Fictitious Ecology

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Fictitious Ecology
Environment, Poetics, and Children’s Picture Books

Paulina Zuckerman

Abstract

My thesis project, *The Mountain Fog*, is a children’s picture book pitch that tells a light-hearted story of two dogs who must face an environmental disaster. In this accompanying critical essay, I break down the process of crafting a fictional relationship between author-illustrator, animal characters, and the environment. It begins through the context of J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories,” which identifies seeing the world through two lenses - the Primary world and the Secondary world. From these terms, I navigate the idea of a fictitious ecology, an encapsulated anthropomorphic world governed by the creator’s personal experience with nature. This essay seeks to understand how the Primary and Secondary world inform W.H Auden’s idea of the “historian” and “poet,” using the evolution of scientific illustration and children’s picture books as examples. It then describes how the visual language and concepts of anthropomorphic characters “animates” a story and gives life to otherwise unrealistic places and characters. The intended audience for The Mountain Fog book is young elementary schoolers and the essay reveals how these elements come together to craft a method of thinking for young readers. It points out how children’s picture books and reimagined environments are evolving to allow appreciation of nature and society through visual means.
Title page for The Mountain Fog
Above
Two dogs scout out a mountain
Primary and Secondary Worlds

On a quest to launch a delicious bakery and a lush garden, two friends move to the bottom of a very tall mountain. A sudden storm floods the top of the mountain and causes fog to avalanche into their homes. The two friends must figure out how to deal with the misty mischief that ensues and save their homes.

My project is a children’s picture book about two dogs facing an environmental disaster... but what it’s really about is fictitious ecology in a goldfish bowl.

Ecology defined as a network of organisms in relation with each other and their ambient landscape.

Fictitious as the personal, human interpretation that fabricates and invents reality.

And the goldfish bowl refers to the territory that this “fictitious ecology” is limited to.

At its foundation, fictitious ecology stems from us, and how we experience the world. From taking a leisurely walk in a pine and oak forest, to kayaking a river with class 5 rapids, to bar hopping beneath bright city billboards at 2AM, to sitting on an Amtrak watching a hazy yellow meadow whip by with mountains in the distance, some of our real life ecologies are constructed and some have been the default, slowly evolving over millions of years on Earth.

Is this world building? Well, all of these situations together, yes. But where the term worldbuilding differs from the idea of fictitious ecology is that worldbuilding is the reworking or creation of an entire location. This might mean large-scale continents, multiple nations, and includes a multitude of ethnographic dispersals. It sets a larger picture for the reconstruction of politics, international dispute, explanation of histories, and the evolution of places to be explained. Imagine a globe and an entire world is created. However, within this world are different ecologies. We don’t look at the world and say it is one ecology.

Ecologies refer to very specific relationships between biotic elements and the surrounding terrain. For example, the marshlands of Australia are very different from the marshlands of Maine with the type of rock and sediment each one sits on, the way that the winds blow, tectonic plates, hemispherical relations, the insects and wildlife that inhabit them and how the people have used the land. Even within this, a Maine marsh that is five miles north from another marsh could have an entirely different zooplanktonic makeup simply because more mummichogs or mollusks could access the marsh and feed due to a weaker tidal cycle. Between fictitious ecology and world building, “ecology” is a term which describes the relationship between specific members of a very localized place. Where worldbuilding is entirely about the construction of a place, fictitious ecology
presents boundaries within a world and a narrative which has some indication of a beginning, middle, and an end.

In J R R Tolkien’s essay On Fairy Stories, he separates the world into two parts - the “Primary world” and the “Secondary world.”

The Primary World is made of things that we can physically experience and see. It is a pragmatic explanation, describing the world “as it is,” like all of those idyllic activities listed in the opening paragraph of this essay. The Secondary World comes from our interpretation of the Primary World. It is a subcreation, a place which we can’t physically enter but we can imagine - the fiction, so to speak.

Although the Primary world is considered “real” in an ecological sense, the Secondary World is also considered “real” because your mind must conform to the laws of that imaginary space. It may not be a physical landscape, but it is a space legitimised by human means such as speaking, writing, and making art about it.

These two places colliding make up the world of fictitious ecology.

In terms of fictitious ecology, the Primary and Secondary world are only the tip of the iceberg. They are foundational to fabricating environments. The Primary world is naturally alive and shifting with the germination and migration of flora and fauna, and is ever changing with weather, shifting tectonic plates, and fluctuations in global climate. The Secondary world, which Tolkien identified, is broken down in W.H. Auden’s essay The World of Sagas. Auden’s read on Tolkien’s worlds transfigures his idea of two worlds into the “poet” and the “historian.” Now, instead of the Primary world and Secondary world being two entirely separate items, what Auden suggests is that they are bound together by two methods of processing. The historian seeks truth bound by physics and logical understandings of our world, and the poet speaks in a more dramatic and metaphorical tone. Both ideas are yin and yang to each other and use a small part of the other to be able to know their limits. The Secondary world can be defined

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Similarly, the first children’s books were created with the intention of constraining their behavior to suit social expectations and have since evolved tremendously. Today, they have branched into many different genres and many encourage exploring imagination and reflection rather than only instruction. During the same time period as Maria Sibylla Merian was working, James Janeway published A Token For Children in 1672, a Puritan take on the many ways children could die if they were disobedient. The opening preface reads, “How art thou affected, poor Child, in the Reading of this Book? Have you shed ever a tear since you begun reading? Have you been by your self upon you knees; and begging that God would make you like these blessed Children? or are you as you use to be, as careless & foolish and disobedient and wicked as ever?”


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3 “Alternative system of logic” - a brilliant phrase coined by Heidi Kolk, 2022.
6 Excerpt from A Token For Children by James Janeway, published in 1672.
The idea of historian and poet are not black and white, but a sliding scale where things may lean towards one side more so than the other.

While Auden is contemplating these questions, I feel that the fantasy world does not always need to be logical. The universe beyond planet Earth is as alien as the worlds we are crafting in our minds and concepts of space and time still are not fully explainable, so who are we to judge how a fictional world should operate? It seems relatively normal for people to wear cutesy hoodies with cat ears on them and no one bats an eye when Arthur the aardvark is best friends with a bunny named Buster on the eponymous animated show Arthur. Looking at psychedelic media which is all about sensory alteration, things are simply accepted “as is” in the way they manifest. The best way to engage with an audience is to make a world that they can also relate with in some way. By the same token, the audience will need to let go of their perception of real life if they want to be involved in any type of fictional ecology.

The shift in the presentation of worlds has opened their range from more didactic to more imaginary and allowed more emotional translation to be available in the content. I see children’s picture books to be the perfect medium for merging the Primary world and Secondary world, especially when it comes to things that we see in the realm of scientific illustration, like more realistically rendered animals.

When semi-realistic animals are crafted by other artists, like the picture book illustrators Jan Brett or Beatrix Potter, the scientific aspect lessens and the illustrated animal’s biological characteristics fall further into the poetic. Auden defines this Secondary world by the way people are questioning its existence. Rather than asking, “is it true that hedgehogs and rabbits speak english?” which pits the reality of a made-up world against our own, he might wonder “for what reason were these animals in particular enchanted and poeticized?”

Poetics

In this section I will identify some elements of poetics and explain how they contribute to making a world imaginary. The poetics are where the more intrinsically human experiences are translated into environments. With a work of visual art, the way it is crafted is as important as the story it tells and characters that it depicts. This crafted landscape, in many different ways, is the method of transportation into the Secondary world and becomes a “place of passage.”

Visual

For my thesis project, I chose to illustrate my work using cut paper, creating scenes that I could photograph, edit, then compile into an InDesign document with text. The method is much more laborious and time consuming than illustrating the entire scene onto a flat piece of watercolor paper. I start with a sketch, and then I hand paint every character, tree, and element separately, making sure they are all relatively proportional to each other. Then, using a sharp Xacto blade or my heavy black shears, I cut the illustrated area from the sheet. The purpose of this method is to create a diorama-like scene where lighting can be toyed with and depth is shown. Some of the paper has different degrees of translucency, allowing the scene to weave into itself, casting shadows and melting together.

Tolkien claims that art is inherently a Secondary world and in most regards he is right. The world we experience is filtered, abstracted, then re-imagined through the process of illustration. It is impossible to physically step foot into a secondary world. Yet in an art piece, people can find a relationship with specific elements and catch a glimpse of how otherwise absurd elements manifest in logical ways. The reason why I wanted to attempt to have the two dimensional/three dimensional look was to explore depth. Where I stated that we cannot actually submerge ourselves into a fictional world, by making a single frame from that world and crafting it into a three dimensional place, it means that at one point in time, this place really did exist beyond the pages of a storybook. It was a physical space that a small creature like a mouse could fit into. And now, it has been forever preserved within the two-dimensional printed spreads of a children’s picture book. Looking at it is a little bit like looking at Treachery of Images by Rene Magritte - is it a pipe, or is it paint on a canvas that resembles a pipe?

Is it a three dimensional physical space made of cut paper or is it a two dimensional illustration in a book? Or, because it was illustrated on a flat piece of paper first, is it a two dimensional space to begin with?

The outlook is all dependent on how the viewer interprets things around them. It’s expansive, malleable, and infinitely dimensional.

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The world which I created in my thesis provides aspects of an imagined habitat. It opens with a relatively conventional looking forest and mountain scene and slowly shows itself to have fictitious aspects. The opening page of the story deviates from reality by having two dog characters standing on their hind legs. On the next page, there is a bread bakery where the oven lid is in the shape of a dog’s open mouth. The story as a whole harbours anthropomorphic dogs, feline fog, and miscellaneous other typically inanimate things with enchanted qualities. We have seen things like tools, plants, and dinnerware come alive through other worlds like that of Fantasia and Beauty and the Beast by Walt Disney Productions or Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Caroll.

We already know that a pug could never really run a bakery. Not because they don’t have thumbs or know any recipes, but because their sizable appetite would wipe out all of the baked goods before they could sell a single loaf. So, when dealing with subjects or things in art that are incongruent with the “truth” we know in the Primary world, like a baker pug, they are made real by the boundaries of the world they are crafted in. In Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories”, written in 1947, the main aspect of the essay is to determine whether a story can be considered a fairy tale or not. He uses “faerie” as a measurement of determining if a story is mythical enough. “Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words: for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable but not imperceivable.” However, he goes on to describe the “beast fables” in which animals become masks to do human things. He claims these are not fairy tales for the reason that animals do not have the same morality as humans. What I think he is referring to is moral tales, like that of Aesop’s Fables where the fictitious element of witty and speaking animals is only meant to be a metaphor of morals and emotions. While at the time this article was written this may have been true, the character of anthropomorphism has evolved greatly into the 21st century.

My thesis deals with anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism at its core. It is a story by a person for people yet uses animals and animated scenery to tell a story. Throughout my entire life, I have always found animal-based stories and strange anthropomorphized stories to be my favorite. Many people who enjoy drawing people wonder why I would not make the main characters in my story people, or why I would not make the animated elements like the fog into just regular fog. When I look back, my immediate family was essentially 60% dog. That is, my mother, my brother, and my 3 pugs. I spent a majority of my time with my dogs while bird and wildlife watching, and exploring local forests, beaches, and fields. My primary world was the natural world, and the people in it were often creatures.

Historically, and personally, animals have played a great role in forming human identity. They are the only other cognitively evolved species in the entire universe that we know of. Prehistoric cave paintings of horses and bison, Egyptian mythology with the heads of dogs and cats, family crests of lions, logos like Pumas or Lacoste, are all normalized in today’s society. In literature, some animals have been used more frequently and stigmatized to show particular human emotions or characteristics. Terms like “greedy as a pig,” “sly as a fox,” and “sings like a bird” are common examples.

Speaking of foxes, the stop-motion film Fantastic Mr Fox directed by Wes Anderson, based off the book by Roald Dahl, is exemplary in how it picks and chooses which characters are anthropomorphized and which are not. The storyline follows Mr Fox, a fox who steals chickens from three dim-witted farmers to feed his family. As the farmers begin to rebel, Mr. Fox and his family move underground and outsmart the farmers with the help of other wildlife clans. Mr. Fox and his family, despite being foxes, are the most human characters in the film. They think, speak, and even dress like people. Somehow, these animals have evolved to be able to do such things, yet the chickens they steal from the farmers are still cartoons of chickens with no conscience. The farmers on the other hand are seen more like pests – some kind of role reversal.
There are so many reasons children’s picture books have come to use animals as stand-ins for people. I think the issue Tolkien had with considering beast fables as fairy tales was that a beast fable felt like a story. It reminded the child that it was not real life at all and the idea of it being a story was simply part of the story-telling. Whereas in a fairy story, the story’s environment and characters should be so well-calibrated to each other that it doesn’t feel like a story, but it feels like a world that you can visit time and time again. He sees the usage of animals as an indicator of a false world, and I can agree to some extent as seen in extremely short stories like Aesop’s fables where the intention is to suggest as many morals as possible. In a world like Fantastic Mr Fox, it seems less so because the emotional state of the characters helps drive the plot and we can relate to these types of emotions over subjective feelings of justice and “right and wrong.”

One of the major changes between the time of Tolkien’s essay and now has been the way animals are displayed and the amount of animation that a character is given. By animation, I don’t mean 24 fps moving images, but the amount of life and vivacity that a character or element has. For example, an element of small contention within my thesis has been the fog’s appearance, taking on a feline form. I animated the fog, an otherwise gaseous form of H2O, not to suggest that it is a cat itself, but metaphorically moves like a cat. I think this is reasonable and we see these types of personifications with many kafkaesque characters, the grim reaper for example, or the main insect character of Shaun Tan’s Cicada, who is a cicada living in a corporate human world. Nearing the end of my thesis, my dear classmates and professor pointed out that there was even a poem called Fog by Carl Sandburg which suggested someone else, years before me, realized cats romantically have the same dainty, stealthy manner as fog.

“The fog comes on little cat feet.

It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on.”

Left
A screencap from Wes Anderson’s 2007 film version of Fantastic Mr. Fox adapted from Roald Dahl’s book of the same title, first published in 1970.

12 Carl Sandberg’s poem “Fog” first published in 1916.
Ultimately, my story is told in a human voice but utilizing “de-automization”\(^\text{13}\) by using animal characters where we expect humans to be. What I created is not a particularly preachy story but it is also not long enough to be able to describe in great detail the ways these dogs govern their lives and build a full world. This is only a brief snapshot of their lives. Though being a farmer and a baker seem very cottagecore and idyllic in the story, the dogs are still intertwined with labor. Their entire lifestyle is that of living off the land and sustainably. Though it isn’t overt, it is a story dictated by the economy. If the two dogs can’t produce their commodities due to the fog, then how do they expect to sustain themselves and their businesses? Rather than a wild animal, I chose two domesticated canines to appeal to those with dogs but also to keep a little bit of the human aspect.

\(^{13}\) Christopher Kelen and Chengcheng You, *Poetics and Ethics of Anthropomorphism*, 61.
Though word and image interact, it is a visual story with animated quirks. An inspiration for this is watching films by Hayao Miyazaki and taking note of how strange mythical creatures inhabit and animate otherwise “normal” worlds. A wonderful example is in his film Spirited Away, where a young girl, Chihiro, steps through a tunnel and finds herself lost in a spirit realm. She visits a bathhouse and discovers that it is run by coal, however, the conveyor belt feeding the coal into the machine is not mechanical, or even human – it is small sprites made of soot that come alive but also easily disintegrate back into dust. We come to understand that the soot sprites don’t have feelings and are alive only by magical forces. In another film, Princess Mononoke, a story about two people trying to save a forest from deforestation, the trees are enchanted by small ghostly figures called Kodama from Japanese folklore. They appear in many scenes, sitting on trees and rocks while winding up and rattling their heads. Miyazaki gives life to these small elements, making them memorable and calling personification to the landscape. He ensures they also play an effective role in animating and telling the story.

Audience
My intention has been to craft a children’s picture book for a young elementary school audience. Because there is a limited amount of words that work best in these types of children’s picture books (at most around 500), the story needed to be fairly concise with location, plot, and relationships. Earlier, when I was comparing fictitious ecology to world building, I suggested that one element of fictitious ecology was its ability to be contained. Where world building is the foundation, the fictitious ecology zeroes in on a specific relationship. It encapsulates in the same way a goldfish bowl captures a plot of water and magnifies the carefully curated subjects inside.

When children’s books were first made, they were mostly meant to create obedient children. Now, children’s books have a variety of purposes. Some are meant to express difficult emotions, are informational, follow fairytale tropes, are silly, are witty, are wordless visual stories, among many other intentions. The story I created is lighthearted. There is a problem that is solved and a lesson to be learned, however, much of the experience is based on taking an imaginary trip to a land at the bottom of a mountain.

Left
A proposed spread for The Mountain Fog
Other picture book artists like Jerry Pinkney use this method, subtly adding faces to trees in a forest or more overtly to talking eggs.
In my story, I wanted elements that are not typically alive to have a life force breathing through them. I think that it makes sense for a landscape with feline fog to have other animated elements. While the story as it sits may need reworking to find a place where this animation contributes more fundamentally to the plotline, this is only the beginning for me of thinking about characterization and ways it can manifest.

The clearest deviation from our real life are the dog characters. However, in terms of children’s picture books representation, statistically speaking, they are quite common. One study in 2018 found that 50% of books depict white children, 27% animals, and the remaining 23% is divided amongst all other ethnicities. There is a significant lack of skin color representation for children who are not white.

Though my book is not about race, I thought about representation and what it meant to have dogs instead of humans. Initially, I thought to make the main characters the two most popular breeds - a french bulldog and a labrador retriever but I decided to switch to dogs that have less of a classist tone, do not overtly suggest skin tones, and are not about breeds in particular. One is a dark grey mixed breed and the other is a pug.

Thinking about ways to speak to our society, the primary world, and reinterpret it for the secondary world, I seek to create work that is inspiring and memorable – something that taps into someone’s imagination and suggests ways of seeing the world which they hadn’t noticed before. For my story, it would be the kind of thing where the next time you see billowing smoke falling gently from a chimney, lay in the grass watching white clouds racing by, or see a hazy foggy mountain, you can remember that those are whimsical weightless cats, silently inhabiting our world.

The Peak

In the realm of *The Mountain Fog*, I have been exploring an environment and topics many people are familiar with – mountains, fog, and domesticated animals – and reimagining it as something more fictitious. It began with the setting, diving into the characterization, and thinking about how these “real” things can be translated to best tell a story. Although the initial goal was to explore world building and fictitious ecology for an elementary audience, the creation of this work has shifted the way I view the role of children’s picture books and our environment. From a formal standpoint, this was my first attempt at creating a pitch for a children’s picture book and thinking about aspects such as word count, and specific formatting that is best suited for an early elementary age group. In light of my thesis being a pitch, the story itself may not be as tight of a story as it should be for a children’s picture book, however the process was a valuable insight into how I can bring my appreciation of nature into a storytelling setting.

Children’s picture books are an incredible opportunity to highlight the importance of natural environments, especially now - in the midst of a rapidly changing environment due to human activity. By adding emotional impact to an environment, it has the ability to draw people closer to that ecosystem and gives them a reason to care for a place they otherwise may not understand. Children’s picture books can be seen as introductions to places and allow for personal, individual experience into a location. There would be little reason for someone who has never visited a mountain to care for the ecology of a mountain, but if they had been introduced through a story previously, a new familiarity has been able to take root. A child’s visit to say, the Great Smoky Mountains, may be seen in an entirely new and enchanting light. From there, they can consider multiple ways of seeing a location and thinking about the landscape. Fictitious ecology allows the author and audience to create a new atmosphere to tell a distinct, and purposeful story.

Left
“Your bread was as mighty as a watermelon!” from *The Mountain Fog*

Right
Spread from *The Mountain Fog*
Bibliography


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