

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition

Student Contests & Competitions

---

2023

### Paging through Palimpsests: Used Picture Books and Their Connection to Place

Danielle Ridolfi

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ridolfi, Danielle, "Paging through Palimpsests: Used Picture Books and Their Connection to Place" (2023). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 79. <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/79>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Contests & Competitions at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

## **Paging Through Palimpsests: Used Picture Books and Their Connections to Place**

Of the many items in my childhood bedroom, my dollhouse stands out most prominently in my memory. Much different than my friends' elaborate Barbie Dreamhouses, my dollhouse was a simple wooden structure with wallpaper inside and a grass green roof—a kitschy yard sale find from one of my mother's thrifting expeditions. Its sturdy walls enclosed three rooms and an attic—humble, but plenty of space for the unconventional contents I kept inside. For many children, a dollhouse mirrors the larger world, providing connections with the objects and ideas they will someday wield. But I chose to fill my wooden house not with dolls and miniature furniture, but with books whose illustrations offered a different sort of reproduction of the world. I filled every square inch of miniature real estate with picture books that my mother bought me, as well as an ever-changing rotation of library books. Like lively travelers seeking temporary lodging, those books regaled me with a steady flow of adventure tales. But my favorite picture books told not of faraway and fantastic adventures, but of the ordinary natural wonders available in my own backyard—caterpillars, fish, vegetable gardens, and snowy days—and in doing so, encouraged me to experience them for myself. My childhood picture book collection quickly became a catalog of experiences that carried traces of place and time.

The notion that books should connect children to the ordinary as opposed to the fantastical has deep roots in educational history. In the early to mid 20th century, progressive educators and publishers, like those associated with the Bank Street School in New York City, of which *Goodnight Moon* (1947) author Margaret Wise Brown was associated, believed that books should depict everyday objects a child had access to like socks, kittens, and toys. My mother heartily agreed and crafted adventures to accompany each of my books to ensure a thorough

object-based exploration. *The Goat in the Rug* by Charles Blood and Martin Link (1976) about Native American weaving processes led to trips to local alpaca farms and potholder weaving projects at home. *Two Little Gardeners* by Margaret Wise Brown and Thatcher Hurd (1951) contributed to our own backyard gardening efforts, which yielded tiny watermelons, spindly asparagus, and tomatoes that my brother and I sold from a plywood table in our front yard. Reading Leo Leoni's *Fish Is Fish* (1970) about a minnow who longs to be a frog led to several expeditions to ponds in the woods to ladle frog eggs carefully into clear plastic containers. Watching the tadpoles slowly sprout tails and then legs was like glimpsing a hidden world. The day we returned to release the full-grown frogs back into the wild a couple of weeks later was a melancholy one, but with *Fish Is Fish* on my shelf back home, the memories of my amphibious friends, and hundreds of other childhood moments like this, were never far away.

My picture book collection often left my dollhouse at home and accompanied me on these expeditions in nature. Although I loved reading in the blissful solitude of the library or my bedroom, nothing compared to reading outdoors where I could actually touch the world in my books. Soon, sand and dirt collected in the books' creases and wayward marks and tears became commonplace. One of my favorite picture books, *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* by Linda Williams (1986), bears particular evidence of its use. I often read this autumnal tale about a woman walking home through the dark woods while nested in the center of an enormous pile of crunchy crimson leaves. The book's frayed spine now encloses pages patched with scores of clear tape and flecked with mysterious stains. Some books carry markers not only of place, but of precise moments in time. Some ripple and wave with water damage—a remnant of a rainstorm that leaked through our roof during my first year of elementary school.

Some bear the faint musty scent of my grandmother's basement where my brother and I lived during the years of my parents' separation. Recently, many of my books have developed a new layer of loving scars as I read them with my brother's young children. Opening their pages provides an instant portal, more potent than any photograph, to the beloved places, moments, and people in my past.

My love of beautiful imperfections makes me particularly drawn to used—or what I prefer to call, previously loved—books as I expand my collection. Decommissioned library books peppered with due date stamps, books with elementary school names pressed into their covers, and books with mysterious markings in the margins carry traces of the children who loved them, sometimes many years before I was even born. A recently-purchased copy of Evaline Ness' *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine* (1966), marked "Robertson County Circulating Library", contains several pencil scribbles accompanied by the initials of scrupulous librarians documenting the damage accrued from years of at-home adventures and wayward pencils. *The Little Golden Books* in my collection offer an even more endearing connection to their previous owners. Nameplates inside their covers invited children to draw and decorate—to lay claim to these beloved possessions. I wonder whether the "Elizabeth Lynne Zahn" who signed her name over forty years ago to my copy of R.P. Maison's *Once Upon a Time* (1974) read this story about pancake-eating animals while making pancakes with her own mother. The worn pages of this book say yes. While I do not intentionally seek out damage, I often buy used books sight unseen, fully expecting and even looking forward to the patina inside. The imperfections read like a secondary narrative, every bit as rich and meaningful as the text, that tells of the adventures of a child long ago.

Although I store my picture book collection today in a bookshelf, not my old dollhouse, my collection still serves as a miniature version of my world. The books saved from my childhood about ravenous insects and cabins in the woods sit next to more recently purchased used books about friendly toads and stowaway elephants. And directly above my picture books sits another collection of mine—pieces of driftwood from the ocean, stones from favorite hikes, a vial of sand from the desert. They are artifacts from the adventures that my books have inspired. Both collections provide a bridge from my home to the natural places that I love most. My books are palimpsests of their past lives, their meanings made richer with each smudge and tear. I will leave my mark on them, as will the children who inherit my books someday. I hope that my nephews will appreciate the soul in these humble objects when I am gone. Still other books of mine will find their way through a labyrinth of donations and estate sales into the hands of children unknown to me. A child someday will see my name printed in the cover of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and wonder who I was and whether its wavy pages got wet during a rainy camping trip or in a leaky row boat. And then, I hope, that child will go outside to live a similar adventure for themselves.

## Bibliography

### ***Books Inherited from Childhood***

- Ahlberg, Janet and Allan Ahlberg. *The Jolly Postman: Or Other People's Letters*. Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1986.
- Blood, Charles L. and Martin Link. *The Goat In The Rug*. New York, Parents' Magazine Press, 1976.
- Calmenson, Stephanie. *Barney's Sand Castle*. New York, Western Publishing Company, 1981.
- Leonni, Leo. *Fish Is Fish*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.
- Maison, R.P. *Once Upon a Time*. New York, Harper & Row, 1974.
- Schwartz, Alvin. *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories*. New York, Scholastic, 1984.
- Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York, Scholastic Book Services, 1963.
- Williams, Linda. *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything*. New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1986.

### ***Used Books Purchased in Adulthood***

- Carle, Eric. *The Grouchy Ladybug*. New York, Harper Collins, 1977.
- Carlson, Natalie Savage. *Runaway Marie Louise*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977.
- Lobel, Arnold. *Frog and Toad Together*. New York, Harper Collins, 1971.
- Low, Joseph. *What If*. New York, Atheneum, 1976.
- Ness, Evaline. *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.
- Swanson, Susan Marie. *The House in the Night*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008.
- Tresselt, Alvin. *The Smallest Elephant in the World*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959.
- Wiesner, David. *Tuesday*. New York, Clarion Books, 1991.