

Scary green Monsters

Contemporary children are so drenched with eco-propaganda that it's almost a waste of resources. Like acid rain, but more persistent and corrosive, it dribbles down on them all day long. They get it at school, where recycling now competes with tolerance as man's highest virtue. They get it in peppy "go green" messages online, on television and in magazines.

And increasingly, the eco-message is seeping into the pages of novels that don't, on their face, necessarily seem to be about environmentalism at all. Thus children who might like to escape into a good book are now likely to find themselves pursued into that imaginative realm by didactic adults fixated on passing along endless tellurian warnings.

Susceptible children are left in no doubt that we're all headed for a despoiled, immiserated future unless they start planting pansies in their old shoes, using dryer lint as mulch, and practicing periodic vegetarianism. Not surprisingly, many young people are anxious. The more impressionable among them are coming to believe that their smallest decisions could have catastrophic effects on the globe. This, of course, is nonsense, unless their smallest decision involves tipping vats of mercury into forest streams. But they're children, for goodness' sake: They tend to believe what adults tell them—minus the nuance.

Thus we have the spectacle of a 12-year-old becoming distraught when her father orders seared tuna at a restaurant (this happened to a friend of mine), on account of overfishing, or a 6-year-old (son of an acquaintance) panicking at the prospect of even a yogurt container going into the trash: "But I can use it as a toy!"

The patriarch of the vogue for green-themed children's books is surely Carl Hiaasen, the novelist and Miami Herald columnist who shot to eco-stardom in 2002 with "Hoot," a novel for middle-schoolers about three children who foil a corporation's attempt to build a pancake restaurant over a burrow of endangered miniature owls. "Hoot" won a Newbery Honor Award, and was followed in 2005 by "Flush," a tale recounting the adventures of a different group of youthful oddball allies that is seeking to expose a casino-boat operator who's been flushing raw sewage into harbor water.

Mr. Hiaasen's latest, "Scat," which came out in January, ever so slightly betrays the strains of extending the franchise. Here the story features a new group of three children who band together with an eccentric biology teacher and an armed eco-terrorist to stop a buffoonish Texas oilman from illegally extracting petroleum from the habitat of the endangered Florida panther.

In all Mr. Hiaasen's books for children, young readers are asked to sympathize with environmentalists who thwart businessmen, even when the good guys take destructive measures such as sinking boats or torching billboards. And the eco-tropes that have worked so well for Mr. Hiaasen—Good nature! Bad capitalist!—are steadily creeping into books across the age range.

Joan Bauer's "Peeled" (Putnam, 2008) won a Newbery Honor and hordes of young adult readers with its lively tale of a courageous teenage journalist who manages to outfox corporate interests that are trying to bamboozle a small apple-growing town. A newer novel for teenagers, Timothee de Fombelle's "Toby

Alone" (Candlewick, March), is also getting buzz. In this story, we meet a boy on the run from a thuggish industrialist who, you will not be surprised to learn, is both fat and rich. The tycoon's rapacious practices endanger the entire world of the book's characters, who—and this is skillfully drawn—are tiny people no taller than two millimeters who dwell on the branches of a giant, weakening tree. Shades of the global warming debate, anyone?

Children a step younger who open the latest in the popular "Grk" books by Joshua Doder, "Operation Tortoise" (Delacorte, January), will learn how a boy named Tim and his dog discover a secret laboratory on a tropical island in which a billionaire mistreats tortoises in the hopes of extracting from them whatever it is that causes them to live so long. When Tim reproaches the wicked magnate, the man smiles: "You're very young. You don't know much about life. Let me tell you how the world works. The rich make the laws and the poor obey them."

Even younger readers who are drawn to the appealing pastel illustrations of Katherine Hannigan's "Emmaline and the Bunny" (HarperCollins, March) will find within a risibly didactic tale about a little girl who lives in a town dominated by a fleshy, bowtie-wearing mayor. The pudgy politician has ordered all trees to be cut down, and all grass paved over, to keep the place tidy. Poor Emmaline yearns for a rabbit, but the mayor has banished wild creatures. Eventually the child finds a pet, but only after encountering a brusque old crone with a long white braid: "Humans," the woman snorts. "Cutting this, clearing that, concretizing everything. They don't care a bunny's hair about anyone else."

When Emmaline protests, "I care," the young reader probably will too—which, we have to assume, is the point of the exercise.

As any parent can tell you, children like routine. They're not put off by predictability in stories. They're accustomed to princesses being pretty, dragons being fearsome, and, it seems, alas, their fictional businessmen being corpulent and amoral. So it's probably pointless to object to the eco-endlessness on the grounds of artistic feebleness.

Yet there is something culturally impoverishing about insisting that children join in the adult preoccupation with reducing, reusing and recycling. Can they not have a precious decade or so to soar in imaginative literature before we drag them back down to earth?

MEGAN COX GURDON reviews children's book for the *Wall Street Journal*. This article originally appeared in the *Journal* on April 17, 2009. Reprinted with permission.

