

Reflections of Water: Glimpses of the Evolutionary Dance of Water and Aquatic Organism in Children's Nonfiction

Water is everywhere and nowhere in two recent nonfiction Scientists in the Field books, Lourie's *The Manatee Scientists: Saving Vulnerable Species* and Swinburne's *Sea Turtle Scientist*. I say that because the tributaries, channels, and miles of ocean navigated and experienced by various kinds of sea turtles and manatees appear everywhere in the print and photos of these books but only ever as background. In my paper for the 2018 ChLA Conference, I pull back the anthropocentric surface layers of two nonfiction books about scientists saving endangered aquatic species to reveal deeper layers in which water appears as a central force. The books' tales of creatures surviving via an evolutionary dance with water flash into view with descriptions of turtles as "hydrodynamic" and manatees as able to find their way in murky water through sensory processes that "find and detect the movement of water." They do so with sensitivity akin to humans "[sensing and reading] Braille" (30-32). The anthropocentric impulse behind these books foregrounds the agency of remarkable human beings saving remarkable creatures. However, the more interesting evolutionary history that surfaces in the books nudges humans to the margins of the picture and fills the frame with water and organisms. Humanity's absence from that dance is emphasized by the fact that scientists must work so hard to find the animals in the water. "Scientists," Swinburne tells readers, "know almost nothing about male sea turtles that spend their entire lives at sea" (41). Readers who have learned to see water as inanimate might find it disorienting to think of water assuming the role of agent, but they need not. In separate works, Abrams and Diadij explore other cultural frameworks in which water and other things we think of as inanimate substances are acknowledged to possess being and power. Through the evolutionary histories that peek through the accounts of scientists, the young reader has an opportunity to understand the forms of manatees and sea turtles as reflections of water.