

BOOKS

Will Children's Books Become Catalogs of the Extinct?

As an environmental journalist and a parent, I worry that the animals in my son's bedtime stories will disappear before he learns they're real.

By Tatiana Schlossberg



Rop van Mierlo

DECEMBER 28, 2022

SHARE ▼

The other night, as I began the expansive and continually growing routine of putting my 11-month-old son to bed, we sat together on the rocking chair in his room and read *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, by Judith Kerr, and met a tiger who just would not stop eating. My son wasn't yet ready for sleep and made that clear, so we read *Chicken Soup With Rice*, by Maurice Sendak. We encountered an elephant and a whale, and traveled through all the months of the year, braving the sliding ice of January and the gusty gales of November. Then we turned, as we always do, to *Goodnight Moon*, and met more bears, rabbits, a little mouse, a cow, some fresh air, and the stars.

As I slid the books back onto the shelf, they rejoined the long parade of animals around his bedroom: the moose and his muffin, Peter Rabbit, Elmer the patchwork elephant, Lars the polar bear, Lyle the crocodile, stuffed kangaroos and octopuses and lions and turtles. Every night, I sing “Baby Beluga” to him as a lullaby: “Goodnight, little whale, goodnight.”

That evening, my mind jumped to a book I’d had when I was little that I recently bought for my son. It’s called *Physty: The True Story of a Young Whale’s Rescue*, by Richard Ellis. The book tells a slightly embellished but true tale of a sperm whale that ended up beached on the shore of Fire Island in 1981 and was nursed back to health by a group of scientists and vets. I loved learning that young whales gleefully dive and splash just like I did, and that they jump out of the water simply because it’s fun.

But lately, I have started to worry that I am populating my son’s imagination with species that could go extinct before he has a chance to understand that they’re real. We read about Physty the same way we do about Custard the dragon. To him, they are equally delightful and fantastical, neither real nor unreal. He sees fossils of dinosaurs, and I tell him that they disappeared millions of years ago. Even if whales or tigers don’t vanish entirely in the next several decades, in our age of accelerated environmental damage—climate change and what some scientists are calling the sixth mass extinction—I’m concerned that many of these books about the incredible, unlikely diversity of animal life on this planet will feel like fairy tales too.

I am a climate-change and environmental journalist, and thinking about whales now means considering the multiplying threats they face: warming waters, ocean noise, pollution, disappearing food sources, ship collisions, overfishing. Although many species’ populations have rebounded since the moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, the outlook for others is not good: Of the 13 kinds of great whales, six are endangered or vulnerable.

RECOMMENDED READING



Quit Lying to Yourself

ARTHUR C. BROOKS



Why It's So Lonely at the Top

ARTHUR C. BROOKS



The Genetic Legacy of the Spanish Inquisition

SARAH ZHANG

Read: How I talk to my daughter about climate change

Whales aren't the only threatened storybook animals. "We are going to lose Gorilla and Brown Bear, Brown Bear," says Hillary Young, a community ecologist and professor at UC Santa Barbara who studies our biodiversity crisis and is a mother of three. "But we're also losing Frog and Toad and the Very Hungry Caterpillar, because our loss of animal life is so deep and pervasive."

Scientists predict that as many as 1 million plant and animal species are at risk of going extinct, "many within decades," according to the United Nations. This era of "biological annihilation" is already under way: In ecosystems spanning the globe, the average amount of plant and animal life has fallen by about a fifth—mostly since the beginning of the last century. Climate change is driving these dynamics by limiting or shifting species' geographical ranges, which alters and removes the food, water, and habitat that they require.

In some ways, the current crisis is a new version of what has been happening from the age of colonization onward. It has become more intense in the centuries since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when humanity entered a new phase of exploitation and extraction of natural resources. The decline of animals and their habitats, and of the cultures that followed and relied on them, has long been colonialism's destructive legacy, and Indigenous communities have warned for generations about its effects on their identity and survival. But given the quickening pace and severity of change, different forms of this phenomenon may come to pass in every community.

I'm relatively insulated from many of the worst effects of global warming thus far, but some parents don't have the chance to worry about how to break the bad news about the planet to their kids, because their homes were destroyed in hurricanes or fires or floods. Despite having been born in 2022—one of the warmest recorded years in human history, which by October had marked 29 billion-dollar disasters, and which

began with a North Atlantic right whale population of about 340, the lowest number in 20 years—my child is one of the lucky ones.

Plenty of difficult subjects lurk in the margins of children's books but don't evoke dread or guilt for me. When I read *The Story of Ferdinand* to my son, I don't worry so deeply about the day he finds out from me, or elsewhere, what the banderilleros and picadors and matador want to do to the bull hero. But climate change feels different—it seems to foreclose the future. Scientists can study to what degree seas will rise and ice caps will melt and heat waves will bake the Earth. For the first time, we have a plausible model for what is to come, and we know that it will bring a diminished version of the world we were born into, a more chaotic and difficult one.

Read: How extinction shaped the Australian outback

Still, Young reminded me, for kids, this understanding is an example of a shifting baseline, a phenomenon that Daniel Pauly explored in 1995 in a paper about the attempt to establish sustainable commercial-catch levels for various fish species. Now the term is used to describe “new normals” more generally: Once we become aware of a set of conditions, we understand them as “normal,” and they become the standard against which we compare any aberrance. Our books’ meanings have changed already, Young said. If *Are You My Mother?* were written today, the story might feel much more bleak, and the hatchling might not be able to find his mom: Since 1970, nearly 60 percent of the bird species in North America have seen population declines, a net loss of about 3 billion birds.

Perhaps it's a delusion to think that I will have much control over what my son learns about the natural world. I also don't want to keep stories from him because they have become artifacts instead of portals to discovery. It seems possible, instead, to teach him about the world as it was while not shielding him from what is happening. Lauren Oakes, a conservation scientist and an author, also has a young son, and she says she is hesitant to introduce him to narratives of loss, though she also knows that she can't shut out the reality of climate change entirely. Her son recently came home from a trip to the planetarium and barged into her office shouting, “The planet is changing!”

“Part of our job as parents is to foster wonder,” she told me. “I think our children are born into some innate reverence for nature, and that sometimes gets taken out of us.”

In a [1956 essay for *Woman's Home Companion*](#), Rachel Carson, the marine biologist and author of *Silent Spring*, wrote about a child's inborn sense of wonder. It can falter in adulthood, she warns, withered by disenchantment, preoccupation with the artificial, and "alienation from our sources of strength." Carson urges her adult readers to encourage children's capacity for exploration and connection.

She also suggests that the adults will get something out of it too, as we do with most acts of empathy. "Exploring nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you," she wrote. "For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind ... One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, 'What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?'"

[Read: Boston is losing its snow wicked fast](#)

We, or our children, may reach a day when there will be no more really snowy days in New York City, or no more monarch butterflies. I don't entirely know what to do with Physty and Frog and Toad and the Very Hungry Caterpillar and Gorilla and the red fish and the blue fish. But abandoning these stories because the animals might go extinct feels like the worst kind of indulgence—it presumes that we can't do anything to save the species we love. Of course we can, but it will mean changing our behavior and inhabiting this Earth in a way that is more compatible with different kinds of life. Addressing the climate and biodiversity crises requires collective action: voting; getting involved in civil society and advocating for environmental protection within our communities; asking questions and demanding transparency of the companies we work for and shop from; talking with our friends, families, and co-workers about the challenges we face together. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

If I knew that no one would ever see a sperm whale again, would I read my son the story of Physty at bedtime? I don't know, but I'd rather teach him about the possibility of a world where people worked to make sure that cataclysmic future didn't come to pass—one where he and I and his dad were part of that project. There is a flip side to the ability to imagine a future without these animals: imagining one with them.

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.