

## Rooted In Nature: Exploring the Interconnectedness of Literacy and Perception of the Natural World

By Caroline May

### *Third place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing*

Whenever we watched an animal documentary in elementary school, the same thing always happened. Cut to the cheetah chasing the gazelle, the music starts to pick up, and the tension starts to build. It cuts again to a close-up, and now the cheetah is closing in. The air in the classroom is thick with worry and apprehension. All the kids are on edge. “Is it going to die?” one girl asks, her voice wavering with concern. Meanwhile, I’m sitting at my desk unbothered because I know that statistically there is only a one in 10 chance of a cheetah actually getting a kill. Really all my classmates are just fussing about nothing. And, besides, even if the cheetah does make the kill, it's the circle of life. The cheetahs have to eat, just like us.

While some kids were raised on *Spongebob Squarepants* or *Hannah Montana*, my parents wanted me to consume content that was more educational so I grew up watching animals maul each other to death, more or less. The TV in our family room was always playing *Animal Planet*, *NatGeoWild*, or *Discovery Kids*. It’s not like I minded. I was captivated by shows like *Big Cat Diaries*, *Zoboomafoo*, and *Bindi the Jungle Girl*, watching them with enthusiasm throughout my early years. It wasn’t like all other TV shows were restricted, I could watch Disney Channel if I wanted, but nothing there seemed to pique my interest.

When the weather was nice, I was in the backyard collecting bugs or looking for crayfish in the creek behind our house. I loved watching the birds in my backyard, and they often were the subjects of my early sketches – renderings of the chest feathers of a downy woodpecker in red crayon or shadings of a robin’s eggshell with a soft blue. I would stand in our living room window with a pair of binoculars, checking off the list in the back of a battered copy of *Birds of Pennsylvania* whenever I saw a new one. I even had some delusional thought that maybe I’d tame a bird. Standing by the birdfeeder, I’d hold out a handful of millet, waiting for one to alight the tips of my fingers and eat from my palm just like on TV. It never happened.

My mother grew up on a farm in rural Ohio so I visited my grandparents' house in the summer. Hot afternoons were spent sitting under the wisteria sipping sweet tea and lemonade, and evenings were spent knee-deep in pond muck catching frogs with my grandmother, cicadas and crickets droning on in the tall grass. We watched sunsets, marveling at their reflections on the surface of the water, and listened for coyote howls echoing in the hollows. My grandmother and I would stay up late to watch the latest episode of *Survivorman* as the grandfather clock ticked in the living room. I ran through the fields on the heels of my grandparents' dogs and picked honeysuckle and wild blackberries, eating them out of my palm. My summers were spent in a haze of childlike bliss.

However, in preschool, I began to get a sense that I was a bit different from my peers. One day, a woman brought in animals and insects to show and teach the class about – mainly small things like frogs, lizards, and insects. She held up a cockroach, asking if anyone knew what its hard outer shell was called. I raised my hand tentatively and replied, "It's an exoskeleton?" When my mom came to pick me up in the afternoon, my teacher told her about this, shocked that I knew such a "big" word. I had learned it from a book about bugs that my parents had read to me, filled with colorful pictures and with a close-up holographic picture of a fly on the front.

One day, during snack-time, I remember everyone at the table was talking about an episode of *Spongebob*, laughing to each other about the jokes and recounting the events of the episode. They all seemed to connect, to know something that I didn't. I felt alienated, but it wasn't just because I didn't watch *Spongebob*. (In fact, I tried to watch it, but had ended up hiding behind the family room armchair because I was honestly a bit frightened.) My interests just seemed to be different than everyone else in my class. For example, during recess I asked my teacher if I could borrow some paint brushes because I wanted to try and look for dinosaur bones in the pile of dusty slate next to the playground. So, that's what I did, spending my recesses dusting off thin layers of rock. I enthusiastically searched for fossils while the other kids ran around tagging each other or playing in the sandbox.

In elementary school, I took to wandering around the playground collecting leaves and acorns or making houses for roly-polies. I remember telling my mother that I often didn't play with the other kids,

even though I did have friends, preferring to do my own thing. She remarked, half-jokingly, “Don’t be such a hermit,” but it stuck with me. In second grade I came to feel more distant from my peers. I remember a girl in my second grade class wrinkling her nose at me and saying, “You’re weird.” And I guess I was a bit “weird” – different from all the other girls in my second grade class who were all obsessed with Justin Bieber and grossed out by the monarch caterpillars I brought into class for show-and-tell.

Yet, one of the ways I found to indulge my unique interests was through reading. I had always marveled at the brightly colored spines of books lined on the library shelves. Once I learned to read and began to pick up books, naturally, I looked for animals on the covers. This habit led me to stories like Jack London’s *White Fang* and Avi’s *Poppy*. Through this I came to love reading, at least, when I could read things that I wanted to – exciting stories of adventure usually focusing around nature (bonus points if they had talking animals.) I found freedom in reading. Reading was an escape from a world that was oftentimes alien and confusing. I fell headfirst into new worlds and explored their wonders.

As I grew, I slowly came to acknowledge that I didn’t have to have the same interests as everyone else and that was okay, but there was always an undercurrent of worry that I didn’t “fit in,” a universal childhood experience that I’m sure everyone feels at some point. In fifth grade my friends and I began to label ourselves as “nerds” with a sense of accomplishment and pride. Our favorite place during recess was underneath the branches of a great oak tree or on the grassy hillside, taking in everything, whether it was the overly-dramatic kickball games or the kids doing tricks on the monkey-bars. Sometimes we would just sit next to each other in silence, reading or sketching. Whenever my best friend and I wrote “stories” in fifth and sixth grade, they were always about animals, which was probably a product of cramming our heads full of too many *Warriors* or *Guardians of Ga’Hoole* novels. Sometimes it seemed like we spent more time absorbed in worlds different from the one we lived in.

Over time, I realized that everyone liked what they liked, and I didn’t have to fit into a certain mold. In middle and highschool, I fell in love with my passions, creating art and learning about the environment. I read books on topics that interested me or discovered fiction novels with worlds, plots, and

characters I came to love. Through art, I also found an escape in a world full of expression and possibility. I filled up sketchbook upon sketchbook with my ideas. I found that nature and art were often intertwined, and nature always finds a way to weave itself into my work today.

Looking back, I'm honestly so grateful that my parents raised me in the way they did, inspiring an awe and appreciation for the natural world. My earliest memories of literacy encouraged a curiosity for nature and came to shape the way in which I view it now. Now, more than ever, nature has proved to have a profound role in my life. I grew up in the suburbs of Pennsylvania, and I took my access to nature for granted. I could just sit out in my backyard or take a walk around my neighborhood whenever I pleased. However, moving to a city for college and away from everything I've ever known, nature has surprisingly become all the more important in my life although my relationship with nature looks very different now. Instead of my backyard, I find myself gravitating towards the parks in Richmond's Fan District or the rocky banks of Belle Isle, situated along the James River.

Sometimes nature seems like the only thing in my life that seems to remain constant, a refuge I can return to for solace and comfort. It has become the thing that grounds me amidst the chaos and busyness of everyday life, whether that's allowing myself to take a couple deep breaths of the fresh air or enjoying the warmth of the sun on my skin as I walk to class. My earliest memories of literacy encouraged a curiosity for the natural world and came to shape the way in which I view it now. It is a testament to how much these literacy sponsors can impact our very identity, the integral aspects of ourselves that make us unique and influence our lives. Nature has become a recurring motif in my life. More and more, I find myself embedded in the natural world through the roots that formed in my early childhood – roots that I know will continue to spread throughout my life, further and deeper.

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