

Anthropomorphism in Picture Books and the Cultivation of Environmental Empathy:  
Was the Tree *Really* Happy?

ABSTRACT

Perennial favorite *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein exemplifies a perspective on the natural world common in picture books for young audiences in the anthropomorphized character of the Tree. Frequently intended to cultivate a sense of empathy for nature and an interest in and concern for “the environment,” picture books that present human-like animals, plants, and geological features such as Silverstein’s self-sacrificing apple tree paradoxically complicate children’s relationship to the natural world. While encouraging empathy for the human-like individual characters in the texts, this strategy can in fact impede young readers’ ability to experience the natural world creatively, imaginatively, realistically, and directly. Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, along with other advocates for cultivating children’s connection to nature, urge that unmediated, sustained individual interaction with natural spaces and their inhabitants is critical to developing environmental empathy. With reference to Robin Calland’s critique of anthropomorphized mother-child pairs in “Animal Mothers and Animal Babies in Picture Books,” this research examines several popular and award-winning picture books for young children, from 1964’s *The Giving Tree* to the 2018 Caldecott winner *Wolf in the Snow*, to argue that assigning human characteristics to non-human members of the natural world hinders children’s understanding of and empathy for animals, plants, and geological features by reducing complex ecosystemic relationships and unique non-human characteristics to a simple and limiting anthropocentric context.

Keywords: cultivating environmental empathy; picture books; anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism