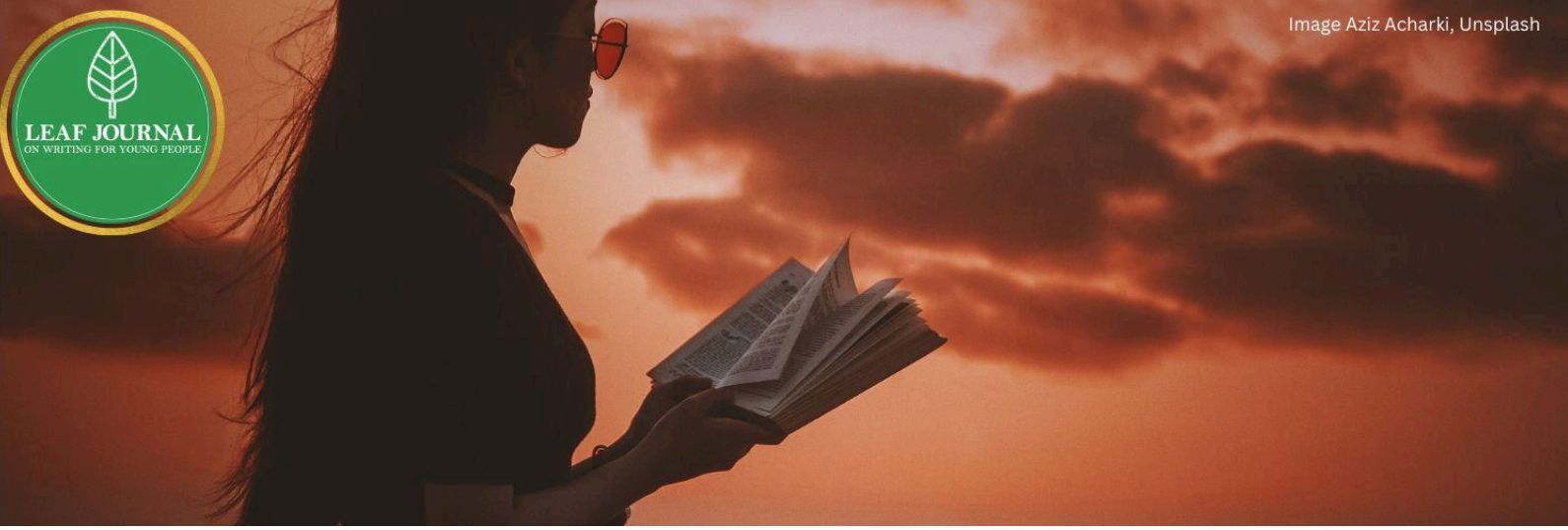

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Literature Across Borders: The Pilot Year
Part 1: The Staff

Meghaa Gupta, Alexia Casale & Alexander Robert Phillips

Abstract
This piece outlines the conceptualisation, planning, delivery and staff reflections on the culmination of the pilot year of the 'Literature across Borders' project, a collaborative endeavour between Ashoka University (India) and Bath Spa University (UK), facilitated by the Green Literature Festival (India). This piece accompanies a partner article (see this issue) exploring the reflections of eight of the pilot year student participants.

Keywords: *transnational*, *children's literature*, *environment*, *collaboration*

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Introduction: Aims and Objectives of the Pilot Year

Literature across Borders (LaB) was conceived as a way to 'make books travel', in the words of co-founder Meghaa Gupta: exchanging pairs of themed books as a basis for a dialogue across cultures and continents enables an entirely new type of discussion for students of Literature and Creative Writing. With the Green Literature Festival (GLF) acting as facilitator, it was an obvious choice to start with children's books focused on nature, wildlife and the environment. Here, there's a natural synergy between the goals of the GLF and LaB – the climate crisis, and our broken relationship with nature, cannot be repaired by one country acting alone, no matter how inspiring the stories that country tells to engage society in united action. Action on the climate crisis has to be international if it is to have any power so, if any literature is to 'travel', what type could be more important than books that are inclusive of children and adults?

While children's books may be aimed at a child audience, they're not just for kids – they're for everyone, children and up. These shared stories help stitch together family, community and even societal bonds. Being accessible to children doesn't make these stories simple or facile: they're often deep and complex, but they're geared towards a wide range of knowledge and understanding. This is why they have so much power. Not only do they shape how children understand themselves, others, and the broader world, but they form a core part of the shared cultural language of whole societies. Stories are the key vehicle for transmission of culture – and values. It is vital that some of the values we transmit are about the critical importance of the natural world and our place in it. A positive relationship with nature, wildlife and our environment has significant implications for wellbeing in terms of mental and physical health – and even, as the student reflections show, a sense of spiritual health in the sense of connectedness to something beyond the human world: connection to our natural places helps us feel connected to the whole world, through the ages of the land.

Pilot Year Activities

Students from the MA Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University (BSU, UK), led by Dr Alexia Casale, were paired with students of the MA in English at Ashoka University (India), led by Professor Alexander Phillips, through the facilitation of Meghaa Gupta (co-founder of the GLF). One copy of each book from the other side of the exchange was provided to the partner institution via the GLF by January 2023. While students at BSU read the Indian books, students at Ashoka read the British books. The exchange activities ran from March to July 2023.

The four pilot-year book pairings were as follows:

1. *Twitch* by MG Leonard (UK) and *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* by Shabnam Minwalla (India). Both books look at secret green places that set children off on bold adventures.
2. *The Girl Who Stole an Elephant* by Nizrana Farook (UK) and *That Summer at Kalagarh* by Ranjit Lal (India). Both books look at elephant adventures featuring strong-minded girls.
3. *Varjak Paw* by SF Said (UK) and *The Wildings* by Nilanjana Roy (India). Both books look at feline adventures focused around the wildness of (supposedly) domesticated animals.
4. *My Name is River* by Emma Rea (UK) and *Year of the Weeds* by Siddhartha Sarma (India). Both books look at the human relationship with land and the place of childhood within this.

Students were asked to record short videos where they summarised the book, provided a brief reading, and a quick review. However, the core of the exchange comprised the online dialogues where the students discussed each pair of books at length in sessions chaired by Meghaa Gupta. Issues explored in the dialogues included how similar themes were tackled by children's authors in different geographies, the commonalities and divergences, the suitability of the texts for readers in both markets, and how they contributed to the environmental discourse. The GLF provided a platform to hold the dialogues and promoted the exchange via its social media handles. At the end of the exchange, physical certificates of participation were given to all participants. The students were also invited to be part of a series of author interactions organised by BSU and GLF.

Literature Across Borders pages on the GLF website: https://greenlitfest.com/literature-across-borders/

Inaugural dialogue on the exchange between Dr Alexia Casale at BSU and Professor Alexander Phillips at Ashoka and Meghaa Gupta at the GLF: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9AQCu-a3PI&t=11s

Since the project was launched before a suitable copyright license could be written (a legal requirement at BSU), the dialogues were transcribed and only short video-clips released (with consent given by the students involved):

https://greenlitfest.com/twitch-the-six-spellmakers-of-dorabji-street-pair-1-of-literature-across-borders/

https://greenlitfest.com/the-girl-who-stole-an-elephant-that-summer-at-kalagarh-pair-2-of-literature-across-borders/

https://greenlitfest.com/the-wildings-varjak-paw-pair-3-of-literature-across-borders/

https://greenlitfest.com/my-name-is-river-year-of-the-weeds-pair-4-of-literature-across-borders/

Author sessions with MG Leonard and SF Said, organised by BSU, were private to BSU students, GLF partners and participating Ashoka students. However, clips were provided (with consent from the authors) to the GLF to run on its social media platforms. A Twitter (now X) Q&A was held with Nizrana Farook. A public interaction with the Indian authors Ranjit Lal and Shabnam Minwalla was organised by GLF in July: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCyncZJtnE0.

Thirteen students (5 from Ashoka, 8 from BSU) participated, of which eight have offered reflections in the partner piece (see this issue); each dialogue is represented by at least one student. Through LaB, books were not just exchanged and read, but also deeply analysed, resulting in a complex, critical engagement with unfamiliar texts, between unfamiliar people.

Key Areas of Interest

LaB was established to pursue a number of aims and objectives focused around the values inherent in any cultural exchange, especially one in a scholarly context, but we were also curious to explore a variety of broad themes to see which emerged as particularly important and/or surprising. Given that we approached Year 1 as a pilot to establish the worth of the project, trouble-shoot practical challenges, and refine the work through principles derived from action-based research, we were keen not to structure this year on *a priori* assumptions but instead allow concerns to emerge from the experience and both staff and student reflections on this. These emergent themes are explored below in general terms, but the partner piece (see this issue) sheds individual light on how the students themselves conceptualised their understanding of these elements.

Does literature travel?

Despite the impact of globalisation on many areas of life, books do not tend to travel much, especially when it comes to children's literature. Moreover, there is significant disparity in terms of books travelling into and out of the UK and USA. According to McMartin and Van Coillie (2020, citing previous research) only around 4% of British children's books are translations, and around 2% in the USA. It is not easy to determine how many children's books in English are bought from other countries/territories by British publishers for UK editions/the UK market, but such titles are rarely seen on bestseller lists. On the other hand, many children's books written in English are bought by other countries and territories for distribution and for translation: in some countries, a significant portion of children's books are translations and English-original books often account for a substantial percentage of these. Even when books do 'travel' through distribution deals or rights sales, discoverability remains an issue. For instance, many children's books from other countries (both those written in English and other languages) are bought by British publishers, but their marketing leaves much to be desired. These books rarely receive significant publicity, rarely feature in bookshop displays, rarely get reviewed - either formally or informally. They also rarely

get nominated for non-translation prizes. For comparison, many translated books in Germany are shortlisted for key awards. As such, it's hard for readers to find out about them. This has major implications for dialogue about books and results in discussions often going only one way. There is rarely a true dialogue. This is one of the main reasons LaB was first conceived and, indeed, one of the most powerful findings is how unusual it is for books to travel.

Meghaa Gupta, as chair of all four dialogues, noted that only one of the BSU students had previously read a book by a children's author based in India. Some had read books by Indian-origin authors who are well-known in the UK, like Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry. Among children's authors based in the UK but born in India, the most common name that came up in the dialogues was Jasbinder Bilan. Bilan is a BSU alumna. A complicating factor here is the relative nascency of children's literature in India; this parallels the fact that Ashoka students are drawn from an MA in English because creative writing is little-taught at HE level in India, and there are currently no specialist degrees.

Students at Ashoka were much more familiar with literature from the UK, including children's literature. However, this familiarity was typically restricted to legacy names such as Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. None of the students were familiar with the UK authors whose books were part of this exchange.

What was surprising about the unfamiliarity was that rights to some of these titles (e.g. *The Wildings* and *The Girl Who Stole an Elephant*) have been bought by publishers in the opposite market and, thus, are distributed/published domestically. Additionally, some of the authors (e.g. Nilanjana Roy and MG Leonard) are relatively well-known internationally.

At the end of each dialogue, participants recommended other children's books that touch on nature, wildlife and the environment. There were several interesting discussions at this point about what makes a book 'environmental literature'. International bestsellers were a common theme: Katherine Rundell was a favourite among the students at BSU, while Ruskin Bond was mentioned by a majority of students at Ashoka. This is a further demonstration of how hard it is to help books 'travel'; one key area for growth in LaB Year 2 is to promote more up-and-coming authors through making space for books not being read as part of the exchange.

<u>Place, Setting & Wildlife</u>

All the books from India, and most from the UK, were geographically rooted, creating a strong sense of place. In the first dialogue, Subhi from India was drawn to the small-town setting in MG Leonard's *Twitch* because it resonated with his own upbringing in a small-town in India, defined by its verdancy and the close relations between people. Meanwhile, Charli from BSU, who read Shabnam Minwalla's *Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* (set in Mumbai: a megapolis in India), could identify with the urban space and the importance of common green grounds (such as parks and garden) in city living. Participants in the third dialogue noted how SF Said's *Varjak Paw*

painted an urban setting without any distinctive geographic markers; they could tell that the story was unfolding in a city without knowing *which*. This, as suggested by Dharani at Ashoka, made the text more accessible to those from other countries. On the other hand, *The Wildings* by Nilanjana Roy is located in Delhi and includes distinctive terms and markers that created a strong sense of 'the foreign' for participants at BSU. However, in this pairing, the protagonists were cats and, as Lexi from BSU remarked, learning about a place through the eyes of a non-human protagonist makes for an unusual and compelling literary experience where *everything* is rendered unfamiliar.

Elephants are common in children's literature in many places in the world, though these creatures are only found in Asia and Africa. In the second dialogue, which looked at elephant adventures featuring strong-minded young girls, the students reflected that elephant stories from countries that don't have wild elephants tended to be more rooted in imagination compared with the more realistic narratives from countries like India. Rebekah from BSU spoke of growing up with *Elmer the Patchwork Elephant*, a beloved picture book series by David McKee, while Zehra from Ashoka spoke of real-life elephant encounters in childhood and stories of such encounters shared by her family.

In the final dialogue, which explored the complex human relationship with land, participants observed how development of land for construction often leads to an alienation and a loss of the local community's sense of belonging. Both Rupert and Janette from BSU commented on how the sacred relationship that Korok, the protagonist in *Year of the Weeds*, shares with his land is virtually unknown in modern Britain. They were also struck by the bleakness of Korok's circumstances; this led to a discussion about ideas of privilege in different geographies and if this plays a role in one's relationship with the land. Rupert remarked that, more than privilege, location determines one's relationship with the environment, with children in urban centres being less exposed than others: an interesting reflection in light of the themes that emerge from the first dialogue (see above). There was much discussion of how children's literature with environmental themes, particularly non-fiction, rarely focused on human engagement with the environment; the general feeling was that if a book foregrounds a human story, it is more of a social – as opposed to an environmental – fable. However, as Dharani's reflection states (see partner piece in this issue), 'humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature', so this division is a false one that speaks to our alienation from the natural world.

A common observation made by participants at both universities was that, before the exchange, they felt that 'environmental literature' was decidedly academic. It surprised them to discover how the books in the exchange explored environmental themes, weaving these with all the fun and adventure that tend to characterise children's fiction.

Areas of Growth & Limiting Factors

If, as hoped, additional universities in additional countries join LaB in future years, we may expand the list of titles so that pairings become short lists of their own. Alternatively, we might look at having a greater number of pairings to connect different universities for different books/themes to ensure a good spread of engagement across the LaB network.

Even if we don't increase the number of titles, we're already on the way to increasing the range: LaB Year 2 includes non-fiction and illustrated titles in verse for younger readers. In the future we're keen to look at graphic novels, YA and more. Literature in translation is another key area for us to explore. Finally on the theme of breadth, we're considering expanding to other human rights issues, such as disability and migration: the opportunity to make a broader range of books travel through the exchange is too valuable to miss.

However, there are a range of limiting factors that are likely to impact how and when we are able to grow in various directions.

The cost of the books, especially if posting internationally, could be tricky if we significantly expand the numbers of students at BSU and Ashoka, or if we add additional partners. It is likely we would have to move to a model where participating institutions supply their own copies of the entire list, though this will require ongoing institutional support. This is more feasible in institutions with dedicated reading programmes and/or specialist courses;creative writing in HE isn't well-established in some countries, including India, so this will be a particular challenge for equity across international partnerships.

In terms of 'human resources' in the literal sense, the current team is small, but we're exploring various models to ensure sustainability as we grow and develop; Alexia Casale's interest in mentoring people into careers in the Arts means there is on-going exploration of how current students, alumni and others could be involved in managing and delivering the project as well as participating in it. LaB offers brilliant opportunities for CV enhancement and, coupled with the need to ensure the team isn't overloaded, this creates important space to ensure the work is not just carried out, but as much as possible carried out by people who can directly benefit from the experience and skills-acquisition involved.

As with any significant project there are also logistical issues.

Working across two time-zones is tricky enough. If we expanded to include additional partners there might have to be significant compromises in relation to scheduling dialogues, meetings and tie-in author events.

Different countries also have different legal systems. A major workload issue in Year 1 was the need to transcribe dialogues since a copyright license for the project wasn't available in time. This is now in place to support Year 2 so we can release the entire video of each dialogue. LaB is also considering whether dialogues could be livestreamed (depending on consent from participants) or whether stakeholders could be invited to offer questions through a suitable online platform, though it is more likely

we will explore whether additional tie-in author events could be publicly available as recordings or livestreamed, as the GLF-led event with Ranjit Lal and Shabnam Minwalla in Year 1 was. There are several author-event models being developed at BSU so Alexia Casale is exploring which would suit LaB purposes and what additional funding might be accessed to support expansion of this sort.

Another logistical issue concerns the hosting of LaB content; as the project grows and develops, especially if other human rights themes are introduced, it is likely to require too much GLF bandwidth and be less of a fit as core content versus being boosted through the partnership. In Year 2, website hosting will transfer to BSU; a Project Page is under construction to support this. GLF will continue to provide social media boosting and platforms for dialogues, though the balance of work will continue to be discussed to ensure it remains fair and sustainable as the project develops.

Summer 2023 Research Study

Thanks to a grant through BSU's quality-related research-grant income stream (HEQR), LaB was able to undertake some research (conducted by Meghaa Gupta) to explore the possibilities for growth, including public engagement and/or outreach, potentially involving schools, book groups or libraries. The research project report underlies this piece.

The HEQR-funded study focused on examining existing models (e.g. the Yoto Carnegie book-award shadowing scheme in the UK) to see what elements might be adaptable for LaB purposes. Meghaa Gupta also held a number of knowledge-exchange directed conversations to see what potential partners thought about these possibilities, including in relation to logistical challenges. Stakeholders engaged with included the head of a reading programme at an Academy in Bangalore, a librarian at a high school in Mumbai, a library consultant, the facilitator of a large children's book club in Delhi, a communications expert at a different university in India, an expert children's bookseller in India, and another core-team member of the GLF.

As part of the study, Meghaa gave a talk (sponsored by BSU Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research & Enterprise John Strachan) at the MA Writing for Young People Summer Conference, which in 2023 was attended by two of our HE partners: the Norwegian Institute for Children's Books and Vermont College of Fine Arts (USA). This talk explored the Indian children's publishing industry and Year 1 of LaB. Both our Norwegian and American partners expressed an interest in involvement, as did some individual students in their professional capacities, including a few librarians.

One of the challenges of LaB is that, though the exchange featured books for young readers, the discussions are between university students; indeed, the question of how children themselves would respond to these books was raised a number of times in the dialogues. Bringing in this perspective would add an entirely new layer of insight and offer an exciting opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue to young readers themselves. However, outreach with children is complicated for many reasons ranging from safeguarding to availability of funds to buy the books necessary to join in

(especially in terms of library budgets), and from online fatigue (and school policies to limit screen-time) to issues with reliable internet connections at speeds suitable to support livestreaming/recording.

While dialogues involving schools or children's reading groups are under consideration, there are a variety of other ways LaB could start offering outreach opportunities; perhaps booksellers, librarians and/or teachers could engage in cross-cultural dialogues to be recorded for public release/publicly live-streamed. If children provided some questions, this would afford a degree of participation.

Finally, LaB is exploring a range of non-dialogue opportunities. In addition to sharing recordings of dialogues and author tie-in events, there are engaging possibilities in livestreamed/recorded short interviews, written features, and flash-review content on a broader range of books. The HEQR study identified a strong interest from Indian stakeholders in creative writing sessions, which is perhaps not surprising when this is still such a nascent area in the country.

Reflections from the LaB Team

Meghaa Gupta (GLF)

Change, more often than not, comes from engaging with the unfamiliar. Things that break usual patterns, making room for new experiences, and a world view free of dominant narratives and overpowering stereotypes. For me, Literature across Borders is about fostering such change through engaging with new kinds of literature.

In the first edition of this exchange, students read thematically-related, contemporary literature for young people published in each other's countries, then engaged in deep dialogues on how these books approached similar themes. As it turned out, most students were not familiar with contemporary writing for young people in each other's countries and this was the first time they were engaging with such texts.

Environmental concerns transcend national borders and in recent years the youth movement for the environment has become particularly strident. This is the main reason the GLF agreed to come on board as a facilitating partner. Hence, it was decided that the environment would be an overarching theme. Not surprisingly, then, a strong sense of place was a common feature running through the books.

As the chair for the dialogues, I wondered how the participants would respond to narratives set in alien places. How would someone from India respond to the yearnings of children growing up on an English farm or near a woodland in the UK? How would readers in the UK react to the bleak reality of a child from a tribal community in India's margin lands or a cat's view of the crowded and busy lanes of Nizammuddin in Delhi? The environmental themes in these books are not entirely straightforward and need some rumination. In fact, many of the participants were surprised that these books had even been considered 'environmental'.

I wasn't sure any of the students had ever travelled to each other's countries. They had certainly not met each other before the dialogue. So it was extremely

pleasing to see how they had made an effort to find the familiar and empathise with the unfamiliar in these texts from each other's countries.

Subhi from India was drawn to the small-town setting in MG Leonard's *Twitch* because it resonated with his own upbringing in a small-town in India, defined by its verdancy and the close relations between people. Meanwhile, as a city girl, Charli from BSU could identify with the urban space and importance of common green grounds, such as parks and gardens, in Shabnam Minwalla's *Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street*, which is set in Mumbai, a megapolis in India. Dharani at Ashoka commented on how the lack of distinctive geographical markers made SF Said's *Varjak Paw* feel more inclusive of the global urban experience, while Lexi at BSU remarked on how learning about a place through the eyes of a non-human protagonist made for an unusual and compelling literary experience in Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings*. Both Rebekah from BSU and Zehra from Ashoka vouched for their love of elephants – except, Rebekah had seen them mostly on the pages of books while Zehra had witnessed them at close quarters, since the creatures are a common sight in India. Although struck by the grim life of Korok, the protagonist in *Year of the Weeds*, both Rupert and Janette from BSU remarked that the sacred relationship he shared with his land was virtually unknown in modern Britain because many people have been alienated from their environment.

That they were able to see the environment in what they initially perceived as social fables driven by anthropocentric concerns was an important accomplishment. Yet, what stayed with me was their openness to engage with the unfamiliar and make an attempt to think deeply about another culture and its literary works. It reminded me of the value of cross-cultural conversation to drive learning between people residing in different countries. In a world riddled by cultural conflict, spaces for such dialogues may not be enough to bring change, but they do sow seeds of understanding – and that's a great beginning!

Alexia Casale (BSU)

LaB came about through a series of happy coincidences – and a commitment to seizing exciting opportunities. When Meghaa and I first connected, it wasn't with any view to starting an international partnership project, but that has been part of the joy.

However, it wasn't until quite far into Year 1 that I realised how important the project is. At the author tie-in event with Shabnam Minwalla and Ranjit Lal, I asked how readers in other countries had responded to their work and whether there were any patterns. They replied that they had no idea; the odd child from other countries got in touch, but that was it. Nizrana Farook echoed this sentiment in our Q&A. Then, at the MAWYP Summer Conference at BSU, all the authors involved from India, Norway, the UK and USA said the same thing. Our books are sold in translation and in English, but we rarely have any sense of what impact they're having. Thinking about conversations with other authors, I can think of no one who has any sense of this except for a few cases of run-away success in a specific country.

At the Summer Conference there were two papers on the publishing context in two very different countries – Meghaa presented on India and Endre Lund Eriksen on Norway. We then had two panels – effectively in-person dialogues, when viewed through the LaB model; bringing in the UK and USA perspective, we explored our insights into these differences as published authors with additional industry experience. This glimpse into how the shape of the publishing industry, public engagement and culture, and the role of government drives creative choices and options was startling. So much of how we, as authors, approach things is imaginative, and yet we rarely examine certain assumptions. This was a chance to consider how we could do things differently – how, if we are curious and open-minded, we can adopt positives from other countries while offering our own in exchange. There was a sense of frisson in the air as we expanded how we thought about building a career as an author and what a 'culture of reading for pleasure' comprises. There was also a lovely sense of solidarity. Writing is so often a lonely occupation, but here was a gathering of people all deeply committed to the importance of literature for children and young people: a group of people who all believe passionately in its power to reshape our future for the better.

LaB and its impact on how we planned the Summer Conference – including drawing in GLF and our new Norwegian partner – transformed the event, which was already wonderful, into something even better. While our Summer Conference has always had an international dimension as it's centred on a visit from partner institute Vermont College of Fine Arts, the types of discussions possible when comparing, for instance, the challenges of getting books into readers hands are enormously enriched by perspectives not just from the UK and USA, but also India and Norway. In India, a big challenge is cost: many people simply can't afford books, so the publishing landscape is significantly shaped by nonprofits seeking to support access to books and, thus, create a readership. In the USA, book banning and socio-political divides are having a huge impact at present: in Norway, by contrast, the socio-political context ensures that not only do all children receive books from statutory institutions, all schools have mandated author visits. Delving into what this means to us as writers in terms of how our context shapes not just our income, but the way we're able to conceive of what books are *for*, was truly seismic in shifting and broadening our thinking.

That alchemy is what I think characterises LaB most of all. We had laudable aims and goals at the start, but we've remained curious and allowed the unfolding of the project to surprise us, staying open to how happy coincidences, new contacts and partnerships, can enrich what we're doing.

As we move into Year 2 and beyond, I am even more excited to see how we can grow and develop, bringing in more stakeholder voices and looking at models for outreach and co-production of at least some of our future activities. I'm so grateful to everyone who made this first year possible, laying the groundwork for everything that will follow after. Looking ahead, the one thing I can safely predict is that there is even better yet to come. I'm both curious and hopeful about what exactly it will be.

Alexander Robert Phillips (Ashoka)

That literature has some sort of didactic dimension is a deeply ingrained assumption for many readers. Even those of us who make our living thinking and writing about literature 'professionally' are not always further along than beginning students who ask about 'the moral of the story'. As a teacher of literature, much of my work is about helping students recognise that the meaning of what they read is never reducible to some message. But as a specialist in literature and ecology, I work with plenty of literature and criticism that holds that environmental texts, at least, have something to teach us about the value of nature. For instance, the ecocritical project of more-firmly entrenching nature writing in the canon of texts that we research and teach proceeded, in part, from a belief that such texts could orient us towards our environments, helping us to overcome fundamentally anthropocentric worldviews.[1]

Many people hold similar assumptions about literature aimed at younger people. In the United States, right-wing groups are actively working to remove books from schools and libraries; this is especially common with books that depict individuals and groups that do not conform to a patriarchal white, Christian, heterosexual paradigm, on the grounds that such depictions will send messages or instil values the Right finds politically repugnant. More benignly, the assumption that literature must teach something commonly appears in my class on fairy tales, a genre that is also supposedly for children. In every iteration of this class, I argue that even the most didactic stories are not reducible to any 'lesson'. Even when an author supplies a short statement summing up some sort of broader lesson that we are supposed to distil from the text (i.e. a 'moral to the story'), we should never take it at face value. Charles Perrault, for instance, ends his stories with such morals, but I argue that their function is more aesthetic than didactic. They come in the form of cute short verses; sometimes he supplies two morals that contradict each other. We can imagine alternative, contradictory lessons in Aesop's *Fables*. And if we consider Aesop's spiritual ancestor from the subcontinent, the *Panchatantra*, the stories that enframe the narratives become a vehicle through which the characters argue the meaning of the didactic narratives. These debates are ultimately more important to the larger pedagogical project than this or that 'lesson'.

It was gratifying to see that the conversations in Literature across Borders were open to the richness and ambiguities of the books under discussion. I was struck, for instance, by an argument Farishta Anjirbag made about SF Said's *Varjak Paw*. When the pampered housecat Varjak joins the feral colony in the neighborhood, he experiences it as a moment of liberation from human dependence. That plot point might be grist for the mill of all those who argue against pet 'ownership' on ethical grounds. And yet, as Farishta points out, in a book that implicitly deconstructs such boundaries as inside

[1] See, for instance, Glen Love, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 225–40, among others in that volume.

and outside, natural and non-natural, this plot-turn seems to reinscribe a boundary between the human the non-human. *Felis catus* and *Homo sapiens* both belong to the animal kingdom, and, in spite of anthropocentric illusions of domestication as something that 'we' humans do to 'them' animals, current scientific thinking on domestication favors a co-evolution model. Cities are, and have always been, multispecies places. The anthropologist James C. Scott memorably termed the earliest such sites 'late Neolithic multispecies resettlement camps.'[2] Varjak may be as liberated as he feels, but ethical ambiguity remains. Being a mature reader and thinker means facing such ethical ambiguities squarely.

But there is something to be rescued from a model of reading that focuses on the didactic. To search for the moral of the story may be reductive, but for those scholars who inaugurated a critical discourse on literature and environment at the end of the twentieth century, it was not lessons that were at stake, but 'orientation'. I was struck by Zehra Naqvi's report that, while reading Nizrana Farook's *The Girl Who Stole an Elephant*, she had to look up what a *jambu* fruit was. That small detail refracts the larger stakes of reading anything, but particularly fiction. Reading about others living in other times and other places can help us to grow by confronting other ways of perceiving reality – at least, if we have the intellectual curiosity and openness to be receptive enough. I hope that Zehra's son read the book and that it lived up to his initial enthusiasm, and that his world is that much larger for it. Indeed, I would hope the same for all of us.

Conclusion: Why the Work Matters

As Meghaa's HEQR-funded research report noted, during LaB Year 1 'it became evident how little literature ends up travelling across national borders' and that 'knowledge of children's publishing in India – the largest English books market in Asia – remains limited overseas. As more publishers from the West invest in distribution … the exchange can serve as a useful resource'. LaB hopes to grow and develop to facilitate 'literary exchanges not just between readers, but also between librarians, educators, booksellers, authors and publishers'. In pursuing this goal, however, she cautions that 'we need to be careful about making it a two-way flow.'

The climate crisis cannot be solved by one country acting alone. Similarly, a sense of global community can only be built through mutual understanding – and that requires dialogue. LaB offers a way to engage with both the human need for connection and the need for communion with the natural world. Making children's literature the focal point reminds us of the value of hope, of curiosity, and of the tremendous power of stories (particularly the stories that shape our first understanding of ourselves, others and the wider world) to help us imagine a better future.

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[2] James Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

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Author Biographies

Dr Alexia Casale is Programme Leader for the MA Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, and the author of three YA novels (Faber & Faber), with a fourth to follow in 2024 alongside with her adult crime debut, *The Best Way To Bury Your Husband* (Viking/PRH). Her debut YA novel, *The Bone Dragon* (2013), was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize and the Jugendliteraturpreis. She is also a script consultant and human-rights non-fiction editor specialising in prevention of torture and male violence against women and girls.

Meghaa Gupta has worked in Indian children's publishing for over a decade and believes that all change begins with getting children to read books that demystify the world and its infinite possibilities. She heads the young people's programme at the Green Literature Festival, curates a course on nature writing for young readers at Azim Premji University and writes books on environment and history for children. Her picture book, *A Home of Our Own* (Tulika, 2018) is part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Book Club. Her latest book is *After Midnight: A History of Independent India* (Penguin, 2022).

Alexander Robert Phillips is an assistant professor of English at Ashoka University. Prior to coming to Ashoka, he taught in Germany and the United States. After studying at the University of California, Irvine and the Humboldt Universität in Berlin, he completed his PhD in German Studies at Cornell University. He has published on literature, ecology, environmental aesthetics, and nineteenth century mass media. His forthcoming book, *Ecology and German Realism: Poetics, Politics, and the Conquest of Nature* explores the relationship between the representation of environmental degradation and aesthetic reflection in German literature in the years of Germany's industrialization between 1840 and 1900.