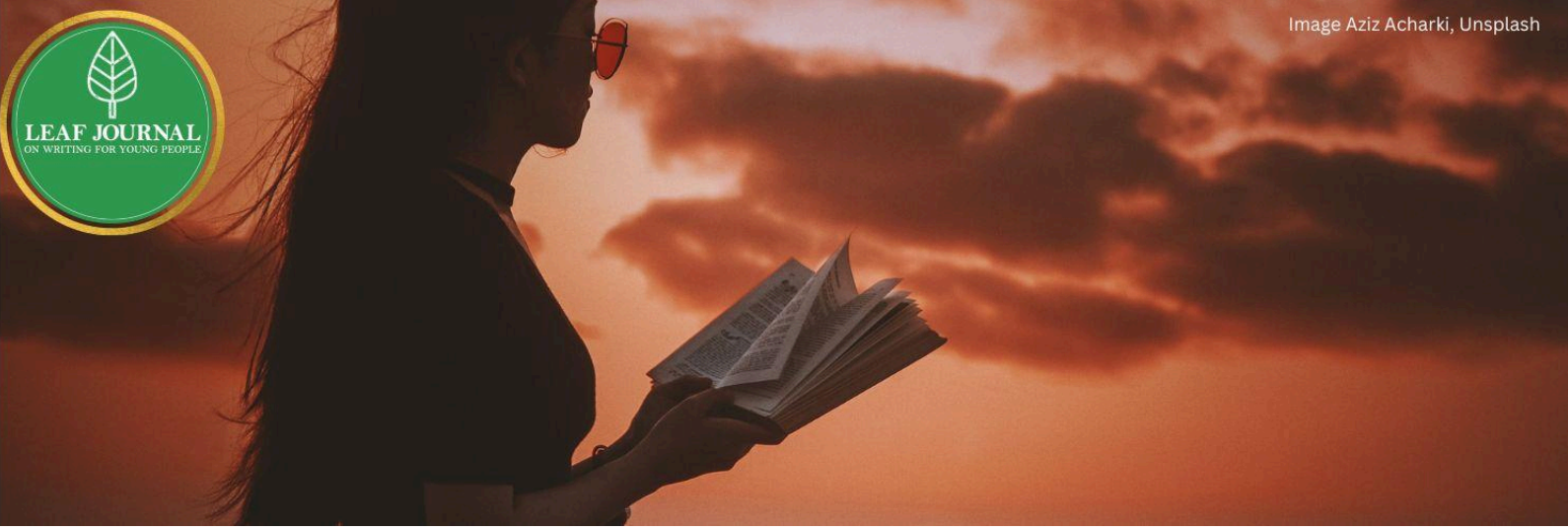

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Literature across Borders: The Pilot Year
Part 2: The Students

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with additional material by Alexia Casale and Meghaa Gupta

Abstract
This 'project proceedings' article comprises eight reflections from students involved in the Pilot Year of the Literature across Borders project, facilitated by The Green Literature Festival (India) between Ashoka University (India) and Bath Spa University (UK). This article pairs with a partner piece (see this issue) outlining the concept, planning, and delivery of the pilot year, and exploring staff reflections.

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

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Introduction

One of the best and trickiest things about any pilot is that no one knows what to expect – what things are going to go wrong, what things that everyone thought were minor issues will turn out to be major stumbling blocks, and what unexpected but brilliant things will emerge, either alongside the main aims of the project or, sometimes, instead of them. Action-oriented research and engagement thrives on reflection, reconsideration, and refining working methods, aims and objectives – and also re-examining ideas of reach. Reach is one of the things that Literature across Borders (LaB) will be focusing on in Year 2 (see the partner piece in this issue).

The goal for *this* paper was to encourage students to reflect on what the pilot involved, and what it meant to them, in order to embed the relevant learning, enrich the experience, and offer a written record to help staff understand what was most important to participants. The latter is critical to the future shape of the project as LaB is, at its heart, concerned with curious minds in dialogue.

The following eight pieces offer the students' own critical reflections on being part of LaB Year 1. The reflections are ordered to match the chronological sequence in which the dialogues were filmed (see the partner piece for more details); every dialogue is represented by at least one student reflection.

Sarah Dyer (Bath Spa) – Dialogue 1

Literature across Borders provides emerging writers a chance to read and discuss children's books published in the UK and India. Reading and discussing literature published in another country matters because it builds understanding between authors, broadens perspectives, and enriches individual craft. As part of Literature across Borders (2023), Subhi, Charli, Rebecca, Meghaa, and I discussed *Twitch* by MG Leonard (2021) and *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* by Shabnam Minwalla (2012). As an American living in England, it was my pleasure to speak with a student from Ashoka University and peers from Bath Spa University.

Reading is an independent experience; the reader is in dialogue with themselves and the text. Speaking with others, however, extends the text through discussion, building deeper understandings. For me, Subhi pushed my interpretation of children's climate fiction by saying, "That a child not only understands climate change but has the potential for a positive response against these forces of environmental exploitation is something new and hope-inducing for me ... It's text that speaks to the imagination of a child" (Literature across Borders, 2023). It is essential that today's children's literature engages with environmental issues, and it must be done with hope. I love the idea of

speaking to the imagination of a child and, through your writing, igniting hope. It is an insight that will stay with me as I write for young people.

As a child, I devoured books and read widely. Though I did not have the language to explain it at the time, these novels widened my perspective and understanding of other cultures. In "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), educator and multicultural children's literature expert, speaks to how "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience." Bishop's work gave me language to use with my 7th Grade English Language Arts students when we discussed our reading. As I shared in our discussion, "in my classroom I used to talk about books that we read as mirrors because they reflect what we know and books that we read as windows because they show us something we don't know" (Literature across Borders, 2023). *Twitch* showed me what it is to love the natural world, especially birds. While I too love nature, Twitch's expertise was a window into the birding world. *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* sparks the desire for environmental activism by telling the story of a group of children fighting to keep some local bimbli trees from being cut down. Their advocacy mirrors the resilience and determination of children I've taught who care deeply for the environment. One time I saw such advocacy was when students, to confront fast fashion, organized an up-cycle clothing exchange, while others campaigned for school Halloween costumes to be made from recycled materials.

Both MG Leonard and Shabnam Minwalla showed me new writing strategies. MG Leonard showed me how to use a passion or hobby as a lens through which the protagonist responds to the world. On many occasions in *Twitch* the protagonist uses his understanding of the natural world to get out of sticky situations. In one example, Twitch mimics a peregrine falcon's call to disrupt the wood pigeons in Aves Wood to scare away two bullies before they harm his friend Jack (p. 83). Shabnam Minwalla showed me how to bridge cultural differences by giving characters interests that have cross-cultural significance. In *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street*, Nivi loves fantasy, and specific titles like "*Harry Potter*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Inkheart*, and *His Dark Materials*" (p. 18) are named. Nivi's interest in fantasy brings readers who have read and loved these titles into her perspective even if they may not have been to Mumbai. Coming across those two writing strategies in *Twitch* and *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* improved my craft.

Discussing *Twitch* and *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street* with Subhi, Charli, Rebecca, and Meghaa deepened my understanding, broadened my perspective, and enriched my writing for young people.

Subhi Suvradeep Banerjee (Ashoka) – Dialogue 1: Reaching out to the Child Within

Living in the small town of Durgapur, India, where heat waves and high humidity are a regular reality, I accepted very early on that my environment is becoming hotter with

each passing year. Daily conversations amongst family members and friends would include remarks on the increasing temperature's effect on our regular lifestyle—shortage of underground water, increasing need to use sunscreen creams, need for frequent showers to get rid of the burning sensation on the skin, and cases of heat fevers. Moreover, this spilled over into casual observations about the winters not being as cold as expected. I would add here, however, that as a teenager these conversations did not mean much to me. I did not connect the dots to make a rational perspective out of them until my graduate days, when extensive reading on climate change issues echoed these teenage days. While this aspect of my environment never drew much attention from me, I was *aware* of another aspect of the world around me: the streets dogs, the house lizards, the cockroaches, the sparrows (nearly invisible now in my town), the Indian crows, the cows and buffaloes, the goats, and the little, not often visible but melodious, crickets. Some of these creatures of my neighborhood were daily visitors to my home, at the expense of annoying my mother, but intriguing me to admire them. Nevertheless, some scared me to the extent that I did not hesitate to shoo them away or kill them. Thus, I could not ever discount their *presence*: my emotions, though discriminatory impulses, were rooted in the recognition that these lives were around me, and *different* from me.

To relate this lofty description of my childhood experiences with "ecology", "natural setting" or "environment", I would add that I acquired a recognition of these non-human lives outside of the books that were inside my house. The bookshelf in my house consisted of thrillers, detective tales and romances, with some mentioning a non-human creature (for instance, the Dog in Enid Blyton's books). However, not finding much in them to relate to my experience of the non-humans around me, I became the black sheep of the house—I introduced horror and fairy tales to this shelf. Back then it was with no noble cause of noting the non-human subjects specifically in these works, which, today, I can mark as the politico-ecological potential of these pieces of literature. Rather these works presented the horses, the goblins, the Cthulhu, the bugs, the butterflies, the octopuses, and, my favourite, the snakes in a manner that I was able to relate to my daily reality. The emotions of fear and admiration were capsuled together in these works. My interest in them grew to the extent that creatures around me gained a certain awe as unknown creatures who visited me to keep me informed of their presence. It was then that my age-literature, commonly now termed "children's literature", became realistic to me *with* all its fictional acrobatics: I could find my experience of non-human nature in them. Eventually my perspectives about the non-human neighbours around me developed into reading more of such works, and shifting gradually to media content that spoke about these creatures in faraway lands and time periods. And, years later, from a far-away land, arrived another author who talked about the avian neighbours around humans: MG Leonard.

As someone who grew to know non-human species through fairy tales and horror stories, I was intrigued by the fact that she is writing about a child's relationship with a bird—a possible fairy tale, or perhaps, a unique form of thriller. It was as a

participant in the Literature across Borders programme 2023 that I came across MG Leonard (pen name of Maya Gabrielle). Bath Spa University, UK had organized this programme with Ashoka University, India, in partnership with the Green Literature Fest, India, to bring together readers from across the two regions into conversation about authors who bring their literary imagination and ecological consciousness into works for young readers. MG Leonard's novel *Twitch* presents no child stuck in a fairy tale or a horror plot, but is about a regular school-going boy. The novel *is* about all of its children: their school games, acts of bullying, fascination with birds, tree house games, jungle hunts and domestic atmosphere. The novel provided me with the regular world of my childhood, with the element of wonder that I always fancied as a feature of children's literature. I found a child curious about his non-human avian neighbours, but with an experience that made me further cognizant of the ones around me. In this regard, reading Leonard's work provided me with a refreshing taste of children's literature as an adult—her novel speaks not only to her young readers, but it can also speak to an adult who wishes to access their childhood again.

Such a reading, while one's personal experience, can nevertheless produce solidarities when it brings like-minded people into each other's company. I found such people during the course of the programme with whom I could talk about non-human species in their regular manifestations. My co-speakers, creative writers in their own right, spoke of the childhood experiences that they could trace in the novel *The Six Spellmakers of Dorabji Street*, by Shabnam Minwalla. The giggles and discussions that I shared with them over an online interaction remains the star point for me. As a student scholar who works with literary texts as archives made of different literary methods, it was intriguing to listen to my co-speakers who work with those methods themselves. To that end, the joint conversation (to borrow a phrasing from one of my co-speakers) opened a "window" between two regions and two ways of thinking about literary works produced for young readers.

Rebekah Curtis (BSU) – Dialogue 2: Connecting with Meaningful Nature Writing

As a writer of children's fiction who loves writing about the natural world, I participated in the Green Literature Festival-facilitated Literature across Borders exchange because I enjoy engaging in conversations about authorial approaches to this literature. What took me by surprise was how much I also reflected on my *own* work after the project.

<u>Meaningful nature writing:</u>

The project's focus on green literature bolstered my dedication to reading more in this space. It also awakened in me a desire to bring more dedication to my own nature writing. That is, to produce *meaningful* nature writing.

Taking part in the exchange's dialogues – in which I reflected on both the beauty of nature writing and the importance of it – prompted me to consider how meaningful

nature writing requires both of these layers. First, there is nature writing itself: the celebration of nature's beauty through the pleasure of writing and the value of sharing that enjoyment with others. Second, there is the author's endeavour to inspire young people to engage positively with the world around them: in short, the meaningful message within the writing.

I always write literature for young people with both these goals in mind. But, after relishing the dedicated discussions on green literature during the exchange, I considered the importance of synthesising these two values to create *meaningful* nature writing: celebratory nature writing that also inspires positive engagement with the natural world. As a reader and writer, I find that meaningful nature writing increases my environmental awareness, my hopefulness about conservation, and my sense of wellbeing through increased engagement with the great outdoors. This is, surely, the kind of nature writing young people require: stories in which nature is not simply decorative (a former writing habit of mine), but in which an aspect of nature helps to spur positive changes in the characters, thus, potentially, in readers.

Through endeavouring to make my own nature writing as meaningful as possible, I now feel increasingly connected to my characters, to their environment, and to my potential readers.

By putting green literature in the spotlight, the exchange has also served as a reminder that, in a time of extreme environmental degradation, writers have a vital platform that should not be squandered. After taking part in the exchange, I asked myself, 'What do I want to say to young people? What do I *need* to say?' In turn, I am increasingly creating characters I care about in stories I care about.

So, taking part in the project not only took me deeper into nature writing, but into meaningful writing as a whole.

Agency should be at the heart of any meaningful children's book. I have learned that meaningful environmental literature, which champions nature as protectable, and beneficial to a character, can empower writers and readers by showing how and why to actively engage with nature, whether it's simply to enjoy it or to protect it.

<u>Connection</u>

The project helped me to meet people through the discussion, to read books I hadn't yet come across, and to boost both my engagement in, and experience of, public discussion. Exploring the books with others from BSU and Ashoka University also underlined to me that books may be at their most valuable when they combine familiar and unfamiliar experiences – for example, landscapes or wild animals one has not encountered in person, combined with universal experiences, such as appreciating the natural world or a relatable struggle.

This exchange – which struck me as a synthesised ode to nature, to writing, to connectivity, and to dedication itself – has helped to keep me on a new path: a path to being a writer who, through truly connecting with what matters to me, creates stories

that I hope can help young people to increasingly connect with themselves, with others, and with the natural world.

Charlotte Taylor (Bath Spa) – Dialogue 3

This spring I had the opportunity to take part in Literature across Borders in conjunction with Ashoka University in India. I was part of a dialogue, alongside fellow students from Bath Spa on the MA in Writing for Young People who undertook a reading exchange with students from Ashoka. I was intrigued to take part in an event that brought students with a collective love of children's literature together from two very different backgrounds. I had no idea what to expect, other than an opportunity to engage with other readers, and I have to say that I was really inspired and engaged by the process of using technology to open up a discussion 'across borders'.

Alongside Lexi Dyer, I read *The Wildings* by Nilanjana Roy (Pushkin Press 2012) whilst Ashoka students Farishta and Dharani read SF Said's classic middle-grade novel *Varjak Paw* (Corgi 2003). Both books feature anthropomorphised animals, with cats as the central characters. I approached *The Wildings* with a real sense of curiosity, as a book aimed at young readers, featuring feline characters, and steeped in the world of New Delhi. It was an immersive, often dizzying read: it follows a group of feral cats in Nizamuddin, New Delhi's oldest neighbourhood. The 'wildings' are a characterful, fierce clan of wild cats who roam the streets and alleys; they are surprised when new arrival Mara upsets the hierarchy. There are enemies everywhere in this tough world, especially in the 'shuttered house', but there are unexpected allies too. It is a rich, densely layered narrative, carefully written, and paced so the tension slowly builds to a tantalising climax.

Our opposites at Ashoka, Farishta and Dharani, read *Varjak Paw*, which follows the tame Mesopotamian blue cat of the title as he finds his way in the outside world. On one level, there were plenty of similarities: the books both feature cats as protagonists; they are both set in warm climates; and they both focus on the challenges that tame house cats face when they encounter the brutal street culture outside their pampered domestic domains. However, for me, the real fascination in Roy's novel was the Indian setting, which almost stole the show: a vibrant, buzzing, colourful, and chaotic New Delhi is brought bubbling to life by Roy's observations. Her writing engages all the senses, and the reader is crouched alongside the cats in the narrow streets, listening to the calls of the 'bigfeet' and the birds, smelling the street stands and the pungent rubbish dump, seeing the colours of the market, touching the dust under the paws of the central characters, and perhaps tasting some of the spices that hover through the hot air of the city.

The book gave me a profound sense of the writer and the inspiration for her book. I loved the way the prose was thick with imagery, carefully weighed with action but also so thoughtful: the action unfolded with plenty of time for the reader to take in all that happened in each chapter.

The dialogue session chaired by Megha was an opportunity to discuss the books with our Indian counterparts. We were able to express our thoughts about the book, which seemed inherently Indian, and they too were able to tell us their thoughts about *Varjak Paw*. This was particularly insightful as the students live and work in a culturally different place to the UK. The world of Varjak Paw is never established as a particular place, but it offers a sense of 'otherness' that a child reader would find exciting and intriguing. Lexi and I read The Wildings by Nilanjana Roy, a narrative that is steeped in the world of New Delhi. It was an inherently 'Indian' read because the reader is plunged into a world of the senses and the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of a bustling Indian suburb. The prose itself mirrors the density and the multilayered society that the feline characters prowl through in that there are paragraphs that are packed with dazzling imagery. I also felt that there were interesting points raised about how humans and animals learn to co-exist in the settings of the books: the humans are, for once, placed at the edges of the narrative, and the animals are placed front and centre. We see the world from a cat's eye view, close to the pavement, or crouched in the bushes, and the effect of this is startling with some thought-provoking points about why humans enjoy the dependency of cats in both novels, and whether, in fact, the domestic animals have the upper hand.

Being involved in Literature across Borders has been an invaluable experience. It has connected me with like-minded students at Ashoka, as well as connecting me in different ways with my peers at BSU. I loved the challenge of the online debate, answering questions and choosing passages to discuss with the group. I found listening to other points of view particularly interesting, and the fact that we paired the books, to offer a different perspective, was a successful choice: by contrasting both books and viewpoints the dialogue was varied and complex.

As an individual, I felt enriched by the experience of thinking about the natural world through the lens of literature for young people, and I particularly enjoyed the insights from the students at Ashoka.

Dharani Dhavamani (Ashoka) – Dialogue 3

I participated in the Literature across Borders book exchange while I was doing the Young India Fellowship – a multidisciplinary post-graduate diploma that included a plethora of courses ranging from statistics, cognitive science and organisational behaviour to art history, leadership and film making. This meant that, despite being a student of literature, I was not able to be fully immersed in literary spaces. That said, I was quite intent on nurturing my passion for environmental humanities since that's an area I aim to explore in future work.

The book exchange added to my understanding of the area in two ways.

Having done my Masters' degree in Comparative Literature, the essence of the book exchange (where we read novels not from our own country) accentuated our dual roles as (a) insiders with respect to the novel we are reading, despite being outsiders to the novel's geographical context, and (b) outsiders with respect to the novel that our

UK counterparts were reading, where I was the geographical insider. Listening to my peer from Bath Spa talk about the cats in *Wildings* weave in and out of the streets of Delhi – the region I was living in then – and responding with my takeaways from *Varjak Paw*, where the protagonist kitten learns about the mysterious "Way" of life from its Mesopotamian heritage (an area I have never been to), was a notable juxtaposition. It added a fresh nuance to comparative studies in terms of concepts like region, heritage and environmental humanities, be it for the feline characters of the novels, or us women from different continents discussing these cats. Those who had read the *Wildings* had never visited Delhi, and we who live in Delhi had not read that novel. But together, we could all connect emotionally with the place and space.

The books we read had similarities in that both had feline characters and catered to children and young adults. But in terms of how they dealt with geography and space, there was a stark contrast, and that sparked an interesting line of discussion. While *Wildings* was very vividly rooted in Delhi, *Varjak Paw's* adventures (barring the Mesopotamian dream sequences) take place in "the city". And yet, both reiterate the role of identity, community, traditions and heritage. What these two different approaches that essentially convey a unified message could imply for the readers turned out to be my favourite realisation of the talk. It also increased my understanding of how anthropomorphism in children's books and films is an efficient tool for kids to believe, and know, that humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature.

The members of our Literature across Borders panel included people who had just started their Masters' programme and also a university lecturer, but as cliché and trite as it may seem, we did not sense any hierarchy in the discussion. It fostered a space that enabled us to share how these specific books added to the field of children's literature and animal literature and what we could learn from the similarities and differences between the texts. The discussion also gave us a chance to compare these learnings with the books that influenced us in our respective childhoods, and to trace our paths to see how far we've travelled. We have sustained this coming together of academics from across borders and cultures and have remained in touch. My hope is that the children who read these books now will later be able to look back to their childhoods and be proud of their ability to have maintained their connection to and appreciation for nature.

The opportunity provided a platform for us to express our mutual love for environmental humanities and cultivate a new understanding of what it is like for someone from outside your environment to read texts that took root in yours. It demonstrated the presence of geographical, cultural and traditional diversity while emphasising the futility of borders and boundaries that divide them. We've experienced how the cycle of understanding compounds and passes on, and for a field like environmental humanities, the cycle must continue to diversify and expand its geographical reach.

Janette Taylor (BSU) – Dialogue 4

I originally signed up for the Literature across Borders project because I wanted to seize as many opportunities as possible while studying for my MA. I was slightly apprehensive because I wasn't quite sure what to expect and I'm not very keen on being videoed or having my opinions 'out there'.

I enjoyed reading both of the books in my pairing and I think it was really useful to have the comparison. *Year of the Weeds* by Siddhartha Sarma is not a book that I would have been likely to come across if I hadn't chosen to be part of this project and I am so glad that I had the opportunity to read it. It gave me a wonderful glimpse into another culture and a different set of values.

The discussion itself was so interesting that I forgot all about being filmed. One of the points we talked about was whether young people would be able to relate to protagonists from a different culture. For me, I think the difference in culture adds an extra layer of interest and there is great value in experiencing our world from a very different viewpoint. In fiction, we often expect our readers to connect with characters from completely different worlds, so it shouldn't be too difficult to connect with someone with a different experience of our own world.

One interesting contrast between the two books was that in *My Name is River* the connection to the land was ancestral: a sense of belonging to the place where the protagonist's family has lived for many generations. We discussed the fact that in Britain many people no longer have a connection to a geographical place in this way. In *Year of the Weeds*, the Gonds have a strong spiritual connection with the land. Again, I think this spiritual connection to natural, sacred places has largely been lost in modern Britain, where we are more likely to attach spiritual significance to buildings, such as churches.

This connection to places, whether spiritual or ancestral, is something that I hadn't really thought about before and is something I would like to explore in my own writing, along with the impact of having to leave a place to which you feel strongly connected. Having moved around a lot in my adult life, I feel no significant connection to the place in which I live. I am also aware that my ties to the town in which I grew up are diminishing. Like many people, I don't feel that I belong anywhere in particular, but I wish that I did.

I am so glad that I chose to be a part of this project and I would definitely recommend it to others. Looking at literature from another culture was extremely valuable because it helped to see my own culture and values through a different lens. It made me appreciate how different the experiences and values of a young person can be according to where they have grown up. In the UK, young people are surrounded by technology and social media, whereas the protagonist in *Year of the Weeds* had little access to technology of any sort, but this gave him a far greater appreciation of the natural world around him. This is such an important element to storytelling – truly

seeing the world a character inhabits through the lens of their lived experience and values they have grown up with.

Pooja Kadaboina: A slow act (Ashoka) – Dialogue 4

As I read my way through the marvellous adventure that Dylan and his friends embark on in Emma Rea's *My Name is River*, I found myself restless at times. I was intermittently stricken with a burst of energy and the urge to put the book down and take a walk around my neighbourhood so that I could notice which way the wind blew that day, how many clouds populated the morning sky, how my friends were taking to the day's temperament, and which shades of green glistened in the morning light. Reading about Dylan's bonds with his friends, his family, and their farmland inspired me to connect more earnestly and immediately with my own environment. I wished to seek the lively company of my own ecological companions so that we might share in the marvellous beauty of our existence. The restlessness of my senses as inspired by my reading was born out of a desire to partake as a member of my natural environment and to be a thorough witness to its spirit. On deeper introspection, I believe my restlessness also emerged from being fully enraptured by the act of reading itself.

The act of reading is imbued with slowness—it demands patience so that its subject may take shape. Yet, in a time when speediness is made to reward socio-economic advancement, slowness is a luxury. In a state of slowness, we are compelled to ask, 'Are we doing enough?' The urge to *do something* is doubly underlined by the capitalist conception of productivity and by the need to mobilise against the disintegration of our environments. Swiftness characterises ecological exploitations just as it does the mobilising efforts to undercut them. Reading as a slow act, then, is a rebellion against the fast-ness of the capitalist systems we inhabit. The exercise of reading and the consequent dialogue with companions from across the world through the Green Literature Festival's Literature across Borders project presented a space for sharing knowledge about our ecological communities as well as our anxieties concerning them, especially those that arose from our readings. These exchanges demonstrated to me that a deliberation on the stories we read is essentially a deliberation on our modes of inhabiting our ecosystems.

Underpinned by an encouragement to engage with curiosity, the exchange fostered new questions in me. What we were reading was literature for children, but its intersection with the subject of the environment made especially clear that this literature serves a purpose of introspection for people of all ages. Struck by the generous use of ecological metaphors in common parlance by the characters in Emma Rea's book, I was moved to reconsider the vocabulary of industrial metaphors that overwhelmingly populates the English vernacular. Dialoguing about how differently land forms the locus of oppressive systems of power like caste, gender, and class in India and the United Kingdom pushed us to identify meaningful thresholds that we could cross together to arrive at an environmental consciousness shaped patiently by the terrific life forces shared by the environments we inhabit. The deliberateness of

our reading and the conversations that followed held up a mirror in which we saw ourselves in thoughtful slowness as we patiently tended to what each of us had to say. We shared our reflections and sought to understand others' with empathy, comprehending our cultural exchange through children's environmental literature as a doorway to encounter deliberate modes of mobilisation characterised by the exchange of knowledge.

Rupert Barrington (Bath Spa) – Dialogue 4

The project started for me as an opportunity to critically appraise a book I would not otherwise have come across: *Year of the Weeds*, by Siddhartha Sarma. As valuable as this was, the opportunity to discuss it with a group of readers from the UK and India was enlightening. The different cultural perspectives on the story broadened my view of the possibilities of environmental literature for children.

A key reason behind the impact of the experience was that the book is so good. In UK eco-literature for children, the environment and biodiversity are often in the foreground. The story's characters battle either to save it, or to survive after its destruction. Sarma's take is quite different and emerges from the cultural landscape of India. His story may be about the battle to save a piece of nature, but he uses this almost like Hitchcock used his 'MacGuffin': as a device to get the plot going before our attention is directed elsewhere. Sarma's story is *really* about privilege and poverty, inequalities of education, power and oppression, the juggernaut of capitalism, and how this complex stew plays into environmental loss. I had not seen this perspective placed so boldly in the foreground before in children's eco-literature.

The brilliance of this book for me lies in the way Sarma treats his villains – the politicians and their hired hands. So often we read eco-stories in which the politicians or rulers are a dark, frightening and all-powerful force. They make deeply satisfying enemies and reflect the worst of human regimes in ways that those regimes might be happy to be portrayed. But Sarma strips away the aura of controlled power to reveal the real-world incompetence, pettiness and greed that often drives political players, in India and elsewhere. He portrays them in a way they most definitely would *not* wish to be seen. Sarma makes them humans as fragile as anyone else, more so perhaps given their ever-insecure toehold on the rungs of power. He makes us laugh at their absurdity. These are not villains wielding shocking levels of power with absolute certainty. Instead, much of their power comes from being surrounded by an almost impenetrable bureaucracy.

By showing authority to his readers in this way Sarma is not only offering entertaining observations on the real world, but letting the reader see that this kind of power can be challenged and defeated. This feels like fertile ground, and an empowering perspective, for all kinds of eco-stories set within different cultures.

What made the discussion of the book so fascinating was comparing cultural differences around its themes, and asking whether these differences could offer readers a new perspective, or a writer a new story-telling approach. For example, is

there a way in eco-fiction to bring to the foreground both nature *and* the real-world politics that drive eco-disaster? How can we help UK readers understand the perspectives of people with a deeper spiritual connection to the land than them? After all, for most in the UK today, positive feelings for the landscape revolve largely around ownership, a sense of home or history, or an interest in nature. But for the oppressed in Sarma's story the land is a part of them, and they of it. I am asking this question of a story I am currently writing. How can I create characters in a European setting with such a strong connection to their landscape that damage done to it is also an attack on who and what they are?

Is there more to be done in UK eco-literature around nature as a spiritual resource for people, rather than it being simply useful, or vital for our own survival? Scientific research confirms the 'spiritual value' of exposure to nature, in terms of physical and mental health. You don't have to be as tightly bound to the land as the oppressed in Sarma's story to feel and value that.

While levels of inequality may be more extreme in Indian society than in the UK, they nevertheless exist in the UK too, making it harder for those sections of society to fight their corner. I set off on this line of thinking after reading the companion novel in the GLF exchange, Emma Rea's *My Name is River*, in which a struggling farm faces a buy-out from a pharmaceutical company. The result will be 'development' of the land, for which read 'destruction'. This brought to mind the wonderful 1980s film *Local Hero*, which pits an American Oil Company against the inhabitants of a small Scottish village that the company wants to buy up. These stories of victory by the small and powerless over giant corporations are exciting and inspiring, and ever more relevant in the UK and across the world.

I'm glad I had the opportunity to take part in the GLF. I learned a lot and may even become a better, or at least a more interesting, writer for it.

Conclusion

There are a variety of words and phrases that crop up again and again in these reflections on the pilot year of LaB: connection, engagement, contrast, similarities and differences, cultural differences, opportunity, familiar and unfamiliar, new lens, home, place, awareness, commonality, imagination, co-existence, the senses, and more.

Pooja talks of a deeper understanding of her "own ecological companions", Subhi of the importance of writers bringing "ecological consciousness" into their works, and Dharani of the fact that "humans are a part of nature, not apart from nature". Rebekah describes the exchange as "an ode to nature, to writing, to connectivity", while Charlotte discusses being "enriched by the experience". These beautiful expressions of the core aims and objectives of the project are an endorsement of the success of the pilot year.

However, the surprises in these pieces are just as valuable as they indicate important areas for growth and development. A few surprising common themes include, as Janette puts it, discussion of "spiritual connection with the land", and

Rupert, "nature as a spiritual resource", paired with a reconsideration of core values. Those who do not value nature, wildlife and their environment have less interest, let alone commitment, to tackling threats to it, like climate change. Collectively, the reflections tease out how many aspects of wellbeing are tied to a sense of connection to land – to home – as a physical place, shared with plants, animals, insects and more. When Subhi talks of "the element of wonder" as a "feature of children's literature", this is partly what is meant by "spiritual connection" and "spiritual resource" – the sense that humans are enriched by our natural surroundings and our non-human neighbours. This strikes a powerful note that will form part of how the project is conceptualised and promoted in future.

It's not surprising that in exchanging and discussing contemporary children's books participants reflected on their own childhood reading and how that has shaped their understanding of what such books can accomplish, but it is an important common theme in the pieces. Part of the purpose of the project is to help literature 'travel' so that powerful stories – stories that can help all of us to engage with the threat to our natural environment and, indeed, the world via climate change – do not become the preserve of one country. One major limitation is that the project is looking at books in English, but perhaps the model being developed can one day broaden to enable exchanges across linguistic barriers as well as geographic borders.

There are two particular themes that are structuring the planning process as the project moves into Year 2 – Pooja's characterisation of LaB as "an encouragement to engage with curiosity", and Sarah's reflection on "the idea of speaking to the imagination of a child and, through your writing, igniting hope." It is hard to think of a more enticing basis for continuing a complex, challenging project than the knowledge that it partners curiosity and hope in pursuing scholarship and real-world impact.

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