

UCLA

Electronic Green Journal

Title

REVIEW: Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children's Literature

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6cc882v6>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(42)

Author

Laberge, Yves

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/G314241592

Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Electronic Green Journal
Volume 1, Issue 42

Review: Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children's Literature

By Liam Heneghan

Reviewed by Yves Larberge
University of Ottawa, Canada

Heneghan, L. *Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children's Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 338 pp. ISBN: 9780226431383, hardcover. US\$27.50; also available as an ebook.

There seems to be an abundant presence of an unpredictable nature, talking animals and unimaginable creatures from another age in children's literature, and especially bedtime stories. As such, the environment has progressively become a frequent topic in many books for children; but it might be just a recent shift in our interests and within the trendy topics most publishers are currently trying to consider when they commission new stories from potential authors for children. Looking back at this everlasting genre broadly known as "children's literature," even though there are countless varieties and subgenres, DePaul University Environmental Science and Studies professor Liam Heneghan cleverly refers to "the environmentally salutary implications of children's books" in his first book as a sole author, titled *Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children's Literature* (p. 20). That is his approach: highlighting how environmental themes are introduced and negotiated in a variety of books written for a young audience.

Perhaps a book such as this would not have been possible three decades ago; looking back at the excellent collection of essays gathered by Peter Hunt in his comprehensive book titled *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London, Routledge, 1992), there are few references to nature, the environment, pollution, the preservation of resources. It seems obvious the focus has now changed in just one generation of books for youth.

Adopting a straightforward style without any jargon, Liam Heneghan resolutely focuses on environmental education's main themes like the capacity to be amazed in front of the nature (p. 33). The 27 chapters explore and reconsider many stories and characters all children should know, for example Robinson Crusoe, or Babar, the latter being presented here as an elephant but also in scholarly terms: as an "urban adapter, that is,

one of those species that can tolerate a human presence in dense settlements” (p. 244). The opening essay on *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920) is perhaps too short, but some of the following ones are more rewarding. Possibly the most interesting, the essay on “Environmental Literacy in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*” (*Le Petit Prince*, 1944) highlights the fact Saint-Exupéry avoided the adults’ values and criteria based on money and material value: “A centerpiece of the story’s charm is its dismissal of adult’s pretensions and materialistic values” (p. 257). In that sense, Heneghan aptly achieves to link *The Little Prince* with the fundamental goals of education for sustainable development, that is, to wonder and appreciate nature for itself, and without any consideration for its financial value.

At least four categories of readers could appreciate Heneghan’s *Beasts at Bedtime*. First, graduate students in environmental education who would like to link their discipline with the use of books for children in innovative ways that are not just descriptive but rather analytical; in other words, some readers might find here what these narratives can tell us about our natural world, and which attitudes should characters, and therefore people and young readers, adopt in these imaginary situations. Secondly, teachers at primary and secondary levels in search of possible approaches for interpretative understandings of classic books for youth will find here many possibilities, even though this *Beasts at Bedtime* is not a teacher’s manual and includes no exercises or “dynamic strategies for the class.” Thirdly, scholars in sociology of education will probably appreciate Heneghan’s capacity to gather a wide corpus and provide a coherent analysis of many specific imageries, in a mixture of realism and fantasy. And finally, parents (or grand-parents) who have young children will find here an essential repertoire of universal, classical titles for young persons (and teenagers) that go well beyond the too-familiar and omnipresent Disney universe. Yes, there is still room for real books and bedtime stories.

Yves Laberge, PhD, ylaberge@uottowa.ca, University of Ottawa, Canada