

The relationship between nature and human beings in award-winning picture books of the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study analyses the representation of relationships between human beings and nature in contemporary children's and young adult literature. The corpus consists of picture books that have won awards in 21st-century competitions organized by publishers that publish in Spanish and distribute their works in Spain. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically through a multiple case study. The analysis identified twenty-three picture books in which these relationships are significant, grouped into three categories: 1) harmony between humans and nature; 2) degradation of nature by human action; and 3) fascination with nature. In thirteen cases, oppression towards animals or ecosystems and denaturalization are evident. However, most works do not explicitly point to those responsible for environmental degradation, and only a small number encourage reflection on the potential of collective action. The study concludes that the predominant discourses are reformist in nature (Bradford, 2003), presenting damage as manageable without questioning underlying political-economic structures. Furthermore, a widespread absence of a *sense of place* (Filipova, 2021) is observed, which may limit understanding of inequalities and social injustice linked to ecological problems.

Keywords: Children's literature; picture book; environmental education; ecology; content analysis.

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La relación entre naturaleza y seres humanos en álbumes ilustrados premiados en el siglo XXI

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Resumen

Se analiza cómo se representan las relaciones entre los seres humanos y la naturaleza en la literatura infantil y juvenil contemporánea. El corpus está compuesto por álbumes ilustrados premiados en certámenes del siglo XXI organizados por editoriales que publican en castellano y distribuyen sus obras en el Estado español. La investigación se desarrolló mediante un enfoque cualitativo, concretamente a través de un estudio de caso múltiple. El análisis permitió identificar veintitrés álbumes en los que estas relaciones son relevantes, agrupados en tres categorías: 1) armonía entre seres humanos y naturaleza; 2) vulneración de la naturaleza por acción humana; y 3) fascinación por la naturaleza. En trece casos se evidencian opresiones hacia animales o ecosistemas y procesos de desnaturalización. Sin embargo, la mayoría de las obras no señalan explícitamente a los responsables del deterioro ambiental y solo un número reducido fomenta la reflexión sobre la potencialidad de la acción colectiva. Se concluye que los discursos predominantes son de carácter reformista (Bradford, 2003), al presentar los daños como manejables sin cuestionar las estructuras político-económicas subyacentes. Asimismo, se observa una ausencia generalizada de *sense of place* (Filipova, 2021), lo que puede limitar la comprensión de las desigualdades y la injusticia social vinculadas a los problemas ecológicos.

Palabras clave: Literatura infantil y juvenil; álbum ilustrado; educación ambiental; ecología; análisis de contenido.

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INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has linked childhood with nature since the 19th century, following the Rousseauian idea that children "están mejor predisuestos para entender la naturaleza y para entrar en contacto con ella" (Laso-y-León, 2010, p. 347). However, it has also reflected historical tensions between humanity and the natural environment. With the 20th century environmental movement, nature came to be considered not only a privileged space but also a victim of human beings (Ciudad-Camacho, 2022; Laso-y-León, 2010; Vouillamoz-Pajaro, 2021).

Within the field of literature for both adult and young audiences, the ecocritical perspective has allowed scholars to examine how the degradation of nature threatened by human presence is represented in literary works, while also exploring whether the natural environment is once again conceived as a privileged and idealised space. Drawing on this perspective, this article analyses the relationship between people and nature in a corpus of ninety-seven illustrated picture books that were awarded prizes in the 21st century in competitions run by publishers that regularly distribute their works in Spain and with Spanish as one of their languages of publication. The article also aims to identify which discourses are privileged in what is transmitted to young readers, whether the relationship between human beings and other living creatures is critically examined, whether care for the environment is encouraged, and whether contemporary picture books propose responses that might mobilise citizens to act collectively in response to the current climate crisis.

HUMAN BEINGS AND NATURE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In children's literature, nature has played a central role from a variety of perspectives. Works have emerged that aim to show young readers the diversity of the natural world (Campos-F-Figares & García-Rivera, 2017), while others explore the conflict between human beings and other forms of life – such as *Moby Dick* – or focus on human domination over the environment – such as *Robinson Crusoe* (Gasol, 1996) –. However, romanticised visions of nature have also been transmitted – present in the works of A. A. Milne (Martos-Núñez, 2023) – and stories have been written in which the world constitutes a source of fascination and exploration – Martos-Núñez (2023) cites the works of Jules Verne, and Gasol (1996) those of Mark Twain. Other classic works of fiction, such as those of Jack London, denounce the mistreatment of animals (Laso-y-León, 2010). In numerous works, animals are portrayed with human traits, as in the stories of Beatrix Potter, who was committed to environmental preservation and sought to offer a harmonious image of nature (Kerslake, 2022). In recent years, however, the anthropomorphisation of animals has been questioned due to the complexity of its semiotic implications (Laliena & Taberner-Sala, 2023), and several scholars – Nodelman (2019), Córdova (n.d.) and Martos-Núñez (2023) – argue that attributing human traits to animal characters could imply a form of symbolic domination.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, ECOLOGY AND ECOCRITICISM

Since the last third of the twentieth century, children's literature has incorporated themes that echo environmental concerns, informed by ecological principles. The 1970s brought changes that consolidated the modern concept of ecology, the expansion of children's publishing, and the emergence of its academic study; this convergence opened the way for environmental considerations and, subsequently, for a critical discourse (Laso-y-León, 2010).

From that point on, works for young audiences incorporated new themes related to nature. The ecocritical lens revived critical reflection on human action upon the environment and the exploitative relationship between human beings and other species (Ciudad-Camacho, 2022), in line with the environmental turn in the humanities and social sciences. The critique of the Anthropocene, considered as the period in which human beings became "una fuerza a escala planetaria [que] tal vez sea ya el principal agente de cambio en la Tierra" (De-Cózar-Escalante, 2019, p. 14), has prompted theoretical

and political approaches and challenges, as well as alternative ways of relating to the natural world. Environmental justice movements have reinforced the premise of Cheryll Glotfelty – founder in 1992 of the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (ASLE) – that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. XIX). Moving beyond the opposition between nature and culture, a range of inter- and transdisciplinary fields have emerged, including science and technology studies, environmental history, hybrid geographies, materialist and relational ontologies, animal studies, posthumanist thought, literary ecocriticism, biosemiotics, political ecology, multispecies anthropology, and more recently, environmental humanities as a transversal and inclusive platform (Ares-López, 2019, p. 220), alongside ecofeminism, which denounces the oppression of nature by men within the capitalist system (Puleo, 2019).

Within literary studies, ecocriticism emerged in the United States in the late 1970s (Balarezo-Andrade, 2022; Laliena & Tabernero-Sala, 2023). Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; as a critical stance, it situates itself between literature and the earth, and as a theoretical discourse, it mediates between the human and the non-human (Glotfelty, 1996).

PICTURE BOOKS AND ECOCRITICISM

If the starting point of ecocriticism was the founding of ASLE in 1992 – followed by the organisation's journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) –, three years later studies on children's and young adult literary works would begin. In 1995, a special issue of the journal *The Lion and the Unicorn* titled “Green Worlds: Nature and Ecology” (1995) was published, alongside another on “Ecology and the Child” in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (winter of 1994–1995). In 1996, ISLE published a collection of essays on Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (Gaard, 2009). From these years onwards, the ecocritical perspective on children's literature began to attract the interest of the international research community (Laso-y-León, 2010).

Thanks to these studies, it is possible to observe the evolution of the representation of nature in children's literature. In the Hispanic context, Laso-y-León (2010) describes how environmental problems began to emerge in the 1970s and how the works of the following years depicted specific and localised natural disasters and accidents, while also denouncing those responsible. Towards the final decade of the twentieth century, however, children's literature spread awareness on global ecological problems and adopted “un discurso basado en recomendaciones para fomentar pautas de conducta responsables” (Laso-y-León, 2010, p. 357), urging children to follow it. In addition to looking back at classic works, ecocritical studies of literary texts aimed at children have examined how specific natural elements are reflected in children's literature (Barriga-Galeano & Del-Pino-Tortonda, 2022; Campos-F-Figares & García-Rivera, 2017; Nodis, 2021; Quiles-Cabrera & Martínez-Ezquerro, 2020). Furthermore, several analyses, such as those of Ciudad-Camacho (2022), Laliena & Tabernero-Sala (2023), Ramos & Ramos (2014) and Vouillamoz-Pajaro (2021), have examined themes related to nature in picture books, which are increasingly prominent in the current publishing landscape.

Most of the studies cited above on illustrated children's literature have focused on two of the lines of inquiry that Flys et al. (2010) consider central: the place occupied by nature in literary works and the recovery of the tradition of those writers who have paid particular attention to the natural environment. However, the focus of the present study is on a third line (also explicit in the aforementioned article): the relationship between nature and human beings. In this regard, in a 2003 study, Clare Bradford (drawing on the theories put forward by Driyzeck, 1997) classified responses to environmental problems in several picture books according to whether they aligned with reformist discourses, which considered ecological problems manageable within the political economy of industrial society, or radical discourses, which advocated for the reform of political and economic structures. Building on this distinction, the present study aims to examine which environmental discourses underlie picture books, what kinds of responses are offered to ecological problems, and whether collective action and citizen participation are encouraged.

The issues raised by Gaard (2009) have also been taken into consideration. Gaard raised the following questions: “Does the narrative conclusion offer an appropriate strategy for responding to the problem posed in the story, rejecting hierarchy in favour of community and participatory democracy? Are children left alone to solve ecojustice problems originally created by adults?” (p. 328).

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Given the prominence of the picture book within the field of children's literature in recent years, this article focuses on the corpus of the research project “*Literatura Infantil y Juvenil Actual, Cultura y Educación- Ilustraciones del álbum*” funded by Universidad Camilo José Cela, comprising award-winning picture books, in order to address the research questions. The study draws on the premises of Tarrío-Varela (2013) and Gómez-Díaz and García-Rodríguez (2024), who focus on literary prizes as shapers of the canon due to their potential to legitimise literary quality and their capacity to reach young audiences through mediators. The results are therefore expected to be, if not representative, at least valuable for addressing the research questions posed.

To this end, a qualitative study is conducted, specifically a multiple case study (Bisquerra-Alzina, 2009). The aim is to describe how the research questions are addressed within the aforementioned corpus, which consists of ninety-seven award-winning picture books from seventeen prizes established in the 21st century by publishers with wide distribution in Spain, and in which one of the languages of publication is Spanish:

- Premio Internacional Compostela para álbumes ilustrados (Kalandraka).
- Concurso Internacional de Álbum Infantil Ilustrado “Biblioteca Insular. Cabildo de Gran Canaria” (Edelvives).
- Concurso Internacional de Álbum Ilustrado Biblioteca Insular de Gran Canaria (A Buen Paso).
- Premio Internacional de Ilustración (SM).
- Premio Apila Primera Impresión (Apila).
- Premio Internacional Ciudad de Fuengirola (OQO).
- Certamen Internacional de Álbum Infantil Ilustrado "Ciudad de Alicante" (Anaya).
- Premio Destino Infantil - Apel·les Mestres de álbum ilustrado (Destino).
- Etxepare Saria para la creación de álbumes infantiles (Pamiela).
- Premio Literario Internacional Ciudad de Benicarló - Modalidad álbum infantil ilustrado (Onada).
- Premio álbum ilustrado (Sargantana).
- Certamen Princesa de Éboli (Anaya).
- Premio Algar de Literatura Infantil - Modalidad cuento (álbum) (Algar).
- Premio Internacional Enric Solbes d'Àlbum Il·lustrat (Bromera).
- Premio de Álbum Ilustrado Miguel Calatayud. Villa de Aspe (Degomagom).
- Concurso de Álbum Ilustrado A la orilla del viento (Fondo de Cultura Económica).
- Premio Internacional de Álbum Ilustrado Edelvives (Edelvives).

The work carried out in this study was developed in several stages. First, a thorough compilation of data was undertaken relating to the winners of all editions of the awards under study, covering the period

from 2000 to 2023. Subsequently, the information gathered was recorded and systematised, facilitating the digitisation of the award-winning works. This step was fundamental in ensuring access to and processing of the texts in digital format, enabling the researchers to carry out a collaborative analysis of the works.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis was guided by the research questions outlined above:

- Which discourses are privileged in the picture books in the corpus?
- Do they critically examine the relationship between human beings and other living beings on the planet?
- Do they encourage care for the environment?
- Do they propose responses that might mobilise citizens to act collectively in response to the current climate crisis?

In this regard, we consider it necessary to include some observations about the corpus. On the one hand, all award-winning picture books have been included, meaning the sample includes both picture books with literary text and wordless picture books. On the other hand, since the study is limited to award-winning picture books, the age range of the intended readership has not been considered.

We have also drawn on contributions such as those of [Laliena & Tabernero-Sala \(2023\)](#), who analyse animal anthropomorphisation from a complex perspective. In this context, we specify whether animals are presented as wild, whether humanisations function as metaphors for the human condition, and the implications of these characterisations. We have likewise incorporated the reflections of [Nodelman \(2019\)](#), [Córdova \(n.d.\)](#) and [Martos-Núñez \(2023\)](#), who critically examine representations of humanised animals as strategies of domestication or affirmation of the centrality of the human species, and which reduce the anti-speciesist potential of children's fiction.

ANALYSIS

Of the ninety-seven titles examined, twenty-three feature significant relationships between human beings and nature, representing 22.31% of the sample (the list of the twenty-three picture books is provided in [Appendix I](#)). Given that the relationships between human beings and the natural environment vary considerably, three thematic categories have been established, which are described and analysed below:

1. Harmony between human beings and nature.
2. Degradation of nature by human beings
3. Human fascination with nature.

Harmony between human beings and nature

The first category comprises eight titles in which harmony between human beings and other living creatures on the planet is given priority. Representations of traditional societies dominate, presented as respectful of the environment. Farms, where animals coexist peacefully, are the settings for *Nilo y Zanzíbar*, by Javier García Sobrino and Cristina Müller-Karger, and *Un loro en mi granja*, by Pep Bruno and Lucie Müllerová. The animal characters are humanised and domestication appears to be assumed as the natural state of agricultural settings. The events of *Una última carta*, by Antonis Papatheodoulou and Iris Samartzi, take place in the idyllic community of what appears to be a Greek island, where its inhabitants live in harmony, and in *Jacinto y María José*, by Dipacho, two children spend their childhood in a village among mangroves and wild animals. *De cómo nació la memoria de El Bosque*, by Rocío Martínez, tells

the story of a table which, after being made by a woodcutter, takes on new lives and functions before returning to the forest. In *Mamá*, by Mariana Ruiz Johnson, through parallels between a woman who has become a mother and several wild animals with their babies, 'la idea abstracta de madre se concreta y se expande al mismo tiempo, ya que trasciende lo humano y se extiende a la naturaleza en su conjunto' (Senís-Fernández, 2015, p. 119). This biologicistic and idealised vision of motherhood, set within an idyllic natural environment, represents an example of non-constructivist feminism (Puleo, 2019) and stands in opposition to the city, with its factories and pollution, where the protagonist's son goes when he separates from his mother.

In two of the picture books in this category, *La huerta de Simón*, by Rocío Alejandro, and *La sopa de Tomás*, by Joan Subirana Subí, farmland is a space in which the community comes together to carry out agricultural tasks. These books have a more utilitarian focus, highlighting concepts such as the importance of mutual aid and collaboration, perhaps because they are aimed at very young readers. Animals are anthropomorphised: in the first case, they are the only actants in the story and may therefore be interpreted as metaphors for human beings, while in the second, anthropomorphised animals live alongside a farmer and his granddaughter. Following the argument proposed by Perry Nodelman (2019), the harmonious coexistence depicted in these books appears to be subordinated to a hierarchy between humans and animals.

Degradation of nature by human beings

The second category comprises eleven picture books in which the relationship is not ideal and where human beings and their practices rather constitute forms of oppression, harm or threat towards other living creatures and the natural environment. At times, the human intervention that destabilises other systems is resisted, although individual responses predominate, initiated by non-human characters. In *El ladrón de sombreros*, by Susana Sutherland de la Cruz and Rafa Vivas, an unnamed agent reveals the characters' heads and the hats come to occupy the branches of trees burnt in a fire, serving as nests for birds returning from migration. Animals confront human oppression in two titles. In *La fuga*, by Cristina Oleby and Pablo Pino, it is the elephant protagonist, tired of working in the circus, who escapes on his own from the exploitation to which he is subjected in search of freedom (although the humanisation of the character reduces the strength of his wild nature). And in *La sombra del rey*, by Elena Hormiga, once again talking animals face the monarch, who intends to cut down a tree in order to enjoy its shade. In *Ahab y la ballena blanca*, by Manuel Marsol, an adaptation of Moby Dick (a non-humanised whale) manages to throw the captain off course and causes him to abandon his obsession.

However, in *El último safari*, by Hadi Baghdadi, a hunter, after being saved from falling off a cliff by a flock of birds, redeems himself by giving up hunting. In four cases it is the child protagonists who attempt to repair the damage. In *El perro de Milu*, by Mariann Máray, a girl single-handedly advocates for anti-speciesism, freeing a bear (notably, a non-humanised one) from the zoo. This picture book highlights the importance of empathy towards animals and critiques human practices that harm them, encouraging reflection on the ethical treatment of other species. Again, another girl, the protagonist of *Tan especial como quieras ser*, by Raquel Díaz Reguera, opposes the felling of a tree at her school, and her protest is joined by her mother and a group of firefighters. This example, which is the only one in the category in which the threat targets only a plant species, shows how individual action can trigger a collective response, highlighting the importance of peaceful resistance and civic action in protecting the natural environment. The story underlines that even the youngest can lead movements for change and that community solidarity is crucial in facing ecological challenges. Similarly, in *Laura y la tortuga*, by Laia M. Ledesma and Carme Ledesma, and in *Monstruo verde*, by Canizales, the child protagonists act to resolve the problem, first on their own and then by mobilising collective action. However, the overly explicit message of both works undermines any potential literary value, reducing the picture books to mere models of behaviour rather than artistic works (note also the humanisation of the tortoise character in the first of the two works). Indeed, both books seem destined for educational practices in which, as García-Única (2017)

argues, precedence is given to “el objetivo de captar adeptos a una causa ideológica al de educar lectores” (p. 89).

Other times, the damage caused by human activity goes unanswered within the literary narrative. In *Bandada*, by David Daniel Álvarez and María Julia Díaz, the decline of the civilisation of humanised birds, which has even subordinated other species represented without humanisation (the circus once again appears as a metaphor for speciesism, in which a saddened tiger performs), has affected every individual. The story ends without a clear resolution, but with a glimmer of hope in the younger generation. This picture book critiques structures of power and exploitation, suggesting that new generations have the potential to do things differently. By offering no easy resolution, it invites readers to reflect on the root causes of environmental problems and the need for systemic change. In *Esperando el amanecer*, by Fabiola Anchorena, the animals of the jungle, who are the narrative voice and have witnessed a devastating fire, must learn to survive after the catastrophe without any assistance (we understand this applies equally to the trees and plant species destroyed). However, in one of the double-page spreads, the animals appear to look directly at young readers, urging them to help. This picture book stands out as an exception among those discussed, for two reasons. The first is that, in the final paratext, the author herself recounts how the story is based on the fires that devastated the Amazon in 2019, while others were also occurring in Australia and several European countries. Furthermore, the author also distances herself from the other examples described by pointing to those truly responsible for the disaster: “las personas poderosas que ven a la Amazonía, a nuestro planeta como un negocio más”. At the same time, she frames her own book as an act of protest: “este proyecto es mi pequeña contribución, y desde aquí alzo mi voz de protesta” (Anchorena, 2022), and introduces young readers to those cohesive groups that confront environmental disasters and show a path of civic struggle that readers can follow:

Agradezco enormemente que en Perú existan comunidades nativas de pueblos indígenas (...) que se preocupan por la conservación y vigilancia de los bosques de la Amazonía. En todo el mundo existen organizaciones a las cuales apoyar y también contribuir con ellas difundiendo el gran trabajo que hacen al proteger nuestros bosques, los pulmones de la tierra (Anchorena, 2022).

It is worth noting that in this second category, harm inflicted on animals predominates as an example of the violation of nature. In the case of plant species, the felling of trees is only critically examined in *La sombra del rey* and *Tan especial como quieras ser*. In *Esperando el amanecer*, the fire has also affected plant species, but the focus remains on the jungle animals. In *Monstruo verde* and *Laura y la tortuga*, the contamination of habitats appears, but the emphasis is not placed on the plant kingdom. Therefore, harm to animals is represented more prominently than harm to plants in this category.

Human Fascination with Nature

Finally, the third category includes four picture books centred on a lack of contact with nature, which the child protagonists resolve. This is the case of *Selva*, by Marina Gibert; *El bosque dentro de mí*, by Adolfo Serra; *¡Qué niño más lento!*, by Lucía Serrano Guerrero; and *Un árbol*, by Rodrigo Mattioli.

The first two titles share several similarities. Both are wordless picture books, both feature children fascinated by natural environments in a kind of romantic reinterpretation, and both end with the protagonists bringing nature back to the cities to which they return. In *Selva*, a child explores a lush natural environment, reflecting a romantic vision of nature as a space of discovery, wonder and play. In *El bosque dentro de mí*, the young protagonist discovers at the edge of a lake a being who reveals to him the secrets of the forest, the birds and the starry sky. Both works present an idyllic vision of nature and childhood, as Laso-y-León (2010) notes, and portray children as agents of change and the rewilding of cities (Ciudad-Camacho, 2022). However, these are individual responses, there is no collective action or civic collaboration, nor do any ecological problems appear, only the distance between the city and the forest or jungle. These are titles that stimulate the imagination and foster a connection with the environment, continuing the trend in children's literature of the 1990s (Laso-y-León, 2010). The jungle and

the forest serve as spaces of subjectivity and discovery, of imagination, adventure and self-exploration for the young characters, with whom readers are invited to identify in order to reconnect them with nature (Ciudad-Camacho, 2022), in the spirit of wonder proposed by Rachel Carson (1965). Both *Selva* and *El bosque dentro de mí* share features with other works examined by Ramos (2023): “*finales felices*” and “*el hecho de partir de la dicotomía entre espacio natural y espacio urbano, valorando el primero sobre el segundo y proponiendo un mayor equilibrio entre ambos*” (p. 43). In this regard, and midway between literature and didacticism, sits *Un árbol* by Rodrigo Mattioli, in which the child protagonist creates an entire ecosystem by planting a single tree, but does not rewild a city as in the previous cases.

Finally, *¡Qué niño más lento!* evokes the Horatian topos of the *beatus ille*. Overwhelmed by the pace of life of the characters around him (his mother, father, teacher and classmates), the child protagonist discovers peace and tranquillity on the outskirts of the city, in a rural environment populated by characters who enjoy the unhurried rhythm of nature, and in which the rediscovery or discovery of the natural environment becomes the happy ending of the character's narrative journey.

It is worth noting in this final section that animals are always portrayed in a non-humanised way, perhaps reflecting a gradual anti-speciesist outlook in children's literature that has become increasingly established in recent years (Córdova, n.d.) and which seeks to be more respectful of non-human animals by refraining from attributing human characteristics to them that might prove domesticating (Nodelman, 2019).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

After analysing and classifying the data, here are the results of the research questions.

First of all, the relationship between human beings and other living creatures on the planet appears significant in twenty-three books. Of these, thirteen reflect a lack of contact with nature, as well as harm or threat towards animals or ecosystems, which highlights the relevance of this issue in the analysed corpus.

Eleven of the thirteen belong to category 2, degradation of nature by human beings, and two to category 3, fascination of human beings with nature. This indicates that more than half of the corpus presents scenarios of environmental damage, revealing a significant tendency towards the critical analysis of the nature-humanity relationship.

However, and as already noted, some caveats must be made regarding this explicit critical analysis. The first is that there are six picture books in which harm, oppression or deprivation towards the natural world is referenced but those responsible do not appear: *La Fuga*, *El perro de Milu*, *Laura y la Tortuga* and *El ladrón de sombreros*, *Selva* and *El bosque dentro de mí*.

In seven instances there are identifiable aggressors, although the tendency is for the perpetrators of the harm to be individual characters: the monarch in *La sombra del rey*, the hunter in *El último safari*, or Ahab in *Ahab y la ballena blanca*. The school headteacher in *Tan especial como quieras ser* also appears as the culprit for wanting to cut down the tree in the playground, although he seems to represent a collective “we” (the school management or staff, who are never named).

Only in three works — *El monstruo verde*, *Esperando el amanecer* and *Bandada* — culpability is conceived as collective. In the first case, the child protagonists are responsible, although it is acknowledged that pollution and rubbish are collective problems. In the other two books, the culprits are identified (the powerful people who see the Amazon as a business — as indicated by Anchorena's paratext — and the civilisation of birds, respectively). Therefore, in these thirteen analysed books, an attenuation of human responsibility is observed alongside the attribution of harm to individual actions, which contributes to diluting the notion of collective responsibility.

Secondly, we examine who assumes responsibility for repairing the damage and resolving conflicts between human beings and the natural world in the stories. Within the thirteen books that present oppressions or threats towards nature, eleven titles are analysed in this section, because they include explicit repair strategies on the part of the actants of the plots themselves (*Bandada* and *Esperando el*

amanecer are therefore excluded). Of this subset, in two cases (*El último safari* and *El monstruo verde*), it is the human perpetrators themselves who repair the infraction committed. In *El ladrón de sombreros*, resolution is present but its agency remains unknown. In three works, human help is omitted, as are the animals who manage to escape the threat (*Ahab y la ballena blanca*), solve the problems caused by people (the elephant in *La fuga*), or help other endangered species (the lion in *La sombra del rey*, who protects the tree). In the remaining three books, children repair the damage inflicted by adults, as occurs in *El perro de Milu*, or renaturalise their cities individually (*Selva* and *El bosque dentro de mí*). Ciudad-Camacho (2022) had already noted that one of the tendencies in children's and young adult literature was to strengthen the identification between child characters and young readers in order to reconnect them with nature. However, it could also be interpreted as a tendency to leave children alone to resolve the ecojustice problems originally created by adults (Gaard, 2009).

Even so, the fact remains that only in the books with more explicit and less nuanced messages (*Monstruo verde* and *Laura y la tortuga*) does environmental commitment extend to more characters, including adults. However, following Bradford (2003), this type of illustrative work tends to present child protagonists with an almost hagiographic quality, which could distance readers rather than encourage them to explore possible solutions to environmental problems.

Overall, the eleven books analysed (those that include repair strategies, whether by human perpetrators, animals or children) present reformist discourses, as the damage is shown as manageable and does not imply modifying political-economic structures, which are not identified as responsible.

Nor is the system held responsible in the only examples of collective repair (*Tan especial como quieras ser* and *Laura y la tortuga*). These books promote a critical citizenship that is in solidarity with nature through strategies such as peaceful resistance and civic action, although their effectiveness in encouraging reflection is limited. Furthermore, the approach is utilitarian and moralising, more oriented towards educating in environmental care than towards offering a literary work that allows young readers to draw their own conclusions (Garralón, 2025). This reinforces the idea that, even in cases of collective repair, the approach remains utilitarian and more pedagogical than literary.

By contrast, only the discourses inherent to two works could be considered radical (Bradford, 2003): *Bandada* and *Esperando el amanecer*, as they identify those responsible for the damage, which is exposed and left unresolved in order to encourage young readers to question the political-economic structures that have allowed it and to exercise agency in the face of these problems, while preserving the artistic quality of the books. The first book calls into question an entire civilisation of birds that has fallen into decline and suggests that perhaps childhood can do things differently and not repeat the mistakes of adults (once again, responsibility is shifted onto the younger generation). In the case of *Esperando el amanecer*, Fabiola Anchorena identifies those responsible for the fires in the Amazon – the powerful people who profit from nature – and who are sheltered by the political systems that sustain predatory capitalism towards the environment. She also charts a course for young readers to confront environmental injustice collectively and through organised, ecologist collective action that is taking place in various parts of the world, although it is important to note that this explicit discourse appears in a paratext, and not in the literary work itself. We believe that this is what distinguishes this book from those that are more overtly didactic.

Consequently, radical discourses are exceptional and are concentrated in works that foster critical thinking about the system and the potential of collective action.

However, in addition to the primacy of reformist discourses in the studied corpus, another characteristic of the books is worth highlighting. With the exception of *Esperando el amanecer*, all the stories lack a *sense of place* (Filipova, 2021); that is, they are narrated from locations without distinguishing features or without geographical identification. While it is true that this delocalisation of the stories can lead to the idea that all ecological problems are global, it also poses a risk for readers, who may fail to understand that, in terms of environmental justice, it is the most socially and economically deprived places and social groups that are most vulnerable to environmental degradation, extractivism and the climate crisis (Demaria et al., 2016; Gaard, 2009). Glotfelty (1996) believed that ecocriticism "will become

a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion" (p. xxiv) and, with the exception of Anchorena's work, the books in the corpus do not allow for this, which hinders readers' perception of the inequalities and social injustice that underlie ecological problems. The absence of concrete localisation therefore limits the understanding of environmental inequalities and reduces the connection between ecology and social justice.

Nevertheless, this analysis has shown that the relationship between human beings and nature and, more particularly, the concern towards the environmental crisis is gaining presence in award-winning children's literature in recent years, or that a growing tendency towards the incorporation of ecological themes in children's and young adult literature is becoming evident. Indeed, nine of the thirteen books that thematise damage to nature have been awarded prizes and published in the last five years. Even so, the studied corpus is highly heterogeneous from an ideological point of view, as it spans a range that moves between indoctrination and well-meaning simplicity – aligned with a protectionist conception of childhood – and openly critical and potentially transformative positions – which link childhood with the notions of agency and citizenship. Likewise, the fact that the Bologna Ragazzi Awards have incorporated a special category dedicated to sustainability suggests that children's ecoliterature may not be a passing trend, but rather an important tendency in the current literary landscape. Only time will tell what role the new discourses on ecology and global justice will play in children's literature.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Patricia Carballal-Miñán: Formal analysis; Conceptualisation; Data curation; Writing - original draft; Writing - review and editing; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Validation; Visualisation.

Iria Sobrino-Freire: Formal analysis; Conceptualisation; Data curation; Writing - review and editing; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Validation; Visualisation.

Marta Larragueta: Project administration; Formal analysis; Conceptualisation; Methodology; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualisation; Funding acquisition.

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APPENDIX I. PICTURE BOOKS EXAMINED, LISTED CHRONOLOGICALLY BY AWARD

Premio Internacional Compostela para álbumes ilustrados Kalandraka

Díaz-Garrido, M. J., & Álvarez-Hernández, D. D. (2012). *Bandada*. Kalandraka.

Ruiz-Johnson, M. (2013). *Mamá*. Kalandraka.

Samartzi, I., & Papatheodoulou, A. (2016). *Una última carta*. Kalandraka.

Alejandro, R. (2017). *La huerta de Simón*. Kalandraka.

Máray, M. (2019). *El perro de Milu*. Kalandraka.

Gibert, M. (2021). *Selva*. Kalandraka.

[Anchorena, F. \(2022\). *Esperando el amanecer*. Kalandraka.](#)

Concurso Internacional de Álbum Infantil Ilustrado “Biblioteca Insular. Cabildo de Gran Canaria” (Edelvives)

García-Sobrino, J., & Müller, C. (2007). *Nilo y Zanzíbar*. Edelvives.

Sutherland-de-la-Cruz, S., & Vivas, R. (2008). *El ladrón de sombreros*. Edelvives.

Bruno, P., & Müllerová, L. (2009). *Un loro en mi granja*. Edelvives

Premio Apila primera impresión (Apila)

Mattioli, R. (2019). *Un árbol*. Apila Ediciones.

Baghdadi, H. (2023). *El último safari*. Apila Ediciones.

Premio Destino Infantil - Apel·les Mestres de álbum ilustrado (Destino)

Díaz-Reguera, R. (2022). *Tan especial como quieras*. Destino Infantil & Juvenil.

Hormiga, E. (2024). *La sombra del rey*. Destino.

Premio álbum ilustrado (Sargantana)

Ledesma, L. M., & Ledesma, C. (2024). *Laura y la tortuga* Editorial Sargantana.

Premio Internacional Enric Solbes d'Àlbum Il·lustrat (Bromera)

Canizales (2020). *Monstruo verde*. Algar.

Subirana-Subí, J. (2021). *La sopa de Tomás*. Algar.

[Oleby, C., & Pino, P. \(2022\). *La fuga*. Bromera.](#)

Concurso de Álbum Ilustrado A la orilla del viento (Fondo de Cultura Económica)

Martínez, R. (2008). *De cómo nació la memoria de El Bosque*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Dipacho (2009). *Jacinto y María José*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Serrano-Guerrero, L. (2010) *¿Qué niño más lento!* Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Serra, A. (2016). *El bosque dentro de mí*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Premio Internacional de Álbum Ilustrado Edelvives (Edelvives)

Marsol, M. (2014). *Ahab y la ballena blanca*. Edelvives.