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Loveable Lack: The Reimagined Wild of "Real" Bears

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Abstract: The image of the bear and its relationship to the human undergoes many representations in children's literature. Their bodies range from cute and squishable teddy bears to non-fiction representations of wild bears. For example, the lone polar bear, a popular visual device for expressing the "slow violence" of climate change, coined by Rob Nixon in 2011. This gray area then invites one to consider how these two opposing states influence one another in the context of conversations around climate change. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change, this article addresses how polar bear imagery is translated into modern children's literature when it often draws on cute aesthetics. Cuteness then calls into question how 'real' bears have been reimagined into fictional settings and whether relationships between child and bear can provide commentary on inspiring environmental activism. I explore Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* and its sequel, *Finding Bear*, as borderline ecopedagogical texts which highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject is used to encourage environmental activism amongst its younger readerships.

Keywords: cute studies; polar bears; child agency; climate change

1. Introduction

Charismatic animals are often used in marketing and awareness campaigns for various charities and groups warning against the effects of the climate crisis (Manzo 2010a, 2010b). In this context, the polar bear appears as dominant iconography (Manzo 2010a, 2010b; Engelhard 2017; Henderson 2019; Wærp 2020). Recently captured by wildlife photographer of the year, Nima Sarikhani's award-winning piece from 2023 offers a glimpse into the polar bear and its decreasing habitat. Sleeping soundly, the male polar bear is curled up on a scrap of ice no larger than its body. The ice floe is tipped upwards at a precarious angle, threatening to submerge itself and take the bear with it.[1] In the work of Sarikhani and many other wildlife photographers', the polar bear presented with the loss of its natural habitat often coincides with "fear appeals" in which the visual device can distance observers from the imminent danger, pushing concerns for the climate into the future (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009).

Therefore, communication of the climate crisis through the iconization of the polar bear has its limitations. Kate Manzo argues that polar bear images in climate change communication have "more to do with affect than cognition" (Manzo 2010a, p. 197), noting their "sweet and sad and loveable" associations (Barton 2008; Manzo 2010a, p. 198). So, although polar bear images may raise awareness, they fail to address important aspects of climate change communication: cognition, affect and behavior.[2] However, polar bears continue to captivate us. Henning Howlid Wærp concludes his study on "The Polar Bear in Nordic Literature for Children and Young Adults":

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> Polar bears once symbolized strength, independence and the ability to survive in one of the world's harshest climates. They now represent vulnerability and the global ecological crisis. Without losing any of its power of fascination, one of the Arctic's most dangerous predators has been transformed into a threatened species in need of human protection. (Wærp 2020, p. 82).

Furthermore, polar bears can appear in Northern cultures' mythologies as "optimal spirit guides and intermediaries to the otherworld" (Henderson 2019, p. 252).[3] Henderson observes that "Polar Bear mythology, traditional folktales and legends are full of stories about transmogriphication—from bear to human or human to bear—or cosmically-aligned Ursines with access to supernatural realms; they are rarely about bears, as such, but externalize human emotions and morality" (Henderson 2019, p. 259). Perhaps these historical associations with polar bears perpetuate their power of fascination, giving rise to polar bear celebrities like Knut, who ensured an additional status to polar bears, as "a symbol of the economic potential of ecology", putting "a face to the climate crisis" (Engelhard 2017, p. 24). Manzo notes that images of helpless polar bears raise awareness, relying on their sad and loveable associations. These aspects reflect theories surrounding cute subjects. Both Daniel Harris and Sianne Ngai argue that a cute subject often has an "imposed-upon aspect or mien" (Ngai 2005, p. 816) and that cuteness aestheticizes helplessness for the qualities it lacks (Harris 1992, p. 179). Therefore, the iconization of polar bears in fear-appeals interpellates them as cute subjects, demonstrating a loveable lack. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change and the shifting associations with the animal overtime, this article considers how polar bear iconography in climate change discourse is incorporated into children's literature, considering the role of affects. I focus on how the relationship between the 'real' polar bear character, "Bear", and the child protagonist is used in Hannah Gold's duology *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) to communicate the climate crisis and encourage the child to become an environmental activist through the modes of engagement: affect, cognition and behavior.

2. The Temporal *Might* of the Child Activist

Communicating the dangers of the climate crisis through animal imagery, as noted above, expresses the "slow violence" of climate change (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Coined by Rob Nixon, "slow violence" is a kind of violence that "is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Slow violence then offers a framework for theorists to discuss the seemingly invisible threat of the climate crisis (Nixon 2011; Anderson 2021; Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021; Echterling 2016). As Brianna Anderson argues, slow violence can be seen in its effects not only on land but in the ocean, too. Anderson observes that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, with 94% of it consisting of micro- and nano-plastics, is more like a "boundless, toxic soup" than a "floating trash island" (Anderson 2021, p. 175). From toxic plastic soup, coral bleaching and oil spills to droughts, forest fires, flooding, and species loss (amongst many others) (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021), the damaging effects of climate change are here. Slow and accretive—yes—but with every year they gain momentum, pulling any potential solution out of the future and into the present.

Without a solution to the climate crisis, we gamble across temporalities. As Greta Thunberg argues on behalf of children: "There is simply not enough time to wait for us to grow up and become the ones in charge" (Thunberg 2019, pp. 32–33). In many of her speeches, Thunberg draws on the divide between child and adult perspectives on the climate crisis and the pressure that adult inaction puts onto younger generations (Thunberg 2019; Conrad 2021). However, the divide between child and adult working

relationships exhibited in Thunberg's speeches on approaches to dealing with the climate crisis reflects a larger discussion in children's literature studies. Lying "between the constructed and the constructive" (Rudd 2004, p. 7),[4] children's literature provides a space to discuss the "partially overlapping temporalities" between child and adult (Beauvais 2015, p. 6). As Clémentine Beauvais observes, narratives written for children provide "words uttered [. . .] *in* the present *for* the future [and are] intensely permeated with the past" (Beauvais 2015, p. 46).

In this light, children's literature and its discussions around adult normativity and child agency (Nikolajeva 2012; Beauvais 2015; Beauvais 2012; Gubar 2013; Rudd 2004) reflect the discourse around the climate crisis between the *mighty* child activist and adult authority. Furthermore, child activists like Greta Thunberg and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez become living examples of Beauvais' "mighty child". Beauvais explains "to be mighty is to have more time left; to be authoritative is to have more time past" (Beauvais 2012, p. 82). Therefore, child activists demonstrate their might when they use the temporal stage of childhood tactically to counter stagnant adult authority (Conrad 2021). Thunberg employs this technique in her address to the UN General Assembly:

> This is all wrong [. . .] I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have taken away my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. (Thunberg 2019, p. 96).

To counter the assumption that children lack agency to engage in climate crisis discourse, Thunberg criticizes adult authority using her child might, drawing attention to the abuse of adult power when their inaction in the present denies a future, not only for Thunberg but for the many other children and generations after her. As Rachel Conrad observes the "temporal strategies" of Thunberg's and Martinez's speeches, "when they insist on acting "now" rather than "then", young activists invoke time strategically as a rhetorical driver of an argument for their right, capacity, and necessity to take climate action in the present" (Conrad 2021, p. 226).

Children's literature, then, possesses the potential to explore children's agency in action against climate change, just as it has "*the potential* to question the adults as norm" (Nikolajeva 2012, p. 11), encouraging children to act and take advantage of their *mighty* childhoods. As Marek Oziewizc and Lara Saguisag observe, "it is necessary to reflect on how children's literature has represented the crisis and envisioned young people's agency to respond to it" (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021, p. vii), encouraging children's environmental literature to take on an ecopedagogical role. Greta Gaard argues that aspects of ecoliteracy which can be effective in building towards ecopedagogy are teaching about, teaching in, and teaching through the social and natural environment, helping to teach connections of sustainability and urgency (Gaard 2009, p. 333). Therefore, one element of "ecopedagogy looks at children's environmental texts for their potential to illuminate current environmental issues, as well as the roots of the issues, and the strategies for responding to those issues, both individually and collectively" (Gaard 2009, p. 333). Accordingly, Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and sequel *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) take some steps towards ecoliteracy but ultimately work as borderline ecopedagogical texts which highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject (the polar bear) is used to encourage environmental activism in the child protagonist. While these texts reflect a conventional hero narrative, the wilderness is not an "obstacle that the hero must overcome" (Moriarty 2021, p. 199). Instead, it is a catalyst in which the child can rebel against humancentric thoughts of the Anthropocene. Therefore, the relationship between child and polar bear can help to interrogate "the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community" (Westling 2006, p. 30) through cute aesthetics and affects.

3. Sweet, Sad, and Loveable

Anthropomorphic re-imaginings of animals evolve and alter the animal the narratives are trying to represent. There is then a lack that one can perceive in the artificial animal depictions and in their designations as 'other'. Returning to Beauvais' observations of overlapping temporalities between children and adults, they note that the temporal state of childhood is often viewed as a state of lack (Beauvais 2015, p. 3). The effects of this view position children and animals together in a lack of power and agency. However, not only is their lack due to a perceived weakness, but it also fundamentally draws on the field of cute studies. Although cuteness is not strictly subject to the concept of adult normativity, it does draw parallels with the lack perceived of childhood. Harris defines cuteness as: "something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but a quality it lacks" (Harris 1992, p. 179). Referring to the abnormally diminutive features of the So Shy Sherri doll, Harris continues to point out that there is a lurking sadism and an attempt to aestheticize helplessness, to "maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize" in cute subjects (Harris 1992, p. 179). Furthermore, Ngai argues on cutification: "the more objectified the object, or the more visibly shaped by the affective demands and/or projections of the subject, the cuter" (Ngai 2015, p. 65). Lacking in size and abilities creates a deformation of the cute object and is further explored by Joyce Goggin, who notes of Mattel's "Liddle Kiddles" line that the name and the dolls are "doubly diminutive and doubly cute", with references to the nineteenth and early twentieth century uses of 'cute' to mean "small and compact" or "tiny" (Goggin 2016, p. 226). Therefore, when children and animals become aligned in their state of lack, they adopt a further category of cuteness.

However, in contrast to the loveable lack observed of cute subjects by Harris and Ngai, Joshua Paul Dale proposes a slightly altered definition of cuteness, taking inspiration from affect theory. Dale observes that upon encountering a cute subject/object, there is usually a tension which needs to be discharged and can occur in such phrases as "it's so fluffy I want to die!" (Dale 2016, p. 40). Dale argues that phrases of this kind "testify to the tension building in the subject experiencing the high positive affect that characterizes a strong cuteness response" (Dale 2016, p. 40). Therefore, cuteness as an affect, can trigger physical and emotional responses in the body of the subject, creating "the "AWW" factor" (Dale 2016, p. 46). As such, cute affects occur "in the midst of in-between-ness", a visceral force which drives us forward (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, pp. 1–2). The movement between states reflects that the encounter with "cuteness is reciprocal rather than one-way" (Dale 2016, p. 42). Despite cuteness' initial diminutive and disfiguring nature, it possesses the potential to empower in its in-between-ness.

One aspect of cuteness in the West heavily aligns children with cute aesthetics and stems out of Konrad Lorenz's *kindchenschema*. Lorenz argues that the cute response is irrepressible when presented by children and baby animals, supported by the idea that these features encourage human adults to care for their children. Therefore, cuteness equals care and designates a need to nurture the cute subject. However, this is only one potential result of the cute affect. As Dale observes, "we may all have the same capacity to respond to cuteness", but it will present in different ways, if at all (Dale 2023, p. 12). Lorenz's *kindchenschema*, therefore, becomes problematic when cuteness is assigned to features which are then, intrinsically cute, scientifically grouping those who are loveable and those who are unlovable (Dale 2016, pp. 42–45). Therefore, it is no surprise that Lorenz's theories are fundamentally aligned with his belief in eugenics and history with the Nazi Party (Klopfer 1994). However, what Lorenz stumbles upon and consequently draws attention to is how children often appear as cute subjects.[5] While I agree that childlike features are sometimes present in cute aesthetics as they coincidentally produce that cute affect, I do not agree that these childlike features are the sole expression of cuteness.[6] Instead, cuteness

occurs in many forms and with varying affects. Most frequently, cute aesthetics appear in small, round, bumbling, mammalian bodies with large eyes (Lieber-Milo 2022; Dale 2023), and sometimes with "furry bodies" which are "invitingly soft" (Dale 2023, p. 9).

This short introduction to cute studies demonstrates how cuteness can provide a new lens through which to view relationships with animals and children. For the context of this article, I believe, as Dale asserts, that cute aesthetics create cute affects. The cute affect, then, can have positive and negative connotations and the adjective 'cute' can stem from that lack and/or from joy upon encountering the cute object/subject. Thinking of affect as "sticky", Sara Ahmed writes, "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed 2010, p. 29). On happiness, Ahmed argues "happiness can generate objects through proximity", and they note on the morals of happiness that "certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects. After all, objects not only embody good feeling, but are perceived as necessary for a good life" (Ahmed 2010, pp. 33–34). Ahmed concludes that it is concerning "how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive" (Ahmed 2010, p. 50). Ahmed draws attention to experiences when encountering cute subjects. Cuteness may provoke 'good' or 'bad' feelings and 'good' or 'bad' somatic responses, like the cute aggression of wanting to eat the cute subject.

So, it is in this state of in-between-ness, as observed by Gregg and Seigworth, that we can encounter the cute affect, leading to the "catharsis built into the cute response" in that enigmatic 'AWW' (Dale 2016, pp. 40–41). However, when we meet cuteness, before, simultaneously, and somehow after, the cute affect appears in multiplicities, and this is when positive and negative affects can occur. Therefore, the cute subject, in an assumed state of lack, is where children and animals are once again drawn together. So, when the child in Hannah Gold's work encounters the polar bear, it reflects those images of climate change communication, exhibiting the polar bear as "sweet and sad and loveable" (Barton 2008; Manzo 2010a, p. 198) and simultaneously produces cute affects, drawing on the lack found in the cute subject. Therefore, the next section will begin with considering the cute aesthetics of polar bears, which produce the cute affect in Gold's texts. Furthermore, the combination of cute aesthetics, cute affects and how they are associated with polar bears will shed light on the ecopedagogical attempts made in these texts. As such, cuteness, when combined with ecopedagogy, runs the risk of amplifying affect while reducing cognition and behavior in climate change communication in children's fiction.

4. Affect and Cognition

Outlined by Lorenzoni et al. in their study from 2007, inducing engagement from climate change communication devices is most efficient when climate change communication includes affect, behavior and cognition. These A, B, Cs of climate change communication ensure better engagement, addressing factors such as "underlying knowledge, values, experiences and lifestyles", which are then "affected by the wider social landscape" and determine the success of engagement (Lorenzoni et al. 2007, p. 449). Borrowing this definition of engagement, O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) explain that "fear-appeals" in visual representations of climate change, such as the "iconic" images of stranded polar bears on ice floes (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, p. 358), do not produce effective engagement. Instead, their study shows:

> [Fearful messaging] can enhance feelings that climate change is a distant issue in both time and space. Outcomes of both the icon and imagery studies indicate that meaningful engagement approaches must involve some degree of connection

> with "the everyday", in both spatial and temporal terms [...]. (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, p. 369).

Given these perspectives on climate change communication, it is unsurprising that when writing *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023), Hannah Gold wished to write stories about "hope" and "making a difference" (Gold 2023, Author's Note, p. 339), compared to other dystopian forms of children's fiction on climate change (Gold 2021, Author's Note, p. 295). As such, these texts are pieces of fiction. However, given the importance of climate change discussions in these texts, the polar bear character is depicted as surprisingly realistic. He is not illustrated anthropomorphically, and he appears as if he is a real, wild bear. There are no elements of fantasy, magic or supernatural which allow him to talk or clearly communicate with the child protagonist, and when the two communicate, it is through her interpretation of animal behavior. Therefore, borrowing Lorenzoni et al.'s observations of effective engagement, I will use affect, behavior and cognition as a framework for analyzing climate change communication in Gold's texts. Especially considering polar bear affects on the child and whether they encourage cognition of the animal and its environment relating to climate change, and how a combination of affect and cognition changes behavior, encouraging child activism.

April, our child protagonist, moves temporarily to the uninhabited Bear Island as part of her father's trip to conduct meteorological research at the weather station located there. April's father is distant after the death of her mother, and as such, he throws himself into his work and April is left mostly to herself. One day, while April is out exploring the island, she encounters an injured polar bear and names him "Bear". During this first meeting, we see the effect of the injured animal creating engagement. While the fear-appeal of the injured polar bear is present, there is another factor at work: cute aesthetics. The perception of polar bears and their associations as victims of climate change develops the notion that they are sweet, sad and loveable, displaying a loveable lack in their helplessness. As mentioned above, cute aesthetics can stem out of "a certain neediness and inability to stand alone" (Harris 1992, p. 179). Furthermore, Ngai argues that "it is crucial to cuteness [...] that it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feelings or attitude towards it" (Ngai 2005, p. 816). Hence, this polar bear embodies cuteness when he displays that lack identified by Harris and Ngai as cuteness "aestheticizes unhappiness" (Harris 1992, p. 179). When Bear and April first meet, April identifies that loveable lack as Bear is starving and wounded. However, April interprets the sharpness in Bear's face as "not a horrible sharpness the way some people's faces are sharp permanently. But a sharpness born of hunger and desperation" (Gold 2021, p. 65). Bear's weakness then promotes that cute aesthetic associated with an imposed mien of cuteness, inviting an interpretation of the polar bear's wild nature.

Encountering cute aesthetics in the wild polar bear creates the cute affect. By habituating Bear with oat biscuits and peanut butter, April comes close enough to observe his "chocolate eyes" (Gold 2021, p. 79). Throughout the duology, comparisons are made between the polar bear's eyes and the comforting sweet treat. This interaction further reflects Christine Yano's observation of cute objects with neutral facial expressions. They argue, in combination with Jean Baudrillard's view that "as a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones [...] What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you" (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 89–90 qtd in Yano 2013, p. 20). Cute objects which display neutral expressions become this mirror, "reflecting back desired images [...], a mute presence that does not look back at you or judge" (Yano 2013, p. 20). This comparison between the 'real' polar bear's neutral expression and chocolate serves to create comfort and cuteness in the otherwise intimidating image of a 'real' polar bear. For example, during their first up-close meeting, April remarks that "his dark,

chocolate-coloured eyes [. . .] even from this distance seemed gentle" (Gold 2021, p. 65). Or when April is riding Bear for the first time, we learn that "Bear's steady pulse beat against her skin and there was something about it that felt both comforting and safe. Like coming home after a day at school to a house smelling of freshly baked chocolate cupcakes" (Gold 2021, p. 147). The combination of food and cuteness illustrates Tom Lee's examination of diminutive cute objects:

> Cute things are defined by their capacity to be available to us to bring into ourselves, whether in a literal sense through eating, or through a more abstract but no less real means of possession, such as buying or looking. (Lee 2016, p. 4).

Therefore, through the comparisons with the safety and comfort of chocolate, that which is consumable, the polar bear is interpellated as a cute subject, embodying cuteness in his chocolate eyes. Furthermore, the cute affect of the starving polar bear on the child protagonist motivates April to attempt to cut off the plastic and fishing wire wrapped tightly around his paw. The cute affect in this example prompts a caregiving response. However, it also leads to an interpretation of the wild animal. During their first encounter, April remarks, "you're *completely* wild. And wild animals don't need human names. But I have to call you something, so I'm just going to call you Bear" (Gold 2021, p. 78). The desire to name the wild animal draws similarities with Jacques Derrida's observation that "the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature" (Derrida and Wills 2002, p. 392). By naming the polar bear "Bear", he is adopted as a pet. Therefore, the initial cute aesthetics lead to cute affects and, in turn, interpellate the wild animal as a cute subject when they display that loveable lack.

The cute affects do have a positive effect as they encourage April to learn more about how Bear came to be stranded on the island. Demonstrating the "necessity of an anthropomorphic approach" in children's literature, as it can help encourage children to explore animals' real lives (You 2021, p. 188). Gold's *The Last Bear* illustrates how affect can lead to cognition when, even before their formal meeting, April glimpses Bear from the window of the weather station and immediately begins to question her father about Bear Island. She learns there are no bears on the island because "people *killed* them all [. . .] and the ice caps":

> Polar bears are mostly marine animals and they use the ice caps as a hunting ground to catch seals. But now the ice caps are melting it means that they can't travel as far as they used to. That's why the polar bear population is dropping. (Gold 2021, pp. 47–48).

Furthermore, after developing a friendship with Bear, April learns through "instinct, sensitivity and canny ability to fill between the gaps" (Gold 2021, p. 186) that Bear had lost his mother and was trapped on the island alone (Gold 2021, p. 191). Later that day, to verify her story, April learns of the dramatic loss of sea ice around the island. Her father informs her that "the polar ice caps have, in fact, melted more in the past twenty years than they have in the past ten thousand years" (Gold 2021, p. 195). Acquiring knowledge of climate change and explaining it in text informs not only the literary child but the reading child as they read the text. April responds to learning of the detrimental decrease in polar bear habitat:

> 'Then we have to do something! [. . .] Why aren't people *doing* anything about it? Why aren't *you* doing more?'
>
> Dad frowned. It was obvious he had never asked himself this question and his.

> bushy eyebrows knitted together like a confused caterpillar. 'I don't know.' (Gold 2021, pp. 195–96).

Asking her father, who does not seem to understand how important his role is, highlights the juxtaposition in climate change action, namely the temporal scale. Furthermore, it addresses Sinéad Moriarty's view that environmental encounters in children's literature can exhibit "conventional positions of the adult as teacher and the child as student" (Moriarty 2021, pp. 197–98). Affect and cognition in climate change communication in this text leads to changes in behavior. Armed with these facts, April becomes determined to help Bear escape Bear Island and bring him to Svalbard to be with the rest of the polar bear population. In the reimagined wild of the 'real' polar bear, Gold's books become borderline ecopedagogical texts and so address the importance of children's fiction to reflect on the climate crisis and, as Oziewicz and Saguisag argue, envision "young people's agency to respond to it" (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021, p. vii). Therefore, the following section will explore the ways in which Gold's duology considers child agency when responding to the climate crisis.

5. Behavior

The behavior change resulting from affect and cognition in Gold's work promotes the importance of individual over collective action, simultaneously illustrating April as an environmental hero in her fantastical relationship with Bear. Moriarty argues that environmental texts for children tend to display the conventional hero narrative where prominence is placed on the individual hero's success, reflecting an "enduring cultural focus on the individual" (Moriarty 2021, p. 200). To counter this, Moriarty offers Roni Natov's concept of "community as hero" narratives where "through a discussion of the power and responsibility of the group, the "community as hero" model could celebrate collective action while also working to hold accountable the groups and organizations that continue to destroy environments" (Moriarty 2021, p. 207). Both *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) display a preference towards the individual eco-hero narrative while concluding with help from the collective, skewing messages around agency.

In the first book, April decides to help return Bear to Svalbard to join the rest of the polar bear population. This journey involves April risking her life by sailing herself and Bear a day's boat ride across the Barents Sea. On this journey, they are caught in a storm, and April is dragged under the waves. She is saved by Bear, and the two are picked up by her friend Tör on the cargo ship, who dropped April and her father at the island at the beginning of the narrative. April's determination to save Bear and Bear's rescue of April convinces her father of the possibility of friendship between human and bear and the importance of bringing Bear to Svalbard.

In the second book, April takes full responsibility for Bear's survival, even denying the help and advice of a trained expert on the tundra. The importance placed on the individual child hero is again illustrated when, on an expedition to rescue Bear (after April learns he may have been shot), April ignores the advice of their guide, Hedda. After she becomes separated from her group in the open tundra with only the sledding dogs for comfort, April resolves "Hedda was wrong. She wasn't just a child. Or even a girl. She was half-bear and she would fight to do the right thing. Even if she never saw Bear again, she would still fight for him" (Gold 2023, p. 168). This example demonstrates Gail Melson's observation of animal guide stories. Melson explains:

> In modern animal guide stories, the child—often a young girl—owes more than her survival to her animal saviors [. . .] The child parts the curtain that separates animal societies from human experience. Because the child truly understands the

> animals, from inside their world, she can become their intermediary with often hostile, uncomprehending adult humans. (Melson 2005, p. 153).

This format can aid climate change communication in children's fiction. However, Gold's texts position the individual child as solely interested in and responsible for the welfare of the polar bear. Furthermore, when April breaks apart from her community (even if they are uncomprehending adults), she risks the search for Bear. In this example, April becomes opposed to her community and instead of accepting help, endangers herself to seek out Bear alone. The result is that she almost drowns, and Bear saves her again. Overall, Gold's narratives position the responsibility of the climate crisis on the child as an independent responsibility instead of a collective one. Only when the child is at risk is the adult invited back into the climate change conversation.

Overall, these texts do envision child agency when responding to the climate crisis. However, the ecopedagogical message becomes mixed between child individualism and collective adult ineptitude. The combination of affect, cognition and behavior in these examples do attempt "to enlist readers in taking action, encouraging them to reflect on the world as it is, and to imagine future scenarios if environmental degradation proceeds unabated" (Massey and Bradford 2011, p. 110), but presents limited behavior which the child reader can execute.

While the affective and cognitive factors can have similar effects on the child reader, the texts show limited ways in which children may change their behavior and become climate activists themselves. As Gold states, "you don't need to single-handedly rescue a polar bear like April (I wouldn't advise that!), but I hope this book encourages every reader to believe that they too can help" (Gold 2021, Author's Note, p. 295). Here, the wording presents the dilemma which many children's books on climate change struggle with and this is identifying actionable tasks for the child reader to become engaged with climate activism. Clare Echterling notes that many of these 'What You Can Do' sections are "useful but they tend to recycle the same tips over and over again" (Echterling 2016, p. 296). To some extent this is true of Gold's texts as there are these types of tips scattered throughout. For example, in the first book we learn that April had been "a proud vegetarian for over two years" (Gold 2021, p. 48) but we are not told why that is important relating to April's commitment to protecting the planet. The second book presents a few more actionable tasks. For example, before April flies back to Svalbard we learn that "April felt bad about flying. It was, after all, one of the major causes of climate change" and "she vowed to donate a whole month's worth of pocket money to a company that planted trees to offset carbon emissions" (Gold 2023, pp. 49–50). Unfortunately, there is no reference back to this "vow" once the story concludes, skimming the surface of how children can respond to the climate crisis. In fact, in the "Author's Note" at the end of *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023), Gold addresses "some of the things we can all do" but with heavy emphasis on "the grown-ups" and the political action they might take, like signing petitions and looking into "how our pensions are funded" (Gold 2023, p. 342). Clearly, there is a disconnect presented in who has the power to affect change, reflecting discord between the mighty child and authoritative adult. Anderson argues that without addressing systemic problems, this kind of advice "ultimately disempowers children by suggesting that their ability to participate in environmental activism does not extend beyond opting to drink from reusable bottles [. . .] perpetuating the assumed lack of agency that children have" (Anderson 2021, pp. 185–86). Furthermore, Beek and Lehmen note that "as children are not usually allowed to participate in political debates on a national or international level, their agency in fighting climate change is largely directed to actions in the domestic space" (Beek and Lehmann 2024, p. 155) Anderson, Beek and Lehmann highlight key points which Echterling condenses down to this question: "why can't children be political?" (Echterling 2016, p. 294). Overall,

these texts demonstrate that the combination of the cute affect of polar bears and cognition can change behavior. Cuteness has the power to affect change. But the texts would have benefitted from not a reimagination of the wild animal but a demonstration of it, responsibly placing the animal in its own life and illustrate change through a collective effort to protect the arctic, celebrating "the power of the responsibility of the group" (Moriarty 2021, p. 193).

6. Conclusions

A loveable lack seems to dominate climate change discourse with polar bear depictions. Their sweet and sad dispositions draw on cute aesthetics, and as such, they are poised to visually communicate the slow violence of climate change. The dominance of such images suggests a preference for surface-level engagement when the systemic problems can be glossed over and has led some groups like Oxfam to develop their Sisters on the Planet project (2008), where they adopted the slogan "people not polar bears" to communicate that climate change is also a social justice and poverty issue (Manzo 2010b, p. 98). Furthermore, the iconization of polar bears as an emblem for climate change highlights Anderson's observation that we should be wary of the cutification of climate change in children's fiction, as we risk "defanging" the danger of this crisis (Anderson 2021, p. 179). Therefore, when Gold presents Bear with a similar loveable lack that is illustrated in climate change communication of polar bears, it also draws on the lack found in cute aesthetics, which then invites the child protagonist to interpellate the polar bear as a cute subject. Clearly, there are benefits to the cute affect as it inspires April to action to save Bear from the island, and so, the terms of engagement (affect, cognition and behavior) are fulfilled. However, Gold's texts lack an important factor in climate change engagement: connection to 'the everyday', which suggests that these narratives could still have similar effects as fear-appeals featuring polar bears, only emphasizing the scale of the crisis, pushing solutions into the future.

Furthermore, *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) demonstrate a form of child agency which relies heavily on the traditional hero role, where the success of the individual is prioritized over collaborative achievements with the child's community. These texts then emphasize child *might* and adult ineptitude when handling issues of the environment, drawing on the temporal scale of the crisis. Overall, these texts do create an environment where the child reader can experience affect and cognition of climate change communication through the child protagonist. As such, when the child protagonist encounters animals depicted as 'real' in children's fiction, it can help navigate selfhood "through the lens of the 'the other', of which the animal is perhaps the most evocative and compelling form" (Jaques 2017, pp. 42–43). In this case, Bear's presentation of cute aesthetics and cute affect inspire April to become a climate activist. With these views in mind, Gold's duology presents opportunities to discuss child agency when combatting adult authority on the climate crisis through the child's relationship to the wild animal. While individual child responses to the crisis should be encouraged, they should also appear in a collaborative effort with larger communities so that overlapping temporalities unite to develop solutions.

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Notes

[1] Nima Sarikhani. Ice Bed. The Natural History Museum, London. Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Special Award: People's Choice 2023.

[2] Manzo (2010b) explains that cognition, affect and behavior combined have more positive effects for raising awareness on the climate crisis than if these factors operate individually.

[3] For more information on the representations of the polar bear across Northern cultures, please see further: (Dolitsky and Michael 2020; Engelhard 2017).

[4] Page number reference is from ProQuest generated PDF accessed 4 September 2024.

[5] In fact, Mickey Mouse underwent his own cute makeover, at first appearing too much like an adult and mischievous mouse, to adopting rounded, childish features and a sweeter nature (Lawrence 1986).

[6] For example, in Japan, not only are there *Kawaii* (cute) aesthetics, but also *kawaisō* (cute and pitiful) (Kinsella 2013, p. 236), *Gurukawa* (creepy-cute) and *Yami Kawaii* (sickly-cute) and these are just a few examples of the multifaceted cute (Lieber-Milo 2022, p. 757). Cuteness under Kawaii has similarities with how cuteness appears in the West. For further reference please see: Dale (2023); Kinsella (2013); Lieber-Milo and Nittono (2019); Lieber-Milo (2022).

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