

Loss, Grief and Planetary Literacy in Informational Picturebooks for Children

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Abstract Death is an inevitable part of life with philosophical, cultural and religious dimensions and its problematic emerges differently in the contemporary era, since it is not only perceived as a fundamental aspect of human existence, but also as a consequence of human-made disasters, as well as an urgent environmental concern. Today literary and, in general, artistic narratives and expressions often explore death beyond human exceptionalism; ecocide; the triple planetary crisis; and the mourning for humanity's doomed relationship to nature. Several contemporary authors, with the help of the illustrators, write ironic and horrific stories addressed to children that alter the cultural significance of loss and death and propound dark ecological storyworlds, in which the ecological problems as well as the more-than-human vulnerabilities, aspire to make young readers aware of the functions of the *pale blue dot* they live in and perceive it as the true public space. This article examines how do informational picturebooks for children approach life and death in a more 'ecosophical' manner, proving that the planetary turn has made available to literary studies, aiming to make young readers aware of how humans and nonhumans are fundamentally enmeshed in and negatively interdependent with one another.

Keywords Loss. Death. Grief. Informational picturebooks. Planetary literacy. Dark ecology.

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1 Introduction

The current geological era, called Anthropocene, is marked by significant, often irreversible, changes in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems caused by humans, based on their false assumption that they are dominant on Earth. Human activity on the planet has led to the so-called “triple planetary crisis”, which refers to (i) climate change, resulting in threatening consequences such as global warming, drought, and desertification; (ii) air and water pollution; and (iii) biodiversity loss (Plumwood 2002, 8; Hellweg et al. 2023). Recent studies suggest that the ongoing planetary crisis could be limited if people realized the interconnectedness of all living beings and became informed not only about the way the planet functions, but also about the impact of the global economy to all organisms’ and Earth’s ecosystems’ health and longevity (Bohm 1980, 151; Lehtonen et al. 2019; Angelaki 2024).

It is deemed crucial to encourage children from a young age to adopt a so-called ecosophy, according to which human beings are not superior in value and status; death is not an event that distinguishes the human from other creatures; and hierarchical divisions between humans and other-than-humans, as well as between grievable and non-grievable lives, should not exist. According to David Sobel,

if we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, we should allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it. (1996, 36)

Since Children’s Literature serves as a means for individuals to acquire values, ideals, and spiritual cultivation from a young age (Nikolajeva 2019, 23-6), many contemporary authors often problematise their readers about the triple planetary crisis, by discussing the relations between life and death and human and more-than-human in the face of the ecological devastation and environmental violence in their books. Their aim is to make children planetary literate and to encourage them to change their non-sustainable behaviour so as to prevent further ecological destruction (Kingsnorth 2017, 143).

2 Planetary Literacy, the Problematics of Death, and Children’s Literature

Planetary literacy involves educating individuals and redefining their behaviour with the ultimate purpose of improving and preserving the health of the planet. In this sense, planetary health is defined

as the intersectionality between the health of the environment and the health of human individuals while recognising that the disruption of the environment is human-caused. (Séguin et al. 2021)

This particular form of literacy is considered as one of the key factors for ensuring sustainability and biodiversity (Prescott, Logan 2019; Lenton et al. 2022; Jochem et al. 2023). It is important to note that the reassessment of human behaviour towards the environment, including both biotic and abiotic organisms¹ within the framework of planetary literacy, has dietary, economic, social, and ethical implications (Kahn 2010, 18). For instance, changes in our dietary habits or quantity intake can lead to improvements in the lifestyle of other people, living in places far from our own (Seltenrich 2018; Walpole et al. 2019).

While staying informed and educated about the Earth's natural processes, and understanding that we all inhabit the same planet, which we will pass on to future generations, may lead to the awakening of our environmental consciousness towards its preservation (Dhawan 2017; Capetola et al. 2022), the realization that human actions, including wars, genocides, political turmoil, and economic downturns, have led to the triple planetary crisis gives rise to demands "for new kinds of stories of death, dying and mourning" (Radomska et al. 2019, 5), that may produce planetary consciousness inspired by the post-human ethico-politics of death, raising the question of what it means to live in ecological and social proximities of death.

As mentioned above, many contemporary authors seek to raise awareness among their young readers and make them planetary literate, while urging them to take a critical approach concerning the injustices of the world, the impending dangers, and the issues of un/liveability in more ethical ways. The production of the so-called 'ecological children's books' is, indeed, quite extensive. However, most of these books either end up articulating ecological crises, without promoting civic engagement, collective actions, or political programs (Bradford 2003, 116), or contain stories that not only imply that Nature is a force beyond human control, able to heal whatever humans inflict on it (Kerslake 2022, 39), but also prioritise capitalist, anthropocentric, and colonial interests (Doermann 2021; Midkiff, Austin 2021), failing to introduce planetarity as a different order of connection, or to address critical questions concerned with life and death and nature/culture.

1 Biotic resources refer to the living components, including animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and protists. Abiotic factors are the non-living components of the ecosystem, including its chemical and physical factors.

Some authors strive to nurture children's common bonds with the planet by replacing "the imaginaries of exclusionary familialism, communitarianism, nationhood, ethnic culture, regionalism, globalization, or even humanism, with the ideal of planetarianism" (Miyoshi 2001, 296) and eco-grief imaginaries. They are inspired by dark ecology, a philosophical movement that draws attention to global pollution and the planetary ecocide brought about by capitalism, "that nobody seems able to prevent" (Kingsnorth 2017, 142). Dark ecology is also driven by the ecological devastation that renders all forms of life vulnerable, exploring how industrialization has damaged humans' relationships with nature (Morton 2010, 15; Kingsnorth, Hine 2017, 266). This is reflected in eco-dystopian narratives (Hughes, Wheeler 2013) that reshape the cultural significance of loss and death, while promoting dark ecological storyworlds where ecological issues affect both the planet's and humankind's future health (Gerhard 2012). The presentation of human and more-than-human vulnerabilities in their stories aspire to make children aware of the functions of the *pale blue dot*² they live in and perceive it as the true public space. This paper argues that those authors' aim is to help children become aware of the so-called 'global interconnectedness' and perceive Earth as

a living organism, as a shared ecology, and as an incrementally integrated system both embracing and rechanneling the currents of modernity. (Elias, Moraru 2015, xii)

3 Nonfiction Picturebooks for Children

Admittedly, there are some ground-breaking fantasy environmental picturebooks that can possibly educate and motivate young readers to care about unsustainable living conditions and their root causes, such as Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* (1971) and Bill Peet's *The Wump World* (1970), that both depict the environmental damage caused by corporate power in the twenty-first century, or Maria Gianferrari's *Be a Tree!* (2021), whose aim to enable children imagine and understand relations between human and other-than-human while blending a Deleuzian-Guattarian discourse of worldly territoriality and addressing critical questions concerned with the body in a more-than-human sense (Angelaki 2023a). This study focuses, though, on books whose authors attempt to inform young readers about the human actions that negatively impact the geological and biological processes of the Earth, contributing to the mortality of humans and

² As the Pulitzer Prize-winning astronomer Carl Sagan named Earth in his book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1993).

more-than-humans, books that encourage children to reject anthropocentric practices, as well as to support their future resilience in the face of climate change impacts, through stories that evoke the feeling of ‘solastalgia’: a term used to express the anguish and despair one feels after the sorrowful realisation that the conditions at home have dramatically changed (Albrecht et al. 2007). Precisely because planet Earth is essentially the home of humanity, the term is now used to denote the negative emotions that overwhelm individuals when they realise that the climate change they have contributed to, is dramatically altering the balances in the environment they inhabit (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, 332; Yazgünoğlu 2019).

This is, for instance, the case of Shaun Tan’s picturebook *Tales from the Inner City* (2018): a work set within a speculative landscape, since the plot of each story in the book takes place in a “dark” ecological space (Cohen 2013, 272) that brings awareness to the Anthropocenic spectrum of anxieties; contains “negativity and irony, ugliness and horror” (Morton 2010, 17); concentrates on the ethical relationship with the more-than-human world, as well as planetary social and environmental justice, and animal rights; encourages hopeful imaginative reconstructions between children and Earth, inviting readers to “undo the current ways of doing - and then imagine, invent and do the doing differently” (Taylor 2016, 6). In it solastalgia unfolds through the eco-dystopian story that highlight humans’ and other-than-humans’ vulnerability and goes beyond utopian visions merely suggesting the idea of a self-healing planet.

However, the study focuses on artistic or ‘new generation’ nonfiction picturebooks that prove that the planetary turn has made available to literary studies, books that provide children with a sign of hope which is required to make a change in an apparent hopeless world, where environmental grief, stemming from the present and anticipated environmental losses “caused by natural or man-made events” (Kevorkian 2006, 2) alters the cultural significance of loss and death, by disrupting the monument of human exceptionalist narratives on death; refutes the human/ more-than-human binary; and directs children towards ecological and ethical more-than-human sensibilities (Radomska 2023). The reason for this focus is academics’ interest in exploring what ‘nonfiction’ picturebooks are, since they tend to present the world “in a more artistic, metaphorical and unapologetically subjective way” (Grilli 2020, 81); and what do they have the capacity to achieve (Pappas 2006; Goga et al. 2021; Angelaki 2023b); how do informational picturebooks construct knowledge, acknowledging that its dissemination in these books varies according to the context in which the text was created? And how do they help “create an engagement with our world that will be crucial to the future of our planet” (Grilli 2020, 88)?

4 The Research Material

From the large corpus of children’s environmental texts whose authors claim that they invite young children to examine the consequences of illogical human behaviour and “to consider how their own actions – or failures to act – might affect the future of the planet and humanity” (Cart 2010, 103), the books featured here are “beautiful objects as well as learning books, that represent a turning point in nonfiction” (Grilli 2020, 80), as they mesh information and imagination; whose scientific presentation of objective verifiable facts, full-page illustrations, choice of style, color and composition allow the world to unfold before the readers’ eyes and seem to discard hegemonic discourses on death, loss and grief. The books have been discussed in the Greek media for the way they are designed to arouse children’s senses with their colorful images and for provoking environmental melancholy to readers, while informing them about the ecocide with which humanity is nowadays confronted, stressing that everyone is part of this process that contains uncertainty and loss (Kingsnorth 2017, 216). The sample consists of three informational children’s picturebooks addressed to children from 8 to 12 years of age: *Planet SOS: 22 Modern Monsters Threatening Our Environment (and What You can Do to Defeat Them!)* by Marie G. Rohde (2020) and *The Mess That We Made* (2020) by Michelle Lord and illustrated by Jullia Blattman and *The Book of Disasters*³ (2022) by Maria Andrikopoulou and illustrated by Myrto Delivoria.

Since human senses underpin the way people relate to the world; are able to grasp its “ultimate unity”; enable readers to feel part of it and, therefore, care about it (Grilli 2020, 77-8), the selected books are visually imposing, lavishly illustrated informational picturebooks. However, they depict the current ecological condition marked by climate change, global pollution and biodiversity loss without embellishments, and try to avoid presenting the Earth as the planet that provides solace from negativity. Instead, Earth is depicted as the readers’ residence who inevitably experience ecological grief as a response to the realisation that their landscape has dramatically changed because their ancestors and, most probably themselves too, did not adapt to it in a more respectful way. As the described societies are confronted with the prospect of unyielding ecological decline and the loss of environmental futures in the name of progress and development, idealised by some (Carol, Totaro 2003, 127-9), readers are called upon to consider the escalating ecological crises that may result in ecological and human loss, and to “mourn” for what they may lose (Cunsolo, Ellis 2018, 275). At the same time, they gain

³ The original title of the book in Greek is *Το βιβλίο των καταστροφών*.

an understanding of how they can ideally live if they choose to act as “eco-heroes” (van der Beek, Lehmann, 2022) and try to fight for the elimination of the triple planetary crisis that threatens all forms of life on Earth.

5 Aim and Methodology

The study examines how the authors, with the help of the illustrators, talk “planet- talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided natural space rather than a differentiated political space” (Spivak 2005, 72) in their books. It also discusses how readers are prompted to mourn for the ecological destruction that has occurred due to anthropogenic actions and transform dystopia into utopia (Cunsolo, Landman 2017, 10). The article seeks to explore whether the dystopian narratives in the books, which “feed on reality by taking real issues, problems, and failings of the world, expanding and distorting them, and reflecting them back for readers to view anew” (Pullan 2015, 3-4), offer “a powerful commentary on the problems that actually exist in the world and the realities we face every day”. It questions whether these narratives leave readers solely with a sense of doom, without providing substantial solutions to the current ecological crises. The study also discusses the structural and visual strategies, the allegorical literary devices, the narrative techniques, and devices of poetic impressions, with which the authors of the selected books not only demonstrate nonhuman death but also try to make children planetary literate, enabling them “to read the world as a text” (Iovino 2016, 350) and to realise that their health and longevity depend on the preservation of the planet’s health.

The article draws on planetary literacy, eco-grief, and inter- and transdisciplinary research on ‘planetarity’: a term that signifies a worldly structure of relatedness and “affirms the planet as both a biophysical and a new cultural base for human flourishing” (Elias, Moraru 2015, xxiii). In addition, it draws on death studies, approaching dying and mourning as complex phenomena, as well as post-humanist approaches to Children’s Literature. This approach recognises both humans (adults and children) and more-than-humans as an intrinsic part of nature. The study also employs the concept of ecodystopia (Hintz, Ostry 2013) and the theory of dark ecology, which Morton (2010, 28) describes as “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection” “of all living and non-living things”. Finally, it relies on the recent studies concerning the stylistic strategies in children’s informational books, and how nonfiction for young readers proffers affordances for developing critical thinking skills (Kokkola 2018). The books’ ideology is detected in the narrative voice of the text and the narrative content of the images (Stephens 1992, 200), while semantic content

analysis (Beyersdorfer, Schauer 1989) is opted for in order to identify the key components of literary dystopia, as well as to emphasise the concept of eco-dystopias and the ecologically driven grief that the authors deal with while attempting to make children planetary literate, enabling them to “grasp the world as a whole” (Robertson 2000, 73).

6 Analysis

6.1 *The Book of Disasters*

This awarded book⁴ serves as a conduit for the author to impart knowledge about Environmental Crisis and Disaster Management to children, to whom a third-person narrator explains how disasters affect people depending on their socioeconomic status, as well as the capacity of environmental systems to cope with current or anticipated disasters. It includes scientific information, table of contents, index, maps, and suggested bibliography, and according to Meibauer’s taxonomical model could be characterised as a “simple descriptive nonfiction picturebook”, since its verbal texts, that are not very long, convey knowledge about the world in a truthful and comprehensible manner, with the figures elaborating the verbal information (Meibauer 2015, 67). In the introductory note, the term ‘disaster’ is explained, clearly making the distinction between disasters caused by natural processes on Earth, those caused by human activities, and those occurring after natural events such as hurricanes and earthquakes. The interconnectedness of all these types of disasters is highlighted, including technological disasters such as chemical and nuclear leaks or fuel spills. The book is structured in separate chapters providing information and explicit scientific descriptions about various disasters. Each chapter includes a glossary and guidance on what individuals can do to manage unavoidable disasters, while outlining measures to be taken “to restore normalcy”⁵ in the environment (Andrikopoulou 2022, 8). Additionally, the book includes an appendix featuring world days that deserve human attention, related to the environment and climate change.

Conventional assumptions surrounding the issues of death, transformation, and grief are challenged from the book’s first chapter

⁴ The book received the Geek Reader Award 2023 as an informational book for children, and was referenced as an exceptional book of this genre at the IBBY 2023 Shortlist. More details at: <https://www.protothema.gr/culture/books/article/1313956/maria-andrikopoulou-to-vivlio-ton-katastrofon/>.

⁵ Original Greek: “για να επανέλθει η κανονικότητα”.

since the third-person narrator discusses the loss of people, animals, and landscapes due to geophysical disasters, such as earthquakes, landslides, and coastal erosion, volcanic eruption, tsunamis, cyclones, and subsidence, whose management, according to the text, involves and requires special planetary education. The section covering the hydrometeorological hazards addresses extreme weather events such as drought, storm, extreme temperature, wildfire, wet mass movement and floods that threaten human and animal lives, as well as telecommunication, road, and electrical networks. The narrative emphasises that human activities, including “construction and the use of impermeable materials like cement and asphalt”, worsen the impact of floods (Andrikopoulou 2022, 28).⁶

In the chapter concerning the climate-related disasters, the narrator exposes an ecological ontology of death as he mentions that they cause both human and more-than-human death. For example, he focuses on forest fires caused by human-induced climate change, resulting from environmental pollution and discusses the concept of “ecological degradation, leading to desertification”, suggesting that “it can result in irreversible soil destruction” (Andrikopoulou 2022, 34).⁷ The fact that this may cause eco-grief to the readers, who are encouraged “to reflect on the world as it is, and to imagine future scenarios if environmental degradation proceeds unabated” (Massey, Bradford 2011, 110) may pave the way for the development of an ecocritical worldview, urging readers to act against the triple planetary crisis.

In the chapter drawing upon biological disasters, the narrator unfolds ethical territories of eco-grief: he mentions that biological disasters involve epidemic, insect infestation, animal stampede and death among humans, animals, and plants and underlines that the infectious diseases arise from natural disasters, leading to additional problems such as economic issues.

According to Yazgünoğlu,

the ecological reality in the twenty-first century is indeterminate, encompassing ugly chemical plants, nuclear bombs, horror and terror that ecocatastrophes have inflicted upon humans and non-humans. Dark ecology, therefore, illustrates how humans and non-humans are fundamentally enmeshed in and negatively interdependent with one another with no boundaries between nature and culture. (2019, 45)

⁶ Original Greek: “η αποψίλωση του εδάφους από τη βλάστηση και η κάλυψή του από αδιαπέραστα υλικά, όπως τσιμέντο και άσφαλτο”.

⁷ Original Greek: “η οικολογική υποβάθμιση που οδηγεί στην ερημοποίηση, μπορεί να οδηγήσει σε μη αναστρέψιμη καταστροφή του εδάφους”.

Consequently, Andrikopoulou informs her readers through the narrative voice that the anthropogenic disasters caused by human action or inaction and negligence may include famines due to droughts, caused by irresponsible irrigation and the construction of dams. They also result in riots, wars and genocides, terrorist attacks, nuclear incidents, technological disasters, and industrial accidents. The narrator provides examples for each disaster, such as the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, and the chemical factory explosion near Seveso, Italy, while underlining that these disasters “did not only result in the death of thousands of humans and animals” but also “in the disruption of normalcy in the ecosystems and in environmental pollution” (Andrikopoulou 2022, 40),⁸ and “destruction of habitats and agricultural lands” (Andrikopoulou 2022, 44).⁹

Finally, the narrator mentions the natural technological disasters, that are termed “natechs”, such as the second worst nuclear power accident in history that took place in Fukushima, Japan, which was caused by a severe earthquake and a powerful series of tsunami waves. According to Morton the realisation of how capitalist societies work provides a basis for an eco-grief, underlining the precariousness of human beings (2010, 80). Perhaps this is the reason why the narrator highlights the significant risk of the natechs’ occurrence in densely populated and industrial urban areas, as well as the fact that the existence of these disasters underscores the impact of the “increasing human influence on the environment” (Andrikopoulou 2022, 8).¹⁰ Arguably, as the narrative emphasises practices such as “inappropriate agriculture, deforestation, construction, and overexploitation of natural resources significantly alter ecological balance” (34),¹¹ rather prompts readers to realise that human vulnerability to catastrophic events is intrinsically related to environmental issues.

This book’s illustrations invite readers to “to use their interpretation skills, relying on their literary knowledge as well as their knowledge of other art forms such as painting, music, or sculpture” (Cabo et al. 2018, 92) in order to construct meaning: “The illustrator decorate the book’s pages using the technique of collage”. This kind of art, “by definition brings diverse images together to form an aesthetically pleasing composition” (Panaou, Yannicopoulou 2021, 59). Arguably, depicting some of the mentioned disasters, such as tsunamis

8 Original Greek: “δεν αφαιρούν απλά ζωές ανθρώπων και ζώων και διακόπτουν την κανονικότητα σε όλα της επίπεδα” αλλά “μολύνουν και το περιβάλλον”.

9 Original Greek: “οδηγούν στην καταστροφή βιότοπων και γεωργικών εκτάσεων”.

10 Original Greek: “αυξανόμενης ανθρώπινης επίδρασης στο περιβάλλον”.

11 Original Greek: “ακατάλληλες πρακτικές γεωργίας, κτηνοτροφίας υλοτομίας, δόμησης και υπερεκμετάλλευσης των φυσικών πόρων που μεταβάλλουν την οικολογική ισορροπία”.

waves or erupted volcanoes, could help readers understand what they read about. However, the art of collage is also used in this book as an inter pictorial reference with ideological dimensions that “helps children develop visual literacy and inducts them into epistemic and aesthetic communities, such as the world of art and culture” (Wang 2023, 84). Therefore, in the section about the anthropogenic disasters, the illustrator chooses this particular technique aiming to create a playful atmosphere and to enable children to obtain an artistic knowledge background, by parodying famous anti-war paintings such *Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso, who “responded powerfully to the mass death and violence of wars and totalitarianisms” (Radomska 2023, 8) and the accompanying grief and mourning, and Pieter Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death*, a painting that symbolizes death’s inevitability. In the end of the book, readers are informed that they should respect nature’s rhythms and the biosphere’s ecological limits and recycle, avoiding unnecessary water and electricity consumption, and refraining from littering in forests, seas, and roads, as this behaviour poses risks such as fire hazards, water pollution, and blockage of drains. The proposed actions may be in the child’s purview but it will not solve any disaster of the magnitude just given. It might seem both overly simple for true solutions and overly complex for a child to manage the risks of extreme events and disasters. However, the narrative obviously challenges the conventional cultural framings of death and mourning, as it refers to extreme events interacting with exposed and vulnerable human and nonhuman systems.

6.2 *The Mess That We Made*

The Mess that We Made is an awarded¹² informational picturebook that falls into the category of the simple descriptive picturebooks (Campagnaro 2021, 209), as it contains author’s notes, preface, bibliography, index, and appendix. This book’s uses watercolor as a painting technique and its author arguably attempts to raise children’s awareness and appreciation of nature; to encourage them to obtain a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world; and to make them aware of human errors resulting from the lack of knowledge and respect for the planet. In order to achieve her goals,

¹² The book received an Honor in the 2023 *Storytelling World Awards Program*; the 2024 Northern Lights Book Award, Winner of the Environment Category; was at the Nevada Young Readers’ Award List; the Pennsylvania Keystone to Reading Elementary Award list, 2021-22; the twenty-sixth Japan Picture Book Award Finalist 2021; and was selected as a mentor text by the Department of Education of NSW, Australia. Pictures available at <https://susannahill.com/2021/04/23/perfect-picture-book-friday-the-mess-that-we-made/>.

she attempts to activate children's "environmental imagination" – a seminal term, referring to the readers' ability to experience a sense of connection with the environment (Kerslake 2022) – by portraying the course of an enormous amount of plastic from landfills to the oceans through drainage systems with the help of rain. By reading the book, children are informed that the Pacific trash vortex is a collection of marine debris in the North Pacific Ocean, entirely created by us, "the people at work and at play, that stuff the landfill, grow-up each day, that spills the plastic thrown away".

The third-person narrator discusses the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and plastic pollution on marine life, highlighting that

the ever-growing trash vortex, which contains an estimated 79,000 tons of plastic, plays a significant role in the larger climate change crisis (Anderson 2021, 172)

is made up of tiny bits of plastic called microplastics that are not biodegradable and affect our health. As the narration points out that these particles have entered the food chain through fish shellfish and other marine animals, travel through the human body and lodge in our organs since we consume foods with high microplastic contamination, children are encouraged to imagine and understand relations between human and nonhuman and life and death in a more ecosophical manner, while being informed about planetary environmental disruption.

In *The Mess that We Made*, words and pictures are presented in a "synergistic relationship" with which children can make meaning through sustained engagement with the text (Sipe 1998, 99). The visual modality is characterised by scientific and aesthetic accuracy since it depicts, for instance, sea turtles snared in discarded fishing nets and fish eating colorful bottle caps. The scientific facts regarding more-than-human vulnerabilities as well as the disruption of the planet's health and, consequently, our own are presented in the context of the journey of four young children to the Pacific Ocean "on a boat of welded steel". There, they see "the fish that swim in the mess that we made" which in the next double spread are eaten by "a seal that swims in the mess that we made". On the following page, according to the narrator,

the current that swirls through the bay rocks the boat, that dumbs the net that catches the seal that eats the fish that swims in the mess that we made. (Lord 2020, s.p.)

The children's boat is then swept away by the current and eventually ends up in a coastal area. As the four children come across a

landfill growing each day that spills the plastic thrown away, that traps the turtle green and gray, that rides the current through the bay, that rocks the boat of welded steel (Lord 2020, s.p.)

it seems that the book opens up a space where mourning is considered in an ecological manner and in connection with the ever-changing social and cultural and economic conditions, possibly on the understanding that the ecological grief caused by dystopian ecocritical stories can serve as a catalyst for change, in view of the increasing ecological losses humans find themselves entangled with (Barnett 2022).

Then the narrative points out that

although we made the mess, we are also the ones who can save the day, reduce our waste at work and at play, recycle the plastic thrown away. (Lord 2020, s.p.)

In fact, this is the very point where the four children see themselves as ‘eco heroes’ and contribute to restoring the ecological balance; consequently, readers, are prompted to develop a socio-political stance towards climate change. The dystopian situation in the ocean becomes transformed into an idealised, purified “after” stage: the four children appear happy, greeting their peers playing ball on a clean beach next to clear blue waters, and calm turtles and seals swimming in clear oceans. This transformation according to the verbal and visual narrative takes place after the children “rescued the turtle” and “hailed the garbage from the bay”. But the dystopian “before” stage of the narrative rather corresponds to our current situation, and the blissful “after” stage described in the book is in fact the planet’s “before” stage, “until the first grain seed was cultivated, after which we slid into a future of hierarchy, control and ecological destruction” (Kingsnorth 2017, 37).

While Lord tries to establish a new framework for describing the so-called ‘Garbage Patch’ and the planetary crisis with which humans and more-than-humans are nowadays confronted, encouraging readers “to mourn while recognising the value of what has been lost” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, 333), she seems to fall into the aforementioned “trap” of suggesting that the planet is actually able to heal whatever humans inflict on it, taking into account her story’s happy ending. She does though what all the authors of environmental texts for children think they should in terms of balancing an (over) abundance of proof of environmental disasters and the appropriate response, both from the adult world (e.g., government, social institutions) and from children. More specifically, in the back of the book, informational notes may be found about “OCEAN POLLUTION AND CALLS TO ACTION”, highlighting the multiple benefits of recycling and managing waste for the health of the planet, and hence

the health of humans and nonhumans; the narrator advises readers to reduce the amount of stuff they use and throw away, to reuse stuff when they can, to recycle paper, bottles, cans, and even toys, while providing some interesting examples of such strategies, such as Mount Trashmore Park in Virginia, USA, created by compacting layers of solid waste and clean soil. However, what is not mentioned or implied in the book is the fact that recycling is both an “easy” solution, within a child’s purview, and also a complex problem that we, adults, need to fix; for example, recycling facilities do need major infrastructure overhauling to reduce waste themselves, while a circular economy needs to be put into place to use the plastic being recycled- something that is omitted from the text.

6.3 *Planet SOS: 22 Modern Monsters Threatening Our Environment (and What You can Do to Defeat Them!)*

According to Colman (2007, 260) “nonfiction is writing about reality in which nothing is made up”. However, Rohde’s postmodern informational picturebook, *Planet SOS*, offers “more of a literary experience and may be read all the way through like a fiction text” (Mallett 2003, 92). It falls into the category of complex descriptive picturebooks (Campagnaro 2021, 213): it includes scientific information about the triple planetary crisis, sustainability tips and energy saving suggestions; glossary; index; a world map showing where pollution is more intense; and references citing the sources on which the author relied. *Planet SOS* also incorporates fantasy elements, intertextual and intervisual references. The scientific information in both the verbal and visual text of the book¹³ explain how humans have become a geologic force changing the planet’s ecosystems. Furthermore, they describe the unsustainable living conditions that contribute to the mortality of humans and more-than-humans. What is interesting, though, is the fact that this information is interwoven with the fictional primary narratives of the 22 monsters, who are wreaking havoc on our planet.

The monsters in Rohde’s book, as is the Fanged Ozone Serpent, the Road Snake, the Glareworm, or the Logre, essentially represent the monstrous behaviour of all of us, humans, towards the environment, and their narrative enriches the reading experience, serving as a way “to critique the effects of advanced technology on humankind and the environment” (Ames 2013, 15). Each monster’s identity

¹³ The book was longlisted for the UKLA Book Awards 2021. Pictures available at: <https://www.awordaboutbooks.com/blog---archive/planet-sos-22-modern-monsters-threatening-our-environment-and-what-you-can-do-to-defeat-them-marie-g-rohde>.

derives from a different source of inspiration for Rohde: for instance, for Atmosdragon's identity (the monster who is heating the planet, causing global warming), the author became inspired by Chinese myths. When it comes to the names of the monsters, Rohde also plays with words, making intertextual references that activate the readers' imagination. The book's outside-the-box approach to destruction of Earth's ecosystems, biodiversity loss and mass extinction that aim to evoke readers' ecological grief rather verifies academics' assertions concerning the "new generation" nonfiction picturebooks' stylistic strategies, "in defiance of standard categorization into watertight compartments" (Grilli 2020, 86).

Rohde's choice to produce a grief imaginary and engagement with human and more-than human death while choosing to highlight the concept of monstrosity verifies the assertion that monsters have always formed part of both cultural and scientific imaginaries, crossing boundaries and exceeding containment in a metaphorical, conceptual and literal sense (Radomska 2018). It could be also argued that the work involves "parody, bricolage, irony and playfulness" (Dresang 2008, 44) and includes the anthropomorphic monsters' primary narratives that expose humans' and nonhumans' vulnerabilities in the text, not only because these are recognised trends in multimodal children's books (McMillan 2010, 5), but also because they are considered popular techniques through which uncomfortable truths are explained to children (Harju 2006, 181); as is the contribution of environmental violence to the extinction of species, the loss of entire ecosystems and the increased mortality rates.¹⁴

Arguably Rohde makes an effort to prompt her readers to "acknowledge the reality of the loss, and the pain it causes", probably having in mind that (eco)grieving is "the starting point for being able to move on and through, and to begin to rebuild yourself again" (Kingsnorth 2017, 98). Additionally, since all lives are grievable in the dark ecological vision, she demonstrates the present state of the planet through the monsters' first-person narrations, who acknowledge nonhumans suffering and mortality. For example, Acid sea dragon states that he "slinks about under the sea", and "feeds on the carbon dioxide that we humans make". He then explains how our actions "make the water more acidic, which is the perfect habitat for him, but is not so great for other sea creatures", "such as clams, oysters and coral" and clarifies that their "skeletons and shells are slowly dissolving" (Rohde 2020, 8). Accordingly, Nuclear Jinns claim that they "spread poison over our planet", "harm any wildlife that they come into contact with" and even "succeeded in making some areas

¹⁴ Anthropomorphism is also employed in Rachel Hope Allison's picturebook/graphic novel *I'm Not a Plastic Bag* (2012), where the narrative takes up the issue of the ever-growing Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

completely uninhabitable”, because nuclear power plants “are not super secure” (21) so as to keep the monsters inside, and because humans “have been looking after them” by “haven’t eliminated nuclear waste”. Atmosdragon, in his narration, explains what global warming is, stating that this causes problems such as “ice caps melting, which means polar bears have nowhere to live”; “seas are rising and large storms are sweeping over humans’ homes”. At the end of his presentation, he confesses that “he is very worried” because humans’ “switching to renewable energy sources, like solar or wind power” and “eating less meat” would mean that he would “have less carbon dioxide to eat” and “would not be treated a particular delicacy- methane gas” (12).

While all readers might not be able to understand irony and sarcasm, the narrative does speak to what children are able to understand on the issue of human and more-than-human death and the accompanying grief and mourning, implying what they should appreciate, and change. It is through the Plaken’s ironic primary narrative, where he admits that he has all-invading tentacles formed from thousands of tonnes of plastic debris, that Rohde attempts to inform children about marine species extinctions and endangered bird species; accordingly, Logre, whose job is to rid the planet from forests and jungles, informs readers about more-than-human death through his own ironic narrative, poetically tackling complex relations between ecology, dying, and grief. And it is E-waste Golem’s ironic narration that prompts us to characterise *Planet SOS* as “a radical book about the environment”, which according to Mickenberg and Nel (2011, 457) “does not just advocate recycling, but also consuming less” and evokes ecological grief in readers who are encouraged to think critically and to acknowledge their share of responsibility at the human-made disasters wrought upon the Earth, while staying informed about “the true consequences of pollution, resource depletion, decreasing biodiversity, unrestricted development, and lost animal habitats”. Specifically, E-waste Golem says:

You threw me away but I’m back to haunt you. I am made of millions of electronic gadgets, batteries, chargers, mobile phones, computer monitors and random electronic clutter. These things were expensive when you bought them with valuable metals hidden inside. You adored your gadgets and couldn’t stop playing with them while they functioned. When they broke, grew older or ran out of batteries, you threw them out and forgot about them. Now they’ re mine!.. Sometimes I need to rest my weary wires, and when I do, I leak toxic metals which pollute the air, water and soil...You humans could reuse my metals if you really wanted to... If you did that, then you wouldn’t have to keep digging for metals and making new gadgets. Start recycling electronic waste - anything with a plug - and my motherboard will begin to malfunction. (Rohde 2020, 31)

The book also contains gatefolds highlighting monster-beating actions kids can take and a list of human actions that feed the monsters and help them grow. The fact that each monster admits its weaknesses, which are outlined in the Monster Cards¹⁵ that accompany them, indicates Rohde's effort to encourage children to use each monster's weakness to the planet's advantage and consequently to theirs. For example, Smogosaurus' narration proves Rohde's intention to inform children about "humanity's doomed relationship to a nature" (D'Albertis 2017, 137) and impact on the planet, and to encourage them to behave in a way that does not "feed" the monsters that threaten Earth's longevity. The monster states that he "is made of smoke and dust"; his body "is built out of tiny particles that hover in clouds over our cities"; he "feeds on exhaust fumes from cars and factories" as well as "on dust from construction work and sucks up smoke from wildfires or volcanic eruptions". The monster's confession that "a very good start to get rid of him" is people to "limit the numbers of lorries, cars and other traffic" and to "improve public transport and bike lanes, so people can travel without causing air pollution" (Rohde 2020, 20), signifies in essence Rohde's effort to educate readers about the environment, to encourage them to engage in problem solving, and to nurture their common bonds to the planet. The fact that Smogosaurus sarcastically states that he "finds smoke from burning coal extra tasty", "making pollution so thick we can't even see through it", makes us wonder, though, if children can comprehend written irony, and thus humans' ontological relationship with the world (Olkoniemi et al. 2023).

Accordingly Noisybird introduces itself to the readers, sarcastically stating that

it hates it when can hear peaceful noises, such as birds singing. It needs loud noise to survive, and loves the wail of saws, the honk of car horns and the roar of airplanes. It is its job to make sure noises are turned up to the max,

encouraging children to

raise their voices and turn their speakers up loud to keep cities and seas full of all those buzzing, crashing, whining and other delightful noises, keep their favourite monster alive and well. (Rohde 2020, 38)

Undoubtedly Rohde's intention is to inform readers that noise is the second largest environmental cause of health problems, and does

15 Examples available at: <https://missclevelandsreading.com/2020/03/31/planet-sos-by-marie-g-rohde/#jp-carousel-3560> and <https://missclevelandsreading.com/2020/03/31/planet-sos-by-marie-g-rohde/#jp-carousel-3561>.

serious damage to wildlife. However, irony might prove to be challenging for children to understand. It should be noted, though, that this monster is depicted as a bird with nine heads. Although the informative note at the bottom of the page states that it is the Nine-Headed Bird of Ancient China “jiǔ tóu niǎo”, its depiction also refers to the ancient Greek mythical monster Lernaean Hydra. On its tails, there are also designs similar to the fireworks that affect human health and the ecosystem, causing anxiety, fear, stress and even death to animals. Therefore, it could be claimed that the in the book “science and imagination interweave as they always should” (Grilli 2020, 84) and illustrations, in addition to their great artistic value and decorative role, complement the narrative, prompting readers to actively interpret what they see, so as to understand the book’s ideology and construct meaning.

7 Conclusion

One of the primary functions of children’s environmental texts is “to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow, by positioning readers as ecocitizens, dedicated both to sustainable development in the local sphere and also to global responsibility” (Massey, Bradford 2011, 109). However, most of them end up articulating ecological crises without presenting the world in all its facets in an accurately detailed, yet artistic fashion, omitting to indicate as they should the dark aspects of humanity, stemming from its “delusions of difference, of its separation from and superiority to the living world which surrounds it” (Kingsnorth 2017, 266). This article examined three critically acclaimed informational picturebooks for children. All of them, are discussed for the way they demonstrate that death and loss have become urgent environmental concerns. The aim of the study was to explore informational picturebooks’ capacity to enable readers to become planetary literate and to perceive climate change as the greatest health threat of the twenty-first century. The study also explored whether children were enabled to realise that human and more-than-human survival on the planet depends on the balance in the Earth’s ecosystems and biological processes (Elo et al. 2023), while being informed on the issue of human and more-than-human death and the accompanying grief and mourning. Finally, the article examined whether children were prompted to take action on environmental issues (Echterling 2016, 286) in order to transform dystopia into utopia, by rejecting anthropocentric notions.

The information concerning the Earth’s biological systems, climate change, pollution biodiversity loss and the issue of more-than-human death, is presented in the sample in a scientific manner, yet

in a poetic, artistic and original way: the scientific facts are communicated through the poetics of language and images (Kesler 2012), and combined with metafictional strategies, such as visual and verbal puns, polyphonic narratives, disruptions in the cognitive stereotypes and the playful narrative style (Allan 2018, 202), thus, confirming von Merveldt's argument that "the boundaries of what qualifies as an informational picturebook are fluid" (233).

Children are challenged to learn to evaluate what they read (Kokkola 2018) and "to use multiple modes (words and images) simultaneously to gain meaning, rather than prioritizing one mode over the other" (Shimek 2018, 519), while the pictures' artistic value verifies the notion that the visual mode's elusive, poetic quality in children's informational picturebooks contributes to the readership's understanding of the provided information (Angelaki 2023b, 36). The pictures visualise the meaning of texts, whereas textual information describes and/or explains what the illustrations depict. The two modalities bear both artistic expression and scientific dimension and the incorporation of elements from different genres within texts verifies Martins' and Abicalil Belmiro's argument that "it becomes routine to find fictional elements in the contemporary production of informational books for children" (2021, 16).

All three informational picturebooks seem to socially acknowledge loss beyond the frames of human exceptionalism, refuting the notion according to which more-than-humans "are mere means to human ends" (Callicott 2006, 119). All three of them discuss non-liveability in the context of the triple planetary crises without shattering "a sense of hope, without destroying... the *green* and replacing it with *gray*" (Platt 2004, 192).¹⁶ Their dystopic narratives serve as mirrors upon the readers' environmental reality, enabling them to "acknowledge the reality of the loss, and the pain it causes" (Kingsnorth 2017, 98). The books urge readers to consider the complexities of environmental crises, lamenting what they may lose (Yazgünoğlu 2019, 44) if they do not adopt the principles of Environmental Ethics, as they portray the ecological problems of our world. Instead of depriving children of hope, they bring nature, its beauty and its suffering into children's everyday lives (Buell 2017) in a way that may evoke environmental melancholy, thus helping readers change the anthropocentric vision they might have already adopted and "look forward in the future and to something that could have an impact for future generations" (Prévost 2019, 16).

16 The phrase is lifted from another context, in order to review the book with this language.

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