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Editorial

Eco-Rebels with a Cause: Introduction to a *Humanities* Special Issue

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In a time when global environmental initiatives might lose traction in the face of armed conflicts and war, it is important to maintain focus on the long-term measures required to protect natural habitats, prevent species loss, and champion environmental justice. By highlighting the topic of environmental protest and rebellion as expressed in literature for children and young adults, this Special Issue seeks to contribute to sustaining such long-term thinking, while also hoping to be, in a modest way, a counterweight to the dismantling of democratic and academic freedoms that are currently under pressure in many countries. The right to dissent of opinion and peaceful protest is the foundation both of healthy democracies and of scientific inquiry. However, while there is strong scientific consensus that human overexploitation of natural resources is a significant factor triggering global warming and climate change (UNESCO n.d.), the implementation of climate change measures is highly politicized. For instance, while the US "played a crucial leadership role in bringing countries together around a specific vision of the [Paris] agreement", the US commitment to the agreement has shifted with the political views of each administration: While rapidly accepted by President Obama, President Trump has withdrawn the US from the agreement while rolling back a number of environmental protections (Wagner and Allan 2020).

In his recent book on ecology and economy in the time of capitalism, human geographer Ståle Holgersen (2024) claims that the climate crisis should be analyzed as a political crisis, since ecology is far too important to be left only to people who love nature. Despite the agreement enshrined in the COP28 declaration to phase out fossil fuel emissions (UN 2023), the continued political acceptance of the capitalist exploitation of human and natural resources remains an obstacle to be overcome. Arguably, the comprehensive action required to mitigate and end the global ecological crisis is still generally lacking. Nevertheless, among children and adolescents globally, and reflected in recent environmentally oriented children's and YA literature, we see a growing commitment to rebellion and protest. This focus is combined with attention to how children and young adults may be heard in ecological, social, ethical, and economic matters that concern them (Nairn 2019; Wahlström et al. 2020; Haugseth and Smeplass 2023).

A literary point of departure for this Special Issue is John Stephen's argument in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992) that no children's book is ideologically neutral:

> On the one hand, the significance deduced from a text—its theme, moral, insight into behaviour, and so on—is never without an ideological dimension or connotation. On the other hand, and less overtly, ideology is implicit in the way the story an audience derives from a text exists as an isomorph of events in the actual world: even if the story's events are wholly or partly impossible in actuality,

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Received: 20 June 2025
Accepted: 16 July 2025
Published: 24 July 2025

Citation: Goga, Nina, and Lykke Guanio-Uluru. 2025. Eco-Rebels with a Cause: Introduction to a *Humanities* Special Issue. *Humanities* 14: 155. https://doi.org/10.3390/h14080155

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> narrative sequences and character interrelationships will be shaped according to recognizable forms, and that shaping can in itself express ideology in so far as it implies assumptions about the forms of human existence (Stephens 1992, p. 2).

As Stephens' analyses demonstrate, language, narrative structure, and character portrayal may all, more or less subtly, take part in communicating (or challenging) cultural and political ideologies. Another scholar who has emphasized and discussed the role of politics in children's literature is Kimberly Reynolds, who in *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007) reminds us of the importance of studying "the way that children's literature contributes to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by, for instance, encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change" (Reynolds 2007, p. 1).

As some of the contributions to this Special Issue suggest, it may require "rebel readings" or an eco-pedagogical methodology to open such ideological content for young readers and to invite them into dialogue. One current trend in environmentally themed children's literature, particularly for younger readers, seems to be that environmental texts seek to point their young readers towards environmental *action*—prodding them, more or less explicitly, to seek solutions and act on behalf of the environment, thus aiming to incite various forms of eco-rebellion.

In young adult literature, genres such as utopian and dystopian writing that are inherently political have enjoyed sustained popularity in the past few decades, problematizing current political responses to issues like the climate crises, species extinction, and biotechnology while promoting various types of "eco-rebels" and differing forms of eco-rebellion (see for instance Hintz and Ostry 2003; Bradford et al. 2008; Basu et al. 2013; Curry 2013; Day et al. 2014). Notable examples of such problematizing works for young adults are the *Uglies*-series (Westerfield 2005–2007), *The Carbon Diaries* (Lloyd 2008, 2009), and *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline 2017). The more recent genre of solar punk fiction draws on science fictional and dystopian roots while explicitly seeking to envision environmentally and socially just futures, in collections such as *Sun Vault; Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (Wagner and Wieland 2017), *Solar Punk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (Lodi-Ribeiro 2018), and *Ecolution*: *Solar Punk Narratives to Transform Reality* (Verso 2024). An emerging genre, solar punk is a form of collective and generative activism that seeks to actively harness the power of narrative to further sustainable futures—a form of rebellion that aims to provide cultural templates for alternative social and environmental solutions.

We also see representations and explorations of (rebellious) activism in other types of texts addressing children and young adults (June and Abadía 2022; Dåsnes 2022; Hopkinson and So 2020; Amoore 2020). While not all of these directly address environmental topics, postcolonial, feminist, and racial themes are often related to the same power mechanisms that sustain the environmental crisis (McDonough and Wagner 2014; Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2023). In addition to fiction (picturebooks as well as novels), a growing number of biographies depicting activist life, in particular the life of Greta Thunberg, have recently been published and studied (Malpezzi 2024; Moriarty 2021; Martínez García 2020).

In light of these current trends, this Special Issue of *Humanities* understands children's and YA literature as an aesthetic and ethical laboratory and thus as a cultural form of expression where different readers can meet and explore representations of climate and environmental politics and activism. Not necessarily for them to be directed towards a specific ideology, response, or action, but rather to enable them to gain the experience of being taken seriously as critical, reflective, and political beings.

In line with tendencies in current children's and YA literature, where representations and explorations of politics and activism abound, the CfP for this Special Issue, *Eco-rebels with a cause*, was motivated by the right of children and young adults to express and

organize themselves and be heard in issues concerning them (see Unicef 1989), and by children's and young adults' environmental involvement on different levels. Inspired by such youthful activism, the aim of the Special Issue is to explore, ethically and aesthetically, new literary ways of foregrounding connections between environmental and political justice that reaches across ideological, species, and scalar boundaries.

The Call for Papers opened for responses along various lines, including, but not limited to, analysis of eco-rebel biographies, eco-rebels in dystopian or utopian YA literature, visual and or interactive representations of eco-rebels in various media, contributions discussing climate and/or social justice, theoretical and methodological reflections on how children's and YA literature may enable critical and collaborative thinking and activism, and on "activist reading" as a method for analyzing political and environmental aspects of children's and YA literature in both classic and contemporary literary texts. The Call for Papers received a number of varied and interesting responses, comprising contributions from scholars in Ukraine, Finland, Norway, Italy, the UK, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, all sharing their unique analyses of literary eco-rebellion written for children and young adults. As will become evident in the presentation of the contributions below, each of these responses position themselves in relation to current discussions in the scholarly field of environmental research on children's and YA literatures in their own ways.

Two of the articles in the Special Issue responded to the call for contributions discussing eco-rebels in dystopian or utopian YA literature by investigating, in different ways, the figure of eco-rebellion in fantastical fiction for young adults. In her article "'You Two Are the Bad Guys!' Intergenerational Equity, Ecophobia, and Ecocentric Card Games in Disney's *Strange World* (2022)", Roberta Grandi focusses on Disney's animation *Strange World* (2022) and argues that it explores the themes of the "energy unconscious", "intergenerational equity", and "ecophobia", in relation to intergenerational justice. Grandi notes how the film centers on three generations of men, each representing different attitudes towards nature, ranging from the colonialist values of the grandfather, Jaeger Clade, who views nature as a hostile force to be conquered, via his son, Searcher, an intensive farmer, who regards nature as a battleground between useful beings and pests, and Ethan, Searcher's teenage son, who adopts an ecocentric perspective. Highlighting these character portraits, Grandi classes *Strange World* as a cli-fi allegory that urges humanity to choose between being parasitic destroyers or symbiotic contributors to ecological recovery, while concluding that the film ultimately presents young viewers with a transformative, ecotopian message.

In "Vegetal Modes of Resistance: Arboreal Eco-Rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*", Lykke Guanio-Uluru posits that a fictional eco-rebel might be not just a human (child or young adult), but also a plant, revolting against the destruction of its dwelling place. Building on perspectives from critical plant studies that frames plants as active and intentional beings, Guanio-Uluru argues, by way of a literary analysis of three instances of arboreal hostility and rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*, that Tolkien created a novel kind of eco-rebel, founded on his deep feeling for plants and his acknowledgement of plant agency. This figure of arboreal rebellion, while now over 70 years old, still holds radical and rebellious potential.

Time, not least slow environmental violence, is the starting point for the literary analyses in two other contributions in this Special Issue. In "Slow Violence and Precarious Progress: Picturebooks About Wangari Maathai" Sinéad Moriarty is motivated by Rob Nixon's pursuant to the writing of Kenyan environmentalist and politician Wangari Maathai as work which captures the notion of slow violence. Moriarty interrogates the extent to which seven illustrated biographies of Maathai capture what Nixon describes as "slow violence"; that is, violence that occurs slowly, over time, and which is often overlooked. The article also introduces the term "precarious progress" to describe the fragile nature of

the change initiated after slow violence. Finally, drawing on Val Plumwood's writing on place attachment and "shadow places", Moriarty explores how the Kenyan landscape is depicted as not a mere object but as a subject in these texts, highlighting the way in which they work to foster a consciousness of place in their child readers.

As pointed out by Elizabeth Ritsema in her contribution "Loveable Lack: The Reimagined Wild of 'Real' Bears", the lone polar bear is a popular visual device for expressing the slow violence of climate change. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change, Ritsema's article addresses how polar bear imagery is translated into modern children's literature as 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. Focusing on Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* and its sequel, *Finding Bear*, Ritsema sees them as borderline eco-pedagogical texts that highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject is used to encourage environmental activism amongst its younger readerships.

The concept of slow violence is closely linked to ethical dilemmas and questions related to environmental justice, which Kaisu Rättyä focuses on in her article "Eco-Activism and Strategic Empathy in the Novel *Vastakarvaan*". The novel depicts a young Finnish student's ethical dilemma when her eco-anarchist friends are planning an attack on a fur farm that the protagonist's family owns. Rättyä's analysis is grounded in the concept of strategic empathy, exploring the ways in which the emotions and ethical decisions of the protagonist are represented in physical, social, and temporal settings, how types of dissent are presented, and how three types of empathy are represented: bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial strategic empathy, and broadcast strategic empathy. The analysis demonstrates how the protagonist's dilemma is emphasized in different stages of dissent: her decision to participate in the attack or not is debated on different levels of narration.

Also, in other contributions, new analytical tools are developed and tested. Jonas Vanhove and Simon De Backer's article "Do I Dare to Leave the Universe Alone? Environmental Crisis, Narrative Identity, and Collective Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction" draws on theories from literary studies and sociology to explore the impact of cultural narratives of environmental crisis and destruction on an emerging narrative identity in adolescents represented in young adult literature. They find that although two of the selected novels (*Dry* and *Green Rising*) affirm that narratives of environmental destruction engage the transformational potential of adolescents for society, the third novel (*Snowflake, AZ*) complicates this image by questioning whether the impact of narratives of environmental crisis could be overwhelming for adolescents. The article concludes that the young adolescent protagonists adapt their narrative identity in response to environmental destruction.

While Vanhove and De Backer draw on theories from literary studies and sociology, Corinna Lüdicke presents a linguistic method for analyzing how readers are guided in ecological children's and young adult literature, allowing them to follow and understand the protagonist's change towards becoming an eco-rebel. Her article "The Development of Ecological Identities in Children's Books: A Linguistic Approach to Character Positioning as Eco-Rebels" hypothesizes that the development of an ecological identity, although an individual evolution in the story, is a pattern of ecological children's and young adult literature (CYL). Lüdicke finds that the possibilities for identification that a text offers its reader must be considered as crucial for the experiences gained within the fiction framework to influence real consciousness and development processes. For the analysis, Lüdicke expands Bamber's identity dilemmatic spaces to include linguistic categories and argues that the construction of the figure of the eco-rebel can be analyzed according

to different linguistically based or narrative-based aspects, like speech markings or the development of an agenda.

In addition to the call for theoretical and methodological reflections and exploration, the Call for Papers welcomed activist reading as a method for analyzing both classic and contemporary texts. Two articles in this Special Issue suggest and test what they call rebellious readings. In his article "Allying with Beasts: Rebellious Readings of the Animal as Bridegroom (ATU 425)" Per Esben Svelstad seeks to challenge the patriarchal and anthropocentric value system often assigned to a Western fairy tale tradition. By performing what he calls "rebellious readings", Svelstad emphasizes how the female protagonist relates to her animal bridegroom and other nonhuman actors and discusses the ways in which the female protagonists and their enchanted, beastly husbands become with each other. While Svelstad understands rebellious readings as readings that seek to reinterpret texts in ways that go against the grain of their didactic, hierarchical normativity, Sofia Ahlberg and Suzanne Ericson, in their article "An Emergent Rebellion: Activist Engagement with Ann-Helén Laestadius' Coming-of-Age Novel *Stöld*", see rebellious readings as readers' risk-taking engagement with a text while learning "how to read our world now" in solidarity with the protagonist's struggle for her people's survival within an ecologically and socially just future for all.

Reading with young adults is also at the core of Tetiana Kachak and Tetyana Blyznyuk's article "Eco-Rebels in Contemporary Ukrainian Children's Literature as a Tool for Forming Readers' Eco-Activity". The article analyzes the eco-pedagogical potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature through the prism of young eco-rebels. The article further presents the results of a case study using ecocritical dialogues with 26 readers aged 14–15, reading Ukrainian children's literature centered on environmental topics. The dialogues revealed that such literary engagement and dialogue promoted critical thinking, empathy, and personal eco-involvement. The findings confirm that children's literature, when integrated with dialogic and participatory teaching methods, can serve as a powerful tool for shaping environmental literacy and civic responsibility in youth.

Responding to the Call for Papers, all ten articles in this Special Issue in their own way highlight eco-political aspects of children's and young adult literature. Read together, they provide insight into a broad spectrum of European literary texts for children and young adults and discuss a plethora of analytical and eco-pedagogical approaches to working with "eco-rebellious" literature. It is our hope that this collection of articles will inspire researchers and help literary educators to engage with the eco-rebellious potential of children's and young adult literature and help to keep the discussion of sustainable futures alive in times of geopolitical pressure.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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