

Sven Nordqvist's *Pettson and Findus* Series and Children's Education: Ecocritical Dialogues in Preschool

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Abstract

This article explores how Sven Nordqvist's books about Pettson and Findus may be used to initiate dialogues in preschool on the relationship between humans and nature. We argue that Nordqvist's books are especially fitting for ecocritical dialogues on three levels, on which they depart from today's ecocentric aspirations. These levels include (1) the main characters' view of nature as a resource, (2) the untraditional representation of plants, and (3) the characters' assumptions of control and superiority over nature, especially over (other) animals. Another implication of the article is that pre-ecocriticism children's books, and books that are not climate fiction can be useful in preschool discussions thematizing the relationship between humans and nature.

Keywords

Sven Nordqvist, ecocritical dialogues, preschool, human–nature relationship

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that literature can change people's way of viewing the world (Felski, 2018; Langer, 2011; Nussbaum, 2016; von Mossner, 2017, pp. 6–7). In recent years, a plethora of climate fiction (cli-fi) literature for children has sprung out of the woodwork. Children can read about endangered nature (Tucker & Persico, 2019), oil disasters (Lillegraven, 2020), and climate activism (Camerini, 2020; Winter, 2020). We argue that children's books without an explicit eco-activist agenda and books written before questions of sustainability made their way into curricula and other documents regulating school systems can serve an important function by influencing children to reflect on questions of sustainability and, in the long run, to become eco-citizens. One example is Sven Nordqvist's picturebook series about Pettson and his cat Findus. The countryside is a constant backdrop across the series, depicted as a pastoral idyll, rich in flora and

fauna. In addition, the characters' close connection to nature is central. These factors make Nordqvist's books especially fitting for prompting ecocritical dialogues with preschool children. We highlight three characteristics from the books that support this argument.

Our theoretical point of departure is Garrard's (2012, p. 5) definition of ecocriticism as an investigation of the relationship between humans and nature in literature. The concept of ecocritical dialogues, defined by Goga et al. (2023) as dialogues whose goal is to make children reflect on humans' contact with nature, is central to our study. According to Goga et al. (2023, p. 20), a central question in ecocritical dialogues is whether nature is understood from an anthropocentric or an ecocentric perspective.

Nature as a Resource

The often-recurring depictions of Pettson and Findus' use of nature as a resource are apt incentives to embark on ecocritical dialogues with children. In the series, several illustrations show how Pettson and Findus use nature as a resource to obtain food (growing vegetables, picking berries, fishing, keeping poultry, etc.). The images are rich in details and tell parallel stories to the textual one (Nikolajeva, 2000, p. 226). Tracing these stories can be detective work to activate the attentive reader. In *A Ruckus in the Garden* (2018), the reader may notice that Findus is planting a meatball in the vegetable garden. It is interesting to hear the children's ideas on whether the meatball will grow. These reflections may, in turn, lead to discussions on the differences between plants and animals. Here, the preschool teacher may ask, "Where do vegetables come from?" "Do we buy them at the store?" "Where do Pettson and Findus get their vegetables from?"

In addition to using nature as a resource for food, the protagonists use it as a source of recreation and happiness. In *Festus and Mercury: Wishing to Go Fishing* (2016), Pettson (here translated as "Festus") suffers from depression, and to address this ailment, he and Findus (Mercury) go fishing. The book features illustrations of Pettson's mental state before and after spending time in nature. His depression is accompanied by rain and gray colors and his recovery is represented by sunshine afterward. These illustrations offer another opportunity for preschool teachers to prompt children's reflection about connections between the character's emotions and nature.

When we discussed Nordqvist's books with a preschool teacher, she mentioned that she was especially fond of the so-called mumbles—the magical creatures in the Pettson books. She argued that these creatures are closely related to nature and hypothesized that they need it to survive. This, in turn, made her reason about the everyday activities in preschool, which often include excursions to the forest. She suggested that "maybe we are not supposed to bring sticks and leaves and other things from the forest back to kindergarten to keep them or create something of them. Then we see nature as a resource and take things that the mumbles and the creatures living in the forest need." She argued that, together with the children, we should look beyond those resource aspects and teach the children that nature has a value on its own. As we can see, the teacher questions the idea of nature as a resource for humans and puts this critical approach into practice when making field trips into nature with the children.

The Depiction of Nature

Another opportunity for ecological dialogues arises from the fact that Nordqvist's depiction of nature is not always mimetically accurate. Plants are often oversized or out of season. Nordqvist experiments with perspective and size, and this stylistic device often makes the plants especially visible to the reader. The so-called plant blindness (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999), where readers tend to ignore plants and merely treat them as background elements—a view that is often associated with an anthropocentric view of nature—is clearly not an issue in the Pettson and Findus series. Oversized dandelions and daffodils are also accompanied by the mixing of seasons. Attentive readers may notice that spring flowers and summer berries appear simultaneously. Although Nordqvist uses these mixings to enhance the magic of his fictional world, the illustrations may lead to discussions regarding what plants are and in what season they grow.

Findus, who is not an ordinary cat, is related to Nordqvist's often non-mimetic representation of nature. Anthropomorphizing animals is a common strategy in children's literature (Birkeland, 2016, pp. 1–3), but what is unique about Nordqvist's books is Findus' liminal position on a human–animal axis. He wears clothes and always walks on two feet; he could hence be interpreted as a child rather than a cat (Lindgren, 2015). At the same time, he is an animal, because he never speaks to anyone except Pettson, signaling that he only exists as a human within Pettson's (and the readers') head(s). Findus' double status as both an animal and a human relates to Goga et al.'s (2023) argument about anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives on nature and animals. One may, for example, discuss with the children if cats have clothes, if they can talk, and what are typical characteristics of a cat.

Impact on Nature

The third reason that makes the series fitting for ecocritical dialogues centers on the protagonists' anthropocentric view of nature. In Nordqvist's works Pettson, Findus, and other characters often assume they have the right to control nature or other animals. In *Findus Rules the Roost* (2017), for example, Findus is inconvenienced by the rooster's crowing and forbids him from uttering any sound. The rooster's misery is vividly depicted in several illustrations, where the children can see how unhappy and frustrated he is. Another way in which the main characters impact nature is when Findus, in the same book, tries to make a hen fly by using a seesaw-like construction. This is not to help the hen but simply for his own entertainment. These and similar examples of anthropocentric perspectives are opportunities for the teacher to discuss with children questions about nature rights, especially the rights of domesticated animals and plants.

Another example is related to the threatening of a traditional, anthropocentric, lifestyle. It is rare that the series deals with the killing of animals, but in one episode in *The Fox Chase* (2015), Pettson and Findus' neighbor, Gustavsson, is experiencing problems with a fox who threatens his hens, and he ventures to kill it. Pettson and Findus are also troubled by the fox, but their approach to the situation is different as they lure the fox away from the farm. Their strategy is less anthropocentric than Gustavsson's, who sees it as his right to kill the fox. Themes that are interesting to bring up for discussion regarding the reasoning above are whether animals have feelings and

how humans treat animals. This could, in turn, lead to a discussion of how animals' feelings are represented and rendered in the book.

Concluding Discussion

Judith Langer (2011) argues that literature has the potential to position child readers within an imaginary story world but also that children may step out of this world and reflect upon what role the story may have in the real world in their own lives. It is in the latter case where Nordqvist's books, in combination with ecocritical dialogues, are especially powerful. As we suggested earlier, books written without an ecocritical agenda can be just as important as cli-fi when questioning anthropocentric world views and the human–nature divide. We have shared examples of why Nordqvist's Pettson and Findus picturebooks are especially fitting for initiating ecocritical dialogues with preschool children. With their traditional view of nature as a resource for food and entertainment, the Pettson and Findus series are far from “perfect” from an ecocritical point of view. However, these “imperfections” are valuable points of departure for questioning and discussing how humans treat nature. The teacher may ask the children: “Is one allowed to try to make a hen fly, like Findus did?” “Are we allowed to take what we want from the forest in the shape of sticks, fruits, berries, etc.?” For whom do animals and plant exist?” All this, however, cannot be accomplished without knowledgeable preschool teachers who are aware of the resources for ecocritical dialogues that are hidden in this kind of literature.

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