



Adult-Child Negotiations of Environmental Encounters: Mediating a Future of Hope

—Erin Spring

Hodge, Deborah. *West Coast Wild: A Nature Alphabet*, illustrated by Karen Reczuch, Groundwood, 2015. 48 pp. \$13.97 hc. ISBN 9781554984404.

Lappano, Jon-Erik, and Kellen Hatanaka. *Tokyo Digs a Garden*. Groundwood, 2016. 32 pp. \$13.97 hc. ISBN 9781554987986.

Larsen, Andrew. *Charlie's Dirt Day*, illustrated by Jacqueline Hudon-Verrelli, Fitzhenry, 2014. 32 pp.

\$18.95 hc. ISBN 9781554553341.

Wahl, Chris. *Rosario's Fig Tree*, illustrated by Luc Melanson, Groundwood, 2015. 32 pp. \$13.27 hc. ISBN 9781554983414.

Wahl, Phoebe. *Sonya's Chickens*. Tundra, 2015. 32 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9781770497894.

Wallace, Ian. *The Slippers' Keeper*. Groundwood, 2015. 36 pp. \$13.27 hc. ISBN 9781554984145.

In their seminal text *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm argue that the environment is the “most pressing contemporary issue of all” (xv), particularly because “man’s relationship with Nature is non-negotiable” (39). While issues such as gender and class have become important areas of study within literary criticism, Laurence Coupe suggests that no other issue is of similar importance than is the environment in today’s scholarly landscape. In response to the current environmental crisis, the last few decades have similarly seen a surge in

environmental criticism of children’s literature¹ in addition to an increase in the number of environmental texts for young readers. While the intersections between nature and childhood have historically underpinned the genre of children’s literature (Lesnik-Oberstein; Sigler), the pervasiveness of these texts on contemporary bookshelves reinforces this long-held correlation. Current environmental texts for young people suggest that the child’s relationship with nature is non-negotiable, and that the environment continues to be the most contemporary issue they will face.

In *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd remind us that the child's relationship with nature, broadly speaking, can be categorized in two separate ways, which both link back to eighteenth-century Romantic traditions. Firstly, children are "presumed to have a privileged relationship to nature" (6), echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief that children are inherently innocent and virtuous. Secondly, in line with the philosophies of John Locke, children are blank vessels devoid of content, and thus have no intrinsic connection with or understanding of the natural world (6). It is thus the adult's role to "educate young people into nature appreciation and analysis" (7). While drawing attention to texts that fall into these two schools of thought, Dobrin and Kidd conclude: "both that children are naturally close to nature and that nature education, even intervention, is in order . . . even if the child has a privileged relationship with nature, he or she must be educated into a deeper—or at least different—awareness" (7).

In this essay I review six picture books published in the last two years by Canadian presses: Deborah Hodge and Karen Reczuch's *West Coast Wild: A Nature Alphabet*; Jon-Erik Lappano and Kellen Hatanaka's *Tokyo Digs a Garden*; Andrew Larsen and Jacqueline Hudon-Verrelli's *Charlie's Dirt Day*; Chris Wahl and Luc Melanson's *Rosario's Fig Tree*; Phoebe Wahl's *Sonya's Chickens*; and Ian Wallace's *The Slippers' Keeper*. These texts represent a mix of the two Romantic traditions

outlined by Dobrin and Kidd. Through the interplay of word and image, the child protagonists in these picture books are depicted as being devoid of content and in need, therefore, of an education about the natural world. Yet they are also represented as virtuous and inherently connected to the natural world. The implication of this dual construction is that the child's success hinges on being connected to the natural world, while also depending on adults for the transfer of environmental awareness. Children, rather than adults, are perceived as carrying a sense of hope as well as the burden of responsibility for future generations.

In this review essay, I explore the variety of ways in which adults are positioned within these texts and conclude that they are most often the mediators of children's environmental encounters and experiences. Adults are presented as having a responsibility for ensuring that children have a connection with the natural world, often through nature "intervention" or education. A close reading of these texts dispels a set of cultural assumptions about children and childhood, adults and adulthood, and the role of the natural world in the current environmental context.

A City's Green Future

Tokyo Digs a Garden (hereafter *Tokyo*) by Jon-Erik Lappano and Kellen Hatanaka, published in 2016 by Groundwood, firmly positions its child protagonist as the future of the city, and thus its only hope for

sustainability. While the verbal text is, at times, quietly didactic, the strength of the visual text² is that it leaves much room for interpretation, resulting in a picture book that speaks to current environmental anxieties surrounding urban sprawl, deforestation, and children's lack of proximity to nature.

Tokyo, the protagonist, is a young boy who lives in a densely populated metropolis with his parents, his grandfather, and their cat, Kevin. In hues of grey, black, and navy, the first double spread depicts an expansive cityscape devoid of any green space. Sketched in sharp lines, the buildings are geometrical, creating a modernist sense of control. The family's small white house, placed in the bottom right corner, is almost pushed off the page by a crowd of bleak buildings, fast food billboards, power lines, and electric towers. The characters have no eyes, suggesting that their perspectives or worldviews are somewhat blinded or narrowed.

Through stories told by his grandfather, Tokyo comes to understand the city as it "used to be." On the second double spread, the reader, too, catches a glimpse of the city's past. The family home appears in the top right corner, perched atop rolling green hills. Trees and an abundance of colourful fox, deer, and salmon replace the urban, industrial landscape of the previous page. On the third double spread, Tokyo's grandfather explains, "the city had eaten it all up. Cities had to eat something." Images of diggers armed with forks and

knives, and buildings resembling spatulas, whisks, and graters, signify consumption, capitalism, and greed.

The narrative changes when an elderly woman appears on a bicycle, gifting the child with a handful of small seeds, which he plants under concrete bricks in his backyard. By the next morning, the space has been transformed into a garden. The remaining double spreads showcase the garden increasingly overtaking the city: moss, flora, and fauna grow atop skyscrapers; bears climb telephone poles; billboards now advertise eggplants, peppers, and carrots. Tokyo's house is foregrounded on the page, rather than being relegated to the gutter.

There is a tendency in children's literature for texts to represent a space where the adult author can live within a "fantasy of childhood" (Rose 138). *Tokyo* shifts this power dynamic. The city does not "return" completely to its original state—the rural place longed for in Tokyo's grandfather's stories. While the adults in Tokyo's life, and presumably the adult reader, might be nostalgic for the city's more rural past, there is no going back from the sprawl that has ensued. Rather, the city and garden come to coexist symbiotically in space. Buildings and power lines do not disappear from the page, but rather are minimized by the proliferation of the garden. On the final double spread, the urgency of growth represented in the previous few pages has toned down; the garden and the city appear to be harmonized. They are no longer a binary competing for space on the page.



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In the text's conclusion, it is Tokyo, the child, who declares, "[W]e will just have to get used to it," suggesting that this way of life is the expected future or that it cannot be changed. It is noteworthy that the city remains unnamed, while the child protagonist is named Tokyo. In carrying the city's name, Tokyo is symbolized as being its future. It is the child rather than the adult who takes responsibility for a sustainable, greener future. Initially, Tokyo does not have an intrinsic connection with or understanding of the garden. He is perceived as being "devoid of content" and must be instructed by adults: he does not know what to expect when the woman gives him the seeds, and his grandfather must guide him regarding when to plant them. Although Tokyo is prompted by adults to plant the seeds, the proliferation of the garden's growth suggests that he has a privileged relationship with this space—his hands rather than theirs do the hard work. The word "dig" rather than "plant" is significant, as it implies that Tokyo is actively searching for something that has been lost.

Juxtaposing "Tokyo" and "garden" in the title not only reinforces the child's privileged role in building his city's future but it also gestures to the possibility that uniting city and garden spaces is a viable way of doing so. Lappano and Hatanaka's iconotext—the synthesis of words and pictures (Hallberg in Nikolajeva and Scott, 6)—implies that it is possible to live an urban life, surrounded by the amenities of business and technology, while remaining connected to green spaces. Tokyo comes to understand these aspects of his city not as competing sides of a binary, but as an integrated whole. By presenting a realistic depiction of this symbiosis in today's globalized and urbanized society, this picture book has the potential to incite conversations about urbanization and environmental restoration with readers of all ages.

Gazing Over Backyard Fences

In Chris Wahl and Luc Melanson's *Rosario's Fig Tree* (hereafter *Rosario*) published in 2015 by Groundwood, the child is portrayed as being an empty vessel, devoid of any knowledge of the natural world. This text features a young girl who lives next door to Rosario, an elderly man who can often be found tending his vegetable garden. Throughout the text, Rosario teaches the unnamed child to care for his fig tree. While there is an exchange of knowledge between generations, as there was in *Tokyo*, the tree and garden remain the man's property: Rosario never transfers to the girl any responsibility for or ownership of the fig tree. As a result, the girl is permitted to gaze over the fence at the tree, and learn from her encounter with Rosario, but she never develops any personal sense of belonging or attachment to the garden. As the text's title suggests, it is Rosario's fig tree. Leaving the girl unnamed is at variance with the agency and futurity assigned to Tokyo.

Similarities can nevertheless be drawn between the generations represented in these two texts. While other adult characters, such as his father, are referenced in passing, Lappano and Hatanaka's narrative focuses on Tokyo's relationship with his grandfather. Comparably, the unnamed girl in Wahl and Melanson's text engages with Rosario, as well as three other elderly male neighbours. Her parents are never mentioned. Expertise in gardening and general

care for nature has skipped a generation. In doing so, the authors appear to be blaming the parents of the child characters (and by association the parents of child readers) for the environmental crises in which the characters find themselves.

Despite being the only hope for a sound environmental future, the child in *Rosario* never moves beyond gazing over Rosario's fence. She never independently digs her own garden, or even explores without the watchful eye of Rosario. Her lack of engagement, evidently mediated by Rosario, comes through most evidently in Wahl and Melanson's visual text, which is simplistic, computer generated, and sketched in a cartoon style. In *Tokyo*, Hatanaka's visuals bleed into the gutter of the page. Vibrantly coloured illustrations occupy the entire double spread, leaving no white space on the page, encouraging the reader to look carefully, read slowly, and become engaged alongside Tokyo. Conversely, in *Rosario*, the visual text is often separate from the verbal text. On the eighth double spread, for instance, three small thought bubbles hover on the white space of the page, each containing short phrases. The lack of interaction between the visual and verbal texts brings to mind the child's own physical and emotional disconnection from the garden. Her detachment is further reiterated through the verbal text. The girl frequently refers to Rosario as a "magician" because of the knowledge that he holds. Both adult and child

repeat words such as “know” and “learn.” In doing so, the space is never fully quite the child’s, because it is always mediated through the adult. By contrast, Tokyo takes risks in space and is given the freedom to explore on his own.

The interdependent relationship between urban and garden spaces that is achieved in *Tokyo* is never realized or even visualized in Wahl and Melanson’s text. Houses are close together, backyards are fenced in, trees are only just beginning to grow, and garden plots have “boards around the edges.” The space is confined, tame, and manicured. The fig tree that Rosario tends is buried in fall and winter, suggesting that it is not native to this geography. The child’s inability to engage with the space, even through play, echoes this foreignness. Because the adult figure maintains ultimate control and upholds clear-cut boundaries between urban and garden spaces, the child protagonist in *Rosario* is always at the periphery of nature, never fully integrated. While sharing his knowledge with the girl hints at his belief in the importance of caring for the fig tree, the transfer is never successfully made: the child has acquired skills, but has been distanced by the adult from coming to understand the intrinsic value of the lessons he has shared. The sense of hope for the future that is assigned to Tokyo by his adult counterparts is not mirrored in *Rosario*, where nature ultimately belongs to the adult.

Growing Tomatoes in the City

Charlie’s Dirt Day (hereafter *Charlie*) by Andrew Larsen and Jacqueline Hudon-Verrelli, published in 2015 by Fitzhenry and Whiteside, likewise relies on intergenerational knowledge transmission to educate the child about urban gardens, with the recurring incentive of preparing the child for a particular environmental future. Charlie, the young protagonist, lives in an apartment building in an unnamed urban centre. On the second double spread, evidently curious about the world beyond his apartment walls, and thus not entirely devoid of intrinsic knowledge, Charlie looks down from his balcony to see a crowd of people congregating in the park. Charlie and his father follow them, to where a large pile of compost is being given away to pedestrians. “I wish I had a garden,” Charlie proclaims. An elderly man named Mr. Martino explains that he has a balcony garden. He gives Charlie a pot and a seed, and instructs him to water his plant daily.

Through its emphasis on questioning, the verbal text reiterates Charlie’s initial lack of knowledge: “Compost? What’s that?” “What are you going to do with all that compost?” While the environmental urgency illustrated in *Tokyo* is absent here, the free compost being shared in the park indicates that there *is* an incentive to increase the production of food grown within the city—and that children can be part of this initiative. The maturation of Charlie’s plant from seed to fruit mirrors his own physical growth through the

second half of the text, suggesting that his newfound proximity to nature is preparing him to an increased sense of independence in the world. On the eighth double spread, an adult is seen giving Charlie a pot of soil. For the next four double spreads, Charlie appears on his own—planting, watering, and tending his tomato plants, the kind of embodied learning missing in *Rosario*. Much like Tokyo, Charlie is guided by an adult figure but is then given the freedom to practice and explore newly acquired skills on his own. On one of the last double spreads, Charlie is seen cooking spaghetti with Mr. Martino, using ingredients they have grown independently. Despite being a child, Charlie is presented as being fully capable of participating in urban renewal, like Tokyo. While Rosario teaches without transferring any tangible knowledge to his child neighbour, Charlie and Tokyo are left changed (and more prepared for their futures) through intergenerational knowledge transmission. The final double spread of *Charlie* contains step-by-step instructions for composting, growing vegetables in pots, and building rooftop gardens, positioning child readers as participants in this endeavour.


In earthy shades, the final double spread of Larsen and Hudon-Verrelli's text features Charlie on his balcony, surrounded by pots of vegetables and flowers. While the balcony is a reminder that Charlie lives in a confined urban space, his rooftop garden speaks to the reality of urban and natural spaces existing

symbiotically, rather than as binaries, and to the child's ability to participate meaningfully in this process.


Life and Death on a Farm

In focusing entirely on a rural place, *Sonya's Chickens* (hereafter *Sonya*) by Phoebe Wahl, published in 2015 by Tundra Books, moves us away from the integrated representation of urban spaces represented in the first three texts. Wahl's picture book features a female child protagonist, Sonya, who learns about nature from living on her family's farm. She is one of only two characters in these picture books who lives in a rural setting, and is the only visibly mixed-race character. While she inevitably learns from her parents, Sonya is depicted from the very beginning as having an innate, privileged relationship with nature. This intimacy is evident from the cover, which places Sonya at centre stage, holding a bright white hen against her chest. Tall, yellow sunflowers and a backdrop of deep green trees surround her on the page. She appears comfortable and independent in nature in a way that the other child protagonists have had to learn to be. With that said, there are still difficult lessons that Sonya needs to learn on the farm, particularly about life and death; these are delivered through her parents.

While Wahl's text gives the child agency in nature, it also upholds conventional gender norms in that it depicts Sonya as having a maternal connection with the hens that live in her backyard. "I'll be your mama,"



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she tells them. We are repeatedly told that Sonya “is a good mama” to them. Her independence on the farm and her maternal instincts suggest that she is prepared to be its future custodian. The picture books reviewed thus far have relied on an adult male to fill the child's gaps in knowledge or to provide the instructional lesson. When a fox takes one of Sonya's young hens to feed her kits, Sonya's father takes the opportunity to teach her about the cycle of life. For three double spreads, the verbal text becomes somewhat informational. The father provides the facts of life and death through storytelling, which stops the narrative from being overly didactic or instructional.

For the first time in this review, it is the child's parent that delivers the knowledge, rather than a much older relative or neighbour. While Sonya's father is inevitably mediating her experience of this space, the transfer of knowledge feels intimate and expected because it is coming from him. On a final double spread, the entire family joins Sonya in the yard as she holds a funeral for her hen. The sorrow evident on Sonya's parents' faces signals that they feel their child's grief, thereby reinforcing Sonya's agency. In this instance, Sonya and her father are on the same level—there is no hierarchy between the adult and child—two people comforting one another. It is not a contrived, cautionary encounter with nature, but one that is lived and embodied on a daily basis. Wahl's picture book approaches the difficult realities of nature in a comforting yet realistic manner.

The Child as Custodian

A similar depiction of a child's innate, unmediated relationship with nature, particularly a rural space, is presented in Ian Wallace's *The Slippers' Keeper* (hereafter *Keeper*), published by Groundwood in 2015. This picture book tells the story of Joe Purdon, born in 1914,

who was an early conservationist in Canada. It begins with Joe's teenage years, when he and his dog Laddie came across a cluster of wild orchids in bloom on his family's farm in eastern Ontario. Rather than learn more about the industrial side of the family farm, and thus adhere to family gender norms, Joe decides to dedicate his time to caring for the orchids, and becomes an expert in their particular needs. Joe's freedom on the farm mirrors Sonya's: he is often alone with Laddie in the woods, implying both comfort and knowledge of space. While adults occasionally appear on the pages, such as his teacher and his mother, much of Joe's education about the natural world is obtained through personal, self-guided exploration.

We witness Joe grow from childhood into adulthood. The verbal text, in particular, makes visible the change that accompanies this transition. The narrative is intercepted with elements of non-fiction, such as the fact that after Joe's death, sixteen thousand Showy Lady's Slippers were entrusted to a conservation authority for preservation. While offering a biography of Joe Purdon, Wallace's text reiterates that childhood is a formative age to foster environmental agency. While child Joe is presented as not needing this instruction from adults, adult Joe's legacy presumes that child readers do not have the same affinity. This transition suggests that children forget or lose this ability in their transition into adulthood.

“Wild” Spaces

Deborah Hodge and Karen Reczuch's *West Coast Wild: A Nature Alphabet* (hereafter *West Coast*), published by Groundwood in 2015, privileges the wilderness over the human-dominated landscapes such as cities and farms. In each of the five texts reviewed thus far, the focus has been on the unfolding of different adult-child relationships within varying environments. In *West Coast*, humans only appear on the first and final double spreads.

The end pages of the text feature a close-up of sea life, including coral, shells, and the surf, foreshadowing the prevalence of the seascape in this place. The first double spread reinforces the size and scope of the natural world: it features a child in a red raincoat on the right-hand side of the page, gazing up in awe at the towering rainforest above. The child is small enough on the page that there is no expression of gender identity. In other words, it is the child's surroundings that matter, here, rather than the child itself. Interestingly, the child is alone on the page, not in the company of an adult, suggesting that the character, linking back with Sonya and Joe, has an innate relationship with nature, and is given freedom in space by the adults in his or her life.

Several of the picture books reviewed thus far use differences of scale to signal the importance of the natural world. As in *Sonya* and *Tokyo*, nature spills over the gutters of the double spreads in *West Coast*, consigning all signs of human life to the edges of the

page. Each page features a different animal that can be found in this place, including bears, wolves, whales, and cougars. The animals are large and drawn in intricate detail. The reader is introduced to this place from various perspectives, such as under the ocean and up in a tree. Due to the lack of human presence on the page, and therefore within this place, the reader is in the privileged position of viewing this space in its organic form. While the verbal text is more informational than instructional, the proximity to nature that is provided through the visual text is quietly didactic, working as a warning of what might be lost if we are not careful custodians of this place.

The child appears again on the final double spread, but is now joined by another human figure. For the first time in the books selected for this review, the text is void of any adult–child dialogue or instruction, leaving it up to the reader to interpret the book’s overarching message. The first double spread of the text reads: “would you like to visit this special place? Come and explore the Pacific West Coast!” The picture book serves as an invitation to visit this place and to learn about the ecosystems that exist there. The absence of people within the iconotext, however, suggests that this coastline is a natural oasis that is best left untouched. The best way of “visiting” is through reading. As if to confirm this, the end pages contain information about the protection of the Pacific Coast Region and Great

Bear Rainforest, which seems to go against the invitation to visit offered on the first double spread.

Concluding Thoughts

Five of these six picture books position adults as the mediators of children’s environmental encounters and experiences. The titles and cover pages of these texts foreshadow the adult–child relationships that are negotiated within their pages. Wahl and Melanson’s cover depicts Rosario, the adult, standing beside the child protagonist. While they appear to be working together to plant the fig tree, it is clear that Rosario is in charge, while the unnamed child stands in attention. The cover of *Rosario* thus suggests that the agency remains with the adult character—even though the unnamed child is learning to tend to her natural surroundings, the space ultimately does not belong to her, denying the child any possible agency.

Conversely, the children’s names in *Tokyo*, *Charlie*, and *Sonya* are not only featured in the titles but the children are also prominently and independently illustrated on the covers, signalling their agency within the texts. *Sonya’s Chickens* insists that the chickens belong to Sonya. While her father is responsible for teaching her about the cycle of life, Sonya’s innate sense of belonging within the natural world goes beyond his teachings. Similarly, *Tokyo’s Garden* implies that the urban garden belongs to Tokyo. He is therefore responsible for the regrowth and

regeneration of the city. While Joe's name does not appear in the title of *The Slippers' Keeper*, there is no doubt that he is the keeper of the Showy Lady's Slippers. While these child characters each engage

with adult figures and are the receptors of their knowledge to varying degrees, the texts' visual and verbal interactions reinforce their innate curiosity and love for the natural world.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Curry; Jaques; Kahn and Kellert.

² *Tokyo Digs a Garden* was the recipient of the 2016 Governor General's Award for Illustration.

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