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“Enchanted Forests and Secret Gardens: Nature in Children’s Literature”

Alison Lurie, Frederic J. Whiton Professor Emerita of American Literature, Cornell University

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When I was seven years old, my family moved to the country, and my perception of the world entirely altered. I had been used to regular, ordered spaces: labeled city and suburban streets and apartment buildings and parks with flat rectangular lawns and beds of bright “Do Not Touch” flowers behind wire fencing. Suddenly I found myself in a landscape of thrilling disorder, variety, and surprise.

As the child of modern, enlightened parents I had been told that many of the most interesting characters in my favorite stories were not real: there were no witches or fairies or dragons or giants. It had been easy for me to believe this; clearly, there was no room for them in a New York City apartment building. But the house we moved to was deep in the country, surrounded by fields and woods, and there were cows in the meadow across the road. Well, I thought, if there were cows, which I’d seen before only in pictures, why shouldn’t there be fairies and elves in the woods behind our house? Why shouldn’t there be a troll stamping and fuming in the loud, mossy darkness under the bridge that crossed the brook? There might even be one or two small hissing and smoking dragons—the size of teakettles, as my favorite children’s author, E. Nesbit, described them—in the impenetrable thicket of blackberry briars and skunk cabbage beyond our garden.

No longer a rationalist, I began to believe in what my storybooks said. Suddenly I saw the landscape as full of mystery and possibility—as essentially alive. After all, this was not surprising: it was the way most people saw the natural world for thousands of years, and the way it was portrayed in the stories I loved best.

For me, and I think for most children who have really known it, untamed nature seemed both powerful and sentient—a conscious force. The simplest rhymes assumed this: “Rain, rain, go away! Come again some other day,” my sister and I chanted as the gray drops blurred the glass. The clear implication was that the rain could hear us, even if it chose not to do as we asked. This didn’t seem strange; after all, nature often spoke by signs—the rainbow that marked the end of the storm, the groundhog that did or did not see its shadow on February 2nd. Beasts and birds and plants predicted the future, and they even knew what other people secretly thought of us, revealing this through the petals of a daisy: “He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me a little, he loves me a lot, he loves me not at all.” Even the distant stars could, if they chose, grant our wishes: “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight . . .”

In fairy tales it was clear that nature was magical. This magic was concentrated in the forest, often referred to as an enchanted forest. If you were a fairy-tale hero or heroine, that was where you went or were sent to find adventures, in contrast to the ordinary world of the village. What you found in the forest might be wonderful or terrible or both. There were wolves there and bears and deer, some of whom might be princes or princesses in disguise; there were houses made of cake and candy, dragons and giants, witches and dwarves. If you met anyone or anything in the magical world of nature, it was important to be polite, kind, and helpful, since they had the power to assist or thwart you, to change your life.

The underlying message of folklore and fairy tales was that nature is alive, aware of us—that it must be treated with care and respect. This was well illustrated in the Grimms' tale "Mother Holle." It begins with a girl whose mother does not love her, preferring her lazy sister. In a state of despair, the heroine jumps into a well, but instead of drowning she finds herself in a strange meadow full of flowers. She doesn't just sit there and grieve; she gets up and starts walking, and presently, the story says, "she came to a tree that was full of apples and it cried to her: 'Oh, shake me! shake me! my apples are all ripe!' So she shook the tree till the apples . . . were all down, and when she had gathered them into a heap, she went on."¹

You may have noticed that the heroine of this story does not eat the apples. Instead of using them to satisfy her own needs, she cooperates with nature, helping the overburdened tree and recognizing its needs. She walks on, and presently she comes to a little house where there lives an old woman called Mother Holle, who is a domestic version of the pagan German nature goddess Holde. We know who she really is because, like Holde, she is in charge of the weather; when she describes the job she is offering our heroine, she says, "Take care to make my bed well, and shake it . . . till the feathers fly, for then it will snow on earth."² The girl does as she is told, and when she goes home, she is rewarded with gold. Her lazy, greedy sister jumps into the same well and finds herself in the same meadow, but she refuses to cooperate with nature. She will not help the apple tree or shake the feather bed properly, and she comes home covered with tar.

Fairy tales made it clear that nature could be both protective and destructive. If you were a princess who fell into an enchanted sleep, a hedge of flowers and thorns would grow up around your castle. It would shield you for a hundred years, and destroy all the wrong princes who tried to cut their way through and get at you. Then it would open to admit your true love.

The powerful, magical image of nature found in folktales also appears in many classic and modern works of children's literature. Even the simplest stories sometimes contain messages about the mysterious importance of the natural world. Consider Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*, one of the most popular picture books of the twentieth century. It is a series of rhymed good nights addressed to all the most familiar objects of childhood. There is food (a bowl of mush), toys (a red balloon and a doll's house), articles of clothing and grooming (mittens and socks, brush and comb), pets (two kittens), and an old lady knitting, who may be a grandmother or a baby-sitter.

In the illustrations to *Goodnight Moon*, both the old lady and the child are rabbits, something that may seem strange at first, but is in fact one of their most important qualities. Like the animals in the fables of Aesop, they make the story universal. If the child in *Goodnight Moon* were human, the artist would have to show it as male or female, and as belonging to some ethnic group. But because the rabbit's gender and race are concealed, any reader or listener can identify with it.

Another advantage of many animal heroes is that they are classless; but the big green room is clearly that of a contemporary middle-class Western child. It is spacious and comfortable, contains pictures and books, and two clocks—being on time is important in this world. There is also a mechanical connection to the outside: a telephone. In 1947, when the book was published, for a child to have his or her own telephone was a great luxury; if Margaret Wise Brown had been writing the book today, the appliance on the little rabbit's bedside table might have been a computer.

Still, of all the things to which the story bids good night, the moon is the most important. We know this because it is mentioned in the title—after all, the book is not called *Goodnight Kittens* or *Goodnight Mittens*, though those phrases appear in the text. The moon also appears twice: once as a crescent in the picture of a cow jumping over the moon, and once as a full moon, surrounded by stars, outside the bedroom window. As the scene darkens, the objects and figures inside the “great green room” begin to fade, while at the same time the moon and stars glow brighter and brighter. They represent both nighttime and the natural world outside the little rabbit's bedroom; they will be there while he or she sleeps, and may bring dreams. The last lines recognize this, and also the fact that as we close our eyes, the visual world disappears before the auditory one does:

Goodnight stars,
Goodnight air,
Goodnight noises everywhere.³

As we drift toward sleep, the last thing we are usually aware of is sounds: people speaking and moving about downstairs, the crunch of traffic passing, a plane overhead, a dog barking, the chirping of birds as they settle for the night. The tale bids them farewell, the room is dark, and what we are left with is the image of the moon and stars.

Stories written for children are unique in many ways. It is not only that the central characters tend to be children: the whole world view is often different. For one thing, these stories, like fairy tales, usually have a happy ending. The good are rewarded and the bad are punished—as Oscar Wilde famously said in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that is what fiction means.

It has been suggested that in classic children's literature, food replaces sex as the principal source of excitement and sensual pleasure. Certainly there is something to this: think of the Christmas dinner of turkey and plum pudding in *Little Women*, or the picnic on Johnson's island in *Tom Sawyer* when Tom and Huck and Joe Harper eat fried bacon and cornbread. It

might even be said that when food in children's books is inedible or unavailable, it is the emotional equivalent of bad or denied sex in an adult novel. One of the reasons *Alice in Wonderland* is sometimes unpopular with young readers may be that all Alice ever has to eat is drugs disguised as food ("Drink Me" and "Eat Me" their labels command), and they have supernatural and unpleasant effects. She never actually gets any tea at the Mad Hatter's tea party; and when she attends the banquet at the end of *Through the Looking Glass*, she cannot eat the leg of mutton because it has been formally introduced to her, and as the Red Queen says, "It isn't etiquette to cut anyone you've been introduced to."⁴

If food replaces sex in children's books, what replaces religion? In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, of course, books for children were full of religion, specifically Protestant Christianity; but by 1850 this theme was beginning to fade. By the end of the century, religion had largely been replaced by the worship of nature. Many children's classics of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries present nature as divine, naturally good, and full of inspiration and healing properties. There is a pagan tone to some of these books: the Christian god is replaced by spirits of another order, sometimes associated with natural features of the landscape, or with water or wind.

John Ruskin's "The King of the Golden River," written for the little girl he later married, and published in 1851, is an ecological fable in fairy-tale form. Its hero, little Gluck, has two selfish older brothers who, like greedy capitalists, have no interest in the beautiful valley where they live except for the profits they can make from it.

They killed everything that did not pay for its eating. They shot the blackbirds, because they pecked the fruit . . . they poisoned the crickets for eating the crumbs in the kitchen; and smothered the cicadas, which used to sing all summer in the lime trees.⁵

The South-West Wind, who appears as a little old man in a long black cloak, is disgusted by the behavior of Gluck's brothers. As a result, he no longer blows the rain clouds toward their valley, and it becomes dry and barren, "a shifting heap of red sand."⁶ But when little Gluck shares his last drops of water, the land is restored to fertility and the wicked brothers become two black stones.

Water and wind, in both folktales and children's classics, often have magical powers. In Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) a dirty, ignorant little chimney sweep is redeemed by falling into a river, where he meets wise maternal beings who comfort and educate him. In George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) a spirit of the air rescues the hero, sickly little Diamond, from a London slum and carries him off on several wonderful nighttime journeys.

Here in America, in the nineteenth century, nature was seen as transcendently wonderful rather than magical. The scene that greets Tom Sawyer when he awakes on Jackson's Island in Twain's beloved Mississippi reads almost like a passage from Thoreau:

It was the cool gray dawn, and there was a delicious sense of repose and peace in the deep pervading calm and silence of the woods. Not a leaf stirred; not a sound obtruded upon great Nature's meditation. Beaded dewdrops stood upon the leaves and grasses . . .

Now, far away in the woods a bird called; another answered; presently the hammering of a woodpecker was heard. Gradually the cool dim gray of the morning whitened, and as gradually sounds multiplied and life manifested itself.⁷

The British writer Kenneth Grahame, like Twain, was in love with a river, though in his case it was the Upper Thames. His most famous book for children, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), is full of Grahame's own love and reverence for nature, and also his expert knowledge of it. Unlike some writers, both for adults and for children, Grahame knew what flowers bloom where and in what order, as in this famous passage about the riverbank:

Purple loose-strife arrived early, shaking luxuriant tangled locks along the edge of the mirror. . . . Willow-herb, tender and wistful, like a pink sunset cloud, was not slow to follow. Comfrey, the purple hand-in-hand with the white, crept forth to take its place in the line; and at last one morning the diffident and delaying dog-rose stepped delicately on the stage, . . .⁸

In *The Wind in the Willows*, the River Thames is almost a character in its own right. When the Mole, in the first chapter of the book, suddenly comes upon it, he is overwhelmed, and sees it as alive, like himself:

Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh . . .⁹

His friend the Water Rat perceives it even more intimately:

It's brother and sister to me, and aunts, and company, and food and drink and (naturally) washing. It's my world and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got is not worth having, and what it doesn't know is not worth knowing.¹⁰

The Mole and the Rat live in cozy burrows in a safe and beautiful rural landscape, but sometimes they venture into the Wild Wood, Grahame's sometimes sinister version of the enchanted forest. The Wild Wood is dangerous: to survive there, as Rat says:

. . . there are a hundred things one has to know. . . . passwords and signs, and sayings which have power and effect, and plants you carry in your pocket, and verses you repeat, and dodges and tricks you practice. . . .¹¹

When the Mole first enters the Wild Wood, he finds it exciting, but he soon begins to imagine supernatural terrors:

Twigs crackled under his feet, logs tripped him . . . trees crouched nearer and nearer, and holes made ugly mouths at him on either side. . . .

It was over his shoulder, and indistinctly, that he first thought he saw a face: a little evil wedge-shaped face looking out at him from a hole. When he turned and confronted it, the thing had vanished.¹²

The Rat realizes that the Mole is missing, and goes to rescue his friend, but soon they are both hopelessly lost, and it begins to snow heavily. They are saved by stumbling upon the underground home of their friend Mr. Badger, who is large and strong enough not to be afraid of the weasels and stoats and foxes that live in the Wild Wood. But the place remains threatening. When they leave, “. . . looking back, they saw the whole mass of the Wild Wood, dense, menacing, compact, grimly set in vast white surroundings.”¹³

The natural world, and the animals that live there, are for Grahame more enduring than the human civilization that sometimes seems to have triumphed over them. The Wild Wood and the Badger’s underground house, it turns out, are built on the ruins of an earlier human city. But as the Badger says:

People come—they stay for a while, they flourish, they build—and they go. It is their way. But we remain. There were badgers here, I’ve been told, long before that same city ever came to be. And now there are badgers here again. . . . And so it will ever be.¹⁴

In a famous later chapter of the book, which takes place at the most magical time of the year, midsummer’s eve, the Mole and the Rat see a figure whom they recognize as a great god. Kenneth Grahame does not name him, but since he plays pipes and leaves hoof marks in the turf, it is clear that he is the classical nature god Pan, who was traditionally the protector of small animals. At the time, Pan was a popular figure in British literature: he appears in much poetry and fiction, and also is suggested in the name of J. M. Barrie’s boy hero, Peter Pan, who refused to grow up and lived on a wild island.

A. A. Milne’s Pooh books can be seen as a quieter, more domesticated version of *The Wind in the Willows*, one in which humor plays a larger part. Most of Milne’s characters are toys rather than live wild animals, and the natural dangers that sometimes threaten them are comparatively minor and humorous. Even Tigger, so violent and unpredictable at first, turns out to be lovable. Yet in Milne the power of nature is not underrated: there are floods and fogs and torrential rains and snowstorms, and the big tree in which Owl has built his house is blown down in a storm.

One common characteristic of nature in classic children's literature—as in real life—is that it is essentially random and mysterious. The Pooh books celebrate this. Nature cannot be totally understood or numbered: no one will ever know how many trees there are in the enchanted place at the top of the Forest.

Christopher Robin knew that it was enchanted because nobody had ever been able to count whether it was sixty-three or sixty-four, not even when he tied a piece of string round each tree after he had counted it. Being enchanted, its floor was not like the floor of the Forest, gorse and bracken and heather, but close-set grass, quiet and smooth and green. It was the only place in the Forest where you could sit down carelessly, without getting up again almost at once and looking for somewhere else.¹⁵

Nature in the Pooh books is also timeless. Christopher Robin will grow up and go away to school, but (as he promises Pooh) in another sense he will always be there in the enchanted place at the top of the Forest. Of course, the idea of a magical grove of trees at the top of a hill has a long history and many reverberations in British folklore and history. Such places were the site of prehistoric burial mounds, and even today these groves of trees can be seen all over the British countryside; often these are the locations that contemporary British pagans and druids and white witches choose for their ritual celebrations. They are sacred places, somehow outside of time.

Not all classic children's books, of course, present nature as wholly benevolent or even manageable. In the tales of J. R. R. Tolkien, for instance, some trees, like Treebeard, are wise and good; others are malevolent. I love willows, which here in Ithaca are the first to put out leaves in the spring and the last to lose them in the fall. But in English folk tradition, as Tolkien knew, the willow plays an ambiguous role, and his willows are dangerous. This is also true in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, where the Whomping Willows delight in slapping and hitting anyone who gets too close to them.

There are also classic children's books in which nature becomes irrational and unstable. In *Alice in Wonderland*, animals boss Alice about and make fun of her, and in *Through the Looking Glass*, she enters a secret garden in which flowers criticize her nastily, and she cannot get anywhere no matter how fast she runs.

When nature is not irrational, it can still be dangerous, as in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series or L. Frank Baum's Oz books, though in both cases the dangers do not end tragically. Wilder's family must face a series of natural disasters, including blizzards, droughts, prairie fires, and a spring flood that nearly drowns young Laura. An entire book, *The Long Winter*, tells the story of the record-breaking winter of 1880–1881, when the town is snowed in and people are on the edge of starvation, living on brown bread and water for weeks. But the Wilder family faces these hardships together and overcomes them; in the end they are stronger and closer because of what they have gone through.

The cyclone that carries Dorothy away in the first of Baum's Oz series, and the typhoon and earthquake that she encounters in later sequels, all have happy outcomes for Dorothy, since in every case she ends up in the Land of Oz. While these natural disasters are terrifying, she always faces them sensibly and bravely, just as she does other natural and supernatural dangers. She not only survives her adventures, she enjoys them. Clearly, the message of both Wilder and Baum is that nature, though unpredictable and sometimes frightening, is essentially a positive force, and that even apparently life-threatening natural catastrophes can have wonderful consequences.

Consciously or unconsciously, many of the authors of classic children's books are pantheists. For them nature is divine, and full of power to inspire and heal. But while for some, nature must be sought in the enchanted forest, for others the magical location is a garden. In their books, to go into a garden is often the equivalent of attending a Sunday service, and gardening itself may become a kind of religious act.

For Frances Hodgson Burnett, nature was intrinsically healing. She herself was a dedicated gardener, the author of a how-to book about her own garden on Long Island. In her famous children's story *The Secret Garden* (1911), two extremely neurotic, unattractive, and self-centered children are transformed by a combination of fresh air, do-it-yourself psychology, and, most of all, the discovery and restoration of a long-abandoned rose garden.

When we meet Mary Lennox in India, she is a sickly, disagreeable child whose selfish, beautiful mother never had any interest in her. No one has ever loved her and she loves no one. But even then, to amuse herself, she plays at gardening, sticking scarlet hibiscus flowers into the bare earth. Later, after both her parents are dead, she is sent home to England, and then to Misselthwaite Manor on the Yorkshire Moors, which she hates at first sight. Things begin to improve when she is sent outdoors to play:

. . . the big breaths of rough fresh air blown over the heather filled her lungs with something which was good for her whole thin body and whipped some red color into her cheeks and brightened her dull eyes. . . .¹⁶

Eventually Mary discovers the secret garden of the title. For years, like Mary herself, it has been confined and neglected. Then, as winter turns to spring, she begins to restore it, to weed and water and prune and plant, and in the process is herself restored to happiness and health. Later she is assisted in her task by a local boy, Dickon, and by her cousin Colin, who has spent most of his ten years indoors. Colin's mother died when he was born, and he has been brought up to believe that he is a crippled invalid. Yet he too is transformed and restored to health in the garden.

Sometimes in children's books the power of nature is embodied in a character, and Dickon in *The Secret Garden* is one of the most famous of these characters. Though he is only twelve years old, rough and uneducated, he is a kind of rural Pan, who spends most of his time, winter and summer, out on the moor. He can charm birds and animals by playing on his pipe, and knows all about plants—his sister says he “can make a flower grow out of a brick walk. . . .

he just whispers things out o' th' ground."¹⁷ It is Dickon who teaches Mary and Colin how to bring the secret garden back to life, and he is the first to declare that nature has spiritual powers; he calls it Magic.

"Everything is made out of Magic," [Colin says] "leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us."¹⁸

Toward the end of the book, the three children participate in what might be called a kind of spiritual communion when they have a natural-food picnic of "roasted eggs and potatoes and richly frothed new milk and oat-cakes and buns and heather honey and clotted cream."¹⁹

Frances Hodgson Burnett once wrote, "There ought to be a tremendous lot of natural splendid happiness in the life of every human being,"²⁰ and at the end of *The Secret Garden* she provides all her characters with a splendid if somewhat supernatural happy ending. Through a dream-vision of his dead wife, the restored garden summons Colin's father, who has been wandering all over Europe in a state of hopeless depression for ten years. He returns to Misselthwaite Manor, and finds that the son he had thought of as a whiny, helpless invalid is now strong and full of energy, and in the famous last scene of the book they are reunited. Planting and weeding and watering can not only change a wasteland into a garden—the moral is, it can change your life. For more than twenty years, when I taught children's literature at Cornell, *The Secret Garden* was my students' favorite book, and this was the scene that moved them most.

For Cornell's most famous literary alumnus, E. B. White, nature was also magical. His best-known book, *Charlotte's Web*, celebrates life on a New England farm that was based on his own farm in North Brooklin, Maine. The story is a kind of modern pastoral; it takes place over the course of a year, and is founded on close practical experience and observation. It tells how a little girl named Fern and a spider named Charlotte together preserve the life of a pig called Wilbur. They do it with words, in something of the same way that E. B. White, in his book, preserves a year in the life of a small New England farm in mid-twentieth-century America. The book has a happy ending for Wilbur, but it is also a kind of natural tragedy, since Charlotte, being a spider, has to die at the end of the summer. On a farm, White tells us, life and death are cyclical; but death always gives way to life, just as winter gives way to spring in this famous passage at the end of the book:

"I heard the frogs today," said the old sheep one evening. "Listen! You can hear them now."

Wilbur stood still and cocked his ears. From the pond, in shrill chorus, came the voices of hundreds of little frogs.

"Springtime," said the old sheep, thoughtfully. "Another spring." As she walked away, Wilbur saw a new lamb following her. It was only a few hours old.

The snows melted and ran away. The streams and ditches bubbled and chattered with rushing water. A sparrow with a streaky breast arrived and sang. The light strengthened, the mornings came sooner. Almost every morning there was another new lamb in the sheepfold. The goose was sitting on nine eggs. The sky seemed wider and a warm wind blew. The last remaining strands of Charlotte's old web floated away and vanished.²¹

When children read books like these, they are beginning to learn, or somehow already know, what their authors are trying to tell us: that nature is magical and that it can also be life-changing.

Notes

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