



## **Children's Books and Colour Ecstasy: Humans' Disconnection from Nature and What We Should Do About It** — Wanderley Anchieta

Gamblin, Kate Moss. *Lake: A See to Learn Book*.

Illustrated by Karen Patkau, Groundwood, 2020. 24 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 9781554988815.

Lebeuf, Darren. *My Forest Is Green*. Illustrated by

Ashley Barron, Kids, 2019. 32 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 9781771389303.

Lebeuf, Darren. *My Ocean Is Blue*. Illustrated by

Ashley Barron, Kids, 2020. 32 pp. \$19.99 hc. ISBN

9781525301438.

Ryan, Candace. *Red Light, Green Lion*. Illustrated by Jennifer Yerkes, Kids, 2019. 40 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781525300158.

Weisman, Kay. *If You Want to Visit a Sea Garden*.

Illustrated by Roy Henry Vickers, Groundwood, 2020. 32 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 9781554989706.

Cao Dewang, a Chinese billionaire featured in *American Factory*,<sup>1</sup> said: “The China of my youth was poor. . . . I feel I was happier then. Now I live in a new era of prosperity and modernity, but I have a sense of loss. *I miss the croaking frogs and chirping bugs of my childhood. The wild flowers blooming in the field*” (emphasis added). He then ponders whether he is a monster for destroying the environment with his many factories or a social benefactor. *My Forest Is Green* (Lebeuf) tells the story of a boy who meanders through the forest near his home. In establishing his strong connection to nature, and nature’s colours in particular, he picks up stones to paint or makes use of coloured paper and collages to imaginatively rebuild trees or insects; the book thus touches on the very delicate question of the artificiality that surrounds our daily lives, celebrating the very active relationship the boy has with his natural environment. Michael Taussig addresses modern society’s demand for instant gratification, which echoes the surge in demand for and production of artificial

colours two centuries ago: “It was indigo, with its Sanskrit-derived name, *nila*, meaning blue, that provided the name for the substance in coal tar—*aniline*—that spawned mauves, reds, yellows, greens, and blues, and, with them, modern chemistry” (218-19). Taussig’s remark is not an exaggeration; the desire for colour provoked British-, French-, and German-funded research into the chemical production of artificial colours, which would make colour available and accessible to everyone.<sup>2</sup> The global race for colour also influenced the production of medicines, pesticides, perfumes, soaps, plastics, glass, and other products. Sean Cubitt explains that those aniline dyes discovered “in March 1856 by the eighteen-year-old William Henry Perkin of Shadwell . . . ended the centuries-old guild craft of making up paint from pigments and linseed oil” (130). Both Cubitt’s and Taussig’s arguments highlight how colour production generated immense profits—most of which were concentrated in Germany, especially for the chemical company IG Farben.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the artificial colours that surround modern humans, the books under review here prominently feature nature’s colours: they celebrate our reconnection to nature and its colours, like the boy from Darren Lebeuf and Ashley Barron’s *My Forest Is Green*, at a time when most of us have been separating ourselves from it. On the first page of the book, the boy points to a real forest that exists as a view from his balcony and states, “This is my forest.” On the next page, he is at home with lots of coloured drawings based on the actual forest. He remarks: “Well, actually... *this* is my forest.” This is where many youngsters reach out to nature: as an imaginative act, rather than a physical connection. The book addresses this question very delicately, interweaving sections where the boy contemplates or crafts homages to his beloved forest, with long passages of him inside it.

All these books target the balance of the synthetic and natural; even the books themselves, their physical existence, is industrial in nature: prints are made of a remarkable number of chemical products that compose both paper and dyes, and yet they do not acknowledge their industrial form. This self-awareness would require complicated and monotonous explanations that would bore both children and adults. Instead, the synthetic essence of our daily lives has become a given, but in Lebeuf and Barron’s *My Forest Is Green*, the child ventures out into the real forest. In doing so, he reconnects with the world around him and has a corporeal and

<sup>1</sup> *American Factory* is a 2019 American documentary film by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert about the Chinese company Fuyao’s factory in Moraine, Ohio. It follows workers, managers, and the chairman Dewang through many phases of the plant’s existence.

<sup>2</sup> By comparison, in the Middle Ages, ultramarine blue could cost more than three times its weight in gold.

<sup>3</sup> IG Farben was the biggest industrial complex of the twentieth century: a chemical and pharmaceutical conglomerate formed in 1925 from a merger of six companies—BASF, Bayer, Hoechst, Agfa,

Chemische Fabrik Griesheim-Elektron, and Chemische Fabrik vorm. After being seized by the Nazis during the Second World War, they fabricated “the final solution,” a pesticide named Zyklon B.

vivid encounter, what Richard Shusterman would call a somaesthetic experience (19). He uses his body to move around, run, jump, touch, smell, and lift rocks, and in doing so makes use of his corporeal self to grasp and acknowledge the world.

In Lebeuf and Barron’s subsequent story, entitled *My Ocean Is Blue*, colour is again a motif in a young girl’s connection to the beach. In this sense, her immersion sparks poetic descriptions. “My ocean is big” is written in front of a drawing of a petit girl facing the immensity of the sea, while on the same page, a close-up of her hands makes them appear enormous while she holds a mollusk and states, “My ocean is small.” In this sense, this book deals with a girl who spends most of her time *physically* at the beach. So, the colours she sees and names are a kind of reclamation of nature: while on a kayak, she says, “My ocean is blue. Deep Blue, quite blue, loud blue, endless blue.” She watches the whales hum, echoing Dewang’s reminiscence of the chirping birds he heard before his industrial plants started polluting the world and rendering it quiet. The girl has a strong bond to the beach: she oversees the high and low tides and notes, with care, every single detail of it, again, with special attention to its lustrous colours: “vibrant pink,” “rusted orange,” and even “balanced gray.”

Currently, almost every colour humans have within reach is synthetic. Cubitt describes a “particular yellow” (114), which is “no longer the yellow of daffodils or custard, but a free-floating quality of perception, disassociated from any object or system of meaning. . . . colours that once had the very smell of their sources embedded in them [now are] anonymous industrial commodities ready packaged in identical tubes” (114-15). We see the synthetic substituted for the natural in the crayon the boy of *My Forest Is Green* dabbles with, while the text reads, “My forest is smooth.” The fact that colour is not made directly from any natural substance has some implications. First and foremost, colours become arbitrary. They emulate the natural but do not have any actual relation to real colours. In that sense, they bear some resemblance to a certain point. The lack of coincidence matters because it marks the utter separation between humans and nature itself. As human life becomes more and more synthetic, people not only read colours that are made in a laboratory but also digest, daily, food designed through chemical industry. Although we use conventional and arbitrary systems, such as RGB, CMYK, Pantone, HSL, RAL, and others, to furnish the disconnection of the colours people

use and the ones found in nature,<sup>4</sup> these books are fundamental to help everyone remember where colours originally come from.

It is interesting to note that since science rendered colour readily available, the entire spectrum of visible colours resulting from splitting white light have been produced from a completely dark substance: black tar or coal. In this way, “for ill as well as good, [William] Perkin began the technical democratization of colour. One impact was the decimation of the markets for natural dyes such as indigo and madder” (Cubitt 131). It was not only the market for natural dyes that suffered from obliteration: nature—in the sense of natural, untouched—has been replaced through industrialization. Almost everything humans have within reach bears marks of artificiality: from the colours that shine on children’s books to the dyes used to paint chocolate, clothes, walls, even the pixels that illuminate computer screens. In this sense, *My Forest Is Green* and *My Ocean Is Blue* are powerful texts that show an important attitude toward life itself, encouraging a reconsideration of the natural world through the fresh eyes of youngsters and their observations of and participation in natural environments. Two sets of colour patterns emerged from the industrial production of colour. The stories describe colours generated by a reflection of sunlight produced by organic material inside the protagonist’s eyes—as the varying tones of blue the girl senses. On this matter, the girl astutely notices that the beach houses a wondrous explosion of thousands of colours. So, she points at a shell’s “faded” whites, crabs’ “runaway” reds, and stones’ “polished” greens.

The next two books under review deal chiefly with water. *Lake: A See to Learn Book*, written by Kate Moss Gamblin and illustrated by Karen Patkau, is awirl with questions about nature and reminds young readers of all the natural beauties that exist. This kind of nature-centric text also offers opportunities for the adult reading to a child to look again at the world around them. A lustrous page featuring an adult silhouette that points at the dark sky beside a child, in a place where the blue of the lake almost intertwines with the blue hovering in the sky above, asks: “Do you see the trees, dark against the indigo sky, embracing the lake? They stand, quietly at their starlit work, putting the day to bed.” These books assert the need to maintain connections to the organic, the raw, the natural. Humans must respect the environment and model this respect for children. *Lake* showcases an impressively simple how-to: for instance,

<sup>4</sup> Some of the implications of this change can be seen in the very complex processes involved in the restoration of grand classic paintings. As an article in *Scientific American* explains, the natural pigments are “an acrylic time bomb” (Brazil). Not that synthetic colour is better in that respect: all colours fade over time (see Ball 3). Colour is always on the verge of disappearance, making it a very delicate artifice.

the father and son swim in the lake instead of a chemically treated pool, reinforcing their reconnection with the natural. Instead of watching a documentary on a screen, the father and son regard the swans “and their cygnets, their feathers lightening through their first autumn, only their feet busy yellow”—*in natura*, in touch with the real place. Together, they also watch “silvery tumbles” near a bevy of otter cubs not during a visit to the zoo, where locked animals are displayed as curiosities, but in close contact with the raw, the wild, the untamed marvellousness of nature. *Lake* reminds us, page by page, that nature is an integral part of our existence.

*If You Want to Visit a Sea Garden*, authored by Kay Weisman and illustrated by Roy Henry Vickers, is yet another homage to the grace of life: “If you perch near the top of the wall, you can see creatures on both sides. Whelks and sea cucumbers, fish fry and kelp, sea stars and bat stars, hermit crabs and rock crabs, chitons, barnacles and octopuses all make their homes on this beach.” In foregrounding the theme of being around and involved with the natural world, this book showcases both the relationship between a loving father and his son and the value of the diversity of life. A beautiful illustration of “dancing clams” accompanies the following text: “Listen closely for the symphony of clams, welcoming us to their beach. Here, there and everywhere they spurt and sputter, exhaling right on cue.” The motif of reconnection, of being close to nature, recurs and not just reassociation with the wild, the raw. The book also teaches respect, as the father warns his son to recognize and value life: “*Step carefully* so you don’t slip on the rocks. *Many of them are covered with barnacles*—tiny creatures that live inside sharp shells” (emphasis added). In yet another moving passage, on a page that is bathed in the colours of sunlight, another guidance reaffirms all four books’ commitment to respecting nature: “We’ll need to tend our garden before we leave. . . . [W]e can gently rake them [clamshells] into the beach. . . . [This] will give new clams room to grow.”

*Red Light, Green Lion* by Candace Ryan and Jennifer Yerkes is a playful book that ends every page with the syllable “li-,” the start of a word that is then completed on the next page. This premise is as clever and eye-catching as the protagonist: a green lion who is waiting for a green traffic light to cross the street and is caught by many surprises while he waits. One thoughtful passage reads, “Some days, we meet others in need. Red Light, green li...vestock. (livestock)

And we can choose to show kindness.” Kindness and respect are two substantives that should become, immediately, a must to all. By and by, these books reveal their true intent. As the lion waits, the text reminds the reader: “Some days, we find tiny things that need tender care. Red light, green li...lac. (lilac).” *Red Light, Green Lion* continues the project of these many books: reconnection, acknowledgement, and all those acts necessary for us to re-establish balance between our artificial world and the natural one. The book is, in this respect, very subtle. In yet another thoughtful passage, the green lion mentions some “amazing things” that humans take for granted and mostly ignore, like “[r]ed light, green li...ghting bugs (lightning bugs).” In this regard, the lion is delicately reminding humanity of its tendency to overlook what surrounds it. Perhaps, if humans continue to live according to the changeless pace of consumerism, there will someday only be silence: no chirping bugs or humming whales.

A common thread softly imbued in the collection of books under review is the appreciation of colour and the natural environment. These books explain in playful fashion the connection between expressing colour and acknowledging nature. At the same time, they elegantly display a recognition of the small acts, the beautiful things in life that we take for granted in our daily rush, like a glance at the stars with your child, or taking care of flowers, or simply being alive in this wondrous world of natural colourfulness. Although all colours humans use are synthetic, a more sweeping realization of their real origins would be a gigantic leap forward to a humbler approach to Earth’s interconnected ecosystems.

Each of these books offers opportunities for language learning as they make use of many synonyms so that children can develop their vocabularies while enjoying the visuals of the stories. This is a powerful tool to aid learning, for it occurs playfully within the stories. In this regard, while distracted by the gorgeously coloured pages, and focused on the stories the books unravel, children’s understanding of new words emerges in a genuine way.

All these books will activate the child’s imagination and encourage curiosity about the world surrounding them and its delights, as they all deal categorically with the recurring motif of being around nature. Future generations must be educated to admire and respect the natural world. At the same time, the books should encourage adults to rethink their inescapable relationship with nature.

<sup>5</sup> It is a paradox. Even artists, who would seemingly embrace colours, have a truly complicated history with them. When William Eggleston showed coloured photographs at MoMA in 1976, it scandalized the art world, so much so that he has been attacked for decades.

David Batchelor offers the following observations on colour: “These days I would say that our relationship with colour is best described as ambivalent: most of us are both drawn to and repelled from color; we experience strong and simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion, even of love and hate towards it” (13).<sup>5</sup> Colour tantalizes. It slanders. It appalls. It also provides the deepest “spiritual harmony” (Kandinsky 58). The ultra-vibrant-very-beautiful colour imprinted on the pages of these books serve to impress and invite readers, young and old, to reengage with nature. They also bear the scars of colour history: it was our desire to have colour at our grasp, when only the rich could afford it, that generated modernization, industrialization, and placed nature in danger. There is still time to be gentle, as the Green Lion insists, tenderly. Or as Weisman and Vickers suggest on a page where the colours simulate an awe-inspiring sunrise: “If you want to visit a sea garden... you’ll have to get up really early, *but it will be worth it*” (emphasis added).

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