ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

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The term "environmental awareness" is a concept that has many generalized implications. Certainly in the realm of the elementary school, "environmental awareness" is a concept that falls into the so-called affective realm. It is an affective concept in the sense that environmental awareness is a positive attitude that individuals develop towards the environment. In the school situation, environmental awareness is a subjective concept which teachers find very difficult to statistically measure. As a result, some teachers feel uncomfortable teaching a concept that will not establish a percentage of grade norm. This somewhat statistical, almost mechanical approach towards teaching is unfortunately becoming popular among schools which feel that accountability is the essence of their curriculum. Yet it is the teacher who realizes that an awareness of one's environment is a significant as well as necessary goal, which although in the end cannot be measured, but still needs to be strived for. Children's literature is one means of effectively reaching the goal of environmental awareness.

Before a discussion of environmental literature can be attempted, a definition of environment must be established. The term "environment", as related to the elementary school child, is simply everything with which the child comes into contact. Environment is then an all-encompassing term, yet it can be divided into that which is nature (natural environment), and that which is made by man (cultural environment). It is necessary for the child to make a distinction between the natural and cultural environment, for it is the interaction of the two

environments which in effect creates the balance or imbalance of the natural environment. There is definitely an interdependency between the two. All too often, teachers approach environmental studies strictly from the aspect of the natural environment. They fail to enable the child to see how the cultural environment relates to, and interacts with, the natural environment. The impact of the cultural environment on the natural environment is all too often ignored. In the same manner, some children's books deal with environmental awareness strictly from the natural point of view. These books certainly have a place in environmental literature, yet ideally, environmental literature should attempt to establish a relationship between the natural and cultural themes. Only through witnessing man's interaction with the natural environment can a sense of awareness be realized by the reader. If the book does not establish or make clear the responsibility which the reader has in developing a positive relationship with the natural world, then the environmental meaning of "awareness" is lost. A relationship between the cultural and natural environments also connotes a sense of responsibility on the part of man. Man's freedom can be a deadly gift if it is not tied in some way with a sense of responsibility to all living things. Books that promote artistically the theme of man's relationship and responsibility to the natural environment can be considered "environmental books."

Robert Lawson's Rabbit Hill and Tough Winter are excellent examples of books which establish a clear insight into the relationship between man and nature. The animals which occupy "the hill" are for the most part dependent on "the folks" who care for them. Immediately, Lawson has established a fundamental relationship between man and nature, a relationship which depicts the essence of environmental awareness: man's responsibility to the animal world. This responsibility may take the form of providing for animals who are indirectly dependent upon man.

> Every evening for the past year and a half, they (the folks) had set out a bountiful meal for the Little Animals. The fields and lawns were lush with rich grains and grass, free for all. Around all the property boundaries were No Hunting signs. Even invading dogs were promptly driven off, chiefly by Mr. Muldoon, the Folk's ancient cat.[1]

Indeed the relationship which existed between the Folks and the animals on the Hill was one of positive and sound environmental practice. The Folks provide for the reader an example of "environmentally aware" man. However, of more significance is the contrast which Lawson makes between the "aware Folks" and the "unaware caretaker." By employing this contrast, Lawson enables the reader to realize the profound impact that man has upon the natural environment. Guns, steel traps, poisons, and a total apathy for the animal are all characteristics of the "unaware man." By enabling the reader to witness both the positive and negative relationships between man and animal, Lawson has allowed a distinction to be made between the "aware" and the "unaware" man. It is in the awareness of the Folks that we see a balance in the relationship between man and animal. The "aware" man understands and aids this balance while the "unaware" man ignores it. In the end, however, one cannot help but gain a sense of optimism from the balance that is eventually created at Rabbit Hill.

> Because on this Hill there was kindness, respect for the rights of others, and no fear, there was also happiness and peace.[2]

> But peace and happiness do not always flow on endlessly, without interruption, and folks are not trees, to stay forever rooted in one spot.[3]

Although this last statement was taken from Lawson's The Tough Winter, it serves as an appropriate introduction into the theme of negative environmental relationships which exist between the cultural and natural elements. While it is important to view the relationship between man and animal as a balance, it is also equally important at times to view the upsetting of this balance. In dealing with environmental awareness, children's literature must at times illustrate the negative impact that man has on the natural world. While Rabbit Hill serves to reaffirm the working relationship between man and animal, A Stranger at Green Knowe succeeds in effecting a dissolution of this positive relationship and in doing so,unleashes a wave of pessimism which is unfortunately painfully real. In order to become environmentally aware, one must see the ugly side of man's relationship with nature, a relationship which perhaps can be better described as "the peculiar institution." It is indeed a type of slavery when man makes it his duty to demoralize that which is wild. L. M. Boston enables the reader to view, as would a patron at the public zoo, the deanimalization of one of the jungle's most majestic and powerful creatures, the gorilla.

> Certainly it had never occurred to him that an animal could be stripped of everything that went with it, of which its instincts were an inseparable part, and that you could have just its little body in a space of nothingness. As if looking at that told you anything of the nature of sorrow, which you knew anyway. Here in their ugly, empty cages the monkeys were no more tropical than a collection of London rats or dirty, dark pigeons. They were degraded as in a slum.

The gorilla who falls victim to man is a reflection of all that has failed in our relationship with the environment. Ping serves as an example of what the relationship ought to be, yet, in the end, even Ping falls victim to an unaware

society. With the crack of rifle fire, the relationship which for a moment bound man and animal is ended. Boston creates a sense of social injustice at what has taken place at Green Knowe, and as a result, we come to know what injustice is in the eyes of an animal. We in effect become "aware" of injustice. It is significant that an author such as Boston enables the reader to witness that which is environmental injustice, for indeed, man's injustice toward the natural world is at the very root of our environmental problems. It is perhaps the revelation of such injustices by the author which enables the reader to begin to formulate a sense of responsibility towards the other world. Furthermore, the unveiling of the injustice done to Hanno, the gorilla, may prompt one to take positive steps toward eradicating such injustices. This then allows a higher level of awareness to evolve. Ping, in his own way, possessed such an awareness. He attempted to re-establish the relationship between man and animal. It was Ping who succeeded for a short period of time in rebalancing the scales which have for so long been tilted in man's favor. Ping succeeds in gaining that "simple" concept of awareness while society fails miserably.

Indeed, Boston's unraveling of injustices and the overwhelming sense of destruction apparent in A Stranger at Green Knowe serves to make us more aware of the environmental apathy which has befallen our society. Lawson's sense of optimism also serves to increase our environmental awareness. Both qualities are needed when attempting to identify good environmental literature. However, where does one seek solutions to these problems? Surely, one must include in this repertoire a book which offers solutions to all that is wrong with the environment. How does an individual eradicate environmental injustice? How does he

maintain a semblence of optimism? Robert C. O'Brien's Mrs. Frisby and the Bats of NIMH provides some insight into environmental problems as well as offering some solutions.

> "I don't believe that," Jenner said, "You've got this idea stuck in your head. We've got to start from nothing, to work hard and build a rat civilization. I say, why start from nothing if you can start with everything? We've already got a civilization." "No, we haven't. We're just living on the edge of somebody else's, like fleas on a dog's back. If the dog drowns, the fleas drown too."[5]

In the end, Jenner's mechanized dog causes a short circuit and Jenner and his comrades fall prey to their own mechanization.

If O'Brien makes us aware of anything, it is the fact that man must begin to re-evaluate that which he calls civilization. Nicodemus, the leader of the rats of NIMH, had enough foresight to realize that his mechanized civilization would in the end, destroy the very nature of that which is rat. The technology that the rats had created was beginning to destroy the relationship between themselves, as well as the relationship they had established with other living things. The rats in the end gained a sense of awareness which in reality saved them from their own destruction. Man, on the other hand, was not aware of the ill-fated relationship which existed between himself and technology. O'Brien leaves man shuffling through the garbage and dirt which so neatly conceals the instruments of destruction left behind by the rats.

O'Brien offers a very simple solution to the problems posed in Boston's and Lawson's books. Ping embodies it as do the "Folks," and the Rats of NIMH. They all discover it in their own personal way. It is somewhat of a cliche, yet its meaning is so clear: a return to nature. Ping as well as "The Folks"

possessed throughout their stories qualities which made them environmentally aware. This awareness was woven into the fabric of their character. Yet O'Brien's rats had to discover for themselves the threads which make up the fabric of awareness. They had to discover the concept just as man must do if he is to retain that which makes him human. O'Brien enables us to discover this key to awareness and in doing so he offers us a choice: do we trudge blindly on towards destruction as did Jenner, or do we look back and return to Thorn Valley as did Nicodemus.

> Mrs. Frisby watched them as they loped away swiftly in single file and disappeared from her view, back into the deep forest and up the mountainside. The rear guard was gone, bound for Thorn Valley.[6]

Other characters have heard the call to return to nature, but nature beckons only to a chosen few. Buck, from Jack London's The Call of the Wild, finally returns to that world which was intimately known by his ancestors, and has since been lost through the interferences of man.

> Night came on, and full moon rose high over the trees into the sky, lighting the land till it lay bathed in ghostly day. And with the coming of night, brooding and mourning by the pool, Buck became alive to the stirring of the new life in the forest other than that which the Yeehats had made. He stood up listening and scenting. From far away drifted a faint, sharp yelp, followed by a chorus of similar sharp yelps. As the moments passed, the yelps grew closer and louder. Again Buck knew them as things heard in that other world which persisted in his memory. He walked to the center of open space and listened. It was the call, the many noted call, sounding more luringly and compellingly than ever before. And as never before, he was ready to obey.[7]

Greta, in Fog Magic, returns periodically to a world which was made magic by nature's mist. The foggy enchantment of Blue Cove calls Greta as it calls all of us who are aware of the power of nature.

> It is the things you were born to that give you satisfaction in this world, Greta. Leastwise, that's what I think. And maybe the fog's one of them. Not happiness, mind! Satisfaction isn't always happiness by a long sight; then again, it isn't sorrow either. But the rocks and spruces and the fogs of your own land are things that nourish you.[8]

Chibi, the character in Crow Boy, has captured a keen awareness of the natural world. The reader cannot help sensing the peace which Chibi experiences as a result of his simple understanding of nature.

> On the playground, if he closed his eyes and listened, Chibi could hear many different sounds near and far. And Chibi could hold and watch insects and grubs that most of us wouldn't touch or look at. Chibi knew all the places where the wild grapes grew. And when his work was done he would buy a few things for his family. Then he would set off for his home on the far side of the mountain, stretching his growing shoulders proudly like a grown-up man. And from around the turn of the mountain would come a crow call -- the happy one.[9]

So as the Rats of NIMH carry themselves away to Thorn Valley, the "aware" man is left with the overpowering feeling that somehow he too must go along. Disrobed of all that is man-made, he must enter the valley in his own natural state. Only then will it become possible for a reconciliation between man and nature. The books which Lawson, Boston, and O'Brien have written serve to make children as well as grownups aware of the great task which is ahead of us. Their themes echo the thought that man has been careless in his treatment of the environment.

> The most priceless possession of the human race is the wonder of the world. Yet, latterly, the utmost endeavors of mankind have been directed towards the dissipation of that wonder .... Science analyzes everything to its component parts and neglects to put them together again.[10]

It is man's responsibility to see that the natural and cultural elements of our world are not set at odds with each other. It is man's responsibility to make children aware of this responsibility. Lawson, Boston, and O'Brien have not shirked this responsibility. They have in effect, "put our world back

together again." They give us the following advice: As the "Folks," we must become aware of our responsibility to nature, for indeed, at this point in time, certain elements of nature are dependent on man for their survival. As Ping, we must develop that compassion which is deserved by all living things. As the rats of NIMH, we must have the foresight to see what technology is doing to our relationship with all living things. If we do not, the result is most evident. When we have captured or have enabled our children to capture the spirits possessed by such literary characters as "The Folks", Ping, and the Rats of NIMH, then we may consider ourselves environmentally aware.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Lawson, The Tough Winter (New York, 1954), p. 17.

[2]Ibid., p. 10.

[3]Ibid., p. 10.

[4]Lucy Maria Boston, A Stranger at Green Knowe (New York, 1961), p. 38.

[5]Robert C. O'Brien, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH (New York, 1971), p. 175.

[6]Ibid., p. 222.

[7]Jack London, The Call of the Wild (New York, 1968), p. 110.

[8]Julia L. Sauer, Fog Music (New York, 1943), p. 24

[9]Taro Yashima, Crow Boy (New York, 1955), pp. 20,21, and 22.

[10]Kenneth Grahame, The Wind and the Willows (Cleveland, 1966), p. 9 of forward.

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