



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Exploring the writer's relationship with the more-than-human by traversing Mabi Forest: Towards an integrated perspective in middle-grade eco-narratives

Abstract:

The relationship between a writer and the more-than-human influences the writing of eco-narratives. Many middle-grade eco-fiction novels take an egocentric view, positioning humans at the narrative centre while relegating the more-than-human as either a backdrop or a cornucopia at humanity's disposal. This paper explores how a sense of place fosters an ecocentric perspective by integrating empathetic mimesis and emotional qualia into the narrative fabric. The choice of middle-grade literature is deliberate, as this developmental stage is pivotal for shaping children's evolving sense of self and their relationship with the world. Field research conducted in the critically endangered Mabi Forest in North Queensland's Atherton Tablelands employed an iterative approach of research-led and practice-led research to enrich understanding of the region and forge a connection with place. Through immersive activities including photography, hiking and community engagement with a local revegetation group, this paper elucidates how such experiences inform a writer's sense of place, subsequently shaping the portrayal of interconnectedness between the human and more-than-human within their written works. Writers that form an emotional connection with the more-than-human imbue the narrative with themes that encourage readers to adopt a more ethical stance and instil a sense of responsibility towards the care and preservation of our shared environment.

Biographical note:

Ola Kwintowski is a PhD Candidate at UniSC exploring interconnectivity between the human and more-than-human to promote empathy and engagement within environmental narratives. Ola's writing is a culmination of a decade of experience as a professional photographer, combined with her love for literature. Her works have been published *TEXT*, *SWAMP*, *Jacaranda*, *Verge*, *Social Alternatives*, and reviews for *Sisters in Crime*.

Keywords:

More-than-human, emergence aesthetics, aesthetics of care, ecocriticism, place

Introduction

The removal of nature to accommodate human comfort or benefit is a common recurring theme. In recent months there has been much debate about dredging, expansion and deep-sea mining that will have direct destructive impact on the ecosystem in Great Barrier Reef in Northern Queensland (Marine Conservation, 2024), as well as land clearing of ancient forests in Takayna, Tasmania – Australia's largest temperate rainforest and second largest in the world (Bob Brown Foundation, 2024). Greed, short-sightedness and human-supremacy overpower the ability to make thoughtful decisions.

Renowned biologist, environmental activist and writer, Rachel Carson, eloquently stated,

Modern man seldom forgets that he cannot exist without the plants that harness the sun's energy and manufacture the basic food required for his survival... If we see utility in a plant we foster it. If for any reason we find its presence undesirable or merely a matter of indifference, we may condemn it to destruction forthwith. (1962, p. 69)

It is not just plants that are at risk of being commodified by humans. The more-than-human, which includes entities such as plants, animals, insects, microorganisms, ecosystems, abiotic elements, landscapes and ecosystems, are often treated as an asset for human use, something to tame or control. This perspective is reflected in news stories as well as in the narratives we read and allow our children to read. Humans are either destroying nature or portraying themselves as heroes to save it (Echterling, 2016).

What can be done to disrupt this way of thinking? What is the required change to stir empathy and alter the direction of the conversation towards conservation. Echterling (2016) confirms a popular view, that narratives reflect our values and culture. Therefore, there is a need to adjust the narrative to include the more-than-human as a source to inspire to and care about.

A renowned children's literature scholar and ecocritic, Clare Bradford, argues that literature requires a call for "a new world in which nature and culture are rewoven" (2011, p. 104). With this as inspiration, I set out to create a narrative inspired by an Australian landscape (nature) that I could explore and connect with for a deeper understanding of the ecological and ecopolitical themes (culture). To prepare for this challenge there were a few important factors that required attention.

Firstly, it was important to explore the connection with nature through an understanding of connection to *place*. Gaston Bachelard, a philosopher, who in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, claims that a writer's depiction of a place within a story is highly influenced by an emotional and psychological connection (1994). This paper will unpack how, as a writer, my connection to place through fieldwork, hiking and community engagement, affected my emplacement with nature, and the more-than-human, and impacted my writing.

Charles Foster, naturalist, writer and philosopher, committed wholeheartedly to immersing himself in the more-than-human by adopting the lives of five different animals as research for

his book *Being a Beast* (2016). He lived, fed and migrated as the animals would in their respective habitats, aiming to gain a profound understanding of their experiences. Foster's insights from his great undertaking are incredibly informative, delightfully engaging and honest. There is emphasis on the importance of empathy and connection that is gained from such an immersion that he contrasts against the modern humans disconnect. Foster (2016) challenges the assumptions we make of animals and encourages a realignment of our perspective that he believes is necessary to protect the more-than-human world from ecological challenges.

While I wasn't prepared to live in a tree or burrow in the bush for the purpose of this paper, I was excited to take my research into the field and become a keen observer. It was crucial to identify a location rich in history, focusing on areas affected by development, species endangerment and those with an active community engaged in conservation efforts. This led me to discover and share the story of Mabi Forest, the ancestral land of the Ngadjon-ji and Yidin-ji people, located in North Queensland's Atherton Tablelands. With limited time available, I set out on a three-day intense research trip. In the lead up, I had communicated with local guides and made arrangements to engage in community activities, such as a planting day, as well as include time to explore the forest.

Over the last century, the timber and agricultural industries have been responsible for clearing 98% of Mabi Forest, leaving a scattered 9.5km² to date (Department of Environment and Science, 2021). To provide a visual appreciation, if a person took a tablespoon of water from a full litre bottle, the contents of the spoon would resemble what is left of the forest today. The clearing of the forest has resulted in many of the fauna and flora becoming endangered or extinct in the region. The deforestation has impacted pollination and threatens the microclimate with the rise of feral predators. The detriment of Mabi Forest is representative of broader ecological problems of today. Therefore, another important factor to consider, along with connection to place, is how this depiction is conveyed. In this context, the choice of language is crucial. How a sense of place is transcribed will have some impact on a reader's response.

Language has the power to shape perceptions in the way elements of the more-than-human world are portrayed. A writer has the choice to highlight empathy or reinforce stereotypes. Often, narratives that feature animals and plants are often anthropomorphised¹ and are frequently 'made into human surrogates' in stories shaped by human perspectives (Archer-Lean, 2019, p. 6). It is therefore important to approach the writing in a considered manner, taking into account relationships by incorporating a deeper understanding of ecological relationships and ethical considerations. To address the issue of anthropomorphism and human-centered narratives, the prominent ecocritic and environmental humanities scholar Kate Rigby, developed a concept of *ecopoesis* that provides a valuable framework (2006). Rigby (2006) states that *ecopoesis* addresses the relationship between human and the more-than-human by considering place, history and interactions through specific use of language and poetic expression. Rigby (2016) explores how poetic expression can shape perception of nature and

how poets use language in representation and storytelling. Rigby believes in the importance of an illumination by the 'light of things', meaning that a different perspective is required to become a recipient and to surrender old ways of thinking, and for the hidden messages of the more-than-human world to reveal themselves (2016). Rigby's article on the polyphonic song emphasises that deeper engagement and observation of the more-than-human enables humans to have a better understanding of the 'language of nature' (p. 61). While I hiked throughout Mabi Forest, I was inspired by Rigby's concept and, utilising my senses, paid attention to the multilayers of communication of the more-than-human with and around me. I collected this data in the form of written observations and photographs.

The perspective and choice of wording shapes the agency we give the more-than-human and shapes how we, as humans, position ourselves through the perspective and observations we reveal through our writing (Rigby, 2016). As writers, we use language in storytelling to generate awareness and understanding with the ambition to empower change.

Language would be further influenced by the target audience of my novel. I chose to focus on middle grade children (aged 9 to 12 years old) as this readership is at a crucial stage of identity development vis-à-vis extrinsic values and would benefit in developing connection and awareness of environmental issues (Ahn, 2011). Presently, middle-grade literature is saturated with doom narratives which can overwhelm readers, and if the problem appears too complex, writers risk readers finding the narrative unrelatable, or they become complacent. It appeared to me that middle-grade readers could benefit from a narrative that considered ecopoiesis, themes of interconnectivity and embodied an ecocentric perspective.

My emplacement within Mabi Forest guided the creation of the novel, *Saving Mabi*, with the aim to share my experience with middle-grade readers to instil a sense of empathy and promote a connection with the more-than-human in the face of ecological crisis. Gaard (2008) argues that creating interconnectivity between humans and the more-than-human, the link between self-identity and a sense of accountability is strengthened. I was curious how my storytelling technique would be impacted by my connection to such a unique environment and whether I could embody an entangled interconnection to successfully transcribe into a compelling narrative. To this end, I have endeavoured to weave my personal experiences with ecological awareness to inspire young readers to value and care for their natural surroundings.

The scope and methodology applied in this research

Field work was employed as a key methodological approach to explore and establish a connection to place. The field work served two purposes. Firstly, to experience and document the connection with the more-than-human, and secondly, to collect stories, photographs and information that would aid the creation of a middle-grade novel. It was through immersion in place and community that I gained insight into Mabi Forest's landscape, history and present-day challenges.

Saving Mabi, is a middle-grade mystery novel set in rural Northern Queensland, in the Mabi Forest. It follows the friendship of two children who become entangled in an environmental predicament where they must make moral choices that do not always have straightforward outcomes. The novel seeks to redress the challenges in eco-fiction pertaining to the representation of nature and engagement with ecological problems in ways that encourage interactivity while also promoting lateral thinking.

Investigations into eco-pedagogy, as well as how eco-narratives are constructed and read was part of my practice-led research. Then data collected from the field work (per research-led practice), guided and informed the creation of the creative artefact through what Smith and Dean (2010) refer to as the “iterative cyclic web”, where one begins at research-led practice, such as field work, and uses the acquired theory and knowledge in a specific field to inform practice-led research, including idea development and construction of the creative artefact.

Within my creative practice, I was able to stop my process, assess the work in relation to my aims and loop back into research-led practice where further knowledge or a readjustment of the theoretical framework was required. New ideas were generated before the cycle began anew. Smith and Dean (2010) argue for the importance of this methodological approach, given that it allows research to evolve with each repetition as more knowledge is gained, along with a deeper understanding of the artefact’s direction and limitations.

Field work as an essential method in writing eco-literature

As a methodology, field work, or site research, was used to explore the connection between writer and the more-than-human. This subjective method emphasises spatial immersion for researcher engagement and emotional insight (Smith & Dean, 2010):

Traditionally, the first step for a writer who wants to explore a place in her writing is to explore the place in real life. Convincing and true reflections of place on the page are a product, in part, by the writer’s foundational response to the place as she experienced it herself: this kind of on the ground field work – observation; immersion; real-time reportage and reflection; picture taking; corporeal interaction with people, atmosphere, spontaneous events – this is important, crucial work for building authentic representations of place on the page. (Scholfield-Peters 2022, p. 340)

Mabi Forest is situated near the town of Yungaburra, where I was based during my field work. It was through the act of walking that I was able to gain an appreciation and *feel* for the area. The middle-grade novel I was writing, was based on this town; hence, it was important for me to observe and absorb as much information from my surroundings. As I walked through town, I noticed subtle intricacies and character details that would enrich my writing, such as coming across the community board where I learnt about Sam teaching guitar on Tuesdays, Jean’s yoga classes at the community hall, a jewellery workshop over the weekend, a gem festival next month, and Pat offering mowing services – this added to the town’s verisimilitude. I walked past houses with neighbours talking across waist-high fences, and bikes left unchained in front of the grocery store. I met Max, a young boy who constructed “sick” jumps out of firewood for

his BMX and told me that by frying rocks on a pan, one could reach the diamond inside. I met Doug, one of the original locals, with a shed bigger than his actual house that contained a gadget for just about everything, and Chris from the second-hand bookstore with enough books to fill Doug's shed. I attended a volunteer planting group where I was involved in planting tiny saplings while humbled by their full-grown parents which shaded the centre (figure 1). I spent time with Angela and Mark who shared their infinite love and knowledge of birds, and who took me around to all the scattered parts of Mabi Forest where I was stalked by pademelons and inquisitive robins, and I trekked along Peterson Creek that meandered through the forest under a full moon in search for platypuses and tree kangaroos. It is through walking that we pay attention to the finer details and this, in turn, binds us to a place.

Author, conservationist, and self-proclaimed walker Sophie Cunningham declares that “walking opens our hearts. Thoughts stop swirling in tight circles. They loosen up. Meander. Slow down” (2015, p. 1). Cunningham (2022) states that without walking and interaction with the land, she would not be able to write or connect with the natural world; she affirms that it is essential for her process as a writer.



Figure 1: Mabi Forest Nursery

The act of walking while meticulously collecting observational data, combined with an emotional response to place, enriches methodology by providing it with greater depth and complexity.

Bachelard claims that phenomenology, the philosophical study of experience and consciousness, influences how a space is perceived (1999). He describes the experience of *seeing* a space as a poetic image that “emerges into the consciousness as a direct product of the heart, soul and being of man [sic], apprehended in his actuality” (1999, p. xviii). Past experiences, memories and values will influence how spaces are perceived; the experience is result of a blend of psychological and objective articulation.

When exploring a place, we pay attention to sounds, textures and smells, and all this influences how we write about it; our language and observations are inseparable from the feelings we experience. This includes elements and words that we include or omit; hence, the meaning we convey helps us simultaneously understand place and create it (Ward, 2014). Ward, who is an academic geographer and creative writer, found through her research on place that immersing oneself in a landscape allows the writer to reflect on themselves and their engagement with place. The experience expands beyond the mind:

the body is the means through which we experience and feel the world ... bodies are not only written upon but also write their own meanings and feelings upon a space in a process of continual remaking. (Edensor 2000, p. 100)

Researchers in the fields of creative writing, history and geography have been intrigued by the relationship between the environment and its influence on writers. Krauth eloquently likens writers to “hunters and gatherers”, commenting on his process as being “on the hunt for ideas in the environment. Walking allows the mind to be coupled to the body, the body to be coupled to the environment” (2008, p. 6). These experiences that a writer comes upon in the landscape can be explored through ways that influence their impact. Daniels and Lorimer (2012) consider that factors such as textuality (bringing unfamiliar landscapes to life through innovation and relatability), temporality (articulating the passing of time in history) and locality (considering the physical landscapes and culture) make sense of environment and add or shape meaning. Walking, immersion in the natural landscape, enhances the reliability of observations that inform and guide creative writing.

To illustrate the connection between language, place and ecological awareness, I have included an excerpt from the creative artefact, *Saving Mabi*. This example reflects two characters that are trying to find their place in nature – one from a science perspective, the other spiritual:

‘You can’t deny that the moon doesn’t affect tides – right?’

‘Right...’ I said. ‘But that’s straight science. You can measure the gravitational—’

‘So, if the moon all the way from up there can affect the oceans, why can’t it affect us? We’re primarily made of water, so what’s to say that the moon doesn’t pull the tides within us. Helping us flow within our own rhythms. Can’t it shift our internal chemistry, alter our energy and influence our peace, insight, intuition? Are we so different from the plants and animals that we share this floating rock with, as we travel through space? Don’t we thrive in light and warmth? We dance to the ebb and flow within our own watery bodies – and is it wrong to assume that the moon guides us in that? Hmm? Isn’t that science and magic blended?’ The moonlight rimmed her face and hair, and with the fog moving in, she glowed. She also looked mighty pleased with herself. ‘Just like you see science in everything, I see magic,’ she added.

The narrative integrates ecocritical principles, elevating both human and more-than-human entities to an equal plane, emphasising their interconnectedness and shared significance within the ecosystem.

Aesthetics of care: Mimesis, metis and emotional qualia

Through my own writing practices, including observational journaling, nature walks and photography, I developed a deeper entanglement with the more-than-human. This has led me to reflect upon the following questions: How can an immersive experience be translated into a narrative about the natural world effectively? How can the sights, smells, sounds, and, more intricately, feelings be transcribed into something that resembles connection?

The process of translating scientific observations into written form can be better enhanced by a clear understanding of the specific observations themselves. Biologist and philosopher Thomas Sebeok (1999) expands on the concept of “*umwelten*”, originally established by German biologist Jakob von Uexküll. The *umwelt* of a being relates to their distinct interpretation and expression in relation to the environment of that organism, meaning each entity has a unique way of communicating through signs specific to themselves (Sebeok, 1999). It is the interpretation of these signs – they may be chemical, mechanical or electrical – that allows us, humans, a closer interpretation of their meaning (Wheeler 2013). This involves moving beyond superficial descriptions of birdsong in the background to studying specific bird calls, investigating mating and social etiquettes, understanding migration behaviours and impacts of changing seasons, and integrating these insights thoughtfully into the narrative.

The theory of *aesthetics of care*, by ecofeminist Josephine Donovan, delves deeper into understanding the more-than-human *umwelt* by creating an emotional connection (2016). The theory considers “emotional qualia” of the more-than-human, an acknowledgement that each being has their own conscious experiences and emotions that they experience. She provides examples of a dog’s bark – how it could mean many different things – warning, playfulness, fear, a marking of territory, and by paying attention we become closer to a better understanding of the world around us. In this way, Donovan (2016) demonstrates that when humans immerse into the web of life and begin to interpret the signs around them specific to each organism’s *umwelt*, they move away from reasoning everything based on human values and reactions and move toward+ appreciating and understanding the world on a more spiritual and intuitive level. The relationship between human and the more-than-human shifts from “I-it”, where nature or other beings are often “othered” and seen as inferior, to an “I-thou” concept, where each being has “a story of its own [that] is worthy of attention” (Donovan, 2016, p. 80). One example of this concept comes from Charles Foster and his interactions with foxes, which explains that his immersive experience transformed his understanding of the creatures and shifted his perspective to view the more-than-human as “I-thou” (2016). It allowed him to tune in to their social dynamics and prompted broader questions pertaining coexistence and inter-species harmonious relationships.

Part of my field work involved a visit to the Tolga Bat Hospital in the region. The rescue hospital is home to orphaned bats due to an endemic paralysis tick in the summer that spreads through the bush and claims the lives of many spectacled flying foxes. The hospital extended itself to other rescued bats brought in due to snagged wings (from barbed wire) or who had been attacked by domestic animals. The experience was invaluable on many levels. It served

an educational purpose, allowing me to learn about bats – their communication, diet, social structure and temperaments – while also fostering a closer connection to individual bats, where I observed their distinct personalities and temperaments. Spending time at the hospital and listening to the carers reflect on their involvement with the bats offered an insight into the integrated lives of both humans and local fauna – some aspects were positive but many detrimental due to human thoughtlessness. The interaction allowed me to become more aware of my ecological footprint and impact on the more-than-human world, significantly influencing the themes I wrote about and the sensitivity I employed. This deeper understanding fostered a greater sensitivity and consideration towards the more-than-human, ensuring that my writing was approached from an ecocentric perspective.

Demonstrating how enhanced understanding improves representation of the more-than-human in narrative comes when one of the characters from *Saving Mabi* is observing flying foxes:

Rupert switched on the monitor and three different frequencies buzzed on the screen.

‘You see these frequencies? That’s the microbats chatting. And these? Flying foxes! Fascinating, innit?’

Ruperts love for bats was infectious. We followed him around the forest as he pointed into the trees.

‘They all have unique personalities. You see that one up there?’ He pointed towards a bat flapping its wings and screeching at its neighbour. ‘Well, he’s been picking fights with other juveniles. See, now he’s ruffled the one next to him.’ The two bats batted their wings and nudged each other while screeching. ‘Keep an eye on the one on the left for me.’ Rupert handed Zoe the viewer and rummaged through his bag. ‘I’ve got his file somewhere... I’ve been recording his interactions with the other bats, trying to work out whether it’s territorial behaviour or if there are specific bats he doesn’t get on with.’

He was cross-checking double-sided pages of notes coded with acronyms and numbers. It looked like a different language.

One particular encounter involved Gypsy, an Eastern tube-nosed bat. Gypsy resides at the hospital due to an injury – a hole in her wing caused by barbed wire – that rendered her incapable of flying and thus unable to catch food (figure 2). I witnessed as the staff hand-fed her. She willingly climbed onto their hands, then shirt, and made her way to the top of their head where she rummaged through their hair. It was a unique relationship to observe – filled with care and trust – both important elements required for a peaceful coexistence. I learnt about the complexities associated with echolocation, about the social lives of bats and about the conservation efforts in place and those that are still required. It was a privilege to see her beautifully speckled skin, the soft folds that gave her distinct nose, to look into her honey-coloured eyes – I felt an overwhelming sense of awe and respect for her. The immersion facilitated a reflective process wherein I could consider my thoughts and emotions, thereby enhancing my ability to articulate personal perceptions of the more-than-human world.

Donovan (2016) explains that when a writer considers the more-than-human through an aesthetics of care they embody *metis* by demonstrating an awareness through their writing that portrays values of the natural world. This perception is linked with *empathic mimesis*, which

reflects a deeper understanding through emotional connection. My experience at Tolga Bat Hospital allowed me to gain a more intimate insight into the lives of bats, and the close interactions brought that experience beyond the scientific and prompted an emotional attachment. I am aware that for most part the relationship was one-sided – had the bats been uninjured and in the wild, it would have been different. However, the experience, in its bias, still proved precious and offered me a fresh perspective and a closer glimpse into the lives of these exquisite creatures.

Walking through Mabi forest with my local guides provided me with information about the different plants and animals endemic to the area. I learnt about the stinging nettle, Gympie-gympie, and its excruciating properties that served as good warning to stay away, but also added a layer to my storytelling – it not only informed readers of the stinging nettle's qualities but highlighted the importance to respect the natural world and understand its unique properties (figure 3). Learning and being perceptive of the *umwelt* of different species and elements around me, equipped me with increased respect and understanding of the more-than-human. I was collecting ideas and complexities to weave through my narrative – my observations extended to themes of inter-species co-existence and the impacts of the human footprint.

The next step would be to collate the information from this experience and merge all the elements into an ecocentric and integrated narrative.



Figure 2: Gypsy, the Eastern tube-nosed bat from Tolga Bat Hospital



Figure 3: Mabi's infamous stinging nettle, Gympie-gympie

Emergence aesthetics: Art, nature and literature

The observations from the fieldwork were organised into a repertoire of forms and genres. Daniels & Lorimer, specialists in cultural geographical knowledge, have researched many works of writers striving to share stories of the land through a range of tools, for example through “photo-essay, travelogue, memoir, letters, poetry, and diary dispatches” (2012, p. 6). While many of the aforementioned methods aided me in annotating the experience, I relied mostly on storytelling and photography to share my experience with readers in *Saving Mabi*.

Photography allows reflection and can act as a trigger for memories through details captured that store information linking emotion and meaning (Loeffler, 2004). A well-constructed photograph features a specific point-of-view with elements such as lighting to dictate mood and particular framing to guide the viewers' gaze to deliver a message which has the capacity to provide more impact than words (Loeffler, 2004).

Capturing photographs, which feature in this paper, during my field work was crucial in providing a portal to the memories and feelings that helped me make sense of the experience upon quiet reflection that fuelled my creative practice. Loeffler supports this notion, claiming that forging connections between the outdoors and photography provides a greater “experience recall” and “deeper reflection” – both elements that enrich the process of writing and the end product achieved (2004, p. 61).

By including images of the forest (figure 4), I was able to share how I experienced Mabi Forest. Photography allowed to capture how the light shone along the path and fell upon the leaves –

readers could better visualise the setting as I guided them through the leaf covered path and explained the various mosses, vines and trees that were part of the biodiversity that unfolded with the narrative. Both immersion in place and the process of creating photographs profoundly impacted my entanglement with the natural world and, consequently, the perspective I imbued within *Saving Mabi*.

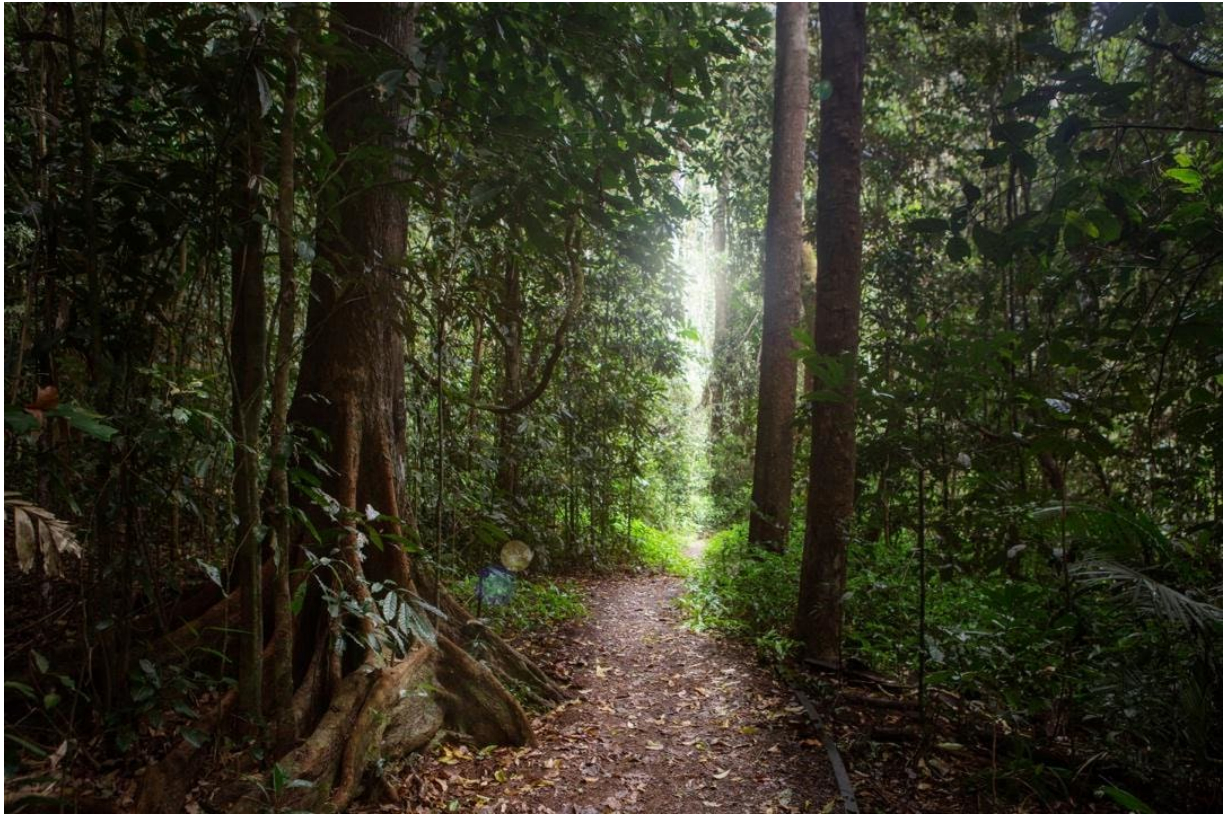


Figure 4: Hiking through Mabi Forest

A study by Mendelson and Papacharissi (2007) analysed cognitive and emotional responses related to photography accompanying fiction versus non-fiction narratives. They found that when provided a fictional narrative with an accompanying photograph, readers are more likely to think about the message than if it were a non-fiction narrative. When presented with a fictional text, readers look for deeper meaning (2007). The study explains that readers imagine themselves in the situation through the combination of reality and fiction, as opposed to being an outside observer when the text is a report of a real situation. These are welcome findings for writers and, specifically, for my construction of *Saving Mabi*. I am relying on facts and real photographs to present a fictitious story with the goal to both entertain and encourage empathy with the hope to instil environmental stewardship.

To represent Mabi Forest in an authentic way when writing the narrative, I included elements of history, biology and environmental politics that presently impact the land and local people. During my exploration of Mabi forest I made a conscious effort to slow down and pay careful attention to both external surroundings and my internal thoughts and emotions.

Gil (2018) conducted a study where participants spent time in nature and wrote haiku poems about their experience. For Gil, the attentiveness to detail stimulated “inward contemplation” that “reflect[ed] the writer’s inner world” (2018, p. 6): “Photography and writing, like other forms of art, are vehicles of personal expression that abet the development of attentiveness and inward contemplation skills” (Dewey cited in Gil, 2018, p. 4). I decided early in the project to focus exclusively on positive imagery, rather than portraying environmental devastation, due to the already prevalent negative messages. Photographs were intended to reflect beauty and hope – to provide the readers with something to strive towards and conserve, rather than potentially overwhelming or defeating the reader with images of catastrophe.

Building on the theory of aesthetics of care, where the more-than-human’s unique *umwelt* represents an individual voice, Donovan (2019) strives to express this perspective further by consolidating this voice with art, through a concept of *emergence aesthetics*: a new perspective emerges by coupling nature’s voice with art.

Art, in this case, photography, was a tool used to showcase place. Documenting the forest through photography involved slowing down and paying attention to finer details, such as how the trees interlaced with one another, how the light dappled patterns onto the ground and plants, I noticed back-lit leaves illuminated to showcase networks of vines beneath their membranes. I watched the sun set and coat the forest in purple and orange hues before it disappeared allowing the moon to cast a silver glow (figure 5). While photographing the fungi low on the ground, I smelt the damp, woody forest floor, and the musty scent of moss with sweet hints of decaying leaves (figure 6). The act of exploring place and taking photographs offered a chance to consider nature’s *voice*. The experience left me inspired and curious; I was filled with awe and respect for the creatures and landscape in which I’d become immersed. The marrying of visual information to the scientific information offered a deeper engagement, and hence a new perspective. Donovan (2016) refers to this as *empathic mimesis*, where a deeper appreciation of the human experience is created through an emotional connection with the more-than-human.

Art can be used as a communication strategy to portray the more-than-human in a way that “inherently opposes any objectification of nature” and instead “*sees* the subjectivity ... and liberates it from human objectivist domination through the artistic process” (Donovan, 2019, p. 8). The photography included in *Saving Mabi* presents a link to the more-than-human, an insight into the beauty and rawness of the natural world. The role of photographs reflected the uniqueness of the more-than-human with the intention to share an ecocentric perspective with the reader. Visual elements accompanied descriptions of *sounds*, *smells* and *emotions* as readers were *led* through the landscape.

However, are the experiences transcribed true accounts of the more-than-human? Or are they explorations of the human mind? Foster (2016) deliberated this question after his lived experience with the animals he interacted with – he questioned whether his account was more of an exploration of his re-wilding, instead of an understanding of the animals’ view of the world. I would argue, even if the recount is tapping into an ethnographic approach, the

consideration and portrayal of the more-than-human world presented with an entangled and empathetic view, is valid and invaluable – for both writer and reader.



Figure 5: Sunset over Mabi Forest



Figure 6: Fungi in Mabi Forest

During the writing process, the photographs acted as prompts for memories and emotions that aided in authenticating the narrative. I was considerate of the tone and words I chose to recount my experience. Cunningham, who aside from being a passionate nature writer and former journalist, strongly believes in the importance of words, arguing that they possess the power to “frame and constraint debates” and “affect our ability to imagine a better future” (2021, p. 130).

The impact of my depiction lay in its potential to influence readers' perspectives' by conveying the connection I experienced.

Creating positive narratives that reflect interconnections with the more-than-human world enhance the conversation about integration with nature and normalise eco-centred views (Cunningham, 2021). Presenting readers with a more entangled perspective can influence how we as a culture see, treat and respect nature. In an interview that Cunningham reported with scientist, Mike Dunlop, Cunningham affirmed that narratives that reimagine a better world are like "ripples" – "even if they can't be focused on the end point, they can be focused on a direction" (2021, p. 133).

My immersion in Mabi forest, through walking, creating photographic art, documenting my thoughts and feelings, and interacting with local people and place, resulted in a multidimensional connection that allowed me to embody an intuitive understanding and feeling of interconnectedness.

A particular scene in *Saving Mabi* which demonstrates my interconnectedness is when the protagonist experiences loss and sadness while surrounded in the beauty of nature – it is a moment for reflection, that allows readers to gain perspective about the fragility of life, emotions and nature:

The sky lit like it was on fire. It seemed unfair for it to be so beautiful. Its magnificence crushed me further into the ground.

Zoe whispered from her crumpled origami-ness. 'It feels like a thousand nettles have erupted in my heart.'

Was that heartbreak? And wasn't life filled with it? A balance of love and loss, happiness and sadness, hope and despair. The ebbs and flows within us. The absence of one makes you notice the other, and the balance of both makes you feel alive. All these emotions were making my head dizzy and my heart heavy.

The sun took its final dip, burning the sky a deep orange hue before the moon rose above us, removing all colour and coating us in a blanket of silver.

My experience emulated Donovan's theory of emergence aesthetics, where new perspective arises from the amalgamation of nature and art. My next quest was to consolidate this connection to create a middle-grade narrative with the ambition to present the more-than-human as agentic. To move forward was to consider the role of ecopedagogy.

Eco-literature and the function of ecopedagogy

Stories help us make sense of the world; through eco-literature one can explore a relationship with the more-than-human world. The onus is on the writer to present a compelling narrative that will move and inspire readers. However, the rise of ecocriticism has illuminated that, too often, nature is written into stories as a commodity for humans, and the oppressive depiction of the more-than-human world presents "problematic relations between culture and the environment" (Oppermann, 2006, p. 117). The disassociation between the human and more-than-human world abates reader empathy and, consequently, action.

Gaard (2008) argues that through the ecopedagogy of children's environmental literature, a positive correlation between literary representations of nature has a positive influence on the interconnections between humans and the more-than-human. Further, the construction of self-identity in relation (or opposition) to nature is spurred by a sense of accountability and responsibility towards it: "[When] human subjects listen to what the nonhuman world has to say ... the child is constructed as an environmental subject open to reformulation and change through interaction and empathy" (Bradford cited in Gaard, 2008, p. 16).

Gaard (2008) builds on this idea, stating that literature exploring interconnectivity, activism and the importance of ecological and inter-species justice encourages the development of a self-identity with problem-solving capacities and resilience. This concept has been more recently supported by the research of Myren-Svelstad (2020), who confirms that environmental literature has the capability to shape reader behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. However, he adds that knowledge and empathy are not enough to lead to sustainable practices – there must be a drive that leads such behaviours (Myren-Svelstad, 2020). Writers are challenged to:

find ways of dealing with the power of literature to fascinate and trouble us. To revitalize literary studies, we need to take advantage of this power of fascination as a starting point for interpretation, instead of assuming that an immersive aesthetic experience is naïve and apolitical. (Myren-Svelstad 2020, p. 5)

Myren-Svelstad (2020) encourages writers to create texts with disturbing or unclear points of view invite discussion, interpretation, and can be thought-provoking:

The essence of deconstruction is realising you [the reader] don't have to believe everything you think. At the same time, you realise that you are stuck in your reality. There is some kind of ironic gap between the openness and the stuckness. Becoming aware of this ironic gap is something that literature education can facilitate. (Myren-Svelstad 2020, p. 16)

Echterling (2016) argues that it is important to encourage organised activism or political intervention. Many eco-narratives oversimplify and depoliticise ecological crises and activism. Problems, such as littering of single-use plastics, are easily managed or corrected by protagonists on their own, and industrial and governmental culpability are overlooked. Texts that show the importance of recycling, however, promote the message to demand that companies use biodegradable and renewable materials and encourage to consume less, are more successful at inspiring action and making a real change (Echterling, 2016). It is crucial for children to understand the real effects of pollution, urban development which affects biodiversity, resource depletion, and lost animal habitats, so that they can be part of the solution and problem solving required for the future (Echterling, 2016).

During the field study, I met with a range of people, from volunteer planting attendees to representatives of environmental council groups, farmers, local business owners and conservation group leaders who provided insight about the ecological challenges of the region.

Two local groups that provided imperative information towards my research were *Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands* (TREAT), a community-based organisation that manages a rainforest nursery and organises tree planting events, and the Northern Queensland Land Management Services (NQ LMS), a group involved in nature repair and rejuvenation projects. I learnt about aspects such as philanthropic versus government funding, about the historical origins of deforestation due to the distribution of land packages to soldiers after war, impacts of mining and tourism on the environment and town development, and impacts of population growth in the region. This contextual knowledge informed the narrative complexities of *Saving Mabi*.

The novel encapsulates complexities that aren't simply 'good' or 'bad' problems; 'good' characters are placed into situations where they make 'bad' choices to fulfil their personal quests. I weaved in elements where humans interact with the more-than-human world and experience loss and happiness through situations that are natural and out of their control. This was in response to theory, suggesting that texts should not be didactic (Myren-Svelstad 2020).

Myren-Svelstad (2020) further elaborates that narrative style, using irony or wit, can influence the reader into questioning the intention of the story by promoting active reading, prompting deconstruction of a narrative's voice/s, perceptions of authority, and thematic messaging. Rather than passive engagement, active reading has the potential to develop comprehension of integral connections between self, text and nature. Through stylistic or structural elements – such as effective use of point of view, voice, juxtaposed perspectives, epistles, etc. – narrative can disrupt accepted notions of “truth” and encourage the reader to question the face value of what is written and search for deeper meaning, or navigate the portrayal of truths, engendering a more considered engagement with either the narrative's environmental themes, or our interconnectivity with the more-than-human more broadly.

In this way, a writer being more acutely aware of different species' *umwelt* has the capability to introduce new insights and fresh perspectives to their readers for an emphasis on “intersubjective relations” (Bradford, et al., 2011, p. 83). This awareness provides readers with the opportunity to connect to the narrative through an ecocentric perspective, where the human and more-than-human are both striving to understand each other without one being dominant.

Communicating real-world issues in a middle-grade novel presents a challenge of avoiding overwhelming readers with information that may be difficult to relate to. It is important to maintain a balance between incorporating scientific and factual information while simultaneously entertaining readers. Pyyhtinen argues that fiction can “inform, enrich, extend, intensify and challenge the sociological imagination” (2019, p. 2). The study highlights the power of fiction to give nature agency and bridge the gap between science and sociology through creative writing as a way of translating facts and bringing forth meaning. With imagery and literary allusions, writers can shape scientific facts and “re-interpret, interrogate and enrich issues” (Pyyhtinen, 2019, p. 2). Indeed, guiding readers through an imaginative exploration of a landscape while presenting environmental predicaments similar to those in their real world

encourages relatability and understanding. Readers can safely explore the problems and solutions within the pages of a novel under the guidance of an informed author.

This approach also intersects with the use of literary techniques. There is a tendency to utilise metaphors to enliven fiction through symbolism (Pyyhtinen, 2019). While this is often helpful and well-meaning, it is important not to rely heavily on metaphors, as they tend to oversimplify and undermine the more-than-human. Researchers, such as Donovan (2016), are trying to move writers away from metaphors and instead take a step closer into the *umwelt* of living entities and draw on emotional connections and empathic *mimesis* (a deeper emotional understanding) to present an honest and vulnerable account.

Nonetheless, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) exemplifies effectively how blending scientific facts with poetic language can transcribe complex concepts into relatable notions. Carson relates true stories about communities and raises concerns about environmental damage caused by pesticides to wildlife, insects, agriculture and humans, through language and imagery that is moving and emotionally engaging. While this is not a work of fiction, or targeted at middle-grade readers, Carson's execution and balance of non-fiction and narrative offers a powerful example to draw upon. She paints a picture of pesticide as "white clouds of settling mists" (1962, p. 123) that settle on the plants and insects, which then affect insect-eating birds, resulting in 'summer mornings without birdsong' (1962, p. 107). The blend of graceful imagery of mists with together morbid consequences of death provides a suggestive portrayal of the gravity of human impact without being overly overt. Carson's work resonates with Donovan's call for narratives to cultivate emotional and ethical connections between the human and more-than-human world. Carson invites readers to not only understand the ecological impact but to feel it on a personal level, encouraging readers to feel interconnected.

Carson's demonstration of the interconnection between the human and more-than-human world highlights the urgency needed for positive action due to the impact of human negligence. These narratives are essential, and their value depends on an enlightened and engaged relationship between writer and place.

Conclusion and future implications

Forging a deeper connection with place allows the writer to gain a better understanding of the more-than-human world and approach the narrative with a more integrated and ecocentric perspective. By immersing in Mabi Forest, meeting the rangers and local townsfolk, I had the opportunity to observe the area more closely and learn about the environmental concerns that are part of every-day life in the region. This facilitated a more deliberate and thoughtful approach to my depiction of place, and through this newfound connection, I was able to add greater depth to the narrative.

Incorporating photography created an opportunity for readers to form a better understanding of the more-than-human and encouraged interconnectedness. While the primary role of photography was to capture the landscape, it was also important in conveying a sense of reality.

Photographs are often perceived as representation of the “truth”; their inclusion helps readers connect with place and recognise environmental predicaments in the narrative as akin to those affecting their own regions (Bardis, 2014).

Due to the restricted time of only three days in the field, the study has inherent limitations that necessitate further research to expand upon the findings. It is crucial to engage with the traditional owners of the land, the Ngadjon-ji and Yidin-ji people. Although I had successfully arranged meetings with TREAT and NQ Land Management Services groups – who collaborate closely with the Indigenous communities and were willing to share the insights on the impact and progress – the perspectives and contributions of the Indigenous peoples themselves would be invaluable for future studies.

It would be also advantageous to observe the area across different seasons to observe variations in plant life, insect types and movements, and animal behaviour.

My time in Mabi forest and the town of Yungaburra significantly deepened my connection to place and my entanglement with the more-than-human, leading to a more authentic depiction of place in my writing. This immersion allowed me to resonate more deeply with the words I committed to paper, fostering a heightened curiosity and awareness of the *umwelten*, of the more-than-human, and our shared coexistence. These curiosities and observations enriched the narrative, providing a more informed and nuanced account, and offered readers the opportunity to experience the connections and insights I encountered.

In creating *Saving Mabi*, my aim has been to evoke a sense of wonder and stimulate conversations about our natural world. At the very least, I wish to share with the reader, the beauty of Mabi Forest. A writer’s deep connection with place extends its benefits to the reader, inviting them to lose themselves in nature, and perhaps, rediscover a wilder part of themselves eager to reconnect with the natural world.

Foster (2016) highlights that as we learn about the complexity of the more-than-human world, we simultaneously learn more about ourselves. This illustrates a profound interconnection and entanglement between humans and nature, demonstrating the importance of creating meaningful connections that foster learning and inclusive perspectives. Such connections have the power to send ripples of curiosity and empathy, instilling values that might one day contribute to the preservation of a single walnut tree or perhaps an entire forest. This sensitivity and awareness influences the perspective through which writers craft narratives, thereby shaping themes that contribute to our cultural discourse and understanding.

Notes:

[1] Anthropomorphism: the attribution of human-like characteristics, emotions, or behaviours to more-than-human entities, as if they possess human-like qualities motivations.

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