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## *The Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate – an Ideal Eco-critical Read?

[...] in the Anthropocene there are no  
non-committed observers –  
there are only participants.  
(Green, 2021)

**Abstract:** The bestseller book, published in more than twenty countries, entitled *The Wishtree*, by Katherine Applegate has been analyzed in terms of its usefulness in the promotion of eco-critical thought among young readers of literature. The analysis has been accompanied by reflections on desired features of a literary text aimed at making the young readers aware of the role they play in the world inhabited by other humans and non-humans. The article has also discussed the question of teaching considerateness and responsibility for other members of the eco-system. It will involve the type of education which builds the young people's sense of agency, without paralyzing them – as it often happens – with fear of an inevitable disaster of the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** *The Wishtree*, Katherine Applegate, ecosystem, biopolis, literature for children

The doyenne of Polish children's studies Joanna Papuzińska, willing to provide parents with hints how to build home libraries for their children, called the second stage of "literary initiation" "The Stage of Seven Books", starting with *Księga natury* [The book of nature], i.e. a subset of books making young readers sensitive to the beauty and diversity of nature (Papuzińska, 2007: 42–43)<sup>1</sup>. According to the researcher, publications propagating the knowledge of fauna and flora take priority over guidebooks to Polish history, culture and tradition, collections of fairy tales and legends, and technical lexicons. Her decision may

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Zabawa, 2017: 21–44 – the author presents here a large set of contemporary publications which introduce children to the issues of the environment and nature conservation in a modern way.

be considered obvious and related to the presence of the themes of nature and natural science in children's literature from its beginning, first of all in the animal character that, getting rid of the allegorical costume, has become an original, independent and exceptionally meaning-making inhabitant of the worlds presented in the literature<sup>2</sup>.

It seems that we may fully appreciate the significance of the bibliographical hint given by the author of *Nasza mama czarodziejka* [Our Mother Enchantress]. The choice made by the researcher remains in line with the current themes in academic, political and media discourses focusing on all forms of human activity in the world which – it is more and more clear – threaten the existence of the former as well as of the latter. Papużyńska's suggestion is addressed to those who will have to face the results of the activity; and their survival will depend on to what extent they will be aware of the importance of the relation between the humanity and nature. Before our very eyes, literary testimonials of this relation grow in importance, which is expressed in eco-critical reinterpretations of classical children's books<sup>3</sup> and an editorial avalanche of encyclopedic compendia of nature. While in the first case it is based on literary tradition, in the second case – on science, it is quite difficult to find an original, fresh, simply good eco-critical book for young readers beyond these two areas. "Good"? What does "good" mean here? This question – although it comes from an ecological rather than an aesthetic perspective – is important because it concerns a young recipient for whom the attractiveness of book is the main (and most often the only) argument for reading it.

The example I intend to mention here – the concept of the Anthropocene – requires discussing in a broader context. It can be found in the center of ecological discourse presented in congresses, conferences and panels, constituting the story of the man who – despite fairy-tale scenarios – turned his success into disaster, not completely aware what price he will have to pay for being in the position when he can do "everything". Scholars louder and louder alarm, but the effectiveness of the alarm seems to be doubtful, resulting from a slow rate of decision-making by particular bodies and high costs (also ecological ones) generated by their meetings. The issue is discussed by Ewa Bińczyk in the book *Epoka człowieka* [The epoch of the man], whose subtitle suggests both the character and the evaluation of human actions in the area of nature conservation: *Retoryka i marazm antropocenu* [The rhetoric and stagnation of the Anthropocene] (Bińczyk, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> A selection of articles devoted to examples of animal characters in literature is, inter alia, presented in Mik A., Pokora P., Skowera M. (eds.). (2016). *Czytanie menażerii. Zwierzęta w literaturze dziecięcej, młodzieżowej i fantastycznej* [Reading a menagerie. Animals in children's literature]. Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Bibliotekarzy Polskich.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mytych-Forajter, 2019; Gralewicz-Wolny, 2019.

Bińczyk's book is the key publication on the issues of the dangers of the Anthropocene; it is also a good example of reflexive narration on the language we use talking about the disaster which threatens the Earth. The topic undoubtedly requires to be discussed in categorical terms:

I think that the moral condition of the Anthropocene is a condition of irreparable losses, lost chances, the loss of the planet and the loss of the future. The Anthropocene is a formation of irreparable changes from which there is no going back. (Bińczyk, 2018: 277)

The trenchancy of the message is inevitably related to the question: Does a statement formulated in the language of negation have a chance to reach the addressees and will it have a positive impact on their attitudes? A similar question is provoked by the quotation from the book by Dawid Juraszek, *Antropocen dla początkujących* [The Anthropocene for beginners], equally significant for the issues discussed here:

If the truth about the future threatening us frightens people to such an extent that they will start frankly talking about climate and ecological disaster, the worst scenarios will not have to materialize. Thus, let's get frightened, because we have a reason – after what we have done, no stone will be left unturned. (Juraszek, 2020: 37)

The question is: Will the addressees of the message, paralyzed with fear, be able to act to save themselves and their planet, or will they come to the conclusion that they can only wait helplessly? The question seems to me justified as voices can be heard that pro-ecological enterprises are pointless, because we have already pronounced a sentence on the Earth, and the execution is being finished.

In this way, there is an impasse in communication as the ecological situation is not optimistic, and we need some positive reinforcement in order to act. As Ewa Bińczyk writes:

[...] focusing on the loss [...] makes a paralyzing, narcotizing effect, blocking brave, optimistic reflection on possible futures radically different from what we know. (Bińczyk, 2018: 277)

In this situation, the key issue is a form in which the information about the condition of the natural environment reaches the audience. By now, catastrophizing which has dominated the discourse on the Anthropocene, resulting in the inevitable indifference of the addressees (partly caused by the defense mechanism), is combined with the scientific character of the discourse, understood only by participants of academic debates, and the lack of positive reinforcement of the audience who are constantly told that their activities are environmentally wrong, but are not praised for pro-ecological actions at all.

A solution to this situation seems to be provided by Lawrence Buell, an American eco-critic, (quoted by Julia Fiedorczuk in her book *Cyborg w ogrodzie* [A cyborg in the garden]) writing that “the ecological crisis is, first of all, an imagination crisis” (Fiedorczuk, 2015: 12). In this sentence, the researcher condemns people for commonly ignoring warnings about the consequences of reckless human interventions in the ecosystem, treating lack of imagination and inconsiderateness as equal. However, his words are worth pondering: we may find there not only a diagnosis but also hints what to do. In this context, literature, understood as an imagination exercise, constitutes an attempt to obviate the crisis described by Buell by means of subtle (and perhaps because of that more effective?) encouragement to revise our views and attitudes based on the Anthropocene. Following the trend, the literary scholar is obliged to check how the principle works on the literary ground where imagination is the basic and – what is most important – inexhaustible natural resource, i.e. in literature for children.

To do so, I have chosen the book I consider the best candidate for the laurels in the area of eco-critical literature for children and which – here I have every confidence – Joanna Papuzińska would without hesitation include in her project “The Stage of Seven Books”. The book *The Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate, the number one on the bestsellers’ list of the publishing house Dwie Siostry<sup>4</sup>, is one of the inspiring examples of modern books for children which has undoubtedly deserved the compliments quoted in its blurbs, such as: “A beautifully written and inspiring story” (*The New York Times Book Review*), or “A lively, clever and tender story in which respect, courage and hope win” (*Kirkus Reviews*) (Applegate, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. It is addressed to young readers, above seven years old, it is attractive in many different ways, constituting an example of a competent use of the writer’s tools for a good cause. The American writer’s exceptional talent for writing has been confirmed by her impressive literary output – more than one hundred fifty fantasy books and books for children and adolescents. Although the bibliography, large in numbers, (in which we can also find Harlequin romance fiction) perhaps is not a proof of high quality, Applegate has, no doubt, constructed here an interesting story, aware of the power of the literary means of expression.

As the golden rule of creative writing says, in prose the first sentence is most important. The author of *The Wishtree* remains faithful to the rule, but enriches it with some subtle but impressive retardation twist. Although the opening words of her story, “It’s hard to talk to trees” (Applegate, 2017: 8), seem to be

<sup>4</sup> <https://wydawnictwodwiesiostry.pl/katalog/bestsellery> [Accessed: 13.05.2022]. The text available on the publisher’s website and on the back cover of the book provides the information about the high positions of *The Wishtree* on the *New York Times* and Amazon bestseller lists (in the category of “Children’s book on tolerance”).

<sup>5</sup> The quotations come from the back cover.

pretty obvious, the second sentence which follows, “We’re not big on chitchat” (Applegate, 2017: 8), is a true opening of the story, consisting in impressive juggling with the human-plant perspective, i.e. a rapid change of a point of view, signaled by a possessive pronoun, which reminds me of the two verses from Wisława Szymborska’s poem *Notatka* [A note]: “To be a dog / or to stroke its warm coat” (Szymborska, 2002: 40–41).

The beginning of the story is the first occasion to meet the narrator, and at the same time the main character of the book, whose name is the Oak, which stresses its unequivocally plant identity<sup>6</sup>. The two hundred years old Oak constitutes a true center of the story both in terms of the presented world and the plot happening there, as well as in terms of the pro-ecological message to the reader. Focusing on the latter, we should appreciate the choice of an oak as a representative of the world of plants, as a species recognizable by young readers, easy to find in their close environment, easy to draw (taking into consideration the characteristic shapes of its leaves and acorns, which together with chestnuts are the traditional purpose of autumn walks for preschoolers). Certainly, the young reader will not be aware of the rich sacred symbolism of the oak as a tree of pagan gods (Gieysztor, 1986), or the concept of *axis mundi* (a tree being one of its examples) introduced by Mircea Eliade (Eliade, 2017). However, it is good that the author has decided to discuss topical issues against the background of the motif rich in cultural meanings, increasing its semantic potential. The choice has been supported by the poem “Be Different to Trees” written in the 1920s by the American poet Mary Carolyn Davies, preceding the story:

The talking oak  
To the ancients spoke.  
But any tree  
Will talk to me.  
What truths I know  
I garnered so.  
But those who want to talk and tell,  
    And those who will not listeners be,  
Will never hear a syllable  
    From out the lips of any tree.

The poetic motto is in this case both an indication of a source of inspiration and a clear gesture of connection with tradition. It is completed by the dedication

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<sup>6</sup> In the modest terminology, I can see the resistance to the temptation to anthropomorphize by name, which can be exemplified by the oldest Polish *Quercus robur* (common oak) of great renown, called Bartek. The title of the highest tree in Poland belongs to the Douglas fir with a nice human name – Helena. Other examples of arboreal onomastics are available in the Polish Monumental Trees Register, see <https://www.rpdp.hostingasp.pl/Default.aspx> [Accessed: 17.05.2022]

with an intergenerational meaning, included in the book: “for newcomers and welcomers”. The story of the wishtree, constructed para- and metatextually (to use Gérard Genette’s terminology), is a perfect example of ecological thinking as a project of the intergenerational community in which those living today have to face the results of the activity of those living yesterday, having in mind the quality of life of those who will be living tomorrow.

The strategy of marking a relatively large field of vision, used by Applegate, also refers to the construction of the gallery of characters which appear in *The Wishtree*, intended to make the young readers aware of their place among other inhabitants of the Earth (including those who are not human). As has been mentioned, the key issue here is the centrality of the non-human main character, a tree, which involves taking a non-anthropocentric perspective and a shift from the human to the vegetable, which turns out not to be so distant from the human. Applegate successfully uses the magical as well as narrative potential of the motif of the talking tree, drawing a picture of the plant as a conscious being, manifesting its species distinctness, also in communication, where everything in the story starts (*vide* the opening lines of the text).

The oak appointed to be the narrator has undoubtedly all the necessary competences to perform the function. In the introduction it makes, it freely uses forms of collective subject and words of address. It is able to control the dynamics of talk by means of rhetorical questions and anaphoras. It carefully chooses words, not only considering their meanings but also their tone. It uses the rhetorical potential of short sentences, and gracefully interweaves academic terminology with colloquialisms, and skillfully divides its utterances in accordance with the syntactic parallelism. The oak’s monologue has a theatrical potential, which should be more highly evaluated because – as the narrator itself claims – “Most trees are introverts at heart” (Applegate, 2017: 9). Thus, the oak goes beyond its nature, telling the story, in which communication constitutes an important issue, including its ethical parameter:

Trees do talk to some folks, the ones we know we can trust. We talk to daredevil squirrels. We talk to hardworking worms. We talk to flashy butterflies and bashful moths. (Applegate, 2017: 8)

In the context of the same parameter, the man appears in the Oak’s story, although the light shed on their relation is a little less bright:

Trees have a rather complicated relationship with people, after all. One minute you’re hugging us. The next minute you’re turning us into tables and tongue depressors. (Applegate, 2017: 9)

Both quotations are a good example of the finesse of Applegate’s ecological discourse. The main value of the anthropogenic narration is engaging the readers to connect the facts and draw conclusions concerning human behavior in the

eco-system. In the Oak's story, there are neither admonitions nor reprimands for irresponsible behavior towards the Other. The narrative strategy consists rather in constructing a nice image of the tree that, like the best friend, tells you its adventure, focusing on describing the events rather than complaining (which could be justified in the light of what has happened in the book). The atmosphere of literally understood co-feeling depending on the common place of residence is built from the very beginning:

Name's Red, by the way.

Maybe we've met? Oak tree near the elementary school? Big, but not too? Sweet shade in the summer, fine color in the fall? (Applegate, 2017: 10)

A sequence of simple rhetorical questions is a good way to attract attention to creatures living next to us, in our direct vicinity, often noticed by people only when they become troublesome (or at least they seem to be). The concept of vicinity will turn out to be the basis of the plot conflict which will have been solved only when people revise their attitudes. However, before the Oak finds itself in the center of the conflict which poses a threat to it, Applegate skillfully interweaves into the introduction the special terminology of natural science ("photosynthesize", "*Quercus rubra*", "Boojum"), and comic gossips about other trees, which effectively warm up the narration (for example, about an unfriendly maple tree growing in the corner, or about an eccentric California palm tree called Liliana). Having read the first two chapters, the reader finds the Oak a good old friend. In fact, it turns out that "our" Oak is an extraordinary oak, as it performs an honorary function of the wishtree, on which every year people hang pieces of paper or fabric, expressing their wishes.

Applegate gives the Oak a task of describing to the readers the tradition of wishtrees. It performs the task in accordance with the above-described strategy of narrative play in different tones. The wishes are diversified (from "I wish for an A on my geography test" (Applegate, 2017: 14) to "I wish for a world without war" (Applegate, 2017: 14)). The Oak's attitude to this original custom changes as well:

It's an honor, all the hopes bestowed upon my tired old limbs.

Although by the end of May Day, I look like someone dumped a huge basket of trash on top of me. (Applegate, 2017: 15)

Both the way the Oak tells its story and the idea of presenting a tree as having human desires show the difference which the American author intentionally juxtaposes with the concept of community to formulate the message about a possibility of their connection. This is not accidental, as the intersection of difference and community defines the situation of all those who are interested in saving the Earth. The Oak has, certainly, a suitable comment on this problem:

We disagree sometimes, but that is the way of all friends, no matter their species. I've seen many surprising friendships during my life: a pony and a toad, a red-tailed hawk and a white-footed mouse, a lilac bush and a monarch butterfly. All of them had disagreements from time to time. (Applegate, 2017: 17)

In the Oak's narration, the motif of the commonality of differences is developing in accordance with the rule of retardation followed by the writer. Before we reach the climax of the interpersonal (and human-vegetable) conflict, we will listen to the fragment on the difference between the Oak and other trees, then on the difference between a crow and other crows. The fragment is only an introduction to the story about different creatures living in the Oak's crown and its roots, about which it proudly says: "I'm not just a tree, by the way. I'm a home. A community" (Applegate, 2017: 22), and later adds:

[...] I've hosted more than my share of raccoons, foxes, skunks, opossums, and mice. One year I was home to a lovely and exceeding polite porcupine family. (Applegate, 2017:22)

In the following paragraphs, the Oak's identity declaration, elevated in tone, oicological in nature, will, in accordance with the principle adopted by the author, be broken through by the quarrels of the house tenants. Certainly, the Oak will be a mediator:

And certainly, there've been some disagreements. But I've made it clear that eating your neighbours will not be allowed while I'm in charge. [...] Making others feel safe is a fine way to spend your days. (Applegate, 2017: 24)

The narrator's conclusions of that sort prepare the ground for the story which provides food for thought about people's attitudes to the concepts of community and difference. The local community observed by the narrator seems to be similar to the one which was staying in its crown:

Over the years, many families had called those houses home. Babies and teenagers, grandparents and great-grandparents. They spoke Chinese and Spanish, Yoruba and English and French Creole. They ate tamales and *pani puri*, dim sum and *fufu* and grilled cheese sandwiches. Different languages, different food, different customs. That's our neighborhood: wild and tangled and colorful. Like the best kind of garden. (Applegate, 2017: 46)

When a Muslim family moves in, the bonds between people and between people and trees are put to the test, as the message cut in the Oak's bark, addressed to unwelcome visitors, *Get out!*, becomes a call for cutting the tree. The conflict is a theme of the moving and inspiring story, strongly existential, including the prospect of an inevitable end:

In the sweet calm, surrounded by everything I loved – moonlight, air, grass, animals, the earth – I wondered, with a pang, how much longer I would be able to savor such moments.

I wondered, too, if I'd done enough for the world I loved. (Applegate, 2017: 62)

As can be seen, the theme of bonds, so important in the context of environment protection, can be observed in the center of the above quotation. These are interpersonal bonds, the bonds people feel with nature, but thanks to the literature magic, also the bonds nature feels with people. At the climax, preceding the execution of the tree, “[s]even opossums, four raccoons, five owls, and six skunks” run onto the stage (Applegate, 2017: 147), they are joined by the man who will stop the execution. It turns out that what has finally saved the tree is the bond between human and non-human inhabitants of the community<sup>7</sup>. What is more, thanks to Applegate’s writing talent, the readers enchanted with the Oak’s rich personality, also “protest”, together with the book main characters, against its death, practicing activism for the good of nature on the literary simulator. One may hope that they will transfer the joy of the happy end to the real world, and will not treat the words at the end of the story, “[...] it’s *alive* [...] This tree ... It’s like it’s human” (Applegate, 2017: 131), only as an emotional metaphor.

The Oak, wise and funny, very convincingly plays the role of the advocate of the co-existence based on respect and openness to the needs of the Other, which constitute the foundation of pro-ecological thinking. The book *The Wishtree*, published in more than twenty countries, is children’s literature which takes the responsibility for the tough reality in spite of the fact that it uses the fairy-tale imagery. Combining moods and changing registers, playing, deeply moving the readers, addressing them, making them reflect and building their sense of agency – Applegate and her assistant, the Oak, translate the differences in the presented world and the language they employ to tell about it into a clever and non-frustrating lesson of living in the community in which there is imagination and there are hard facts of everyday life. No one has to be convinced that an attractively presented example may be more effective in the just cause than an order or a ban.

The last issue which requires a commentary is a question mark in the title of my article. Well, in this case, it is an expression of my modest conviction that there is not a good book which could not be replaced with a better one. Having

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<sup>7</sup> An authentic story (although with an ending which is not so optimistic as in *The Wishtree*) confirming the possibility of establishing a human-arboreal community has been described by Michał Książek (2019) in the reportage *Wszyscy płakaliśmy po Stefanie* [All of us were mourning for Stefan]. In the context of the affective relation between the man and nature, the story is referred to by Magdalena Roszczyńska, the author of the article *Drzewa i lasy – alternatywne przyrody w polskich księgarniach (w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku)* [Trees and forests – alternative natures in Polish book stores (in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century)] (Roszczyńska, 2020).

no doubts as to the eco-critical potential of *The Wishtree* – a book about the biopolis space, combining social and political issues with ecology, against the background of the urban scenery (Rybicka, 2018) – does not preclude us from hoping for other books, equally good, that will be published. We need them very much.

*Translated by Ewa Bogdanowska-Jakubowska*

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