

TEACHING CHILDREN TO LET NATURE TO JUST BE IN ECOLOGICAL CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS BY KATE MESSNER: AN ECOCRITICISM ANALYSIS

Mengajarkan Anak-Anak untuk Membiarkan Alam Sebagaimana Mestinya dalam Buku-
Buku Bergambar Ekologis karya Kate Messner: Sebuah Analisis Ekokritik

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Abstract: *Over and Under The Snow and Over and Under The Pond are children's picture books by Kate Messner that teach children life both and under certain terrains in this world that exist because of how nature works. This article aims to make readers understand the value of children's books and how they are an excellent way to teach about how nature works in this world. Ecocriticism is a theory that analyzes the works of authors, researchers, and poets in the context of environmental issues and wildlife. The Ecocriticism theory that is applied to this research is by Cheryll Glotfelty. This article uses a qualitative approach that describes the answers to the questions that have been collected. Over and Under The Snow and Over and Under The Pond are great books to teach children about how life is under The Snow and pond; these books help them to understand how to take care of the environment better since they would know we are not the only kinds to live in this world and how other non-human creatures struggle to survive the terrains nature have.*

Keywords: *Nature, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Children's Picture Books.*

INTRODUCTION

Children's books are an intermediary medium for children from an early age to learn about the things around them. Children's books that we often find are picture story books, which are easier for children to understand because of the visuals given to the story the author wants to convey. Research has found that children can more easily understand and develop language and speech skills if they learn by applying how to read and discuss pictures (Brodin and Renblad, 2019). The characteristic of picture books is that they contain more pictures than text. Usually, pictures in picture books fill the entire page with text in the bottom corner, top corner, or even the center of the picture and only take up a small part of the page. Picture books also have qualities that make the book excellent and worth choosing as a learning medium. We choose picture books to teach basic things about life to children that they will remember until they grow up. A good picture book is a book that looks neat so that children do not get bored while reading it, has distance and precision between the pictures, and contains facts or phenomena that happen in life (Dowdall et al., 2020). Although parents at home can easily facilitate picture books for their children, picture story books are now the primary medium for early childhood learning in schools. Teachers can more easily teach values that can be implemented in life through picture books (Halim and Munthe, 2019).



Ecocriticism is a theory that studies the interdisciplinary relationship between humans and nature. If we learn the relationship between humans and nature, we cannot be far from the term ecology. Ecology itself is a science that studies the reciprocal relationship between organisms and their environment, which in ecocriticism, it is humans and nature. In their book entitled "The Ecocriticism Leader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology", Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm write several questions that can connect a literary work with ecocriticism, such as "How is nature represented in this sonnet?" and "How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?" Many other questions were asked about the relationship of human culture to nature and how what we do affects nature and vice versa. Ecocriticism exists because there is a motivation for this awareness of nature with a survival limit and how humans must accept the consequences of what we do to nature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996: 18-19).

It seems fitting that we can teach young children the relationship between humans and nature because they can care for nature as they grow up. As mentioned above, eco-criticism arises because of the awareness that nature has enough for human actions. Today's children's book writers raise the theme of nature in their books because they want to raise this awareness in the next generation of inhabitants of this earth. Not to mention that these days children are more focused on technology than going out to play in the park, which could help them enjoy nature better. These writers may also be aware that today's children are spoiled with video games, cartoons, and animation shows but do not get enough education to equip them with how they should treat nature in the future (Mishra and Bidyabhaban, 2016).

Kate Messner is a bestselling author known for her passion for encouraging children to be curious and wonders about the world around them. Messner has written a variety of books, including both fiction and nonfiction, aimed at young readers. This article focuses on Messner's picture books, "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond". The story "Over and Under The Snow" follows a young girl and her father as they ski through a winter landscape, observing the world above and below The Snow. The story explores interconnectedness and the delicate balance of nature as the girl learns how different animals rely on each other for survival. The story "Over and Under The Pond" follows a young boy and his mother as they explore the vibrant ecosystem of a pond. The boy observes the plants and animals living in and around the water. This picture book features a vivid and detailed illustration that brings The Pond's ecosystem to life. Both picture books are recommended for children aged 4 to 8, which is an excellent choice for parents, educators, and nature lovers looking for educational and engaging picture books about the wonders of the natural world.

METHOD

This article uses a qualitative approach that describes the answers to the questions that have been collected. Literature Review is applied in this article with assistance from articles, journals, and internet studies to solve questions in the discussion. By using a qualitative approach, the article aims to explain, describe, predict and control phenomena through focused numerical data collection (Moleong, 1989).

The qualitative approach is based on the philosophy of postpositivism, which is used to study the natural conditions of objects (as opposed to experiments) where the researcher is the key instrument. Sampling and data sources were carried out purposely, and The Snowball technique was collected by triangulation (combined) data analysis. Data analysis is inductive/qualitative; which will result in this qualitative research to be better in emphasizing meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2015: 15).

A qualitative approach is applied because it is appropriate to use for the problem studied in "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond" books to analyze the phenomenon and understand children's books' value. It can explain how they are an excellent way to teach about nature's works in this world. This type of research uses literary research, books, notes, and reports on the results of previous research as the primary data source for exploring existing theories and concepts, which are then reviewed, collected and analyzed using the method.

Research procedures are steps carried out in research in the form of research methods, population and samples (quantitative) or sample data sources (qualitative), research instruments, data collection techniques, and data analysis techniques (Sugiyono, 2014). The procedures for analyzing qualitative data are:

1. Collecting data sourced from books and research journals that focus on the topic of research methods;
2. Grouping the data into types of research (quantitative, qualitative, R & D);
3. Discussion of the types of research methods and suitability with the ideas/titles of the research to be discussed accompanied by examples of methods;
4. Seeing the possibility of these methods being combined (mixed method) or existing in research methods with the same research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early childhood days for children make them quickly absorb things around them, primarily if they are taught about them correctly. Awareness of protecting our environment can easily be applied in this way, namely learning or being taught since we were toddlers. Many children's book writers today seem aware of this, too, so getting children's books to teach them is more accessible. Kate Messner herself had previously written many picture books before she wrote *Over and Under The Snow* and *Over and Under The Pond*. Kate Messner loved to write books that could make children wonder and explore (Shawnee Mission Post, 2022). Her passion for writing books that could make children wonder is evident in several of her other works with the same theme, namely ecology.

This article aims to make readers understand the value of children's books and how they are an excellent way to teach about how nature works in this world. In our discovery of two of Kate Messner's works, "*Over and Under The Snow*" and "*Over and Under The Pond*," several questions arise for discussion;

1. Differences in the relationship between humans and nature and the relationship between non-humans (animals) and nature.
2. How, in Kate Messner's book, children are taught to let nature be as it is.

3. The importance of teaching children about the way nature works and the terrains that arise because of the way nature works.

(1) Every human being evaluates and appreciates nature differently. Many believe that human life depends on nature, so if nature is damaged, human physical and mental health conditions will be affected (Pritchard et al., 2019). Whitburn, Linklater, and Abrahamse (2019) state that "a close connection with nature is beneficial for human and environmental well-being."

The non-humans in this article are animals because Kate Messner uses animals as examples or comparisons with humans in her stories. Animals and humans have a similar relationship with nature. We both depend on nature and adapt our way of life if nature changes or has terrains that exist at any change in time or season. However, from the differences, animals have a closer relationship with nature than humans. They have something called "bioacoustics," a theory about how animals can receive signals from nature, and these signals can help them to be better prepared for changes in nature (Penar, Magiera, and Klocek, 2020).

In Kate Messner's "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond," we cannot see clearly or imply the relationship between humans and nature since it only shows what the narrator is doing on nature's terrain. However, it does not show what the narrator does to that terrain. Messner only shows life above and below The Snow and ponds, the lives of animals in terrains that exist because of how nature works. Some examples of narratives in Over and Under The Snow are as follows:

"Over The Snow I glide, past beech trees rattling leftover leaves and strong, silent pines that stretch to the sky."

"Under The Snow, voles scratch through slippery tunnels, searching for morsels from summer feasts."

We can see the difference in what humans and animals do in The Snow or winter. Maybe as humans, even though we struggle with winter, we can enjoy natural terrain like this. From the narrative above, the animals seem to be struggling more in the face of The Snow, and they have to make a new place to live according to the changing terrain, namely making a house under The Snow and gathering food to store so they can survive if a storm strikes.

Not much difference in "Over and Under The Snow." The book "Over and Under The Pond" also shows the different activities of humans and animals. Here are some of the narrations contained in the book:

"Over The Pond, we skim past tall rushes. Whirligig beetles loop and twirl-skaters on a warm summer surface."

"Under The Pond, minnows dart through waving forests of grass, while a brook trout lurks, ready to lunge."

Kate Messner never shows what to teach children to make nature better. In her books, she only tells a child who narrates about exploring nature's terrains and what happens both over and under that terrain, or more precisely, what animals do to survive in nature's condition.

Here it can be seen that the authors of "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond" only teach children that there are creatures other than humans in this world. He wants children to know that when we go through, see, and do nothing about nature, nature can work just fine. So, in conclusion, the books above by Kate Messner teach children to let nature do its own thing, and we humans don't need to interfere in it. Just let nature be.

(2) Children's Picture books are powerful tools for shaping children's attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. Picture books can also help children develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural world and inspire them to become stewards of the environment (Williams et al., 2011).

Kate Messner's books "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond" encourage children to appreciate the natural world and to let nature be as it is by showing the delicate balance of the ecosystem and the interconnectedness of all living things. Through the story's narrative and illustrations, children learn to observe and appreciate the plants and animals living in and around The Snow and The Pond without disturbing their natural habitats or disrupting the ecosystem's balance.

Based on "Over and Under The Snow," the girl learns about the animals that live beneath The Snow, such as voles, snowshoe hares, bullfrogs, and chipmunks.

"Over The Snow I stand and stare, Little mountains in the marsh, under The Snow, beavers gnaw on aspen bark settled in for supper. Can they hear my tummy rumbling, too?"

"Under The Snow, a chipmunk wakes for a meal. Bedroom, kitchen, hallway - his house under my feet."

The story emphasizes the importance of respecting and appreciating the natural world, and the girl is careful not to disturb the animals' habitats. Based on both dialogues, the girl watches the animal from a distance and notes that it is important to leave those animals untouched. The book also explains the different ways animals rely on each other for survival, demonstrating the importance of the ecosystem's delicate balance.

This is also related to "Over and Under The Pond" in dialogues:

"Over The Pond, there at the shore, tall, silent, and still, a great blue heron stares down into the deep."

"It tenses... takes one long-legged step... and strikes!"

"It caches a wiggling, quicksilver minnow from where it was hiding, under The Pond."

From what the boy watches, he never disturbed their habitats. Instead, he observes them from a distance and appreciates the natural world around him rather than trying to control or manipulate them. Through both books, children can develop a deeper connection to the natural world and become better stewards of the environment as they grow up.

Both books have a similar format and structure, using simple language and beautiful illustrations to tell a story that encourages children to explore the world around them. The story also follows children and parents as they explore the natural world. The illustrations feature beautiful, detailed depictions of the natural world and the animals that inhabit it. These things are essential to the

story because they can help the natural world to life and inspire children to explore it further.

(3) Part of re-establishing a healthy balance for children, their families, and the environment is to identify, synthesize and communicate the evidence about the benefits to children from having a connection to nature. Natural areas provide opportunities to engage in creative play alone and with friends, set self-paced challenges, find quiet retreats, learn about the environment from direct experience, and form emotional bonds with places and the natural world.

Descriptions of children in nature in Kate Messner's "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond" books children are resourceful agents in exploring and shaping their environment. The work of Lynch (1977), Hart (1979), and R. C. Moore (1980, 1986) revealed the value of nature from children's perspectives and showed the contributions of natural areas to the development of the whole child. Natural areas provide opportunities to engage in creative play alone and with friends, set self-paced challenges, find quiet retreats, learn about the environment from direct experience, and form emotional bonds with places and the natural world.

Teaching children about nature works is a fundamental reason, and nature works in various ways, resulting in terrains that can be diverse and fascinating. It helps children develop a sense of curiosity and wonder about their world. When children learn about nature's complex and interconnected systems, they are more likely to be fascinated by it and want to learn more. This can inspire a lifelong interest in science and the natural world.

In "Over and Under The Snow," nature is depicted in the wintertime when the landscape is blanketed in snow. Despite the cold and quiet of winter, the books highlight the diverse and active ecosystem beneath The Snow. In "Over and Under The Pond," nature is depicted in and around a pond ecosystem. The book highlights the diversity of life in and around The Pond, showcasing the interdependence of the various organisms that make up the ecosystem.

Nature also can help children to develop a sense of empathy and respect for living things. When children learn about the importance of ecosystems, biodiversity, and the interdependence of species, they are more likely to view nature as something to be valued and protected rather than something to be exploited or destroyed.

The book showcases various animals that live in nature. Beneath The Snow, such as voles, shrews, and mice tunnel and burrow to create their networks of homes and passageways. These creatures have adapted to the harsh conditions of winter by storing food, hibernating, and relying on the insulation provided by The Snow. The interactions between these creatures illustrate the complex web of life within The Pond ecosystem, depicting various aquatic animals, such as fish, frogs, and turtles, which live in and around The Pond.

Teaching children about nature can help them to develop essential life skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Learning about the complexities of nature requires children to think deeply and use their imaginations to understand how different systems work together. When children understand the importance of protecting and preserving natural resources, they are more likely to take action to do so in their own lives and communities.

CONCLUSION

In our discovery of two of Kate Messner's works, "Over and Under The Snow" and "Over and Under The Pond," we collected some questions that arise when we are talking about the importance of teaching children how to take care of the environment.

Children are resourceful agents in exploring and shaping their environment. Teaching children about the way nature works and the terrains that arise because of the way nature works helps children to develop a sense of curiosity and wonder about the world around them, develop an understanding of empathy and respect for living things, develop essential life skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

As for the findings and discussion, it is found that we as humans have to let nature do what it should do and not interfere with it. Teaching this to children also helps them understand that by allowing nature to just be, we already help nature to be better.

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