

Seeding the Future in Children's Literature and Film



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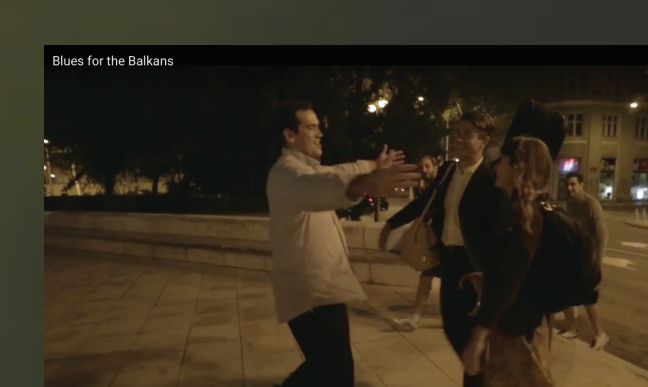
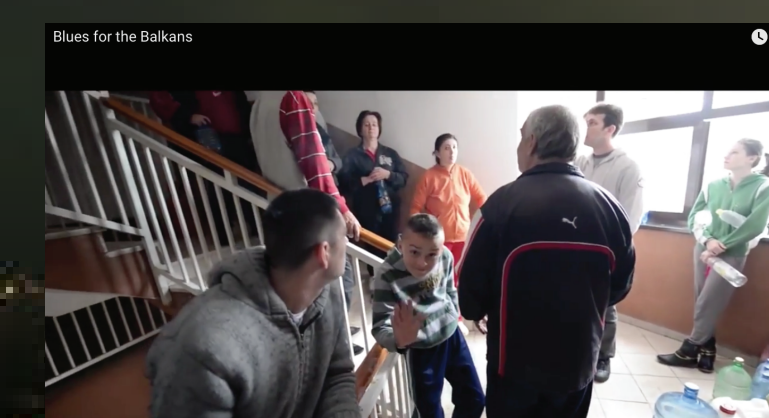
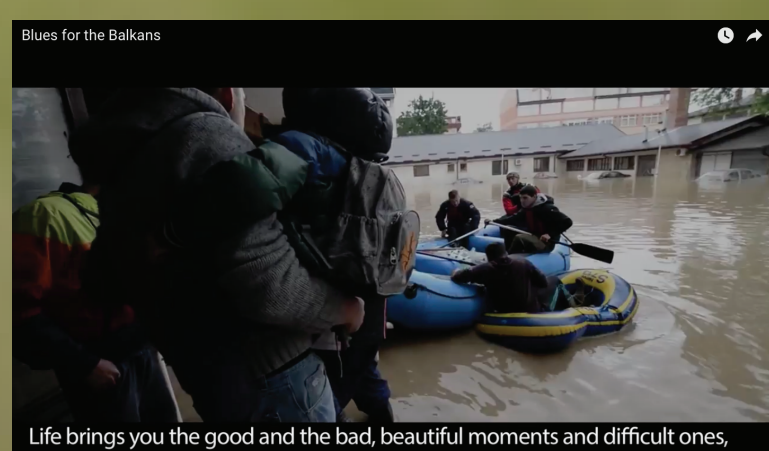
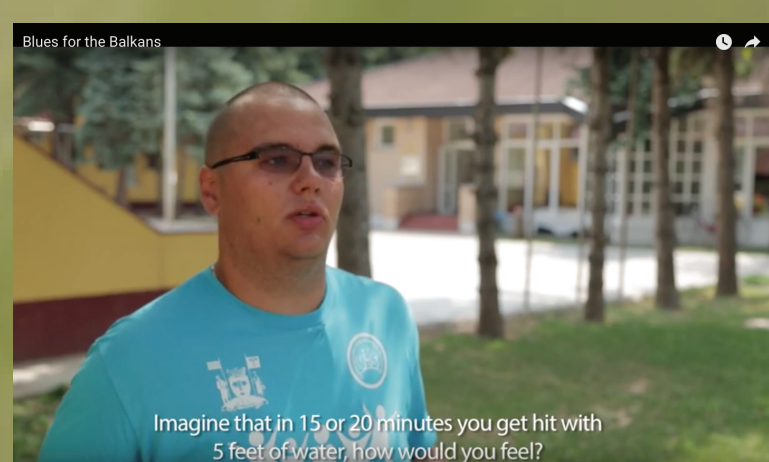


"I don't want to leave, man. I want to be a part of it too."

Growth as an art

Abstract

Children suffer from lack of access to other species. In *Why the Wild Things Are* (2001), Gail Melson studies the ways in which children become cognizant of the world around them by the presence of animals: "Animals enact the dramas of birth and death in a visible, accessible way at a time when these human events are hidden from children...friendly pets are social partners who tend to induce physiological relaxation, making new situations less stressful and more approachable" (17). Stories and films about ecosystems and the history of animal interaction within society not only benefit children's learning but also explore challenges of sustainability. Yet increasingly in school, subjects are taught theoretically, not by practice, participation, and active engagement with living creatures. My research studies how story and film portray wild things and events, including environmental disaster, to ignite cognitive development and cultivate the imagination. I investigate examples of roles that animals have played in eco-culture, including the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde; *Princess Mononoke*, a 1999 epic eco-historical animation by Hayao Miyazaki; and *Blues for the Balkans*, a documentary of the 2014 flooding. Comparing depictions of children and other living things at risk, I identify communal survival skills such as music, storytelling, play, and shared gardens. My methods include filming *Blues for the Balkans*, a literature and film survey (books, data analyses, journal articles), and personal observations of sites where children and animals meet. For example, I examine pedagogy at Andrus, a school in Yonkers, New York, that specializes in supporting at-risk youth. Andrus staff provides emotional support for students through the caring for animals. Students learn responsibility, ownership, and empathy. So far I have found that contact with animals not only inspires students academically but also instills good citizenship. My research suggests that the child-animal bond, like ecological messaging, can build social character and reknit the fabric of community.



Objectives

- Study how Oscar Wilde's fairy tales represent communities of Nature
- Examine animal-child bond in stories for young readers
- Interview staff from Andrus School
- Prepare materials for RC 334 Rites of Reading: The Animal Story
- Join the production team of *Blues for the Balkans* mock/documentary

Methods

- Literature and film survey on psychology of the child-animal bond
- Field interviews on education with animals (James Leaf, Laura Hollander)
- Library research (2017 Phoenix Award)
- Course development for Rites of Reading: the Animal Story
- Analysis of Oscar Wilde's fairytales
- Research on Balkan flooding 2014 with Jugo Kapetanovic

Analysis

My study examines interaction of children with animals in schools, films and literature for young readers. My research indicates that contact with non-human creatures not only benefits children's learning but also builds social character. Pedagogy at Andrus, a school in Yonkers, New York, for example, shows that staff specializes in supporting at-risk youth with animal interaction. In exploring the roles animals have historically played in literature and film, I analyze how stories about animal life help children and adults explore human suffering. Animal figuration in stories ignites cognitive development and cultivates the imagination of child readers.

Work Cited

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