

## Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

### Plant Tendrils in Children’s and Young Adult Literature

Elizabeth Tavella  
University of Chicago  
[ecozona.arts@gmail.com](mailto:ecozona.arts@gmail.com)

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Since the inception of storytelling, plants have been woven into the very fabric of our cultural production. As integral members of global ecosystems, living in a vibrant state of cross-species interdependence, they play a vital role in human daily experiences, including through their permeating presence across creative forms of expressions. While plants ubiquitously inhabit our imagination, in real life, they are going extinct at an alarming rate, representing an imminent threat that gets lost in the “semantic texture of urban, technological consciousness” (Laist 10).

The self-centered habit of turning all non-human life into resources to be exploited and (over)consumed goes hand in hand with the on-going settler colonial project and a logic of supremacy, which benefit from denying personhood to more-than-human beings. Within the cultural and artistic spheres, the systemic reduction of plants to reified metaphors anchored to anthropocentric ends is symptomatic of this denial. In other words, as Giovanni Alois suggests, “to gain our attention, they have to ventriloquize the transcendental side of the existential” (69).

Yet, Indigenous storytelling testifies to the possibility of building kinship with plants through different relational premises, that is by viewing them as relatives, ancestors, and “animate persons” from whom we are meant to learn (McDaid Barry et al. 3). If we were to fully embrace this mode of thinking, we could confidently walk the ecocentric path of the “Planthropocene,” an aspirational episteme according to which communities of photosynthetic creatures are recognized as our most powerful allies in designing new possible worlds and in breaking free from mitigating Anthropogenic violence using Anthropocene logics (Myers).

The “vegetal turn” in the humanities reflects this renewed and growing attention towards our plant kin, thus contributing to amplifying silenced botanical histories. In accordance with Frederike Middelhoff and Arnika Peselmann, I contend that by expanding our sensorium to plant being and centering more-than-human ontologies that transcend colonial approaches to dealing with vegetal worlds, we create powerful yet challenging avenues for “questioning what constitutes and what is knowledgeable about plant life and vegetal narrative cultures but also, more

specifically, about vegetal forms of communication and interaction” (178). Storytelling is thus key to forging new trails not only for this kind of enchanted adventure, but also for passing down through generations ideas of kindness, stewardship, and justice that can offer to our youth new cultural paradigms. At the same time, storytelling can help us set strong foundations to (re)root ourselves in forgotten, erased, or ignored multispecies teachings.

The cover image by children’s author and illustrator [Trace Balla](#), a self-described “story catcher,” perfectly encapsulates this commitment to honoring more-than-human agency through creative praxis.<sup>1</sup> The visual narrative invites viewers to shift perspective beyond the human scale and immerse ourselves into enlarged worlds full of vitality and animacy. The combination of abstract elements and more-than-human motions and voices made visible through lines of color, all contribute to questioning mechanistic worldviews emerged in western cultures, while presenting a choral scene that brings affective attention to multispecies coexistence.

Trace Balla is mostly known for her award-winning books featuring Australian landscapes and the local flora and fauna, animated by using storytelling conventions typical of graphic novels, such as sequential art and speech bubbles. Melanie Duckworth describes her drawing style as “informal and intimate” (3) and views her practice of mapping ecosystems as an “anti-colonial engagement with vibrant multispecies worlds” (11), offering experiential visualizations that appreciatively acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous perpetual custodianship of the Land.

With the purpose of entering into conversation with the journal’s scholarly segment dedicated to plant tendrils in children’s and young adult literature, the Creative Writing and Arts section offers a selection of works by international artists that challenge normative (western) ways of viewing plants. Rather than stories *about* plants, these are stories *with* plants. Both contributions are the fruit of a collaboration between a writer and an illustrator who shared and combined their knowledges to make new meanings, just like underground networks.

The first contribution is an ecofeminist retelling of a Flemish folktale foregrounding nettles. The text is written by Wendy Wuyts, who defines herself as an eco-communicator rewilding folktales and restor(y)ing places. In discussing her fascinating methodology, Wuyts mentions that she purposefully lists all the people—including machines assisting with the translation process—who have introduced narrative variants to the fairytale over the past centuries, to emphasize that a fairytale is a fluid, ongoing artwork, often calibrated to actual themes and interests of the storyteller and contemporary audience. This statement confirms what Melvin Konner argues in his book *The Evolution of Childhood*, namely that “even the simplest and most static of human cultures is an engine of inventive mutual influence and change” (590).

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<sup>1</sup> The artist’s work is accessible also on her Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/traceballa/?hl=en>

Wuyts's superb intervention lies precisely in recognizing the personhood of plants by turning the communities of nettles in the story into active protagonists who become powerful allies of the heroine's liberation from patriarchal power. Instead of portraying nettle as an "invasive species," Wuyts adheres to Gilles Clément's reframing of so-called weeds both as vital inhabitants of the lands they populate and as inspiring freedom seekers. In fact, while "everyone rails against the vagabonds" (Clément 276), in Wuyts's version of the story, they rightfully become holders of a lost knowledge rooted in cooperation, resilience, and mutual care. As the human female characters relearn how to converse with nettles, the plants are acknowledged as valuable teachers who help re-establish "the sacred bond between the people and the land."

Besides reclaiming the active role of plants on a narrative level, the text also challenges dominant patriarchal dynamics that traditionally govern fairytale plot structures, especially in the rewriting of the ending, which exemplifies ecofeminist principles in action. In fact, the female characters join forces to "attune themselves to the whispers of nettles and the desires of their hearts," blending "craftsmanship, intuition and openness to the magic of plants." In so doing, readers—virtually of all ages—are exposed to a story of rebellion and newfound independence that holds the potential to reshape cultural and social practices surrounding questions of gender and ecology.

The three illustrations accompanying the text beautifully bring to life the spirit of the revisited folktale. They are realized by [Yule Hermans](#), a Belgian illustrator who curated the visual storytelling of several children's books, including Tom Mariën's picture book *Geef Wacht!* (Give Guard!, Van Halewyck, 2020). Her love for myth and legend manifests in a sophisticated and highly recognizable style blending magic and reality. The use of acrylic paint, combined with the choice of an earthy color palette mixing shades of greens and purples, further contribute to creating a poetic, dreamy atmosphere that centers the empowering bond between women and plants.

The second contribution features an introspective piece by Bijal Vachharajani, a writer and editor of young adult literature, a certified climate worrier, and a [blogger](#) of various topics ranging from animal rights to environmental literature. For this special issue of *Ecozon@*, she wrote an insightful reflection on her latest young adult novel *Savi and the Memory Keeper* (2023), a moving story set in Shajapur, India, that connects personal loss with planetary loss by exploring the nuanced dynamics of grief from the perspective of an adolescent. Another prominent thematic thread in the book is the interconnection between humans and the natural world, which signals a joyful triumph over corporate greed and ecological devastation.

The opening dialogue between the author and the houseplants, featured as co-protagonists in the novel, presents the same humorous and witty tone found in the book. Dismissing the presence of talking plants as purely anthropomorphic would risk losing sight of the special role they play as companions and witnesses to the young protagonist's life. In fact, after the sudden loss of her father, Savi enters in a relationship of memory sharing through touch with the potted plants that have

outlived him. By evoking past memories, the plants take on the role not only of memory keepers but also of actual storytellers. And just like Savi processes the loss of her father through the act of tending to his plants, so does the author in her reflective piece reminisce about her late partner through the same process within the intimacy of the domestic sphere.

[Rajiv Eipe](#), the illustrator of the novel, contributes three drawings to complement the text, specifically referencing the conversation between the author and her forty-two potted plants.<sup>2</sup> In his artist statement, he shares that in composing the full-page illustration at the end of the piece he wished to create a non-anthropocentric composition that did justice to the variety of shapes, sizes, and colors of the individual plants, while also trying to encompass the author's eagerness of stepping into the refuge and companionship of these plants at a difficult time in her life. Eipe's perceptive art, which straddles a variety of genres from animation and children's books to comics, combines crayons, pencils, inks, and digital media to create a sensitive illustration that brilliantly grasps the collective sociality of plants without losing sight of their individual features and personalities. By offering a visual depiction of the houseplants that goes beyond an ornamental function, they are deliberately reframed as "models of resilience at the limits of more-than-human social life in late capitalism" (McHugh 194).

As already mentioned, the novel also deals with ecological loss, touching upon pressing issues like global warming, pollution, forced migrations tied to climate change, and deforestation, which the author evokes in her commentary to emphasize the dramatic loss of collective knowledge linked to the accelerating loss of biodiversity. In the same line of thought, Vachharajani points out the growing disconnect between nature and childhood by citing mental health conditions such as "shrinking roaming radius" and "environmental generational amnesia." Within this context, trees are recognized as cultural beings who carry histories of our entangled ecologies and, as such, must actively participate in our collective endeavor of strengthening ecosystem resilience. Similarly to the first contribution, in which women and nettles build interspecies alliances, here too human teenagers and tree elders come together to offer a vision of the future beyond crisis, which reject infantilizing views of young adults who vigorously refuse to perpetuate the current status quo. They are not afraid to dream; they have not lost hope.

In conclusion, both contributions feature narratives that center empowered female characters who prioritize interspecies care and mindful stewardship. Together, authors and illustrators promote an ontological realignment of the vegetal world towards personhood that diverges from a relational model based on disposability and exploitation. The range of perspectives on the subject of plant life explored by these various artists provides a vision of interspecies interdependence that honors the emerging subjectivities of plants. Their textual and visual stories thus

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<sup>2</sup> The first two illustrations are reproduced from the back cover of the book *Savi and the Memory Keepers*.

serve as a gentle reminder that we must (re)learn not just how to collaborate, but also how to *conspire with vegetal beings*, to breathe with them, always keeping in mind that “they breathed us into being” (Myers).

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