

Plant Tendrils in Children's and Young Adult Literature. An Introduction

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The articles in this first issue in *Ecozon@* dedicated to the analysis of children's and young adult (YA) literature all explore how plants are entangled in and with stories for children and young adults. As a collection, the articles in this issue examine the fictional worldings shaped and made possible by metaphors drawn from the life cycles of plants at many levels—from seeds, tendrils, and rapid new growth, which can be either hopeful or threatening, to ancient trees, falling leaves, and the afterlife of plant matter in compost and decay. The plant metaphors examined in the stories presented here are sometimes reused tropes but may also form part of stories that highlight and respect the unique materiality of plants. Often, the bodies and minds of children and young adults are depicted as permeable to, or emblematic of, a plant-like flourishing.

The articles in this special issue may be considered reflections and reverberations of, as well as contributions to, the “vegetal turn” in the environmental humanities, most significantly coalescing in the developing field of critical plant studies, where recent botanical research focussing on plant capabilities has led to the re-examination and revaluation of the roles played by plants in philosophy, history, literature, and the arts. Growing rapidly, the cross-disciplinary field of critical plant studies has been propelled by key researchers and writers such as Anthony Trewavas, Matthew Hall, Michael Marder, John Charles Ryan, Stefano Mancuso, and Monical Gagliano.

Under the umbrella of critical plant studies, several volumes dedicated to exploring the presence and representation of plants in literature have been published, notably *The Poet as Botanist* (2008) by M. M. Mahood, *Plants and Literature: Essays in*

Critical Plant Studies (2013), edited by Randy Laist, and *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari. At present there are two specialized international anthologies dedicated to the investigation of plants in the study of children's and young adult literature, namely *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2021), edited by Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guanio-Uluru, which collects contributions by authors from 13 different countries and *Storying Plants in Australian Children's and Young Adult Literature: Roots and Winged Seeds* (2023), edited by Duckworth and Annika Herb, which focusses on Australian literature and engages with intersections between Indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial perspectives on plants. The articles in this special issue engage with, and develop, theoretical perspectives introduced in these two anthologies.

In the introduction to *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017), Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patrícia Vieira note how “works of poetry and prose in the Western tradition tend to represent plants as part of the landscape and as the backdrop for human and, on occasion, animal dramas” and how “[f]or many writers, plants become, at most, the correlatives of human emotions, eliciting feelings of pleasure and displeasure, triggering memories, and reflecting human states of mind” (x). Studies on plants in children and YA literature so far support the observation that plant presence in literature frequently is metaphorical and often a comparison of children and adolescents to plants is rooted in the (adult) view that they must all be nurtured and tended to grow *right*. Such a connection between childlikeness and vegetal life can be found in the myths of many cultures—for instance in William of Newburgh’s haunting 12th century story of two mysterious green children, who emerge from the earth, green hued, and eat only broad beans.

In *Exploring Literary Conceptualisations of Growth* (2014), Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses more in depth how writers of childhood and adolescence tend to employ growth metaphors. Drawing on cognitive psychology, she comments that “our brains tend to create metaphorical structures in terms of the embodied experiences we have lived, we structure our thoughts in ways that replicate physical experience” (66). Trites’ observation might help explain the ubiquity of plants in language, since plants make up approximately 80 % of the biosphere (Bar-On et al. 6507). Entangled in our embodied experience, plants appear as integral to our thinking and emerge for instance in the form of language- and family trees, as figures of philosophy (like Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘rhizome’) and as often fruitful poetic and linguistic figures. In literature, the vegetal model may also provide an escape from societal norms and expectations, as in the seventeenth-century author Cyrano de Bergerac’s proto-sci-fi tale, *Voyage to the Moon* (1902), in which cabbages capable of seeding multiple planets, potentially starting new societies, are pitted against the strict norms upheld by fathers in patriarchal societies. Vegetal presences might thus also be cast as disruptive.

While there may be cognitive reasons for the ubiquity of plants in linguistic figures and for their presence in literature, the agency of the plants themselves might further account for their influence on our thinking and our storytelling practices, as

well as for the noted tendency of many writers to weave references to plants into their fiction when portraying human emotion. Many plants use pheromones, or chemical signatures, to communicate, and these pheromones may affect humans—a recognition of this fact is, for instance, the fundamental premise of aromatherapy, and studies of plant chemistry is the foundation of modern pharmacology. Plant chemistry and its effects on human and animal lives has also been a topic of interest for biologists. In *The Triumph of Seeds* (2016), Thor Hanson discusses how plants “repel attackers with alkaloids, tannins, terpenes, phenols, or any of the many other compounds invented by plants” (139) and notes how many of us are addicted to stimulating plant chemicals—be they the mental pick-me-up of the caffeine in coffee or the pungent attacks of the anti-fungal capsaicin of the chili (139, 140, 151). Says Hanson: ‘It’s only a slight exaggeration to call us servants of our food plants, diligently moving them around the world and slavishly tending them in manicured orchards and fields’ (184). Such perspectives bring into focus the non-metaphorical power of plants, their oft-overlooked agency, that appears readily translated into literary metaphor.

The various contributions to this special issue each in their own way engage with the material or metaphorical presence of plants. The issue is structured so that the only contribution analysing children’s literature is featured first, followed by the remaining contributions that are discussing texts for young adults. While the first contribution revolves around the entanglement of seeds and children conveyed by the words and images in three picturebooks, the next four essays in various ways engage with works in which young adolescents find themselves in entangled relationships with trees and forests. In the sixth essay, trees are mostly present as what Ryan has termed “botanical traces” (2017), since in the fictional world of this climate fiction (cli-fi) novel, forests are all but extinct. The seventh and final article reflects on the function and metaphor of compost, thus highlighting how vegetal matter is part of self-sustaining natural cycles. The remainder of this introduction briefly outlines the seven articles in some detail.

In “Seeds of Change: Negotiating Hierarchies in Seed Picturebook Stories”, Liza Hu analyses the verbal and visual representations of seeds and their poetic entanglement with children in three stories featuring seeds. Drawing on Jane Bennet’s concept of “vibrant matter” (2010), Hu argues that the three seed stories, by highlighting the entanglement of seeds and children, help reveal the agentic power of both, thus countering a view of both seeds and children as vulnerable and controlled.

Plants in literature are not necessarily benevolent, as discussed by Samantha Hind in “The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us”: Entangled Bodies and Fragile Flesh in M.R. Carey’s *The Book of Koli* (2020). Hind develops the term *plant flesh*, denoting both the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal, tracing how genetically modified plants wreak havoc in Carey’s YA novel. In *The Book of Koli*, the modified plants mimic the human desire for control and consumption—turning into what T.S. Miller (2012) aptly termed “monster plants.” Plant flesh thus functions as a term of indistinction, encompassing transformations of plant matter from passive

resource to living bodies and from human bodies into flesh vulnerable to violent attacks by the dystopian, rapacious plants. It is this vulnerability that the adolescent hero needs to recognize and navigate.

The significance of plants, and particularly trees and forests, to the development of young adult protagonists is highlighted in Sara Pankenier Weld's essay "Survival, Sustenance, and Self-Sufficiency: Taking a Plant-Based Perspective in Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*". Drawing on ecofeminism, Weld shows how an increasingly intimate knowledge of, and relationship with, giant redwoods on the part of the novel's protagonists in Hegland's post-apocalyptic tale leads to great self-sufficiency, not least through the embodied practices of gardening and foraging, albeit in a future that is equal parts utopian and completely outside a modern consumerist lifestyle.

In "Unlikely Friends in Patriarchal Lands: An Ecofeminist Reading of 'Sonal Bai' and Sandalwood Tree" Sushmita Pareek investigates, through interpretive commentary, the metaphorical representation of a girl's coming of age through her relationship with a Sandalwood Tree. The tale "Sonal Bai" is rooted in the prevalent 'katha' culture of oral storytelling in India where women exercise freedom of voice through singing and narrating tales within all-female groups, and Pareek discusses the tale as an encoded moral lesson for Rajasthani teenage girls.

An important aspect of YA fiction is to provide steppingstones toward futures and worlds not possible or not easily accessible in the mainstream social spaces governed by late-capitalist economies. Dystopian outcomes, including destruction and war, can provide prompts in YA fiction for characters to develop and grow with others, in new social formation and bonds. Cynthia Zhang in "To See with Eyes Unclouded: Nonhuman Selves and Semiosis in *Princess Mononoke*" ventures into Hayao Miyazaki's legendary *anime* to explore the ability of the fantasy genre to expand understandings of interspecies communication—including between plants and human and nonhuman animals—and thus offer tools for respecting the personhood of nonhuman living beings. Zhang shows that anime as a medium allows for visionary access to the semiosis of the forest (personified as Forest Spirit) in ways that humans cannot fully perceive, because of our status as a particular animal or specific "nature", to use the term that Zhang borrows from multinaturalism.

Like fantasy, cli-fi envisions (often dystopic) future worlds. In "Seeds of latent hope: The figurative entwinement of children, adolescents, and plants in Maja Lunde's *The Dream of a Tree*", Lykke Guanio-Uluru, drawing on theorizations of climate fiction and perspectives from critical plant studies, shows how the child and adolescent characters in Lunde's most recent cli-fi are embedded in figurative patterns associating them with growth and hope in ways that she argues rhetorically serve to shift Lunde's dystopian climate quartet towards a more utopian resolution.

Finally, reflecting on the life-sustaining interdependence of plants, people, animals, and soil, Lydia Kokkola turns to Donna Haraway's concept of "compost" in her essay "Living and Dying as Compost in the Torne Valley Mires". To live as compost means to live with an awareness of and proximity to death—our own and that of

others. Kokkola draws on Indigenous scholars, most significantly the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, and on critical plant studies, to bring into focus the life of moss in the liminal space of the mires. She reads *Som om jag inte fanns* [As though I wasn't there] by Kerstin Johansson i Backe (1978), a Swedish novel for young adults set amongst mossy and treacherous mires, as a meditation on the possibilities and the dangers of living as compost.

In times of climate and ecological crises, met by lagging and inadequate responses within late capitalist regimes in economic, social, and cultural domains, texts for and about young people respond by experimenting with plant-based narratives and perspectives. Doing so, they contribute to a questioning of the boundaries of the self, by encouraging reflection on the interdependence of different life forms, offering hope, and food for thought, while bearing witness to the shapes of plants and their storying.

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