



Brief

What Role Do Birds Play in Children's Picture Books, in Light of an Ecocritical Approach?

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Birds and children's relationship to nature have long been central in children's literature. However, the premises in picture books can have an impact on children's understanding of nature and a sustainable society. The Norwegian curricula for both kindergartens and schools emphasize that it is important that children become familiar with nature's diversity, have nature experiences, create a sense of belonging to and learn to take care of nature. This means that it is necessary to create awareness of what sets the premises for such a development. In light of an ecocritical approach, this article draws attention to the role birds are given in picture books, and how the relationship between birds and humans is depicted in the physical environment. Based on the analysis of twelve picture books, in which birds and children are part of a significant (friendship) relationship, it is discussed what significance the representation of the birds' role in the relationship in the fictional narrative can have on the understanding of nature, with a view to sustainable development. The analysis shows that six of the picture books are linked to an existential theme, in that the birds have a supportive role in the relationship with the child character who experiences exclusion and existential challenges. In these picture books (except one), the birds are depicted with anthropomorphic characteristics as talking. In this way, the birds are given the opportunity to be in dialogue with the children's characters, to support them in their existential development, to become braver in interaction with others and to find their way into the community. What characterizes these picture books are that they usually present an anthropocentric perspective and a celebratory attitude on the relationship between birds and children's characters. The other six picture books are largely characterized by a more holistic way of thinking about nature, in that the children's characters are surrounded by and spend time

in nature with birds. The picture books have animal protection and pollution as their theme, and the role of the birds is apparently to give the children characters the opportunity for new understanding, reflection and recognition of the animals' uniqueness and biodiversity. There are more facts about the birds' lives through changing seasons in these picture books, although they also depict human assumptions about birds. The picture books present an ecocentric perspective, with elements of anthropocentric perspective. It is both a celebratory relationship between birds and humans, and a more problematizing representation of nature, which itself can be dangerous and also that man-made environmental pollution means that birds have to fight for survival. It is implied that birds and humans have much in common. These picture books offer no easy answers to the ecological challenges the world is facing, but an invitation to reflect upon the complexity. Such wondering and awareness can have an impact on the implementation of sustainable development in kindergartens and schools.

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