail in subsequent sections.

2.1.ii. Shaun Tan – Background, Influences and Creative Output

Shaun Tan is a critically acclaimed Australian author and illustrator. Among his many awards and accolades is the 2011 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for Children’s Literature and an Academy Award, bestowed the same year, for a 2011 film adaptation of his picturebook *The Lost Thing* (2000). Over a prolific career, his output has included over twenty visual narratives as either illustrator, or author and illustrator; film and theatre adaptations of his work; art installations and exhibitions; and maintains a significant online presence – his website (www.shauntan.net) includes a blog and detailed commentary by Tan himself on his creative output. Born in Fremantle, Western Australia, Tan has shared that his father is Malaysian Chinese and his mother is ‘a third-generation Australian of English and Irish ancestry’ (‘Strange Migrations’, 2012). Tan has spoken of his empathy with those who feel a certain sense of displacement, stating that he finds the question of belonging ‘constantly interesting’ as his childhood ‘lacked any strong cultural roots or a sense of historical context’ (Comments on *The Arrival*, 2006).

Tan is most closely associated with the visual narrative: his creative output is dominated by various forms of visual literature that tend to defy rigid categorisation, blending characteristics associated with comics, picturebooks, illustrated narratives and graphic novels, and most closely aligning, perhaps, with Evans’ concept of the ‘fusion text’. Tan has articulated his frustration around conceptions of visual narratives as ‘simple’ literature in terms of narrative structure, thematic concern, visual appeal, and/or materiality. He argues that such an appearance of ‘simplicity’ is deceptive, and that a more nuanced understanding appreciates the complexity, subversiveness and sophistication of this literature. Tan has made no secret of his desire to provoke the reader, stating that in the process of creating his works, he asks questions such as ‘How can they be playful and subvert our usual expectations? What

are the ways that something can be represented to most effectively invite us to think and ask questions about the world we live in?' ('Picturebooks: Who are They For?', 2004).

Commenting on the work of renowned author/illustrator Raymond Briggs, an acknowledged influence, Tan has noted the unique propensity of the visual narrative to achieve 'a far more disturbing resonance than might be possible in any other medium' (2011, 4). Elaborating on this, he comments on '[t]he innocence of the form, its simple presentation of pictures and words, its intimacy of small drawings and physical gestures; all of it is brilliantly effective in suggesting emotional complexity below the surface' (ibid.).

Tan's status as an acclaimed writer and illustrator is a relevant epitextual feature of *Tales*. At the point in time when this book was published (2018), Tan was well established and widely recognised for his creative output. This, it is argued, lends a certain self-aware confidence to his work and motivates him to consider the nature of story and storytelling in a self-reflexive and self-reflective manner. The potential reader of *Tales* is quite likely to have been exposed to Tan's previous work, or to be aware of his distinctive narrative and illustrative style. On his aforementioned website, Tan provides detailed commentary on the motivations for his work, his artistic processes and personal interpretations of his narratives. He emphasises that he is explaining 'a little' for 'curious readers' and expresses his hope that 'these notes do not adversely colour [one's] own interpretations or impressions, or limit any other possible reading and understanding' (*Notes*, 2018). Notwithstanding his desire for each reader to formulate their own responses, his lengthy interpretations of each story demonstrate an artistic self-confidence that perhaps comes with years of experience and critical recognition and acclaim. They also, in some ways, work to impede the idea of the story as 'a living being', with agency of its own. While Tan encourages open-ended interpretation, his extensive personal reflections reassert the author's presence, which, as previously noted (in reference to Barthes) can potentially limit the multiplicity of meanings a text can generate.

However, from a materialist and intra-active perspective, both the reader's freedom to interpret and the author's commentary are integral threads in the text's material-discursive web. They co-constitute the meaning-making process, where the text, authorial input, and reader engagement continuously intra-act and reshape one another, producing a dynamic and ever-evolving narrative. Tan's commentary is part of the epitextual web of *Tales*; a reflection on its ontological status as a creative construction. Bearing this in mind, Tan's own interpretations of *Tales* are referenced in this dissertation, but due care is taken that alternative interpretations are not obscured or discounted as a result.

2.1.iii. Representation: Materialism, Nonhuman Agency and Natureculture

Tales is possessed of a gritty materialism, demonstrating acute attentiveness to the corporeality of the nonhuman body. In 'Shark' (pp. 64 - 69), the reader is presented with a sharp, sensorial image of the fisherman's overalls slicked with 'oil and blood and brine' (66) and that of his blade hitting the shark's gut, with vivid descriptions of a 'sickly white belly...the colour of spoiled milk' (ibid.). The gathered crowd wonders if the shark's innards will reveal 'treasures or horrors?' (ibid.), manifestations of the material reality of consumption. Tan forges connections between this material reality and human emotion, and ponders upon the capability of language to sufficiently grasp the depth and complexity of human feeling, or indeed human understanding of the material, as he writes: 'The mayor felt for a word that meant both disgust and delight, but he couldn't find one' (ibid.). 'Shark' is a contemplation of the materiality of life, its messiness and the inexplicable morbid delights and pleasures in witnessing something that is grisly and macabre but nonetheless fascinating. The shark's corpse is not inert waste but an active participant in the narrative's ecology: it 'speaks' through its textures, odours, and scale, asserting a nonhuman agency that disrupts

human systems of value and control. The fisherman's disillusionment mirrors this unsettling encounter with materiality. He is weary and doesn't make eye contact with the gathered crowd. Traditionally a figure of mastery over nature, he is here diminished – his labour rendered meaningless before the overwhelming reality of the dead shark. His quiet gaze signifies the collapse of anthropocentric narratives of purpose and dominion.

The morbid fascination evoked by the scene – its mixture of revulsion and wonder – suggests a recognition of shared corporeality, a transcorporeal entanglement of human and nonhuman flesh. The corporeality of the shark is lucidly depicted; the reader is engaged in a multi-sensorial engagement with the descriptions and the imagery. The shark's guts collapse onto the street 'like a sack of slurry'(ibid.). There is reference to overwhelming 'sight and smell' and 'stringy fluid', at which 'stomachs [are] inverted' (67). The material act of butchering, revealing a torrent of smaller sharks 'thrashing... [with] [m]ouths like crystal necklaces' (ibid.), operates as a symbolic articulation of generational annihilation – an anticipatory image of an apocalyptic future that foresees the butchering of both human and nonhuman life alike. This is emphasised as Tan uses stark, striking language to draw comparisons between human and shark. He refers to 'the blood and gore of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents' (ibid.): the ancestry of the shark, but described using deliberate human references. The illustration of the captured shark (Fig. 2.3) is painted in a dark, brooding, gloomy colour palette. The entire left side is dominated by an expanse of grey/black. It is unclear what this setting is: ship walls, or perhaps the city wall. The darkening sky appears to meet the dark sea, punctuated by splashes of red: the shark's maw, its blood and innards, reflected in the red flags of the onlookers. The humans are miniscule and dark, an anonymous mass that blends in with the threatening, shadowy background, while the figure of the shark is frighteningly, supernaturally colossal. Smoke emanates from industrial chimneys. Wheels and pulleys elevate the shark, its mouth open in a silent, distraught cry, evoking both its pain

and its vitality. The ‘dreaded’ maw is red, visceral and teeming with exuberant energy, in contrast to the human creatures, who seem devoid of life, character and individuality. The image bleeds to the edge of the page, the gutter marking the dividing line between the vibrant and hideously fascinating image of the captured shark and the murky gloom of the background. The illustration both complements Tan’s vibrant, gritty, material language, and extends it. This depiction is less about the intricacies of matter, and more about human oppression of nonhuman agency, the entanglement of the emotional and the material in the nonhuman and the use of colour to represent enmeshment: the murky grey of the shark, the crowd, the sea, the sky and the materials of industry.



Fig. 2.3. 'Shark'

There is a similar attentiveness to the corporeality of the nonhuman in ‘Horse’ (pp.78 – 83). Tan describes ‘rolling marble eyes and wind-rippled manes and ...the pounding rush of their breath’ (79). Connections are drawn between the work, the animal, the earth, the natural and

the cultural through reference to the bodily functions of the animal, human and nonhuman bodily fluids, and natural and man-made substances:

There it is, rising up through the *heat and dust, brick by brick, barrel by barrel*, in some long-ago dreamtime when *blood* came before *diesel* and the streets reeked of *manure*, and the incessant din of *clip-clopping hooves* left every crack of the whip to clemency. Horses pulling freight and people, the *dirt* of massive urban excavation huge dead-axle drays carting *ice, iron, meat, beer and coal*, all the things that made a city run. Crowded omnibuses shunting *human bodies* back and forth.... horses grinding *metal shoes* against *cobblestones*, pulling *loads* beyond all natural measure up endless *hills* and corridors of *heat and snow*' [emphases mine] (80).

Here, the materiality of industrial life (brick/barrel/diesel/iron/beer/coal/loads/metal shoes) is enmeshed with the material reality of living, breathing creatures (blood/manure/meat/human bodies) and the materiality of the environment (heat/dust/dirt/hills/ice/stones/snow). Tan contemplates the transience of nonhuman material corporeality as he addresses the cycle of life for the horse; although it is 'towed away and piled into a flyblown heap...a knackered corpse'(80), its materiality does not decay, but is re-harvested by the human, for cultural production and industry: 'stripped down for dog meat and candle fat, bones burnt and ground down into fertilizer, skins tooled into straps and fastened to the wither of their offspring, ligaments boiled for furniture glue'(ibid.). The materiality of the horse ultimately assists it in the posthumous performance of 'some terrible belated retribution': 'a blight of fly-borne typhoid rising up from vast pits of manure that nobody knows what to do with' (ibid.). The phrase 'long-ago dreamtime' invokes the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming, a cyclical temporality in which land, animal, and human are interconnected. By placing the city's rise within this mythic frame, Tan contrasts Indigenous cosmologies of vitality and continuity with the mechanised modernity of 'diesel' and industrial progress. The reference acknowledges the suppressed presence of Aboriginal histories beneath urban landscapes,

transforming the scene into a hybrid myth where pre-colonial and industrial temporalities coexist. This subtly critiques colonial erasure while reasserting the enduring agency of the more-than-human world within the modern city.

With deliberate yet seemingly effortless precision, Tan's descriptions interlace the anatomical, the scientific, the figurative, and the symbolic to convey the complex material entanglement of human and nonhuman life. Narratives such as 'Moonfish' devote entire paragraphs to the anatomical make-up of the eponymous creature. His description of the family's gutting of the captured fish (96-7) refers to the intestines, the liver, the ozone bladders, the valve-bulbs and the heart 'filled with the aerogel blood that had retreated in from the arteries as the fish made its lonely descent' (97). Here, Tan applies his biological knowledge of an actual moonfish's anatomy to imagine how this might alter if a fish inhabited the sky rather than the sea. The result is a tale that transposes scientific fact onto a fantastical premise. Over a single page, the reader is transported from the mysticism of celestial angling to the stark reality of fish gutting.

Tan does not shy away from visceral, gruesome detail that represents a type of scientific ekphrasis, descriptively recounting nonhuman anatomical composition and, in many instances, making rhizomatic, non-hierarchical connections between this and the material composition of the human and the earth. Both 'Shark' and 'Horse' effectively illustrate these connections: the dissection scene in 'Shark' collapses distinctions between birth and death, human and nonhuman, flesh and environment and likewise, in 'Horse', the merging of 'blood' and 'diesel' entwines organic and industrial matter, evoking a shared material continuum that resists hierarchy. In the worlds of *Tales*, matter is inherently vital: not secondary or additional to human life but something we are immersed in and enmeshed with. As contended by Barad, 'Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative...[it] is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things' (2007, 137).

The narrative of enmeshment is extended and deepened in the narrative ‘Hippo’ (pp. 138 – 145). Reminiscent of Aboriginal ‘dreamtime’ stories, the written narrative reveals that the hippo appears in the dreams of an exceptionally gifted boy, who ‘only ever dream[s] about hippos’ (140). He speaks about his dreams to no-one, as they are ‘the one part of his life that [is] utterly beyond explanation’ (ibid.). The boy is possessed of knowledge and wisdom beyond his years. He gives public lectures about ‘a political system that would end all militarized conflict, a fiscal system that gave a commercial index to moral virtue and a world without religion’ (141), indicating a critique by Tan of political and cultural systems of power. The boy is clearly intrigued by the natural sciences, as he keeps logarithmic tables of odours, draws maps of cumulus clouds in small notebooks, proffers a ‘crackpot’ theory of water memory and creates a design for a machine that will recover bird calls that happened over a century ago. Tan and the protagonist share certain resonances that invite comparison: Tan has produced an entire series of observational oil sketches of clouds and frequently includes scientific tables in his picturebook artistry, most notably in *The Lost Thing*. As a grown man, the protagonist ultimately disappears from society, driven away by the mockery of a critical media and public, and the open-ended denouement to the narrative implies that his human body has somehow merged with or metamorphised into the hippo’s, described in a dreamlike yet viscerally material state. The man/hippo also appears to merge with the water, itself possessed of a vibrant agency:

Elsewhere, the hum of insects and tropical heat pressed in upon his ears, and he waggled them. He felt his own girth and the girth of those beside him, and the weightless mass of water that touched everything that ever existed, rank and sweet with the knowledge of all things living and dead. The hippos opened their wide, wide mouths to let it in and together they slipped beneath the surface (143).

The image of the hippo (Fig. 2.4) is mostly typical on the left side, its wizened face and expansive upper body depicted in grey, swirls of white and splashes of blue. The gutter acts

as a point of demarcation between the typical hippo and a dreamlike hippo, the hefty girth of the latter emblazoned with splashes of luminous colour, as if he is electrified from within. The narrative, comprising text and illustration, speaks to Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, which emphasises the porosity of bodies. Tan utilises colour to effect as a prismatic representation of the creature's vitality. In commentary on the narrative on his website, Tan reveals that the illustration is entitled 'Water Memory'. The controversial pseudo-scientific concept of water memory refers to the supposed ability of water to retain a 'memory' of substances previously dissolved in it. While the idea has been critiqued in scientific fields of research, Tan's description of water as being 'rank and sweet with the knowledge of all things living and dead' points to his intrigue with water's agentic capacity¹³. The enmeshment of water and body at the story's end encourages the reader to ponder on the fact that fifty-five to seventy percent of the bodily composition of a human or nonhuman mammal is water. The story's ending explicitly asks the reader to 'consider for a moment that these are only words on paper, that in truth there was no body, living or dead, and possibly there never had been one' (143). In typical self-reflexive fashion, Tan plays with the reader's understanding of language as a source of truth and power, and highlights the uneasy relations between realism and constructivism.

¹³ The concept of sentient and agentic bodies of water is one that is receiving increased mainstream attention in recent literary publications, including, for example, *Is A River Alive?* (2025) by Robert McFarlane, and in the Irish context, *Listen to the Land Speak* (2022) by Manchán Mangan.



Fig. 2.4. 'Hippo'

Tan's pervasive concern with the agency of the nonhuman, and the looping intra-action of language, symbolism and the biological world, resonates through *Tales*. 'Parrot' (pp.168 – 173) sees the narrator contemplating the similarities between human and nonhuman as he notes that 'humans love tricks' (169) and recalls a recurring human comment on animals: 'Look...[t]hey are just like you and me!' (170, emphasis in original). The reader is encouraged to consider how our understanding of nonhuman agency may be inhibited by an appreciation for animals that extends mostly to those that behave like us. The illustration (Fig. 2.5) extends the narrative, however. A diminutive human figure sits opposite an enormous parrot, only the parrot's head visible. Reminiscent of Legler's conception of the post-pastoral 'as a vision ...that images human/nature relationships as "conversations" between knowing subjects' (1997, 229), human and parrot appear to be in silent contemplation of each other – a conversation that transcends verbal language.



Fig. 2.5. 'Parrot'

Tan's ascription of agency to the nonhuman extends beyond the animal. In 'Bee' (pp. 200 – 207), the tree is a living entity that responds to voice as a human might. It has 'wounds and fungal infections, lesions fused by constant talking and singing' (201). The human characters, Mr and Mrs Katayama, are aware without any obvious signs that the tree is about to come into flower and the narrator muses that '[m]aybe the moon is telling them, or the tree itself' (202), suggesting a communication that is more visceral than literal. This event is treated as a type of 'graduation', a debutante ball, a coming-of-age ceremony. Children, relatives, neighbours and colleagues attend, but greetings are 'hushed, whispered, because everyone can already sense some kind of pressure rising and settling along the sparse and gnarled branches of the tree' (203). There is an innate respect for the tree and its agency. The tree itself is deciding the order of events.

Tan's contemplation of matter, the material, and corporeality includes an enduring preoccupation with the idea of human-as-animal. In the opening narrative of the volume, 'Crocodile' (pp. 10 -15), the crocodiles see the humans as 'hairless apes' (12). The workers,

blinded to the existence of the nonhuman world on the eighty-seventh floor of their building, take frequent naps, during which time they dream of their primal selves ‘running naked through a dark forest screaming terrified monkey gibberish, only to wake with a rush of overwhelming exhilaration and clarity, of feeling absolutely alive’ (ibid.). In ‘Shark’, the gutting of the creature produces a roar from the gathered crowd that morphs into ‘a low animal sound’ and ‘the collapse of all civilised language’ (66/7), while in ‘Moonfish’, the children ‘bounc[e] around the kitchen on invisible trampolines, making sounds that [a]ren’t quite human’ (96) – a contemplation on language and sound, both human and nonhuman, and the frequently indistinctive boundary between the two. In ‘Pig’ (pp.84 – 89), Tan muses, ‘maybe pigs suffer in a way we can’t know. Who can say for sure what another animal is feeling?’ (85). The use of the word ‘another’, as opposed to ‘an’ is telling; the pig and the human are both cast as ‘animal’, a destabilising of boundaries between one and the other. ‘Pigeon’ (pp.194 -199) sees the narrator compare the pigeons to accountants ‘in smart grey waistcoats’ (195), and the tall buildings ‘humans build to announce vast accumulations of power and capital’ (ibid.) are described as ‘excellent upgrades from the seaside cliffs upon which they originally evolved’ (ibid.). The characters who work in the subterranean kitchens in ‘Moonfish’ are also possessed of inherently animal qualities: the ‘surly kitchenhands squatting in the filthy back lane’ have fish-like eyes ‘as big as dipping bowls’ (98), they bark like dogs or foxes and bustle like ants through the underground labyrinth. Mr. Hiro, the ‘person’ in charge, inhabits ‘a world that did not belong to ours, nor ours to his: a subterranean kingdom of flames and steam, with weird things hanging, broiling, pickling and fermenting....and any number of plaintive animal sounds’(ibid.). He ‘is described as ‘not quite four feet tall...with the face of a tortoise, a tortoise with really long teeth...his finger darting over the body of the fish like a flustered insect’ (99).

'Lungfish' (pp. 146 -155) describes the appearance of the creatures 'in gutters, drainpipes...pooled at the foot of subway stairs', an unusual occurrence that is barely noted by the apathetic human narrators. The narrators inform the reader that 'too much had happened, too much turmoil and damage and sorrow, so that our exhausted, waterlogged hearts were immune to all marvels' (147), suggesting that the appearance of the multitude of lungfish occurs after some sort of disastrous or apocalyptic event. The narrators note the 'hypnotic' and 'primeval' beauty of the nonhuman creatures and acknowledge a 'parental' and 'narcissistic' fascination as the lungfish at first resemble loyal and dependable pets, and then begin to rapidly morph into human-like creatures that are capable of completing domestic chores, conversing, proofreading newspapers, building their own domiciles and working full-time. They develop their own cultural world, vividly described in fairy-tale fashion as a cross between a shopping centre and an underwater seascape:

knee high shopping arcades sparkled like diamonds...bright new tunnels webbed their way under filthy railway platforms...mysterious objects crept into art gallery stairwells...in the spare corners of cinemas you might see the diminutive glow of those other movies...fluttering with mysterious beauty and wordless drama (152).

The creatures' brilliance eventually overshadows and intimidates the humans, who choose to ignore or forget about their existence that 'presumably [is] still unfolding somewhere else', but can be sensed in 'the microcosmic vibrations of wires and bloodstreams, a tangle of chromosomes, all those other selves' (153). Tan contemplates the subversive possibility of another world, unfolding elsewhere, or perhaps unfolding in parallel real time, unnoticed or disregarded by the human, in which the nonhuman demonstrates its own intellect and agentic capacity. This supposed 'parallel world' does not constitute an 'othering' of nature, but rather underscores the limitations of human perception – our failure to recognise the vitality of the nonhuman within the same material reality. From a material ecocritical perspective, Tan's vision reveals not separation but enmeshment misunderstood as distance, suggesting that the

nonhuman world is not elsewhere but always already intertwined with human existence, operating beyond the narrow bounds of anthropocentric awareness.

The expeditious evolution of the lungfish also serves as a stark reminder that the human has itself evolved from the animal, and that human evolution has accelerated rapidly in the last five to ten thousand years. The subject of human evolution is further addressed in the final narrative, 'Human' (pp. 216 - 221), in which the human appears to regress to a primitive hominin form, recalling its evolutionary kinship with the Neanderthal. The protagonist describes how 'we chatter and chatter in our simian way...we are that kind of animal, as if the rebellion of our spines against gravity, this bizarre upright gait, has also caused some other anomaly of the eyes and mind...always restlessly searching, noses too far from the ground' (217/8). By collapsing distinctions between the human and its ancestral counterparts, Tan destabilises anthropocentric hierarchies and re-situates human consciousness within the same corporeal and ecological materiality that shapes all life. The description thus becomes a reminder of the body's agency and the shared material vulnerability that binds human and nonhuman existence.

Tan's contemplation of human-as-animal is a thoughtful attempt at collapsing sharp nature/culture binaries, while simultaneously recognising that certain distinctions remain. In 'Snail' (pp. 60 – 63), the humans, at first disgusted by the presence of the 'indecent' (61) gigantic creatures 'making love right then and there' (ibid.) in their human environment, eventually come to appreciate the snails, their 'grace, pride, slowest of dances in the dark' (ibid.) and what they teach the humans about love. There remains a distinction: the humans have merely accommodated the snails into their cultural world, but there is also an acknowledgement of the capacity of the nonhuman to feel and display emotion, and to be possessed of a potentially greater wisdom on the subject than the human: 'We would be so sad if they ever went away, leaving us all alone with our small ideas about love' (ibid.).

Conversely, the crocodiles in the opening story dwell in the same building as the workers, but are hidden away from view. The double-page illustration of a skyscraper reflecting a cloudy, blue sky (Fig. 2.6), described by Tan as one of our ‘secular temples, sheathed in reflective glass, more of the sky than the earth’ (Notes on *Tales*, 2018), provides no visual clues as to the nature of what lies beyond the shiny exterior. Tan’s striking imagery situates the natural in the cultural, the nonhuman in the human world; at times, they appear effortlessly enmeshed, at other times, they are uneasy bedfellows.

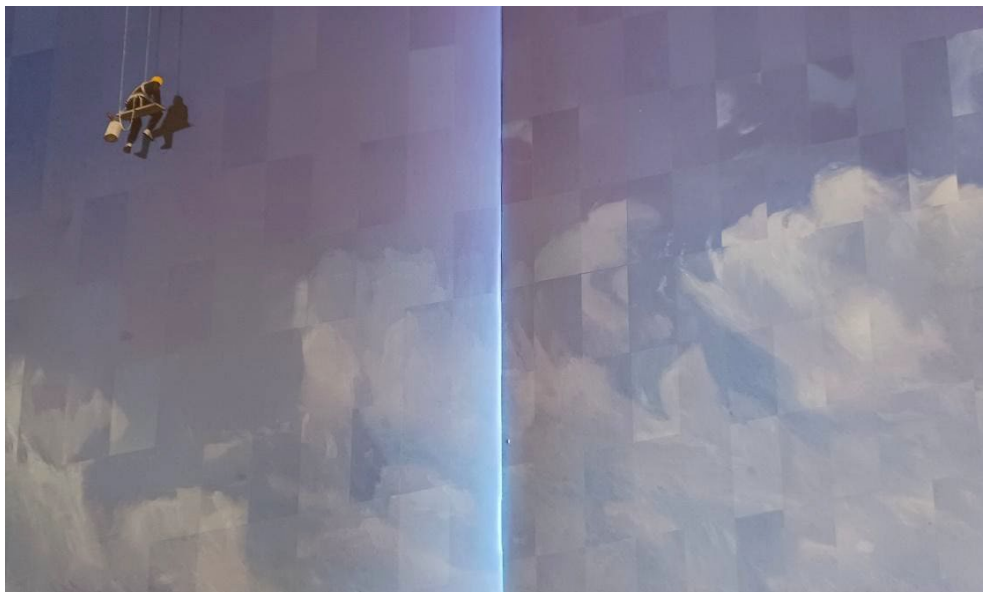


Fig. 2.6. 'Skyscraper'

Tan’s frequent contemplations of parallels between human and nonhuman evolution, behaviour and emotional complexity are well-informed and provocative, and disrupt anthropocentric conceptions of human exceptionalism. He avoids drawing clear conclusions, prompting the reader to reflect on human/nonhuman relations and entanglements, and ideas of sentience and agency. *Tales* emphasises the provocative, gritty and often graphic material reality of nature and culture, depicted in detailed ekphrastic and multi-sensorial descriptions and arresting illustrations that highlight how ‘the supposedly distinct realms of culture and nature are “naturalcultural” throughout, interconnected in ways that are as likely to be

uncanny or threatening as aesthetically inspiring or physically pleasurable' (Garrard, 2012, 205).

2.1.iv. Epitext – Background, Influences and Motivations

Tan's attention to the material realities of nonhuman life is evident in the artistic and literary representations in *Tales*, but a solely hermeneutic approach to analysis of his work is limiting. The epitext is of significant relevance to Tan's work in the context of this study, as it exemplifies the materiality of the book as an artefact, and also highlights the significance of the book's position, and that of its author/illustrator, within broader cultural discourse. Tan's childhood home was in a suburban area of Fremantle, close to Perth, and much of Tan's work demonstrates his preoccupation with suburbia and feelings of displacement or alienation in urban environments. He was a talented artist from a young age but also briefly considered a career as a genetic scientist ('FAQ', official website). These key elements of his identity are reflected in his work in *Tales*. At numerous junctures, there is evidence of his frustration with urban-dwelling humanity (see subsequent section in this chapter) and his consciousness of the acute post-colonial nature of Australian (and, by extension, human) existence. His scientific knowledge infuses his work, and is particularly evident in *Tales*, in which, as previously outlined, Tan consciously departs from typically anthropomorphised depictions of animals to instead portray them in stark anatomical detail.

The area of Western Australia that Tan grew up in has a rich Aboriginal cultural heritage. Tan's narrative and illustrative style draws on experiences of displacement and his own childhood experiences of alienation and contemplations on identity, which, to some extent, resonate with the Aboriginal experience of dispossession. One of his earliest picturebooks, *The Rabbits* (1998, written by John Marsden) has been critiqued as a commentary on

colonialism and its impact on Aboriginal culture. In discussing his research for *Tales*, Tan has acknowledged the impact of Indigenous culture and tradition on his work, stating,

[w]hen I look at Indigenous societies, the relationship [with animals] still feels complicated, but it is far more respectful. Even when slaughtering and eating them, they display a level of respect that we don't show to animals in our society. We're not being mean to animals – but there is evil in obliviousness (interview with *The Guardian*, June 2020).

Tan's detailed portrayals in *Tales* point to a desire on his part to highlight his subjects as sentient, complex creatures that are deserving of human attention and respect – an attitude that he believes is less ingrained in non-Indigenous cultures. However, he retains ambiguity in his depictions. Tan acknowledges that the animal world is not completely knowable by the human and his open-ended and enigmatic narrative style enables the reader to also contemplate this fact and to reflect on the tensions of ontology and epistemology in a natural-cultural world. The disconnect between human perception and the reality of the nonhuman world is emphasised in stories such as 'Sheep' (pp.134 -137), in which humans are happy to hug the warm woolly body of a sheep but recoil from the 'rank breeze' that emanates from a livestock ship at a nearby port, inconveniently spoiling their 'al fresco dinners, evening strolls [and] patio parties' (135). Simultaneously, as outlined previously, Tan ponders on the commonalities of human and nonhuman habitats and behaviours, paralleling with Indigenous understandings of interconnectedness and reciprocity. This creates an indeterminacy that stimulates and challenges the reader. Rules and pronouncements are not clearly defined, and the reader must draw their own conclusions.

Interestingly, although Tan alludes to his admiration of Indigenous cultures' more respectful treatment of animals, he does not cite Indigenous storytelling or artistic practices as direct influences in his lengthy and detailed notes on *Tales*. Nonetheless, distinct intertextual references to Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and practices are evident across his work in the

volume; most notably, Tan's fascination with dreams and dream-worlds, reminiscent of the Aboriginal Dreamtime. According to (but not exclusive to) Aboriginal spiritual beliefs, the land, including the earth and the sea and all matter within, the human and the nonhuman, were created by the Spirits at the beginning of time, elegantly articulated in 'The Beginning of Life' by Aboriginal poet and educator Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1992, 23). Noonuccal's work can be read as an early literary expression of Indigenous material agency, illustrating that matter and land narrate, remember, and teach – a poetic precursor to what material ecocriticism later theorises. Tan's corresponding idea that our most ancient stories are written in the materiality of the earth, lending them a vital narrative agency, is evident in 'Bear' (pp. 174-181). Here, the narrator proclaims, 'the Ledgers of the Earth, written in clouds and glaciers and sediments, tallied in the colours of the sun and the moon as light passed through the millennial sap of every living thing' (178). Tan's references to dreams and dream-like states or worlds, linked to a distant past, are recurrent in *Tales*. In 'Crocodile', the city workers reconnect with their primal selves through vivid 'exhilarating' dreams (12) that situate them naked in dark forests. In 'Horse', Tan explicitly refers to 'dreamtime' in his description of the memories evoked by the horse spirits: 'There it is, rising up through the heat and dust, brick by brick, barrel by barrel, in some long-ago dreamtime' (80). This narrative is bound by recurring references to 'story' and 'dreaming': the child is dreaming of the history of the world, our past, our long-forgotten visceral connection to nature and the nonhuman. Such insights echo not only the Aboriginal understanding of Dreamtime but also the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari: the dream world represents that which is 'inbetween...migratory, mediatory, transitive, always in the middle' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 25).

Tan's nonhuman creatures are all possessed of a vital, spiritual agency, in parallel with the aboriginal belief in 'animism'. This energy is artistically rendered in illustrations of animals

illuminated by vivid, luminous colours, often painted in a 'pointillism' technique, very similar to traditional Aboriginal Dreamtime art. Such a technique is utilised to striking effect in the paintings of 'Moonfish' (as on dust jacket, Fig. 1.7) and 'Hippo' (Fig. 1.4), for example. Tan also makes connections between spirituality and nature through his use of religious symbolism and metaphor in the textual narrative. In 'Butterfly' (pp. 16 - 21), the passive and still humans wait for 'a weightless blessing' (17) from the active, agentic butterflies, depicted descending from the heavens in swirling dashes of luminous colour, and described using active verbs: 'gliding/skipping/fluttering'. The butterflies do not appear to possess this spiritual power in isolation; it emerges in their engagement with the human. The family in 'Moonfish' washes the fish parts 'baptismally' and all organs are 'sacredly wrapped' (97). The moonfish gifts them 'an upward shower of golden sparks, a *benediction* of transcendental caviar and remorse' (101, emphasis mine). The subterranean underground is described as 'purgatory' (ibid.). In 'Fox' (pp. 188-193), the text describes how the titular creature 'run[s] along the wintered fibres of your soul' (190) and the illustration depicts the fox hovering like a protective spiritual presence over the sleeping human figure. 'Bee' sees the human protagonists Mr and Mrs Katayama leave their sleeping physical bodies, and their material and physical preoccupations with age and pain, as their other selves depart to their garden on the rooftop in what seems to represent a literal separation of body and spirit, and an ascension to an alternative world or reality above.

Also reminiscent of the beliefs of many Indigenous cultures, Tan extends vital agency to place, as is evident in 'Horse'. The child is dreaming or visualising the horses at a very particular and specific place, the city, with which their history is inextricably enmeshed. It is implied that this place is saturated with spatio-temporal spiritual energy; not only that of the horses, but also the agentic energy generated through their interactions through time with all forms of human and nonhuman matter. The narrator refers to the 'mountains in the night',

how the city ‘grows and grows’, the horses having ‘carried [the] whole city on their backs’ (80). The horses themselves dream, a dream within a dream: ‘[t]hey dream of running along some green and grassy ancestral plain. They’ll never find it’ (81). The illustration depicts the horses like ghostly apparitions, standing high above the city on a concrete overpass, ‘having run all the way to the city limits.’ This ‘consciousness of place’ aligns with Barad’s assertion that agency is constituted through particular intra-actions, including those between human, nonhuman and place. Such beliefs in the agency of ‘place’ are also notable in many Indigenous cultures (Marker, 2018; Watts, 2013). Watts, an Indigenous Canadian scholar, offers an articulation of material agency that notably complements Barad’s theory of performative materialism, arguing that land, place, and thought are not separate – that place itself *thinks*, acts, and participates in meaning-making.

This understanding of place as animate and agentic provides a useful lens through which to consider the ways in which Tan engages with the lingering effects of colonialism on land, identity, and storytelling. ‘Horse’ can be read as both a contemplation of human and nonhuman intra-actions and a symbolic representation of the subjugation of generations of Indigenous peoples under colonial and imperial onslaught. ‘Bear’ tells a similar story of oppression and control: Tan explores the idea of all animals being ‘recognised as legal entities within a cosmic hierarchy’(175), as the bears take a legal case against the humans for a number of offences committed against them, including theft, pillage, unlawful occupation and others that are alien to human understanding, demonstrating that human language is limited in its ability to represent such outrages. The parallels with Australia’s colonial history are clear. In his personal notes on the story, Tan specifically refers to ‘the way that colonial powers have historically drafted ‘fair’ legislation concerning Indigenous populations’ and reflects on the agency of law itself: ‘law is often used as the agent of baser motives: self-

interest, prejudice, abuse of power and so on, disguised as their exact, ennobling opposite' (2018, n.p.).

It is argued that Tan's enmeshed naturalcultural representations are sites of 'complex and indivisible relationalities' (Demos, 2019, 1). *Tales* is, fundamentally, 'an encounter with otherness' (Stephens, 2018, 299). Tan is clearly influenced by Indigenous conceptions of materiality, spirituality and agency, and Indigenous storytelling and artistic traditions. The postcolonial history of his native country is a dominant influence, and thus a salient epitextual feature of his work. The legacy of this history is a powerful extra-textual force that affects Tan's work and inspires him to address how the injustices enacted upon marginalised communities and the Earth are interconnected.

2.1.v. Peritextual Features

Tales departs from the conventional picturebook form through its length, textual density, and particular aesthetic design, aligning more closely with the illustrated book tradition, where images, though narratively potent, function less as sequential story components and more as independent visual meditations that frame, interrupt, or expand the text. Unlike picturebooks – where image and text typically co-construct a continuous narrative rhythm – Tan's images operate as discrete yet thematically resonant artworks that shape the reader's interpretation beyond the immediate narrative arc. Tan's large-format design and painterly, often standalone visuals function as conceptual meditations that extend the prose, positioning the work as a hybrid art-literature object rather than a picturebook in the strict sense.

Nonetheless, *Tales* possesses several peritextual features that are typical of the picturebook form, and quintessentially characteristic of Tan's work. Examples of these include elaborate illustrations on the cover and dust jacket, and use of the endpapers, title page, half-title page

and contents page to facilitate notable aesthetic details that extend the narrative. Tan successfully utilises the entire book-as-object in his storytelling endeavours, finding imaginative fodder in all aspects of the book's materiality. The dust jacket (Fig. 2.7), taken from the story 'Moonfish', depicts a silhouetted child holding aloft an enormous, luminous fish painted in golds and oranges. The creature's translucent body, speckled with glowing particles, echoes the fiery lights of a cityscape or sunset behind it, merging child, fish, and horizon into one radiant image. Executed in a pointillist style reminiscent of Aboriginal 'dreamtime' art, Tan's surreal composition fuses fantasy with realism, anticipating the book's thematic preoccupations. Silhouetted wires and poles contrast with the glowing landscape, while the title's rustic hues and symbolic arrows evoke the book's concern with time and transformation. The back of the dust jacket features an image taken from the narrative 'Cat', painted in far darker tones, contrasting sharply with the front. The accompanying text reads, 'Where can we live if not in each other's shadow?' Tan's substitution of 'people' with the indefinite 'each other' decentres the human, allowing the phrase to encompass nonhuman coexistence. The 'shadow' becomes not a metaphor for dependence or limitation, but a shared zone of material and ecological entanglement – where bodies, species, and environments mutually sustain and define one another. The darker tones of the *Cat* image reinforce this ambivalence: shadow as both concealment and connection.

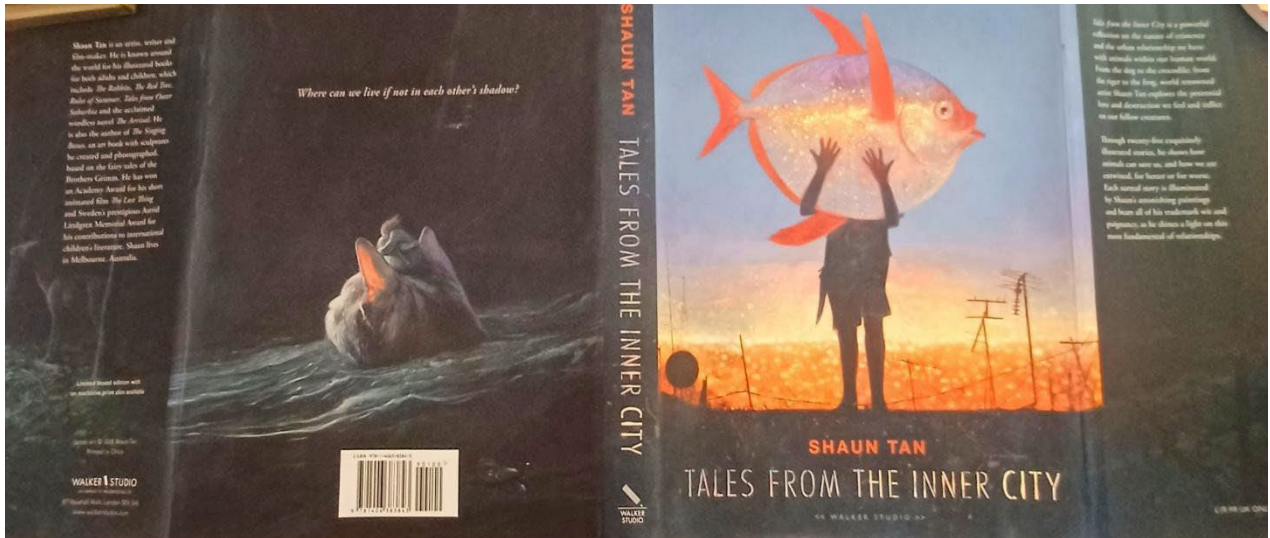


Fig 2.7. *Dust Jacket*

Upon removing the dust jacket, the hardcover of *Tales* (Fig. 2.8a) reveals an image not drawn from any narrative within the anthology but existing as a stand-alone visual narrative. It depicts two deer – a stag and a doe – peering through a pane-less concrete window onto a vast urban skyline reminiscent of New York’s Chrysler Building. Rendered in muted greens and browns, the image inverts the familiar human perspective: here, animals gaze outward at the city as the alien ‘other’. The dark, indefinite wall forms a boundary between the natural and cultural worlds, contrasting sharply with the dust jacket’s imagery of ecological entanglement. This opposition foreshadows the duality explored throughout the volume – some stories emphasising human-nonhuman enmeshment, others maintaining distinct separations. In his commentary, Tan notes that the composition was modelled from small toy deer placed in a cardboard-box forest on his windowsill (2018, n.p.), revealing his practice of constructing tangible, three-dimensional prototypes to capture lighting and texture. Even his most abstract illustrations, then, originate in material experimentation – underscoring Tan’s persistent grounding of imaginative vision in the physical world.

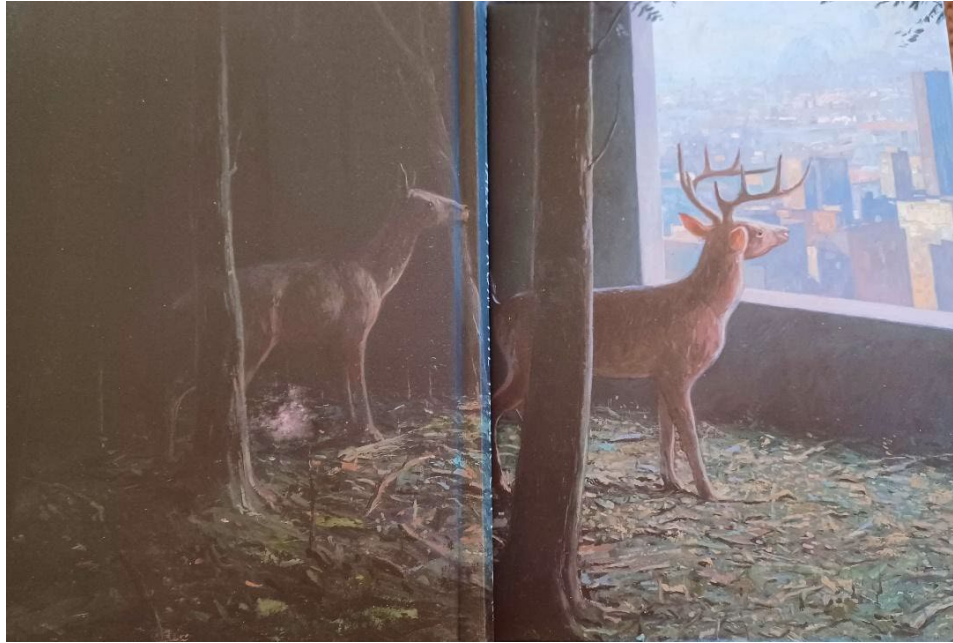


Fig 2.8a. Hardcover



Fig 2.8b. Hardcover image in full as it appears in front matter

The book is a sturdy and weighty object that sits comfortably in adult or young adult hands. It would certainly not be so easily manageable for a young child. Furthermore, given the miniscule size of the typeface, the inclusion of lengthy and quite complex descriptive passages in some instances, and the occasional appearance of vulgar slang such as ‘*Holy shit*’ (‘Moonfish’, 95, emphasis in original), it can be assumed that the intended readership is

young adult or older. However, the rich visual storytelling and material expressiveness of *Tales* also invites an embodied, multisensory engagement from younger readers, in which meaning emerges through material and visual interplay rather than linguistic complexity. The book is small enough to encourage easy perusal, but large enough to do justice to the luminously detailed and expansive double-paged spreads within. Nonetheless, there are over two hundred pages in total, considerably more than in any of Tan's previous publications. This highlights the fact that a considerably greater amount of paper was used in the publication process, which, perhaps, does not align easily with the book's overarching environmental thematic concerns. The pages – of both text and illustration – have a low sheen coating; a higher quality and more durable finish than is typical of most literary productions, which enhances and sharpens colour and images. Each page number features the same backward and forward-facing arrows depicted beside the publisher's details on the dust jacket.

The book's peritextual pages are eye-catching and distinctive. The front and back endpapers (Figs. 2.9a and 2.9b) feature familiar urban vistas of concrete walls and road signage, with the addition of a tiger on the back endpaper image, a somewhat displaced emblem of the natural situated within the cultural. This is a significant juxtaposition, which acts as a reminder for the observer on the perceived stark divergences between 'wild' natural and urban cultural, prompting contemplation on the displacement of the nonhuman in the cultural, urban world. Art director Nghiem Ta has revealed in interview that the endpaper design was her idea, inspired by road markings she had seen. She created the stencil for the design and then Tan created it in what she refers to as 'a design relay' (in an interview with Hope, 2020). This revelation emphasises the entangled nature of a visual narrative project, which incorporates ideas and input from the lived experiences of various sources.

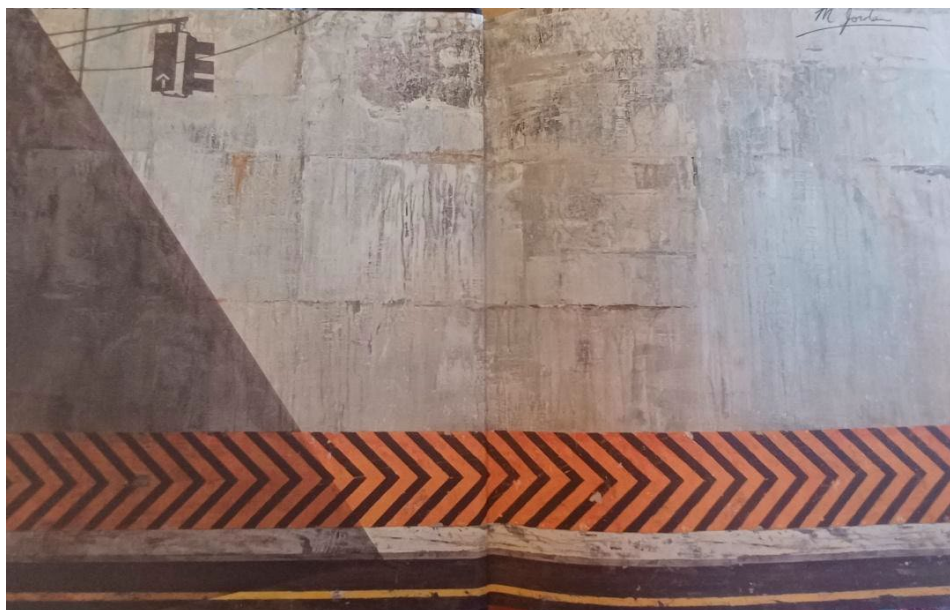


Fig 2.9a. Front endpapers

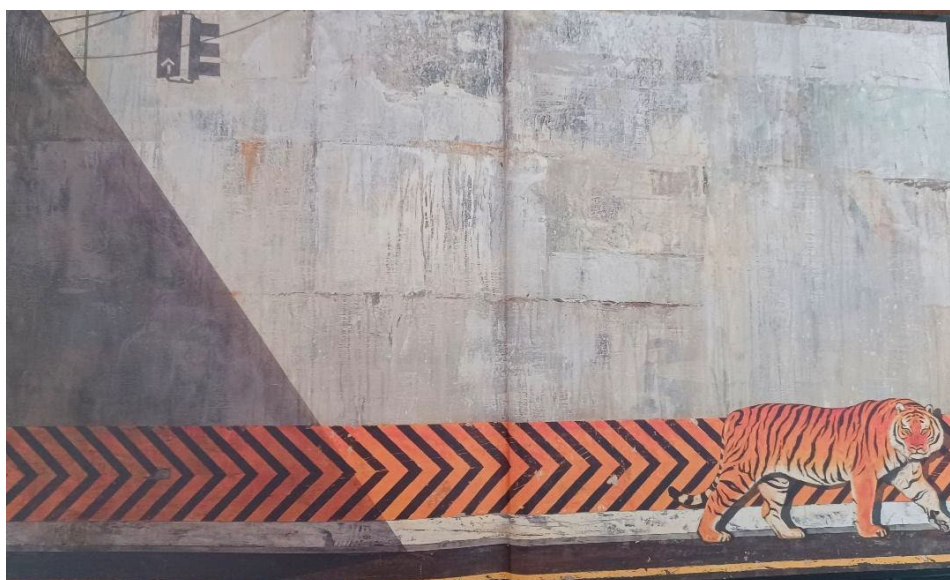


Fig 2.9b. Back endpapers

The other front matter of the book is equally evocative. One page is entirely luminous orange, mirroring the vibrant orange of the wall markings. The half-title page presents the title in metallic silver, the font a more ‘industrial’ style, in sharp contrast to the vibrant, golden tones of the title font on the cover. The full-title page displays the book’s title across a double page; this time, it appears to have been spray painted in black, reminiscent of urban graffiti art. A silhouetted cat, also spray painted, strolls along at the base of the page. This precludes the

aforementioned atypical contents pages (Fig. 2.1). The ‘contents’ images are created in a similar ‘spray painted’ technique to those on the title page. Upon closer inspection, miniscule splashes of red, blue and brown are evident. This creates the impression that each figure, human or nonhuman, is enveloped in a mass of dirt, sweat, water, blood or some other earthly or bodily fluid or substance. Each figure is already a hybrid compound, enmeshed with the earth and ‘more-than-human forces and substances, which visibly or imperceptibly merge with the life of our bodies and places’ (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, 3). Turn the page and a small grey quotation appears on an otherwise blank white spread: a line by American novelist and social activist Alice Walker – ‘The animals of the world exist for their own reasons’. The statement is powerful, yet its diminutive type and placement on the vast white page suggest a questioning of language’s weight in an overwhelming world. Its visual marginality intimates how such truths, though voiced, are often overlooked – not only lost in the world’s expanse but also through humanity’s failure to grant them significance. Here, the blankness, the unsaid, carries the greater force. Tan seems to silently contemplate the world beyond its representation in words. This is a technique he repeats at numerous points over the course of the volume’s pages; some crowded with text (Fig. 2.10a), like a bustling urban centre, others sparsely inscribed, the blank whiteness dominating (Fig. 2.10b).

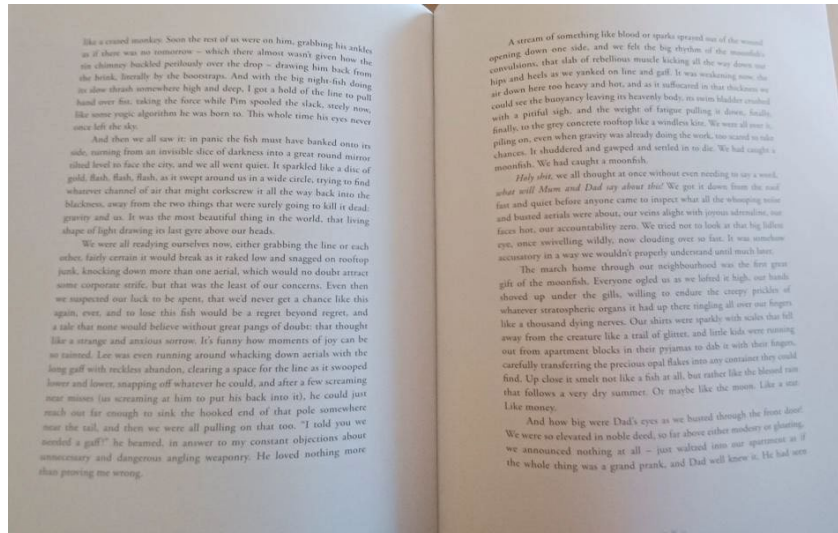


Fig 2.10a. Text from 'Moonfish'

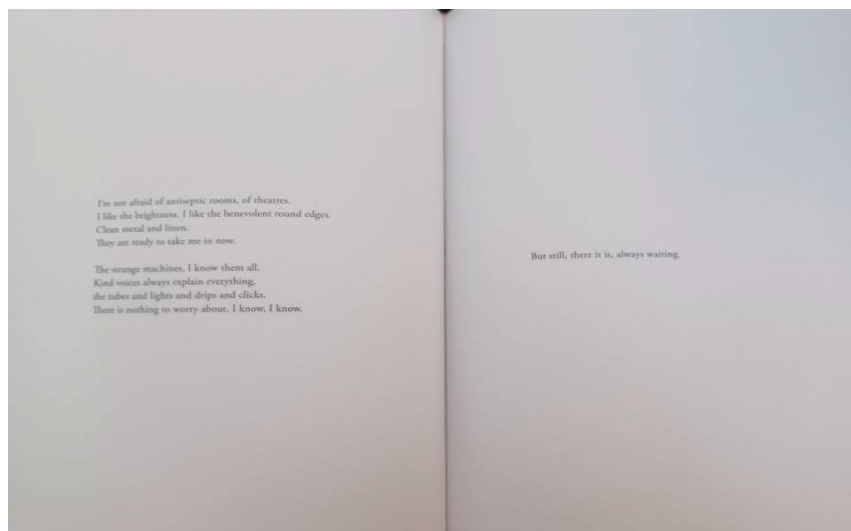


Fig 2.10b. Text from 'Owl'

While all books are material artefacts, *Tales* is distinctive in how consciously its peritextual design enacts the ecological principles it depicts. The illustrated dust jacket and endpapers, the low-sheen, high-grade paper, and the recurring motifs, such as the arrows or the cats are not merely decorative but integral to Tan's aesthetic and philosophical project. These tactile and visual details invite a heightened awareness of the book's material presence, transforming reading into a multisensory experience that mirrors the work's thematic concern with human–nonhuman entanglement. The quality and finish of the pages, the balance of

image and text, and the deliberate cohesion of design all testify to Tan's material attentiveness – a recognition that every aesthetic choice participates in a broader ecology of production and perception. In this sense, the book's exceptionality lies in how it embodies material ecocritical ideas, making the book-as-object itself an active, reflective agent in the dialogue between art and environment.

2.1.vi. *Intermediality, Self-reflexivity and Intertextuality*

Tales, as a media product, exemplifies Elleström's four intra-acting medial modalities: Tan's work combines the more immediately obvious semiotic modality with pre-semiotic sensorial, material and spatio-temporal features that transcend mere text/image relations. In 'Owl' (pp. 108 – 127), the textual nouns and verbs are both visually and auditorily visceral. They are also paradoxically rhythmic and chaotic: poetically arranged, guided by metre and beat, and yet one seems to follow the other in a rushed, palpable burst of synthetic, natural and human energy that almost leads to sensory overload:

metal/linen/machines/voices/tubes/lights/drips/clicks/soft feathers/black needle tips/naked arm/weight of big claws/breathe/skin/shoulder/chest /talons/collarbone/pressure/wings/ears /heartbeat thrums/tight-shut eyes/drowning in feathers

Tan's evocatively sensorial language works in tandem with five double-paged spreads, each punctuated by two pages of minimal, brief poetic text. The spreads represent a medial transposition of cinematography to book; a technique Tan has previously used to much critical acclaim in *The Arrival* (2006). Shot by shot, frame by frame, the camera pans in, beginning with the bland, nondescript, featureless façade of the hospital in frame one, zooming into the stark yet stoic image of a snowy white owl perched on the iron bedframe, with piercing yellow eyes and a dark, foreboding expression, in frame two. The next image features nothing but an expanse of white/grey feathers, created using simple brush strokes, in

which the viewer is engulfed. Parallels are drawn between the sensorial burst of material language and the overwhelming, yet perceptibly calm texture of a sea of downy owl feathers. Frame Four (Fig. 2.11) potentially stops readers in their tracks. It is an arresting, imposing image of the owl's alert, penetrating eyes. Endowed with vitality, the eyes nonetheless possess an inscrutable obscurity – are they questioning, accusatory, searching, or passive? The materiality of the bird, the softness of its feathers and the sharpness of its gaze enhances this effect. Tan expertly utilises the gutter to highlight the symmetry of the image, the owl's spear-like beak pointing sharply downwards, split evenly on the lower gutter. The image bleeds to the end of the page, and yet, held in the reader's hands, the darkness of the book cover frames it, creating an alien creature: angular, unrecognisable, almost demonic. The final image in the sequence is almost identical to the first. The camera has panned out, and the reader is once again outside the hospital building. The previously dark windows are illuminated from within by lights, while activity is suggested with dashes of pinks, blues, greens and yellows. Stars twinkle above and red warning lights flash on the rooftop.



Fig. 2.11. 'Owl'

Tan combines evocative and symbolic imagery with scientific, material terminology, delivering a medial transposition of medical and anatomical procedural writing into poetic form. This stylistic fusion dissolves the boundaries between scientific discourse and aesthetic expression, revealing how language itself operates as a material medium that enacts the very entanglement of human, nonhuman, and textual bodies that Tan thematically explores.

Alliterative techniques lend a musicality to the materiality of the words:

‘afraid/friendly/soft/footfalls/facts’ ‘way/always/waiting/world/without’

‘brightness/benevolent’ ‘friends/family/flowers’ ‘caress/can/claws’. A single line on an

expanse of white page: ‘But still, there it is, always waiting’ (113), utilises the blankness and whiteness of the paper to emphasise the ‘waiting’ and the sense of anticipation. Tan

emphasises the comforting familiarity of human language and touch with reference to ‘warm hands’ and ‘safe words’ (120), while the nonhuman owl is a wordless, colder creature, all

‘claws and feather and stares’ (125), softly breathing in and out with nothing to say. The

proclamation ‘it will never know’ is repeated twice in the text, followed with ‘[i]t only knows

one thing/one cold fact forever guarded in silence/In time you will be well’ (124). The text

contemplates the human conception of what the owl ‘will never know’. The only knowledge

the owl does possess, in the human’s understanding, is directly related to the human

themselves, a silent reassurance. The narrator describes feelings of ‘fear’ and ‘gladness’(125)

as they reach out to the owl. The illustrations tell a counterstory to this master narrative of

human agency. The owl, and more specifically its corporeality – feathers, claws, talons and

eyes – are endowed with vitality and meaning. Entangled with the text, Tan’s use of an

intermedial, cinematic technique is both evocative and provocative. The hard materiality of

the book in the reader’s hands seems to accentuate the imagery, framing it in dark, sharp

corners and edges. The juxtaposition of sparse, reflective prose and monumental, hyperreal

imagery creates a space where text and image bleed into each other, evoking both distance

and intimacy, horror and awe. The meaning is unclear, and the reader is both sensorially and semiotically engaged with the narrative. They can choose to enjoy the subjective pleasure of the book's creative and expressive aestheticism, or to formulate their own interpretation of the narrative, or to experience both in tandem; either way, the reader of *Tales* is endowed with a Barthesian, 'writerly' agency.

Tan utilises a similarly intermedial cinematic approach in the narrative 'Dog'. Thirteen double-page spreads feature one human and one dog in each; the human and nonhuman characters change from one image to the next, but the poses are almost identical, captured from the same overhead perspective in what resembles a cinematic reel (some examples are provided in Figs. 2.12a-c). There is an acute spatiotemporal aspect to the narrative. The initial illustration features what appears to be a tribal warrior and dog contemplating each other across vast darkness, and subsequent images progress through time and space to feature various human characters and dog breeds in forest landscapes, deserts, snowscapes, fields of crops, and urban vistas of railway lines, roads and bridges. The implication is that the reader is contemplating the same setting, but its composition and inhabitants have changed over time. Tan juxtaposes the vastness of geological time with the ephemeral nature of both human and nonhuman life, and the transience of human progress and construction. The written narrative emphasises this, referring to how 'time flowed out before us' (27), 'time passed between us' (31), and 'time is only ever running away from us' (53). This is also evident in 'Crocodile', in which the narrator ponders on how the crocodiles will 'still be here long after the traffic has ground itself back into mud' (13), and in 'Butterfly', in which the fleeting visit of the butterflies is an almost sacred experience, made more so by its 'inexplicable, joyful urgency', but one that passes quickly, leaving the humans to analyse and worry and '[wish] it could last for ever' (19).



Fig. 2.12a. 'Dog' Panel 1



Fig. 2.12b. 'Dog' Panel 5



Fig. 2.12c. 'Dog' Panel 12

Metafictive and self-reflexive techniques remind readers of their own position in space and time as they engage with the book. Reminiscent of Zapf's contention that literature has agency and is implicitly self-reflexive, at numerous junctures *Tales* concerns itself with understanding the complexities of human meaning-making. In 'Shark', the gathered crowds, the 'we' of the story, search for 'words that didn't exist' (67), an acknowledgement that not everything can be explained. In 'Lungfish', as the creatures evolve, the narrator muses on both the inability of the human to explain such an extraordinary phenomenon, and the futility in attempting to do so: 'explanation is a luxury we can't afford these days, and reality doesn't care for it, being far too busy following its own unknowable course' (150). 'Parrot' also features a contemplation on language: 'from the cradle to the grave, our lives are measured, trimmed, emboldened by words...maybe it's enough to feel we are not entirely alone in our funny little world of words, spinning through the big dark universe as we are' (169). In 'Human', the final narrative, the narrator lists each nonhuman creature that has featured in the volume, and, in the apocalyptic world he now inhabits, seems to console himself with the thought that 'at least we gave them our most beautiful words' (219). The self-reflexive

implication here is that representation through language has not been enough; that more is required of us. Tan disrupts narrative conventions: the narratives are mostly non-linear, delivered in a stream-of-consciousness style. The narrators, implied to be human, are unreliable, their pronouncements on the nature of reality, being and knowing are ambiguous and it is unclear if they are relating actual events, imagined futures or dream sequences. This, combined with Tan's critique of the power of language, forces the reader to question the sound dependability of the narrating voices, and of language in general, and consequently empowers them to question and potentially dismantle master narratives of hierarchical superiority and power. As the narratives move through times and spaces that have been affected by human progress, the reader is challenged to question if human undertakings to impose meaning on an unknowable world ever fully (or even partially) succeed.

Tan's intermedial references – to painters such as Dali ('Snails' – Fig. 2.13), Barrioquinto ('Butterflies') and Magritte ('Owl'), to scientifically-inspired illustration ('Hippo'), and to cinematic composition ('Owl'/'Dog') – invite young readers to recognise that artistic forms and materials are themselves ecological agents, part of a wider network of cultural and material exchange. Tan's hybrid aesthetic foregrounds the materiality of media – paint, pigment, print, and page – as active participants in meaning-making, collapsing distinctions between art, matter, and environment. Tan also utilises ekphrastic techniques at various points in his work. The description of the blossoming tree in 'Bee' is akin to the description of a beautiful work of art, which emphasises the both the vitality and vibrancy of the spectacle:

the tree explodes into light...it's as if the whole apartment building is breathing in, like an enormous set of steel and concrete lungs, the whole architecture of existence groaning...the sheer weight of blossomy tonnage drips down like suds from an overflowing bath, drenching the night with perfume (204).

This is a multi-sensorial ekphrastic description, appealing to the senses of sight, hearing and smell, and is reminiscent of Sainsbury's concept of 'botanical inhalation': how flowers, trees and shrubs breathe life into the worlds springing before them in visual narratives, the 'biospheric potential' of children's literature. Intermedially, his work stages encounters between visual and verbal codes that unsettle habitual ways of seeing, compelling readers to question anthropocentric hierarchies embedded in cultural representation. In this way, *Tales* exemplifies the transformative potential of intermedial art: by revealing the interconnectedness of artistic, material, and ecological systems, it challenges young readers to reimagine 'nature' and 'culture' as co-constitutive and inseparable.



Fig. 2.13 'Snails'

2.1.vii. Ideology, Ethics and the Urban/Natural Divide

Tan is renowned for the open-ended nature of his work; narrative incompleteness is a distinctive feature of his output. By virtue of its playful, questioning and often parodic nature, *Tales* demonstrates a predilection for certain aspects of postmodernism. However, there also exists a somewhat more complex, contradictory element: an ambiguity not unlike that within

postmodernism itself, but possessed of more salient ethical leanings, which indicate an occasionally heavy-handed, ideological approach. Tan, at times, whole-heartedly embraces a ‘harbinger of doom’ position: an apocalyptic, eco-phobic vision of a world on the brink of destruction, which lends the feel of ‘cautionary tales’ to some of the narratives. His tendency to proportion blame reinforces perceptions of a battle between nature and humanity, and redefines the boundaries that he has otherwise successfully blurred in his contemplation of materiality, nonhuman agency, and cultural and natural enmeshment.

‘Dog’, for example, presents an apocalyptic warning: ‘But now everything is different. The river flows wrongly, the plains are gone, the sky presses down like a thousand ceilings. It feels like time is only ever running away from us. Where will we go? What will we do?’ (53). In ‘Lungfish’, the human protagonists ‘wearily munch on unethical dinners’ (151), feel ‘embarrassment about our own faded to-do lists and unmet ideals’ (ibid.), and ‘[a]ll asleep to flickering images of global disaster and plaintive calls for action’ (152), while the rapidly evolving lungfish ‘present illustrated lectures on climate change’ (151). There is little evidence here of Tan’s usual restrained nuance; the message is moralistic and judgmental. ‘Rhino’ (104 -107), one of the shortest written narratives in the book, comprising only eight lines, describes how men shoot a rhino dead because it is blocking the motorway, and then feel guilty because they did not know it was ‘the last one’ (105). This seems to be a thinly veiled reprimand on practices of poaching and human disregard for endangered species, which although noble and worthwhile in its admonition, is nonetheless considerably less subtle than some of the other narratives in the anthology. While the bluntness of ‘Rhino’ may be justified by the urgency of its subject – the brutal immediacy of extinction and human complicity – it risks limiting the reader’s interpretive engagement by offering moral clarity rather than ambiguity. In contrast to the more nuanced allegories elsewhere in the anthology, this directness provokes an immediate ethical response but leaves less space for reflective,

imaginative participation. Thus, Tan's approach here underscores the tension between didactic impact and aesthetic subtlety, raising questions about how best to mobilise affect and awareness in confronting ecological violence.

Tan reserves his most moralistic judgement for the concluding narrative in the volume, 'Human'. This is a decidedly apocalyptic tale, in which the human protagonist, returned to a simian state in a decimated world, questions

Why were we so cruel and callous, so selfish and separate, so *lonely* on this high band of rock? Only now, too late, do we remember quietly the things that bind all brothers and sisters in sediment, each husk and bone much the same carbonate as any other (219).

Here, Tan simultaneously acknowledges the entanglement of the human and nonhuman, referring to the shared material composition of their physical make-up, while also proportioning blame for their mutual downfall squarely on 'cruel... callous...selfish ...separate' human shoulders. His ominous pronouncements – that many would argue may prove prophetic – nonetheless reinforce a 'them vs us' master narrative of both division and control. He foresees a world in which humans will only realise – or recall – their entanglement with the nonhuman world when it is too late; this represents a profoundly moralistic admonition.

Also contradictory to Tan's post-pastoral conceptions of the natural are his decidedly pastoral imaginings of the rural and the urban. There are several negative references to 'the city' or urban life, which imply that the true majesty and materiality of nature is only accessible beyond the city confines. In 'Bear', the human legal team is described as having 'spent their entire working life in a city, [knowing] nothing more than the contents of human filing cabinets and libraries. Which were only ever written by humans, it turned out. And meant very little to the rest of the world, it turned out' (176). The ideology is even more explicit in 'Pigeon', where the narrator declares, 'from this vast basin, a great forest will bloom, drawing

to it all the life that had once been pushed to near-extinction by urban pretension: every plant, fungus, insect, bird, lizard and mammal, coming home to rebuild their radiant green world as rivers resume their course' (197). There is no implication here – it is explicitly stated that 'urban pretension' has destroyed the natural, and that salvation can only be found in an Arcadian, 'Garden of Eden' idyll or a great reckoning, followed by a type of 'reset', where the natural world will flourish again. The 'urban' is painted as flawed, unnatural, the source of much damage. By contrast, only the wilderness can redeem us. Tan's urban depiction is, at times, problematic, reinforcing the idea that the natural does not exist in the urban, is incompatible with it and that, when the natural appears in the urban, it is only as part of a dream-like, imagined utopia, reminiscent of pastoral conceptions of 'retreat and return'.

Although his language has been demonstrated to be materially evocative and symbolically rich, with metaphors possessed of an ontic presence of their own, it is evident that Tan occasionally cannot resist the temptation to utilise the written narrative in the communication of a moral or ideological message, either implicitly or explicitly. This research contends that in *Tales*, Tan's most powerful ecological insights arise not from overt moralisation but from moments of quiet estrangement – the gentle, contemplative form of defamiliarisation that Tan often employs – and reflective wonder, where the boundaries between human and nonhuman subtly dissolve. By ascribing agency to the nonhuman, and undermining human/nonhuman dualisms, he delivers a counterstory, a disruptive narrative-creating rhetorical device, which contradicts and rejects established master narratives of power, oppression and control, such as pervasive and prevailing Cartesian understandings. His contemplative imagery and lyrical minimalism evident in some of the narratives discussed in earlier sections of this chapter have the potential to encourage young readers to linger in ambiguity, fostering empathy and challenging perceptions through imaginative immersion rather than didactic instruction.

2.2. The Fate of Fausto

2.2.i. Overview of the Book

The Fate of Fausto (2019), henceforth abbreviated to *Fausto*, is a picturebook created by Oliver Jeffers in 2015, and published in 2019¹⁴. Described on its dust-jacket as ‘a painted fable’, the narrative follows the titular character Fausto, an arrogant and self-important human, and his interactions with various nonhuman entities, including a flower, a sheep, a mountain and the sea, in his quest to claim each of these entities as his own. The book is approximately ninety (unnumbered)¹⁵ pages in length and is unusually sized – smaller and weightier than the typical picturebook format. Its sturdy hardback cover and firm pages provide durability to the book, while its smaller size allows for ease of access and manipulation by the hands of the young reader. The narrative is presented in syntactically uncomplicated prose – set by hand using traditional lead type – and vivid illustrations, rendered in a sparse colour palate and interspersed with expansive blank spaces. It grapples with themes of desire, colonialism, self-destruction and environmentalism. Critics have described it as ‘a meditation on the absurdity of ownership’ (Popova, 2019) ‘a self-conscious warning about the risks of people at their most venal and corrupt’ (O’Reilly, in interview with Jeffers, 2019) and ‘a cautionary fable on the banality of belligerence’ (Kirkus Reviews, 2019). Jeffers himself has commented that the book was ‘written in a stream of consciousness style, in one go’ (in interview with Diazgranados, 2023).

The titular character is named after Faust, the protagonist of the classic German legend (c1587), who, dissatisfied with the finite limits on man's potential, sells his soul to the devil

¹⁴ See Section 2.2.vii. for commentary on the publication delay.

¹⁵ For referencing purposes, I have assigned page numbers to *Fausto* in chronological order, commencing with the dedication page as P.1 and concluding with the Heller anecdote page, P.86.

in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. The legend of Faust was brought to further public attention with the staging of Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, commonly referred to simply as *Doctor Faustus*, in Britain in the late sixteenth century. Over two centuries later, the legend was once again re-worked by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) in his early nineteenth-century tragic play *Faust*. Goethe combined realism with symbolism, as well as utilising various diverse poetic and literary forms and styles in his tragedy of arrogance, unfulfilled desire and self-delusion. Due in no small part to the legacy of both plays, the character of Faust/Faustus remains an iconic figure in Western literature; Jeffers' choice of name for his titular character is, accordingly, not random or coincidental, but rather one that points to and draws upon celebrated mythological and literary history.

The prominent description of the narrative as 'a painted fable' on its dust cover is one that demands further interrogation, in its inherent suggestion that *Fausto* is an explicit moral admonition. The fable is one of the most enduring forms of folk literature, particularly in the oral tradition of storytelling, and notably has performed the function of simultaneously highlighting and juxtaposing human folly and the wisdom of the natural world. Fables have historically featured anthropomorphised animals, inanimate objects and natural forces, and are prominent in the storytelling traditions of diverse cultures and eras, from Ancient Greece to Europe in the Middle Ages, Africa, India, and contemporary Anglophone narratives. The fable is most notably characterised by the moral 'lesson' it espouses, often succinctly outlined at the story's end in a single line or expression, as is the case with Aesop's Fables, which are among the better-known examples of the genre. Originally intended for adult audiences, the philosopher John Locke advocated for fables as appropriate and valuable literature for children in his 1693 treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Aesop's Fables, he opined, are 'apt to delight and entertain a child ... yet afford useful reflection to a grown man.

And if his memory retain them all his life after, he will not repent to find them there, amongst his manly thoughts and serious business' (Par. 156, 1996 [1693]). Fables continue to enjoy enduring popularity in children's literature, but their pedagogical – and, some might say, didactic – underpinnings raise valid questions on the relations between aesthetics and instruction in the literature. The characterisation of *Fausto* as a fable by its author/illustrator and publishers is thus very relevant to this dissertation and is further discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

2.2.ii. Oliver Jeffers – Background and Creative Output

Born in Australia, Oliver Jeffers grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and currently lives and works between Belfast and Brooklyn, New York. His creative output includes painting, bookmaking, illustration, collage, performance and sculpture. Described as 'a publishing titan' (O'Reilly, 2019), Jeffers is most widely known for his picturebooks, which have received widespread critical acclaim and have been translated into over fifty languages and sold over 14 million copies worldwide. He is the recipient of numerous awards including a New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books Award and a BolognaRagazzi Award. *How to Catch a Star* (2004) was shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal in 2006, and *The Incredible Eating Boy* (2007) was the recipient of the Irish Book Awards Children's Book of the Year in 2007. Many of his picturebooks frequently feature on bestsellers lists, both in Ireland and internationally. His biography on his official website lists 'curiosity' and 'humour' as underlying themes throughout his practice as an artist and storyteller, and states that 'While investigating the ways the human mind understands its world, his work also functions as comic relief in the face of futility' (Biography, n.d.). Interestingly, Jeffers has stated on numerous occasions that he did not set out to become a children's book writer or illustrator (in interviews with Diazgranados, 2023; Conroy, 2017; Dean, 2016); however,

when he formulated the idea for *How to Catch a Star* (2004), ‘the children’s book form simply fit its aims’ (in interview with Dean, 2016). Jeffers states that ‘[My books] weren’t really made with an idea of what a contemporary audience of children might want to hear, but they were more to satisfy my own sense of curiosity’ (ibid.). Long before Jeffers published his first children’s book, he was, self-admittedly, preoccupied with the interaction of word and image; combining the two is a feature of many of his adult-oriented projects, including his ‘seascape’ series. Jeffers comments:

I started putting words on these images at a really early point because I just thought that it was a cool graphic device and you could do interesting things by complimenting or contrasting what the image was showing. By doing that, you could effectively create a completely different meaning, piece of work, all together [sic], a completely different story (interview with Dean, 2016).

Jeffers’ comments here demonstrate his appreciation of the iconotext – the enmeshment of word and image – and his understanding that word and image are not separate narrative devices, but intra-acting narratives that together create ‘a different meaning’ and ‘a different story’. This analysis of *Fausto* reveals the multi-dimensional and multi-faceted relations between the words and illustrations in the book, justifying its characterisation as an iconotext. It also demonstrates the intra-action of material, paratextual and post-representational elements with the iconotext, revealing *Fausto* as a performative ensemble.

2.2.iii. ‘Understanding’ and Human/Nonhuman Communication and Meaning-making

Three stark illustrations confront the reader on the front hardcover and title page of *Fausto*: a flower, a mountain and a lake (Fig. 2.14). The images are elemental in nature; one represents the earth (mountain), one the water (lake) and the other (flower) nonhuman life, which is sustained by earth and water, a precursive inclination to ideas of natural enmeshment that are

further explored as the narrative progresses. All three are portrayed as sentient in the narrative. The flower and mountain speak in human language, and while the lake does not speak, it ‘pretend[s] not to hear’ (20) – its capacity to ‘pretend’ an indication of a human-like consciousness or affectation. Fausto also engages dialogically with a sheep, a tree and the sea, with whom he has the most protracted conversation. Each interaction affords an identity to the nonhuman character. Further to Fausto’s quest for ownership of nature, is the idea of ownership of identity. The reader is encouraged to contemplate if ‘identity’ is a concept solely attributed to the human. As Barad asks, ‘what are the theories that humans have invented to bring into existence human-centred notions of identity?’ (2007, 29).

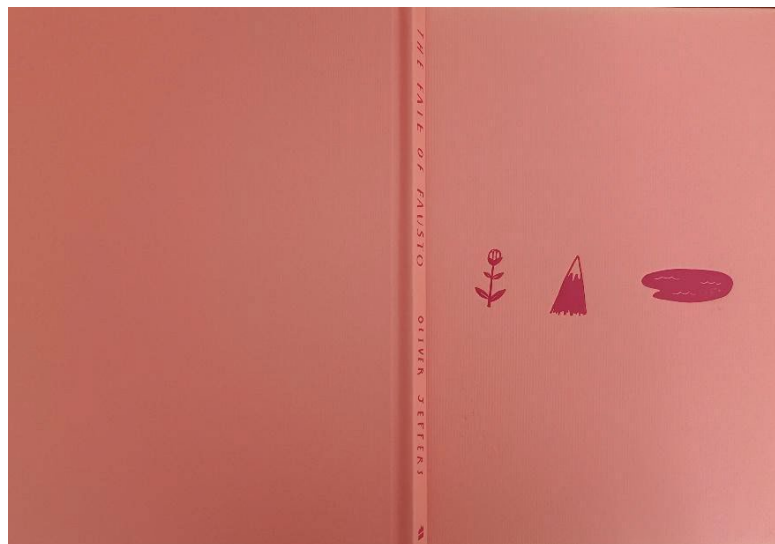


Fig. 2.14. Hardcover

Fausto’s world is one in which mountains and seas are not natural spaces but are anthropomorphically reimagined as animate beings with quasi-human qualities, not only in their ability to speak human language but also, in the case of the mountain, human-like facial expressions and limbs (Fig. 2.15). Jeffers appears to be aware of potentially narcissistic, anthropocentric motives in employing anthropomorphism as a technique. His depiction of the sentient, speaking nonhuman entities is quite metafictional in nature, emphasising the human’s hubristic but delusional notions of hierarchy, while also mocking the idea of language as a

measure of superiority as, ultimately, the nonhuman entities revert to their silent, natural state, uncaring of and unaffected by the fate of the loquacious Fausto. Their indifference to Fausto's downfall decentres the human, revealing a world that persists beyond human control and inviting young readers to recognise nature as active and self-sustaining rather than passive or possessable. Yet this same silence risks reinforcing the human/nonhuman divide by rendering nature distant and unknowable. Jeffers' conclusion therefore stages a productive tension between humility and separation: while it challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, it also exposes the difficulty of depicting nonhuman agency without reasserting human estrangement. Within a material ecocritical framework, this ambiguity is potentially transformative in how it prompts readers to reconsider the limits of human perception and to imagine more reciprocal and relational ways of existing within the naturalcultural world.

Fausto appears to observe a 'Great Chain' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) hierarchy in his interactions with his nonhuman counterparts. His attempts at possession are in order of size, beginning with the smallest, the flower, and concluding with the vastest, sea. The smallest is the most easily captured and Fausto experiences increasing levels of difficulty as he engages with more physically imposing nonhuman entities. The child reader, as a physically smaller human entity than an adult, may consequently position him/herself as this easily apprehended, mastered 'other'. *Fausto* suggests that the small and fragile, like the flower or the sheep, are more likely to yield to authority without resistance.

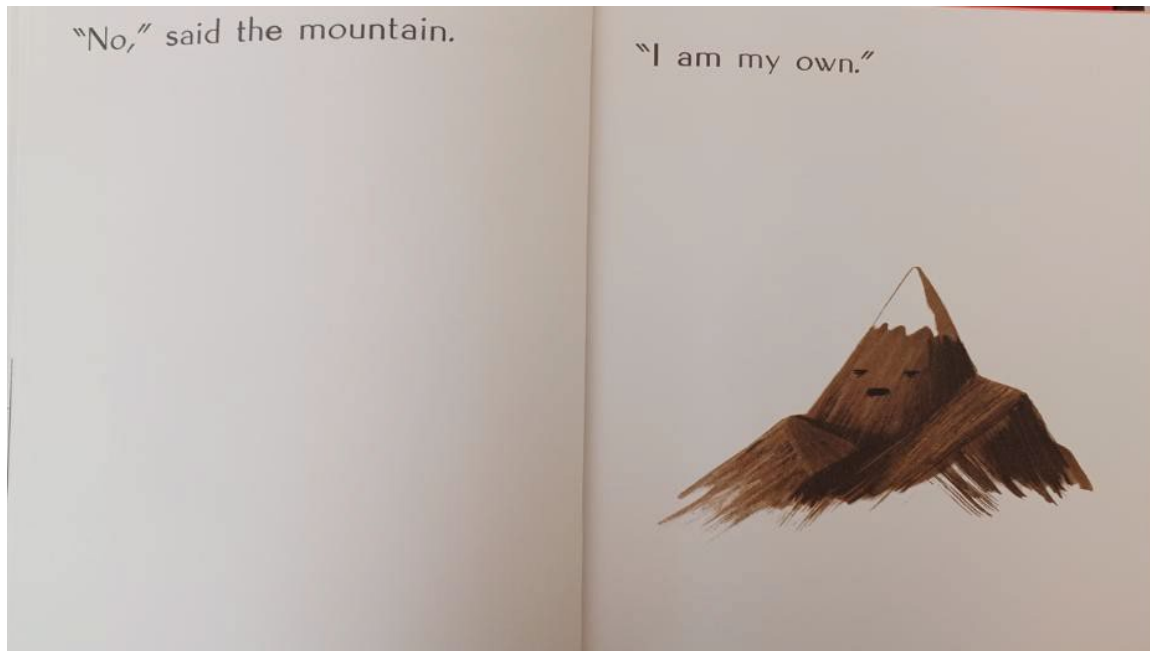


Fig. 2.15.

The communicative interactions of human and nonhuman demonstrate Jeffers' efforts to deconstruct these hierarchies and deliver a more nuanced and ecologically sensitive anthropomorphising. In his consideration of the hierarchical relation of images and words, Mitchell describes this relation as a struggle for 'cultural domination in which the 'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object" (1994, 157). Jeffers' iconotext parallels with Fausto's quest for worldly domination, as the normally passive, silent 'background' image of nature in the picturebook now acquires a human voice. Animals in children's picturebooks are often depicted as speaking creatures, but mountains/lakes/the sea are rarely represented as 'living' in terms of their ability to communicate or 'understand'. Jeffers is clearly concerned with the concept of understanding, and how it relates to 'love'; an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the observation of philosopher Erich Fromm (1900-1980) that understanding and loving are inseparable, the core concept of his 1956 work *The Art of Loving* (although Fromm, as a humanist, was more concerned with social and cultural systems than natural ones). Jeffers explores 'understanding' by playing with the idea of nature utilising our own

semiotic system of language. As Fausto interacts with the sea, the narrative develops from talk of ‘ownership’ to ‘love’ and ‘understanding’. Even though the text is sparse, the word ‘understand’ is repeated four times over twelve pages, finishing with a double-page spread that is entirely blank but for the single, impactful sentence: ‘But he did not understand’ (69). A fundamental premise of material ecocriticism is its concern with the connections between the physical realm and meaning processes. Jeffers’ narrative ponders on how meaning can be made if we do not understand each other. Do we understand nature’s codes, its communicative agency and its signifying power? Jeffers plays with the idea of language as our ‘sign’ that bridges meaning. The reader is encouraged to ponder what that ‘sign’ may be when there is no human language to aid interpretation.

The depiction of the nonhuman speaking in human language risks a propensity towards a linguistic ecocentrism. This, as Zapf argues, ‘assumes an unbroken continuity between nature and language and thus evades the crucial question of translation, mediation and alterity that remains ineradicably present in ecological thought and literature’ (2016, 65). Sainsbury notes that ‘the question of language has long played around the limits of human and nonhuman being and the (in)ability to speak is central to many metaphysical systems that exclude animals and other entities’ (2021, 121). Berger, for example, observes that an animal’s ‘lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its exclusion, from and of man...the animal scrutinises [the human] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension’ (2009, 5). What is emphasised in *Fausto*, however, is the irony of man’s inability to understand the nonhuman, *even though* it is speaking his language. Barad contends that ‘we don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world’ (2007, 185). The character of Fausto is observably ‘standing outside’. This is depicted both linguistically, through his autocratic and intimidating proclamations – ‘Tree, you are mine/Mountain, you are mine’ (13, 24) – and artistically, in his arrogant, haughty stance as he confronts the

nonhuman (Fig 2.16). Jeffers presents a communicational ambiguity in which linguistic egocentrism is questioned. Fausto's interaction with the sea demonstrates that communication, in the truest sense of the word, transcends words, and 'understanding' is not predicated upon a mutually accessible vernacular. Such an observation is both meta-discursive and post-representational in nature. It recognises the agential realist position that 'intelligibility...is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently' (Barad, 2007, 149).



Fig. 2.16.

2.2.iv. 'Understanding' and 'Being': The Nonhuman as Other and the Motif of the Sea

Fausto's quest for power is that between 'self' and 'other': a power play which, as Sainsbury observes, reveals 'ontological tensions' in books for young people. Sainsbury proposes the concept of 'ontological exchange' as 'an ontic meeting of self and other during which being is tested and made aware of its status as being' (2021, 16). The ontological exchange recounts a moment when solitary childhood is confronted by the realisation that '[u]nfortunately, I have to share the world with you. We are here together, and this *togetherness* is inescapable'

(Beauvais, 2015, 103). Sainsbury remarks that '[a]s they are presented in children's literature, such moments are by turn epiphanic, motivational, reassuring, reflective, uncomfortable, perplexing or disturbing and recognise that the process of being human in the world is complex' (2021, 19). These moments can include a situation in which 'being asserts, or defends itself, against a threat from the other' (ibid, 17). The sea and Fausto participate in an uncomfortable and perplexing ontological exchange, during which the sea initially appears to defend itself against the menace of Fausto's human hubris, but, ultimately, poses the greater threat to the human. Thus, both sea and human are alternately positioned as 'self' and 'other'. The reader becomes aware of the sea's status as being, not through its ability to speak Fausto's language, but rather its ability to 'understand' on a more fundamental and philosophical level; Fausto's demise follows the laws of physics, which the sea 'knows', but Fausto seems not to. We are told that 'he did not know how to swim' (73), which raises questions on the nature of knowledge. Jeffers articulation is notable here: 'did not know' as opposed to 'could not', highlighting that an innate capability in the nonhuman aquatic animal is a learned skill in the human. This is a commentary on hierarchies of knowledge and a contemplation of the extent to which 'ability', in this case the ability to swim, is an ontic or an epistemic matter. Jeffers use of the word 'deeply' also highlights an ontic/epistemic dichotomy. Fausto claims to understand the sea 'deeply' (61) – a declaration of his depth of knowledge. But it is 'depth' in the ontic sense that is Fausto's undoing. His 'deep' knowledge of the sea is unmatched by the depth of the sea itself. Knowing, as Barad claims, is part of being. In somewhat morbid fashion, Fausto comes to know more about the sea through his *intra-action* with it, as he sinks *deeply* in it, than through his spoken *interaction* with it, during which he claimed to understand it *deeply*.

The sea is a particularly apt motif in representing this anthropocentric reckoning. Physically comprising the vast majority of our planet, the sea accommodates much of nature's life-

sustaining agencies. The great seas, as observed by Zapf, ‘are a subterranean energy field which connects beginning and ending, life and death, past and present’ (2016, 32). Water, as one of the four elements, forms part of ‘a deep cultural memory of the primary embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman world of material nature’ and is a source domain for some of ‘the most ancient metaphors of creative inspiration and energy’ (Zapf, 2016, 177;180). The sea matches Latour’s description of an ‘actant’: ‘something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general’ (1996, 370). Bennett’s description of matter uses adjectives that are all reminiscent of the sea: ‘vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory’ (2010, 2). The sea, in all its vitality, resists configurations of nature as a ‘blind mechanism’ and is the very embodiment of matter that is ‘governed by an emergent rather than a ...deterministic causality’ (ibid.). Coccia contends that ‘life has never abandoned fluid space – terra firma is just the extreme limit of this cosmic fluid at the heart of which everything communicates, touches, extends’ (2018, 35). Physicist Helen Czerski describes the ocean as ‘an enormous engine, turning heat energy into motion’. Yet, she claims, ‘[p]eople talk about fish and whales and pollution. They talk about the things in the ocean. Almost nobody talks about the [physical reality of] the ocean itself’ (2023, in interview with Schiffman). The sea is a recurring motif in countless films and literary works, although the focus is, more often than not, on what the sea provides or threatens humanity with. It is alternately presented as an arena for cultural activity, a sustaining source of life, and/or an apocalyptic threat; dystopian and disaster narratives frequently feature an all-powerful, agentic sea, rising and expanding in tsunamic fashion to swallow humanity into its dark abyss. Thus, the sea is understood and portrayed as an ambivalent force: beautiful and cruel, creative and destructive.

Symbols and motifs of water and the sea are also inextricably linked to the exploitative practices of colonialism. As Demos notes, ‘mastery over the natural world is ultimately a

colonial stance and our concepts of nature and ecology are intricately linked to the history of European colonialism' (2016, 14). Narratives of colonialism are also enmeshed with conceptions of the other. The onslaught of Western imperialism has left a traumatic legacy on Indigenous peoples around the world. Colonial powers, entrenched in powerful positions of ontological privilege, have presided over the extraction of resources from the land, the procurement of exploitative cheap labour and the general oppression of entire social and cultural groups in what many have argued constitutes cultural genocide. In her interesting study of the ontic function of baby books, Sainsbury explores links between children's tendency to collect and catalogue objects as a rudimentary way of ordering the outside world. She argues that, in spite of the signs of colonial imperative in this 'mastery' and 'manipulation', the act of collecting is not necessarily a way of eliding material bodies; such cataloguing and collecting, she argues, is 'an ontic project that resists mastery and realises material objects of the external world' (2021, 73). For the young child, therefore, collecting is less about 'having' and more about 'knowing' and 'being'. The character of Fausto can be described as a collector, in the colonial sense. His ultimate downfall, however, lies not in his act of collecting, his attempt to put his own order on the world, but in his lack of 'knowing' and 'understanding' that which he sought to collect. A double-page spread (41-2, Fig. 2.17a) depicting Fausto as he sails out to sea, left hand shading his eyes from the sun as he boldly contemplates his potential acquisitions, is a physical and literal embodiment of the colonial stance. The subsequent double-page spread (53-4, Fig 2.17b) depicts the significantly diminished, miniscule figure of Fausto in his boat amidst a vast expanse of ocean that bleeds to the edge of the page and even beyond; the parallel image of the sea on the dust jacket that surrounds the double-page spread as the reader beholds it presents the apparition of a sea that cannot be contained by the page. The narrator informs the reader that the voice of the sea 'appeared to come from everywhere' (52), emphasising its almost spiritual omnipresence. An

exchange of power has occurred here. Jeffers critiques civilisation's fantasies of hierarchy and supremacy and simultaneously reactivates the sea's elemental energy, emphasising both its agency and its predatory nature, which are both misunderstood by Fausto.



Fig 2.17a.

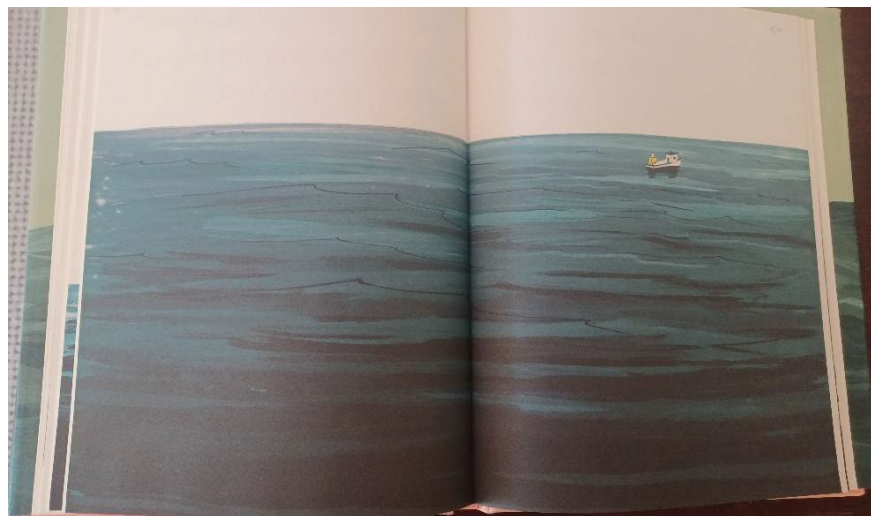


Fig 2.17b.

As previously observed, the sentience of the sea, and of the other nonhuman entities in the narrative, is reflective of Indigenous concepts of animism. In his depiction of the nonhuman in *Fausto*, Jeffers harnesses the understanding in many Indigenous storytelling traditions and cultures that all natural phenomena, including human beings, animals, and plants, but also nonhuman matter such as rocks, lakes, mountains, soil and weather, possess a vital, spiritual

quality and energy. The sea is depicted here as particularly possessed of this mysterious agency and vitality. This is represented in both textual and visual form as it ‘speaks’ of love and understanding, and embodies both stillness and rhythmic vitality, depicted in graduating shades of swirling blues; an ominous but strangely beautiful and animate character that transcends understandings of the sea or ‘nature’ as mere setting or backdrop to human activity.

Consequently, the sea in *Fausto* presents not as the radical other of the human, but as the radical other of human *anthropocentrism*. Paralleled with this is the otherness of the discourse; the dialogic discourse between Fausto and the sea contrasts with an imaginative counter-discourse that undermines Fausto’s ‘civilizational project of absolute supremacy over nature’ (Zapf, 2016, 117) and contemplates our human existence as ‘temporary constellations of matter in an impartial universe of constant flux’ (Popova, 2019). As Fausto experiences a watery demise, the reader is reminded of the sea’s ontological status: ‘The sea was sad for him, but carried on *being* the sea’ (75-6, my emphasis). Similarly, the mountain, the lake, the forest, the field, the tree, the sheep and the flower carry on as before, ‘for the fate of Fausto did not matter to them’ (81-3). Although the nonhuman entities are no longer engaged in a dialogic conversation with the human, their ‘infinite semiosis’ that ‘resists and transcends all forms of discursive appropriation’ (Zapf, 2016, 109) is revealed. The final simple but stark image (84; Fig 2.18) of a newly regrown flower (alongside the remnants of the flower plucked earlier by Fausto to fasten to his lapel) emphasises both the agency and semiosis of the nonhuman, in its capability to reproduce, and its ontological being; Fausto is no longer present to observe the flower, or to engage with it, but it exists, regardless. Jeffers employs subtle metafictional devices here. The reader is empowered to contemplate the metaphysical reality of the natural world, the book as a *representation* of this reality and their own ontological status as observer. The human has disappeared from the world of *Fausto* on the

page, yet the human reader continues to exist, observing and contemplating the natural world in the story from their physical position beyond the page.

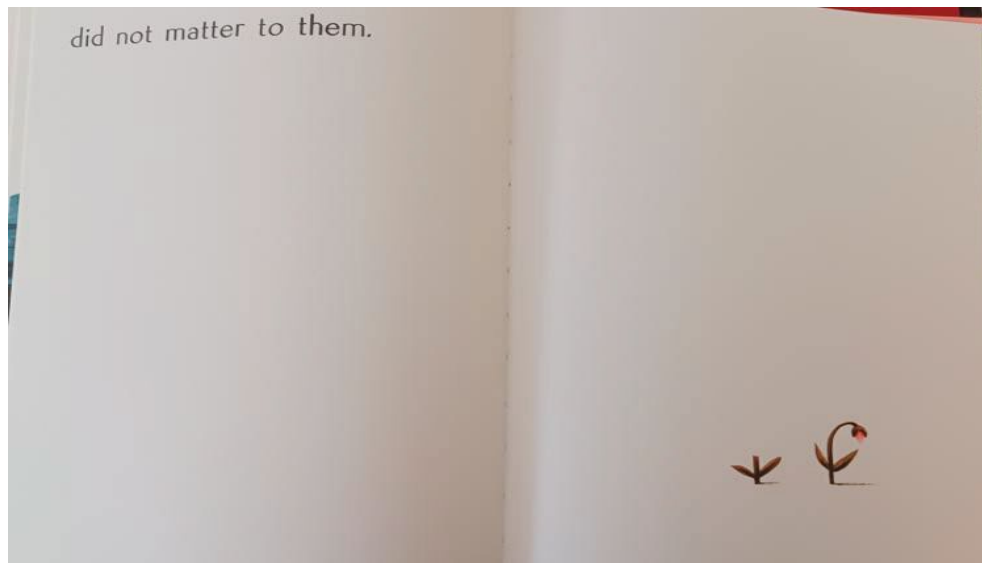


Fig. 2.18.

2.2.v. 'Us' and 'The Planet'

Jeffers has commented that

the point of the book is that saving the planet is the wrong story: we must save ourselves. The planet was here long before us. It's ourselves and every other species that we put in harm's way with overconsumption. The planet will be fine (in interview with O'Reilly, 2019).

This statement, while acknowledging the ontological status of nature and the nonhuman, also, however, reimagines boundaries between 'us' and 'the planet'. His claim that 'the planet will be fine' but that 'we must save ourselves' implies that *we* are not part of the planet, that culture and nature stand as two diametrically opposed entities and that 'saving ourselves' is entirely removed from our direct material engagement with the world. Jeffers' statement on his work reinforces ideas of 'otherness' that, one might claim, is reflected in the denouement of his narrative. Ultimately, it appears here that the human and the nonhuman are unable to co-exist in the world of the narrative. The sea seems predatory, representing an ecophobic understanding of the natural world that has influenced the plotlines of much of the corpus of

environmental dystopian fiction and film. The world of *Fausto* appears a calmer, more balanced one once the human character meets his demise, which, as implied by the title of the narrative, has been 'predestined', an ominous apocalyptic metaphor. The sun shines brightly, the sheep grazes peacefully, the tree is no longer bowed in servitude and a new flower has bloomed. The elimination of the hubristic, domineering human appears to have immeasurably benefited the nonhuman world.

Jeffers' use of literary devices such as metafictional approaches and multiperspectival narration challenge any simplistic reading of the story's ending, however, even if his comments on his own work indicate that such a non-nuanced interpretation is intentional. The central narrative of *Fausto* is focalised through a third-person narrator, but also through the interactive dialogue between the character of Fausto and the nonhuman entities, which destabilises hierarchies. In Fausto's encounter with the nonhuman other, the reader is enabled to position themselves as this 'other', envisioning the world from its perspective and empathising with its predicament. The reader can also, however, position themselves as Fausto. When Fausto declares his love for the sea, we are informed by the narrator 'But Fausto was lying, and the sea knew it' (57-8). Here, however, the reader might pause to question the narrator's declaration. Perhaps Fausto does feel love, but it is impeded by his lack of understanding? Similarly, his downfall was not as a result of an evil or destructive act against the other, but once again because of his lack of understanding of it, which renders the reader sympathetic to his fate. Accordingly, the emphasis shifts from 'good nonhuman/bad human' to *understanding*. *Fausto* emphasises that 'difference cannot be taken for granted; it matters – indeed, it is what matters' (Barad, 2007, 136). It also foregrounds how an understanding of commonality and difference is crucial and that such an understanding can only be achieved through direct intra-action with and as part of the world. This is redolent of Goethe's *Faust*, when angels, who arrive as messengers of divine mercy, declare at the end of Act V: 'He who

strives on and lives to strive / Can earn redemption still' (Part 2, V, 11936–7). Fausto, like Faust, was not beyond redemption. Hence, *Fausto* transcends the baddie/goodie trope, detectable in some works of conventional children's literature. Yes, Fausto was selfish and controlling, but he also lacked understanding – or did not *strive* to understand – and so his fate elicits some sympathy. This creates an uncertainty and indeterminacy in the narrative. Such uncertainties, Zapf argues, 'create a textual space for otherness that alone can break up the sermonizing monologues of missionary (eco-) politics' (2016, 60). In this sense, the reader does not passively receive meaning from *Fausto*, but rather, actively participates in its construction. *Fausto* enables what Rosenblatt would designate as an aesthetic reading: depending on their own social, emotional or geographical context, each reader might interpret the actions of Fausto, the nonhuman entities he encounters, the sea and the narrative's ending differently. *Fausto*'s narrative openness enables young readers to participate actively in shaping its meaning, positioning them as co-creators in exploring the interrelated dynamics that foster ecological understanding and awareness.

2.2.vi. Materiality and Aesthetic Design and Structure

The openness of *Fausto*'s meaning, as discussed in the previous section, emerges through several aspects of how the book is made and experienced. These include its material form, visual style, and design; the ways it blends and refers to different media; and the wider context of its creation – the spaces, times, and cultural and political conditions that shape how it is read.

Jeffers' aesthetic processes function in *Fausto* 'like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourses' (Zapf, 2016, 3) and these processes themselves emphasise interrelatedness and diversity, connectivity and singularity. The book was created using a

200-year-old lithography¹⁶ press in Paris and Jeffers enlisted typographer David Pearson who used ‘Chambord Maigre’, a 1945 type, for the book’s typeface. Pearson has stated that this type was chosen ‘to provide a simple, elemental appearance...and also for its connection to France, where Oliver’s art was created’ (in interview with Steven, 2019). The imagery and the typeface are thus not only intricately connected in their telling of the narrative but also represent a particular place and time. Pearson relates the rumour that the typeface was stolen in 1945 from one French typographer, Charles Peignot, by another, Roger Excoffon, meaning the foundry of the latter typeface designer (Fonderie Olive in Marseilles) could claim the typeface as their own. Thus, as Pearson contends, the typeface itself ‘echoes the book’s themes of greed and power’ (ibid.). The Chambord Maigre typeface had never been digitised and was set by hand, giving the entire book the weight and heft of an older, more classic story. Its use in the narrative was, Pearson reveals, ‘a painstaking process’, but one that he argues ‘adds to the book’s carefully crafted feel’ (ibid.) The typeface is an artistic image in itself: the ink density is unstable, with some characters more boldly and densely printed on the page, while other characters are faded or incomplete (Fig 2.19). The ‘ink dry back’ process is evident as spots and imperfections are visible in the text, which connects the reader to the material process of creation. The text seems to sit heavily and impactfully on the paper, which has a notably thicker, weightier opacity. Unlike most of Jeffers’ previous picturebooks, in which his hand-lettered text is visibly integrated with the image on the page, Pearson’s typeface very visibly stands apart. This, Pearson argues, ‘allow[s] it to feel vast when it needs to, and grant[s] small details the space they need to pull focus and feel significant’ (ibid.). The reader’s eye is drawn more sharply to the starkly indented type than may be the case with Jeffers’ other narratives, but, nonetheless, type and image complement each other. This may

¹⁶ In the lithographic process, ink is applied to a grease-treated image on the flat printing surface, and blank areas, which hold moisture, repel the lithographic ink. This inked surface is then printed by means of a special press.

be partly due to the aforementioned relation between the lithographic process and the Chambord Maigre type, but can also be attributed to Jeffers' innovative use of blank space. This aesthetic choice parallels with thematic questions about ownership, desolation, exclusion and absence, and also highlights the stark materiality of the book; the shade, texture and weight of the paper, its scent; its very material existence and the indentation of the typeface upon it. While the aesthetic effect of Jeffers' design choices is apparent, one could also point out that the inclusion of copious blank spaces and pages does not align easily with the book's overarching environmental thematic concerns. *Fausto* is a relatively short narrative, but comprises approximately ninety pages, which, (as in Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*), highlights the amount of paper used in the publication process.

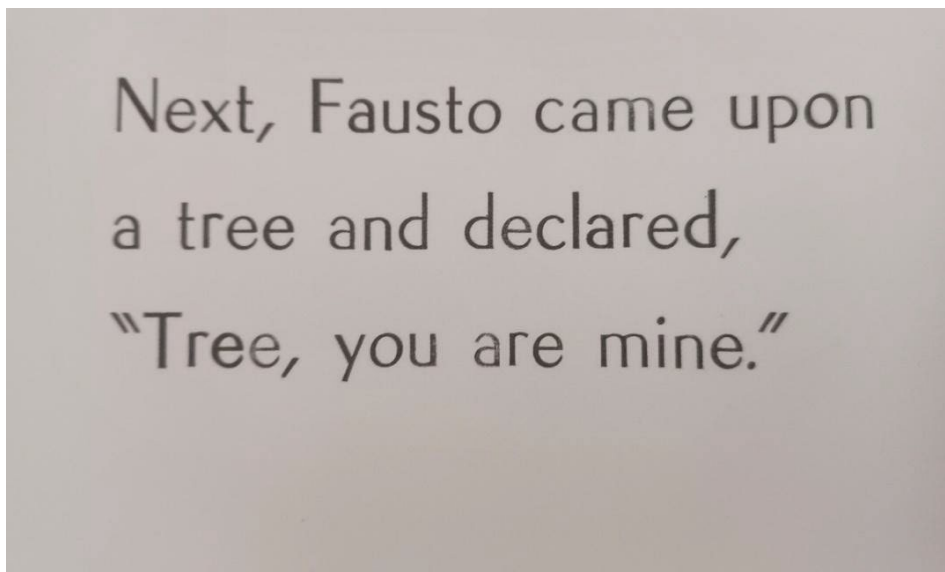


Fig. 2.19. Typeface

One double-page spread (33-4) is an expanse of blank space, punctuated only by the solitary word 'Eventually', followed by a comma (Fig. 2.20). This spread immediately follows Fausto's tantrum in response to the mountain's refusal to allow him to take ownership of it. The pause of the heavily indented comma seems to carry extra weight on these blank pages. The mountain pauses, the narrator pauses, Fausto pauses, and the reader pauses. There is a communal holding of breath, an entanglement of all agents, as they await the turn of the page

and the continuation of the narrative. Sainsbury notes how the picturebook, as a form, ‘pays careful attention to the boundaries, which are evoked through spatially aware illustrations’ (2021, 119). ‘Being-with’, she continues, ‘can never successfully be achieved under the conditions of imprisonment and control’ (ibid, 120). *Fausto* does not contain its characters with boundaries. Neither does it contain its reader. In stark contrast to the titular character’s endeavour to control everything around him, the aesthetic design of the book itself emphasises freedom. The expansive use of blank space allows the reader to pause, to contemplate and to predict, lending the reader agency in their reading experience. The book becomes more than an object, but a phenomenon, in the Baradian sense, emerging as a result of intra-actions between creator, story, artefact and reader. There is a ‘fundamental inseparability’ at play here, in which this agency is realised. Paralleling Morton’s description of a poem as a ‘little ecology’, *Fausto* ‘can talk, more or less, about the physical architecture in which or on which it is inscribed, the air that vibrates when we sing it or the ink that is used to write it’ (2014, 274). Jeffers’ particular aesthetic choices and style of artistry are, therefore, uniquely significant to the impact of the narrative and the reader’s engagement with the book as a material artefact.



Fig. 2.20. ‘Eventually,’

The aforementioned description of the work as a *painted* fable appears on the book's dust jacket (Fig. 2.23), emphasising connections between the aesthetic process employed in the book's creation and its narrative form. Angular images, a stark colour palette and a deceptive simplicity of expression, manifested in basic shapes, lines, squiggles, combine to create a distinctive and deceptively complex aesthetic. Jeffers' colour palette can be read as evoking the four elemental forces of the earth: the monochromatic blues of water, the earthen browns of soil, the acid yellows and neon pinks suggestive of fire, and the apparent expanses of blank space that are, in fact, the bone-coloured surface of the paper itself – the book's air and atmosphere. In drawing attention to the physical presence of colour and material surface, Jeffers situates *Fausto* within an elemental framework that underscores the interconnectedness of all matter. Even the seemingly empty spaces participate in the work's material ecology, inviting reflection on how absence and presence, substance and void, coexist within the same natural/cultural system.

It is not just the nonhuman that is depicted in these elemental colours. Jeffers uses the same colour palette to illustrate the character of Fausto and to emphasise the connection between human emotions and the earth; the colours of both sun and earth recur in the colours of the squiggles that depict Fausto's strong emotional reactions (22, 28, 32, 64), and emanate from his body, affecting his physical environment (Fig. 2.21). This is reminiscent of the argument of both Haraway (1991) and Barad (2007) that the determinate classification of skin as the outside boundary of a person is questionable. Haraway asks, 'Why should our bodies end at our skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?' (1991, 194), maintaining that the insistence of an obvious bodily boundary fails to recognize the body's specific situatedness in the world. Jeffers clearly concurs; Fausto's emotions extend into his natural surroundings, erupting from the top of his head in a vibrant mesh of elemental colour.

Through line and colour, it is emphasised that Fausto's anger and frustration are not contained within his body, but are entangled with and affecting upon all around him.



Fig. 2.21. 'Anger'

This notable vibrancy of colour appears across the book's pages and extends to its peritextual features. The beautifully marbled endpapers (Fig. 2.22) are rendered in the same elemental colours as the narrative images. The earthen brown front endpapers are reminiscent of a mass of autumn leaves, while the vivid Prussian blue endpapers seem to move before the reader's eyes, swirling, spiralling and rippling like infinite oceanic waves. The aesthetic techniques of marbling, painting and lithographic printing fluidly merge, distinctive but also enmeshed in the book's materiality. The hardcover is bright neon pink, the three stark images of flower, mountain and lake indented in darker pink on its surface, so the reader can close their eyes, touch the images and feel their contours and edges. The dust jacket (Fig. 2.23) is painted in aquamarine blues and greens interspersed with vibrant pops of colour in the sun, Fausto's raincoat and his reflection. The book's title is rendered in large, imposing, hand-drawn text. The words 'The Fate' appear above the horizon line, 'of' is partially submerged and the word

'Fausto' is completely immersed in the sea; the dust jacket image and title are thus a harbinger of Fausto's demise. Upon closer inspection, the reader notices that Fausto's reflection in the water does not match his stance on the boat; he is standing calmly, surveying the seascape, but his reflection is that of a person with arms raised, possibly in anger, frustration or victory. Jeffers alludes here, perhaps, to the divergences between human outer nature and inner nature; Fausto seems calm, but is actually consumed by emotions that are not always visible on the surface. The sea mirrors the contradictions of human nature, seeming calm yet concealing potential turbulence. On the back dust cover image, the pink flower that Fausto plucked for his lapel at the beginning of the narrative can be observed bobbing forlornly amongst the waves. To the observer who has yet to read the narrative, this may seem like an offering to the sea. It may even be mistaken for a brightly coloured sea creature. Having read the narrative, the reader can return to this image and contemplate it differently. Thus, the narrative does not necessarily end on the last page of the story itself. Jeffers uses peritextual features of the book to extend the tale and allow the reader to more actively participate in contemplating and deciphering it.



Fig. 2.22. Endpapers

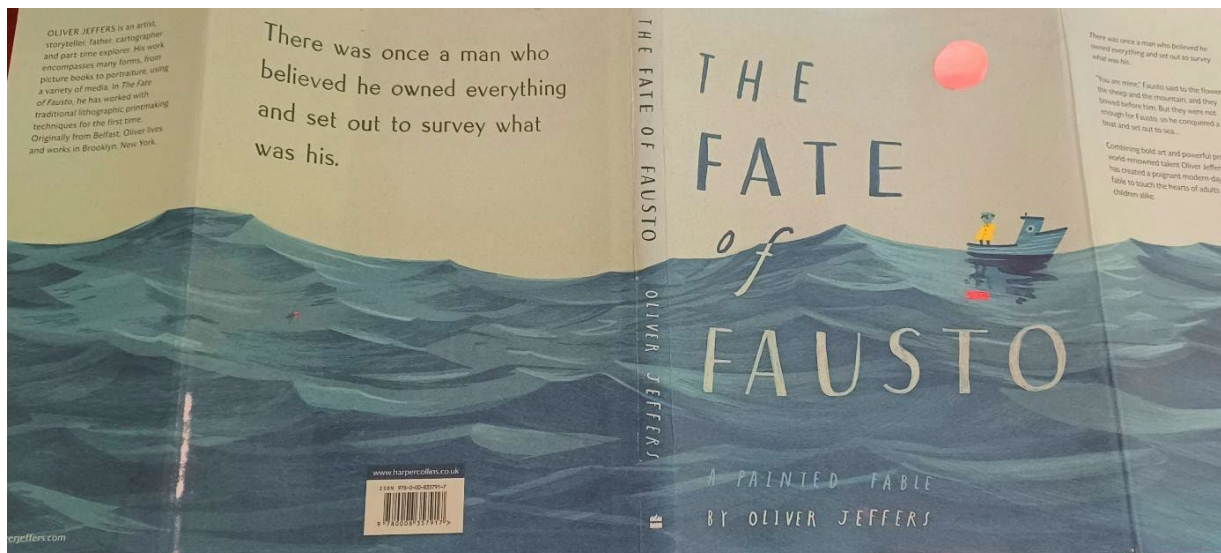


Fig. 2.23. Dust Jacket

Vibrant colour is a recurring salient feature throughout the narrative. Fausto’s luminous yellow raincoat and hat as he sets out to sea (41) contrasts sharply with the blue and grey-blue strokes and slashes that depict the ocean. As he sets sail, his facial colour changes from the dusky brown hue of the story’s initial pages to a deep blue that seems to indicate that the sea is now reflected in his anatomy (Fig. 2.17a). This imposing, swirling blue is ominous in nature, casting a shadow over Fausto that is a forewarning of his impending fate. The expanse of blue that illustrates the sea in the subsequent double-page spread (53 – 4, Fig. 2.17b) darkens in almost menacing fashion as it bleeds to the end of the page. Jeffers’ use of colour here aligns with Oppermann’s contention that ‘in the afflictions of the Anthropocene, colour is never innocent or benign. It has the power to kill and cause emotional pain... Colour is not always innocent, even if it possesses aesthetic power’ (2018, 188). The stark neon pink of the sun (cover, 29, 35; Fig. 2.23) is matched by the neon pink of the flower Fausto attaches to his lapel (8), the ‘F’ brand of ownership he inscribes on the sheep (11), the leaves/blossoms on the tree (15), and Fausto’s reflection in the lake and the sea (22, 60). Through colour, all is intertwined. Oppermann sees colour as ‘a direct material engagement with the ontology of the world... [it] is in the fabric of lively matter itself in which all atoms quiver with life. It is

bound up with creative agency that makes the world alive in generative becoming' (ibid., 183/4). Jeffers' stark colour palette, innovatively applied to highlight both connection and difference, demonstrates the aesthetic significance of colour, and reflects the vibrancy of colour in the natural world, becoming 'a multisensorial as well as a cognitive interaction with the material world from the human perspective' (ibid., 181). Sainsbury maintains that 'picturebooks lend themselves to a metaphysical immersion through a visual dimension that is able to convey directly a connectedness between different entities...[this] opens ontological dimensions that are not present in the verbal narrative alone' (2021, 109). *Fausto's* materiality and aesthetic complexity, demonstrated in its vibrancy of colour, its peritextual features and its unique material structure, lend it an ontic capacity, drawing connections between reality and lived experience. To borrow Lussier's description, *Fausto* 'vibrates with the creative potential of endless evolutions and innovations' (2011, 256).

2.2.vii. *Intermedial References and the Epitext*

Jeffers' use of intermedial and intertextual devices demonstrate how epitextual factors contribute to the conception of the book as a performative 'inventive event'. The typeface is itself visually symbolic; it is a technique that was created at a very specific and notable time in history, marking the end of the Second World War, the collapse of major empires and the rise of new world powers. This type sits alongside images of a moustachioed Fausto in his waistcoat and pinstriped trousers, the embodiment of both imperialist and capitalist culture. As already outlined, the titular character is named after the protagonist of the classic German legend of Faust. Similarities between the character of Fausto and some of the archetypal characters of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943), are also evident; Fausto is reminiscent of the king who issues commands to the sun, and the businessman who endlessly tallies the stars in a hopeless effort to possess them. He is the antithesis of the little prince

who understands, cares for and respects nature. Fausto's most explicit intertextual reference appears on the narrative's dedication page: 'To Kurt and Joe (and the rest)' (1). The story behind this dedication is clarified for the reader by Jeffers' inclusion of a short anecdote at the end of the book (86), an intermedial reference to an interaction between American writers Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*. Vonnegut asks Heller how he feels, knowing that the billionaire who is hosting the party they are attending 'only yesterday may have made more money than your novel *Catch-22* has earned in its entire history'. Heller responds by informing Vonnegut that he has something the billionaire can never have: 'The knowledge that I've got enough'. This acknowledgement of the power and importance of personal contentment and the knowledge of what is 'enough' is reflected in the aesthetic and material simplicity of the book, which, without excessive text or artistry, is 'enough'. The anecdote further emphasises Jeffers' contemplation of 'understanding' and 'knowledge'. Heller's knowledge and understanding affords him a peace of mind that cannot be attained by means of the endless acquisition of material belongings.

Jeffers' own background is significantly relevant to the creation of *Fausto*. Fausto's demise is morbidly humorous, a characteristic feature of much of Jeffers' work, which can be irreverent in nature, poking fun at humanity's futile efforts to impose order upon all. Such dark humour, Jeffers acknowledges, is 'particular to Northern Ireland – a darkness that underpins everything, where nothing is sacred and everything can be laughed at' (in interview with Essmaker, 2013). Jeffers' upbringing in Northern Ireland also underpins his self-professed fascination with themes of duality, which he claims, 'is definitely born from the contradictions inherent in being Northern Irish' (ibid.). He has also referred to how his natural surroundings in Northern Ireland inspired the creation of *Fausto*:

The story came out in one go. I was on the north coast of Antrim and pulled over to watch a storm coming in, and some absent thoughts started to drift off in different directions. I ended up taking a nap and woke up with the story pretty much on the tip of my tongue...All the

things in the book – the sheep, the flower, the sea – were all things that were literally around me there (in interview with O'Reilly, 2019)

Jeffers' related experience here is reminiscent of von Uexküll's concepts of *Umwelten* and *Innenwelten* and the dynamic relationship between the external and the internal. *Fausto* becomes storied matter, as Jeffers implies that the story was already alive in the storm and the sea and that he was merely the intermediary who transcribed it to paper. The sea is an enduring preoccupation and source of inspiration in Jeffers' work as a conceptual artist. His mixed-media artwork, 'Fathom Seascape' series (2015-16)

combines classical landscape and seascape painting with systems of technical measurement, presenting the viewer with both artistic and scientific modes of representation. Rather than increase our understanding of the work, this combination makes things less clear by providing superfluous distraction while simultaneously highlighting the boundaries of perceived knowledge (Jeffers, official website, n.d.)

Jeffers is concerned, therefore, with nature/culture binaries, as well as those of ontology and epistemology and subjectivity/objectivity. These preoccupations are evident in his utilisation of the sea as a central motif in *Fausto*, and in his depiction of nature/culture interactions and tensions within the narrative. His interest in how art and science inform each other is also manifested in his aesthetic choices; the technique of lithography, for example, is informed by scientific concepts and processes. These representational and aesthetic features of *Fausto* thus intra-act with Jeffers' own preoccupations and demonstrate the performative nature of *Fausto* as a material artefact. More than simply an object, the book is better described as a *phenomenon*, in the Baradian sense, that has emerged as a result of intra-acting agencies that are entangled with Jeffers' material and physical engagement with his natural world. His natural surroundings are inextricably enmeshed with, and are the source of, his creative energies. Such an understanding corresponds with Barad's claim that 'it is not so much that I

have written this book, as that it has written me. Or rather, “we” have “intra-actively” written each other’ (2007, 24).

The exploration of the epitext of Jeffers’ work on *Fausto* highlights the practice of writing and reading as ‘an iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of “book” and “author”’ (Barad, 2007, x). The book, as Barad claims, is ‘surely not the simple object one can hold in one’s hands’, but rather is a ‘living and changing phenomenon’ (ibid, xi), emerging through the intra-actions of the author, his background, his upbringing, his sources of inspiration, his artistic creativity, and the reader’s engagement, enabled and empowered by means of material, aesthetic and semantic complexity. This is a rhizomatic understanding: the work is constantly ‘becoming’ and ‘ceaselessly establish[ing] connections connections’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, 8). As Zapf argues, the text’s potentiality only comes into being through its fluid actualisations within diverse and dynamic historical, social, and individual conditions.

Thus, literary works are not *fixed* in space or time. Their ‘eventness’ performs itself in entangled relationalities in varying spatial, historical and temporal contexts. Jeffers has commented that *Fausto* was originally written in 2015:

The reality is it was written almost five years ago. I’d come up with the idea for *Fausto* before I came up with *Here We Are*, but then, when my son was born, it [*Here We Are*] seemed like a much more appropriate story for the time, because of its positivity, its inclusiveness, and *Fate of Fausto* got shelved. Now, it just felt more urgent for me to release it (in interview with O’Reilly, 2019).

These comments are enlightening on many fronts. *Fausto*, according to Jeffers, has come into being at a ‘more urgent’ time than five years previously. But Jeffers’ conception of urgency seems affected by his personal circumstances. The birth of his son, as a positive time for him personally, resulted in the publication of a more ‘positive’ and ‘inclusive’ story. By 2019, Jeffers felt an ‘urgency’ in releasing *Fausto*, although the source of this urgency is unclear; it

may point to the urgent nature of cultural response to climate change, but in light of his preceding comment, could also point to a more personal sense of urgency. Thus, the temporality of *Fausto*'s material form is integral to its existence as an object in the world and extends to the temporality of each reader's encounter with it. The story conceptually existed in 2015, yet no reader could engage with it until the book's publication. A child reading it in 2019 may therefore experience it differently from a child of 2015 or one reading it today. Likewise, a reader in Pakistan might respond differently from a reader in Ireland. Op de Beeck observes, 'picturebooks materially and thematically belong to their eras even when we reread them in ours' (2018, 54); yet, as Attridge notes, 'we experience literary works...as events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same' (2017, 23).

The reader's experience is shaped by material, aesthetic, intermedial and epitextual elements of *Fausto*. Through the reader's intra-actions with the literary work, *Fausto* acquires narrative agency. *Fausto* contains a story, but it is also storied matter in and of itself – its conception and creation tell their own story of the entanglements of human and nonhuman life. These natural, cultural, social and personal entanglements intra-act to bring the material, aesthetic, narrative book into existence. The reader engages with it pre-semiotically and semiotically, as active participants in the narrative. Thus, *Fausto* highlights how the visual narrative is both itself narratively agentic, and also enables its reader to acquire agency in their performative engagement with it. This performative understanding transcends the conceptual description of the book as merely a material object, or a source for interpretative analysis, to instead understand the book, 'the reader's performance of it – and its performance of the reader' (Attridge, 2017, 156), as an inventive event.

2.2.viii. *Ethics and Didactics*

In introducing her concept of vibrant matter, Bennett articulates her hope that ‘a vital materiality can start to take shape’ (2010, viii) for the reader. She then rephrases this, emphasising that ‘it can take shape *again*’ (ibid., my emphasis), as ‘a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects’ (ibid.). Bennett highlights here that the vibrancy of matter and the nonhuman is already very much alive in the mind of the child. The implicit question is, to what extent is this vibrancy lost, occluded or ignored in adult-created narratives for children?

Barad contemplates well-worn nature/culture binaries in their theory of agential realism; Barad does not, however, address one of the most conspicuous binaries that is directly related to that of nature/culture: the adult/child binary. An interesting quotation opens the fourth chapter of Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007): ‘We are far too impressed by our own cleverness and self-consciousness... We need to stop telling ourselves the same old anthropocentric bedtime stories’ (Shaviro, 1997, cited by Barad, 2007, 132). The reference to ‘bedtime stories’ here indicates the powerful impact childhood reading experiences have on adult consciousness and practice, even if, as adults, we don’t always consciously recognise or address this impact.

Fausto, it is argued, does not constitute one of these ‘same old bedtime stories’. *Fausto*’s demise may at first appear to be a defeatist apocalyptic metaphor or a prophetic warning and, indeed, as outlined in the introduction to this section, its very description as ‘fable’ suggests an explicit moral admonition. However, despite this classification of his narrative, Jeffers has emphasised in interviews that he prefers to avoid overt moralising in his work, and that this was not his intention with *Fausto*. He has stated that he wishes to ‘make art about things that [I] feel deeply about rather than trying to make posters selling something to someone who’s

uninterested' (in interview with Diazgranados, 2023). Specifically referring to *Fausto*, he states:

it's in kids' books where you're making art about feelings, about core narratives where, rather than hitting somebody in the head with "owning too much stuff is bad" or "burning fossil fuels is bad" – people just check out. But if it's in a much more engaging story that's actually sort of about the same thing, without the strong moralistic lesson, it's just gonna [sic] be so much more powerful. Lay out the ingredients and let somebody put it together in their own head (ibid.).

Notwithstanding Jeffers' insistence that *Fausto* was not intended as a moralistic tale, a strong didactic tone is apparent at times. However, the representational and post-representational analysis of *Fausto* presented here supports the argument that the book's performativity overcomes its apparent didacticism, whether its status as a moral admonition was intentional or unintentional on the part of its creator. A representational reading of *Fausto* positions the narrative as a counterpoint to depictions of individual heroism in ecophobic narratives that reinforce an anthropocentric culture of narcissistic individualism. There is no hero here.

Neither Fausto nor the nonhuman entities are heroic in their actions. Utilising a multiperspectival narrative approach, Jeffers emphasises 'understanding' as key, and as a result, a more sympathetic understanding of the human protagonist becomes possible, which reveals a semantic openness to the narrative. Concurrently, sensorial, material and spatio-temporal modalities intra-act with the semantic processes, creating an 'in-between' discursive space. *Fausto*'s vital qualities enable the narrative to work co-creatively with its reader. It is a *porous* text, explained by Murriss as 'a dynamic process of thinking together and through the text as an emergent, open, in/determinate process...paying attention to the differences and the fine-grained details that matter' (2022, 89). Zapf names three subfunctions of aesthetically complex forms of environmental narratives: a 'critical impetus', which 'exposes exploitative and pathogenic structures of dominance over human and nonhuman nature', a

‘counterdiscursive impetus’, which ‘activates...human co-existence with nonhuman life as imaginative counterworlds’, and a ‘reintegrative impetus’, which brings together different forms and forces in cultural and epistemological synergies’ (2016, 60). *Fausto*’s critical impetus is evident in its disparaging depiction of the colonial, imperial figure of Fausto; its counterdiscursive impetus in its emphasis on mutual understanding; and its reintegrative impetus in its synergy of modalities, revealing the ‘inventive eventness’ of the literary work.

An ecological-ethical reading of *Fausto* reveals that the book moves beyond straightforward moral instruction, inviting readers to reflect on power, responsibility, and coexistence rather than absorbing a prescribed lesson. Barad contends that

ethics is not simply about responsible actions in relation to human experiences of the world; rather, it is a question of material entanglements and how each intra-action matters in the reconfiguring of these entanglements, that is, it is a matter of the ethical call that is embodied in the very worlding of the world (2007, 160).

Thus, ethics is not a matter of responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside of the self. The human is faced with particular possibilities for intra-acting at every moment, which entails an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world’s becoming, ‘to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering’ (ibid.). Barad argues that the world is not ‘an arbitrary construction of our choosing’ but is ‘sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping’ (ibid., 203). This emphasises that material reality exists independently of us yet is continually shaped through our entangled practices and representations. Critics contend that this risks overstating human influence, implying that the world depends on human perception. However, Barad’s position is better understood as a call to recognise our ethical and material entanglement with the world’s ongoing formation, rather than as a claim of human authorship over reality. This understanding is especially relevant to children’s literature, where learning arises through the dynamic interplay between reader, text, and world, leading to a shared process of meaning-making rather than a one-

directional moral lesson. If young readers are challenged in shaping or reshaping their perceptions of the natural world and the nonhuman, an ecological ethics is developed that is far more impactful than the didactic moralism that admonishes the human as actant, but reinforces boundaries of human/other.

This ethics of reciprocity, an understanding of and attention to our entangled, interdependent networks of relations of other humans and nonhumans, is not understood, or is misunderstood, by the human protagonist in *Fausto*. It is not that Fausto is evil or vengeful or doomed to annihilation; it is that he does not take account of the entangled materialisations of which he is part. He is not ‘truly present’ (Haraway, 2016, 1), is not open and alive to each meeting with the nonhuman, is too impeded by covetousness to be awake to the possibility of living justly. He communicates with them dialogically, but without the cognisance, empathy and active listening that constitute real, actual communication. His blindness, to use another optic metaphor, contrasts sharply with the diffractive reading of *Fausto*, which is one that highlights how the reader ‘sees’, in the Baradian sense, through their intra-actions with the performative text.

Zapf argues that ‘the function of literature as cultural ecology implicitly involves an ecological ethics as well, since it posits the interconnectedness of mind and body, text and life, human and nonhuman world as a necessary context of human responsibility’ (2016, 243). *Fausto* encourages an ‘aesthetic empathising’ (Murphy, 2009, 159), in which the reader is enabled to adopt the perspectives of both human and nonhuman, and a semantic openness, evident in the singularity and distinctiveness of the aesthetic depiction of nonhuman nature and the reader’s intra-active engagement with it. The latter, as we have seen, is an assemblage of communicational processes, paratextual elements and social, temporal and cultural conditions. Thus, as Zapf maintains, ‘the human-nature relationship is always entwined with an inter-human dimension, both of which must be thought together in order to enable a

sufficiently complex, open and multiperspectival ethics' (2016, 246). *Fausto* creates an ethical space that is inextricably linked with its performativity and eclipses its didacticism. Although perhaps intended as such by its author/illustrator and publishers, it is ultimately more than a moral admonition - it is an aesthetically stimulating and generative medium of exploration that empowers its reader to challenge their perceptions and 'see' their world intra-actively.

Conclusion

This representational and post-representational analysis of *Tales from the Inner City* and *The Fate of Fausto* demonstrates how literary devices, aestheticism, intermediality, materiality and paratextuality are entangled in these works, creating performative material narratives that present a complex and nuanced understanding of naturecultures and the agency of the nonhuman/other. This understanding emerges in the reader's intra-action with the books, and vice-versa, and recognises the narratives' agency as entities that continue to 'perform' beyond their creators' original intentions.

This chapter has demonstrated how Shaun Tan's provocative and subversive contemplation of human and nonhuman enmeshments exemplifies Barad's principle of intra-action, and emphasises that nature and culture are not juxtaposed, but a circulating system (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, 4, 10). Tan's work combines a semiotic perspective with a material perspective, demanding the reader to engage with material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic modalities in a reciprocal, communicative relationship. His use of intermedial techniques, including intertextuality, ekphrasis and medial transposition, gives expression to 'alternative forms of seeing' that 'destabilise the dichotomous logic of an active subject and a passive object' (Neumann and Rippl, 2020, 20). The reader is encouraged to create inner images of nature through engagement with the book's materiality and its aesthetically rich

iconotext. Simultaneously, Tan's work is self-reflexive in nature, demonstrating an acute awareness of the limitations of language and representation in our understanding of material reality. This dissertation also demonstrates how Tan is – consciously or subconsciously – influenced by his upbringing, his position as an established artist and writer, and the rich heritage of Aboriginal spiritual belief, art and storytelling.

The analysis of *Fausto* in this chapter demonstrates that author/illustrator Oliver Jeffers successfully explores and plays with ideas of 'being' and 'understanding', critiques civilisation's fantasies of hierarchy and supremacy, and celebrates the elemental energy and agency of the nonhuman. His use of metafictional devices, literary motifs, anthropomorphism and multiperspectival narration are expertly enmeshed with an acutely perceptible materiality and a sophisticated aestheticism. An analysis of these elements of the literature has revealed its semiotic, sensorial, material and spatio-temporal modalities. An epitextual analysis of the work has revealed the enmeshment of the natural and the creative, the spatial and the temporal, the reader and the creator, the process and the product. This highlights the work as more than a material object, but as a performative phenomenon – an inventive event.

This dissertation also demonstrates that there is an inherent moralism in elements of both Tan's and Jeffers' work and that in some cases, the ideology is overstated and heavy-handed. Tan's representation of the urban is, at times, problematic, reinforcing a natural/urban dichotomy that is at odds with the subtle, yet sophisticated articulation of human and nonhuman entanglement that is otherwise evident. *Fausto* may be construed by some as a defeatist apocalyptic metaphor or a prophetic warning and its designation as 'fable' suggests an explicit moral admonition. However, this analysis has demonstrated that the performativity of both books transcends apparent didacticism. It is argued that the work of Tan and Jeffers is most impactful when they employ a 'writerly' approach, which avoids

explicit moralising and instead allows readers to develop their own agency in their engagement with the work.

Highlighted at the opening of this chapter, Morton contends that art emerges in the shifting intra-actions between materials, bodies, and environments, where boundaries blur and new meanings take shape. As both *Tales* and *Fausto* demonstrate, art also happens in ‘conversations’ between author/illustrator and reader, between reader and book, between text and image, between epitext and peritext. These books are situated in ‘an in-between space of discourse between cultural mediation and immediate experience, between the conceptual and the preconceptual’ (Zapf, 2016, 66). In their reconfigurations of binary oppositions of human/nonhuman, ontic/epistemic, natural/cultural, image/text and material/symbolic, *Fausto* and *Tales* are not only *sources of* material knowledge, they *are* vibrant material performance themselves. The readers are part of these performances, and understand themselves as so, and it is in this entanglement of knowing and being that the transformative potential of the visual narrative is realised.

Chapter Three

‘A Hint of Wildness’: *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus* as Feral, ‘Unsafe’ Literature

Apollonian, Dionysian. There are two conditions in which art manifests itself in man even as a force of nature, and influences him whether he consents or not: it may be as a constraint to visionary states, or it may be a wild impulse.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (2014 [1901], 798).

Introduction

The idea of ‘wild’ can signify a place and also an emotional or behavioural state of being, and thus is a revealing concept to examine in the context of blurred boundaries between outer nature and inner nature, and between matter and mind. This chapter aims to explore how, in the context of material ecocriticism, creative practice can be understood as ‘wild’ in the sense that it resists containment, hierarchy, and control, instead emerging through entanglement with the material world. Although not a book examined in this dissertation, Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) provides an important point of reference: as one of the most seminal works in the field of visual narratives, it established a framework for exploring emotional and imaginative wilderness, and for challenging boundaries between civilisation and the untamed self. Indeed, in his Hans Christian Andersen Award acceptance speech in 2010, David Almond referenced Sendak, stating, ‘the children’s book world is also *Where the Wild Things Are*. Maybe that’s because children themselves are still part wild and not quite civilised and still driven to explore the wilder fringes of the world and of their own minds.’ While Sendak ultimately restores his protagonist to the safety of home, *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus* extend and complicate this vision by leaving their protagonists – and readers – in more ambiguous, entangled relations with the wild. Ellen Spitz asserts that ‘some people believe that the purpose of art is to stimulate the imagination and allow children to go over to

the other side, as it were, without leaving home – that is, they believe art is safe’ (1999, 207). ‘Unsafe’ art, by contrast, has the potential to remove young readers from their comfort zones, to provoke them to question master narratives, and to challenge their perceptions of reality and experience. Wild, unsafe’ art is also self-reflexive and questions its own legitimacy as a source of knowledge and truth. It is argued that rather than ‘civilising’ the young reader by teaching him/her the ‘right’ and ‘correct’ way to think, *The Savage* (2008) by David Almond and Dave McKean and *Den om Rufus* (2021) by Thorbjørn Petersen, Mårdøn Smet and Herman Ditte both ‘unsafely’ remove the reader from their comfortable position of observation and actively engage the reader in their ordered chaos. As the central protagonists of each story encounter ‘the wild’, so too does the reader; both reader and protagonist navigate this experience together, albeit in quite different ways.

3.1. The Savage

1.1) *Overview of the Book*

Written by David Almond and illustrated by Dave McKean, *The Savage* is a hybrid prose and graphic novel, sometimes described as ‘a graphic novel within a novel’. It was developed from a short story commissioned by ITV and Seven Stories, the then British Centre for Children’s Books in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. First published in 2008, it has since been re-published several times. Some versions are hard-back, others are soft-back, and the cover illustrations vary on different publications, although they always depict the character of the savage (see Fig. 3.8). The copy of the novel discussed in this study is a soft-back version, published in 2009, similar in size and shape to a typical comic-book and comprising 80 pages. Stylistically, parallels between this work and comics are also evident: the text and fonts are incorporated into the overall aesthetic, and illustrator McKean, a prolific comic and graphic novel illustrator, uses sequential panels and frames, distinctive borders, full-page

spreads, stand-alone illustrations, speech bubbles and cinematic camera techniques, such as zoom, wide-angle and low-angle images. The work defies definitive nomenclature, and, similar to much of Shaun Tan's output, can perhaps best be described as a fusion text, combining elements of various forms of visual literature.

The Savage does not appear to deliver an explicit environmental message. On first perusal, it seems more concerned with human emotions and preoccupations. The narrative focuses on the central character, Blue, whose father has recently died. Blue finds an outlet for his grief by writing the story of a 'savage' boy who lives in the woods near his house. The savage has no family, lives on berries, roots and rabbits, and also occasionally chases, kills and eats humans – the reader is informed of the latter through Blue's narration, but cannibalism is not explicitly depicted in the book. Almond employs narrative metalepsis, a technique theorised by Genette (1972), through which the embedded tale and its framing narrative intertwine, intentionally collapsing the boundary between storyteller and story. The narrative combines the words of older Blue, reflecting on the initial period of his bereavement when he wrote the story, and the story of the savage, written by the younger Blue. Older Blue's narrative is presented in a standard font and conventionally grammatically correct English, while the story of the savage adorns its pages in a child-like, wild scrawl, replete with grammatical and spelling errors. Thus, narrative and artistry are fluidly intertwined. As the story progresses, boundaries between Blue and the savage, between fiction and reality, and between nature and culture become increasingly tenuous, and consequently, dichotomies of ontology and epistemology, and matter and meaning, are interrogated. Accordingly, *The Savage*, in its absence of specific 'environmental' themes or explicitly moralistic messages, creates an implicit space in which ideas of naturalcultural enmeshment and nonhuman agency can be explored.

1.2) *David Almond – ‘Beyond the Wall, Where the Wild Things Happened’*

David Almond is a critically acclaimed British author often described as a ‘crossover’ writer, as his works transcend the traditional divide between children’s and adult literature. In literary authorship, the term ‘crossover’ refers to works that appeal to or are intended for both children and adults, transcending conventional age or genre boundaries. It denotes writing that operates on multiple levels of meaning, allowing diverse audiences to engage with the same text in different but equally meaningful ways. Almond’s narratives combine accessible storytelling with philosophical and emotional depth, appealing to readers of all ages. Through this blending of perspectives, Almond challenges the boundaries of genre and audience, creating fiction that occupies a fluid, intergenerational space.

Although Almond has published for an adult readership, the vast majority of his oeuvre is written for children and young adults. Among other accolades, he is a recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award (in 2010) and his debut children’s novel *Skellig* was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 1998, its year of publication. Almond’s works are known for their ‘aesthetic qualities and thematic richness’ (Joosen, 2024, 3). Often, his fiction demonstrates recurrent themes and concerns, including the human/nature relationship; natural/spiritual entanglements; constructions of boyhood; and grief and bereavement.

Almond was born and raised in the North-East of England, in an area with a long history of industrialisation. His sister died when he was seven years old, and his father died when he was fifteen. These significant events have clearly affected his writing; the absence of the father is a prevalent theme in many of his novels, including *The Savage*, and the latter narrative also features a male protagonist who is quite protective of his younger sister. The physical and social working-class environment he grew up in, and where he continues to reside today, is also a strong influence on his work, including his fictionalised

autobiographical work, *Counting Stars* (2000). Almond has stated that he and his family live ‘just beyond the Roman wall, which for centuries marked the place where civilisation ended, and the waste lands began’ (Almond, ‘About Me’, official website). This geographical location, as noted by Nodelman, ‘can stand as a metaphor for the fictional space created by his novels’ (2014, 31). Almond himself, drawing comparisons between his physical environment and his creative output, notes that ‘beyond the wall was where the kind of wild things happened...[g]ood books have kind of been into the wilderness and have come back again and they’re kind of controlled, they’re kind of civilised, but if they’re any good, they’ve still got that kind of hint of wildness about them’ (cited by Nodelman, 2014, 31). Nodelman identifies a foundational or archetypal ‘ur-story’ and ‘ur-plot’ in Almond’s work: many of his novels feature a central character in early adolescence, usually a boy, who lives at the edge of a town, but also near a wild space, and as the story progresses, the boy interacts with

a person, animal or creature identified as being somehow savage, an exotic and often magical “other” who comes from or is otherwise connected with a wilderness beyond the borders of the boy’s normal life...and whose presence engages the boy in a consideration of the wildness within himself (Nodelman, 2014, 31/2).

Nodelman does not see the repetitive nature of Almond’s novels as a weakness; rather, he argues that ‘their repetitiveness is a key to what makes them so compelling’ (2014, 47).

Nodelman views repetition in Almond’s work as an act of renewal: a structural and thematic rhythm that reflects the cycles of life and creativity themselves. Nodelman argues that the recurrence of ideas, images, and emotions across Almond’s novels transforms repetition into resonance – one of the key sources of their power and beauty. This thematic recurrence is closely tied to Almond’s exploration of humanity’s place within the natural world, where repetition becomes a means of tracing the continual interplay between the self and its environment. Almond’s tendency to focus on the relationship between ‘inner nature’ and

‘outer nature’ points to his inclination to ‘enact and explore the problematics of our dynamic relationship to nature’ (Khateeb, 2018, 94).

Almond’s work has been described as both magic realism (Latham, 2006) and mystical realism (Johnston, 2014). Magic realism reveals wonder within the ordinary through the coexistence of the real and the fantastic. Mystical realism reveals the sacred within the real, emphasising spiritual depth and metaphysical unity rather than magical disruption. Almond’s engagement with magic realism is evident in his propensity to situate the fantastical within the everyday, observed by Valerie Coghlan as ‘a lurking capacity for the extraordinary to nudge at the ordinary’ (2014, 84). This is apparent in *The Savage*, in which the lines between fantasy and reality are frequently obfuscated. His inclination towards mystical realism is manifested in his contemplation of entanglements of the spiritual with the natural and the cultural. Many critics, including Johnston and Coghlan, have commented on Almond’s Roman Catholic upbringing as an influence on his work, and this is acknowledged by Almond himself, who has stated that his Catholic upbringing encouraged him to ‘find the miraculousness in reality’ (in interview with Sarah Crown, 2010). The savage lives under a ruined chapel in Burgess Woods, and this choice of location does not appear to be a random one for Almond; the chapel sitting in the woods situates the spiritual within the natural, connects the earthly to the divine and prompts the reader to contemplate these entanglements, and the possibility that the savage may have some sort of sacred significance. Almond has acknowledged the influence of British Romantic writers, in particular William Blake, on his work. Indeed, Blake’s influence is linked to his ‘inspirational intertexts’ of Christianity and Catholicism (Johnston, 2014, 15). Johnston notes how Blake ‘believed that imagination – and the work of artists and poets – was a God-given and God-inspired work’ (ibid., 14).

Almond’s first children’s novel, *Skellig*, contains numerous references to Blake, quotations from his poems and allusions to Blakean imagery. Almond’s writing depicts worlds where

the physical and social landscape is also possessed of a latent spirituality and the characters have an almost mystical connection with nature: an inclination towards the human experience in nature as a reunion with the spiritual self and a confronting of our own mortality. Similar conceptions of the natural world were prevalent in the work of many poets and painters of British Romanticism. Almond has voiced his appreciation of another feature of Blake's work, which provides insight into his desire to collaborate with illustrators: 'I love the fact that Blake illustrates his work. I love the blend of text and illustration' (in interview with Atherley, 2017).

Alongside thematic concerns with the extraordinary and the mystical in his work, Almond has demonstrated his appreciation of medium and intermedial modes of communication. He has spoken of how, as a child, he 'wrote stories and stitched them into little books' (Candlewick Studio Biography, n.p.), an indication that he was mindful of the materiality of his work, even at a young age. *Skellig* has been adapted into various medial forms, including a radio play, a stage play, an opera and a film, and *The Savage* has also had various stage adaptations (2009, 2016). Almond has been actively involved in the creative and planning processes of many of these productions. He has collaborated with several illustrators to produce a significant corpus of visual narratives, including Stephen Lambert, Polly Dunbar, Oliver Jeffers, and his collaborator on *The Savage*, Dave McKean, with whom he has also collaborated on *Slog's Dad* (2010), *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* (2013) and *Joe Quinn's Poltergeist* (2019). The diversity of form in Almond's oeuvre contrasts sharply with the uniformity of his central characters and thematic concerns. His narrative representations may be strikingly similar to the point of repetitiveness; however, the paratexts of his books point more discernibly to the heterogeneity of natural, social, and cultural experience.

1.3) *Dave McKean – Radical Techniques and Creativity as ‘God’*

Born and raised in Berkshire, Southern England, Dave McKean is a prolific and award-winning artist and illustrator, whose creative output includes album and book covers, stand-alone art pieces and installations, photography books, picturebooks, comics, graphic novels and concept art for television, film and theatre. He has also worked as a film director and songwriter and is an accomplished pianist. He is renowned for his experimental approach to art, an approach that is often attuned to the material composition of his work: he utilises a range of materials including fabric, text, photographs, found objects, sculpture pieces, paper drawings, digital art and acetate and is known for combining various techniques, such as collage, digital photography, drawing, painting and sculpture in a single work of art.

He has discussed his desire to communicate a story through the materiality of his media:

if an image is trying to express how strong and solid a man is, then maybe it should be a clay sculpture or a pile of stones. If it's trying to express his uncertainty, perhaps it should be a simple pencil drawing done with the left hand so it is awkward and wobbly. The form should always match the content (McKean, cited by Cyr, 2009, 39).

McKean's work has been described as 'radical' art (Gravett, 2005, n.p.) that 'breaks conventions, resists categorization [and] subverts reading expectations' (Panaou and Michaelides, 2011, 63). Comic theorist Scott McCloud describes McKean as an artist who is 'forever on the move, experimenting, taking chances, never satisfied' (1994, 56). In the field of children's and young adult visual literature, McKean has collaborated on numerous occasions with authors Neil Gaiman, S.F. Said, and as previously noted, on four occasions with David Almond, *The Savage* being the first of those collaborations.

McKean has spoken of his interest in the entanglements of 'rational science' and 'imaginative art' (in interview with Andrew J. Rausch, 2016). He states that

right now, and it's probably always been the case, science needs the influence of art to think of irrational possibilities, to disturb dogmatic thinking, and to connect with those deep emotional needs we have. And art needs the influence of science to add truth and reality to what we do, to show us the vast and awe-inspiring raw material of the universe from which we can interpret and express new ideas (ibid.)

He has frequently advocated for a multi-disciplinary approach to art, which, he claims,

'doesn't sit well with the way the creative arts are taught' ('FAQ', official website, n.p.).

McKean encourages potential artists to 'seek out like minds in other disciplines...the sciences, historians, everyone...[k]nowing how to develop a narrative, to marry sound and pictures, to visualise ideas, to deal with motion, will all help you find a place in this interactive world' (ibid.). His appreciation of the value that an entangled, multi-disciplinary approach can bring to art is reflected in his technical and stylistic hybridity, which, as Panaou and Michaelides contend, 'impl[ies] a reader who...accepts and celebrates flexibility, fluidity and transmutation' (2011, 66). McKean has spoken of his desire to extend his involvement in the aestheticism and artistry of a book to include its overall layout, design and production, as he contends, 'The image doesn't stop at the drawing or painting, it continues on to the paper selection, typography, use of borders and the rest of the design elements. All of which carry meaning' (cited by Cyr, 2009, 41). Although he is an atheist, McKean has spoken of his fascination with 'the need we have to believe in something, the need for a purpose in life, something to give what we do value' (in interview with Rausch, 2016, n.p.).

He states that '[i]f I had to identify my god in some form, I would call it creativity' (ibid.).

Elaborating on this, McKean likens art to a sustaining physical energy, asserting that 'art, in its purest, most abstract form...simply keeps our minds fit, in the same way that food, energy and physical exercise keeps [sic] our bodies fit' (ibid.).

Interestingly, McKean and Almond did not meet or directly communicate during the creation of *The Savage*. Almond recalls, 'I didn't sit down and talk to him...[t]he first time I met Dave

was after he had done the illustrations at the launch of *The Savage* (in interview with Emily Cooper, 2013). The creative exchange thus operated in one direction: McKean responded to Almond's completed text, while Almond did not, in turn, engage with McKean's imagery. Only McKean was in dialogue during the process, developing an autonomous visual interpretation of the story free from authorial influence. Yet this absence of collaboration does not diminish the unity of the work. As Betsy Bird observes, '[t]he pictures and the words are interacting constantly, each one reliant upon the other' (2008, n.p.). *The Savage* functions as an *iconotext*, where text and image – though produced separately – interweave through material and intermedial entanglements. Viewed through material ecocriticism, this interplay foregrounds the agency of the artwork's material components – the textures of ink, paper, and line – and their role in co-producing meaning alongside language. The physicality of McKean's layered illustrations and the tactile rhythm of Almond's prose invite an understanding of creativity as an ecological process, one in which meaning emerges from the vital interplay of media, matter, and imagination.

1.4) *Becoming in the World: The Wild/Civilised Human and the Posthuman*

Almond, articulating a belief that aligns with the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, has stated that 'Language is about becoming in the world' (in interview with Sundmark, 2016, 67). Older Blue similarly ponders the nature (and limitations) of language as he writes retrospectively that 'I felt sad, small, frightened, furious, bitter, lost, lonely...But like I said, there's no words that can say how I really felt' (50). Older Blue's acknowledgement of the inadequacy of language to express the intensity of his emotions reflects what Jacques Lacan identifies as the tension between the Symbolic and the Real (1978). The Symbolic order, structured by language and culture, allows experience to be expressed but also confines it within human systems of meaning. The Real, by contrast, signifies that which lies beyond

language – the raw, unmediated intensity of emotion or material existence that resists articulation. Through this moment, Almond exposes the limits of linguistic representation, revealing how grief and trauma exceed what can be symbolised. Blue’s encounter with the unspeakable Real also gestures toward the agency of the material world: the affective, bodily, and environmental forces that shape experience beyond human language. In acknowledging the failure of words, Almond opens a space for material presence – for feeling, texture, and embodiment – to become part of the story’s expressive ecology.

Following his reflection on the limitations of language, Older Blue recalls his younger self grabbing his notebook and ‘writing fast and hard’ (50). Ironically, while the older Blue cannot articulate the emotions he experienced as a child, younger Blue can access them through written words on the page. In his expression of these words, Blue contemplates nature – human nature and the natural environment and the entanglement of the two. He allows nature to speak back to him, generating the story he tells. Almond has described the act of writing as a desire to ‘explore the gardens of the mind, crawl through wilderness, emerge with scratched skin and muddied knees’ (2002, 87). Blue’s writing sees him bring this metaphor to life: at the climax of his narrative, he literally crawls through wilderness to encounter the savage and reflect on the nature of time, loss, and artistic expression.

Blue’s metanarrative comments on the act of writing, his inability to stop once he starts writing (12), and his finding himself ‘living right inside the savage’s story’ (67), are a reflection on the nature of creative expression and the agency of story itself. This act of writing is implied as being almost independent of the human, and takes on both cathartic and magical qualities. Writing allows Blue to navigate the coexistence of stability and transformation in his life as his selfhood evolves; what Emma-Louise Silva describes as ‘continuity-in-change’ (2022, 93). Writing also, however, takes on a life of its own, which points to the idea of story as a living entity, also indicated by the climactic encounter of Blue

and the savage, at which point the story appears to move beyond the page to a realm where narrative and reality merge.



Fig. 3.1.

Language, story, and the physicality and materiality of his environment all interconnect to facilitate Blue's 'becoming' in this wild, muddy world, as he navigates the mediatory, transitive threshold between childhood and adulthood. This is demonstrated effectively in McKean's evocative illustrations, which depict a wildness of character and environment that is aesthetically enmeshed. The figure of the savage is at times indistinguishable from the woods that surround him, both rendered in the same bold black strokes and forest green tones (Fig. 3.1). The Savage's crouched form atop crumbling stones suggests both vulnerability and transformation, situating him within a wild, decaying landscape that mirrors Blue's emotional terrain. The skeletal leaf on the image's left evokes the materiality of nature and resembles a written script, visually linking organic matter with language and storytelling. McKean's earthy tones and textured lines emphasise the tactile world through which Blue negotiates grief and growth. This is a character that is visibly and viscerally enmeshed with his natural environment. If the savage has emerged from Blue's subconscious as a cathartic response to

his grief and disillusionment, then the savage's environment, with which he is inextricably connected, has also emerged, as vibrantly evocative as its wild inhabitant.

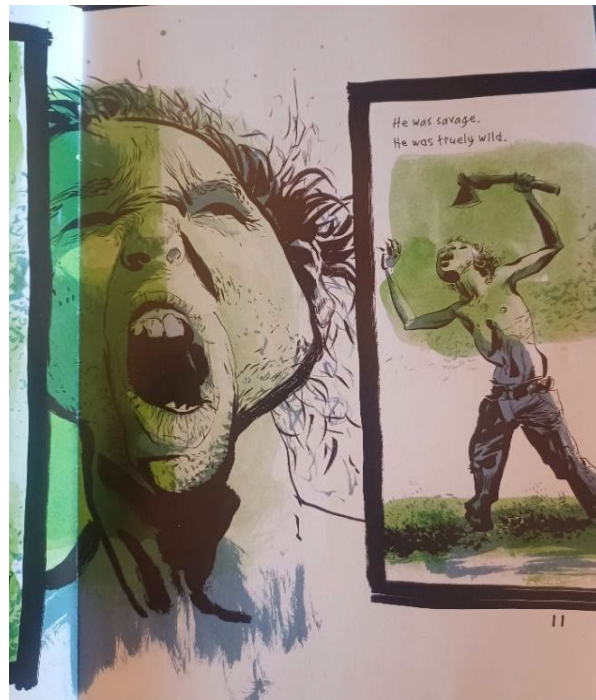


Fig. 3.2.

As Blue describes the character's savagery in viscerally forthright fashion: 'If anybody ever seen him he chased them and cort them and killed them and ate them and chucked their bones down an aynshent pit shaft' (10), McKean's stark illustrations focus on the savage's teeth, mouth and hair, depicting a creature that is more animal-like than human (Fig. 3.2). Although the text suggests that the savage has committed murderous, predatory acts, McKean refrains from specifically depicting these acts in his illustrations, although the suggestion of menace remains, as articulated by Bird: 'The splattered, wiry, gamy Savage suggests a whole world of decay and blood that never make it to the page but lie somewhere simmering just below the surface' (2008, n.p.). Almond's and McKean's savage is neither human nor nonhuman, but an enmeshment of both: a combined pre-human and posthuman figure, neither completely real nor entirely supernatural, sitting on the threshold between reality and fantasy. As a primal, instinctive being born from Blue's imagination, the savage embodies both the raw,

untamed emotions that precede language and the creative, constructed power of storytelling that transcends it. Through this hybrid figure, Almond suggests that human identity exists in the tension between the primitive and the imaginative, the natural and the invented. Kerry Mallan maintains that

the [figure of the] wild child... can be viewed as marking a productive tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism by showing how these different worldviews juxtapose notions of culture and nature, human and nonhuman, civilised and wild (2018, 214).

The Savage challenges ideas of nonhuman ferocity and ignorance as the counterpoints to human civility and enlightenment. The parallels with Rousseauian constructions of a ‘state of nature’ are apparent. Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* lamented the moral decay of civil society, instead exploring ideas of an ideal state of nature, where humans are free, equal and self-sufficient. Almond’s savage is a complex character, comparable to Rousseau’s hypothetical natural man. Initially presented as an uncivilised brute, this construction of the savage is revealed to be misleading as the story progresses, revealing brutish characteristics in the human characters and emotional complexity in the character of the savage.

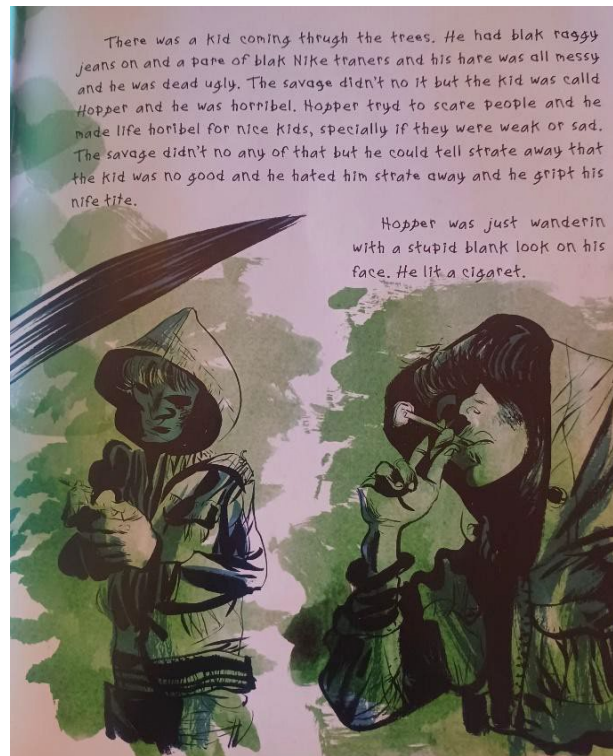


Fig. 3.3.

Almond's alliterative description of Blue's bully, Hopper, as he is first introduced to the reader, echoes descriptions and images of the Savage and suggests an animal-like wildness within the human. 'He walked around smoking and sneering and spitting and swearing' (15). When Blue is at his lowest ebb, Hopper chooses to target him and Almond uses prey/predator language to describe this: 'When he saw how wounded I was, it was like he smelt blood and started moving in for the kill' (17). The illustration of the hooded figure of Hopper (Fig. 3.3), as the savage encounters him for the first time, is intimidating and sinister, drawn with sharp angles and lurking in ominous shadow. Like the savage, he blends into his background, and both words and illustrations portray a predator and prey scenario, as the savage 'stud where Hopper had stud and he smelt the smell of Hopper still lingerin in the air' (27). Hopper has now switched from predator to prey, but the savage does not want to kill him for sustenance: 'He didn't want to eat him tho, cos he looked like he wud taste too horribil' (26). Rather, the savage senses an ugliness to Hopper's character: 'he could tell strate away that the kid was no

good and he hated him strate away and he gript his nife tite' (25). Thus, the boundaries between human and nonhuman are destabilised: the savage embodies emotional depth and self-awareness typically associated with humanity, while Hopper is rendered through instincts of dominance and aggression that expose the latent savagery within the human.



Fig. 3.4.

A scene in the woods where the savage watches Blue and his sister Jess dance and play demonstrates McKean's artistic depiction of this inversion of human/nonhuman. The savage becomes transfixed by the children and feels that these are 'nice kids'. Blue, meanwhile, senses that they are being watched and calls out in greeting. The children then hurry home, and the savage lingers on the spot where they played, sitting and smelling and dancing and mimicking their behaviour. Although 'he new nothing about words' at first, now 'he was starting to lurn' (39). The savage is depicted in comedic fashion by McKean in framed sequences that portray him imitating the children (Fig. 3.4). In comparison to the savage, the

reader may understand Blue and Jess to be the supposedly ‘civilised’ and ‘real’ characters; however, the illustrations of them are faded and obscure, whereas the savage is once again rendered in sharp lines, vivid greens and thick black frames that both emphasise the character’s isolation from the children and accentuate his impactful presence on the page. The result is that the real characters seem less real than the imaginary and the wildness is more palpable than the civilised. Simultaneously, McKean’s art captures the savage’s entanglement of emotions in visceral fashion in his depiction of the savage’s contorted facial expressions, which parallel Blue’s complexity of emotion as it is rendered in his raw, scrawled narrative. As articulated by Coats, ‘[the savage’s] broad face with its sensual lips and asymmetrical eyes stares forth in an anguish that is by turns furtive and confrontational, charting the rhythms of Blue’s own path through grief’ (2009, 275). This expression of emotion lends a vulnerability to the savage, challenging understandings that associate feeling with the civilised human alone.

The motivations and fears of each character explore the natural predator-prey dynamic; it is not only the savage but also Blue and Hopper that assume alternate roles that reflect a more primal, animalistic nature. The young reader is encouraged to question the concept of ‘wild’ as something that is ‘out there’, existing in savage creatures and uncultivated environments. *The Savage* refutes the idea that the wild *co-exists* with the apparently civilised; rather, it proposes that the wild and the civilised, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, are mutually entangled.

1.5) *The Internal and External Wild*

The recognition of the relationship between inner nature and outer nature is a key concern across Almond’s body of work, as noted by critics such as Joosen (2024) and Nodelman (2014). Nodelman contends that in many of Almond’s novels, ‘[t]he wildness breaches the

walls of the ordinary and forces [the protagonist] to confront both the otherness out there beyond the home that keeps him relatively safe and the dangerous but potentially powerful otherness hidden inside him' (2014, 34). Blue's safe world at home has been irrevocably disturbed by the death of his father; his sense of security has been shattered, and he also finds himself questioning the infallibility of parental wisdom. His dad had advised him to ignore Hopper's bullying, and that Hopper would become bored as a result and leave Blue alone. A few weeks later, as Blue recounts, 'it was my dad that went away, and Hopper was still there' (17). Blue's existence is now disordered, dangerous and upended. He is faced with a harsh reality that has snatched him out of his secure childhood and forced him to confront the discomfort of growing up, of being more responsible, of caring for his younger sister, of becoming 'civilised'. He has become the 'other', a child that is markedly different to who he was before, and he incessantly writes about an 'other', who is not only wild and uncivilised and alone, but lives in a wild and uncivilised environment. As posited by von Uexküll, the characteristic environments of humans are both external *and* internal. Zapf concurs, contending that 'the inner worlds and landscapes of the mind, the psyche, and the cultural imagination...make up the habitats of humans as much as their external natural and material environments' (2016, 80). These environments, as *The Savage* portrays, are inextricably linked. The savage *lives in* the wild, but he also *is* wild. He represents the disordered, uncivilised part of Blue's psyche, and for Blue this is manifested in a wild natural environment.

Such an understanding blurs boundaries between matter and mind. Yet, there is a tendency to separate the two, as per Iovino's previously cited comment on 'misreading the text of the world' (2016, 364). The savage, in both illustrated and textual form, emphasises the porosity of the body, and Burgess Woods is a 'time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"' (Alaimo, 2008, 238). As the

savage grunts, growls, chews, spits and kills, and as Blue mimics his behaviour, and lines between reality and the supernatural become blurred, nature ‘invades, pervades and constitutes’ (Glotfelty, 2014, 223) the character’s bodies, such that their bodies, moods and mind are ‘fundamentally interconnected’ (ibid.). This is further emphasised by illustrations that bathe the characters in swathes of blue and green, and that focus on eyes, hair, teeth, hands and blood, entangled with leaves, stones, bricks, feathers and dirt.

The setting of the woods is a significant and prevalent one in children’s literature through the ages, particularly in fairy tales and folktales. Bruno Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic interpretation of these tales (1976) viewed the forest as a representation of the hidden and frightening realms of the unconscious mind. Jack Zipes is more concerned with the sociocultural implications of the journey into the woods. Reflecting on the prevalence of the forest trope in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, Zipes observes that

the forest is always large, immense, great and mysterious. No one ever gains power over the forest, but the forest possesses the power to change lives and alter destinies. In many ways it is the supreme authority on earth and the great provider...it is the place where society’s conventions no longer hold true. It is the source of natural right, thus the starting place where social wrongs can be righted (2021 [1989], 66/7).

Burgess Woods, home of the savage, the dark and unfamiliar place on the outskirts of Blue’s civilised town, matches Almond’s earlier description of his own childhood equivalent: ‘where civilisation ended and the wastelands began’. As Blue wanders through the wastelands of bereavement, resisting the inevitability of moving on, growing up and becoming civilised, Burgess Woods becomes a metaphor. But this metaphor has ontic presence, reminiscent of Sainsbury’s contention of the looping doubleness between the biological world and language, and the understanding that metaphor *is* being, as opposed to being *about* being. Blue inserts himself into the story, with his tale of the trip he takes to the woods with his sister. In the

ensuing description, the woods are transformed into an idyllic, pastoral setting, into which Almond manages to insert a subtle Wordsworth reference:

the sun was shining down through the trees, there were a few fluffy clouds, and the flowers and the grass danced gently in the breeze. I had Jess dancing and skipping and singing with the sun in her hair and butterflies fluttering round her head. I sat her down and started reading poems to her – stuff about daffodils and skylarks and sunlight (32).

This is written as part of older Blue's retrospective narrative, and fiction and reality become blurred - did Blue and his sister really go to the woods that day? Blue's pastoral description suggests he sees a healing, restorative quality in idyllic nature; this is the classic retreat and return scenario. Almond employs an intermedial reference to disrupt this Arcadian scene.

Blue shares with the reader that he construed this scene in his story 'like one of those scenes from a film – innocent and happy people frolicking about and relaxing in the sun, and all the time being watched by something dangerous and wild' (ibid.). The narrative transitions to younger Blue's story, and immediately the woods become a more threatening, uncivilised place, as we see the children from the savage's perspective: 'the scrawny kid and the little girl looked tasty' (34). This is reminiscent of the aforementioned Brothers Grimm fairytales where cannibalistic characters prey on unassuming children in deep, dark woods, and calls to mind both Bettelheim's conception of the forest as a representation of the frightening realms of the mind and Zipe's understanding of it as the place where societal conventions are disregarded. The savage refrains from fulfilling his predatory compulsion, but the implication remains that danger is ever-present in the woods. For Blue however, Burgess Woods ultimately represents a cathartic reckoning rather than a terrifying one. His face-to-face encounter with the savage at the story's climax is a complex intra-action in which internal nature is inextricably entangled with the external environment.

1.6) *A Savage Encounter: Intra-actions of the Physical, Material, Temporal and Spiritual*

Blue's ultimate confrontation with the savage is an ontological exchange, but also an act of introspection, which has been foreshadowed in Blue's numerous previous references to a crossover between the fictive and the real:

That day was like I was living right inside the savage's story, like the savage was living right inside me (67)

in my mind, that was as vivid and real as the real world (67)

I bared my teeth and snarled at her like the savage would (68)

Reminiscent of Freud's concept of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919), Blue stares at the savage 'like a reflection' (73), writing that 'he was just like me, only weirder and wilder and closer to some magic and darkness and some dreams' (73). Blue sees the savage's drawings: the savage has used charcoal and dye from leaves and earth and berries to render images of Blue on the cave wall. Contemplating the drawings, Blue realises 'the savage had drawn me long before I had ever started writing him' (75). This line of text further dismantles the partition between fiction and reality. It is an intra-action, revealing what Sainsbury calls a 'complex metaphysics...in which entities move past and through each other' (2021, 102).

Erica Hatley critiques the implication in *The Savage* that Blue's literacy alone facilitates his liberation, arguing that the text promotes 'a kind of ideal, neoliberal, masculine literacy' in which '[m]asculinity ... is a civilised form of savagery, partly made acceptable by the acquisition of literacy' (2012, 177). She contends that Almond's novel fails to interrogate literacy, education, and class as intertwined systems of power, and therefore 'buys into a neoliberal discourse which treats literacy and gender as markers of a desirable individualism' (ibid., 179). Hatley's critique is persuasive if one assumes that writing functions as the sole

mechanism through which Blue negotiates grief and selfhood. Indeed, Blue rejects institutional forms of expression, such as the counsellor's journal-writing task, only to find comfort in his own private, individual writing. However, this reading risks overlooking Almond's self-reflexive critique of the very notion of 'civilised' art. Blue does not simply *write* the Savage — he *draws* him: 'I did drawings of the savage as well... [with] teeth like a wolf and feet as tough as a horse's hooves... a dog skin around his waist and chicken feathers on his head' (*The Savage*, 31). Through this act, Almond complicates the hierarchy between word and image, civilisation and wildness. What initially appears to contrast literacy and savagery instead becomes a meditation on their interdependence: the Savage's own art reveals a primal creativity rooted in material and ecological awareness.

Almond's ekphrastic reverence for this art suggests that true expression emerges not from the civilised mastery of language, but from the entanglement of human imagination with the tactile, elemental world. In the spirit of 'magic and darkness and dreams', his description recalls the cave paintings of the Pleistocene epoch, when early humans harnessed natural materials to depict images of interactions between themselves, animals and places: representations of a complex and complicated prehistoric relationship with nature that endures today in humanity's ongoing artistic and ecological consciousness and continued impulse to represent, materialise, and reimagine our entanglement with the natural world through art, story, and image. The Pleistocene epoch also marked the emergence of early human toolmaking, as people fashioned implements from stone, bone, and wood – initiating one of the earliest material dialogues between humanity and nature, much like the savage does in the story. Westling describes these prehistoric artefacts as 'sedimentations of an ancient ecological imaginary nourishing all human cultures' (2016, 65). As Blue brandishes a pen (Fig. 3.5), a fundamental symbol of language, culture and civilised society – what posthumanist writer and academic Cary Wolfe describes as the 'old saws of

anthropocentrism' (2003, xi) – the savage clutches his knife, and McKean illustrates both pen and knife in strikingly similar fashion, both elongated and sharp, ready to pierce the enemy or the page. Blue's pen, as Hatley contends, is a weapon to defend him from pain, a reminder of his civilised nature, and a liberating tool that he uses to create a new narrative. The savage's weapons of knife and axe speak to a time before words caused pain, when humanity preoccupied itself with immediate physical threats rather than threats cloaked in language. And yet, the savage has also used the natural resources at his disposal to craft a story on the cave walls that Blue describes as 'works of wonder' (75) that render him unable to speak. The implication is that one does not need words to communicate wonder and wisdom. Almond, interestingly, sees his own pen as 'hollow bone', musing that 'maybe all instruments of art are like hollow bones, because...it's a narrow tube, through which my words come through, but through these things come all kinds of experiences' ('An Evening with David Almond', cited by Silva, 2024). Pen, knife and bone: cultural, natural, corporeal. In the world of *The Savage*, all are entangled in a generative dynamism that enables survival, sustenance, creativity and self-discovery.

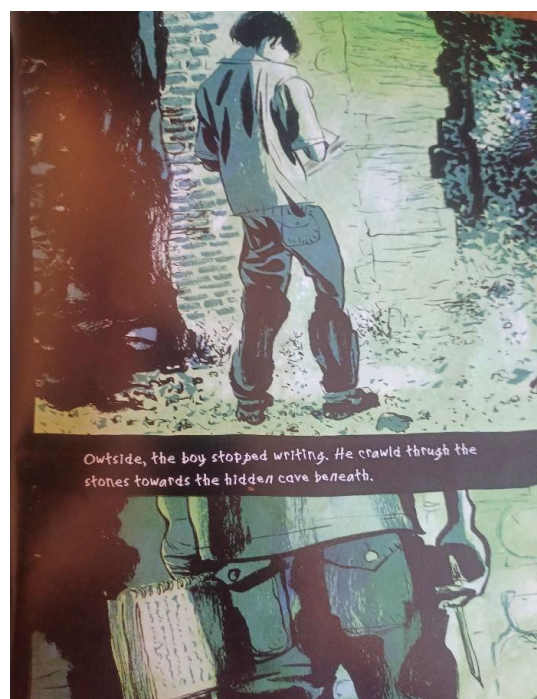


Fig. 3.5.

The meeting between Blue and the savage has a ritualistic feel, in which the physical, the spiritual, the material and the emotional are connected as the savage puts chicken feathers into Blue's hair and rubs dirt across his face. It is a cathartic experience for Blue, as he writes, '[t]he chicken feathers were in my hair and the savage was in my heart and my dad was in my soul' (76). This mystical encounter with the supernatural remains rooted in the ordinary, gritty setting of the cave, with its 'soft and sandy' floor (73), covered in stones, dirt and feathers, although the reader is aware that the cave is situated under the ruins of a chapel, lending a possible spiritual significance to the encounter. Almond, commenting on his propensity to situate the fantastical in the everyday, has stated 'this is the transcendence. Heaven is here. The more I live, the more gorgeous and wonderful the world is, but it is also terrifying and constantly endangered' (in interview with Jones, 2008). There is a suggestion that the encounter is the culmination of a healing process for Blue, as older Blue writes 'We're [Blue, his sister and his mother] not as sad as we were back then' (78). However, it is unclear if Blue's *story of the savage* or his *encounter with the savage* (which may or may not have been real) is endowed with restorative power. Prior to this point in the narrative, it has appeared that one enabled the other; that Blue's story is what brought the savage into being. The encounter in the cave generates an understanding that is considerably more complex. Aligning with the spiritual connotations of the narrative, it is suggested that the savage is omnipresent, existing regardless of words in a realm that transcends narrative representation. This realm is not a separate 'out there'; it is the real, tangible naturalcultural world in which Blue and the reader also exist.

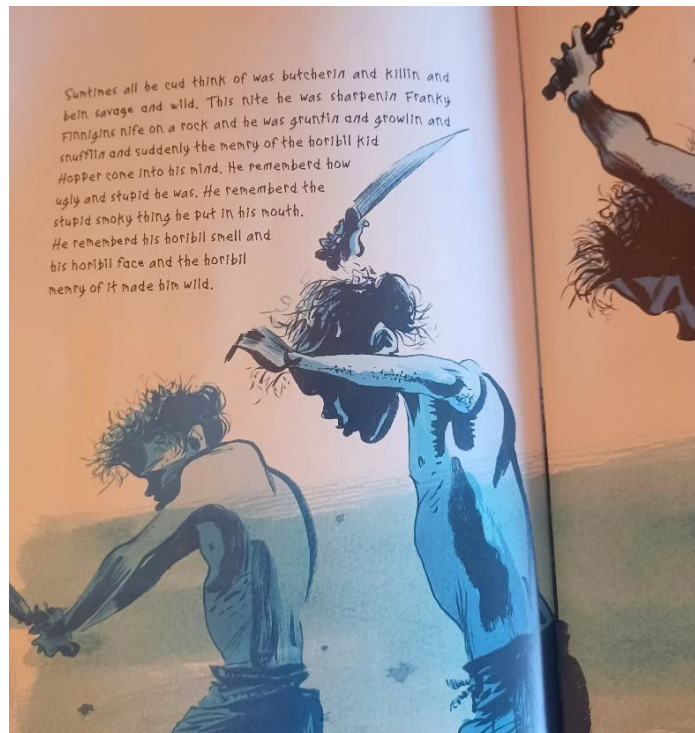


Fig. 3.6

1.7) *Construction of the Boy as Savage and Wild*

The construction of the boy as innately wild is one that is pervasive not only in literature, but in culture more broadly. Almond's protagonists reinforce this perception. At an early point in the narrative, Blue's mother says to him that '[I]ads need their dads to grow up properly' (14) and, as older Blue, he writes that he 'knew this to be true' (ibid.). Blue refers to 'the hard lads', the 'swagger' of male characters and the fact that he is 'dead soft inside' (15). Later, Blue's mother tells him, 'You're a brave and clever boy...[a]nd you're a savage, too' (50). The typically male characteristics of the savage's anatomy appear to be exaggerated by McKean – his angular jaw, the inverted triangular shape of his upper body, the appearance of stubble around his chin. By contrast, the female characters in *The Savage* have less prominent and more stereotypically 'feminine' roles of caring (Blue's mother, his teacher Miss Brewer and his school counsellor Mrs Molloy) or needing protection by the male protagonist (Blue's sister Jess). The only female character depicted in the illustrations is Jess, and she appears

infrequently and in diminutive – and arguably diminished – form (see Fig. 3.4). Both Blue's mother and his sister are under-developed characters, who only appear in the context of Blue's or the savage's perception of them. Blue's encounters with other female characters also demonstrate a stereotypically wild male/gentle female characterisation. When Mrs Molloy tells Blue 'You know you can speak to me' (68), he responds by grunting at her. She 'tr[ies] to be tender' but he rejects her tenderness: 'I couldn't stand it. I bared my teeth and snarled at her like the savage would' (ibid.) Encounters between males are portrayed in the contexts of mutual aggression, bravado or posturing. Blue's memory of an interaction with his father sees his dad 'put[ting] his hand up flat and we played at me thumping it, like we had done since I was little. I thumped and thumped and tried to imagine that dad's hand was Hopper's face. We laughed, and Dad pretended my thumps were really hurting' (16). The savage's interactions with the other male characters (Blue and Hopper) depict him trying to fight them (57), mimic them (38), or impress them (74). His interaction with Jess, as she sleeps, is a considerably gentler affair – he strokes her cheek, tries to say poems, and is 'full of tenderness and care' (63). These interactions reinforce what Kidd refers to as 'a mythic understanding of masculinity's wild essence (against the feminine project of domestication)' (2004, 169).

Randall argues that in Anglo-European culture, the adolescent boy has long been understood as a hybrid creature, embodying the conflict between the primitive and the modern, and the savage and the civilized (2000, 25). Randall sees the boy as an imperialist metaphor: at that transitory point between childhood and adulthood, the boy represents both coloniser and colonised. Images of the savage brandishing his knife (Fig. 3.6) are reminiscent of imperialist soldiers wielding their weapons, while simultaneously, depictions of his face contorted in frustration and anger as he raises his axe (Fig. 3.2) call to mind the subjugation and disruption of the colonised. Constructions of both coloniser and colonised, particularly the former, have

been historically gendered; the prevailing conception of soldier and defender is invariably male, and, indeed, this was the case for the vast majority of imperialist forces. The savage's aggressive defence of his territory (11) and brutish attempt to subjugate a perceived enemy at a moment when he is most vulnerable and powerless as he sleeps (59) emphasise the hybridity of the character as both defender and aggressor, but both are also distinctly gendered representations. The fact that the book was written and illustrated by men is also of consequence. As previously noted, boyhood, influenced by his own childhood experiences, is a prevalent thematic concern of Almond's, while McKean's position as a successful male artist who has predominantly collaborated with male writers has perhaps influenced his creative expression.

Gender is a significant aspect of the young reader's positionality. Almond's characters are very distinctly and emphatically gendered, which may reinforce a young male or female reader's perceptions of immutable gender binaries and constructions of 'wild' boyhood and 'gentle' girlhood. While the savage's hybridity is complex and well-developed, allowing for a nuanced reflection on dichotomies of 'wild' and 'civilised', Almond and McKean shape a discourse of inner wildness that, at times, conflates agency with hegemonic masculinity and sustains, rather than challenges, gender configurations.

1.8) ***'Bringing Wildness Under Control': Wild Illustration, Civilised Text?***

The intra-action of text and image in *The Savage* is complicated by its narrative metalepsis. Older Blue's story is in written form only; younger Blue's self-written tale of the savage is illustrated. The reader is aware from the beginning that Blue not only *wrote* the story but also *illustrated* it; however, unlike the text, it is not specifically stated that the illustrations in the book are Blue's; thus, the illustrations take on a life of their own; although they extend the written narrative, they are also somehow independent of it. They have a surreal, dream-

like quality, but also act as a point of connection between the fictional world created by Blue, and the possibility of its actual existence, revealed towards the story's end. A brief perusal of the book reveals an interesting fact: among an abundance of stark and striking imagery, illustrations of the character of Blue, the story's narrator, only appear on six of the book's almost eighty pages, and many of these depictions of the character are very small in size, with his face often obscured. The savage, in comparison, appears on the cover of all editions and on thirty-five subsequent pages, in expansive illustrations that feature low-angle, wide-angle, zoomed-out and zoomed-in viewpoints of the character's face and body, and in a combination of full-page and double-page spreads, comic-style sequences and both large and small framed images. Were one to read the text in isolation, without focusing on the images, the centrality of the character of Blue is far more apparent. He narrates the story, writing as an older version of himself who reminisces on the past, and the narrative of the savage is written by – and for – his younger self: 'It was my kind of story, just for myself' (*The Savage*, 12). The abundance of illustrations of the savage could point to McKean's personal interest in the character, which he may have felt provided him with more artistic inspiration and expressive scope than that of the human boy. It could also be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the enmeshment of human and other-than-human; there is no need for too many separate illustrations of Blue because Blue *is* the savage. Indeed, the human character's name is itself significant, denoting the colour that is most prevalently used by McKean to depict the savage.

Bird argues that the illustrations fill a gap created by the text. She writes,

I feel as if you actually need McKean's gaunt, half-crazed figure out there to give the book the sense of menace missing from the text. McKean's Savage could do anything. He could hurt the narrator or destroy someone in the story we love. You begin to feel like the only way he's kept in check is through Almond's gentle words (2008, n.p.).

Bird interestingly draws parallels here between wild nonhuman/gentle human and wild illustrations/gentle text. In a stark example of form mirroring content, she infers that the text represents the civilised, the Apollonian, and the illustrations the uncivilised, feral Dionysian. Bland concurs, claiming that ‘the illustrations are fierce and menacing, and suggest a horror that is gently alleviated by Almond’s poetic text’ (2014, 6). Yet, such observations are not wholly accurate. There are numerous indicators that the written story is also possessed of a somewhat feral agency. Aside from the ‘wild’ typography of young Blue’s story (see Fig. 3), which forms part of the overall aesthetic of the book, many of Blue’s comments indicate that he feels that his story – and by extension the character he has created – has taken on a life of its own. He writes ‘once I started writing the story, it was like I couldn’t stop, which was strange for me’ (12). At numerous junctures, Blue refers to a sensory awareness of the character he has created on the pages:

[w]hen I drew him and wrote about him, I could see him, I could hear him, I could smell him. Sometimes, it was nearly like I was him and he was me (31)

I still had the wild scent of the savage in my nostrils (40).

I realised I was grunting and growling as I wrote (67).

I caught his scent. I heard his breath. I saw his eyes, shining in the dark (73).

Blue demonstrates here what Oppermann describes as ‘a multisensorial as well as a cognitive interaction with the material world’ (2018, 181). Blue’s writing is not intended to civilise or control: on the contrary, it is writing that is active and agentic, highlighting the interconnectedness of the text and the body. Although Bird sees ‘gentleness’ in Almond’s words, there is also the suggestion of menace, not just in the construction of the character of the savage, but in the implication that ‘happy-ever-after’ stories are, as Blue maintains, ‘not what life’s like’ (12). Stories, like real life, can be dangerous and threatening and have unpredictable endings. Blue’s grunts and growls as he writes harkens back to a time when

such noises comprised the human language of communication, and reminds the reader, as Garrard contends, that

human language, the supposedly unassailable marker of culture, is wild in the sense that it 'rises unbidden' and 'eludes our rational intellectual capacities'. It may be domesticated for educational or other purposes but fundamentally language 'came from someplace else' (Garrard, 2012, 81, also citing Snyder, 1999, 177)

Almond has expressed his distrust of 'perfect' 'tightly woven' language and the elevation of literature, articulating instead an interest in playing with language, and retaining its roots: 'the body, the screaming and dancing and singing' (in interview with Sundmark, 2016, 67). This 'distrust' is evident in Almond's decision to write Blue's story in the style a young child might, laden with misspellings and grammatical errors. These errors also prompt the reader to read the passages aloud to sound out Blue's phonetic spelling and facilitate understanding. In this way, Almond transforms reading into an embodied, auditory experience that blurs the boundary between written and spoken modes. The text thus becomes performative: language is not merely decoded but heard and felt. Almond foregrounds the material and sensory dimensions of storytelling, suggesting that communication – like Blue's process of becoming – depends on the interplay between voice, text, and embodied experience.

Almond's reference to 'the body, the screaming and dancing and singing' also emphasises the performative nature of language. The oral story is one such performance, a common bedtime ritual in modern times between adult and child. Almond plays with this concept in *The Savage* by inverting the status-quo, as the child (Blue) tells the bedtime story to the adult (his mother), with Blue asking his mother 'Are you sitting comfortably?' (41) and his mother giggling and clapping her hands at the end of the tale. As children try to make sense of the world, their parents may provide comfort, whispering stories in their ears as they fall asleep and leaving remnants of their voices drifting through their semi-consciousness. *The Savage* highlights how children become storytellers themselves, constructing and telling their own

stories to bring comfort or meaning to their world and the world of others. Blue's new reality is not one in which the child is snuggled up comfortably in his bed, being soothed by a 'once-upon-a-time' tale from his parent. This is a world where the parent listens as the child and *his* story assume agency and the child then comforts his younger sister with the same story, as his mother observes. This presents an inversion of the typical roles protector and comforter, a sense of disorder, which, for the young reader, is a prospect that is perhaps simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying. This scene also sees Almond reimagining masculinity as empathetic and relational rather than self-sufficient, complicating Hatley's previously discussed view of the novel as promoting a neoliberal ideal of individual mastery through literacy. By comforting his sister and symbolically supporting his mother through storytelling, Blue embodies a nurturing, creative masculinity rooted in care. Read through a material ecocritical lens, this act of shared narration also gestures toward an ecology of interdependence, where emotion, language, and the material world are bound in mutual restoration.

1.9)ix. *Ordered Chaos: Harmonious Design and Transmedial Techniques*

'Ordered chaos' pervades *The Savage*, both thematically and aesthetically. Blue's existence exemplifies this: he is expected to continue with the ordered routines of his daily life – family life, school, eating and bedtime rituals – while his emotional self is in turmoil. This thematic ordered chaos is mirrored by the ordered chaos of both the narrative structure and the aesthetic design of the book. The narrative metalepsis aligns the 'ordered' writing of older Blue with the wild and 'disordered' narrative of the younger boy. This is visually apparent in the diverse typefaces, but is less clearly defined in the narrative content: the climax of the story, the encounter between the savage and Blue, is perhaps its most 'chaotic' element as boundaries between the two characters and between fiction and reality are blurred. This

element of the story is not written by the young Blue, but by his older self. There is therefore an indeterminacy to the narrative structure, whereby the reader cannot/can no longer be sure that older Blue is the voice of factual reason, and younger Blue is the imaginative storyteller.

Although some of the previously cited critics align the Apollonian with the text and the Dionysian with the illustrations, it has been demonstrated that both text and illustration in *The Savage* are possessed with a wildness and disorder, mirroring the ferality of its central character. The book's material and aesthetic design is, however, demonstrably ordered. It borrows from conventions of various forms, but the result is far from chaotic; on the contrary, there is a synchronicity to its design. This harmony of design is evident in the recurrence of a cool colour palette, the rhythmic back and forth of the 'wild' (younger) and the 'stable' (older) typography, the organisation of the narrative into eleven succinct chapters, and McKean's unwavering commitment to a cinematic visual style.

While the consistency of style and design can be described as orderly in certain respects, the 'ordered chaos' is most distinctly revealed in the fluctuating motion of McKean's imagery. This cinematic style recalls *The Savage*'s first iteration as a short story commissioned for television. It is transmedial in nature as McKean utilises motifs, techniques and perspective variations that combine picturebook, comic and graphic novel conventions, but also, at times, appear to transcend all these categories and develop into something more viscerally cinematic, for example his sequence of frames of the savage mimicking the children in the woods, which resembles a film reel more than the typical frame sequence convention of a graphic novel (Fig. 3.4). While the latter fragments time through discrete panels separated by gutters, McKean's depiction evokes cinematic continuity rather than segmented narration. This blurring of still image and motion invites a multimodal reading aligned with Elleström's concept of intermediality, where media modalities intersect to generate new forms of meaning. By invoking the temporal fluidity of film within the static form of the page,

McKean animates the Savage's movements and collapses distinctions between stillness and motion, text and image. The result is a heightened sense of vitality and transformation, visually mirroring Blue's own liminal process of becoming within a world where imagination, materiality, and perception intra-act. McKean's appreciation of the motion of the narrative corresponds with Almond's frequently articulated conviction that 'stories are endlessly moving' (in interview with Atherley, 2017, n.p.). McKean's 'cinematic camera' is in constant motion: zooming in and out on the figure of the savage (8/9, 10/11, 50/1; Fig. 3.2), capturing single sweeping movements in sequential panels of animation (52/3; Fig. 3.6), creating full-page bleeds to depict the immersion of the body in nature (20/1, 44/5, 60/1; Fig. 3.1), utilising foreground, mid-ground and background, and wide-angle and low-angle images to create perspective (44/5, 55/6, 70/1; Fig. 3.5) and framing selected images with dark, thick lines that create impact and emphasise visual continuity (34/5, 38/9; Fig 3.2). Such techniques exemplify what Serafini and Kress describe as the hybridisation of page-centric and screen-centric modes of representation – foregrounding the image's spatial logic and cinematic movement while retaining the sequential, left-to-right reading conventions of the page (Serafini, 2014; Kress, 2003).

These illustrations that emphasise constant fluidity of movement crowd the pages of the book – chaotically so in many cases – demanding the reader to remain alert and attuned to the multitude of visual details that are simultaneously presented, adjusted and redefined. McKean's vibrant aestheticism, both systemically recurrent and subversively transmutable, melds fluidly with Almond's evocative and provocative text, which is itself in constant motion from scrawl to print, from young Blue to older Blue. Johnston sees the ordered chaos in Almond's overall oeuvre, contending that 'imageries that are used over and over again [ordered] avoid becoming repetitive and instead become somehow enriched and enlarged

with every appearance – colours deeper, meanings more profound [chaos]’ (2014, 26). The same contention applies to McKean’s recurrent but captivating artistry in this book.

Corresponding with the thematic concerns of the narrative, order and chaos are aesthetically fused, and in this fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian polarities, we see what Nietzsche might identify as ‘the apex of artistic creation’ ([1901], 2014, 798).

As discussed in Chapter One, long-standing conceptions of order and chaos as opposing and mutually exclusive have sustained rigid dualisms between culture (as order) and nature (as chaos). *The Savage*, however, both thematically and aesthetically, reveals these forces to be intertwined rather than opposed. Its ordered chaos demonstrates, in line with material ecocritical thinking, that pattern and disorder coexist within the same living systems. In Almond’s vision, order and chaos are mutually constitutive, and the idea of pure order – separate from the dynamic flux of the material world – is exposed as an anthropocentric illusion.

3.1.x. *Hybrid Aestheticism, Medial Configurations and ‘Wild’ Materiality*

As a hybrid novel or fusion text, combining elements of the graphic novel, the illustrated story, the comic and the picturebook, *The Savage* ‘draw[s] attention to [itself] as [an] artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’ (Tandoi, 2017, 330). *The Savage* is not just a story; it is also a ‘book *about* telling or illustrating stories’ (Athanasίου-Krikelis, 2020, 365). Blue expresses his creativity materially, scrawling words into his notebook, paralleling the work of his creator Almond, who has emphasised the importance of writing materials in his work, such as ‘notebooks, sketchbooks, pens, pencils, and coloured pencils’ that enable ‘words and images to flow from the hand onto the page’ (‘On Writing’, official website, 2018, n.p.). Almond compares his notebook to ‘a landscape

that [he] can explore and inhabit' (ibid.) and similarly Blue's notebook becomes a landscape, in which he not only writes about but also, as previously noted, draws the savage.

McKean also treats his canvas as a landscape. The natural world of the savage is resplendent in lush green watercolour washes that illustrate the scenes that occur at daytime (Figs. 3.1; 3.2; 3.3), and deep midnight blues and charcoal greys to portray the night (Fig. 3.10). The characters, both human and posthuman, are immersed in these riotous colours: as Silva notes 'Almond's protagonists resemble the natural resources they engage with when it comes to their evolving minds and bodies' (2024, 53). The endpapers (Fig. 3.7) feature pale green washes of abstract trees and branches, and splashes of green watercolour also adorn the cover (Fig. 3.9) title and dedication pages. McKean is attentive to transitions: temporally, between night and day, and narratively, between fiction and reality; the 'real' human characters generally appear in ironically more obscure and inconspicuous depictions than the 'imaginary' posthuman savage. As Almond utilises metanarrative devices, McKean similarly reflects visually on creativity and the act of writing. The front matter features a full-page illustration of a notebook (Fig. 3.8), the scrawled artistry and title on its cover redolent of the typography that depicts Blue's handwriting throughout the book. The book's title and the names of its author and illustrator are rendered in smudged green and blue lettering on the cover, as if drawn by fingers dipped in charcoal or berry ink, perhaps the same fingers that created the cave drawings Blue is fascinated by in his ritualistic encounter with the savage. The back cover features three panels of small illustrations, two of thickets of trees in Burgess Woods (the natural) and one of a thoughtful savage, crouched animal-like on the ruins of the chapel (the naturalcultural). Many chapters end with abstract images: scrawled vertical lines that could equally represent claw marks or lines of ink—an abstract rendition of naturalcultural entanglement. The first page of Chapter Three features a solitary leaf (see Fig. 3.1), its intricate network of veins rendered in black ink markings of various thickness and curvature.

The image is repeated at the end of the narrative, on the final page of Chapter Eleven, this time illustrated in blue inks. McKean communicates a sense of wonder at the intricate design of this vascular phenomenon, a common symbol of growth and rebirth. It is natural artistry at work, and McKean's reverent but incomplete drawing suggests that no man-made artistry can compare. The stark images of both leaves and trees also call to mind the origin of the paper on which the book is printed. This creative cultural artefact would not exist without the lush natural vegetation that McKean vividly depicts within it.

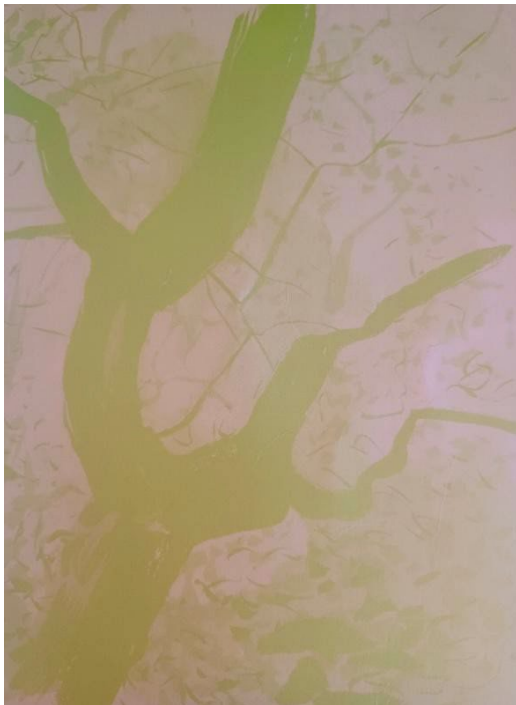


Fig. 3.7. Endpapers



Fig. 3.8.

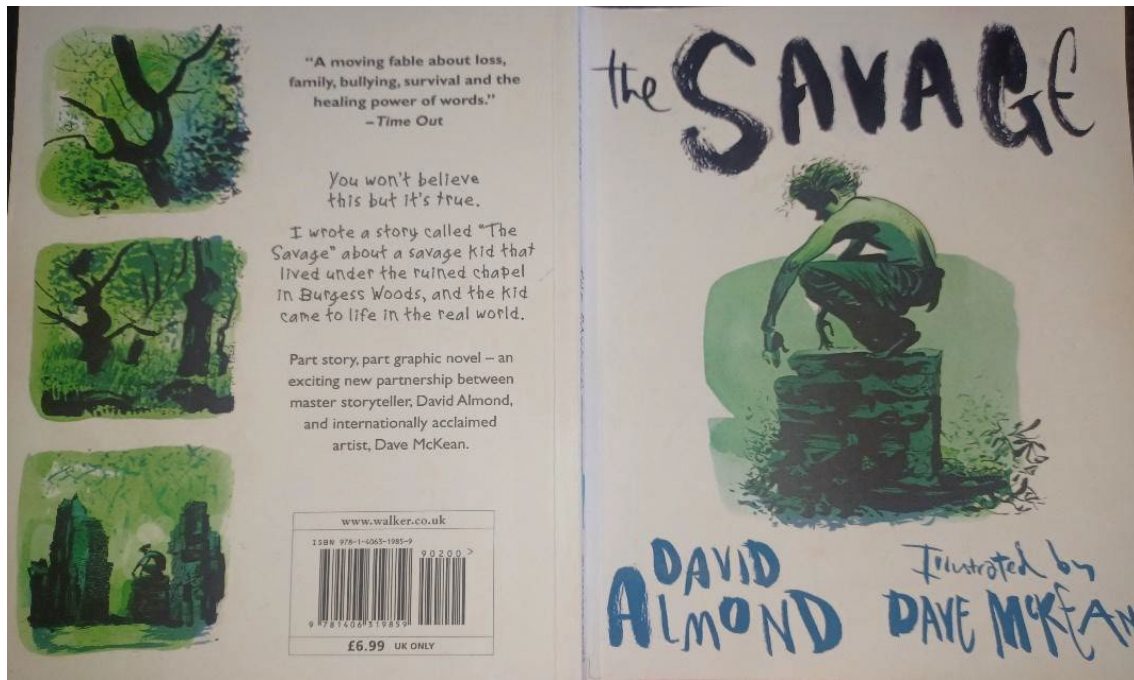


Fig. 3.9. Cover

McKean's abundant use of cooler shades of blue and green is disturbed only once, with a vibrant dash of red, splattered across two pages (57, 59), when the savage visits Hopper at night, punching him in the face, resulting in a bloodied nose and lip. The sudden burst of hot crimson, smeared across Hopper's terrified face as he raises his hands to protect himself from the savage's onslaught (Fig. 3.10), emphasises the vulnerability and fragility of the human body, but also its sanguine vitality. As the abundant green indicates the life-sustaining chlorophyll of natural vegetation, the sudden burst of red constitutes human life-force. Again, we are reminded of Oppermann's contention that colour is 'a direct material engagement with the ontology of the world' (2018, 183). McKean's palette is not randomly chosen; it is a commentary on colour as both an aesthetic and material force.

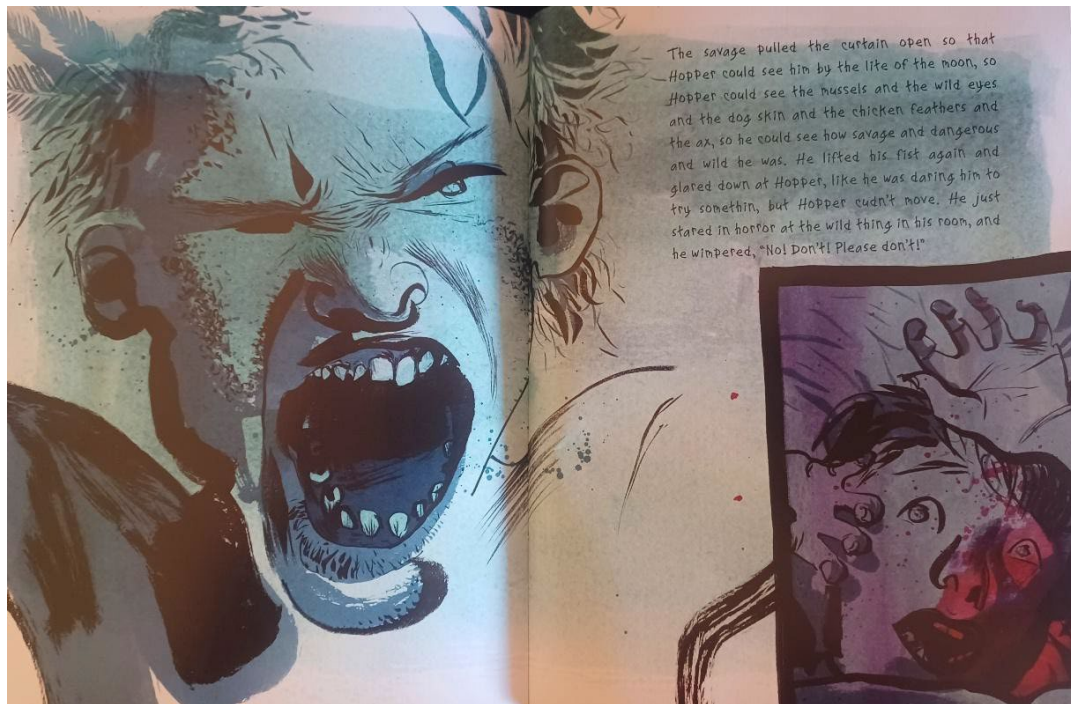


Fig. 3.10

3.1.xi. 'A Good Book is Not Tame': Writerly Endings and Narrative Agency

At the story's end, Blue sits at the kitchen table 'more grown up', with 'spelling that's much improved' and feeling 'happy again' (78); for all intents and purposes, he appears 'tamed'. Mallan claims that 'many stories that feature a wild child often conclude their narratives with wildness being tamed or managed' (2018, 217). However, *The Savage* resists such neat and civilised closure. Contrary to previous indications in the story that the savage was becoming civilised, suggested by the fact that he resisted killing Hopper, and in lines where the reader is informed that he 'wos learnin abowt what it felt like to be human'(51) and 'tried to speak like Blue and Jess' (63), ultimately, in his moment of catharsis, it is Blue who becomes the savage, stamping the earth, grunting and feeling a primal connection to his father. This immanent and embodied moment in his encounter with the savage has been viscerally real for Blue, leaving the reader to contemplate if this was, in fact, a literary construct, or a real, mystical, metaphysical experience that older Blue is only now sharing through his words.

Older Blue demonstrates frustration and anger in his writing; an indication that his emotional ‘wildness’ has not been brought under some kind of control. He frequently swears, proclaiming that ‘if you can’t swear about something like this [the death of his father], what’s the use of swearing at all?’ (13). Although older Blue writes that the encounter in the cave ‘was the story’s end’ (78), he also intends to ‘share the story, to let it go’ (79). Thus, both Blue and the savage remain untamed, and so does *The Savage* book, as the story continues to move with the reader’s imagination.

Interestingly, Chapter Ten, which presents the climax of mystical realism in the narrative, the transcendent moment of catharsis for Blue, is the only chapter in the book that is not illustrated. Mallan notes that the ‘narrative point of entry into the cave is also the point of exit from the graphic novel’ (2018, 222). Thus, transitions in the narrative are paralleled by transitions in the literary form of the text. As previously noted, McKean and Almond did not consult each other as McKean illustrated the story. The reader is left to ponder if it was a deliberate decision on McKean’s part to refrain from illustrating this climactic moment in the narrative. Perhaps McKean sees a sacredness to this ritualistic encounter between Blue and the savage, which he communicates by the absence of imagery, leaving the reader to create their own mental image of the encounter. Critics such as Bird and Bland, who speak of the menacing fierceness of McKean’s illustrations, may argue that as this is a moment of tenderness and contemplation, it is best communicated by the ‘gentle’ text alone. However, in a book that has been replete with striking illustrations to this point, their sudden absence is not only notable, but is also quite discomfiting. Just as the absence of Blue’s father is keenly felt by him, the unanticipated absence of illustration is felt by the reader, who must ease themselves out of Almond’s and McKean’s mystical naturalcultural world of washed-out blues and greens, leaves and shadows, pens and knives, teeth, grit and flesh, and confront their own reality. The illustrations elsewhere have entangled word, image, and material

texture to create an intermedial ecology of meaning; their withdrawal exposes this network by contrast, making the reader more acutely aware of the presence and importance of the intermedial relationships that have shaped their reading experience all along. The visual quietness draws attention to the materiality of both page and reader, transforming absence into an affective reminder of how meaning and emotion emerge through the interplay of media, matter, and embodied perception.

Almond's and McKean's personal motivations, upbringings and environments constitute several threads in the entangled web of *The Savage*. However, such influences do not detract from *The Savage*'s 'openness to different manifestations' (Coghlan, 2014, 98). Together, Almond and McKean have created a Barthesian writerly text: a space where meaning is continually generated through the reader's engagement with the book. Coghlan argues that Almond's books 'deliberately mislead readers [and] constantly bring complexity and lack of certainty to events, leaving gaps destabilising the reader's perceptions of the unusual, and possibly supernatural events which occur' (2014, 85). This dissertation argues that this 'destabilisation' is intensified by the aesthetic complexity of the visual narrative. The entangled aestheticism of *The Savage* motivates the reader to connect their own internal world to the external book, form their own interpretation and complete Almond's and McKean's process of (in the words of Almond) nurturing the story into shape.

In his many interviews and speeches on the art of writing and the concept of story, David Almond has frequently drawn comparisons between the real world and the book. Just as a child can return to a warm and safe home after a day playing outside, and bring 'the outside wildness and darkness in', so too, argues Almond, does the book:

It sits comfortably on our shelves in our comfortable home, but it is not tame. And as you read it, you realise that it's come back from somewhere wild: inside it, there are echoes of wilderness ('The Necessary Wildness', 2011, 111).

One might argue that these ‘echoes of wilderness’ are more discernible in a book entitled *The Savage*. But what Almond alludes to here is not the mere subject matter of a book, its plot or its thematic concerns. Rather, as he has emphasised on several occasions, he is referring to the agency of story itself, the enmeshment of story with our natural and cultural existence and the narrative agency of matter. Referring back to a time when story originated, he notes that

[s]tories didn’t just describe the processes and rhythms of the world, but they were part of the processes and rhythms...maybe the best stories, and especially stories for the young, draw on that ancient magic. They’re physical, intellectual, and spiritual acts; they can be spells and incantations. Such stories aren’t simply about the world; they are of the world, and they affect the world (ibid., 113).

Almond sees story as being ‘in our blood and bones’ (ibid, 112). It is physical, and also primordial, reaching back ‘to the tales that were spoken and sung long before print ever existed, to the first stories and spells chanted by firelight in ancient caves’ (ibid., 113). It is perhaps no coincidence that Blue and the savage encounter each other in a cave, its walls adorned with illustrated stories, a connection between the present and the past, and the spiritual and the temporal. During this ekphrastic, meta-artistic encounter, in which the character within the work of art beholds a work of art himself, Blue engages not only with sensorial and material modalities but also with a spatio-temporal modality as he experiences a work of art that is rooted in history and is very particular to its place.

Almond’s comments on the writing process stress the idea of story as a living entity. He describes how he was ‘ambushed’ by the story *Skellig*, how he ‘nurture[s] stories into shape’ and ‘unlock[s] stories that are already there’ (in interview with Atherley, 2017, n.p.). His commentary on *The Savage*, featured in the author blurb on the final page of the book, further emphasises the agency of story: ‘It was as if the story had been waiting for me, and once I began, it seemed to write itself’ (*The Savage*, 80). These comments are reflected in the

metanarrative comments of the character of Blue, as he voices his intention to share his story (79). Reminiscent of the spiritual energy extended to words by many Indigenous cultures, Blue suggests that the living entity of story is constantly in motion, never quite complete, dynamic and evolving as it reaches new readers and imaginations.

3.2. Den Om Rufus

Note: all personal communication (marked p.c.) from Mårdøn Smet and Thomas Vium was received by email on dates between November 9th and November 20th, 2024.

3.2.i. Overview of the Book

Den om Rufus (henceforth abbreviated to *Rufus*), published in 2021, is a Danish visual narrative, written and illustrated by Thorbjørn Petersen, Mårdøn Smet and Herman Ditte – the latter is the joint pen name of illustrators Silja Lin and Thomas Vium. Upon contacting the authors and illustrators, it was revealed that Silja Lin did not work on this project directly, but is acknowledged in the dedication for her ‘input and creative sparring’. The three creators – Petersen, Smet and Vium – met at The Animation Workshop at Via University College in Viborg, Denmark, where Smet is a teacher, and the others are former students.

Smet reveals that the book originated as a project on which all three worked collaboratively during an internship for Petersen and Vium at Smet’s studio in Copenhagen. Smet describes the pressures of trying to collaboratively complete the book in a short space of time, ‘while the graduates struggled to make ends meet in the “real world”’ (p.c.). Smet reveals that the narrative is based on an old story of his that he’d never got to work out properly himself, and which was developed and refined by the collaborators over a number of story meetings, which involved ‘making rough thumbs...[writing] provisional text...creating the characters [and deciding on] a graphic style for the project’ (ibid.). The text and illustrations were a collaborative effort, ‘made by all three in no particular order’ (ibid.), although Smet and Vium disclose that Vium had almost sole responsibility for the colouring. The sketches and inking were done by hand and only the colour was digitised. As of 2025, the book has not

been translated into English; the copy referenced in this study is in the original Danish¹⁷ and is a hardcover book, approximately fifty unnumbered pages in length¹⁸. The authors/illustrators borrow from picturebook, comic and graphic novel conventions, combining full-page illustrations, double-page spreads, comic-style panel sequences, speech bubbles, and framed and unframed drawings in a fluid narrative. Similar to *The Fate of Fausto*, it is unusually sized: larger than a typical comic, smaller than a typical picturebook. Its pages are firm and crisp, off-white in colour. The ‘wobbly’, cartoon-style illustrations are an acknowledged homage to renowned illustrator and cartoonist Quentin Blake, whose portrait appears in an intertextual reference on page 8 of the book (Fig. 3.13). The typography is a script font: upper case is used for dialogue, while lower case is used for narrative text. This, according to Vium and Smet, was a deliberate design choice, mindful of the stylistic conventions of comics. The colour palette varies from warmer autumnal colours to cooler hues of blue and grey when depicting the night-time scenes and Rufus’ forest adventures. Vium comments that ‘the colours are mainly used to signal transitions in the story, to make the reader aware that there has been a change in Rufus and that the story is now entering a new phase’ (p.c.).

The narrative follows the eponymous protagonist Rufus, an anthropomorphised fox, who lives a seemingly content but mundane existence in a crowded and busy city. According to Vium and Smet, the protagonist’s name is not particularly significant, aside from it ‘being a generic fox name like Reynard in English’ (ibid.). Following a storm, Rufus finds himself wandering away from his urban setting into a mysterious forest, where he encounters younger, ‘wilder’ foxes and discovers his own wild nature in an invigorating and

¹⁷ I received assistance in the translation of the text from Danish to English from Professor Nina Christensen, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark.

¹⁸ For referencing purposes, I have assigned page numbers, commencing with the first page of the main narrative as page 1.

transformative experience. When Rufus returns to the city, his inner savage re-emerges, and though a meeting with a friend restores a semblance of civility, it does not dispel the wildness that continues to shape him from within. This is highlighted in the endpapers, which provide a continuation of the story beyond the conclusion of the main narrative text. Rufus must 'negotiate between culture and nature' according to Vium, a pursuit that he agrees is also crucial for the human in the real world beyond the page (p.c.).

All the characters in the tale are nonhuman birds or animals, most of whom are anthropomorphised (a notable exception is the multitude of pigeons that crowd the illustrations of urban scenes). This was a deliberate decision by the creators (acknowledged by Vium and Smet, p.c.). The only image of a human that appears in the book is the aforementioned Quentin Blake portrait.

Rufus was nominated for the 2022 Nordic Council Children and Young People's Literature Prize. The Nordic Council Prize website, in its justification of the selection of the book for nomination, describes it as 'a wonderful, quirky and incredibly well-composed story with an emphasis on the aesthetic details', in which the reader is 'absorbed into a universe that balances on a knife-edge between nature and the civilised world that cultivated a fox. Or is it the other way 'round?' (2022, n.p.). The publisher identifies its target audience as the 6- to 9-year-old age group; however, there are numerous indicators that this categorisation is perhaps too restrictive – the book's subversive imagery, complex thematic concerns and challenging paratextual features are likely to be enjoyed and appreciated by an older age group also. The book's creators concur: Vium states that '[t]he best children's books are rarely just for kids' (p.c.), while Smet contends that 'the publisher's identification of a target audience is meant to serve as a tool for libraries and bookstores to find their way in an increasingly overcrowded

market of books...I rarely think of stories I'm writing as being suited for this or that target audience' (p.c.).

3.2.ii. *Authors/illustrators – Backgrounds and Creative Output*

Of the three authors/illustrators, Mårdøn Smet is probably the best-known, although he may be unfamiliar to audiences outside of Scandinavia. Smet, who taught the other two illustrators at The Animation Workshop at Via University College in Denmark, is an experienced cartoonist, who has been working with comics since the 1980s, both as a creator of his own works and as an artist for commercial cartoon franchises. He has illustrated approximately 200 works, including picturebooks and 'easy reading' books (Dansk Forfatter Forening, n.p.). Among Smet's output are characters from the Donald Duck universe, created for Disney comics published by Egmont, and this influence is evident in some of the character illustrations in *Rufus*. The significance of this and other influences on Smet's artistry is further explored in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Smet began his illustration career with published work for adult audiences, including the *Stig & Martha* series, published by his own studio Pinligt Selskab ('Embarrassing Company'), which is notable for its dark humour and pornographic cartoons. He began creating comics for children in the early nineties, and is best-known in Scandinavia for his well-received and award-winning 'Moomin' series, a comic series based on characters from Finnish author/illustrator Tove Jansson's novel series of the same name. However, following the release of the eighth volume, Smet's comic series was suspended by the publishers who 'didn't approve' of the artist's sense of humour (Lambiek, 2024, n.p.). This characteristic unsettling dark humour is also notable in *Rufus*. Such humour is reminiscent of the challenging, satirical and provocative work of children's illustrator, Tomi Ungerer; indeed

Ungerer published a children's book entitled *Rufus* in 1961 (about a bat with the same name)¹⁹. Arguably, dark, provocative humour is less frequently detectable in visual narratives published for children in English-speaking countries.

Herman Ditte is the joint pen name of illustrators Silja Lin and Thomas Vium; however, as previously mentioned, aside from occasional informal input, Lin did not work on this project.

Vium trained under Mårdøn Smet in The Animation Workshop, where he now teaches.

Together with Lin, he has created comics, picturebooks, educational material, and fiction for children and young adults including the ninja series *Nobu* (2022) and *Tit and Raven* (2021).

Vium and Lin are also the illustrators and writers of the webcomic *Teklafall* (2023).

Thorbjørn Petersen is an independent illustrator and cartoonist, who also trained in graphic storytelling at The Animation Workshop under the tutelage of Mårdøn Smet. *Rufus* is Petersen's debut published work as an illustrator.

The personal communications from authors/illustrators Smet and Vium are referenced as part of the epitext of *Rufus*, shedding light on post-representational aspects of the book such as the origins of the tale, influences and creative challenges. As with the other primary sources, care is taken that the analysis of either the text or the epitext is not solely informed by authorial intention or motivation, but also takes account of diversity of interpretation, accessibility and availability. This analysis also engages with issues of translation, cultural context, and a mode of aesthetic subversion that differs in tone and strategy from the forms more commonly explored in Anglophone visual literature for children and young adults.

¹⁹ Neither Smet nor Vium mention Ungerer as an influence, although Smet does acknowledge the possibility of 'subconscious' motivations.

3.2.iii. *Picturebook/Comic Hybrid*

Rufus combines some of the commonly recognised characteristics of the picturebook with several conventions more closely associated with comics. Acknowledging this, Vium refers to *Rufus* as a ‘hybrid’ work of art (p.c.). Op de Beeck describes ‘[a typical picturebook’s] limited number of pages, its few words and pictures per page or per spread, and its narrow paper and board binding’ (2018, 51). *Rufus* expands on this description, constituting a multitude of pages that abound with plentiful text and richly detailed illustration. The illustrators use panels, speech bubbles, captions and sequential narrative images (Figs. 3.12b, 3.10, 3.18, 3.19); all typical features of comic books. Sweeping, vibrant double-page spreads present numerous moments of contemplation for the reader. Cityscape images are framed and enclosed, indicating the confined nature of *Rufus*’ existence in these spaces; by contrast, most images of natural landscapes, and of ‘freedom’, such as that of *Rufus*’ dream in which he flies over the sleeping city, are unframed, and bleed to the edge of the page, an alignment of form and content; neither *Rufus* nor the illustration are confined by boundaries. Text is carefully positioned as part of the narrative design: on the ‘dream’ image (Fig. 3.11), for example, the gutter separates the protagonist from the typeface. The gutter is a material barrier as *Rufus* flies away from the ‘human’ words on the verso across a clear sky unhindered by language on the recto. Language in this image seems to symbolise the civilised world, but for *Rufus*, a wild creature at heart, this is also a world of entrapment. The sky surrounding *Rufus* on the recto is silent and clear and the reader can almost feel the peaceful solitude of the fox as he floats wordlessly above the sleeping city.

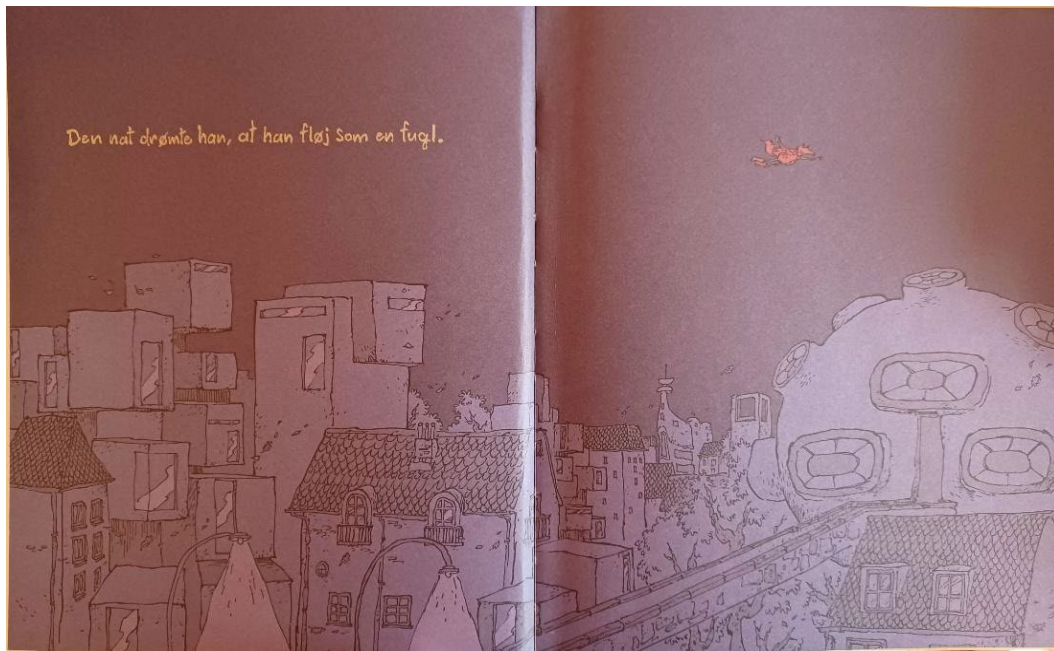


Fig. 3.11

As the distinction between nature and culture becomes increasingly permeable in the narrative, so too does the point of demarcation between the picturebook and comic form. The script font (Figs. 3.11, 3.13, 3.18 and others) appears as a hand-written scrawl, an allusion to the writing process as both a marker of culture, but also a wild, natural act, in the sense that it is ‘unencumbered and unmediated by technological artifice’ (Kahn and Hasbach, 2013, xi). As previously noted, the authors/illustrators have stated that all artwork and typography, with the exception of the colouring, was done by hand. The significance of the characters’ dialogue is emphasised by bold, upper case lettering (Fig. 3.18) and the creators’ adoption of comic devices, including speech balloons and large sound-effect type (*Rufus*, 27, 28, 37). These devices not only emphasise the humour of the narrative but also develop intimacy between the characters and the reader, by creating a sense of immediacy that directly connects the reader to each character's voice and thoughts. The illustrators’ colour choices are attuned to both the thematic concerns of the narrative and the aesthetic design of the book as a whole. The narrative takes place on an autumn day, but the book itself appears to materially

(if not temporally) progress through all four seasons; beginning with cooler, greener shades of spring, moving to deeper blue hues of summer, to the warm autumnal oranges and reds and finally the frostier, 'wintry' shades at the end. The orange of the falling leaves is mirrored in the rusty hues of Rufus' fur, while occasional splashes of bright pink (13, 27; Figs. 3.12a, 3.12b), which draws attention to the vitality of both urban and rural environments, each animated by complex entanglements of human agency and natural generativity that manifest in distinct yet interconnected ways. On closer inspection, unusual illustrative details are discernible: a tiny mole reading a miniscule paper in Hanne's garden (40); a dragon's head and tail protruding from the upper storeys of a skyscraper in the city (19; Fig. 3.16); a framed image of a human man's face, complete with love-heart, in Hanne's shop (8; Fig. 3.13). As previously noted, Vium reveals that this image is an homage to Quentin Blake – it is a replica of one of Blake's distinctive self-portraits. The fact that Blake is the only human that appears in the book indicates the esteem the creators of Rufus hold him in and the level of influence he has had on their work here. The inclusion of these small but significant aesthetic details invites the reader to engage imaginatively, exploring possibilities and visualising scenarios that extend beyond the immediate, explicit narrative. Professor Clyde Kluckhohn once observed that '[o]rdinarily we are unaware of the special lens through which we look at life. It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water' (1949, 11). Kluckhohn's observation reminds us that any habitual environment tends to escape both attention and analysis, and that familiarity (and also lack of awareness) can breed invisibility, more so than contempt. By means of its aesthetic complexity, *Rufus* has the potential to stimulate, in readers, a curiosity and fascination with both the familiar and the unfamiliar, within and outside of the confines of the book.



Fig. 3.12a.

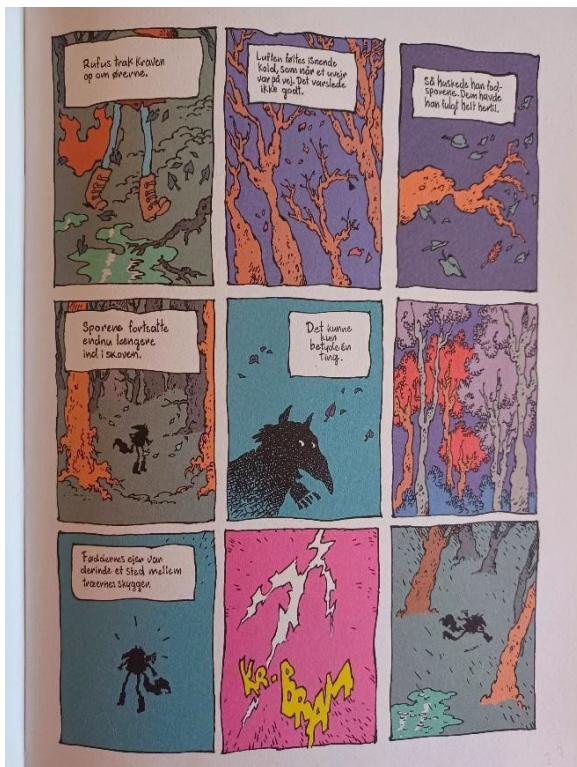


Fig. 3.12b.



Fig. 3.13

The book's hardcover binding is thick, firm and solid. The front cover (Fig. 4.4) features an image of Rufus as he peers out through dense undergrowth, the city skyline in shadow behind him. The image derives from the vignette within the book, marking the point at which he enters the park that ultimately leads him to the forest: the bridge or transition from civilisation to wilderness. As Rufus peers through the leaves, ostensibly beholding the wilderness before him, he also stares at the reader, becoming what Nikolajeva and Scott refer to as an "intrusive" visual narrator' (2006, 119). In this sense, Rufus invites allegiance with the reader and also implies that the reader already exists in the 'wild' world, the world which Rufus peers curiously out at from his fictive urban habitat. Ironically, the reader's immediate environment, as they read the book, is more likely to align with the back-cover image, depicting a comfortable Rufus enjoying his tea in front of the TV as the storm rages outside his window. Vium observes that Rufus, in this moment of contemplation, has 'a feeling of realisation and [a] feeling of being lost at the same time. It's ironically a very human feeling' (p.c.). Rufus' piercing gaze is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's contemplation, in his treatise on the ontology of the nonhuman animal, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), of how animals stare back at human beings; it also suggests that this is the moment where he 'remembers' all that has been forgotten. Literature itself, as Zapf reminds us, is also 'aware of the former stages of its own evolution and of the deep history of nature-culture coevolution...this evolutionary memory remains present in the symbolic forms and codes of literary creativity' (2016, 91).



Fig. 3.14. Cover

3.2.iv. *Nature as Culture and Culture as Nature*

Human understandings of ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ are often limited to sites of distant wildernesses, rather than ‘something concretely and etymologically all around us’ (Sullivan, 2014, 87). Discussing parallels between his character of Rufus and human forgetfulness of the true meaning of nature, Vium observes that

[t]here’s a bad tendency to idealise nature, to think that if we start building our houses out of sticks, planting a permaculture garden and picking berries from the undergrowth, we’ll automatically become better people...many people see nature and culture as separate, and that nature is at best something you “go to” once in a while (p.c.).

The idea of nature as more than just wild berries or a sustainable garden is well-articulated by Sullivan: ‘we may leave the forest or seashore, but we cannot escape from light and darkness or colors, matter and energy’ (2014, 87). It is unclear at the outset of the narrative whether

Rufus the fox has *left* the forest, or whether he has ever actually been there at all, so adjusted does he appear to be to his snug, urban existence, enjoying cups of tea with two sugars in his comfortable armchair in front of the TV. What is clear, however, is that ‘nature’ is not a mere fictive backdrop here; it is sentient, real and agentic: from the initial pages where Rufus lies ‘listening to the call of the wild wind’ (3), through Hanne the Hen’s musing on how ‘invigorating’ it is when the weather ‘shakes things up’ (7) to Rufus’ connection of the storm to his ‘babbling’, because the storm has ‘turned everything upside down’ (8). These initial pages of the narrative are the early indicators of a recognition of the connections between inner nature and outer nature, which act as a harbinger for the rest of the story and Rufus’ transition from ‘civilised’ to ‘wild’. Smet muses that Hanne’s observation about the storm being ‘invigorating’ may ‘suggest sexual excitement’ (p.c.) – a prelude to the romantic relationship that ultimately develops between the characters. The wild and tempestuous storm, which Rufus felt to be foreboding, has generated potent and unpredictable forces within the characters, and there is a sense that emotions have been upended in tandem with the upending of the physical landscape.

Rufus lives according to ‘sociocultural grids of understanding’ (Kirby, 2017, 6), but, following the storm, he experiences compulsions external to this civilised grid. Rufus becomes less readable in human cultural terms, as aspects of his being are governed by ecological and corporeal forces rather than by the civilised logic of his urban identity. Rufus’ friendship with Hanne the Hen is initially portrayed with typical human civility: when he calls to Hanne’s grocery store, they speak politely to each other, commenting on the weather, but when Hanne smiles at Rufus, he feels ‘a strong urge to do something. But he [does]n’t know what’ (8). This marks the first indication of the gradual emergence of Rufus’s latent, animalistic impulses, for, as the reader knows, the fox–hen relationship is, in reality, one of consumer and consumed, predator and prey, rather than one of polite and personable

interaction. Rufus' and Hanne's friendly relationship points to a biotic immersion in their natural world, described by Sainsbury as 'coming into being-with animals that are like and unlike us' (2021, 132). However, it is unclear at this point if such civil cordiality can be maintained.

The parallels between Rufus's inner impulses and those of the human are apparent, as the authors and illustrators question the solidity of the boundaries between 'outside' and 'inside' and explore how the human, too, conceals or regulates their instinctual nature. Zapf notes that '[t]he characteristic environments of modern humans are not just external but also internal environments – the inner worlds and landscapes of the mind, the psyche, and the cultural imagination – which make up the habitats of humans as much as their external natural and material environments' (2016, 80). The storm has awoken an inherent, corporeal nature that Rufus seems to have forgotten or suppressed. His eventual immersion in external nature is paralleled by his immersion in the most primal and instinctive parts of his mind. Smet observes that '[i]n our tremendously successful taming of the world, we tend to forget that we're even animals. And we don't like it one bit the moment we occasionally do remember' (p.c.). Rufus possesses the unique cognitive abilities of the human and has adapted to the complex social structures that set us apart from the animal, but fundamentally his animalistic nature prevails. Rufus may be a fox, but his reconnection with his animal instincts prompts the reader to reflect on human nature, and the extent to which human is animal: a mortal being that feels pain, reproduces, seeks shelter and requires food and water to survive.

Reviewer Morten Tjalve describes *Rufus* as '[a] story about being on the edge between dream and reality, between nature and culture' (2021, n.p.). These unstable dichotomies are emphasised in dream sequences that are textually and visually alluded to at significant points in the narrative, including its beginning and ending. The aforementioned double-page spread on pages 4 and 5 (Fig. 4.1) depicts the flying figure of Rufus, accompanied by the text, 'That

night he dreamed that he was flying like a bird'. After he shares his dream with Hanne, she describes a dream of her own, one which is familiar to many humans: 'I dreamed that I went for a walk in the city. There were people everywhere and I had no clothes on' (10). The comic-style sequence of pictures that depict Hanne's dream demonstrate that the 'people' are, in fact, a multitude of anthropomorphised rabbits and various other creatures, who sit with eerily identical faces and blank, protruding eyes, a red-faced 'naked' Hanne unheeded in their midst. The irony that Hanne appears more 'normal' to the reader in her natural, animal-like 'naked' state than she does fully clothed, demands a contemplation of the idea of the 'natural state'. Clothes are one of the markers of human civilisation and dreams in which they are removed perhaps reveal a deeper fear of regression to a more primal, natural state of being. Smet contends that 'Rufus' dream is a dream of breaking free and Hanne's dream is about being exposed (having her lustful yearnings laid bare for all the world to see)' (p.c.). Hanne's dream acts as a harbinger for Rufus' experience later in the narrative, where his own nakedness, and savage nature, is exposed (30, 42). Smet, Vium and Petersen align boundaries of dream/reality with boundaries of nature/culture, and preoccupy themselves with the in-betweens, the transitions.

3.2.v. The Humanimal

Rufus the nonhuman fox lives a decidedly human existence. He resides on the top floor of a multi-storey apartment block, wears jackets, pants, t-shirts and pyjamas, eats soft-boiled eggs, shops in the local store, watches television, puts out the rubbish and goes for brisk riverside walks in the busy town he inhabits. As outlined in the literature review, the technique of anthropomorphism is one that is used quite prolifically by children's authors and illustrators and has been debated by numerous scholars and researchers in multidisciplinary fields over the past several decades. Yet, as we watch Rufus' character develop, it becomes clear that he

is not a typical, cute, anthropomorphised character, but more closely matches the description Latour applies to humans: that of a ‘hybrid of nature and culture’ (1993, 11). Others concur with this understanding of the human: the work of David Almond, as proposed by Mallan, is ‘a recognition that the human subject is a complex amalgam of human-beast’ (2018, 219), while Pramod K. Nayar uses the term ‘humanimal’ (2014, 5), contending that the human can never disengage from being “an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life” (ibid.). As an inversion of this conception of the human, Rufus is a physical fox, conditioned by sociocultural rituals and structures, but is also a symbolic human, unable to disengage from his ‘network of connections’, his ‘linkages’ to the wild. So culturally conditioned is Rufus that when he spots a set of animal paw-prints, he wonders ‘who went barefoot at this time of year?’ (22). As is the case with Hanne’s embarrassed ‘nakedness’, there is a humour to Rufus’ questioning; the child reader, aware of Rufus’ animality, participates in an in-joke with the authors/illustrators. But this humour has dark undertones that are situated more firmly in the reality of nonhuman existence than in humorous predicaments of anthropomorphism; everywhere he goes, Rufus is surrounded by temptation and the potential to revert to savagery. This is expressed effectively in a somewhat chaotic double-page spread (16-7; Fig. 4.5), which depicts a seemingly oblivious Rufus walking through a frenzied cityscape overrun with rabbits and pigeons, which might ordinarily comprise the staple diet of a fox. At this point, Rufus is impervious to his primal urges even though, ironically, Rufus had earlier consumed a meal of ‘chicken salad and a soft-boiled egg’ (14), a more ‘civilised’ version of a meal a wild fox would enjoy eating. Later in the narrative, driven by hunger, Rufus almost attacks his friend Hanne, only snapping back to cultured, civilized reality when a conversation with Hanne sees his perception of her reverting from ‘food’ to ‘friend’. Yet, the boundary between the two has become less clear; a reminder that ultimately, human or nonhuman, we are all merely matter,

sentient but consumable. In this new enmeshed reality, the protagonist Rufus is telling an ‘evolutionary’ story of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization, extinct[ion] and surviv[al]’ (Oppermann, 2013, 67). More than simply an anthropomorphised animal, Rufus represents an ‘embodiment of the savage within the human psyche’ (Mallan, 2018, 222). *Rufus* presents a diffractive understanding of ‘animal’: savage, but tame; nonhuman and human; fictive, but grounded in the real.



Fig. 4.5.

Nikolajeva sees the animal character as often representing a ‘disguise for the child’ (2002, 125) and Nodelman concurs, wondering if some authors ‘imagine that children already think of themselves as something like humanized animals, not quite yet the fully human beings that adults are – more like puppies and kittens than adults are’ (2015, 40). Murriss argues, ‘Assigned to the realm of nature, the child is found wanting by culture’ (2022, 53). Rufus’ wild nature is only revealed following an interaction with younger, ‘wilder’ cubs in the woods, who, it seems, have never become ‘cultured’ or ‘civilised’. Smet reveals that the cubs

‘are intended to be predecessors of Rufus on a symbolic level...his personified savage self at different stages’ (p.c.), although interestingly, in a separate communication, Vium relates that ‘[w]e did discuss...whether the cubs were somehow representations of Rufus at another stage in his life, but we never really explored that’ (p.c.). The author/illustrators’ comments reveal that interpretations can differ, even between close collaborators. Nonetheless, regardless of whether the cubs are a symbolic representation of Rufus himself, or are separate entities in their own right, their playful youth is wild, free and disruptive, in contrast to adulthood, implied as civilising, conforming, forgetting. Mallan maintains that ‘[t]he child figure embodies a wild, uncultivated state that the adult...find[s] difficult to accept, fearing its unnaturalness and disruption to long-held views of what it means to be “human”, and especially, what distinguishes the human from the nonhuman (specifically, the animal)’ (2018, 215). This is reminiscent of Rousseau, his conceptions of the ‘ideal child’ and his insistence that ‘nature wants children to be children before being men’ (Rousseau, [1762], 2010, 222). Yet, *Rufus* questions Rousseau’s dichotomous understanding of the purity of nature and the corruption of culture. This is most evident in Rufus’ complex relationship with Hanne. Initially one of friendship, understanding, shared storytelling, it is when he reverts to his ‘pure’ nature that his intentions become sinister; Hanne is no longer a friend, but a target, and so it is ‘nature’ that represents corruption of the relationship in this instance.

The boundaries of nature/culture, savagery/civility and freedom/conformity are tenuous, and it is often in our adult subconscious that they are broken down. This, according to Wheeler, is where our mindful, primal selves, transpire. As Rigby similarly argues, ‘[m]uch of what we know viscerally does not make it into our field of awareness’, unless, ‘occasionally’ intuitions, the approach of a threat, or, in Rufus’ case, a primal, carnal hunger, gives us a sign that our ‘mindful bodies are perpetually decoding’ (Rigby, 2016, 48). French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty understands the ‘wild or Brute being’ as the underlying reality of the

intertwining synergies of all beings and things in the world. Ponty emphasises the power of literary works²⁰ that ‘explore this imaginary to reconnect us to memories of the deep past and the wild Being, allowing us to glimpse the unknown ‘forces’ and ‘laws’ of the natural world’ (Westling, 2016, 66). Rufus’ reconnection to the deep-rooted memory of his wild heritage echoes the reconnection of an anthropocentric civilization to ‘the deep-rooted memory of the biocentric coevolution between culture and nature, between human and nonhuman life’ (ibid., 149). Smet interestingly articulates this memory as ‘a bell [ringing] deep within us....[w]e all just have business elsewhere’ (p.c.).

3.2.vi. *The Urban and the Rural: Wildness, Isolation, Retreat and Return*

There is a sense that beneath the veneer of tamed civilisation, wildness abounds, and this somewhat discomfiting and uncanny intuitiveness is narratively and aesthetically brought to life in *Rufus*. Rufus’ urban existence is portrayed most arrestingly in a series of sprawling double-page spreads (Figs. 3.12a, 3.15, 3.16), that depict the frenetic nature of city life. The lines of the illustrations are lopsided and contorted; buildings appear flimsy and perilous; roads and paths are crooked; drainage pipes curved and warped as they descend down malformed walls. As aforementioned, the creators of *Rufus* have acknowledged that this ‘wobbly’ style is in deference to the illustration techniques of Quentin Blake. Regardless of external influence, the approach is an apt one for the narrative, emphasising that this is not a stable world, it is a precarious one, where nothing is sharply defined or crystal clear.

Rufus’ apartment block (12-3; Fig. 3.12a) appears like a sequence of cartoon panels in its own right, each panel depicting a stand-alone story of urban living: a dog snoozes in an

²⁰ Fairytales derived from folk tales are another example.

armchair, listening to music, a lion takes a carton of milk from the fridge, a giraffe smokes out a window, a porcupine lies flat on the floor, the door to its apartment barricaded with a piece of wood and a giant cactus. Mysterious rooms rendered in shadow contain piles of boxes in one instance, a stack of variously sized balls in another. Rufus is illustrated in stop-motion²¹, as we see him traverse the street, climb the stairs of the apartment block, and eventually sit contentedly at his table, smiling as he enjoys his cup of tea with two sugars. Each character has its own story to tell, but there is also a sense of isolation; they are removed from each other by walls and doors, there is no interaction, no conversation, no awareness of the other characters that surround them. By utilising comic-style panels to depict the apartment block, the authors/illustrators emphasise this sense of social estrangement and fragmentation, and highlight the dark humour of the characters' experiences – the aesthetic design mirrors the thematic concern.

Two subsequent double-page spreads (Figs. 3.15, 3.16) depict Rufus' walk through the city, and present the reader with richly detailed portrayals of the urban milieu. Tjalve describes the first of these spreads (Fig. 3.15) as a 'live picture page', reminiscent of a cinematic scene, constantly in motion, its vitality barely contained by the edges of the frame. And yet this vitality, so discernible to the reader, is ignored by Rufus, who hurries along, seemingly impervious to his surroundings and apathetic to the chaotic exuberance that surrounds him. This points to a very human-like apathy; an indifference and impassivity that is sometimes associated with modern existence, as people progress swiftly – and perhaps mindlessly – through their hectic urban lives, consumed by their own thoughts and concerns, their surroundings unheeded. Smet comments that the multitude of rabbits and pigeons in the cityscape illustrations are a 'mass phenomenon...there to describe part of the life of big cities

²¹ Used metaphorically, the term *stop-motion* captures the cinematic illusion of movement generated through a sequence of still illustrations, suggesting temporal flow while remaining within the static medium of the page.

all over the world – the life of the endless masses of the suit and tie workforce and the life of pests’ (p.c.). Smet acknowledges that he sees the multitude of pigeons that populate his home city of Copenhagen as ‘pests’; the illustrations appear to correspond with his view, depicting masses of engorged birds that somewhat alarmingly congest the urban scene. The rabbits, by contrast, representing ‘the suit and tie workforce’, are clothed in suits, carry briefcases, and have the glassy-eyed, unfocused expressions that are frequently recognisable in human throngs traversing the urban milieu. Smet implies that the ‘endless masses’ of anonymous workers in cities are also irritants to a certain degree, as he crowds the illustrated scene with marching rabbits, comparable to the pigeons/ ‘pests’ in their surreal homogeneity.

Interestingly, the nonhuman characters in this case represent both a literal reference (pigeons = pigeons) and a symbolic reference (rabbits = the human workforce). The conception of both as irritants suggests a comparison between urban pigeon and urban worker that is reminiscent of Shaun Tan’s narrative ‘Pigeon’ in *Tales from the Inner City*, in which the narrator compares the pigeons to accountants ‘in smart grey waistcoats’ (*Tales*, 195). Smet also interestingly reveals that his co-illustrator Vium ‘finds the large amounts of these generic characters unsettling [as] he lives in the country’ (p.c.), while ‘I [Smet] definitely don’t [find them unsettling], as I live in Copenhagen. I just hate it’ (ibid.). Vium acknowledges that the inclusion of the rabbits and pigeons was Smet’s creative decision; nonetheless, he states his opinion that these characters ‘add a feeling of life to the world...they are also nice to put in simply to balance the composition while staying true to the universe of Rufus’ (p.c.). For Smet, however, there is clearly a more personal motivation at play. These illustrations tellingly reveal the influence of their (urban or rural) environments on the artists’ collaborative creation of Rufus’ world.



Fig. 3.16.

Upon the turn of the page, Rufus, hitherto oblivious to the vibrant, sentient life in his midst, finally pauses to behold an artistic creation, a large and unusual sculpture, depicted in an imposing double-page spread on pages 18 and 19 (Fig. 3.16). While the preceding spread is framed, this illustration utilises air frames, without any defining lines, famously associated with Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. The air frames signal that Rufus' world is now becoming less clearly defined, and the character of Rufus himself appears in his own air bubble, surrounded by white space, at a remove from the main image. The imposing monument of a heroic 'humanimal' figure, victoriously brandishing swords as it sits astride a bull, dominates the page. Rabbit figures hold their phones aloft, photographing the monument, in a scene that plays out daily at worldwide tourist attractions. This is at once an alien and recognisable cultural scene, peculiar but also familiar. The reader can identify with Rufus, shielded from the activity in his white frame; the reader too feels a sense of detachment and unease as they behold the entanglement of curious abnormality with perceptible familiarity.

This hectic scene is quite abruptly followed by a smaller, more intimate framed illustration, where, mirroring the cover illustration, Rufus stares out at the reader, suggesting complicity between the fictive and the real in this transition. The text reads ‘Suddenly, there was complete silence’ (20). This marks the transition point from urban to rural and from ‘civilised’ to ‘wild’ in the narrative, and this transition is also an aesthetic one, as the cool blues and greys of the city scenes transform into warmer orange and yellow hues, and the turbulent suburban vista becomes a noiseless, tranquil and still townscape. A pastoral scene is imagined, as the narrator informs us: ‘A heavenly peace and tranquillity reigned. Autumn’s multi-coloured leaves were scattered beautifully around and filled the air with sweet scents as they lay there between the stringy rows of paths’ (20). In its emphasis on the peace and silence of nature, contrasted sharply here with the ‘busyness’ and excitement of urban life depicted in the ‘live picture page’ referred to by Tjalve, this pastoral representation, as Rufus crosses the boundary from urban to rural, exemplifies somewhat problematic conceptions of a non-agentic, non-animistic, mute nature. Such conceptions have been lamented by ecocritics such as Christopher Manes and Simon Estok, who argue that nature has grown silent in our discourse, a silence borne out of the contempt and fear we feel for its agency. Indeed, Rufus *is* somewhat fearful, thinking ‘I’ve never been this far from home before’ (23), as he hesitatingly follows a mysterious set of footprints, briefly ruminates on his comfortable cultured life, and ultimately decides to embark on a journey into the unknown forest where ‘the treetops stretched higher than the tallest of the town’s houses, but there were no tidy beds and gravel paths. Everything grew wild in the green darkness’ (26). The trees as the point of departure for Rufus represent a common symbolic motif in children’s literature; Jaques notes that trees ‘both in fantastically talking and more naturalized silent varieties’ have been deployed in children’s fiction ‘in order to question or reinforce the boundaries between man and the rest of the world,’ due in no small part to their ‘nascent posthuman potential’, evident

in their 'symbiotic relationships with humans' (2015, 121; 124). The illustrations of the forest (24-5; Fig. 3.17) embrace this nascent vitality; far from being depicted in 'green darkness', the environment here appears in shades of lilac, bright pink, orange, green and brown. Rufus' fall in the woods represents another common trope in children's literature of 'a steep descent into the underworld' (Zoboli, 2018, n.p.), and is also reminiscent of the 'retreat and return', the most manifest feature of the pastoral trope. This tradition, Gifford argues, 'continues to supply the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilisation for an encounter with nonhuman nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal' (2012, 54). The images of a naked Rufus, dripping wet in a dark, hollow clearing following his fall (29) and curled in a foetal position, surrounded by hazy pink hues (30-1; Fig. 3.18), are womb-like: a uterine symbol of Rufus' 'rebirth'. From this point, Rufus is more animated than we have previously seen him: engaged with his surroundings, running in typical animal-like fashion on all fours, interacting with the younger fox cubs who welcome him back with the words 'Rufus! Finally! We've missed you in the pack! Where have you been all this time?' (30-1); a suggestion that Rufus's return to the wild is not a new transformation but a homecoming. Their words imply that his belonging to the animal world has always persisted beneath his civilised exterior, dormant rather than erased.

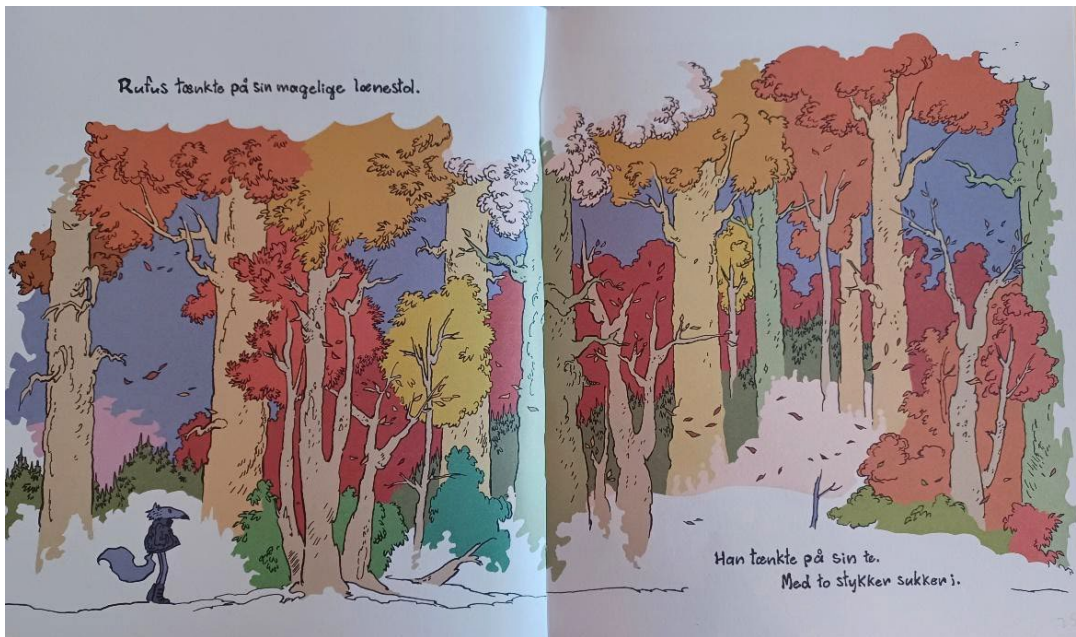


Fig. 3.17.

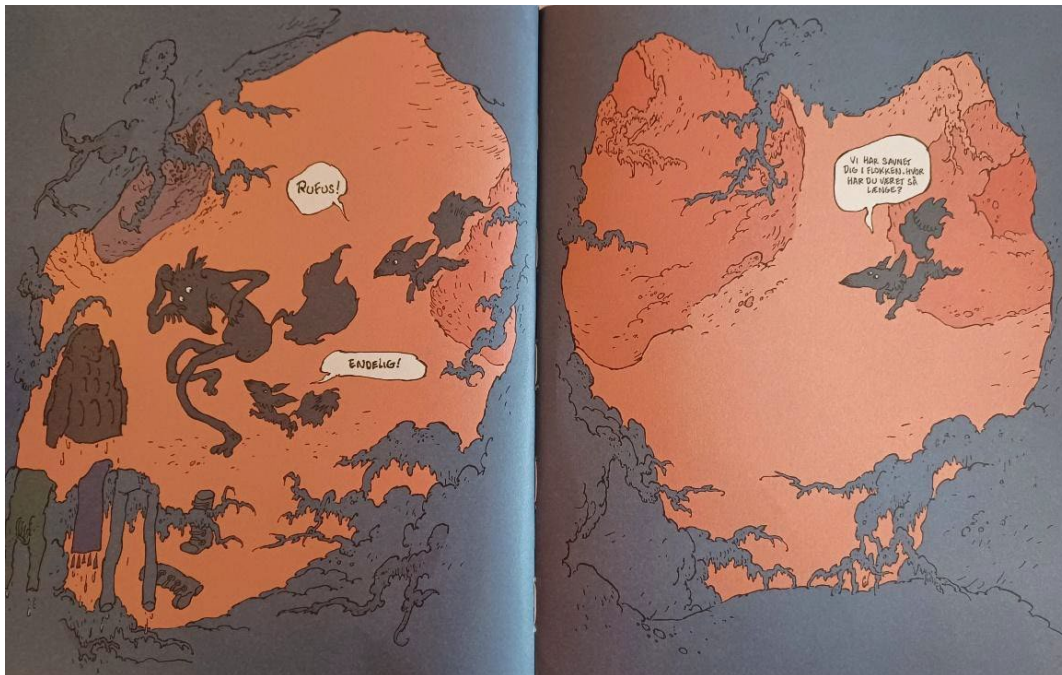


Fig. 3.18.

The temporal nature of Rufus' existence is thus questioned. Joni Adamson, in her reading of German scientist Alexander von Humboldt's travels to the Amazon at the end of the eighteenth-century, notes that 'Humboldt considered "nature" as a "planetary interactive causal network operating across multiple scale levels, temporal and spatial"' (2014, 253). Adamson contends that 'there is not "one world" but "pluriform and multivocalic" worlds of

“humans and natures” (ibid., 255). Rufus’ existence has operated across these multiple temporal and spatial levels. This ‘natural’ world may be another dimension, a primal memory, or a retreat from his normal urban existence: its temporality is unclear. The authors/illustrators play with this temporality in the aesthetic of the narrative. The temporal space is compressed within the material space of the book, but stop-motion illustrations that depict character movement, comic panels that emphasise short, sharp sequences of events and sprawling double-page spreads that are alternately framed, air framed, or bleed to the end of the page obscure the sharp temporality of a narrative; on the surface, it plays out over a single day, but on a deeper level, it exemplifies what Barad might call ‘moments that bleed through one another in time’ (2007, 33).

3.2.vii. Corporeal and Aesthetic Chaos

Rufus’ experience in the forest corresponds with Khateeb’s observation, in his commentary on Stian Hole’s visual narrative *Garmann’s Secret* (2010), that the forest

is natural terrain, not regulated by a set of social rules or norms that influence how children move in the forest....[they] plunge, creep and push branches away. The environment is explored through the active movements of their bodies...[i]f the pastoral outlooks are for the mind, then the wild is both for Garmann’s body and mind’ (2018, 96).

Khateeb’s observation echoes Zipes’ conception of the forest of the folk tale as the place where societal conventions are disregarded (referred to in the discussion on *The Savage*), and this is also true of Rufus’ forest. Rufus is initially embarrassed by his nakedness in front of the cubs, reminiscent of Derrida’s description of standing naked before an animal, trapped in its gaze:

Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us??
What animal? The other.

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am*—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment (2008, 3/4).

As Rufus curls up in fear and embarrassment, he is self-consciously aware of his nudity as he watches the ‘other’ watch him, and yet these others, themselves unabashedly naked, are strangely, viscerally familiar to him. There is a moment when this familiarity is frightening, but then ‘a strange and wild feeling’ consumes him (33). Freed from cultural confinements and ‘civilised’ social conventions, he chases, fights, nips and runs with the younger foxes and can ‘no longer think of anything but their wild play’ (35). In a stark inversion of the ‘human forgetfulness of nature’s agentic force’ (Iovino, 2014, 106), Rufus ‘forgot everything about the city, his cosy apartment, the armchair and the cup of tea – and two lumps of sugar in it’ (36). The young foxes inform Rufus that the forest ‘is ours when it’s night’ (32), implying that during the day, the forest does not belong to them; foxes after all are nocturnal creatures, but with this line, the reader contemplates if this is, in fact, their natural state or an acquired tendency, due to human presence during the day that has displaced the nonhuman.

Nature/culture is thus aligned with another binary: that of night and day, Night is the time of the natural, when dreams create alternate realities and nonhumans play freely in the woods; day is the time of the cultural, when morning breaks, play ends, we wake from our dreams and reconnect to our sociocultural grids. A double-page spread on pages 34 and 35 (Fig. 3.19) combines a stand-alone image of the foxes’ playful escapades between the shadowy trees with inserts of framed images of their individual adventures. The resulting enmeshed image is reminiscent of a family tree, a suggestion that the previously isolated Rufus has found both interaction and familial connection. This genealogical resemblance also seems to represent an acknowledgement of the temporal obscurity of the narrative, the historicity of Rufus’ naturalcultural existence in the world.



Fig. 3.19.

There is a chaos to Rufus' wild playfulness in the forest that contrasts sharply with his carefully structured urban life. Rufus initially notices how the ravages of the storm have 'unleashed dangerous chaos everywhere' in the city (6) and this chaos is now fully active in the woods. The urban chaos, previously depicted through dense, cluttered imagery of the cityscape, shifts into a rural, corporeal form of chaos, embodied in tumbling bodies, snarling jaws, exuberant play, and tangled limbs. The urban chaos is that of the external and the environmental, while the protagonist is at all times ordered, civilised and apathetic; the rural chaos is internal and corporeal – the environment may be described as 'tranquil' and serene, but the protagonist is animated, engaged, energised. As with nature and culture, order and chaos are relational polarities here, with mutually defining movement between the two. They are, as Zapf maintains, co-agentic forces 'in both ecology and aesthetics', aligning with other co-agentic polarities such as text and life, matter and mind, and solid and fluid. The aestheticism of *Rufus* mirrors the alternating intra-acting order/chaos of the narrative. Shaky, unstable lines in the narrative illustrations sit alongside ordered straight lines in the peritextual features. Speech bubbles and comic panels are integrated with full-page bleeds

and imposing double-page spreads. Richly detailed depictions of chaotic urbanity meld with ‘quieter’ renderings of tranquil city parks that suggest that more ‘natural’ sites in the city are the most ordered and least chaotic spaces. Christensen, in her analysis of seventeenth-century picturebooks for children, notes their ‘chaotic’ spreads, rich in images, and highlights their ‘formative didactics’ as ‘it is the task of the child to bring order to the world’ (2012, 35). Bringing order to Rufus’ world is, however, an onerous ‘task’ for the child reader, as the question of what is the ‘natural order’ is constantly subverted by the authors/illustrators. Does Rufus, the humanimal, truly belong in his civilised, ordered cultural world, enjoying cups of tea and soft-boiled eggs, and civil conversations with his friend Hanne? The denouement of the narrative suggests that yes, this is the case. Rufus, enters the city once again, driven by ‘a special urge that he himself was not in control of’ (38), an urge that is driven by an apparent primal need to provide sustenance for the younger cubs who have lamented their hunger. Rufus observes Hanne, but seems detached from his earlier self; he does not recognise her as an acquaintance, but rather beholds ‘the fattest and most delicious hen ready to eat’ (41). It is only when Hanne speaks that this hypnosis is broken; Rufus appears to stutteringly morph back to his civilised self, and they quite literally walk into the sunset (45; Fig. 3.20), as Hanne relates her latest dream to Rufus, a dream identical to Rufus’ own at the start of the narrative, in which she flies ‘like a bird’ (45) – a recollection that is laced with the irony that she *is* a bird, in anthropomorphised form. Speech here functions as a distinctly human marker – a reassertion of linguistic order that disrupts the embodied, instinctual connection established in the preceding scene. From a material ecocritical perspective, Hanne’s voice operates as a mediating material force, reinstating cultural boundaries between human and animal. Yet, as in Blue’s struggle with language in *The Savage*, this return to speech remains uneasy: Rufus’s stutter betrays the persistence of the wild within the linguistic, exposing the instability of the divide between language and the material vitality it seeks to control. A

metafictional indeterminacy is also evident in this scene: the authors/illustrators self-reflexively question anthropomorphism as a literary device, and demand that the reader does also. They also question the notion of the ‘happy-ever-after’. Rufus and Hanne wander back towards the city, side by side, and a subsequent image depicts the young cubs happily playing in the woods. Close the book at this point, as most of the reviewers of *Rufus* seem to have done, and the ending is more straightforward: Rufus has enjoyed ‘a bit of fun and a bit of wonder’ (Tjalve, 2021, n.p.), as has the child reader, but the chaos has ended and both Rufus and reader can now safely return to the civilised order of their normal daily existence. Turn over to the endpapers, however, and an entirely different narrative plays out.



Fig. 3.20.

3.2.viii. *The Endpapers: Metafictional, Peritextual Subversion*

The use of endpaper space as a peritextual feature of the narrative is a salient feature of most picturebooks. Since the mid-2000s, research on the multiple dimensionalities and meaning potential of endpapers has become more prevalent, including studies by Sipe and McGuire (2006) and Duran and Bosch (2011), the latter who categorise ‘epitextual’ and ‘peritextual’ endpapers into secondary subdivisions based on their plain, patterned or illustrated aesthetic design. Such studies, however, fail to successfully categorise endpapers such as those in *Rufus*, which present a stand-alone narrative, but also what could be variously described as a continuation of the narrative in the main text, a parallel dimension, a dream sequence or an unsettling sequel. Once again, the temporality of the narrative is disturbed, and it is abundantly clear that the endpapers are a crucial element of this story. To ignore them is to abandon the entirety of the narrative and to disregard its aesthetic complexity and subversive counterstory. In this sense, the endpapers of *Rufus* are not ‘peritextual’ at all; as Duran and Bosch argue, ‘[s]trictly speaking they *are* the “text”’ (2011, 123, emphasis mine).

The authors/illustrators depict the story of the endpapers (Figs. 3.21a and 3.21b) in the setting of Rufus’ living room, cast in hues of blue, which lend a cinematic effect, reminiscent of how filmmakers cast certain scenes in blue tints – the colour of twilight, a time of transition/liminality, and also a time that suggests impending darkness. The endpapers are an acknowledged homage (Vium and Smet, p.c.) to *The Adventures of Tintin*, a series of twenty-four comic albums published in the period from 1929 to 1976, created by Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi, who wrote under the pen name Hergé. *Tintin*’s endpapers frequently featured similar striped wallpaper on which hung an array of framed character portraits. However, as Vium claims, the endpapers of *Rufus* carry ‘much more narrative weight’ (ibid.). The striped wallpaper is conspicuous, not least for the straight lines of its design – the only straight lines

that appear in the book's illustrations. The order and structure of this pattern as it appears in the front endpapers is echoed in the orderly nature of Rufus' life in this illustration: his comfy armchair, a footstool, his hot mug of tea resting on a side table, a potted plant in the window and a solitary photo of Rufus on the wall, although the protagonist himself is absent from this scene. Such a mundane and tranquil setting does not foreshadow the chaos of the back endpaper scene. The civilised silence of the original vista is brutally disturbed in this closing illustration. Here, we behold an inverted version of the initial front endpaper scene; the armchair and window are now on the other side of the page. Illustrated photos on the wall inform the reader that Rufus and Hanne appear to have developed a romantic relationship, have enjoyed pastimes and holidays together and have had offspring in the form of one fox cub and one chick. The illustrators utilise a medial transposition here: a story told in illustrated photographic form – narratives we all have hanging on our family walls – transposed into picturebook form. The setting beyond the framed photos suggests a more sinister outcome, however: amidst the images of domesticated and content family life is a scene of carnage. Feathers scatter across floor and furniture, the armchair and footstool bear claw marks indicating a vicious attempt at destruction, two cups are upturned, and a broken window opens to the forest. Over the window, an analogue clock ominously displays the time of 5 minutes to 12, reminiscent of the contemporary metaphor of the 'doomsday clock', currently set at 89 seconds to midnight, a stark, apocalyptic reminder of the proximity of global catastrophe. It is suggested that catastrophe may have already occurred in Rufus' world. The reader is left to question if Rufus has ultimately reverted to nature and savagery, and to ponder the fate of Hanne and their children. It is unclear who, if anyone, has fled, or perhaps been targeted; who is perpetrator or victim, predator or prey. In the main narrative, Rufus followed Hanne back to the cultural world, has she now followed him to the natural, or is the dynamic of predator and prey recalled here? Alternatively, this might be interpreted as

a less sinister scene of domestic chaos, a familiar spectacle in any home with young children, in which case the creators astutely draw parallels between the chaotic wildness of nonhuman nature and the chaotic wildness of domestic life. The open window is an apt metaphor – the window has been left open to Rufus to return to the woods at any time (if he has not already done so). The window is also open to the reader to decide for themselves what exactly has transpired here.

Derrida, in his contemplation of the intimacy between being and following claims that

we should not exclude the possibility that the same living creature is at the same time follower and followed, hunter knowing itself to be hunted, seducer and seduced, persecutor and fugitive, and that the two forces of the same strategy, indeed of the same movement, are conjugated not only in the same animal, the same *animot*²², but in the same instant (2008, 55)

Strict boundaries, as Derrida maintains, are refutable. It is possible for Rufus to be the loving partner, the father the reader sees in the ‘photo’ on the wall, crying (tears of happiness? fear? trepidation?) at the birth of his offspring, but also the hunter, the persecutor, the ‘savage’. Similarly, it is possible for Hanne to embody all of this (although the reader is less familiar with her character). To be is to follow, as Derrida argues, but ‘following’ is a response to a call, and that call can come from anywhere or anything, human or nonhuman.

²² *Animot* is a neologism coined by Derrida to disrupt the binary opposition between human and animal. In French, *animaux* is the plural of *animal*, pronounced identically to *animot* (“ani-mo”). Derrida plays on this homophone to critique how the singular category ‘the animal’ linguistically erases the diversity of nonhuman life by grouping all nonhuman beings under one term. The suffix *mot* (‘word’) in *animot* also highlights that ‘animal’ is a human linguistic construct – a word that speaks more about human classification than about the beings it names.



Fig. 3.21a. Front endpapers



Fig. 3.21b. Back endpapers

The endpapers demonstrate an intermedial ‘triple narrative’ effect, representing the primary narrative of the main text, the secondary narrative of the illustrated photographs, and a third ‘writerly’ narrative, suggested by the scene of detritus. One within the book, one within the photos and one that performs beyond the confines of the book, a ‘writerly’ ending in the

Barthesian sense: the meaning is left open, offering the young reader the potential for the negotiation of understanding and interpretation, and the opportunity to challenge their perceptions. There is much to contemplate here: the copulation and procreation of predator and prey, the alignment of human and nonhuman, the extent to which the human mimics a civilized nature and masks their ‘inner savage’, and the idea of the protagonist and the human as ultimately products of nature, or culture, or both. Beneath all of this lies another possible suggestion – a considerably more sinister one – of domestic violence and familicide, a subject considered taboo in most Anglophone literature for children (although Smet claims that this was not an intentional reference or interpretation).

Smet discusses how the endpapers reveal Rufus as a tragic hero, contending that ‘The hero’s journey can only end in tragedy or defeat.’ Rufus’ defeat lies in his choice between the ‘tragedy of barbarism (living by the sword) or of domestication (doing all things civilized)’ (Smet, p.c.). Rufus’ conundrum, Smet suggests, is also a human one. Neither option brings peace or order, each is chaotic in its own way, and while it is suggested that both human and nonhuman crave order, chaos is intrinsic, ever-present, and perhaps also desired on some level.

Aligning with this thematic observation on ordered chaos, the orderly narrative structure has been upended by the chaotic endpaper scene. Having reinforced notions of the pastoral in the main text narrative, the authors/illustrators question the temporal distinction of past as ‘idyllic’ and present as ‘fallen’ in the endpapers. Rufus’ past life is his savage and wild existence; his present is told in happy scenes of domestication and parenthood. But which is real? The reader wonders if Rufus’ past as a wild creature, intra-acting with his natural surroundings in the woods, is in fact his ‘idyll’. Simultaneously, the question of Hanne’s true nature is foregrounded. *Rufus* highlights the entangled, spatio-temporal nature of story, and

its correspondence with the entangled, spatio-temporal nature of life. It is a performative ensemble, in which the dynamic interplay of text, images, peritextual features and the physical, aesthetic, material artefact of the book create a meaningful and engaging experience for the reader. Semiotically, *Rufus* depends on the active participation of the reader in the creation of its meaning. As Evans articulates it, ‘in addition to the book challenging the reader, the reader often challenges the book, delving into gaps in an attempt to understand what is being said’ (2015, 4). This active, participatory role of the reader extends beyond the textual narrative to include the book’s aesthetic and material forms of communication.

Attridge contends that

a full response to the otherness of the literary work includes an awareness of, a respect for, and...a taking responsibility for the creativity of its author...to read a text in the fullest sense – in contrast to mechanically decoding it – is to treat it not as a static assemblage of words [or images] but as the “written” or even better – because it captures the unending activity involved – as a writing (2017, 156/7).

Rufus troubles notions of the linear narrative, the happy ending, the boundaries of text and the boundaries of form. It does so with a dark humour, characteristic of Mårdøn Smet’s oeuvre, that has the potential to both entertain and engage the reader. The cartoonish artistry, exaggerated expressions, and the absurd premise of a fox falling in love with a hen lend the narrative a quirky humour, yet these are offset by an underlying menace, most strikingly conveyed in the macabre suggestion of the endpapers scene. Mindful of Spitz’s assertion, *Rufus* is not *safe* art. Ironically, as the endpapers’ illustrations depict Rufus’ comfortable armchair, the metafictional performance of *Rufus* involves ‘an element of unease’ that requires the reader to ‘leave *their* comfortable spectator armchair to experience the backstage workings of fiction’ (Silva-Díaz, 2018, 179, my emphasis). Creators, object (book), apparatus (aesthetic design) and knowing subject (reader) are thus ontologically entangled in what is produced (Barad, 2007). The child-reader’s knowledge-making practices are ‘material

enactments that contribute to, and are part of' (Barad, 2007, 335) the phenomenon that is the book. As Attridge articulates it, 'the text remains a writing as long as it is read' (2017, 160).

3.2.ix. *Nature and Gender: Hanne the Hen*

The artistic depictions of the characters of Rufus and Hanne the Hen (Figs. 3.13, 3.22a) both emphasise and undermine implied normative gender divisions between the two nonhuman characters. Vium downplays the significance of gender in the tale, stating, 'I don't remember us talking about gender stereotypes directly, but I think it's important for all three of us that our drawings contain characters we meet in the real world – without being dictated by the zeitgeist' (p.c.). Smet emphasises that 'the story is mostly about "human" nature versus civilized behaviour' while also revealing that 'Hanne is the voluptuous dream of both an erotic female idol (Venus of Willendorf²³ [Fig. 3.22b]) and a roast. Rufus, on the other hand, despite all of his civilized splendour, is more of a wimp' (p.c.). Smet's reference to the Venus reveals a conscious decision to create a female character that represents fertility and desire: both carnal desire (which is also corporeal) and corporeal desire for nourishment. Rufus' conception as a 'wimp' suggests cowardice and a fear of the unknown; his artistic depiction as an insubstantial, wiry, shakily rendered figure appears to emphasise these traits, and stands in stark contrast to the imposing, clearly defined figure of Hanne that fills the pages she appears in. An early draft of the character of Hanne (Fig 3.22c), shared by Smet, reveals that she was originally conceived as an even more majestic and formidable character, her bosom dominating the image as she dwarfs a quite startled-looking Rufus.

²³ *Venus of Willendorf* is a small, Palaeolithic figurine, measuring 11.1cm in height. It is carved from oolitic limestone and coloured with red ochre. It was discovered in 1908 near the Austrian village of Willendorf.



Fig. 3.22a.

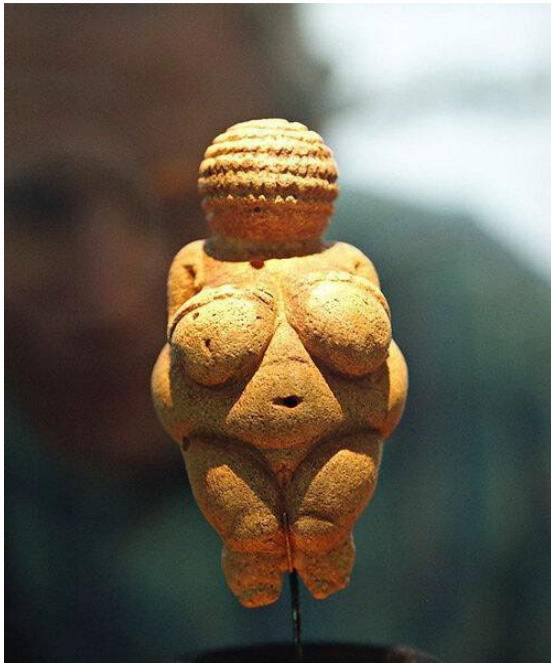


Fig. 3.22b. 'Venus of Willendorf'



Fig. 3.22c. Early draft of Hanne

Rufus is referred to in the text using the pronouns 'he' and 'his'; however, he dresses somewhat androgynously in tight jeans, knee-high boots and a puffer jacket. He is smaller in stature than Hanne and is dwarfed by the latter character's imposing height and girth. Hanne is never referred to as 'she' or 'her' and, yet, Hanne's body is identifiable as female, most demonstrably by her generous bust, which protrudes over the counter-top of her shop as she

engages with Rufus. Once again, the humour of the authors/illustrators is evident in this depiction: hens and chickens are known for their succulent breasts and the creators play with the idea of the breast as a physical and sexual attribute of the human female and an edible attribute of the nonhuman hen. This uneasy equivocality is further emphasised when Rufus, as his savage self, approaches Hanne towards the narrative's end and sees before him 'the fattest and most delicious hen ready to eat' (41). Turn to the endpapers and this 'fat, delicious hen' has evidently become Rufus' romantic and sexual partner. The corporeal and the carnal are thus entangled and manifested in the gendered character of Hanne. This character's representation emphasises the *matter* of the body and is a contemplation of the gendered body 'as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008, 4).

This gendered construction is also highlighted by the fact that at no point in the narrative does Hanne appear to transform into the 'wild' savage; wildness and chaos are reserved for Rufus. The choice of anthropomorphised animal for the female character is a hen, a bird that is usually depicted as domesticated, while the fox – the 'wild' animal – is male. As the titular character, Rufus' musings, urges and emotions are very much foregrounded. However, both Hanne and Rufus relate strikingly similar dreams in which they 'fly like a bird' – an indication of a desire for freedom inherent in both characters (the 'wild' and the 'domesticated'). The endpapers emphasise Hanne as female once again: in one 'photo', she wears a bikini top, in another, she lies in bed with two offspring, ostensibly having given birth, as 'proud father' Rufus sheds a tear by her bedside. She also, however, wears pinstriped trousers and waistcoats, leads Rufus downhill on a mountain-bike ride and it is Rufus who leans on *her* shoulder as they observe a romantic beach sunset; Hanne is not a subservient or submissive female. These endpaper illustrations are where the reader develops the most insightful picture of Hanne but it is up to the reader to decide if she has ultimately suffered a tragic fate or if she is living a life of 'normal' domesticity. Alaimo observes that 'the human

is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world. The substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment” (2010, 2). Read in this light, Hanne’s character transcends simplistic gender binaries: her physicality and agency are materially entangled with the world around her. Her fate – whether domestic or tragic – therefore gestures toward a broader recognition of embodiment as a site where gender, power, and ecology converge.

3.2.x. *Intermedial References: An Interconnected Constellation of Experiences*

Intermedial and intertextual references in *Rufus* emphasise the spatio-temporal entanglements of the creative process. On the opening page of the main narrative, one panel features the image of a palm beach on a large television screen, and the silhouette of Rufus and his armchair in the foreground, as the text informs us ‘He watched a nature programme on television while he sipped his tea’ (1; Fig. 3.23). This intermedial reference is an apt commentary on modern humanity’s increasing tendency to experience the world through a screen. Concurring with this, Smet comments on the ‘schizoid division’ between experiencing the world *really* and *virtually*. He observes how alienation from the world, and from our ‘primal desires’, is not a new concept, but is one that has been accentuated by what he refers to as ‘our brave technological world’ (p.c). The image of Rufus watching television acts as a prelude for his experience in the woods later in the narrative, contrasting the concept of observing the world from a distance with the reality of actually being *in* and *of* the world. Sitting in his armchair, admiring nature on his TV, Rufus is reflecting on the world ‘from the outside’, whereas, as the narrative progresses, his experience is a diffractive one: ‘a way of understanding the world from within and part of it’ (Barad, 2007, 89).



Fig. 3.23.

There are several other intermedial and intertextual examples. The character of Rufus is reminiscent of Roald Dahl's Mr. Fox, from the eponymous *Fantastic Mr. Fox*; as previously noted, Quentin Blake, Dahl's most acclaimed collaborator, is a significant influence. Vium refers to the image of Rufus and Hanne conversing in her shop as 'a love letter to Mr. Blake' (p.c.), as the artists copied one of Blake's layouts in creating this image; namely his use of 'spot colouring' and his prominent use of blank space. This is also the page on which the aforementioned portrait of Blake appears. Vium shares that 'we're all huge Blake fans and we found common ground in a style that was strongly inspired by him' (ibid.). The image of Rufus flying high over a night-time cityscape (4,5), cast in dark, cool tones, is evocative of the similar famed image from Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* – arguably an indelible part of

children's culture, at least in Ireland and the U.K. Vium reveals that the latter was not a conscious influence, but that 'it's...a piece of work that I love' (p.c.). Reviewer Tjalve recognises the influence of German comic-book artist Thomas Wellmann and Danish comic illustrator Jakob Martin Strid in the work. Anglophone audiences may not be familiar with the output of these artists; however, the deference of the authors/illustrators of *Rufus* to comic conventions are evident: the text abounds with word-framing conventions, panel layouts, undrawn inferences and stop-motion sequences. Vium reveals that Wellmann is one of his and Petersen's former teachers, and that he is quite likely an 'indirect' influence. Strid, according to both Vium and Smet, is a more direct influence; Vium observes that the image of Rufus arriving to his apartment (Fig. 3.12a) 'has a lot of Strid in it' and Smet reveals that '[w]e did talk about Strid and his style during the process; after all, he's one of Denmark's most popular children's book artists today, and his work is something every children's book artist here relates to in one way or another' (p.c.). Smet also notes that their technique in the book of using digitised 'flat' colours, without any of the otherwise common gradients, is also a technique often used by Strid; he opines that this technique 'tightens' the lightness of the Blake style. The creators' deference to Strid's style in some of their aesthetic decisions reveals the influence that creative and commercial success can have on the work of other, lesser-known artists and creators.

Intermedial influences are also evident in the process of character creation. Hanne Hen calls to mind the Disney character of Clara Cluck and indeed the depictions of the city, with its countless chickens, is reminiscent of Duckburg, home to many of Disney's renowned 'duck' characters. This is the work of Mårdøn Smet, who, as previously mentioned, has created characters from the Donald Duck universe in his work for Disney. The 'Disneyfication' of the illustrations may lend the narrative a comfortable familiarity for many children. As noted by David Buckingham in the mid-nineties, 'Disney's global hegemony in the field of

children's media culture is unparalleled' (1997, 285), and while various other children's media behemoths, such as DreamWorks, have since emerged, Disney maintains its dominance in children's cultural consciousness. Buckingham contends that 'Disney both constructs and speaks to elements of children's lived experience, while providing adults with opportunities for nostalgic fantasies about their own past' (286). Smet recounts a revealing anecdote about his disillusionment with the commercial realities of children's publishing, recalling that books he wrote for young readers were, in fact, marketed to 'German grandparents' rather than children themselves (p.c.). He describes the children's book market as 'one of the most conservative' in publishing, shaped by nostalgia and adult purchasing power. He remarks that children 'don't buy the books themselves - and if they did, the only books on the shelves would be Disney books', underscoring this cynicism. Within *Den om Rufus*, the intermedial Disney references may thus offer comfort to young readers while simultaneously critiquing – or perhaps inadvertently reinforcing – the commercial forces shaping children's literature.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking intermedial references in *Rufus* are the authors/illustrators' visual allusions to other art forms such as sculpture and photography to tell 'stories within the story'. As has been discussed, the aforementioned photographs on the endpaper walls constitute a narrative in themselves. The imposing monument depicted in a double-page spread (Fig. 3.16) as Rufus walks through the city is also clearly significant; it occupies a substantial space in the town and in the illustration, Rufus has paused to behold it and various other characters are photographing it, but there is no indication of its meaning or relevance, and the reader is left to ponder upon this. The surreal nature of the monument, and the protruding dragon tail behind it, are reminiscent of the equally surreal work of Shaun Tan: Rufus' bizarre but uncannily recognisable city, in which strange monuments and dragon tails

make curious and misplaced appearances, is evocative of Tan's equally other-worldly city in *The Arrival* (2006).

Rufus' intermedial and intertextual references and their entanglements with the authors/illustrators' own motivations, experience and influences emphasise the porosity of the text, highlighting the performative materiality of intermediality in the sense that it entangles the internal with the external. As Allen contends: 'Every text is made up of a large amount (perhaps an untraceably large amount) of *otherness*...No text can ever be mastered (fixed, totally described, understood), because no text is completely and only itself' (2019, n.p., emphasis in original). These intermedial references allow the young reader to make connections with their world beyond the pages. The story becomes what Deleuze and Guattari might call rhizomatic in nature – an interconnected constellation of experiences, fictional within the pages, but grounded in the reality of both the creators' and the child reader's worldly existence.

3.2.xi. Translation, Publication and Challenging Texts

As of 2025, *Den om Rufus* remains untranslated into English, leaving its written narrative largely inaccessible to Anglophone audiences. Though an Italian edition appeared in 2023, an English version has yet to materialise. Reflecting on this uncertainty, Smet remarks that 'the future of our little book is uncertain' (p.c.), a statement tinged with both parental concern and quiet hope for its continued life beyond Denmark.

Gillian Lathey notes that 'the transition of a text from one language to another registers ideological differences between countries and cultures' (2010, xv). This acknowledgement of ideological differences raises questions about what might be lost were *Rufus* to be translated into English. Would the challenging, subversive endpapers, for example, be deemed 'too

risky' for the Anglophone child (or their adult guardian), believed by publishers to prefer more 'sanitised' visual literature? There is evidence that endpapers have been removed or altered in many translations of picturebooks. Duran and Bosch (2011) note *The Snowman* as one such example: in the French and Italian editions the endpapers are white, but in the Catalan edition they are silver (although this does not constitute as significant a change as omitting an entire narrative sequence). The removal of endpapers is not always tied to translation but often reflects commercial considerations: reprints in paperback and cost-cutting measures can influence such decisions. More broadly, the exclusion or alteration of narrative or peritextual elements in translated children's literature may stem from various factors, including censorship. As Lathey notes, translation practices frequently involve adapting texts to contemporary expectations of childhood – addressing developmental concerns, compensating for limited experience, and balancing accessibility with the need to provoke curiosity and openness to the unfamiliar (2010, 7).

Cultural context strongly shapes what is deemed appropriate in children's literature. Christensen observes that Danish and Norwegian picturebooks often address 'less than ideal behaviour' with irony (cited in Evans, 2015, 10), a perceived 'lack of protection' that may explain their limited translation into English. Smet disputes this, arguing that dark or subversive children's books exist globally but rarely sell, constrained by publishers' nostalgia-driven marketing to adult buyers. Echoing Nodelman's concern over the sanitisation of Anglophone picturebooks, Smet contends that familiarity risks reinforcing beliefs that "our version of reality is the right one and there's no point in seeing that reality from a different viewpoint" (Smet, p.c.). He calls this "the convenience of the victorious" — the illusion that comfort equals correctness. Yet in an increasingly unstable world, children's literature that unsettles rather than soothes becomes not only valuable but necessary, opening imaginative space for alternative ways of seeing and being.

Smet states that he doesn't believe in 'an educational mission for stories', but feels that *Rufus* 'has a contribution to make in joining the rank of stories continuously challenging the complacency of the status quo, [which is] an honourable task' (p.c.). Having explored the aesthetic, semantic and paratextual complexity of *Rufus*, and how it engages the reader in a performative contemplation of various dichotomies including those of nature/culture, real/fictive and human/nonhuman, the prospect of children being denied the experience of such creative complexity because of publication decisions – relating to either translation or to commercial interests – is unfortunate at least, and damaging at worst. If, as material ecocritics, we are concerned with interconnection, this must include accessibility to texts outside the limits of Anglophone publishing, and also those that are chosen with the curious and eager child reader in mind, as opposed to an ostensibly discerning adult buyer. Whether or not this happens, in the highly commercialised world of children's book publishing, remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus* challenge conventional distinctions between 'being' and 'knowing', and between 'mind' and 'matter'. Both texts unsettle expectations and resist the binary opposition between wildness and civilisation. They highlight the deep interconnection between the wildness of the individual and that of the surrounding world, presenting wildness as both an inner and outer condition of existence. This aligns with Zapf's insight into the merging of self and environment, where perception, memory, and the material world intertwine to form a continuous field of experience.

The Savage is most successful as a metacommentary on language, writing and art, and the roles they play in our creative *expression* of the world and in our *becoming* in the world. It demonstrates the agency of the narrative, ascribing physical, temporal and spiritual

significance to story, which is seen as a living entity, endlessly changing. *The Savage* foregrounds both the reader's and the protagonist's sensory, material and spatio-temporal experiences of the world through its enmeshed visual and textual narrative and its aesthetic and material design. McKean's evocative artistry is subversive and resists categorisation, and melds order with chaos to engage its beholder. As a hybrid work of art, *The Savage* sits in the 'in-between', that liminal space where children's literature also exists, between the 'civilised' adult and the 'feral' child. *The Savage* as a material artefact resists a dualistic construction: it is an enmeshment, coming into being as narrative matter as a result of a culmination of 'millions of traces' of people, places and events, including traces of its (adult) creators and its (young) readers.

Den om Rufus is a self-reflexive model of cultural creativity that highlights the permeable boundaries between nature and culture, fiction and reality, human and nonhuman, and internal and external nature. As it narratively challenges confinement, so too does its aesthetic form: as a visual text, it defies strict categorisation, melding picturebook, comic and graphic novel conventions. *Rufus* highlights the mutually defining movement between relational polarities such as order and chaos, past and future, and text and life. As Rufus 'remembers' his own primal nature, his 'Wild Brute Being', the reader is simultaneously empowered to recognise the vulnerability of sharp dichotomies, to challenge harmonising understandings of the nature-culture relationship, and to 'read the world beyond a seemingly ruled discourse, even when one is located inside it' (Dudek, 2005, 59). The creators eschew simplistic anthropomorphic representations; conversely, the characters in *Rufus* are complex hybrids that challenge anthropocentric understandings, cultivate a sensitivity to the enmeshment of the corporeal and the natural, and remind the reader that they are 'no longer above or outside a nonhuman "environment"' (Bennett, 2010, 119).

This chapter has explored the significance of gender in both narratives. It has been demonstrated that *The Savage* presents a gendered representation of wildness. The enmeshed narrative of illustration and text at times reinforces problematic, stereotypical understandings that emphasise the wild essence of masculinity against the gentle civility of femininity. *The Savage*'s success in dismantling dualisms of civilised human and savage nonhuman other is partially undermined by a less nuanced contemplation on the intersectional relationship between the oppression of (human and environmental) nature and masculine and feminine dichotomies. *Rufus* also presents gendered constructions of its protagonists; however, *Rufus* successfully emphasises the *matter* of the gendered body and through its semantic openness and complex aestheticism, opens a discursive space in which perceptions of gender can be contemplated and challenged.

The dissertation has demonstrated that neither *The Savage* nor *Rufus* delivers an explicitly moralistic message; rather, both books allow readers to negotiate their own meaning and develop a plurality of perspectives. Johnston maintains that David Almond's greatest skill is that rather than explicitly engage with issues,

he tells his stories and in the telling – out of the characters and events and their chronotopical relationship to time and place – issues and their associated philosophical and religious and theoretical and literary implications emerge, sometimes inconclusively, sometimes ambiguously, but always elegantly (2014, 260).

While this dissertation concurs with Johnston's insight, it extends the argument by suggesting that such emergence is not confined to a single author's narrative voice. Rather, it arises from the *collaborative telling* of both author and illustrator, and from the dynamic *intra-action* between their modes of expression. Meaning does not emanate solely from characters and events, but also from the reader's engagement with the aesthetic, material, and hybrid complexities of the visual narrative. Crucially, understandings – of *naturecultures*, of human

and nonhuman entanglement, and of the mutually constitutive relations between wild/civilised and order/chaos – are not imposed but implied. The reader of *The Savage* and *Rufus* thus becomes the kind of reader Barthes envisaged: one who gathers and holds together within a single field all the traces through which the text – written and visual – is constituted (1977, 148).

The Savage and *Rufus* are not typically ‘safe’ literature for children. The reader of both books is provoked and challenged by their disquieting creative potency. In the case of *Rufus*, such provocativeness may ultimately alter or prohibit its translation for an English-speaking readership. It has been highlighted, however, that challenging literature has particularly powerful potential in how it engages readers in the performance of fictionality, demanding them to respond to metafictional understandings of otherness and to perceive new realities. It is important that children are not deprived of the opportunity to access texts that creatively challenge them to become part of this nature – this world – that we seek to understand, in all of its gritty, delightful and disturbing complexity.

Chapter Four

Transcorporeality, Hybridity and The Material Memoir.

Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation

Once the natural world is understood as different, as completely separate, it is much easier to justify its destruction.

Clint Jones, *Apocalyptic Ecology in the Graphic Novel* (2020, 161).

Introduction

This chapter explores the affordances of the graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Sower* (2020), henceforth abbreviated to *Parable*, in revealing intersections between the material body, the landscape and the ravaging effects of capitalist culture. Nature is not backgrounded in the dystopian world of *Parable*; conversely, this chapter argues that an understanding of ‘nature’ as powerful, peopled, forceful and material is communicated. In staging encounters between diverse human and nonhuman entities, *Parable* affords agency to the other, which troubles grand narratives of progressivism, cultural dominance and religious redemptionism.

This exploration focuses on the specific affordances of the graphic novel adaptation as a ‘material memoir’ (Alaimo, 2010), incorporating the protagonist Lauren’s personal experience, observations, scientific knowledge and quasi-religious passages in written and pictorial form. The analysis establishes *Parable* as a transcorporeal autobiography, presenting the self as ‘constituted by material agencies that are simultaneously biological, political, and economic’ (Alaimo, 2010, 86–7). Examining the graphic novel as a medial transposition (Rajewsky, 2005, 51) entails attention to how medium-specific features of the work shape narration, and how the interplay between form and content both reinforces and destabilises meaning. The discussion further shows that paratextual elements unique to the adaptation from novel to graphic novel significantly influence performativity, mediation, and

signification. Through comparative analysis of the adaptation and its source text, the study highlights the distinctive affordances of the visual narrative in both engaging and challenging the reader.

4.i. Overview of the Book

Parable, written by Damian Duffy and illustrated by John Jennings, is adapted from the original novel *Parable of the Sower* (henceforth abbreviated to *Parable O*), written by American science fiction author Octavia E. Butler and published in 1993. *Parable O* is the first part of a novel duology; the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, was published in 1998. The graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Talents*, also by Duffy and Jennings, was published in April 2025. Butler had planned to write several more novels in this series, but later in her career she struggled with writer's block and depression, which led to numerous false starts with these books and, thus, only two of the intended series were ever published (McCrum, *The Independent*, June 2018; Canavan, 2017). The novel's title is borrowed from the biblical story of the same name and both *Parable* and *Parable O* conclude with an excerpt from this biblical passage.

Butler's original novel is written in the style of a collection of journal entries by the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, allowing the reader direct access to her voice and innermost thoughts. *Parable* is faithful to this journal style, and, it is argued, further develops it through effective use of artistic and aesthetic devices. This chapter contends that the adaptation of Butler's novel into a visual medium that echoes the protagonist's chosen form of expression invites a more immersive engagement with the narrative and its central figure. This argument is further developed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Parable (aligning with *Parable O*) comprises four parts marking the four years of the narrative from 2024 to 2027. This time frame would have been over three decades in the future when Butler wrote the original novel; for her, this was a way of exploring the potential consequences of then-current social, political and environmental trends in a near-future setting. Duffy and Jennings' adaptation came to bear at almost the exact time that Butler had imagined thirty years previously. For the reader of the graphic novel, therefore, this 'imagined future' is presented as imminent. As Jennings and Duffy researched the adaptation, they spoke of how the themes in *Parable O* seemed particularly prescient and 'of this moment' to them, at the time that Donald Trump was about to assume the first term of his presidential office in the United States (where they are based), class and race divisions were widening, a capitalist system dominated, and the climate crisis became increasingly urgent (but was largely sidelined by the incoming administration).

In the original novel, the four main narrative parts are broken into sub-chapters, of which there are twenty-five in total, but Duffy and Jennings dispense with the shorter chapter breaks in the adaptation, which results in a smoother, less disjointed narrative flow. The narrative is set in a post-apocalyptic United States, where climate catastrophe, political mismanagement and corruption, severe income inequality, and class and race division have created an entangled, dystopian natural and social disaster: rampant hunger, poverty, disease and civil unrest prevail and people either scavenge on the streets or protect the remnants of their shattered communities with high walls and barricades. Capitalism has devoured America: new, harmful drugs have been developed by the pharmaceutical industry, leading to increased addiction, education has been widely abandoned resulting in a high level of illiteracy, a radical authoritarian pseudo-fascist president is in power, and the vast level of disparity between the wealthy and the working class is glaringly evident.

The narrative's protagonist and narrator, Lauren Olamina, is fifteen years old at the beginning of the narrative in 2024, black, female, and living in a gated community called Robledo, twenty miles outside Los Angeles. Lauren is afflicted with 'hyperempathy': a psychosomatic feeling that she shares the pleasure and pain of other humans (and also nonhuman animals). Her father is a Baptist preacher, but she is developing her own religion, 'Earthseed', which focuses on God as 'change', a malleable force, an understanding that she believes can provide direction and hope for the future. She documents her observations, thoughts and Earthseed verses in her journal, which she titles 'Earthseed – The Books of the Living', and, as mentioned, both novel and graphic novel are presented as direct excerpts from this account. Following a night of violence and chaos, Lauren becomes displaced from her home in Robledo and travels north with a diverse group of fellow refugees she meets along the way. As their journey progresses, Lauren assumes a somewhat 'messianic' role as leader of the group. Led by Lauren, the group has the ultimate, utopian goal of establishing a new community founded upon the principles of Earthseed, and delivering a more hopeful future for 'the children we have now and the ones we will have' (*Parable*, 257/8).

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives are often presented in graphic novel form, perhaps due to the affordances of a visual medium in delivering a powerful and visceral depiction of a world in ruin; a more sensorial, vivid portrayal of the scale and impact of a cataclysmic event. Such visual and emotional immediacy challenges lingering assumptions about the graphic novel's artistic limitations. Jones argues that the prevailing conception of the graphic novel as 'crude, disposable art' is reductive and underestimates its aesthetic and narrative power (2020, 12). He contends that 'the environment in graphic novels is present in a way that it is not in other mediums...the environment [in graphic novels] is often more than just the backdrop against which the human drama unfolds' (ibid.). Jones also recognises the current 'overuse of the dystopian trope...[y]oung adult literature is currently a thriving

dystopian venture...many older dystopian conceptions are being revisited and given new life by being reproduced in different media and made palatable to different audiences' (ibid., 13). Duffy's and Jennings' adaptation of Butler's tale is thus not only a labour of love for them, as avowed fans of Butler's fiction; from a consumer perspective, it is also most likely a response to the prevalent voracious appetite for dystopia and apocalypse.

The book is a weighty object, comprising over two-hundred-and-sixty glossy pages that adapt Butler's original three-hundred pages of text into sequences of sprawling, arresting illustrations and action-packed panels. The cool blues and greens of the hardcover (Fig. 4.1a) – with its graffiti-covered walls, driving rain, and barbed-wire fences – are overlaid by the sharply contrasting reds, yellows, and oranges of the dust jacket (Fig. 4.1b), which appears to be engulfed by flames. This visual layering enacts a symbolic tension between containment and destruction, as the fiery palette seems to consume the subdued tones beneath, visually echoing the environmental devastation that engulfs the blue-green Planet Earth within the narrative.

Butler's original novel is often described as 'prophetic', producing what Dubey describes as 'a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement' (1999, 106), although Butler explicitly rejected the idea of her work as prophecy – remarking, 'I hope not' – and instead characterised it as 'a cautionary tale' (1998, 'Devil Girl,' n.p.). Shortly after the publication of *Parable of the Talents*, Butler stated that 'the past...is filled with repeating cycles of strength and weakness, wisdom and stupidity, empire and ashes...we must pay more attention to history...we forget history at our peril' (*Essence*, 2000, n.p.). Butler's extensive research for her *Parable* books included research on the Third Reich and Nazi Germany to help her understand 'how a country might slide into fascism' (ibid.). Butler composed the original novel during a period marked by growing public awareness of the climate crisis and the concurrent emergence of ecocriticism as an academic field. She described global warming

not as the background to the story, but as ‘a character in the novel’ (ibid.). From a political perspective, United States–Soviet Union relations had become increasingly strained throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the threat of a third world war loomed large in the public consciousness. Butler stated that ‘these novels [the *Parable* series] kind of grew out of my being a news junkie’ (‘Devil Girl’, 1998, n.p.); as well as the aforementioned political and environmental issues, she cited news stories on modern-day slavery, problems with prison systems and economic issues as significant influences (ibid.).

As Duffy and Jennings adapted the novel almost thirty years later, their collaborative creative input on the project was also significantly affected by their experience of the social, political and naturalcultural world at that more recent time. Reminiscent of Oliver Jeffers’ comments on his sense of urgency in publishing *The Fate of Fausto*, Jennings has commented on how his wife’s pregnancy at the time he was working on *Parable* significantly affected his work. Drawing parallels between new human life and the life he breathes into his art, he has revealed that he ‘watched the book come to bear [as I was] waiting for [my son to be born]’ (L.A. Public Library Interview, 2021). He describes the effects of recent racial upheavals in the U.S., and his worry around raising a child in that space, and how this affected his creative process: ‘You are retraumatising yourself, even though its abstraction. You are having to channel those types of energies, so to speak.’ (ibid.). Both Duffy and Jennings have described how they used images of refugees, border patrol checkpoints, drought, wildfires, and election materials for both Ronald Reagan (US president 1981-89, incorporating the time period of Butler’s research phase for *Parable O*) and Donald Trump (US president 2017-2021, the time period of Duffy’s and Jennings’ research, creative process and publication) as inspiration. As the creators began the marketing and publicity campaign for their book, the dystopian landscape of a world afflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns became a

reality. Duffy remarks on how he ‘finished the script and then I was living it’ (Hugo Award Interview, 2022).

Parable won the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Graphic Story in 2021. Shortly after its publication in 2020, both the graphic novel and Butler’s original paperback novel became *New York Times* bestsellers, the latter achieving this status almost thirty years after its original publication. Both *Parable* and *Parable O* have been marketed as young adult literature – the latter has featured extensively on high school curricula in North America since its original publication – however, both are also suitable for an adult readership and as such can be considered crossover texts. In addressing the dystopian nature of (fictive) societal collapse, Butler broaches complex and troubling subjects such as rape, murder, bodily disfigurement, cannibalism and child abuse. Duffy and Jennings include most of these sensitive topics in their adaptation, and the added visual element delivers a more visceral impact. As a result, *Parable*, along with its predecessor, has been included on banned book lists in libraries and schools across parts of the United States, particularly in more conservative regions, reflecting a growing trend of censorship—especially within children’s and young adult literature. Despite these controversies, the graphic novel adaptation has been widely well received throughout the United States. In contrast, engagement with the work appears more limited in Europe, where it has attracted fewer reviews and less media attention. Nevertheless, the book remains available in European markets, and there is no evidence to suggest that it has been subject to censorship outside the U.S..

DiPietro highlights the graphic novel as ‘a medium that serves a hybrid audience [and] even serves as a hybrid language’ (2021, 83). This chapter aims to demonstrate how *Parable* is, as Jennings argues, ‘more accessible to new audiences’ (Coleman and Due interview, 2020), not least in how it foregrounds visuality and requires the reader to ‘adopt new tools to access the medium’s specific narrative properties’ (Thaxter, 2021, 4). It is argued that *Parable*

demonstrates the veracity of Jones’s contention that the graphic novel ‘actively subverts the monotextual nature of literature [and is] capable of provoking reader participation in the spaces of the novel that are paradoxically full and empty’ (2020, 15).



Fig. 4.1a. Hardcover

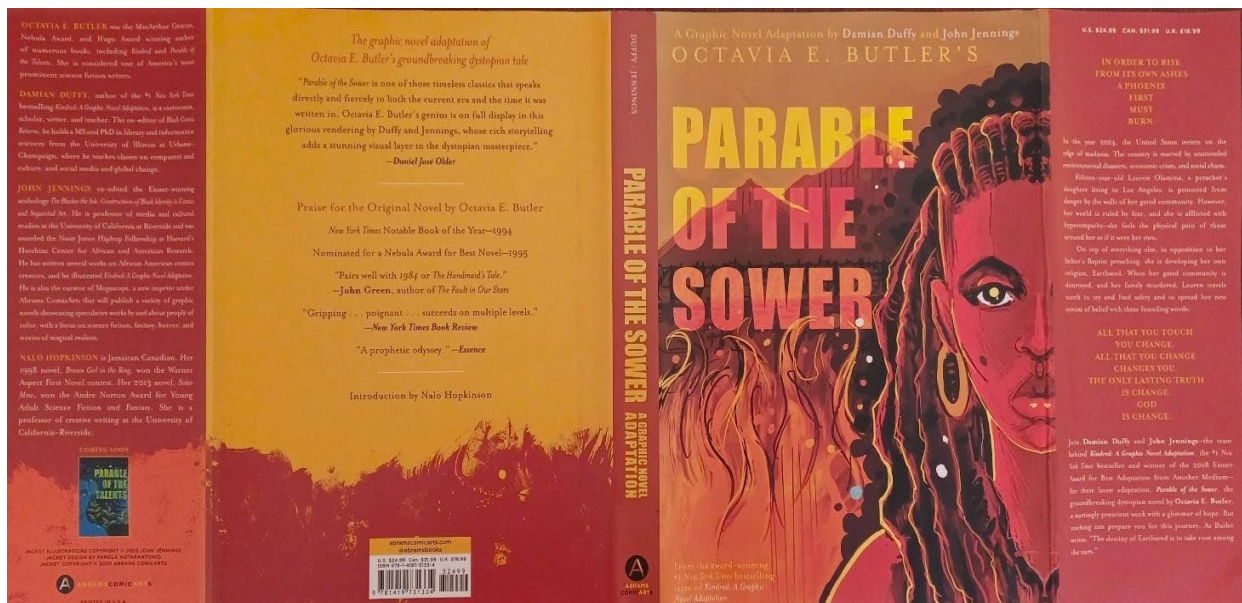


Fig. 4.1b. Dust Jacket

4.ii. Authors/illustrators: Octavia Butler, Damian Duffy and John Jennings

Octavia E. Butler (1947 – 2006) is the author of more than a dozen novels – mostly within the genre of science fiction – that have been translated into ten languages and have garnered multiple awards. Butler, the only child of her widowed African American mother, was born in California and raised in a strict Baptist environment. Her mother worked as a cleaner and the young Octavia experienced racial segregation and class inequality on a daily basis; in interviews later in her life, she spoke of her distress at the memory of the indignities and humiliations she witnessed her mother endure as a black working-class woman working in an affluent, predominantly white area.

Growing up, Butler experienced crippling shyness and an overpowering sense of isolation. Speaking to interviewer Joshunda Sanders in 2004, she stated: ‘I’m black. I’m solitary. I’ve always been an outsider.’ She turned to reading and writing as a source of comfort and a form of empowerment, claiming that ‘I began writing about power because I had so little’ (cited by Davidson, 1981, 35). She has credited the unwavering support of her working-class mother, who lacked a formal education herself, as a crucial factor in encouraging her early reading and writing endeavours. As a teenager, she developed an interest in science fiction but became disenchanted by the poor portrayals of diversity and the lack of memorable female protagonists within the genre. Following her graduation from college, her first books, the *Patternist* series, were published in the mid- to late seventies. One of her most popular and best-selling novels, *Kindred*, an exploration of slavery through a time-travel narrative, followed in 1979. Duffy and Jennings published a graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* in 2017, which was a critical and commercial success. *Kindred* features a strong, black, female protagonist struggling with complicated issues of survival – a frequent trope in much of Butler’s subsequent work, including the *Parable* duology. Butler’s oeuvre also demonstrates her frequent thematic exploration of the complex relationships – and tenuous distinctions –

between humans and nonhumans, including aliens, symbiotic organisms, and even genetic constructs.

In *Parable*, Butler is described as ‘a master of powerful, realistic prose that supported inventive genre narratives’ (2020, 263). Duffy emphasises how Butler ‘paid attention to the world around her’ (Hugo Award Interview, 2022). She was a meticulous researcher and Duffy and Jennings carefully consulted her extensive notes and papers (stored in her archive at Huntington Library and Museum in California) as part of the process of adapting her work. In spite of her Baptist upbringing, Butler was an atheist as an adult but maintained a life-long interest in the motivational potential of religious belief, and the entanglements of nature, culture and spirituality, interests that are evident in themes she explores in the *Parable* series.

Author/adaptor Damian Duffy is a cartoonist, scholar, writer and lecturer, based at the University of Illinois. He is the recipient of awards including the Glyph Comics Award and the Hugo Award for his work on graphic novels. He has published on the subjects of new media and learning, and underrepresentation in comics culture, and has given talks and led workshops internationally on comics, art, and education. Illustrator John Jennings is a professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside. He describes himself as an Afro-futurist²⁴ scholar and artist (L.A. Public Library Interview, 2021). He has written several works on African American comics creators and has curated a series of graphic novels for the Abrams ComicArts programme that focus on the experiences of people of colour. Duffy and Jennings have collaborated on various visual storytelling projects over a number of years. Their first published graphic novel collaboration, *The Hole: Consumer Culture*, was released in 2008. The aforementioned adaptation of *Kindred* was

²⁴ Afro-futurism explores notions of Black identity, agency and freedom, and reimagines more inclusive futures through art, creative works and activism.

published in 2017, winning the prestigious Eisner award, and their most recent collaboration is the previously mentioned graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Talents*.

Duffy and Jennings reveal that they came to Butler's work 'later than most' (in interview with Brigid Alverson, 2017). Duffy first encountered *Kindred* as a sophomore in college, and 'was so captivated by the story that I read it in a single sitting' (ibid.). Following the success of their collaboration on the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred*, they were approached by its publishers with the opportunity to adapt *Parable O*. They have spoken of feeling a strong obligation to Butler's legacy, considering themselves her collaborators, and have stated that they are 'honoured and humbled' to have adapted her work, and brought renewed attention to it (LA. Public Library Interview, 2021).

Jennings and Duffy have spoken at length in interviews about their long-standing professional relationship and friendship. This relationship constitutes a significant component of *Parable*'s epitextual framework. Duffy states that 'we have a lot of experience in visual storytelling and are comfortable because we've been working together so long' (ibid.). Making further reference to 'comfort', he states, 'there's a level of formalism and craft that John and I are both drawn to in comics that provides some comfort while we're portraying these ghastly, horrific scenes' (Hugo Award Interview, 2022). Duffy and Jennings describe this comforting process of doodling, scribbling, thumbnails and breaking down scenes, which they work on collaboratively. They cite mutual influences such as Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore and Mort Weisenger, editor of the Superman comics.

4.iii. *Transcorporeality: The Material Body and the Landscape*

Parable is a startling and troubling account of the disintegration of civil society in the context of accelerating natural disaster. This account is at all times mindful of the fact that the body is

not separate from the social, and the ‘environment’ is ‘always the very substance of ourselves’ (Alaimo, 2010, 4). Alaimo’s concept of ‘transcorporeality’ sees the human as ‘always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world’ (ibid., 11). Even before her birth, Lauren’s body is entangled with this material world, a world ‘composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic, humanly made substances’ (ibid., 24). The reader is informed that her mother, who died in childbirth, abused a drug called Paraceto, which has resulted in Lauren being afflicted with an ‘organic delusional syndrome’, hyperempathy, allowing her to ‘share’ the pleasure and pain of others. Lauren’s body has thus become ‘a space of intrusion’ (Alaimo, 2010, 83) – chemicals have entered her body pre-partum, without her consent, which are intensely affecting her physical and emotional being in the world.

Parable visually demonstrates how Lauren’s hyperempathy entangles her flesh with the flesh of the world. Page 8 (Fig. 4.2) is dominated by an image of Lauren in side-profile, as she gazes upon three smaller panels, rendered in earthen browns that meld the human characters with the dust and dirt around them. These are graphic images of poverty, violence and disease: a child’s face covered in blisters and pustules, a headless corpse, the ‘street poor’ scavenging in the dirt. The opposite page (Fig. 4.2) aligns with the visual style of page 8, presenting a stark front-profile as Lauren beholds the reader. This gives the effect of a double-page spread, split by the gutter. Alongside the dominating front-profile, three smaller panels, painted in blood-red shades, parallel the dystopian depictions on the previous page, but now it is Lauren herself who is afflicted with bulbous sores and missing limbs as she ‘collect[s] some misery’, absorbing the pain and suffering of her environment. Her body becomes a physical landscape that merges with the social and natural landscape. Lauren’s steely gaze involves the reader in the disturbing dystopia. Her intensely forbidding expression

is a challenge to the reader to participate in the viscerality of the scene, to share it in the same way that Lauren ‘shares’ pain.



Fig. 4.2.

Lauren's hyperempathy represents what Alaimo describes as 'deviant material agencies' (2010, 116) as her lived body, intruded upon by xenobiotic, human-made chemicals, deviates from ableist norms and is now afflicted with delusional pain – an affliction that Lauren resents and views as freakish and shameful. She writes, 'I do okay as long as others don't know about me...it's a weakness, a shameful secret' (*Parable*, 11; 146). At the same time, as Hampton argues, her hyperempathy marks Lauren's body 'as unusual and potentially powerful' (2005, 60) in a world where the body has ceased to possess value or dignity and is routinely abused, raped, assaulted and otherwise desecrated. She not only imagines herself feeling the pain of others but also feels their pleasure. Sexual intercourse with her partner Bankole becomes a heightened, powerful experience. Lauren's world is one in which boundaries are blurred between the pleasure and pain experienced by the body. The sadistic

excitement generated by violence is compared to sexual excitement. This is directly referred to in the original novel as group member Zahra informs Lauren that the ‘blue face’ (one of the terms given to the psychotic humans who have become pyromaniacs as a result of drug misuse) was ‘enjoying himself’ as he shot at moving targets in their neighbourhood and that ‘his expression reminded her of a man having sex’ (*Parable O*, 158). However, the interconnection between sadistic and sexual excitement is highlighted less subtly, and arguably more effectively, in the graphic novel through use of colour and artistic design. There is no explicit reference to a connection between sex and violence; however, illustrated sexual scenes in *Parable* (Fig 4.3a) are bathed in the same deep red hues, and feature the same red vein-like emanata, as the scenes of barbarity (Fig 4.3b). Her close contact with her physical attackers is depicted and coloured in strikingly similar style to her close contact with her lovers. This serves as a powerful visual representation of the corresponding, pulsating life-force of acts of pleasure and acts of pain. It is also a thought-provoking, and perhaps troubling parallel, that prompts the reader to reflect on the ‘messy’ entanglements of mind and matter that comprise the human bodily response to both sexual and sadistic excitement.



Fig. 4.3a.

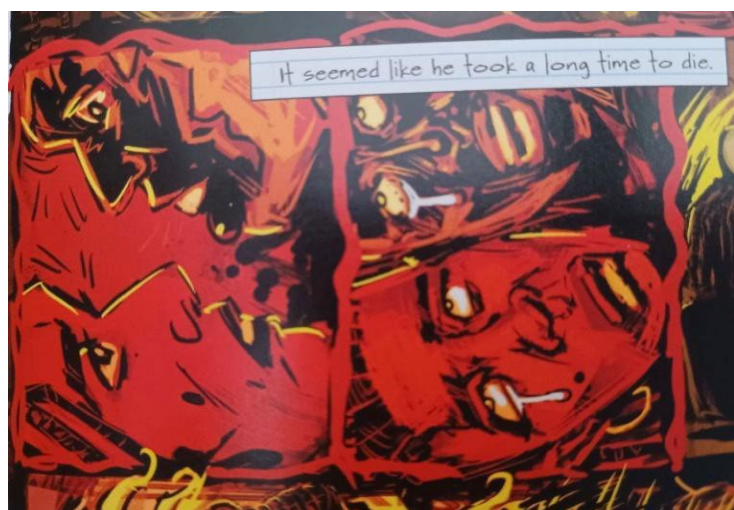


Fig. 4.3b.

The apocalyptic world created by Butler and visually brought to life by Duffy and Jennings emphasises the materiality of the body by highlighting its base needs: food, shelter and physical contact, and how the immersion of the body in its environment facilitates the acquisition or deprivation of these needs. The human bodies of *Parable* are in constant interchange with their environment. Food – described by Alaimo as ‘the most palpable transcorporeal substance’ (2010, 12) – is scarce in this dystopian world. As ecological collapse disrupts systems of cultivation and supply, the natural environment becomes the immediate and often only source of sustenance. In this context, humans, like their nonhuman counterparts, are compelled to scavenge for berries, scraps, and carrion, and, at times, for one another: in one particularly gruesome scene, Lauren and her fellow travellers witness a group of starved children gnaw on a severed human leg (*Parable*, 225). Jennings’ stark images of this scene (Fig. 4.4a) focus on the children’s haggard limbs and faces, and animal-like teeth, and the large, startled eyes of the onlookers. This image recalls an earlier visual moment in the narrative in which a carnivorous bird consumes the carcass of another bird (13; Fig. 4.4b). Human and nonhuman beings become closely aligned as the sanctity of the human body is eroded. The narrative foregrounds the body’s materiality – the flesh as a potential source of sustenance for both species in conditions of desperation. In doing so, it exposes the precarious permeability of bodily boundaries and the shared material vulnerability that defines transcorporeal existence.

Butler, Duffy and Jennings explore the idea of ‘human as animal’ at various points in the narrative. Both human and animal are scavengers. Lauren notes that ‘[t]here are always homeless people and feral dogs living out there, hunting rabbits, possums, squirrels, and one another. Both scavenge whatever dies’ (30). Humans attack other humans for food at campsites, with the groups of attackers referred to as ‘packs’ (152). Lauren speaks about ‘people and dogs [who are] wandering the hills’ (ibid.) and the weaker humans are at constant

risk of attack by predators (198). Lauren muses on how dogs ‘used to belong to people. But dogs eat meat. These days, no poor or middle-class person with an edible piece of meat would give it to a dog’ (30). Notions of hierarchy – of human over nonhuman – are obsolete in this time of catastrophe. The reader must contemplate a world in which human exceptionalism is defunct: human and animal are equally primarily focused on survival, and materiality is not related to wealth or ownership, but rather to the sustenance and endurance of the human and nonhuman body.

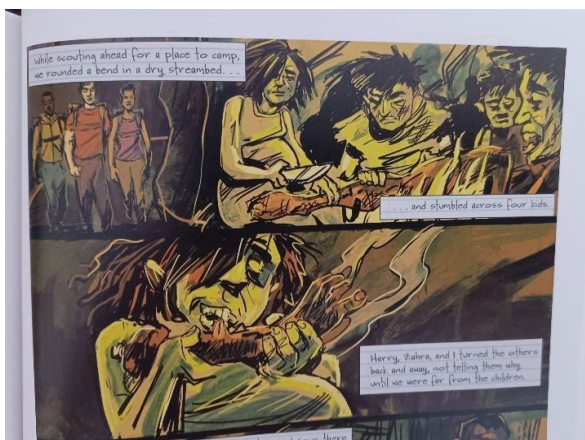


Fig. 4.4a.

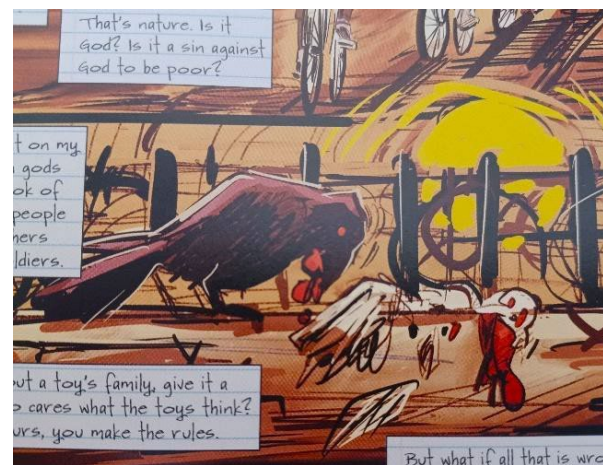
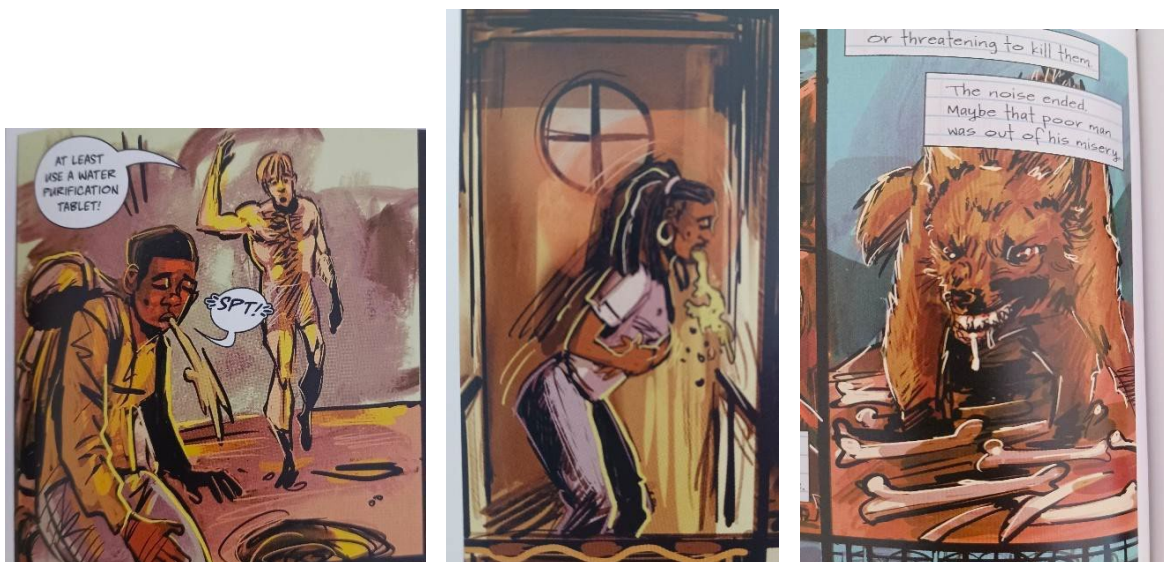


Fig. 4.4b.

Parable presents a material world where dirt, flesh, food, bones, bodily fluids and drugs intra-act in a reimagining of understandings of ‘bodily nature’. Lauren’s body, and the bodies around her, are never static, fixed, consistent or undeviating as Cartesian understandings of the human body are presented. While *Parable O* textually refers to the entanglements of bodily fluids with natural substances (*Parable O*, 179), the graphic and evocative illustrations and aesthetic style of the adaptation more starkly emphasise the gritty materiality of this world. Images of tears (26, 39, 89, 116), human and nonhuman saliva (106, 171), vomit (77, 78) and maggots (66, 105) (some examples in Figs. 4.5) sit alongside multitudinous depictions of fire, dirt, bones, earth and water. Butler, Duffy and Jennings explore the narrative capacity of blood: it tells stories of corporeality, genealogy and pain in its

depictions as a material bodily fluid; as the material and symbolic tie between family; as life-force; and as a symbol of violence. Jennings' illustrations of Lauren's hyperempathy at times of violence are saturated in crimson reds that emanate like rivers of blood from her head and body (34, 77, 125; Fig. 4.6). This is reminiscent of Neimanis' observations on the narrative agency of the body as she writes, 'our buoyant, fleshy selves...read, and rewrite, their messages...our saltwater blood, our intercellular fluids, our hormones and biles and various other lubrications are the writing outputs of a scribbly nature' (2017, 189; 192). As the blood of dead and dying humans and nonhumans seeps into the earth and appears to radiate from Lauren's body, the image evokes the entanglement of bodily and environmental materiality, exemplifying the Baradian intra-actions, flows, and exchanges that blur the boundaries between human and more-than-human worlds. *Parable* demonstrates that all that constitutes a body has come from the environment, which encourages the reader to 'embrace an environmental ethic that understands world and self to be coextensive' (Alaimo, 2010, 98).



Figs. 4.5.

Lauren's relation of the story of her mother's drug abuse to the others in the group describes the experiences of the female body in a dystopian landscape: 'everybody's mama took drugs'; bodies were 'whored' to pay for them; babies, born with sores, tumours or missing

limbs, were thrown away ‘like trash’ when they inevitably died ‘from the drugs or accidents or not having enough to eat’ (*Parable*, 157). Zahra, comforts Lauren, telling her ‘that Paraceto shit was baby milk’ (*ibid.*, 158). Lauren’s sense of hopelessness, vivid in the graphic novel illustrations in her searching eyes and stricken expressions, has come to bear as a result of the entanglement of multiple agencies: hunger, sickness, desperation, abandonment, addiction. The agentic capacity of these materialities is evident in their physical manifestations: sores, tumours, disfigurements, syndromes, illnesses, the scattered bones of dead humans and nonhumans. The bodies of *Parable* are narrative texts that tell stories of ruthless exploitation, deprivation and destruction. As Le Sueur articulates, ‘In that body under your hands every day there resides the economy of that world... You have the news at its terrible source’ (1982, 172). Paralleling the description of the sores on the faces and bodies of babies and diseased scavengers, the city of Los Angeles is itself described as ‘an oozing sore’ and ‘a carcass covered with maggots’ (*Parable*, 7). Metaphors entangle the human body with its environment: the mass of refugees moving north is described as ‘a river of the poor’, illustrated to appear like tiny streams flowing through furrowed fields from an aerial angle (186). Lauren describes her group as ‘a harvest of survivors’ (237), frequently refers to ideas of ‘taking root’, and ‘seeding’ a new community and contemplates how the group will ‘grow our own food, grow ourselves’ (187).

Earth and fire are agentic characters in *Parable*. Soil is a source of food and life and dirty faces, usually viewed as signs of neglect or poor hygiene, are safety mechanisms in *Parable* as humans smear soil on themselves as they leave their homes to avoid appearing too clean, maintained or pampered, and thus being targeted. The name ‘Earthseed’, devised by Lauren as she weeds her back garden, embraces a connection between flesh and Earth, emphasised by Lauren in her words ‘We are Earthlife preparing to take root in a new ground’ (121).

Earthseed for Lauren is not about divine revelation: it is a personal belief that has arisen from

her own deep reflection on her experience. Lauren frequently refers to ‘God as Change’, which emphasises that for her, God is not so much a divine deity as an active, agentic force that exists on the Earth, in the body and in the body’s entanglements with the physical landscape. Lauren’s theology emphasises action and agency in the here-and-now, as opposed to dogma and divinity. As Johnson argues, Lauren’s *Earthseed* is ‘a theology of embodiment and interconnectivity’ that recognises how ‘the “dying place” of earth...forces the body into self-activation’ (2020, 97). Similarly, *Parable* understands the potential of fire to both sustain and destroy. The selected colour palettes of images of fire alternate between blazing oranges and reds to depict the fires that destroy the community and the landscape (116-7, 122-127) and softer pink and purple hues to depict the warm glow of campfires that the group builds for warmth, ‘comfort’ and to cook food (149). Fire, as a natural chemical process, is entangled in *Parable* with the neurochemistry of the brain as Lauren reveals that addiction to a drug called ‘pyro’ has created the horrifying side-effect of turning addicts into pyromaniacs who obtain sadistic thrills from acts of arson, described as ‘org[ies] of burning’ (116). The writers use an array of verbs to emphasise the agency of fire: ‘*jumped* the road...*eating* its way towards us’ (249), creating a ‘terrible, *deafening* noise...*teasing* us like a *living*, malevolent thing...*roared* off...*playing* with us, then *letting* us live’ (252, emphases mine). As Butler’s and Duffy’s words tell the story of soil, fire, dirt and flesh, Jennings’ illustrations paint the picture; the book is saturated in hues of earthen browns, rustic oranges and muted beiges that contrast with the vivid and evocative warm tones of destructive flames and comforting campfires.

Word, flesh, fire and earth are not discrete entities in *Parable* but are materially entangled. The story emerges from the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world; as Lauren ‘writes her lived body’ (Alaimo, 2010, 41) in her journal, she ‘becomes able to read the world around her... transform[ing] nature into a communicative realm’ (ibid.). In one journal excerpt, a

wild dog lies slowly dying in agony, having been shot by Lauren's father. Lauren viscerally experiences its pain, as she writes

I felt skewered. I couldn't keep walking...I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow...I felt it die. Its life flared up and went out like a match in a sudden vanishing of pain ...I felt its life flare and then go out and I was still alive' (34/5).

There is a fluid entanglement here of the dog's pain with Lauren's as the text switches back and forth from 'I' to 'it'. The dog's demise, and Lauren's hyperempathetic response to it, are depicted in illustrations with bleeding red edges (Fig. 4.6). Lauren's hair bleeds red beyond the confines of the frame, her face is contorted in pain, the dog's eyes flash demonically red and the images are situated haphazardly on a smudged brown background, reminiscent of clumps of mud or earth. The red blood that streams from the dog's carcass melds with the trail of Lauren's hair, the sound waves, and the veins that emanate from her body, visually representing the entanglement of human and nonhuman pain.



Fig. 4.6.

Disaster in *Parable* materialises through what can be understood as ‘viscous porosity’ – the entangled intra-action of material and immaterial forces (Tuana, 2007, 193). Tuana’s conception of the ‘membranes’ between ‘my flesh and the flesh of the world’ (ibid., 199–200) underscores the inseparability of bodily, social, and environmental processes. This permeability aligns with Parenti’s notion of ‘catastrophic convergence’ (2011, 7), wherein ecological, economic, and political crises are not discrete but mutually amplifying. Alaimo’s formulation that ‘sociopolitical forces generate landscapes that infiltrate human bodies’ (2010, 27) further illuminates how Butler’s world renders disaster as a transcorporeal condition – one in which human, environmental, and systemic breakdowns are materially and affectively co-constituted. Thus, the materiality of the place Lauren exists in is entangled with the physicality of her body and the bodies around her. Jones argues that graphic novels provide ‘a more expansive representation [of the environment] ...in scope [and] detail’ (2020, 14). *Parable* demonstrates this. It presents a constant visual and textual reminder of how Lauren is embodied within her landscape. Environment is more than mere backdrop here; it is an ‘ever-present concern’ (ibid.), highlighted in the merging of corporeal and geographical physicality.

4.iv. *Erosion of the Earth and Erosion of the Body*

Parable explicitly connects the erosion of the environment with the erosion of the human body. The male and female bodies of *Parable* are ‘hieroglyphs of their exploitation’ (Le Sueur, 1984, xviii). References to the rape of women sit adjacent to depictions of the rape of the land. As Lauren cycles to church with members of her family and others from her community early in the narrative, they pass a woman ‘young, naked and filthy’. Lauren muses that ‘maybe she had been raped so much that she was crazy’ (6). The four-panel illustration of this scene (Fig. 4.7) sees the woman’s naked body, viewed from behind in

panel two and from the front in panel four, merge with her surroundings. She gazes, glassy eyed, upon a defeated Lauren, who acknowledges in thought bubbles that although she wishes she could help her, she is afraid to do so because of previous experiences. Perspective and focalisation are emphasised in the depiction of this scene. The visual depiction emphasises three perspectives: Lauren's, the woman's, and the boys' as a group. The beholder can observe Lauren's disillusionment and sense of hopelessness, the dazed but fearful expression of the woman, and the (wide-eyed) male gaze, positioning the spectators as active and dominant subjects and the woman as a passive and oppressed object. The result is a more impactful presentation of the scene than the nine succinct sentences that describe this incident in *Parable O*.

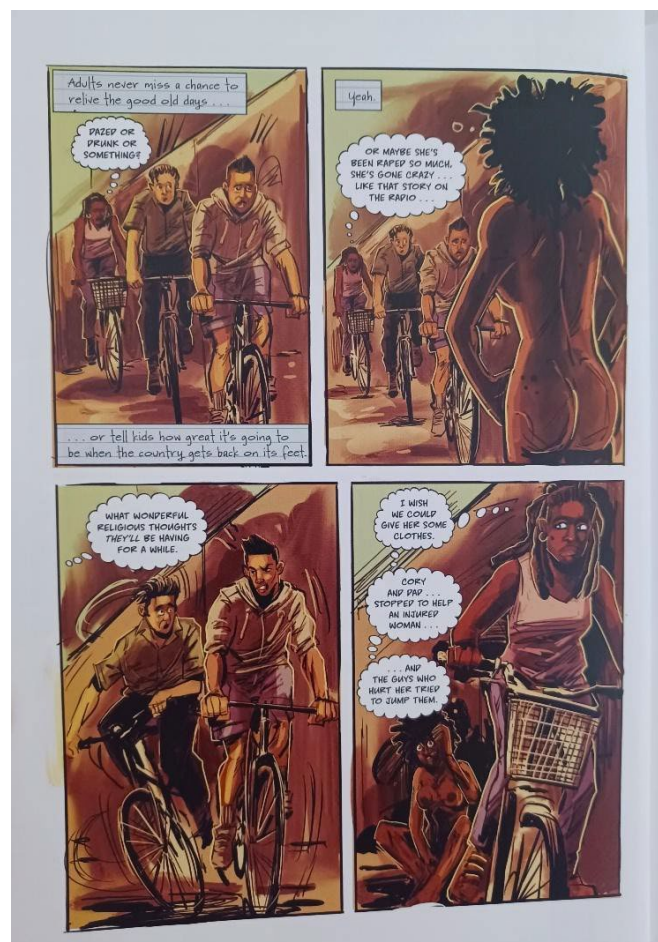


Fig. 4.7.

Lauren's sex is portrayed as a threat to her safety; as she travels with her group outside the safety of her community, she shaves her hair off to appear more masculine. When she is revealed as a woman to some of the group later in the narrative, she informs them 'we believe two men and a woman are more likely to survive than two women and a man' (176). One of the men of the group is perturbed by the fact that his leader is female; Lauren writes in her journal that he is 'not ready to forgive me for helping him twice – and being a woman' (177). This gendered tension extends beyond human relationships, resonating with the narrative's wider ecofeminist configuration of woman and land as parallel sites of exploitation and resilience. As previously discussed, ecofeminist theorists such as Gaard (2010) and Plumwood (1993) have argued that Western dualisms have historically positioned both women and nature as passive, exploitable resources. Butler's narrative subverts this logic. The natural landscape, though ravaged, retains vitality and regenerative potential; likewise, the female body is threatened and violated yet remains tenacious and powerful. Lauren's embodiment exemplifies what Gaard (2018) terms an ecological feminism of interconnection: her body protects, nurtures, feels, and leads, attuned to both human and nonhuman suffering. Her corporeal immersion in place, and the woundedness shared by her and her companions, signal what Zapf calls 'a trans-corporeal crisis of life' (2016, 218), where bodily and environmental vulnerability converge. In this ecofeminist reading, Butler exposes the systemic violence that binds the exploitation of women and the degradation of the Earth, while also affirming the potential for embodied, relational modes of survival and renewal. While an ecofeminist reading of *Parable* foregrounds the gendered dynamics of bodily violation – particularly the ways in which the female body is exploited, objectified, and weaponised – the graphic novel also exposes the shared corporeal precarity of all human bodies within a collapsing social and ecological order. The erosion and theft of the body in *Parable* is not confined to that of the female body. Male bodies are similarly assaulted,

dismembered, abused and murdered. One passage in Butler's original novel distressingly and graphically depicts the damage inflicted upon Lauren's brother Keith's body after he is murdered (following his escape from his walled community); this is presented in *Parable* with an image of Lauren's sombre father relating this damage to his horrified remaining children (89). While Butler's original passage presents the reader with a viscerally explicit description, the impact of his death on Keith's family is more keenly understood by the reader/holder of *Parable*, in their visual encounter with the horror and distress of his siblings' faces (Fig. 4.8). The 'disfiguring repercussions of flight' (DiPietro, 2021, 86) are not always gender specific; just as the depictions of Lauren defy the binary limitations of masculine/feminine stereotypes, so too do the authors'/illustrator's depictions of ravaged figures demonstrate their understanding of the materiality of both male and female bodies, poignantly emphasised by their acute vulnerability. From a material ecocritical perspective, this pervasive violence can be read as symptomatic of a world in which all bodies – human and nonhuman – are enmeshed in destructive material exchanges. Flesh becomes currency, sustenance, and spectacle. The boundary between the violated human body and the degraded environment collapses: both are rendered exploitable matter. *Parable* thus reframes ecofeminist concerns in materialist terms: gender shapes the form of bodily vulnerability, but not its exclusivity. The suffering of both men and women attests to the dissolution of boundaries between human and environment, self and other, and reveals the extent to which systemic violence is inscribed in the materiality of all living bodies.



Fig. 4.8.

The authors' and illustrator's depictions of the almost sub-human pyromaniacal characters that are referred to as the 'Blue faces' or 'Paints' further highlight Butler's dismantling of gender binaries to focus on understandings of humanity, bodily materiality, and base need and desire. Their sex is not specified, and they have similarly androgynous appearances. They 'shave off all their hair, paint their skin. Eat fire and kill rich people...they take this drug that makes them feel like they're fucking the fire' (*Parable*, 187). Butler's use of verbs here – shave/paint/eat/kill/take/fuck – entangles aesthetics, consumption, carnality and violence. This entanglement is further emphasised by visceral, uncomfortable descriptions and depictions of horrifying and gruesome violence. As Lauren and her neighbours search for her father's body, they encounter the dismembered arm of a black man in the branches of a tree, the human limb camouflaged amongst the limbs of the tree (105; Fig. 4.9). The image of the arm is large and imposing; it cuts through the panels, appearing to reach through the branches and tear through the page, its flesh is bloody and maggot-infested and its fingers lurking ominously over the heads of the search group.

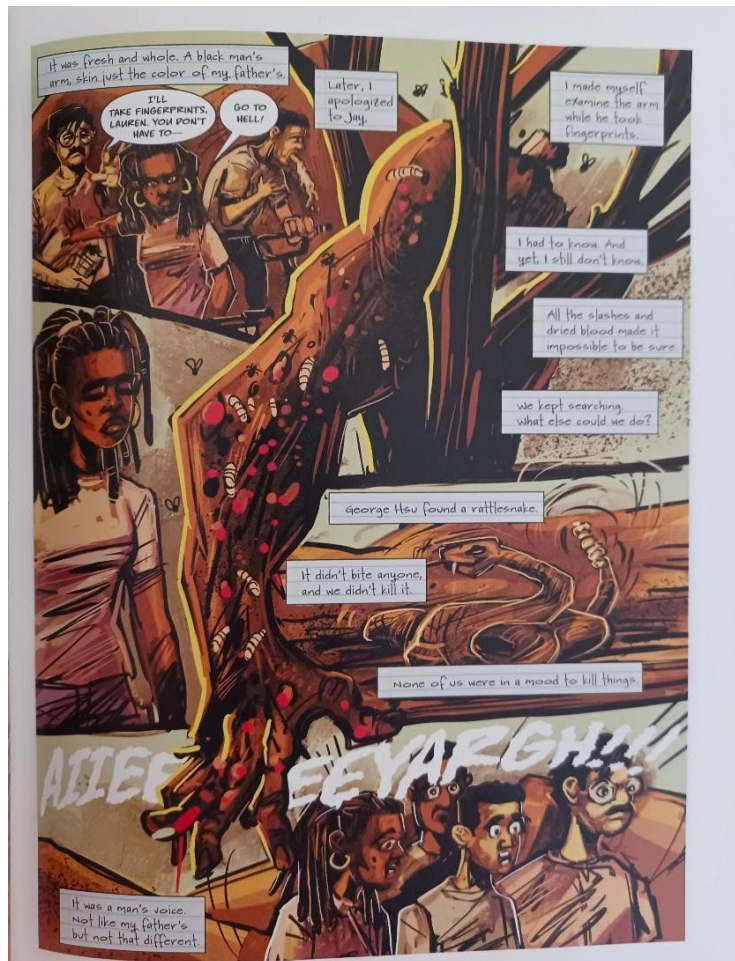


Fig. 4.9.

The narrative text, although considerably abridged from the original novel, nonetheless does not censor its description, referring to the corpses and ravaged bodies that litter the streets and also to rapes, including the rape of a child. It appears that Butler, Duffy and Jennings are not concerned with protecting either the reader or their characters from the horror of this dystopian world. A comment made by Duffy, in which he claims that he and Jennings avoided graphically depicting violence towards children, seems to contradict this assertion: ‘We very specifically made sure not to show images of children being hurt or killed because showing it cheapens it in a way; it doesn’t do the same thing the text does’ (L.A. Public Library Interview, 2021). Duffy’s comments are interesting in how they reveal his understanding of the power of the image. It is fine, he implies, to write about violence towards children, but to depict it in illustrative form is a bridge too far: it becomes too real for

the beholder. Yet, the stark and disturbing imagery of *Parable* refutes Duffy's claims. An image on page 125 (Fig. 4.25b) depicts a child being shot as she flees the violence. Further distressing images on page 137 (Fig. 4.10) depict the ravaged body and face of a child who has been assaulted and murdered. Duffy might argue that these images depict the aftermath of violence rather than the acts themselves; nonetheless, they are graphic, macabre images that certainly do not suggest any inclination towards protecting the reader from the gruesome reality of apocalyptic dystopia.

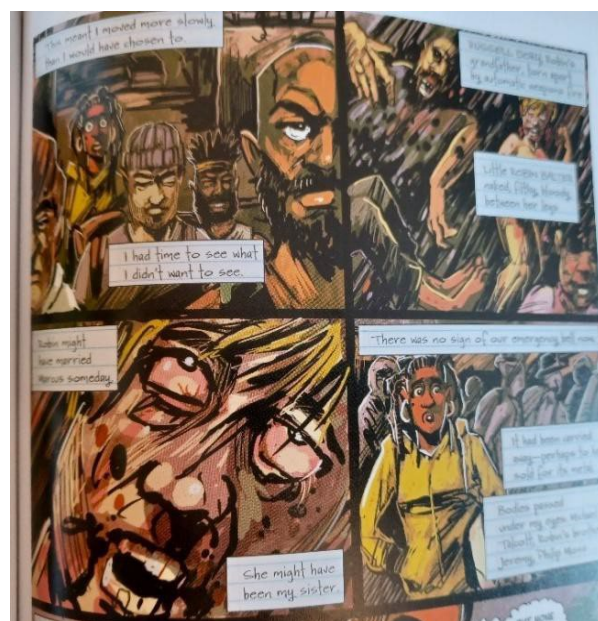


Fig. 4.10.

Nonetheless, the conception of the child as a symbol for new life and rebirth after disaster is also ever-present. This is emphasised in the parallels drawn between the child and the ‘seed’ of Earthseed. Lauren writes ‘a community’s first responsibility is to protect its children – the ones we have now and the ones we will have’ (*Parable*, 257/8). Both child and seed are representations of a hopeful future. When the group ultimately arrives at their final destination, Lauren informs them that she has brought seeds with her to begin the process of growing crops (256). This ‘seeding’ enacts a material gesture of renewal that is simultaneously literal, metaphorical, and spiritual. The seeds exemplify matter’s narrativity

(Iovino and Oppermann, 2014), embodying the interdependence of human intention and ecological process. In uniting the growth of crops, children, and Earthseed itself, Butler, Duffy and Jennings locate regeneration within the dynamic material exchanges that sustain both community and environment.

4.v. *Hope and the Generative Potential of Change: A Materialist Understanding*

Parable's focus on the new-found community of Acorn and the ideal of 'a new beginning' at the narrative's end demand an interrogation of how cultural presumptions of the reality of a post-apocalyptic world are obscured by intense scrutiny of and focus on the social; a 'fix[ation] on the glorious opportunity of an apocalyptic future' (Jones, 2020, 32). Jones cautions against the human tendency to 'imagine a future that is dystopian, but remains recognisable, and in its recognition, comprehensible' (ibid., 21). This approach, he argues, 'ignores the subtleties, complexities and interconnections of nature and human interaction' (ibid.). It is evident that Lauren's messianic vision for the future is founded upon 'refashioning a new and better society on a *tabula rasa*' (ibid., 154). The inclusion of the verse from the original, biblical 'Parable of the Sower' (New Testament) at the end of the narrative (Fig. 4.11), with a final line that reads 'and others fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bore fruit an hundredfold' (262) indicates a hopeful tone, what Morton might describe as 'aesthetic as anaesthetic' (2009, 11). The book the verse appears in in the illustration has been badly damaged by fire, but the verse remains – a symbol of renewal amidst destruction. The question of the presence of hope in Butler's work is a pertinent one, given that the original author herself stated, 'the one thing that I and my characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope. In fact, the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is itself an act of hope' (*Essence*, 2000, n.p.).

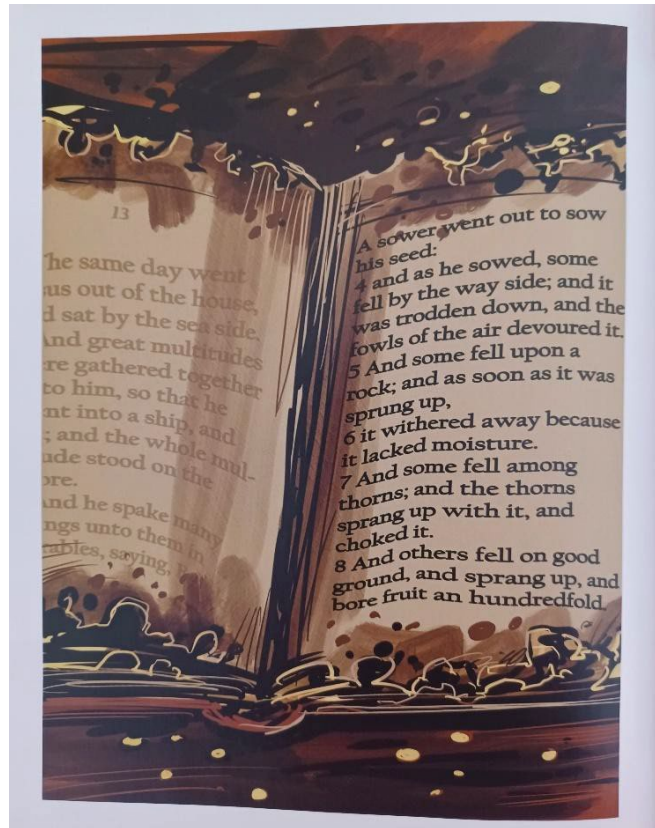


Fig. 4.11.

Hope in *Parable* is not explicitly articulated but emerges through the central concept of change. Variations of the word recur throughout the Earthseed verses, underscoring that transformation – both destructive and regenerative – is inevitable. Allusions to historical injustices such as slavery being repeated in the present suggest that change operates cyclically, while Lauren’s reflections reveal its gradual nature: ‘things are unravelling, disintegrating bit by bit’ (97).

Change also functions as a generative and adaptive force. As Hampton observes, accepting change’s inevitability enables survival and transformation (2005, 72). For Lauren, the Earthseed principle that ‘God is Change’ signals a materialist understanding of existence, one that recognises the fluid interrelation of matter, energy, and life. Philips (2002) interprets this as a dialectical vision of reality, encapsulated in Lauren’s statement that ‘everything changes in some way’ (181). In the original novel, Butler expands this idea: ‘Every living thing, every

bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way' (204). While the graphic adaptation necessarily abridges such passages – at times obscuring lines that emphasise the breadth of Butler's vision (60; Fig. 4.15) – it retains the essence of her materialist worldview. Its recurring motifs of seeds, flames, and the scorched Earth visually articulate the cosmological interconnection of matter, life, and transformation that Butler renders through language in the original text. In both the original novel and the adaptation, Lauren recognises herself as part of the nature she seeks to understand – a reciprocal, evolving relationship that embodies hope as a generative, material process.

Lauren's evolution as leader of her group of refugees has messianic connotations. Jones argues that messianic protagonists suggest that the attendant horrors of the post-apocalypse can be overcome and reconquered, after which 'life can resume its normal and familiar rhythms [and] society can begin anew' (2020, 156). This presupposes any kind of human existence 'after the fact', which is a somewhat anthropocentric, narcissistic misconception. A synergistic understanding, he argues, is 'desperately needed' where the environment 'takes centre stage' and 'is more than just the vague and ephemeral greenery filling in the background' (ibid.). The conception of Lauren as a messianic character is somewhat problematic, in how it subscribes to anthropocentric notions of the human saviour who will overcome post-apocalyptic adversity and lead humankind to a new beginning and a new world. Lauren's ever-increasing gathering of diverse followers, and her communication of the central tenets of *Earthseed* to them, does, to some degree, suggest 'a belief in unlimited human capacity' (Sullivan, 2020, 29), as the other characters look to Lauren for direction, guidance and hope. However, there are other examples of how *Parable* resists such anthropocentric imaginings. There is no pristine utopian denouement, no Arcadian salvation that awaits; there is only the possibility of survival against immeasurable odds. Humanity has not "saved the day" or achieved redemption, diverging from the familiar pattern of

apocalyptic narratives in which, as Steffen observes, ‘the narrative device of the survivor’ ensures that ‘no matter how sudden, total, and perpetual the disaster, someone like us will always find a way to make it through’ (2015, n.p.).

The group’s bucolic sanctuary is less than ideal when they finally arrive: Lauren describes the place as ‘as empty and wild as any land I’ve ever seen’ (253). The accompanying illustrations are not bathed in the lush greens and yellows of sun-dappled Arcadia; rather, they are rendered in washed out reds and browns, as if the earth and the reflected light and heat of burning brushland and detritus have consumed the green. They are dependent on, or at the mercy of nonhuman agencies such as arable soil, clean water, phytophagous insects, bushfires and toxins, and their (productive or non-productive) intra-actions with these agents will determine their fates. Thus, although Lauren’s belief in a liveable future, and the conception of her character as the ‘object of hope’ represents a somewhat narcissistic [mis]understanding of the special nature of human agency, *Parable*’s frequent attention to the significance of nonhuman agency in the realisation of this hopeful future means that ‘the redemptive or salvific potential of human agency is radically diminished in scale’ (Phillips, 2002, 3).

4.vi. ‘Hey, we’re here!’: Race, Hybridity and the ‘Assimilation of Otherness’

Lauren’s race is a crucial factor affecting her existence in the world of *Parable*, as Butler, and by extension Duffy and Jennings, strive to demonstrate ‘material connections between specific bodies in specific places’ (Alaimo, 2010, 61). Kilgore and Samantrai observe that Butler chose to ‘write self-consciously as an African American woman marked by a particular history’ (2010, 353); what she herself termed as ‘writing myself in’ her stories. American talk show host Charlie Rose asked Butler in 2000, ‘what then is central to what you want to say about race?’, Butler responded ‘Do I want to say something central about race?

Aside from, “Hey, we’re here!”? (Charlie Rose TV Show, June 1st, 2000). Butler’s own remarks on issues of race in her work highlight her desire to contemplate race by means of an emphasis on both diversity and hybridity, often explored within contexts of dystopian realism. Indeed, Kilgore and Samantrai argue that Butler’s ‘insistence on hybridity beyond the point of discomfort’ (2010, 357) challenges the reader to confront the instability of racial and species boundaries alike. This hybridity resists simple celebration; it is not the utopian or ‘ethnocentric escapism’ sometimes associated with Afrofuturism but a means of interrogating how power, biology, and culture interweave under conditions of crisis. Butler’s vision is therefore less about transcending race through futuristic fantasy and more about materialising it – examining how difference, interdependence, and mutation function as adaptive strategies within oppressive systems. In this sense, her work occupies a critical space between Afrofuturism’s imaginative reclamation of Black futures and an eco-materialist inquiry into what it means to inhabit a world where identity, like matter itself, is perpetually in flux.

Parable was published fourteen years after Butler’s death, at a time of increasing racial tensions in the United States, following the murder of George Floyd. Both Duffy and Jennings have spoken of the impact of this social and political climate on their creative processes (L.A. Public Library Interview, 2021). These racial tensions have flared in recent years, but have long existed in the United States. Writing in 2002, Philips argued that ‘[f]ew elements of the present are more charged with apocalyptic potential than the current racial formation of American society’ (305). Butler, Duffy and Jennings emphasise precarious temporalities as they suggest that hierarchical attitudes simmer beneath the surface of seemingly civilised society, ready to re-emerge at times of catastrophe. Slavery is referred to at numerous points (181, 234, 258) as the creators highlight how, as Jones argues, slavery would likely ‘flourish in the post-apocalyptic’ (2020, 149). The story of Emery Solis, a new addition to Lauren’s group as they travel north, is depicted in a scrawled and roughly

illustrated page from Lauren’s journal (Fig. 4.12), and reveals how Emery was forced into marriage at a young age, how both she and her husband were forced into a form of slavery, and how her husband ultimately dies ‘on the earthen floor’ (*Parable*, 234) because they cannot afford medical care. Butler’s and Duffy’s narrative here emphasises the objectification of the body for the sake of capitalism, the entanglement of capitalism, racism and misogyny, and also the ‘concrete and abstract terrain’ (McCoy, 2003, 223), that women of colour must follow.

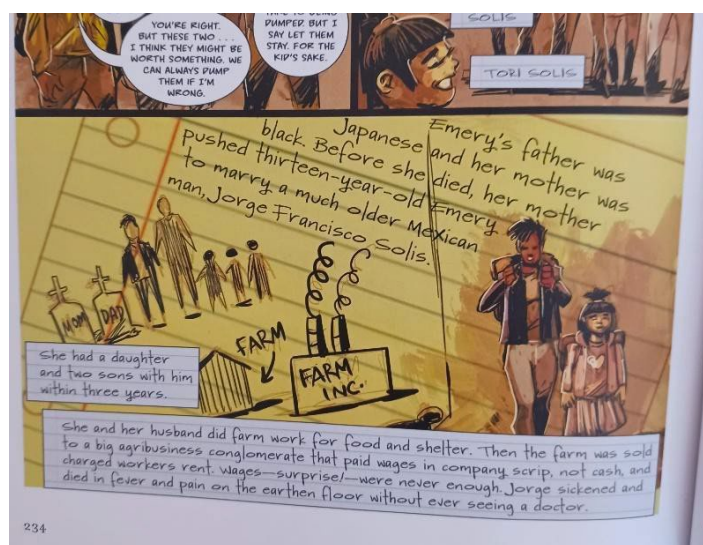


Fig. 4.12.

Lauren’s ever-expanding group of refugees is comprised of people of various races and cultures, including people who are white (Harry, Allie, Jill), black (Lauren, Bankole, Travis, Zahra), Hispanic (Natividad), and mixed-race (Emery, Grayson), and includes both adults and children (Justin, Tori, Domingo). *Parable* presents hybridity and the ‘assimilation of otherness’ (Ferreira, 2010, 401) as responses to the sociobiological causes of hierarchical violence. It recognises that the level of suffering inflicted upon the world as a result of this catastrophe transcends hierarchical structures. The concept of the ‘other’ in *Parable* is complex: it does not refer to the nonhuman, the person of colour, the natural world, or the woman. Rather, the true ‘others’ are the agents and structures of domination – the slave-

masters and the capitalist machine – whose power is sustained by ignorance, hierarchical belief systems, and a failure to recognise the entangled nature of existence. *Parable* thus disturbs grand narratives of subordination and white Western supremacy. Lauren is a protagonist that both literally and metaphorically embodies diversity and change. It is this acceptance of both diversity and change that is suggested as both the antithesis of and the antidote to the anthropocentric, narcissistic and self-destructive nature of mankind. One passage from ‘Earthseed – the Books of the Living’ distinctly highlights Lauren’s desire to dismantle hierarchical structures: ‘Embrace diversity/Unite - /Or be divided,/robbed,/ruled,/killed/By those who see you as prey./Embrace diversity/Or be destroyed’ (160). Two imposing images of fleeing refugees (160; Fig. 4.13) that follow this excerpt are set against the rising flames of wildfires, and feature uniformly depicted characters, united in synchronous misery and hope. The shadows cast by the fire render all of the characters in the same neutral tones, and each has the same resigned facial expression. Regardless of race, their plights are aligned and intertwined. The hybridity of representation in *Parable O* is extended by the hybridity of form in *Parable* as the illustrated depictions of the diverse characters and their entangled landscapes lend a potency and impact to the written narrative that reduces the distance between the reader and the protagonists and their world.

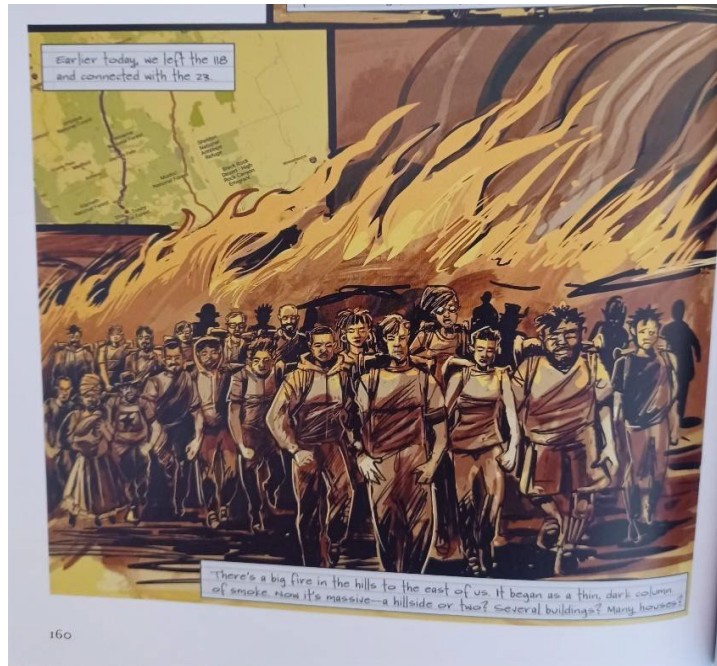


Fig. 4.13.

Parable's creators do not, however, imagine 'a utopian project...where the Other is stripped away' (Jones, 2020, 43). *Parable* advocates for acceptance of the other without the removal of otherness in its recognition that natural and cultural disaster has a significant and particular impact on minorities. *Parable*'s focus on Lauren as a disenfranchised character fighting to survive an entangled social/political/naturalcultural catastrophe aligns the historical exploitation of minorities with the exploitation of the natural world and the other-than-human. As part of the epitextual discourse surrounding the *Parable* adaptation, the authors and illustrators have emphasised their commitment to foregrounding Black voices and experiences. In interviews and acknowledgements, Duffy and Jennings note that they consulted prominent Black American horror and Afrofuturist writer Tananarive Due, a friend of Butler's, to 'privilege a Black woman's voice' and 'do Earthseed justice' (Hugo Award Interview, 2022; *Parable*, Acknowledgements, 265). Due was informally involved throughout the project, offering insights on Lauren's characterisation and the adaptation's fidelity to Butler's vision. Duffy and Jennings further stress that both their editors were Black

women and that the colourists and flatters were all people of colour – an intentional decision, they explain, to ‘have qualified, underrepresented people working on these projects’ (Hugo Award Interview, 2022).

4.vii. *Medial Transposition and the Material Memoir*

As a medial transposition, *Parable* materially embodies the central thematic concern of the narrative: change. Jones argues that ‘few art forms have a comparable ability [to the graphic novel] to hold up a mirror for us to gaze into’ as the graphic novel has (2020, 154). Jamaican-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson, in her foreword to the graphic novel edition, emphasises the agency of the adaptation as she writes, ‘This book lives. It breathes, moves, feels, clamors for your attention, insists on bearing witness, insists on being heard’ (2020, v). Hopkinson’s eloquent words suggest that new life has been breathed into Butler’s work in the process of adaptation, and that the choice of mode is itself, as Thurlow contends, ‘laden with communicative, epistemological and ideological significance’ (2015, 622). Thus, Lauren’s own belief in the power and agency of change, as articulated in her journal, is brought into material existence in the adaptation of Butler’s novel into a visual form that is more closely aligned with the protagonist’s own chosen mode of communication.

As previously noted, both Butler’s original novel and the graphic novel adaptation are presented in the style of a collection of journal entries. At various points in both *Parable* and *Parable O*, the journal entries have an additional note: ‘cont. from notes expanded’, which further emphasises the nature of Lauren’s journal as a work in progress and lends the story a certain intimacy and sense of authenticity. Thaxter highlights how *Parable* connects Butler’s own palimpsestic style of writing to her protagonist’s: Lauren’s ‘retrospective reworking’ (2021, 7) of the recorded events in her journal mirrors Butler’s own laborious modifications of her research notes and narrative drafts, and Duffy’s and Jennings’ meticulous consultation

and adaptation process. Such palimpsest foregrounds the temporality of the narrative within the book; as Thaxter observes, ‘recorded events are always written looking back in time while temporally moving forward’ (ibid.). Nikolajeva and Scott observe that ‘[c]omplex temporality is often limited in picturebooks because of their compact nature, which excludes long time spans’ (2006, 165). The graphic novel is better placed to engage with complex temporalities and spatiotemporalities, not simply by virtue of its lengthier, denser, material size, but also due to its aesthetic style. The page layouts, panel placements and plurivectorial narration of *Parable* facilitate a nuanced reflection on the passage of time. The aesthetic style of the book, presented as a journal, allows the creators to add actual dates to the narrative at regular intervals, signposting the passage of time for the reader. Meanwhile, the white frames, white gutter space and transitions allow for what McCloud refers to as ‘closure...[o]bserving the parts, but perceiving the whole’ (2000, 35). The gutter and the transitions stimulate time and motion, allowing the reader/observer to create connections between individual panels, and participate in the spatio-temporal movement of the narrative. The sequence of illustrations on pages 24 to 25 (Fig. 4.14), as an example, demonstrates the use of transitions (24) and white frames and gutters to emphasise the cinematic movement of the action as a child in Lauren’s community (Amy Dunn) plays with matches, ultimately leading to a ravaging fire that threatens the entire neighbourhood. The white gutters prompt the reader to construct their version of events between Amy’s swift escape (as she breaks the panel frames) and the spread of the fire. It is unclear if Amy has been harmed. The images of her initially curious and then horrified face as she flees from the encroaching flames provide a more immediate engagement with the emotion of the moment for the reader than the one line of explanation in the original text, which reads ‘Amy Dunn, three years old, managed to start [the fire] in her family’s garage’ (*Parable O*, 29).

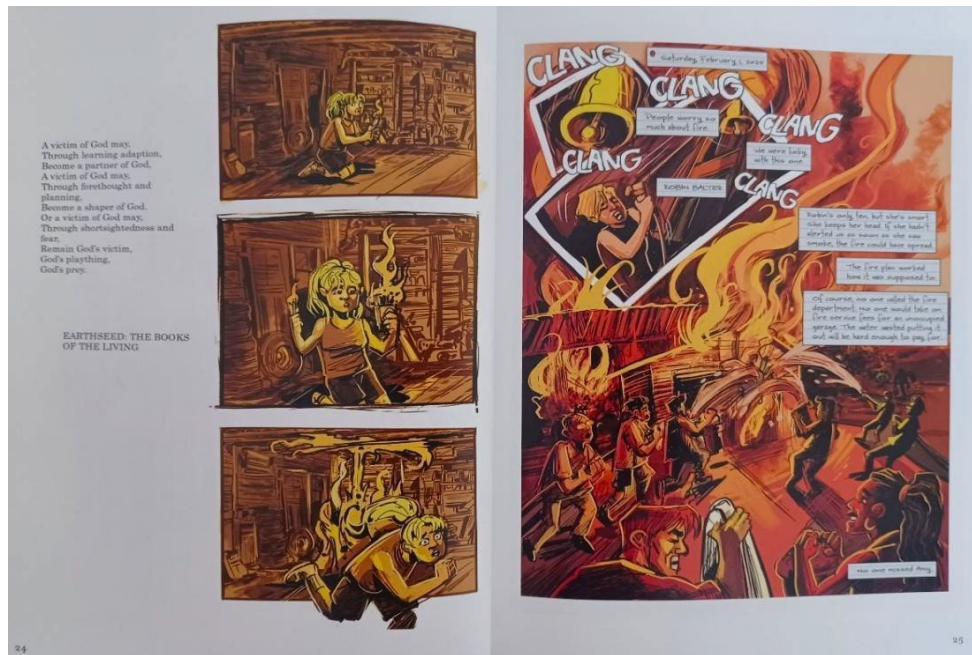


Fig. 4.14.

The temporality of the epitextual narrative of the book is also significant. Butler redrafted her narrative over a lengthy period, during which time various events in her own life shaped the story she created. Duffy’s and Jennings’ adaptation can itself be seen as ‘cont. from notes expanded’, to borrow the expression from the book. Their study of Butler’s research, alongside their own lived experience of a particular time in political, cultural and geographical history, has informed this visual adaptation. Similarly, their access to teams of graphic layout experts and professionals, as well as various modern technologies, adds a layer of visual and textual complexity to the narrative that is specific to the time in which it has been created.

This complexity lends a greater degree of authenticity to the book, which is further emphasised by various examples of self-reflexivity. Long excerpts from Lauren’s journal, handwritten on lined notepad paper, are depicted exactly as if she herself writes them with scrawled notes, questions, additions, mind maps, doodles and underlined sections (21, 60, 67, 234; Fig. 4.15). This, as Thaxter points out, ‘accentuates the materiality of narration, with the visibility of the lined journal pages reducing the distance between reader and protagonist

conceptually' (2021, 4). Her scrawled question to herself, 'Is any of this real?' (21), is metafictional in nature; a nod to the fictionality of the text that the reader beholds. The power and agency of literacy and the written word is referenced in self-reflexive nature many times over the course of the narrative. Lauren's continuous act of writing is more than a hobby; it is a compulsion and a therapeutic act that allows her not only to *record* her lived experience, but actually *becomes* her lived experience. She awakens at night, after a disturbing nightmare, consumed with the thought that 'I need to write what I believe' (20). Following her group's encounter with the dismembered arm in the tree, she states, 'I had to write. To dump this onto paper' (106) and following the attack on Robledo, she again emphasises, 'I have to write. There's nothing familiar left but writing...I have to write' (130). In a lengthy written passage, illustrated as a direct entry from Lauren's lined journal, Lauren writes 'Someday...I'll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past and maybe push them into building a future that makes sense' (60). Lauren thus recognises the written word – in this case, her Earthseed verses – as agentic; possessed of a unique power to transform the future. She also understands the practical significance of literacy. This is demonstrated at numerous junctures: she shows her neighbour Joanne a selection of books on survival and native plants, insisting on their importance (42-3); she reveals that she learned how to filter seawater from a book (170); she buys more books than she can carry at a market (205); she reads science fiction novels left by her grandmother, which connect her lived reality to the world within the book (97) and she teaches Zahra, how to read and write (151). Other characters also appreciate the agentic power of writing. Another group member, Harry, asks Lauren to 'let me read something. Let me know something about the you that hides. I feel as though....you're a lie. Show me something real' (159). Harry believes there is truth to be found in Lauren's words on the page that cannot be found in his dialogic interactions with her. Subsequently, Harry

begins to write in his own journal. The reader of *Parable* can position themselves as Harry, a character within the narrative, exposed to Lauren’s innermost thoughts at their written source.

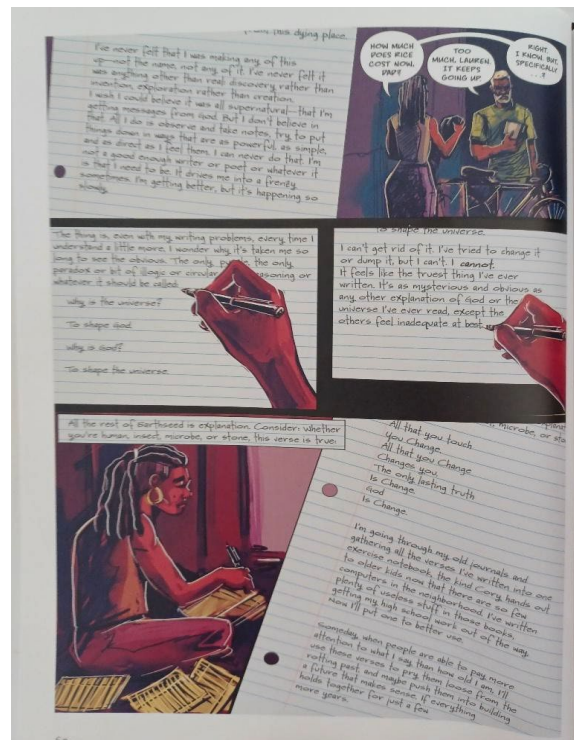
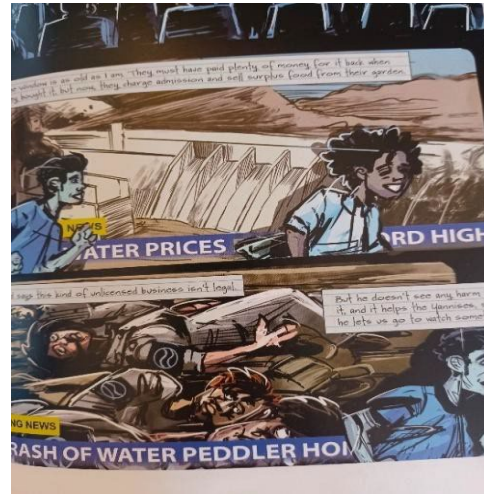
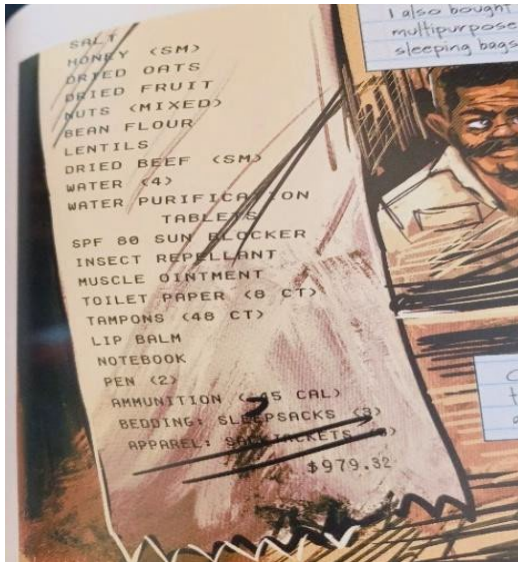


Fig. 4.15

The construction of *Parable* as a ‘material memoir’ (Alaimo, 2010, 85) enables this immersive and transformative experience. Alaimo describes the material memoir as a literary form that ‘incorporates scientific and medical information in order to make sense of personal experience’ (ibid.). *Parable*, as a visual reimaging of Lauren’s original journal entries, is brimming with various sources of information that are scientific (information on plant species, notes on the second law of thermodynamics and references to Darwinian evolution, 21, 22-3) and medical (information on the drug-induced condition of hyperempathy and the side-effects of ‘pyro’, 10-11, 116). The journal also collates historical knowledge (old photographs and books), current affairs, geographical information (plans and maps) and spiritual references alongside Lauren’s own observations and musings. The journal thus becomes a material memoir that Lauren creates in order to understand ‘the very substance of

the self' (Alaimo, 2010, 3). Alaimo contends that 'material memoirs forge new ways of knowing our bodies and ourselves...these trans-corporeal autobiographies insist that the self is constituted by material agencies that are simultaneously biological, political and economic' (2010, 86/7).

An abundance of intermedial references (some examples in Figs. 4.16a-f) support the construction of *Parable* as a visual material memoir: actual shopping lists (145); newspaper clippings (42); computer printouts (42); images of TV news reports with scrolling tickers (15, 16); radio reports transcribed in jagged-edged broadcast balloons with capitalised text (93); signposts (103, 128); placards (93, 94); old photographs (98); song (12, 36); graffiti-laden walls, endowed with words such as 'burn' and 'kills' (hardcover, 4); advertisements (165); hastily scrawled house plans (80, 81; Fig. 4.16g); teaching notes (164) and maps stained by coffee mugs (120/1; Fig. 4.16h). Jennings includes devices such as cut-aways (53, 186) and diagrams (234) to augment what critic Stanford Carpenter refers to as 'the visual language around this world' (Hugo Award Interview with Duffy and Jennings, 2022). These intermedial references form a significant element of the semiotic modality of the book. They lend an immediacy to the work, and a visibility to Lauren's existence, that is less evident in the original novel. This emphasis on the perceptible and material aligns with Alaimo's assertion that '[o]ur most basic sense of the material world is that it is self-evident, apparent, substantial and visible' (2010, 70). Jennings' detailed illustrations draw the reader into the stark reality of Lauren's world emphasised by both its mundanity and its depravity. Whereas the reader of *Parable O* might experience a sense of dystopian escapism to a futuristic, apocalyptic world that is almost unimaginable in its degeneracy, the beholder of *Parable* is constantly reminded that this is *our* world: a world of media reports, coffee stains, notes, lists, and marketing ploys – recognisable and familiar in all its material tedium.



Figs. 4.16a-d. Intermedial references: shopping list(a), news printouts(b), old photos(c), TV news reports(d)

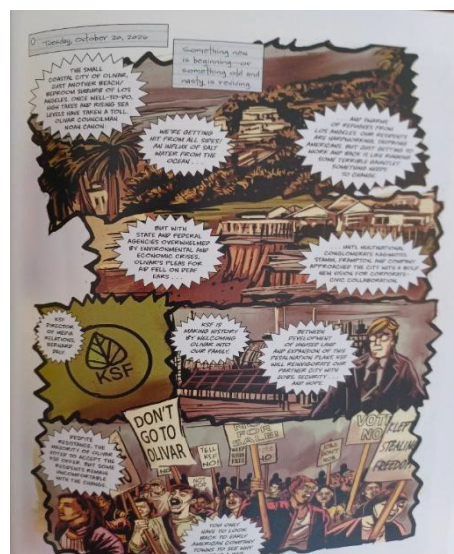


Fig. 4.16 e-f. Intermedial references: singing(e), radio broadcast (f).

See also Fig. 4.1a (graffiti), Fig. 4.11 (biblical verse).



Fig. 4.16g.

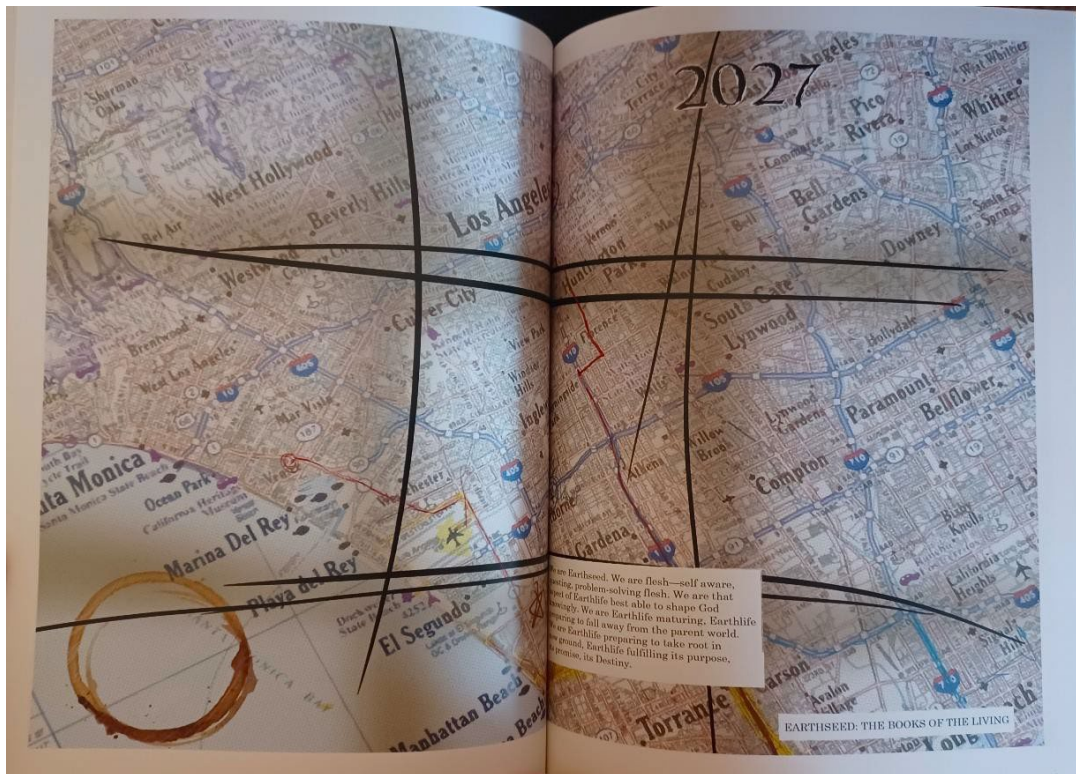


Fig. 4.16h.

4.viii. Colour, Aesthetic Design, and Paratextuality: *The Affordances of Parable*

The process of adaptation from novel to graphic novel mirrors Lauren's own journey of growth and transformation. As Lauren translates the abstract philosophy of *Earthseed* into lived, embodied practice, the adaptation similarly translates Butler's prose into a visual, material form. This shift from text to image externalises Lauren's development, giving bodily presence to her emotions, vulnerabilities, and agency. The adaptation thus does more than retell her story – it performs it – rendering her intellectual and spiritual becoming visible through the textures, gestures, and materiality of the visual narrative.

The adaptation's performative dimension is particularly evident in scenes where emotion and connection are conveyed visually rather than verbally. One scene employs a sequence of wordless panels to portray Lauren's interaction with group member Allie following the loss of her sister, their mutual understanding conveyed through gesture and expression alone (246; Fig. 4.17). The absence of dialogue heightens the emotional resonance of the moment, achieving a quiet intensity that arguably exceeds the more extended narrative description in the original novel (*Parable O*, 287). While this scene positions Lauren within the frame, emphasising her embodied participation in an act of shared grief, other moments are rendered through her subjective point of view. Jennings' illustrative technique often aligns the reader's gaze with Lauren's own, so that her perceptions shape the visual field. This is particularly striking in the scene where her father beats her brother Keith after his return home, presented from Lauren's perspective across nine wordless, framed panels awash in blood-reds and yellows (77; Fig. 4.18), confronting the reader with the visceral immediacy of her witnessing. Jagged, haphazard lines, onomatopoeic sound effects, emanata and burst bubbles highlight the severity of the aggression, as Lauren directly experiences it. At certain points in the narrative, Jennings also utilises diverse viewpoints and angles to create cinematic effects: a split screen illustration highlights Keith's multi-faceted personality (84), a cut-away panel of

Lauren's home from an aerial perspective emphasises her isolation from her family members (53), and close-angle shots of Lauren's and Bankole's facial expressions, interspersed with staggered, connected balloons, lend an immediacy and significance to their first serious conversation about Earthseed (218 – 220). Jennings' cinematic techniques work intermedially to merge the visual language of film with that of the graphic novel, creating a layered mode of storytelling. His tendency to shift viewpoints emphasises perception as embodied and relational, positioning the reader within the affective and sensory flows of the narrative world. The interplay of media and materiality transforms abstract emotion and spatial experience into tangible form, inviting readers to engage with *Parable* as a lived, corporeal encounter rather than a purely representational text.

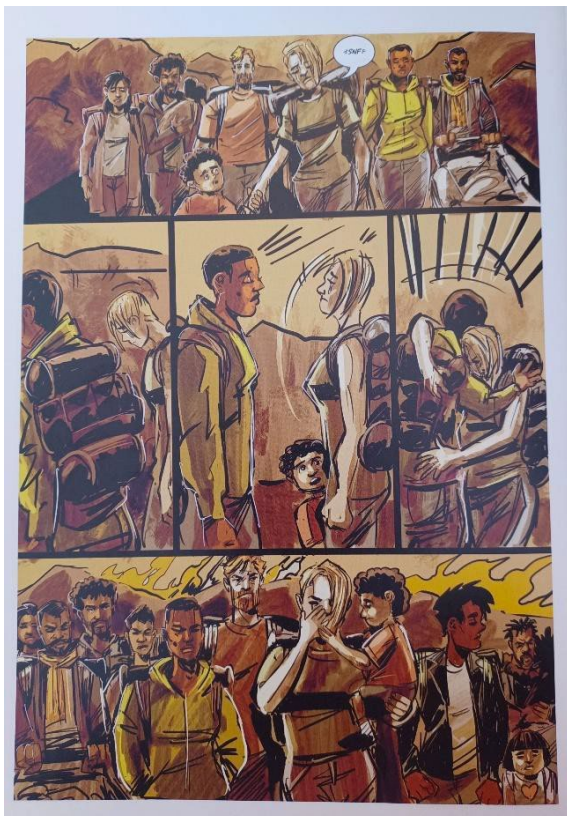


Fig. 4.17.



Fig. 4.18.

The scene on the morning of July 31st, 2027, when Lauren's gated community Robledo is viciously attacked, is the main point of transition in the narrative, marking the end of

Lauren's life in Robledo and the beginning of her journey as a refugee. Twelve pages of descriptive text describe the attack in Butler's original novel; by contrast, it is depicted over sixteen pages in the graphic novel that feature minimal text and an abundance of vividly coloured illustrations, that are at times graphic and distressing. The compelling, evocative illustrations (Figs. 4.19a-c) allow the beholder to experience the destructive chaos in a more immediate and immersive way than by means of the narrative alone. While Butler's written description conveys the devastation with precision and power, the visual form amplifies its sensory and emotional impact: colour, scale, and composition make the violence tangible.

In the original novel, Butler describes 'The houses, the trees, the people: Burning... Everything was chaos. People running, screaming, shooting... red faces; blue faces; green faces; screaming mouths; avid crazy eyes, glittering in the firelight' (*Parable O*, 143-44). In the graphic adaptation, Jennings amplifies this chaos through dynamic panel and page layouts that convey the violence's frenzied momentum. Tears, flames, and splashes of colour merge in images rendered in the hues of fire, blood, and danger. Flames lick at the edges of panels (Fig. 4.19a), suggesting that the page itself is burning, while deep red splatters evoke both the victims' blood and Lauren's hyperempathetic response (Fig. 4.19b). Lauren's wide-eyed terror mirrors the deranged, goggle-eyed faces of the attackers (Fig. 4.19c), who appear to stare directly at the reader as they breach the neighbourhood walls.

Although cinematic in impact, Jennings's use of the graphic form offers freedoms unavailable to film. As Jones notes, comics 'alter... aspect ratios from panel to panel,' granting storytellers greater flexibility in 'design, pacing and emphasis' (2020, 22 – 23). Jennings exploits this to full effect: gunshot wounds spill beyond frames, bodies appear fragmented, and the reader must even turn the book upside down to follow the disordered sequence of violence.

Parable also creates a cross-sensory experience that fuses sight and sound. The victims' terrified expressions are juxtaposed with jagged-edged, onomatopoeic speech bubbles and the tolling of a bell that dominates a full-page image (124). Sharp black and yellow scrawls convey the percussive rhythm of gunfire, engaging the reader's visual and imagined aural senses. Through these choices in composition, dialogue, and sound, Duffy and Jennings construct a visceral *mise-en-scène* that renders the devastation more immediate and sensorially charged than Butler's descriptive prose.



Fig. 4.19a.



Fig. 4.19b.



Fig. 4.19c.

Peritextual features enhance the reading experience of *Parable*. The word ‘do’ is visible in the graffiti on the front hardcover (Fig. 4.1a), the word ‘burn’ on the back; a stark reminder of the binary of construction and destruction perhaps, although this binary is itself mutable; burning fire, as noted, simultaneously destroys *and* creates and sustains in this story. Lauren’s steely gaze on the dust jacket (Fig. 4.1b) invites the reader to participate in the narrative: her one visible eye dominates the image, illuminated by a distinctive bright yellow light reflected from the blazing flames in the background. Lauren’s frontal head shot is positioned to the right edge of the book so that only half of her face is visible. Jennings reveals in interview that the cover design is inspired by the cover designs of the graphic novel duology *Boxers and Saints*, by author/illustrator Gene Luen Yang (2013), in which the covers of each book can be placed side by side to reveal a composite whole image, representative of a divided China. The cover of the recently published graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Talents* features a semi-portrait of an older Lauren on the left edge of the cover, in cooler tones (Fig. 4.20). This image can be connected to the image on *Parable* to form a composite whole. The reader is thus reminded, when beholding the cover image of Lauren on *Parable*, that this is only half of her story and also that Lauren and the world she is part of are broken, and neither become whole in any easily resolved ending to this narrative.

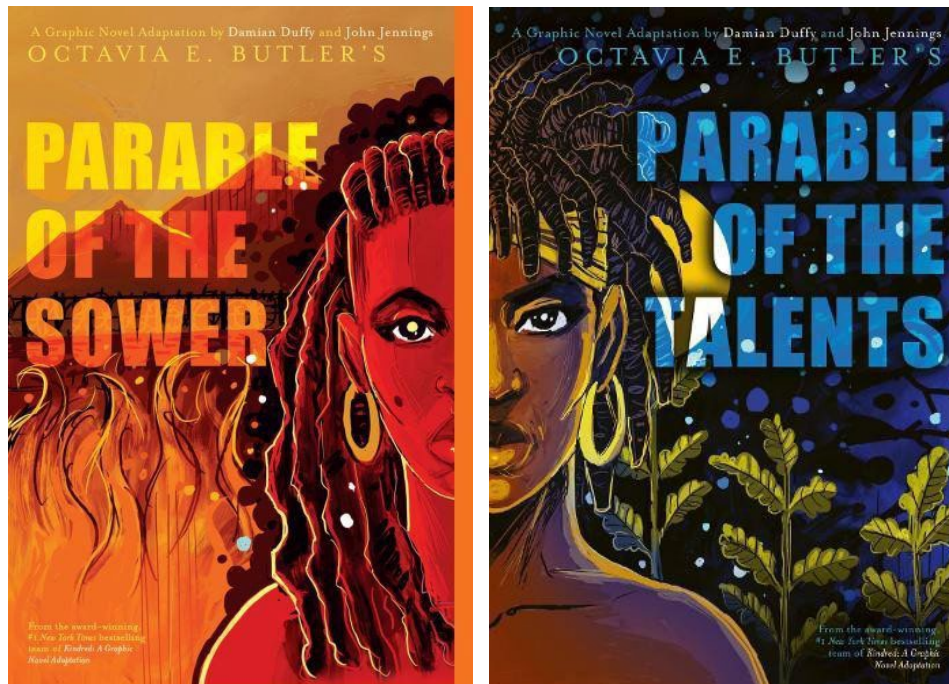


Fig. 4.20. Covers of both graphic novels

The aesthetic and symbolic integrity of *Parable*'s cover design is tempered by epitextual marketing considerations: as Jennings reveals, the final design was determined by the sales team rather than the creative contributors, potentially prioritising marketability over narrative coherence. This tension underscores the paradox of *Parable* as both a material artefact of consumer culture and a critique of the capitalist systems that shape its very production.

Various other peritextual design elements have clearly been carefully considered by the creative design team and indicate Duffy's and Jennings' attention to the materiality of both textual and visual artefacts. Duffy reveals that a 'rougher texture' was deliberately chosen, in collaboration with the book's colour assistants/flattening team, as this felt 'more dystopian and futuristic' (L.A. Public Library Interview, 2021). The front-endpapers and back-endpapers (Fig. 4.21) are saturated in crimson reds, with wiry limbs jutting out from the top, which could be tree limbs, human veins, licking flames or an entanglement of all three. Transitions between the four parts of the novel from 2024 to 2027 are marked by expansive, richly detailed illustrations of constellations, plant species, roughly sketched house plans and

detailed maps, with Lauren's selected Earthseed passages incorporated into all the images. These transitional illustrations merge the natural nonhuman environment with the man-made and the creative, and have the potential to engage the reader's predictive and creative imagination more actively than the plain, uniformly textualised chapter breaks of the original novel.



Fig. 4.21. Endpapers (identical image for front and back endpapers)

The acknowledgements (265) extend the narrative beyond the book, connecting *Parable's* fictional world with its real-world creative context. Duffy and Jennings thank the Butler estate and their collaborators, while personal dedications to family and to Jennings's newborn son echo the novel's themes of kinship and hope. These peritextual features blur the line between fiction and reality, positioning the book as both narrative and artefact – shaped by human labour, collaboration, and material production. The illustrated portraits of Butler, Jennings, and Duffy (Figs. 4.22a–b), rendered in cosmic hues, visually embed the creators within the same ecological continuum of matter, creativity, and transformation that the story envisions.



Fig. 4.22a.

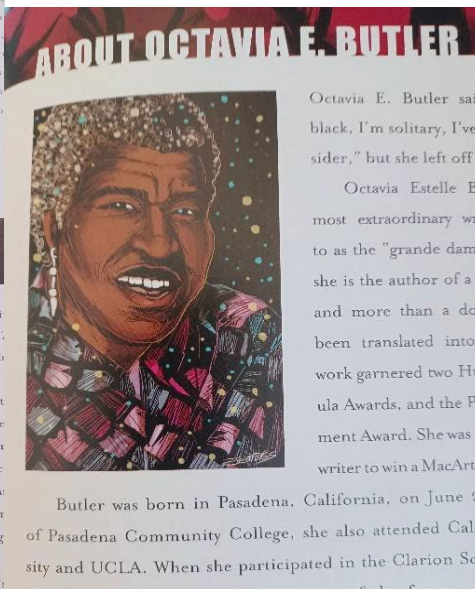


Fig. 4.22b.

The epitext of *Parable* reveals a work that resists stasis in space or time; its performativity emerges through entangled relations across spatial, historical, and temporal dimensions. The collaboration between Duffy, Jennings, and their extended team exemplifies what Attridge terms an ‘inventive event’ (2017, 197), where the book becomes a dynamic process rather than a static artefact. Multiple intra-actions – Butler’s narrative voice and research, the illustrators’ creative labour, the mediation of digital technologies, and the reader’s interpretive participation – coalesce to form *Parable*’s material and imaginative apparatus. The graphic novel medium amplifies this performativity, engaging the visual, aural, and intermedial registers that merge text and image. The work also embodies this complexity affectively; Jennings acknowledges that ‘this book has affected the people that worked with it’ (Hugo Award Interview, 2022), suggesting that the creative process itself carried an emotional and psychological weight. This tension between making and unmaking is mirrored in the material design of the book, where the graffitied ‘do’ and ‘burn’ on the hardcover symbolise the uneasy interplay of creation and destruction. *Parable*’s epitextual world thus fuses the real with the fictive, aligning artistic craftsmanship with the trauma and hope

embedded in its narrative, a convergence that extends beyond the panels and page to affect both makers and readers.

4.ix. *A Cautionary Tale? Didacticism and Warning in Parable*

Butler's own contention that *Parable* is 'a cautionary tale' as opposed to 'a prophecy' (1998, 'Devil Girl', n.p.) is an understandable distinction on her part, but also prompts an interrogation of the level of implicit or explicit ideology and/or didacticism that is traceable in the narrative. Duffy maintains that Butler 'wrote the book as a warning' and that 'people are now picking up her books as guidebooks for the apocalypse' (Hugo Award Interview, 2022). As previously noted, Lauren's interactions with others reveal a consistent preoccupation with teaching – an impulse that may echo Butler's own instructive intent. Lauren offers practical guidance to Joanne (42), literacy support to Zahra (164), and spiritual insight to her group through Earthseed, though she privately concedes to Bankole that it is 'not about fixing the world' (228). Following her interaction with Joanne, her father advises her that 'it's better to teach people than to scare them' (49).

The conception of Lauren as a messianic figure who instructs her followers in a belief system that might deliver a better future risks reproducing the anthropocentric logic of ecophobic 'environmental disaster' narratives, where human leadership triumphs over a passive natural world. Yet *Parable* resists such hierarchies. The very title, and its conception as a 'parable' implies a moral lesson – a didactic impulse Jennings recognises when he notes that the title 'actively utilises a Christian methodology – teaching through allegory and story' (Hugo Award Interview, 2022). By the creators' own admission, there is a cautionary intent: 'John sincerely hopes that people use this book as a guide for what not to do' (Acknowledgements, 265). No text is entirely ideology-free; *Parable*, like all creative works, is shaped by and reflective of the social, political, and cultural contexts from which it emerges. Its

declensionist narrative warns of collapse while hinting that destruction may also yield renewal. However, the text resists heavy-handed moralising. Lauren herself rejects passive salvation – when Joanne claims that “books aren’t going to save us,” she replies, ‘Nothing will save us if we don’t save ourselves’ (44) – and Butler similarly insisted that ‘there’s no magic bullet... Instead, there are thousands of answers – at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be’ (*Essence*, 2000, n.p.). This shared emphasis on agency anticipates the novel’s broader call for active, ethical participation in shaping the world. Emerging from this ethic, *Parable*’s didacticism is subtle rather than prescriptive: it does not seek to impose moral instruction but to cultivate an intra-active awareness of entanglement and responsibility. Through its visual and narrative textures, it invites readers to engage sensorially and ethically with the world it depicts, prompting an embodied recognition of interconnected vulnerability. In this way, *Parable*’s instructive force lies not in directive moralising but in its capacity to make perceptible the shared precarity of all bodies – human and nonhuman – and the dynamic, agentic materiality through which Butler envisions life, change, and co-existence.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that *Parable* challenges perceptions of ‘nature’, affords agency to the other, and reveals the intersections and entanglements between the body and the physical world. On a post-representational level, *Parable* is a visual, material artefact that emphasises intermedial and transmedial hybridity and successfully negotiates potential tensions between the aesthetic and the ideological. *Parable* takes the form of a material memoir – incorporating Lauren’s reflections, spiritual passages, and scientific, historical and geographical information – that allows both protagonist and reader to better understand the substance of self. Butler’s original narrative is complicated and nuanced by the form of the

graphic novel. An array of metafictional devices and intermedial references situate the reader in the complex, dystopian environment of the narrative, allowing connections to be drawn between the real world and the fictive one. Although it has been noted that some worthwhile and revelatory narrative segments have been lost in the transmedial process of adaptation, overall, it has been demonstrated that the reader's experience of the narrative can be heightened and enhanced by the evocative aestheticism of the graphic novel.

Published almost thirty years after the original, *Parable* breathes new life into the tale, at a moment in time where its thematic concerns are timelier and more relevant than before, and the prescience of Butler's narrative can be more keenly appreciated. The reader who engages with *Parable* is aware (from the blurb and the peritextual information on the dust jacket) that this is an adaptation of a story that was first published in 1993. This encourages the reader to reflect on the spatiotemporal nature of story. For readers in 1993, *Parable's* world functioned as a speculative warning; by 2020, its near-future setting demanded a more immediate reckoning with ecological and social collapse. For readers in 2025 and beyond, Butler's imagined future now coincides with their lived present, transforming the narrative into an alternate reality that materialises through reading. This temporal layering exemplifies what Zapf calls 'diffractions of time, space and narrative... formal traces of more-than-human forces infiltrating and transfusing the narrative process' (2016, 264), as *Parable's* intermedial and material forms render the boundaries between fiction, history, and environment increasingly porous. *Parable*, as an adaptation, demonstrates how writing, artistry and storytelling are always moving through time and space, and thus are possessed of narrative agency: reshaped by history, media, creators, and readers. *Parable* exemplifies that creative works don't just exist, they persist and transform. Thus, creativity – like the material world of which it is part – is in constant flux.

Despite Duffy's claims, *Parable* does not patronise its young adult readership by shielding them from the graphic and unsettling realities of an entangled disaster. This is not literature sanitised for educational consumption; it exposes the world in its gruesome materiality, offering instead what Joy describes as 'a conceptual vocabulary that places the emphasis on the reader as an active agent' (2019, 24). The conception of Lauren as 'messianic' may be problematic, as it risks reaffirming hierarchies of salvation that *Parable* otherwise challenges. Yet both the novel's world and our own, shaped by crisis and uncertainty, call forth figures of hope – symbols of renewal grounded in the interdependence of human and nonhuman life and the collective endurance that arises from such entanglement. *Parable* adopts neither naïve optimism nor despair; rather, it privileges 'change' over 'hope'. This focus on change invites young readers to interpret the world as fluid and relational, acknowledging the limits of human control. Lauren's Earthseed entwines spirituality with materiality, rejecting dogma in favour of adaptability, resilience, and a conception of 'God' as a mutable force revealed through human–Earth entanglement.

Parable successfully explores the intersectional nature of oppression and control, highlighting the connections between race, gender and nature. It further extends this vision beyond gendered experience, depicting bodies – human and nonhuman alike – as exposed to shared forces of precarity and violence, and thereby becoming emblematic of the collective material vulnerability that underpins Butler's world. *Parable* presents a synergistic understanding of the world as one that is 'continually doing things, things that bear upon us not as observation statements upon disembodied intellects but as forces upon material beings' (Pickering, 1995, 6). This is a complex ethical stance that does not disregard the ethical responsibility of the human, but instead recognises this responsibility in the context of a greater, multi-faceted, entangled material world.

Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that visual narratives for children and young adults, in their various diverse forms, have salient potential in challenging master narratives of human exceptionalism, dualistic nature/culture, and nonhuman passivity. Prevailing Anthropocentric thought has categorised the world into binaries that parallel those of nature and culture: mind/body; subject/object; reality/language; matter/meaning; and human/nonhuman. This binary thinking has resulted in a disconnection between nature and culture that promotes autonomous individualism and legitimises human exploitation. It has been demonstrated that visual narratives without an explicit environmental agenda can embody relational ways of knowing, destabilise dichotomies, and emphasise world and subject as entangled and mutually constituted. They have the potential to achieve this without ‘preaching’ or ‘teaching’, but instead subtly developing ecological sensibilities to an entangled, agentic naturalcultural world.

This dissertation has argued that the visual narrative is particularly potent and impactful in this regard not only because of its propensity to successfully integrate word and image in narrative storytelling but also because of its distinctive materiality and aestheticism, which shapes how meaning is conveyed, experienced, and embodied. The intermedial analysis of the literature has revealed its semiotic, material, sensory and spatio-temporal modalities, and argues that the young reader of visual literature is enabled to become more than a semiotician, but is also provoked to engage sensorially, emotionally, imaginatively, and temporally with the book. Meaning is not locked in text, but diffused across colour, shape, composition, gesture, and aesthetic design, making interpretation more open-ended and democratic. This dissertation has revealed the performative intra-actions of creation and reception, highlighting book, text and image as material elements of this world that produce and participate in processes and relationships involving the human and the nonhuman. This highlights the visual narrative as an

agentic force in itself. In demonstrating this, this dissertation challenges the primacy of representationalism in ecocritical studies on visual literature for young readers. Its analysis of the complex depictions of materiality and the nonhuman within these narratives underscores that representation does indeed matter, highlighting the power of nuanced and evocative visual storytelling. However, a representational/hermeneutic approach in isolation risks reducing nature to a set of signs to be interpreted, encoded or critiqued and thus flattens the ontological and affective potential of the visual narrative form. Representation is not the *only* aspect of literature that matters. Trite as the statement may be – matter matters: not simply the matter *within* the narrative, but also the enmeshed matter of the artefact, the creative process and the reading experience. This dissertation thus proposes an entangled, performative ecology of reading, that recognises representation in the context of its intra-action with material, aesthetic and paratextual elements. It is argued that reading is more than simply decoding; it is an inventive event in which reader, creator, book and more-than-human world co-constitute one another. Engagement with the complex visual narrative demonstrates that meaning is not fixed; it is emergent and distributed. The ‘writerly’ nature of these narratives is revealed not only in the semantic openness of the narratives but also in the aesthetic complexity of the book-as-object.

This dissertation has demonstrated the capacity of a combined performative material ecocritical/intermedial framework in revealing this potent potentiality. In demonstrating this, it has contemplated a classic tension in literary studies: how to incorporate context, materiality, and intermediality without subordinating the literary work itself. While it can be argued that the literary and visual content of each book constitutes its ‘heart’, epitextual analysis of authorial and illustrative backgrounds, creative processes, and motivations situates the work within specific material, cultural, and ecological contexts. Rather than diminishing the primacy

of the text itself, such contextualisation illuminates the conditions of creation and reception, offering a richer understanding of the book's transformative potential in the world.

Chapter One has highlighted the relevant literature on ecocriticism, performative material ecocriticism, cultural ecology and intermediality. This initial chapter provided the historical context for this research, exploring conceptions of the child, nature and the pastoral, and emphasising the significant intersectional nature of material ecocriticism. The connections between material ecocritical thought and Indigenous understandings of animism, materiality and narrative matter have been highlighted, emphasising that the central tenets of material ecocriticism are not the novel discovery of Western academia, but have existed for generations in many Indigenous practices and traditions. This dissertation argues that Indigenous wisdom deserves increased attention in ecocritical studies of visual narratives, and indeed in children's literature studies more broadly. Having reviewed the relevant literature, Chapter One presented the conceptual framework that laid the foundation for this study. Gaps in existing scholarship were identified, most notably the under-explored propensity of a combined material ecocritical/intermedial approach in revealing the potentiality of visual literature for children and young adults.

Chapter Two's analysis of *Tales from the Inner City* and *The Fate of Fausto* demonstrated how literary devices, aestheticism, intermediality, materiality and paratextuality are entangled in these works, creating performative material narratives that present a complex and nuanced understanding of naturecultures and the agency of the nonhuman/other. The analysis demonstrated how the books continue to 'perform' beyond their creators' original intentions and revealed that both Tan's and Jeffers' creative artistry demands the reader to engage with material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic modalities in a reciprocal, communicative relationship. Their work demonstrates how intermedial techniques, including intertextuality, ekphrasis and medial transposition, offer a vision that disrupts the hierarchical framework

separating the active observer from the passive observed. It was demonstrated that both creators adopt a self-reflexive approach, which acknowledges the insufficiency of linguistic and representational systems in fully conveying the textures of material existence. Tan and Jeffers thoughtfully interrogate concepts of knowing, being and understanding, offering a critique of civilisation's fantasies of hierarchy and supremacy while affirming the elemental vitality and agency of the nonhuman world. Their use of metafictional strategies, recurring literary motifs, and anthropomorphism is intricately woven with a keenly perceptible materiality and a refined aesthetic sensibility. Chapter Two demonstrated how Tan and Jeffers are consciously or subconsciously influenced by their upbringings, cultures and backgrounds, highlighting the entangled nature of the creative process. Chapter Two also highlighted that the ideological framing of these works can at times be overstated, particularly in *Tales from the Inner City*. Their most powerful moments emerge when the creators adopt a 'writerly' mode – inviting active reader participation and interpretive agency, rather than prescribing a singular moral viewpoint.

Chapter Three highlighted the aesthetic hybridity of *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus* and how this hybridity of form is paralleled by the enmeshed natural-cultural world that is depicted in the narratives. It was contended that these books resist dualistic constructions of wildness and civilisation, and order and chaos, revealing wildness as both an internal and external state of being, and exploring the entangled relationality of order and chaos in both book and world. In its function as a metacommentary on storytelling and artistic expression, the agentic capacity of *The Savage* was revealed. Both works challenge anthropocentric ideologies; however, Chapter Three argued that *The Savage* occasionally reinforces gender stereotypes in contrast to a more nuanced contemplation of gender in *Den om Rufus*, which opens discursive space around the gendered body through semantic and aesthetic complexity. Chapter Three incorporated insights from the creators regarding both the works themselves and their

collaborative creative processes, illuminating the interconnected social, cultural, and natural forces that shape the production and reception of literary texts. Aligning with a performative understanding of reading, it was demonstrated that both works resist moralistic messaging or straightforward, linear narration, allowing for open interpretation and a plurality of perspectives. Chapter Three argued that *The Savage* and *Den om Rufus* exemplify the potentiality of the aesthetically and narratively complex visual narrative to challenge rather than comfort young readers, inviting them to actively participate in a nuanced contemplation of the dynamic enmeshment of the naturalcultural world.

Chapter Four explored how the intermedial and transmedial hybridity of the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* enriches the aesthetic impact and thematic depth of the original narrative. It argued that *Parable of the Sower* matches Alaimo's conception of the material memoir, blending scientific, spiritual, historical, geographical and personal content, which deepens both the protagonist's and the reader's understanding of mutually constituted selfhood that is constructed as part of an enmeshed world. It was observed that while some narrative depth is lost in the process of adaptation, the multi-sensorial aesthetic power of the graphic novel enhances the emotional and thematic resonance of the tale. The analysis of the book as a transmedial adaptation has exemplified the spatio-temporal nature of writing and creating, demonstrating how stories are not fixed in one moment or medium, but are shaped by time, space, and cultural context. It has been demonstrated that the graphic novel adaptation is influenced by contemporary understandings, technologies and social issues; although the core narrative is mostly the same, its spatial structure has changed, and both its presentation and its reception are shaped by an alternative temporal setting. Thus, the adaptation becomes a dialogue across decades – a layering of interpretation, demonstrating how meaning evolves, and how the act of creation is a continuous spatio-temporal process. Chapter Four demonstrated that *Parable of the*

Sower respects the young reader's capacity for complex thought and the contemplation of distressing realism; it does not dilute graphic content to cater to the young adult reader but instead offers a nuanced portrayal of corporeality, catastrophe, agency, and change. The narrative resists simplistic optimism or despair, focusing instead on adaptation and resilience through Lauren's Earthseed philosophy. Chapter Four also highlighted how *Parable of the Sower* exposes the intertwined structures of oppression that link race, gender, and nature, and reveals the shared vulnerability of all bodies – human and nonhuman – subject to the same forces of precarity and violence. In doing so, it embodies Butler's materialist vision of an interconnected world shaped by collective fragility and resilience. This chapter concluded that *Parable of the Sower* does not preach to or underestimate the perceptual capacity of its audience; conversely, it promotes an ethical vision grounded in entangled human and nonhuman forces, emphasising ongoing material intra-action over detached moralising.

Collectively, the five narratives explored in this study exemplify how the visual narratives abound with radical potential as uniquely powerful media that challenge anthropocentric thinking by animating the entangled agency of the human and the nonhuman in our shared naturalcultural world. By virtue of their unique affordances, which entangle narrative representation with diverse, distinctive and complex aestheticism and materiality, this dissertation proposes that visual narratives demonstrate powerful potential in encouraging young readers to see materiality as dynamic and relational, rather than inert. It is also contended that the paratexts of these books are a crucial element of their creation and reception, and that paratextual features extending beyond the main text actively participate in the performative eventness of the reading experience.

As is the case with all children's literature, these books are not ideology-free. Environmental concern can, in Western countries particularly, frequently be associated with a progressive, future oriented ideology that influences politics, praxis and pedagogy. In some cases, this

ideology is heavy-handed in these books, and this dissertation has argued that this approach undermines the otherwise nuanced complexity of the works. While it is acknowledged that implicit ideology is inescapable in children's literature, and indeed in all textual production, this dissertation maintains that literature in which ideologies are imposed is less effective in challenging worldviews than more complex, subtle and subversive approaches that engage the reader's imagination and curiosity and encourage a nuanced contemplation of the world. Naturalcultural understandings, which have potentially powerful implications for sustainable futures, are most effectively developed through performative engagement, as opposed to coercion.

This dissertation proposes that to remain relevant in a time of ecological crisis and ontological rethinking, ecocritical studies of visual literature for children must move beyond representationalism towards material and intermedial frameworks that acknowledge the entanglement of representationalism with post-representational strategies that emphasise materiality and relational meaning-making and disrupt the illusion of fixed meanings. The original conceptual framework developed in this dissertation – combining material ecocriticism, intermediality, and elements of cultural ecology – offers a versatile lens for the study of literature beyond children's and young adult visual narratives. By foregrounding the agency of matter, the interplay of multiple semiotic modes, and the relational dynamics between culture and environment, this approach can be applied to a range of literary forms and genres, including a broader corpus of visual narratives, adult fiction, and multimodal storytelling across media. Its emphasis on the entanglement of textual, visual, and ecological elements may enable scholars to explore how narrative structures mediate human-nonhuman relationships, attend to materiality in literary form, and engage with environmental and cultural concerns across diverse literary and interdisciplinary contexts. Further research in this area could also extend analyses to include a wider range of paratextual elements such as

marketing materials, reader reviews, and digital adaptations, to better understand how these contribute to meaning making and reception. Moreover, future studies might adopt an empirical dimension, examining how young readers actually engage with such visual and paratextual features. Through methods such as reader-response studies, focus groups, or eye-tracking analyses, researchers could investigate how readers interpret, emotionally respond to, and physically navigate the multimodal spaces of visual narratives – thereby enriching theoretical discussions of materiality, performativity, and the embodied act of reading. Such explorations can potentially develop a more thorough understanding of the intra-actions between creator, process, product, and young reader that form the relationship within which agency occurs. This means treating visual narratives not just as depictions of nature, but as performative encounters with nature-as-agent – sites where young readers are not merely shown the world, and not preached to about their responsibility to it, but are drawn into its ongoing becoming.

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Appendix A

'The Origin of Rufus' By Mårdøn Smet (11th November, 2024)

As an art school student Thomas Vium was studying Graphic Storytelling - a Danish sequential arts education at The Animation Workshop in the city of Viborg in Denmark. Towards the end of his studying, he asked one of his teachers, Mårdøn Smet (birth name Morten Schmidt) - a professional artist for more than thirty years in the field of comics and book illustration - for an internship at Mårdøn's studio in Copenhagen in Denmark.

They both agreed on a four-month internship. The plan was to start up, and conclude, two projects during that period of time. The first project was meant to be entirely of Thomas' making with Mårdøn as a guide, and the other one a project of Mårdøn's with Thomas as his assistant, in order for Thomas to try his hand at creating something personal under the guidance of a professional, and to let him work as an assistant in a professional environment too.

However, that all changed. Thomas' fellow student from the art school, Thorbjørn, asked Mårdøn for an internship too, and the three of them agreed on a shared internship at Mårdøn's studio for both students at the same time. But as the time for the internship, due to other commitments for the participants, dwindled to just a couple of months, they thought that it would be impractical for both to conclude two projects each. So it was decided for all three of them to do a single project together, to skip the teaching aspect, and simply just to make a book. Hopefully to get it made in the two months at hand and maybe even to get it published someday.

After several failed attempts to come up with an idea for a story, the three of them settled for an old story of Mårdøn's that he'd never got to work out properly himself. It took three storymeetings for them to make the needed corrections and to get the outline for the entire story right. At the meetings, everyone took turns in making rough thumbs of the individual pages at a board, and after each session the thumbs were converted to a dummy and a provisional text was added.

Then came the difficult task of creating the characters of the story together with a graphic style for the project. Some time was spend going nowhere, until it was decided to try out a rough and wobbly style - not far removed from that of the British artist Quentin Blake - a style none of the three could call their own but one that all could manage and feel comfortable with.

In the meantime the two months had vanished into thin air, and after the graduation of Thomas and Thorbjørn from The Animation Workshop the majority of the artwork for the book had to be done while the graduates struggled to make ends meet in the "real world" while commuting between Viborg and Copenhagen when needed.

The artwork was made by all three in no particular order. One did the pencils for one page another did the inks - and ink it was; the computers were only used for the colours, which were the only aspect made by a single one of the three, Thomas Vium. Not being an exactly

homogenous bunch when it comes to artwork, the style changed slightly from one page to the other, but everything was strangely kept together as if by a unifying force. Of course, corrections were made. Everyone had a say at everything if needed, but the spirits were high and the corrections few.

It took a couple of years to get everything down on paper. During that time no publisher was contacted, as all the artwork needed to be finished - colours and all - in order to let the fully realised vision of the story speak loud and clear. At long last, after the last line had been drawn, and the last colour added, the book was send to editor Julie Rotne at Gads Publishing in Denmark, hoping for positive feedback. Julie's answer came after only two hours. The answer was yes.

And well, then came the descent into the pit of editorial corrections, but that's another story.

Appendix B

Q & A with the authors/illustrators of *Den om Rufus*

Mairéad Jordan

Questions were sent by email to the authors/illustrators on November 1st, 2024.

Replies were received by email on dates between November 9th and November 20th, 2024.

MJ = Mairéad Jordan

TV = Thomas Vium

MS = Mårdøn Smet

MJ: The 2022 Nordic Co-operation Award Committee stated about *Den om Rufus* that ‘the will of the work is its own’. What do you think they meant by this?

TV: I think it's because the visual elements of the book and the storyline keep surprising the reader and taking them to places, they didn't expect to go. Many people expect Rufus to stay there when he finds his wild side, but he actually ends up back in civilization. Similarly, the imagery never fails to surprise with Hanne's design, a huge dragon stuck inside a building and smoking giraffes. The book does what it wants.

MS: The will of the work is its own? Not sure about that. Maybe they used an auto generated translation?

MJ: What inspired the idea for this tale and how did your collaboration come about?

See ‘The Origin of Rufus’ by MS

MJ: When preparing for the project, did you assign yourselves particular roles? i.e. did one illustrator work on certain sequences/characters, did one person write the narrative or work on dialogue, or was it a case of a sustained collaborative effort, where you all worked together at all times?

See ‘The Origin of Rufus’ by MS

MJ: Silja and Thomas – is there any reason why you have chosen to work under your pen name?

Silja and I (and Thorbjorn) are all from the same class of Graphic Storytellers at *The Animation Workshop* and Silja and I started working together about 6 months after we graduated. We realized that we could help each other, that we were good at working together and that we could do a lot more together than we could on our own. Also, it's incredibly scary to set up a company on your own with no work experience and no idea who you are, what you can do or where you're going. Being able to 'hide' behind a joint pen name while you practice and become more skilled, so that you can actually answer who you are and what you do, was a very reassuring thought.

MJ: The publisher identifies the target audience of this book as the 6 to 9-year-old age group. Do you feel this is somewhat restrictive, and that *Den om Rufus* would also appeal to older readers?

TV: The best children's books are rarely just for kids. So yes, letting only a particular age group read the book would be a disservice to the audience and the book.

MS: In general, the publisher's identification of a target audience is meant to serve as a tool for libraries and bookstores to find their way in an increasingly overcrowded market of books - each published in an ever-smaller print run resulting in an explosion of titles. It's all about on which shelf to put the books in question. But yes - an estimation of an age group will mostly be conservative. I wouldn't say restrictive.

But I rarely think of stories I'm writing as being suited for this or that target audience. And I'm always taken aback when asked about it by the publishers (and I mean always, as it always happens) because something like that never cross my mind in the first place. Rufus is evidently for kids, but for three-year-old? Five-year-old? Of course anybody can read it.

MJ: Is there any significance to the name of your protagonist, Rufus?

TV: Not that I know of.

MS: I do not recall, but I think it's got something to do with it being a generic fox name like Reynard in English. But it may be subconscious plagiarism too. If it derives from another children's book. Who knows?

MJ: In terms of typography, the narrative type is printed in lower-case, while the characters' dialogue is in upper-case. Is there any particular reason for this distinction?

TV: Mårdøn is a professional comic artist, and at the time Thorbjørn and I were studying to be Graphic Storytellers, basically studying comics for 4 years at The Animation Workshop. In comics, speech bubbles are often written in capital letters. Just as important, it was a design choice so the reader could distinguish narration from direct speech.

MS: In children's books the text is usually in lower-case, while it's mostly in upper case in comics (Tintin is an exception), That makes it a natural Choice to let the narrative text be in lower-case and the contents of the speech-balloons be in upper case. It looks right to me anyway.

MJ: The choice of colours for the book is interesting- were these chosen by the flattening team or did you have input? What is the significance of the pastel tones? The endpapers reminded me of how filmmakers cast certain scenes in blue tints – the colour of twilight, a time of transition/liminality, and also a time that suggests impending darkness. Were these colour choices important for you?

TV: We coloured the book ourselves and nobody else had any influence on the choice of colours. The book was very demanding in terms of time management, because we had to constantly consider coherence versus the fact that we were three artists working on whatever we felt like at the time. That's why we decided to colour the book digitally, so that we could

always adjust and adapt the colours according to everyone's wishes and needs, rather than doing it in watercolor, for example. We did most of the inking for the book in the same studio, but the coloring was done separately. I would colour the pages, send them to the Mårdøn and Thorbjørn for feedback and to make adjustments. Rinse and repeat until we were all happy with it.

The colours are mainly used to signal transitions in the story, to make the reader aware that there has been a change in Rufus and that the story is now entering a new phase. It was always a dream to do a really colourful book for the readers, and that was always in the back of our minds.

MS: Thomas Vium did all the colouring for the book. Maybe Thorbjørn helped out on a couple of pages, and I made detailed suggestions in water colour for two single pages and a spread, but Thomas did all the computer-coloured finals.

As for the pastel tones - everything looks different, when you see it on your screen during the colouring process, and when you finally see the end-result, the printed book. In general, the colours are more luminous on the screen, and they tend to be paler in the printed version. That might look like pastel tones to some, I actually find Rufus' colours quite vibrant and powerful myself, even if they've paled a bit after the transformation from one media to the next. But they're sure not like the real saturated colours as seen in Donald Duck comics.

And yes, the non-realism colours were important for us, as they added a surreal vibe of "unreality" to the book. Actually, for me personally the colours turned out to be a make or break style wise. When we eventually nailed the look of Rufus' character, I did the pencils for a page with both Hanne and Rufus in Hannes Grocery store, and Thomas did the inks - it was pen and paper all the way through, only the colours were computerized. However, when I saw the inked version I thought "Uh-oh, not in a million years." It was terrible. Then Thomas came along with a coloured version, and it blew me away. It looked astonishing. The colours convinced me, that we were on the right track. You'll find the picture in question - the one featuring Hanne in a very early version - attached to this mail. I think these colours are perfect for the book.

The blue on the endpapers - it's a swap from the old Tintin endpapers, and the artwork is a homage to Hergé, besides being part of Rufus' story, but I'll return to that in a later answer. However, If you take a look at the different endpapers on different classic Franco-Belgian comics, you'll find, that quite a few are blue. I think it's got something to do with the blue stepping a little bit back. If you advertise your presence with grandeur all the time, people will tire of your tricks, and consequently they'll maybe miss the real treat. I think the anonymity of the pale blue colour contributes to make the endpapers simply stand as endpapers. On the other hand, this gives you an opportunity to tell a story within - or outside of - the story as seen here.

MJ: The book has a multitude of comic conventions that I believe enrich the narrative and its accessibility to the reader. Do you see comics as important forms of storytelling in children's literature that are, perhaps, too readily dismissed by some as 'frivolous'?

TV: Yes! Comics are a lovely medium for both young and adult. Creating hybrids such as Rufus that combine elements from comics with the children's book format is one way to go about it.

MS: Frivolous? I think that the comic never really shook off its reputation of it being "bad taste", and maybe it never will. It's as if the negative viewpoints hibernate for a while only to wake up again fully invigorated, as if nobody ever got any wiser. Anthropomorphic animals are always an issue, that's for sure, and even the brightest of minds can be totally dismissive about these "funny animals".

But are comics important as forms of storytelling? If the storyteller so wishes - yes. Otherwise - no. To me it's all about the storyteller and the story. Where does the storyteller intend to go? And by what means does the storyteller intend to get there? In my opinion the ends justify the means in storytelling.

MJ: I noticed a few intertextual references in the book - the character of Rufus is reminiscent of Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* and the image of him flying across the night sky over the city reminded me of Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman*. There also seem to be some references to Disney characters and some reviewers have noted the influence of German comic-book artist Thomas Wellman and Danish comic illustrator Jakob Martin Strid in the work. Would you agree that some or all of these are influences? Are there any other artists/illustrators/writers who influenced your work on this book?

TV: Quentin Blake's style was a direct influence on the book. As a love letter to Mr Blake, we even copied one of his own layouts in Rufus (page 8), and we drew his portrait in the shop (look behind Hanne!) on the same page. We're all huge Blake fans, and we found common ground in a style that was strongly inspired by him.

The Raymond Briggs "Snowman" reference makes a lot of sense as it's also a piece of work that I love, but it's just a coincidence. We did most of the compositions in front of a whiteboard together without references.

Thomas Wellmann is actually one of me and Thorbjorn's former teachers and he made a huge impression on me. I personally enjoy his work, especially Nika, Lotte, Mangold! but I don't think his work has directly influenced *Rufus*, but indirectly I've always wanted to create something as colourful as the stuff Wellmann puts out. It's great and his writing is hilarious! My son has copied his drawings from Pimo and Rex to the point where he started to draw like Thomas, that's wonderful!

Strid has come up a lot and has inspired me a lot in my own work, but I can't remember any direct influences. I will say that the page where Rufus crosses the street and goes into his apartment had a lot of Strid in it, especially at the pencil stage (before Thorbjørn and later Mårdøn inked it to make it more coherent with the rest of our book). I can find pictures of it if you're interested.

MS: There are similarities to other artists work all over the book, I'll say there always are and always will be. When you tell stories in a visual media, there are bound to be a whole lot of recycling of ideas, simply because storytelling-solutions pop up in your mind when need be, before you even know it. But in this case, I'll not call it exactly intertextual references, when, for instance, Rufus flies. Animals wear clothes and foxes fly - but in children's literature that's not exactly a novelty.

We did talk about Jakob Martin Strid and his style during the process, after all he's one of Denmark's most popular children's book artists today, and his work is something every

children's book artist here relates to in one way or another. The use of powerful colours combined with pale ones in *Rufus*, could easily be inspired by his work - we talked about it anyway. But the major inspiration was definitely Quentin Blake, we actually agreed to use his "wobbly" style as a guiding light in the process, and I think in some respect we actually did come quite close time and again, but you never really do. And what would be the point if you did? Being a dead ringer for another artist would make no sense, the point in using Blakes style as a model was to find a direction in which to move in unison the three of us, as different artists as we are ourselves.

The lightness of the Blake style is in our version somehow tightened together by the "flat" colours - computer colours without any of the otherwise quite common gradients. It's a similar technique Strid usually uses, but Thomas was far stricter, when it came to not using any effects but only flat colours. The prominent use of white spaces serves to lighten up the otherwise quite compact colouring, and in the second picture of Rufus in Hannes grocery store the use of spot-like colouring almost mimes the colours of Quentin Blake, only he uses water colours.

MJ: Rufus' piercing gaze on the cover of the book is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's contemplation, in his work on the ontology of the non-human animal, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), of how animals stare back at human beings; it also suggests that this moment is his moment of realisation, where he 'remembers' all that has been forgotten. Would you agree?

TV: Yes, a feeling of realisation and feeling of being lost at the same time. It's ironically a very human feeling.

MS: I'm not familiar with Derrida, all I can say is, that the picture of Rufus on the front cover derives from the vignette in the book, when he enters the park. That's where the adventure really begins, when he sees the footprints of naked feet. The thunderstorm is the harbinger, or the heralds trumpet if you like, but entering the park is where the adventure starts. On the front cover, Rufus with his back to the civilized world pulls the branches apart and stares into the wild. We tried different colour variations to choose from, some were blue, some quite darker, and that maybe would signify the unknown somehow better, but we settled for the warm orange, as it was so nice.

MJ: I admire how the question of what is the 'natural order' is constantly subverted by you, the authors/illustrators. The storm has awoken an inherent, corporeal nature that Rufus seems to have forgotten or suppressed. His eventual immersion in external nature is paralleled by his immersion in the most primal and instinctive parts of his mind. Do you see a parallel between external nature and the internal nature of a creature (human or otherwise)?

TV: It may seem a little banal that Rufus feels the most primal parts of his mind when he is literally in nature, and that he behaves in a civilized manner when he is in the city and surrounded by culture. But as a narrative device it works well and is understandable to even the youngest reader.

I think you become more aware of nature the more time you spend in it. I also think that the more time you spend in nature, the more aware you'll become of your basic needs, such as food, sleep and so on. On the other hand, I don't think it's a religious revival that's going to happen overnight. In this day and age, we talk about "finding yourself" as if it is something we can locate somewhere. I believe that life is much more complex and that we explore our personalities throughout our lives without ever arriving at a destination. Rufus is like that. Sometimes he is one thing, sometimes another. Hopefully we've captured that in the final pages, where Rufus and Hanne seem to have started a family, but at the same time the uncivilized life is hinted at (claw and bite marks, window to nature, feathers everywhere, etc.) as a recurring thing.

MS: External nature - as in the natural world - I think it rings a bell deep within us, whether we hear that bell or not, like when a dry season is followed by a rainy one, and you go outside - you feel the change immediately. In our story, Rufus' transformation to his primal self of course is mirrored by the wild of the wood which accentuates the proceedings of the story. But besides being a storytelling device, I find the pull to be real. We all just have business elsewhere.

MJ: Rufus' world is one that is entirely populated by animal characters and yet, initially, and ultimately, he leads a very human-like civilised existence. Were you at any point tempted to include human characters in the book or was the decision to create this 'civilised' world of animals a deliberate one?

TV: No human characters. It was animals from the very beginning.

MS: The decision to solely use animals as characters was deliberate, yes. That's the whole point of the use of anthropomorphic animals. A mixture of the two is rare. Quentin Blake, in the fashion in which he likes to draw himself, smiles at the reader from his picture frame in Hanne's grocery store. Otherwise, no trace of us.

MJ: Rufus' and Hanne's friendly (but ultimately complex!) relationship reminds me of Sainsbury's observation about 'coming into being-with animals that are like and unlike us' (2021, 132). They begin as friends, then Rufus experiences more primal, savage urges, and in the endpapers a romantic and familial relationship is revealed, but there is also the suggestion of a return to savagery on Rufus' part. What are your thoughts on their relationship and its significance?

TV: Rufus and Hanne's relationship is like so many others; it goes up and down, and it doesn't stop when they start a family. In many ways, life with young children is a reminder of the most mundane things we all crave: food, sleep, longing for each other and connection with others, and so on. Hanne and Rufus are obviously very different, but deep down they crave many of the same things.

MS: Hannes and Rufus' relationship is friendly, as you point out yourself, and it's an ordinary affair too, as is usually the case when strangers meet, even if they meet every day but stay strangers all the same - Hanne's actually talking about the weather and about how invigorating it feels. But Rufus has got a strange urge inside. He just doesn't know what to do about it.

On one hand Hanne is very warm and friendly, and Rufus is certainly friendly and civilized too - though he feels an urge deep inside to do something else than being civilized. Does he want to kill Hanne and eat her? Or does he want to have sex with her? Different details in the story point both ways. Hanne's talk about the storm being invigorating suggests sexual excitement, and Rufus' breakfast of eggs and chicken salad suggests a different kind of savagery, even if his daily ritual is ridiculously domesticated.

But then Rufus in his bewildered state chooses a different path of action. He tells Hanne about his dreams - the night before he dreamt he flew like a bird. That's an intimate confession, and Hanne quickly replies that she dreamt she was in a crowd totally naked. Rufus' dream is a dream of breaking free (becoming his true self), and Hanne's dream is about being exposed (having her lustful yearnings laid bare for all the world to see). But the end of the conversation is inconclusive.

Rufus' further adventures lead him still deeper into his savage self, the story leans heavily on killing and devourment rather than romance towards the end, and he's beginning to see the object for his desire - the domesticated caged chicken - simply as an object.

Then Hanne speaks.

And the spell is broken. Faced with Hanne's "humanity", as she speaks and enters his newfound wild world in the guise of a conscious animal like himself, Rufus can no longer bear the prospect of killing, but reverts to his civilized self in the blink of an eye. And as he helps her out carrying the groceries back to the store, Hanne has assumed his dream of freedom (though she knows perfectly well that she'll never fly like a bird), and Rufus in his nakedness is exposed to the world - like Hanne was in her earlier dream - for his shameful savage nature.

But as the vignette of the three infant wolves between the story and the endpaper suggest - even for conscious animals like us our nature is always right behind us, and we can revert to it for better or for worse anytime.

However, in this story the hero is bound to lose. The hero's journey can only end in tragedy or defeat.

Rufus' defeat is the losing of his natural self and his freedom from all restraint.

The alternative is the tragedy of barbarity (living by the sword) or domestication (doing all things civilized). The latter seems the lesser evil, as the endpapers suggest. At least it's a loving life. If not peaceful. The picture on the wall of the children fighting - it's barely readable as the colours are a bit too dark - point towards a troubled future, and the family's home torn and shat upon seems less than inviting, but then the window's always open. And outside the wild wood waits patiently.

MJ: I was fascinated by the endpapers and how they represent a stand-alone narrative. The reader is left to question if Rufus has ultimately reverted to nature and savagery, and to ponder the fate of Hanne and their children. Many reviewers seem to disregard the narrative of the endpapers, which I see as intriguingly subversive and also integral, engaging the reader in the story-telling process. When creating this endpaper narrative, were your intentions to add a little dark humour to the tale? To purposefully leave the ending open? Or to pave the way for a possible sequel?

TV: First of all, thank you for that comment. It means a lot to me because the endpapers were really important to us when we made the book. We created them later than the rest; the idea only came up after we had made a prototype of the entire book and worked on the cover. We felt like the execution of the story was missing a beat and then we came up with the endpapers as a nod to Tin Tin, but with much more narrative weight.

Big YES to your first two questions, and we also discussed the possibility of making a sequel and came up with ideas for it, although we never agreed on anything. The idea was more to come up with other stories in the same universe, not necessarily Rufus stories.

Another possible understanding of the ending is that being a family with children can be a rather chaotic affair when you are frantically running around changing nappies and staying up all night. Another understanding of the uncivilized life. The endpapers were definitely a comment on that as well.

MS: see answer above (14)

MJ: It is suggested that Rufus' past life is his savage and wild existence; his present is told in happy scenes of domestication and parenthood, before he rediscovers his inner savage once more, his wild side. Iovino comments on the 'human forgetfulness of nature's agentic force' (Iovino, 2014, 106), and this seems somewhat inverted by Rufus, who forgets all about his civilised existence when he enters the forest. Is there a comment on our own human forgetfulness here? A parallel between animal and human?

TV: For me, it's more about the classic home-away-home model, where Rufus' life in the big city is the normal state of affairs, and then he gets lost in nature – away – before returning "home" to a new normal.

There's a bad tendency today to idealize nature, to think that if we start building our houses out of sticks, planting a permaculture garden and picking berries from the undergrowth, we'll automatically become better people. Rufus finds another side of himself in nature, but it turns out to cause him problems. It doesn't fit in with what he likes about his old life. He has to negotiate between nature and culture, rather than being 100% one or the other.

MS: In our tremendously successful taming of the world, we tend to forget that we're even animals. And we don't like it one bit the moment we occasionally do remember. I think a lot of it comes down to the convenience of the victorious - we're on top of the world because we've been doing the right thing all along. In other words, our version of reality is the right one, and to us there's no point in seeing that reality from a different viewpoint. Yes, you can call that forgetfulness of our ancestry, and it's fair to say, that it's mirrored in the story's depiction of our flood like - jolly but flood like all the same - civilisation.

MJ: I noticed some intriguing and unusual illustrative details, such as the framed photo of a human man's face, complete with love-heart, in Hanne's shop, a tiny mole reading a miniscule paper in Hanne's garden and the dragon's head and tail protruding from the upper storeys of a skyscraper in the city. When including such details, is your motivation to demand a greater attention to detail from your reader? Or perhaps to suggest alternative narratives to the main narrative?

TV: I love that kind of detail in books, and I'm a big fan of Richard Scarry's, Ib Spang Olsen's and Jakob Martin Strid's books for the same reason. They make you feel that this world is alive, that there is more at stake than what the text tells us. The text always gives a picture specificity, it directs our attention to the right place, while the picture can go in all sorts of directions, like a piece of music that ignites all sorts of unpredictable emotions in us. In the same way, I hope that these details will add an extra layer or two to the book, whether it's just an amusing detail, a suggestion of greater depth, or something else entirely.

It doesn't have to be profound or particularly interesting, it can just be a silly remark, but it's the mere suggestion that there might be more at stake than the narrative voice reveals. This usually piques the curiosity of most readers, because the book somehow treats the reader as an intelligent being who, like a detective, finds things along the way and somehow expands the universe of the book.

Also: See the remark about Quentin Blake/the human face in the book. Oh, I might add, that I (Thomas) never asked Mårdøn or Thorbjørn about adding Quentin's face in the book. I just did it, because he is my idol and it felt appropriate since we took so much inspiration from him, haha.

MS: As I mentioned in an earlier answer - the man in the picture is Quentin Blake, and it's a homage. The mole and the dragon both were 100% Thorbjørn, as he did the pencils for both spreads.

MJ: Nikolajeva sees the animal character as often representing a 'disguise for the child' (2002, 125) and Nodelman concurs, wondering if authors 'imagine that children already think of themselves as something like humanized animals, not quite yet the fully human beings that adults are – more like puppies and kittens than adults are' (2015, 40). Rufus' wild nature is only revealed following an interaction with younger, 'wilder' cubs in the woods, who, it seems, have never become 'cultured' or 'civilised'. Thus, youth is 'natural' 'free' and 'disruptive', adulthood is civilising, conforming, forgetting. Were you conscious of a young readership when creating these characters and are they representative of childhood in some way?

TV: I don't remember thinking about the readership when we created the cubs, although I agree that the cubs in the forest aren't cultured or civilised because they haven't been exposed to adulthood. We did discuss whether the whole scene in the forest was a dream (and the lightning and surreal colours could support that), and whether the cubs were somehow representations of Rufus at another stage in his life, but we never really explored that.

MS: It's more or less the way you picture it. The cubs are intended to be predecessors of Rufus on a symbolic level; they have no personality but are only playing their part - to be his personified savage self in different stages. In the spread, immediately before the foxes reach

the poultry houses, where the rumbling of the cubs' stomachs alerts Rufus, the four foxes are meant to be shown like the classic depiction of the evolution of man - walking in line starting with something quite primitive, moving on to mammals, then to apes and finally to man. I'm afraid, we didn't quite come across with that one.

MJ: Rufus' world is populated by an abundance of abundance of flying chickens, which are notably 'wild' and unclothed, and a multitude of more 'civilised' rabbits, in smart suits and carrying briefcases as they march determinedly to some unknown destination. Is there any particular significance to this choice of animal or would you prefer to leave any interpretation of this open to the reader?

TV: Ask Mårdøn. You can find them or similar characters in some of his work. To us they were fun to draw and put into the scenes, and they also add a feeling of life to the world. On a side note, they are also nice to put in simply to balance the composition while staying true to the universe of Rufus!

MS: As far as I go, interpretations are always up for grabs. Whatever I intend to do or say - when I write a story - when I've finished it, and I've put it out in the world for all to see, I leave it to its fate. I'll neither correct you or any other person for having more or less exotic ideas about the deeper meaning of my work. But I can abstain from endorsing something I find totally haywire.

Regarding the small animals as a mass phenomenon - rabbits are well known for multiplying themselves endlessly, therefore rabbits, and pigeons (no, not chickens - that's not open for interpretation, even if they don't look the part) - it might seem unfair, but they're simply pests, as they are in any big city anytime and anywhere.

They're basically there to describe part of the life of all big cities all over the world - the life of the endless masses of the suit and tie workforce and the life of pests. Some (Thomas Vium) find the large amounts of these generic characters unsettling - he lives in the country - and some (Thorbjørn and I) don't give a toss - Thorbjørn does a little, as he lives in Viborg, but I definitely don't, as I live in Copenhagen. I just hate it.

MJ: The characters of Rufus and Hanne are an interesting exploration of gender stereotypes. Hanne is not a subservient female but Rufus' savage side, particularly in the endpapers scene, was reminiscent of a scene of domestic violence. Did you have any thoughts on gender roles when creating these characters?

TV: I don't remember us talking about gender stereotypes directly, but I think it's important for all three of us that our drawings contain characters we meet in the real world - without being dictated by the zeitgeist and what is generally considered right and wrong to depict. If they disagree, you may quote me on that ●

MS: I fail to see the bit about domestic violence. Is it the picture on the wall of the children fighting? The fox-child's got a rattle (but you're well excused, if you can't make it out, as this picture is nigh indecipherable). Other than that - as far as gender stereotypes go, the story's mostly about "human" nature versus civilized behaviour, and as Rufus is the main character, the one going through the trials and tribulations here, we see the world through his eyes.

Therefore, Hanne is a voluptuous dream of both an erotic female idol (Venus of Willendorf) and a roast. Rufus in all his civilized splendour on the other hand, is more of a wimp.

MJ: Reviewer Damián Arguimbau sees *Den om Rufus* as a reflection on how ‘the world has become a more dangerous place’ and that ‘it is important to know your roots and yourself’ (2022, n.p.). Would you agree with his observation?

TV: I need more of the context to answer that.

MS: The quote is taken out of a context, I take it, and I might not do it justice here, but to say that the world has become a more dangerous place, and that it's important to know one's roots seems pretty vague. Has the world become a more dangerous place because of climate change? How will knowing our roots help us out of that fix? Because we're children of the earth, and we must stop hurting it? That's simply too cute. But then, maybe it's the war in Ukraine? All in all, taken out of its context this quote doesn't really make sense to me, and I don't know the context.

MJ: At the start of the book, Rufus sits in his armchair, experiencing nature though a screen. Later on, he physically engages with the natural world, contrasting the concept of observing the world from a distance with the reality of actually being *in* and *of* the world. Do you think this corresponds with the increasing human tendency to experience the world virtually, rather than naturally/viscerally?

TV: I agree that many people in the Western world see nature and culture as separate, and that nature is at best something you “go to” once in a while, like going for a walk to get some fresh air as if you're going to the gym for a workout. I'm not sure it is directly related to us experiencing the world virtually, though.

MS: Yes, definitely. This, of course, is a way to symbolize alienation that's almost as old as alienation itself. Like all other domestic features in this story it serves the purpose of accentuating the conflict between civilized living and living according to your primal desires. Our brave technological world will add to this schizoid division, no doubt. It's getting increasingly difficult to see it not removing us further from just being.

MJ: Do you think *Den om Rufus* has a contribution to make in a human world that has perhaps ‘forgotten’ its connection to the natural, and is faced with climate crisis, in helping us to remember that we are all a part of the nature we seek to understand?

TV: I think it's important that we continue to negotiate between culture and nature. That's one of the things Rufus has to do. It's important that the nature and culture can co-exist, and unfortunately that's not the case at the moment when we look out into the real world. We can see that nature is rebelling against human culture, with forest fires and flooding, for example.

MS: I think Rufus has a contribution to make in joining the ranks of stories continuously challenging the complacency of the status quo, even if the hero of the story at hand eventually will lose, never to return to the world that was left behind with the wisdom gained.

I don't believe in an educational mission for stories to fulfil, besides joining in the quire of other voices from other stories in our heads. But that's an honourable task too.

MJ: Is there a possibility that *Den om Rufus* might be translated into other languages, e.g. English, or published outside of Denmark?

TV: Yes, it was released in Italy last year, so there is still hope!

MS: It was published in Italy, but the future of our little book is uncertain.

MJ: Nina Christensen notes ‘a tendency in picturebooks from Denmark and Norway to expand the borders of how you can address small children and which kinds of stories you can tell them...in some Danish and Norwegian picturebooks, children are exposed to...less than ideal behaviour presented in an ironic manner’ (cited by Evans, 2015, 10). This so-called ‘lack of protection’ of children in Scandinavian visual literature may be why, Christensen opines, so few of these texts are translated for an English-speaking market. Do you feel, as Danish writers/illustrators for children, that there is more freedom to create subversive and potentially dark literature for children in Scandinavia, than there may be in other parts of the world?

TV: Yes, it's a nice tradition in Danish and Scandinavian children's literature that we can write and draw stories about the heavier subjects. To be honest, it's more a question of how the books deal with the subject; if it's executed well, we have a lot of freedom, but if it's executed poorly, there's little chance of the book being reviewed well or even published, and I think that's the way it should be.

MS: I've got a little anecdote to share with you here (and I'll get to the point, don't worry) -

Back in the day, I considered - and eventually ended up - working on a series of very commercial books for the smallest of children (Pixi Books), and asking the editor what the children liked to read, I was told that the books actually weren't aimed at the children. The biggest market for these books back then was the German market, and those buying the books were mostly grandparents. So, these children's books weren't aimed at nice little kids but at German grandparents. That was a top-tier moment of disillusionment in my life.

This is only to state my case - I consider the market for children's books to be one of the most conservative markets for books on the face of the planet. The fact that the users (the kids) don't buy the books themselves - and if they did, the only books on the shelves would be Disney books - speaks volumes. So, in order to "slip through" with a book on the international scene is not something you just do. The different national markets are extremely conservative - each in their own way, with a long string of nostalgic bestsellers from the parents' and grandparents' own childhood readily available. Scandinavia is no exception. Some Scandinavian children's books are dark, yes, you can call it subversive if you like, but truth be told you can find that anywhere - dark books, sad books, artsy books. And as a great lover of children's books myself I've seen tons of this kind of thing from all over the globe. It rarely sells much, and just as rarely crosses national borders, and I think you're most likely to find the reason in the buyers' conservative and nostalgic habits.

MJ: Finally, any plans to collaborate again on any future projects?

TV: I would love to do a book with the others again, but making children's books is not easy to make ends meet financially, so it will always be a challenge - on top of the fact that we are three creatives who have to agree on text, drawing, colors, and so on. But I'm hopeful that we can collaborate again someday.

MS: No plans at the moment.