

VASSILIKI VASSILOUDI ORCID: 0000-0001-9647-9586  
University of Crete

## Environmental Participatory Fact-fiction and Eco-pedagogy: *Planet Agents*

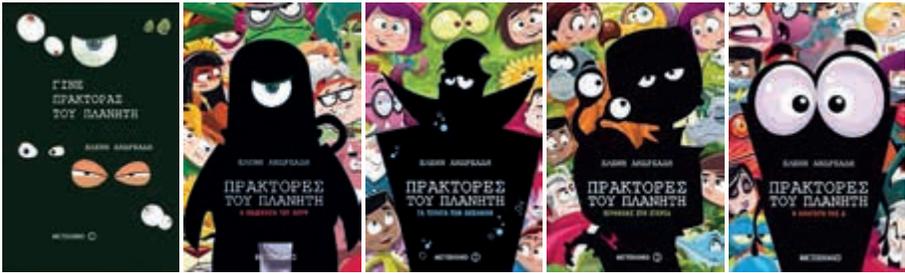
**Abstract:** Based on a popular fiction series in Greek, that is the *Planet Agents* (2014–2020), this study seeks to contextualize its publication in terms of genre and educational deliberations both at the national and global levels by tracing its convergence or deviance from the national curriculum on environmental education and the UNESCO agenda 2030. It further explores the discourse that underlies the series under study which fosters the child's individual responsibility and action, thus leaving untouched the question of political liabilities; what is more, by presenting children across the globe as a collectivity responsible to save the world, it reinforces a neo-colonial view that avoids discussing the impact of Western politics on populations outside the West, rendering them subservient to western green priorities.

**Keywords:** fact-fiction, popular fiction, ecopedagogy, environmental education, ecoliteracy, politics

### INTRODUCTION

This contribution looks into a Greek award-winning fact-fiction book series entitled *Planet Agents*, written by Helen Andreadis, an author with a background in environmental studies. The series, built as a hybrid, comprises five books published between 2014 and 2020: Book 1: *Become a Planet Agent* (2014), awarded the state book award in the category of information books in 2015; Book 2: *Planet Agents. The Revenge of Pooh* (2016); Book 3: *Planet Agents: The Ocean Monsters* (2017); Book 4: *Planet Agents: Piranhas on Land* (2018); and Book 5: *Planet Agents: Commander D Kidnapped* (2020).

Built on the formula of the detective story and treasure hunt, these fact-fiction books set up the child-reader as a heroic secret agent participating in the mission to save the planet from various threats posed by human action, greediness, and indifference. Anita from Bangladesh, Jason and Artchou from Greece, Ben and Maverick from America, Marcella, an aboriginal from the depths of the Brazilian Amazon, and Marie-Louise from France make the squad of planet agents fighting against villains who seek to wreak havoc on the planet.



Picture 1: The front covers of the books in the series

Selecting child heroes from across the globe establishes from the very beginning of the series the rescue of the planet as a collective mission that presupposes individual action. Yet, in a series that consciously tries to avoid racial and gender stereotypes by selecting male and female heroes from across the world, it strikes the reader as curious that Africa is not represented as if neither is it affected by the climate change nor is it entangled in the environmental crisis. Each book in the series presents pressing environmental problems such as climate change, depletion of energy sources and water, the greenhouse effect, the plastic soup, landfills as well as their causes such as intensive factory farming, extensive use of fossil fuels, inconsiderate use of plastic, extreme consumerism, irresponsible consumption, along with the steps individual children can adopt to efficiently counteract these problems.

Part of an ongoing educational project launched by the non-profit organization *Planet Agents* set up by the author herself in 2009, the series aims to raise eco-critical awareness among primary school students and thus secure a sustainable future through their instruction and action. Central to this educational endeavour are the notions of child initiative, decision-making and active involvement in securing sustainability both locally, regionally, and globally (see the webpage of the series, <http://planetagents.org/el/>). The series invites child readers to assume the identity of a secret planet agent, much in the fashion of a detective story, and get informed about the planet's unrelenting destruction, all the while having fun in attempting to solve environmental mysteries and eliminate the environment's enemies by actively undertaking (real) hands-on environmental missions. Enhanced with QR codes, the narrative has the child reader constantly oscillate between text and screen, between the fictional and the factual, while the Planet Agents website provides both educators and readers with educational material and fun pages. Thus, these texts seem to have “one foot in literature and the other on Earth” (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996), one foot in education and the other in entertainment, elevating this series into a form of edutainment, “a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address” (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2005: 46).

Apart from contextualizing this seemingly novel venture in the Greek book market and exploring its educational implications (i.e., the involvement of non-profit organizations in domains traditionally controlled by state education stakeholders), this contribution seeks to explore how the child is set up as an “eco-warrior” or “eco-hero” (Bradford et al, 2008: 90; Van der Beek and Lehman, 2022) to save nature, largely depicted as the Other to humans, not in its own right, but for the benefit of humans. In this respect, the paper looks into what kinds of roles nature in its diverse forms is assigned with and what kind of environmental ethics the series constructs for its potential readers. It further explores the discourse that underlies the series under study; this discourse constructs an environmental ethics that places the child’s individual responsibility and action at its core, thus leaving untouched the question of political liabilities; what is more, by presenting children across the globe as a collectivity assigned the responsibility of saving the world and securing sustainability, it implicitly reinforces a neo-colonial view that avoids discussing the impact of Western politics on populations outside the West, rendering them subservient to western green priorities.

#### GENRE ENTANGLEMENTS: A TOOL FOR APPEAL

Neither entirely informative nor exclusively fictional, the series is indeed a hybrid per se as I hope to elucidate in the analysis that follows which focuses on narrative forms, narrative structure, genre and narratorial address. In respect of narrative forms, the books host a plethora of different types of texts; they feature dialogues, open letters, e-mails, instructions for experiments, text messages, rap poetry, encyclopedic entries to mention just a few of the writing modes deployed in order to spark and maintain the interest of contemporary readers. Accompanied by QR codes dispersed throughout the narrative, the series encourages the use of smartphones and tablets to divert the reader outside the text, directing him to YouTube pre-recorded messages supposedly sent by the fictional planet agents or to websites with real photos or videos of places across the globe inflicted by severe environmental problems so as to enhance environmental knowledge about the issue under scrutiny. According to Eve Tandoi, “hybrid novels in which a degree of narrative complexity is displaced from the semantic to the iconic level, make it impossible to read and respond to the story without attending to the visual elements [which might include] comic strips, diagrams, ephemera such as newspaper articles or screenshots, photographs and design elements including typography, layout and paratextual material” (2017: 329). The accompanying webpage where the reader can resort to, to play, explore and learn, further renders these books a hybrid info-fun-fiction tool used for the immersion of the reader in eco-pedagogy, an issue which will be explored in the final section of this paper. All these elements

along with the seriality of the books which is based on repetitiveness and familiarity as well as fulfilling readers' expectations (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017: 171) could possibly serve as a tool for appeal.

The intersection of the series with popular culture accounts also for the hybridity of the series as narrative and plot devices are ostensibly derived from the latter's comprehensive inventory. With regard to narrative structure, the series displays a blatantly formulaic structure, pertinent to much popular fiction, especially in such genres as adventure, mystery, romance and melodrama (Cawelti, 1977: *passim*). Their structure is reminiscent of successful serialized children's formula fiction such as the *Goosebumps* by Robert Lawrence Stine (1992–1997) or the *Secret Seven* by Enid Blyton (1942–1963). In other words, we trace in the series the structure of popular literature, derived from folk-tale, as proposed by Propp (1968), and summarized by Zipes (2007: 3–4). Their plot rests on the manichaestic distinction of heroes into goodies and baddies, the hero's struggle against an evil antagonist, the hero's patience, wits, and strength being put to test in relation to an urgent environmental problem calling for action, and the victorious closure with the defeat of the antagonist and the restoration of the unsettled equilibrium in nature despite all adversities.

Popular culture links go above and beyond the structure of the series; the connection is also prominent when considering the genre classification of the books under study. The detective or mystery story constitute obvious intertexts as readers are invited to solve environmental problems in the form of mysteries while provided with clues as the plot gradually unravels; science fiction books as well since the planet agents resort to the use of all kinds of odd-but otherwise environmentally-friendly vehicles and tools to accomplish their missions. Information books is another distinct category they mingle with; the fictional plot alternates with pages seemingly copied from an encyclopedic entry on various environmental issues, reflecting "the nonlinear, nonsequential characteristics of digital media and promoting a hypertextual approach to thinking and reading" (Pantaleo, 2008: 296). Popular culture film series such as *Lara Croft*, *James Bond* or even animation films such as the *Smurfs* or *Inspector Gadget* can be seen behind certain characters of the series. For example, the appearance of Ivan Fon Vampower (a pan with vampire), the traditional villain in the series, and its residence resonate with Gargamel, the villain in the *Smurfs*. Strikingly, both the title of the series and its content are reminiscent of the well-known American popular animation series *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, originally broadcast between 1990–1992, which became part of an educational campaign with planeteers' clubs set up across America "taking action for the climate and the planet" (<https://planeteeralliance.com/>). Superhero films also resonate with the series while popular video games also inform both the narrative and the illustration (see picture 2). Characters bear all the typical traits of animation heroes while the plot is divided into different levels, quite similarly

to video games wherein the intended gamer allegedly has to complete a level before proceeding to the next one.



Picture 2: Planet Agents: The Ocean Monsters.

The series boasts an activist slant and preserves an agentic role for the child reader trying to render them members of a glocal community of planet agents, seemingly cutting across race and gender divisions. The child is placed at the center of an anthropocentric environmental campaign as according to the text adult indifference has made Commander D of the Environmental Squad to turn to children: “Our planet needs no one else but YOU! Our planet needs you to transform your home, school, neighborhood before it is too late” (*Planet Agents*, book 1, p. 14, emphasis in the text). The emphasis in the capitalized you along with the proposed transformation of spaces in close proximity to where the child lives reduce the environmental problem to simply an issue that can and must be tackled with individual action. Reflecting on the emphasis of individual (voluntary) action, Clare Echterling suggests that “the discourse of individualism and self-sufficiency – i.e., taking responsibility for your own problems and solving them yourself – manifests here in a way that erases the responsibility of external forces (“others”) and the government, placing environmentalism solely in the hands of individuals” (2016a: 89; 2016b: 291). The narrator addresses the reader, always with an emphasized you, which aims to render him/her an advocate who will not only fight against all environmental ills but will also pave the way for other less enlightened children to follow suit and change their living and consumption habits.

The real secret is that you cannot save the world at one go! We must save the planet every day again and again! We save it each time we turn off the lights or our devices when not needed, thus saving energy. We save it each time we choose a local product instead of one that has travelled thousands of miles, or we plant a tree, each time we devise a new idea to avoid producing CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> and reduce our carbon footprint on Earth... Your mission does not end here. You have to promulgate the super guns (reforestation, responsible consumption and reduction in our carbon footprint) to others and find ways to put

them in effect every day ... The Environmental Squad needs your assistance. It requires you to be a hero every day (book 2, 86).

Though the books attempt to create a glocal community of child advocates, it is always individual action on behalf of the child that is stressed upon as the answer to the planet's deteriorating problems. The seemingly simple structure and plot, and repetitive narratorial address serve the purpose of walking the reader, allegedly the newly enlightened planet agent, through vignettes that work as an apocalypse of various environmental issues from the greenhouse effect to depletion of water, the plastic soup and the destruction of coral reefs. In short, these books take the reader on a journey across the globe so as to make them understand the local, glocal and global implications of the environmental problem but always in relation to the role the individual plays in contributing to or curbing the problem. As Gerry Canavan posits

This is a particularly troubling feature of such texts as they position children as paradoxically the agents ostensibly capable of preventing the necrofuture that is already set in motion by adults. The drama of threshold and transformation into adult [...] is implicit in hearing the apocalyptic narrative itself that shatters the child's innocence, and thereby hails them instead (and immediately) as the responsible adult who is now called upon to act (2017: 84)

#### EC(G)O-LOGICAL/EC(G)O-CENTRIC AND IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite recent theoretical calls for an emphasis on the posthuman, be it animals, plants, inanimate objects or even cyborgs that partake in the symbiotic environmental network (Jaques, 2015: 10), the children's reading matter under discussion draws the readers' attention to environmental issues that call for urgent action to restore order in nature and the environment by combining the scientific, the humanistic and the ludic, but only for the sake of humans. The main concern is to engage readers in everyday practices and help them make informed choices so as to become planet agents, as the title of the series implies; that is, activists that seek to reverse the course adults have set for the fortune of the planet which leads steadily towards destruction. The child heroes are presented as constantly battling in various fronts but what strikes the adult co-reader is that the planet must be saved at all costs and saving the planet is – not surprisingly – mostly in the best interests of humans in the West.

A close analysis of this series reveals its shortcomings, notwithstanding the well-intentioned educational propaganda. The series fails to acknowledge, apart from humans, other elements that partake in the environment; even when it does, these elements are always presented as second and subservient to the human species. Secondly, even in the rare cases that the reader takes

a glimpse in the lives of peoples living, for example, in the Amazon Forest, obviously miles apart from the western capitalist consumerist paradigm, their appearance in the narrative supports the dominant discourse which celebrates the planet as home to Westerners. For instance, it does sound peculiar to be listening to a small Kamayurá girl in the Brazilian Amazon, supposedly outside the realm of Western culture, to address the readers and advise them to recycle paper, instead of fully exposing the detrimental impact of the Westerners' choices on her tribe's everyday life. And even when she does so, by citing the depletion of fish which used to be a staple for her people, she seems to adopt the hegemonic western discourse of nature as subservient to human: "Anita (another planet agent) told me that forests have another important role to play! They produce oxygen for the entire planet, clean the atmosphere in cities and reduce the temperature around them" (book 2, p. 48). As Noël Sturgeon argues "the multicultural kids' teams" who feature in books such as the above "present all cultures as equally responsible for environmental problems, and their enemies are never corporations, or the military, or governments" (2004: 264).

Taking into account the tripartite classification suggested by John Stephens (2006), that is fiction that reiterates the human mastery over nature, fiction that displays awareness of environmental issues, and third fiction that has affinities with "deep ecology" which emphasizes the inherent value of all beings, avoiding their instrumentalization in the service of human needs, one can argue that the series under discussion is an amalgam of the first two categories. Despite being thoroughly informed at the scientific level, this series corroborates the truism that much environmental fiction is ego-centric in the sense that revolves around the impact of the environmental issues on the human rather than on all living and non-living entities that work to make up the complex symbiotic network that our planet is.

Another issue that seems to be at stake here is that the child is still set up as a more apt advocate of the cause against climate change than its adult counterpart as is taken to be closer to nature and animals. Thus, this series reiterates the Rousseauian perception of the child as closer to nature and less corrupted by society who can still envision a better world mostly to the benefit of humans (Rose, 1984: 43). But here lies the paradox: while the adult-child binarism is maintained in many sectors of life when it comes to environmental issues, books as the series under discussion seem to suggest that it is indeed possible to throw into question adult power and authority and work against it. Yet, the economic and political implications of doing so, which means going against adult interests are not explored, thus rendering this kind of fiction really problematic in the sense that serves as mere wish fulfillment.

As already hinted at, the series discusses problems, their causes and preventive or restorative action. Yet, causes and action are only explored in relation to the individual out of fear for their own fortune. In doing so, two problems

arise: first, individualism both at the level of action but also at the level of interest not in nature per se but as an entity of unacknowledged instrumentalization for the benefit of humans, and second, the avoidance of questioning the politics behind the present state of affairs environmentally wise. If children are requested to be the ones to be put in charge in the crusade of changing the world towards a sustainable future for all – humans and non-humans alike – a political stance in its own right, no longer can we sweep the political motives behind the environmental crisis under the carpet, pretentiously arguing for the shielding of children against politics. Greta Gaard, hinting at this problem, dismisses “environmental education that seeks accommodation within a neoliberal framework, championing ‘sustainable development’ without challenging the unsustainability of an economy advocating endless growth” (2009, 326). In other words, the child is asked to become an activist, a political claim in its own right, but without being informed about the political, social and economic implications of the environmental problem which is seen as brought about only by individuals, thus erasing the role states and corporations, themselves an adult construct, have long played in it. Seen in this light, the series under discussion fails to advocate for environmental justice; instead, it endorses an anthropo-western-centric *modus vivendi*.

#### EDUCATIONAL/PEDAGOGICAL/POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS

In this section, an attempt is made to explore the educational, pedagogical and political entanglements of the series under study. Approved by the Greek Ministry of Education, the programme *Planet Agents* has reached, according to the respective website, 12,000 Greek primary school students. Thus, the series is promoted as an educational tool that combines the empathic, the scientific, the childlike and the ludic, all in the service of allegedly molding conscientious planet agents. In this respect, of particular interest is the kind of ecopedagogy they promote for their readership. To tackle this issue, I look into how the series intersects first with the National Curriculum for Environmental Education in Greece and the Unesco 2030 educational agenda for sustainable development, and second with the tripartite ecopedagogy suggested by Gaard’s scholarship (2008; 2009).

In the following chart you can see the four systems which the National Curriculum for Environmental Education, revised in 2014, sees as interconnected in the deliberations of environmental studies. Studied from this perspective, the books fail to get across their potential readers the complexity of the environmental problem as they limit themselves to contextualizing the environmental crisis only in connection with the natural systems and organisms as service mechanisms for the well-being of humans. The importance of the economic, social and political systems that themselves produce

Natural systems	Economic systems	Social systems	Political systems
<i>These provide vital support to all living and non-living entities.</i>	<i>These shape and are shaped by production processes and define the resource models for humans.</i>	<i>These provide humans with resources to live in peace, with equality and respect to humans.</i>	<i>These take decisions as to the ways the social and economic systems make good use of and interact with the environment.</i>

Table 1: The four systems approach to environmental studies proposed in The National Curriculum for Environmental Education in Greece, 2014, p. 5.

the environmental crisis but also environmental injustices across the world do not fall within the underlying debate. Therefore, though ambitious and well-premised on the scientific, these books fall short of their mission. Besides, seen in the light of the UNESCO 2030 educational agenda for sustainable development (see chart below), it transpires that these books are aligned with certain goals put forward in the agenda; for example, goals 6, 7, 11 and 12 are well-pursued in the series which focuses on matters such as energy, clean water, urban environment, leaving out social and economic discrepancies as well as avoiding to address injustices stemming from the different pressure diverse communities put on the planet. Yet, it should be stressed that the series is aligned with the UNESCO agenda to the extent that focuses on the goals that can be attained mostly by individual action, omitting objectives that see the environmental crisis connected with, for example, class and gender inequities or with political issues.



Figure 1: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, taken from <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/education-2030-framework-action-unesco-2015>

In educational practice, goals set by the curriculum are pursued by various classroom methodologies and activities. If we proceed to compare the methodological approaches to environmental education suggested in the Greek

curriculum for primary education with the way environmental issues are dealt with in the series, the similarity of the underlying pedagogy becomes more than evident: the curriculum suggests four levels in the teaching of environmental problems: first, the provision of basic knowledge to students, in other words, informational knowledge, second the detection of a problem, third its exploration, and fourth suggesting counteractive action. It has already pointed out that the narrative in the book series is structured as such: it starts with identifying a problem, then proceeds to providing basic knowledge about it, with the exploration of the causes and the effects of the problem coming next while solutions are offered at the very end. Notwithstanding the methodological convergence, which lends a pedagogical veneer in the series, wrapped up in a fictionalised scenario, the series falls short in exposing children to the complexities of the environmental issues.

Focusing on matters of ecopedagogy, Greta Gaard distinguishes three varieties of ecoliteracy, that is “basic environmental literacy [...], cultural literacy [...] and a critique of the anti-ecological effects of industrial capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and ruling-class culture; the third dimension of the ecopedagogy involves visionary and activist dimensions as well, striving “to mobilize people to engage in culturally appropriate forms of ecological politics and movement building” (Kahn qtd in Gaard, 2009, 326). Seen through this lens, the series under discussion limits itself to the first dimension, informing readers about pressing environmental crises at the regional, local and global levels while at the same time maintains the activist vision for building up a collectivity of children across the world to engage in ecological action but dispensing with the critique. This is in itself problematic; first, because not all cultures perceive nature and the environment with the same mentality – let us note the western mentality of nature’s instrumentalization in contrast with more spiritual perceptions that occur in African or First Nations cultures; and second, because not all cultures contribute to the same degree to the environmental crisis. Yet, these books invite children of all walks of life to bear the burden of reversing the situation, thus blatantly erasing the social, cultural and economic disparities among them, not to mention the different degrees of liability for bringing about the environmental crisis.

Finally, another issue which is only addressed in passing for lack of space is the stepping of non-profit organizations into education, a domain traditionally controlled in the last century and in the new millennium by state stakeholders and education experts. I do not argue for the monocacy of the latter, but I think that the politics of this venture have to be thoroughly scrutinized, especially when as my analysis hopefully has shown only half of the story is told. This is an open call for all of us to think through the muted implications of various (dubious) but most importantly homogenizing pedagogies finding their way into classrooms. By equally dividing the responsibility to save the

planet between children in the West and children in less consumerist parts of the world, a neo-colonial hierarchy is mutedly put in place.

## CONCLUSION

Though modern in terms of form and genre, the books discussed here are intrinsically traditional in that they reiterate first that the child should become an apostle of change to restore the balance between culture and nature, between the human and non-human, all the while living and acting within the same hierarchical system that sets up these polarities without even questioning it as a source of the problems the children are invited to resolve; second, that the child is responsible for undoing the “necrofuture” (Canavan, 2017: 84) created by adults and already lived as a dystopic present, and third that all children are equally responsible for undoing the harm to nature. And this is the challenge environmental info-fiction books should take to address the above fallacies by being fair(er) to the child and to the Other, be it human or non-human, be it living or non-living.

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