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**Creating Children's Literature for an Ecocentric Future**

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## SUMMARY

"Creating Children's Literature for an Ecocentric Future" is a dissertation project that explores children's literature as a means of encouraging environmental stewardship and creating social change. The dissertation is a combination of practice-based research and critical content analysis that relies on theoretical approaches such as ecocriticism, picturebook theory, postcolonial theory, and multiculturalism and diversity. Through an analysis of and reflection on *The Striped Catshark*, the ecocritical children's picturebook that I created specifically for this dissertation, I investigate in what ways ecocritical children's literature may encourage pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes, and furthermore, how such literature could challenge and dismantle 'White universalism' by representing diverse and authentic perspectives from southern Africa.

The dissertation is divided into several chapters: a literature review, an outline of applicable theory and the research methodology, and the critical content analysis and critical reflection. The literature review situates the project within relevant and related research by outlining the field of ecocriticism and its interdisciplinary reach into children's literature and postcolonial theory, with an emphasis on the need for more diverse representations of and from the Global South. Alongside picturebook theory, the chapter on theory and methodology develops a hybrid of theoretical lenses that comprises ecocritical, postcolonial, and multicultural approaches. Collectively, these lenses provide a holistic ecocentric framework for conducting the analysis. Furthermore, a section on the project's methodology explains the steps of the analysis, from its critical approach to its selection of five units from the picturebook for in-depth exploration. Finally, the critical content analysis and critical reflection apply my theoretical approach to *The Striped Catshark* in order to explore the picturebook in relation to my research questions. While the critical content analysis extensively addresses the first question, the critical reflection predominantly engages with the second question and offers suggestions for further developing the picturebook and shaping the future trajectory of children's texts and related research.

Overall, the analysis findings point to the power of ecocritical children's fiction to foster empathy and encourage environmentally sensitive behaviour among child readers. The findings also support the movement towards localised ecocritical stances, in this case by imparting a South African ecocriticism that celebrates native and endemic biodiversity. These results underscore the need for more research in this growing interdisciplinary field, especially regarding the intersection between ecocriticism and the development of emotional

literacy through fiction. In response to the second research question, authentic representations of multicultural and diverse characters and contexts are urgently required in order for children from all backgrounds, not only the White minority, to find their realities portrayed in children's books that thematise the natural environment. Moreover, intersections between environmental and social justice concerns need to be acknowledged both in children's literature and its academic field. The dissertation thus concludes with final suggestions and arguments for creating children's texts and conducting related research in service of a flourishing ecosphere.

# INTRODUCTION

My dissertation project "Creating Children's Literature for an Ecocentric Future" combines practice-based research with critical content analysis in order to explore the use of children's literature as a vehicle for environmental and social change. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have written and provisionally illustrated an environmentally themed picturebook entitled *The Striped Catshark*, which I will critically analyse and reflect on in the following study. My approach primarily falls under the scope of children's literature and intersects with ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice issues. My guiding research questions are:

1. What role does and can ecocritical children's literature play in encouraging environmentally friendly behaviour? Specifically, how might the deliberate design of children's stories produce long-term cultural behaviour that prioritises active environmental engagement and stewardship?
2. And beyond this, how could such narratives simultaneously work to dismantle the harmful myth of 'White universalism' and give voice to a plethora of cultural and ethnic realities, especially those emerging from southern Africa?

Although these research questions may seem ambitious, they are nevertheless urgent and meaningful for vulnerable populations living in the Global South who are increasingly feeling the consequences and pressures of climate change. Social factors such as ethnicity, class, gender, culture, and locality are closely related to the climatic impacts and ecological degradation that communities and nations face across the world. Environmental issues cannot be regarded as separate from humanitarian and social justice issues; in fact, throughout histories of colonialism and oppression, the abuse of human rights and of natural ecosystems have gone hand in hand. This idea is encapsulated in the concept of the Anthropocene – defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "[t]he epoch of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth" (OED). Since the industrial revolution—and as some theorists would argue, even well before this—the scramble for resources and geographical expansion saw European colonialists exploit regions under their oppressive rule. In the wake of mass extraction, which continues to this day in many nations of the Global South, postcolonial literature has emerged to address and confront these atrocities against colonised peoples and environments. On a personal level, my identification as a White South African exacerbates this interconnection between environmental and social injustice. Ecocriticism, the

Anthropocene, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism thus intertwine in complex and critical ways.

Given these complexities, I chose to create a picturebook because this medium has a significant impact on the way young readers encounter and perceive the world. Picturebooks are imbued with ideological components and thereby provide crucial sites for investigating hierarchies of power that shape thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours. My dissertation thus explores in what ways picturebooks' environmental messaging can be optimised, whereby the combination of practice-based research and critical content analysis provides me with the opportunity of honing my critical stance towards children's texts both as an aspiring author-illustrator and as a researcher. It should be noted that the process of creating the picturebook was undertaken from a creative and authorial role, while the subsequent analysis will be conducted from an objective and scholarly position. Moreover, through both the picturebook and its ensuing analysis I seek to highlight and fill a gaping hole in scholarship and children's texts, which I believe warrants urgent attention: the need for a hybrid of authentically diverse and multicultural, postcolonial, and ecocritical literature and media for young audiences.

The dissertation is structured to guide the reader through progressively focused chapters, starting from a broad stance and gradually closing in on my specific research focus and questions. First, a literature review will provide an overview of ecocriticism and its overlap with the fields of children's literature and postcolonial theory. The chapter thereafter will outline my chosen theoretical approaches, which combine anthropocentric perspectives (such as multiculturalism and diversity) with biocentric perspectives (such as ecocriticism and postcolonialism) to yield an overall and holistic *ecocentric* framework. This chapter will also provide insight into my chosen research methodology. Subsequently, the analysis—the main chapter—will be divided into two parts: a critical content analysis and a critical reflection. The critical content analysis will apply the developed theoretical framework in order to explore and analyse *The Striped Catshark* in light of my research questions. As part of the analysis, the critical reflection will provide additional and alternative scope for engagement with the picturebook and offer concluding considerations regarding the future of children's texts and research within this interdisciplinary field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a survey of ecocriticism's intersection with children's literature and postcolonial literature. Included in the review are both primary and secondary texts, which together serve as a backdrop for the creation of, and critical engagement with, *The Striped Catshark*. The foci thematised in the texts range from threatened biospheres and species, to ecocritical and postcolonial perspectives from the Global South. To map out the entire scope of children's literature, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism would be a mammoth task that I will not undertake here; instead, a sharpened focus on these concepts' close connections and overlaps will be offered in this chapter. Accordingly, the review is organised into four sections: an overview of ecocriticism generally; ecocriticism within children's literature; the intersection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism; and primary texts as examples of ecocritical children's literature. The first section will provide both a broad oversight of ecocriticism as well as specific instances of overlap with narrative theory, new materialism, and the Anthropocene. The second section will delve into ecocritical writing specifically within children's literature, while also augmenting the scope of children's literature and media to include youth activism such as spearheaded by Greta Thunberg, as a contemporary example. Thereafter, the third section will explore the connection between postcolonial literature and ecocriticism. As a growing interdisciplinary field focused predominantly on adult literature, I will argue that its expansion into children's literature and media is urgently needed. Finally, the last section will highlight primary literature that thematises environmental degradation. Greta Thunberg features here again, with her climate activism having inspired the publication of several picturebooks since 2019. However, this surge in Thunberg's coverage will be put in hard relief to the wide gap of books by and about young climate activists from the African continent, as well as how the effects of the Anthropocene play out within local African environments. Moreover, this literature review will not only survey key texts within the fields, but also purport to suggest which gaps need to be filled and addressed: most notably, authentic representations of ecocritical children's literature from the Global South.

### Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism emerged as a field within American and European academies during the late twentieth century. Arguably, William Rueckert (1976) may be regarded as the forefather of ecocriticism with his concept of "ecological poetics" (107). He originally proposed to

couple science with literary criticism in his pioneering paper 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. By creatively likening poetry to ecosystems, he suggested that "Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life" (1976: 108). His call for literature to be transformed "into purgative-redemptive biospheric action" remains "the fundamental paradox" that ecocriticism faces to this day (1976: 121). As an early and influential ecocritic, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) describes ecocriticism's development thus: "in the mid-eighties, […] the field of environmental literary studies was planted, and in the early nineties it grew" (xvii). By the mid 1990s, ecocriticism had reached stable recognition as a discipline within the humanities at many Western academies. Glotfelty offers one of the most widely cited definitions of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" which adopts "an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (1996: xviii). She asserts that the human and nonhuman, nature and culture, are deeply interconnected, with the result "that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture" (1996: xix-xxii). This idea has further been crystalised through the concept of the Anthropocene. Lawrence Buell (2005) famously used the metaphor of waves to categorise ecocriticism into two phases. However, some critics oppose this imaginary divide by asserting that ecocriticism is in fact too complex, far-reaching and interdisciplinary to be neatly partitioned. While literary scholars Erin James and Eric Morel (2018) acknowledge the possibility of a third wave "that pays greater attention to postcolonial critique and more sustained attention to issues of theory", they ultimately argue that ecocriticism rather resembles "a banyan tree than a series of waves—branches extend to form alternative yet interconnected trunks" (356). This is especially so given growing overlap with topics of theory, materialism, the Anthropocene, and "broader cultural and sometimes scientific studies" (ibid.).

One such emerging overlap is between ecocriticism and narratology. In their paper 'Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction', James and Morel draw attention to the way that narratives, through their form, create and structure reading environments. Their argument for a narratological approach within ecocriticism is that it may produce new and more effective means of conveying environmental messages (2018: 358). In essence, narrative theory "may renew ecocritical attention to poetics in the etymological sense of poiesis, "to make from"" (ibid.). This idea revives Rueckert's notion of an ecological poetics, or 'ecopoetics', which he proposed nearly 50 years ago. A further implication and encouragement spawned by narrative theory is that it "stands to strengthen the bridge between critical scholarship and creative practice that has long interested scholars of

literature and the environment" (2018: 360). This development, according to James and Morel, may see ecocritics formulating their arguments through narrative itself (ibid.). A pertinent case in point are Indigenous narrative devices, as precursors to scholarship on ecocriticism and narrative theory, which give embodiment to environmental issues in creative, direct, and potent ways (2018: 361). Furthermore, as the authors argue, narratives can effectively be used to "foster empathy and care for nonhuman characters" and "represent the experiences of nonhuman others free of human interference" (2018: 361). Hence, narratology offers powerful tools and devices that should not be lost on environmental scholars and activists. As James and Morel maintain,

> By exploring the politics of readers' empathy for nonhuman narrators and positioning narratives as important imaginative tools by which readers situate themselves within broad ecological networks, respectively, this scholarship queries how narratives can challenge readers' conceptions of what it means to be human and how nonhuman characters and actants express their agency. (2018: 361-362)

In their argument for narratological ecocriticism, James and Morel also touch on the emerging field of material ecocriticism, which "extends ecocriticism's pre-existing interests in the material by treating material as text (not simply material as represented in text)" (2018: 360). This concern with the realness and materiality of the world, of moving beyond textual representation, lies at the core of new materialism. In the introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014), the argument for "storied matter" is presented with "matter and meaning constitut[ing] the fabric of our storied world" (5). Iovino and Oppermann explain that material ecocriticism "examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text" and attributes agency beyond the human to include nonhuman entities and inanimate matter (2014: 2-3, emphasis original). In this way, new materialism in fact diverges from the anthropocentric view that agency is reserved primarily for humans. Their "theory of distributive agency" affords nonhuman entities, both living and non-living, the ability to play causal roles and indeed provide solutions to ecological issues (ibid.). By regarding text and matter to be inseparably entwined, the authors essentially argue for an entanglement of nature and culture that accounts for "the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world" (2014: 6).

While new materialism distributes agency and thus vindicates humans as the sole perpetrators of ecological breakdown, the Anthropocene maintains the opposing view by pinning this accountability directly onto humans. Yet despite their contrariness, the two fields each make significant contributions towards ecocriticism by actively shaping the field in

innovative ways and offering valuable critical engagement. James and Morel describe the Anthropocene as "the idea that humanity now lives in a new geological epoch defined by the carbon-burning activities of humans" (2018: 356). In his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene As a Threshold Concept*, Timothy Clark (2015) comprehensively delves into environmental activism and ecocriticism during the age of the Anthropocene. He, too, stresses "the exploitation of fire and combustion" by humans as a central feature of the current epoch (2015: 150). Yet despite the fatal threat that our consumption of fossil fuels poses, Clark posits that the Anthropocene itself "is never visible in any immediate sense" (2015: 140). As the scale of the planet and human effects on the environment are beyond the immediate grasp and overview of any one person, he argues that we are unable to truly assess the extent of environmental degradation. Clark calls this skewed, disproportionate perception of what is visible versus what is actually happening "Anthropocene disorder" (ibid.). As he explains,

> The phrase is coined to name a new kind of psychic disorder, inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects; and in the gap between the human sense of time and slow-motion catastrophe and, finally, in a sense of disjunction between the destructive processes at issue and the adequacy of the arguments and measures being urged to address them. In response, the mind is suspended, uncertainly, between a sense of rage and even despair on one side, and a consciousness of the majority perception of such reactions as disproportionate and imbalanced on the other. (ibid.)

Moreover, Clark argues that Anthropocene disorder may instil apathy or denial in laypeople and intellectuals alike (2015: 160). He calls for the study of denialism in connection with environmental criticism as he questions the seemingly "simple, direct route from environmental knowledge to environmental living", arguing that even those who are well aware of environmental issues choose not to make sustainable lifestyle changes within their daily lives (2015: 168). This "psychic disorder" and denialism also have implications for ecocriticism and its reach across disciplines. Clark maintains that due to its rootedness in academia and educational contexts "still largely bound to the reproduction and legitimation of the status quo", ecocriticism is precariously positioned to remain an activism for a privileged minority as long as the field fails to engender direct activism that moves beyond "the realm of cultural representations" and enters the public sphere at large (2015: 195-198).

**Ecocriticism within Children's Literature and Youth Climate Activism**

The realm of youth climate activism, under the umbrella of children and youth culture, is one such area that invites ecocriticism to escape its ivory tower and transform into practical action. The youth climate movement initiated by Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg in 2018 exemplifies this, and a study on Thunberg's protest and agency features at the end of this section. First, I turn towards ecocriticism within children's literary scholarship. Similarly to youth activism, children's literature and environmental education are sites for ecocriticism to have a broader effect on shaping culture by reaching young audiences in a way that intends to shift the anthropocentric paradigm. Ecocritical scholarship within children's literature developed as one of the many interdisciplinary offshoots at the turn of the new millennium. Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd (2004) elaborate on the link between childhood and nature in their introduction to the edited volume *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*. Rousseau's influential notion of the Romantic child as inherently innocent and spiritually connected to the natural world is juxtaposed against Locke's 'tabula rasa' philosophy of the child as aloof from nature (2004: 5-6). Between these two poles, Dobrin and Kidd propose a middle ground that recognises children's special bond with nature while simultaneously providing guidance to deepen their awareness of the ecosphere (2004: 7). The authors pay homage to children's classics that have long been thematising the natural world, including *The Jungle Book* (1894), *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), *The Secret Garden* (1911), and *The Lorax* (1971). I argue that these texts' ways of perceiving the child in nature entrench a narrow, yet dominant, Anglo-American perspective; other cultures offer alternative and rich literary traditions focused on the relationship between environment and childhood.

An example originating from Scandinavian cultures is the concept of the 'competent child' who is in deep harmony with the natural environment of the far north. Literary scholars Nina Goga, Lykke Guanio-Uluru, Bjørg Oddrun Hallås and Aslaug Nyrnes (2018) give voice to Nordic ecocriticism in the compiled volume *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures: Nordic Dialogues*. The volume's guiding question reflects its aim to fill a critical gap: "How is nature represented in children's and YA texts and cultures with an emphasis on a Nordic corpus?" (2018: 3). Although Rousseau's 'Romantic child' remains influential within the Nordic context, this view of childhood is incorporated into local cultural traditions and constructs such as the "the Nordic competent child" (2018: 3). Moreover, one of the main contributions to ecocritical scholarship that the Nordic research group presents is "The Nature in Culture Matrix" (The NatCul Matrix) (2018: 4). As a

sophisticated analytical tool, the matrix consists of a set of coordinates that plots nature from being represented as problematic to celebrated on the vertical axis, against the spectral range of anthropocentricism to ecocentricism on the horizontal axis (2018: 12).

Throughout the volume, authors employ the matrix in their ecocritical readings. The study '"We Are All Nature" – Young Children's Statements About Nature' by Bjørg O. Hallås and Marianne P. Heggen (2018) poses as an effective example of how the matrix may be applied to empirical data. By using qualitive research methods with small focus-groups, the authors investigate the way that children perceive, experience and interact with their natural surroundings (2018: 264). The NatCul Matrix, with its suitability for interpreting a wide and varied spectrum of responses, allows Hallås and Heggen to identify and further categorise anthropocentric and ecocentric attitudes among the child participants. According to the authors' findings, children display ecological competence in their understanding of natural phenomena and have a balanced conception of being both part of and distinct from nature (2018: 271). The authors consider these ecological competencies to be "important aspects in their [the children's] ecocitizenship" and suggest future research in order to determine how different contexts may affect and alter children's responses to and understandings of nature (2018: 270-271). It is noteworthy, however, that the authors' focus remains directed on children's statements about nature; their disregard for children's interactions with nature, such as body language and nonverbal actions, may limit their research insofar as behaviour offers further insight into how children embody and play out their convictions toward the natural world.

Further compelling ecocritical perspectives are presented in the study 'Ecocritical Engagement with Picturebook through Literature Conversations about Beatrice Alemagna's *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day*' by Nina Goga and Maria Pujol-Valls (2020). The researchers conducted two Ecocritical Literature Conversations (ELCs) with student teachers in Norway and Catalonia to investigate how they use children's literature as an entry point to encourage ecocritical education in the classroom and "develop the sustainability competencies of their future students" (2020: 1). The study's primary objectives are thus eco-pedagogical in nature. They found that, while the ELCs certainly "did encourage the students' critical engagement with and negotiation of representations of nature and ecological wisdom", the study's limited scope made it unviable to draw more general conclusions about the advantages of ELCs (2020: 14). Goga and Pujol-Valls thus recommend that future research be carried out with ELCs as an empirical method, as well as with other primary children's texts, so that ecocritical thinking and engagement may become deeply integrated into schools and higher

education institutions. In response to Clark's (2015) argument of ecocriticism remaining too elite, this approach may challenge the status quo by normalising considerations of sustainability and environmental activism within culture at large.

Finally, turning to sociological-political inquiry into children's protest, Aida Alvinius and Arita Holmberg (2019) analyse Greta Thunberg's speeches as a response to the climate crisis. It is arguable whether their study 'Children's protest in relation to the climate emergency: A qualitative study on a new form of resistance promoting political and social change' relates to children's literature in a strict sense. In essence, the authors focus on Thunberg's corpus of speeches, which—insofar as they were written and presented by an adolescent Thunberg—may be classified as children's literature, or at the very least as a component of youth protest culture. Indeed, the impressive following that Thunberg has amassed through her protest rhetoric and social media presence demonstrates the growing power of youth climate activism. Using a four-step thematic analysis, Alvinius and Holmberg identify the "need for political and social change" and resistance targets such as "political leaders, capitalist ideologies and older generations" as the two main thematic strains running through Thunberg's speeches (2019: 78). Having instigated "the most comprehensive coordinated global strike ever on 15 March 2019", Thunberg has given rise to a new form of insurgence which the authors call "abstract progressive resistance" (2019: 78-79). According to Alvinius and Holmberg, future research should thus be directed at gaining "a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of children's agency in societal settings" so as to better address "structural, global issues such as the climate emergency and the problems of the future and coming generations in relation to this" (2019: 89; 81). Their research thus offers a strong starting point for understanding and empowering youth resistance within the context of climate change.

## Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism

While Thunberg has been making headlines across the globe, youth activists from the Global South remain side-lined by the media. A case in point is Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate, who was cropped out of a photo alongside Thunberg and other European climate activists at a conference in Davos in early 2020. Although her erasure stirred global outrage, mass media nonetheless continue to perpetuate the hegemonic status quo of the Western perspective. As literary ecocritic Roman Bartosch (2013) asserts, this skewed representation is highly problematic precisely because a seemingly universal problem such as the climate crisis affects societies across the globe in vastly different ways (72). Because "the causes for

ecological catastrophes are social, economic and political," according to Bartosch, environmental crises "complicate and enforce existing inequalities" (ibid.). What is needed, then, is an approach that takes deep-rooted global inequalities and imbalances into account: enter postcolonial criticism. The coupling of postcolonial studies with ecocriticism challenges the Western trajectory by bringing (previously) oppressed and colonised groups into the conversation. Indeed, Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (2012) make a strong case for turning the commonly held Eurocentric worldview on its head. In their provocatively titled *Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*, the authors challenge the "Euromodernist narrative of the past two centuries" by arguing that in fact, "Africa, South Asia, and Latin America seem to be running ahead of the Euromodern world" with the result that "the Global North appears to be 'evolving' southward" (2012: 121). They present examples of adaptability, innovation, and rapid development emerging from the Global South as evidence that these regions "tend first to feel the concrete effects of world-historical processes as they play themselves out" and thus adapt better and faster to changing circumstances and pressures—well before Europe or America (ibid.). Comaroff and Comaroff define the 'Global South' as a term not only replacing "the Third World", but furthermore expressing "more complex connotations" and being synonymous, at least partially, with "postcolonial" (2012: 126).

Despite the prefix "post-", colonialism is not yet banished to the pages of history books as an archaic phenomenon of the past; its remnants remain very much alive in the form of structural racism, unstable economies, corrupt and divided governments, and environmental plunder and degradation. In his seminal work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon (2011) takes colonialism and its detrimental effects of long-lasting, slowly unfolding violence to task. The concept of slow violence is hence defined as a gradual, invisible, and "delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011: 2). Nixon demonstrates how postcolonialism is in fact deeply enmeshed with ecology and the climate crisis, especially due to the extraction and exploitation of natural resources. Modernity and capitalist consumerism are thus destroying countless volatile ecosystems that include not only precious animal and plant species, but ultimately human communities and cultures. Nixon stresses the urgent challenge of rendering this slow violence visible, as

> Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly

> unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. (2011: 2)

Nixon explains that one such strain of harmful slow violence is perpetrated under the banner of conservationism, whereby environmental organisations show little regard for "local human relations to the environment in order to implement American- and European-style conservation agendas" (2011: 36). Game reserves and tourist parks are prime examples of conservation strategies that have severed local communities from their land and traditional ways of life. Moreover, within colonial narratives of development and management of natural resources, "ecosystem people" whose "relationship to the land is historically deep but legally informal" have more often than not been dispossessed of their land through forcible removal (2011: 151). If former colonised nations, largely within the Global South, are haunted by this attritional slow violence, applying a universalised Western ecocriticism to their local context makes little sense; the ecocritical lens needs to be tailored to the local circumstances, specifically to take postcolonial factors as outlined by Nixon into account.

The movement toward localised postcolonial ecocriticisms is steadily growing. Although the Global South encompasses many nations across the globe, within this review I will restrict my focus to African contexts. Among the scholars advocating for distinctly African ecocriticisms are Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth A. Myers (2011); Ogaga Okuyade (2013); Brooke Stanley and Walter Dana Phillips (2017); Hedley Twidle (2013); Anthony Vital (2005; 2011; 2015); Senayon Olaoluwa (2015); and Anna Chitando (2017).

Caminero-Santangelo and Myers (2011) as well as Okuyade (2013) present contemporary selections of African ecocritical engagement in their edited compilations. In *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*, Caminero-Santangelo and Myers explain that their volume developed out of the need to explore ecological literary analysis of African environments, with particular focus on

> how African literatures and modes of analysis drawn from literary studies might contribute to ways of reading the environment in the other disciplines and how African literary studies might productively draw from studies of African environments. (2011: 2)

These guiding questions stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue across literary studies, geography, anthropology, history, and colonial studies in particular. The editors maintain that it is this heightened dialogue that accounts for the volume's "different visions of African environments and environmental change in Africa" (ibid.). Ultimately, as the volume marks one of the first publications thematising ecocritical approaches and applications to African

contexts, the editors and contributors seek to develop and "pursue an African ecocriticism" that considers the "differences and contradictions resulting from variations in geographic scale" (2011: 9). In this sense, while the volume's focus is decidedly African, it offers a broad and inclusive approach to postcolonial ecocriticism in service "of understanding African environments and environmental problems and to develop alternatives" (2011: 11). Similarly, Okuyade's edited compilation *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* takes African literature as its point of departure. However, the volume emphasises interdisciplinary connections with arts and culture, rather than with earth sciences and social sciences. Okuyade argues for the inseparable connection between environmental rights and human rights, bringing attention to their representation in "African cultural art forms" (2013: xiii). Moreover, the volume brings together a broad range of contributing authors who "fundamentally [raise] and [engage] very topical ecological issues from different dimensions" in advocacy for a humanitarian environmental movement across the African continent (2013: xvii).

Literary scholars Stanley and Phillips (2017) explore the notion of a distinctly South African ecocriticism in their article 'South African Ecocriticism: Landscapes, Animals, and Environmental Justice.' They ask what a "specifically South African ecocriticism look[s] like" and how it might tie in with "the broader postcolonial project of challenging bourgeois perspectives originating in the Global North" (2017: 1). In their exploration of these questions, they draw on the work of Hedley Twidle (2013). Writing on Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Twidle observes that while some of Carson's environmental ideas hold universal value, others "seem limited in a postcolonial context […] where practices of nature conservation have so often been linked to political conservatism," as is the case in South Africa (2013: 52). Twidle goes on to describe the discrepancy between the meaning of birdsong in the Global North—where Carson identifies its absence as a symbol of environmental degradation—and in the Global South. Within the latter context, specifically in Twidle's surroundings of Cape Town, birdsong signifies "the grand designs of settler-colonialism" as bird species were introduced to the Cape "to remake the environment in the image of [the colonisers'] native land" (2013: 56). As Twidle explains,

> Along with the nightingales and chaffinches, Rhodes installed Roman lion cages, Mediterranean stone pines, oak avenues, deer parks, llama paddocks, summer houses, and hydrangea beds. (ibid.)

Birdsong then, within the context of South Africa, acts as a culturally loaded signifier of a subjugated environment (2013: 58). Stanley and Phillips build on Twidle's analysis in their

argument for a South African ecocriticism. In particular, they maintain that a tailored ecocritical approach needs to take the environmental impacts of settler-colonialism, such as Twidle's example of birdsong, into account and reject Euro-American assumptions of universality that do not do justice to the specific local environment.

Literary critic Anthony Vital (2005; 2011; 2015) has been especially prolific in his ecocritical analyses of postcolonial literature from South Africa. He, too, argues for a (South) African ecocriticism that considers the complexities of history, colonialism, racial segregation, oppression, and contemporary politics as fundamentally entangled with environmental issues. As a backdrop to the South African context, Vital describes the rise of the local environmental justice movement of the late 1980s. He argues that the movement's history "offers a useful context in which to re-envisage and evaluate South African writing" as part of the project of developing a localised ecocriticism (2005: 297-298). Vital's ecocritical analyses include the works *The Lives of Animals* and *Age of Iron* by Nobel laureate John M. Coetzee; *The Heart of Redness* and *The Whale Caller* by Zakes Mda; and *Thirteen Cents* by Kabelo Sello Duiker.

Notably, these works fall under adult fiction and deal with the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa; as such, Vital's analyses of these works will not be further examined in this review. Moreover, a lack of postcolonial ecocritical scholarship focused on children's literature is a gap that I wish to mention here, and certainly address in more depth later on in this dissertation. While some scholarship is tentatively delving into texts suitable for younger audiences, there is much to be done to elevate children's literature and media within this realm of inquiry. Examples of relevant analyses, stemming from Nigeria and Zimbabwe respectively, will be reviewed in the following passages.

Literary scholar Senayon Olaoluwa (2015) offers an ecocritical analysis of Chinua Achebe's (1958) classic novel *Things Fall Apart*. Like the postcolonial critics mentioned thus far, Olaoluwa calls for the recognition of Africa's colonial history and the "modernity that has shaped Africa in singular ways in the Western imagination" (2015: 197). He stresses the importance of

> acknowledging the role that global/colonial narratives have played in defining the local and at the same time in articulating the vital imbrication of the human with culture, soil, and the larger world of other-than-human nature […]. (2015: 198)

Olaoluwa argues that African ecocriticism should value "African epistemic and cosmological practices" as being inherently harmonious with nature, thereby offering powerful, dialogical counter-narratives to ecocritical discourse from the Global North (ibid.). African spirituality,

mythology, folklore, and sacred practices fall into this category and shape culturally rich, multi-layered interactions with and attitudes towards local environments. Olaoluwa makes a strong case for the connection between African spirituality and biodiversity preservation through animism, which was formerly denigrated as a "primitive" practice by social scientists (2015: 200). Western anthropologists' increasing interest in, and recognition of, animism may be regarded as "a decisive move towards the reconciliation of nature and culture" that attempts to restore "a healthy relationship between humans and the nonhuman others upon whom the continual sustenance and survival of the former depends" (ibid.). In an ecocritical reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Olaoluwa further evidences the link between African sacred practices and environmental conservation in the example of Mbanta's reverence of the Evil Forest: as a sacred site, the community heeds the forest and thus, both inadvertently and through the classification of the space as ritualistic, ensures that its biodiversity is preserved. In this way, the Mbanta community "exhibits sophistication in its organization of space and ecology" (2015: 206).

In Zimbabwe, the *ngano* (folktales) of the Shona people inspire children with reverence and wonder for the natural environment. Zimbabwean literary scholar Anna Chitando (2017) positions such folktales, rich in spirituality and mythology, at the heart of African ecocritical discourse (378). In her article 'African Children's Literature, Spirituality, and Climate Change' she suggests balancing local spirituality with global science to create a distinctly African-global blend befitting of the region, and furthermore shape a local ecocritical approach. In this way, hard science – predominantly a concept from the Global North – does not eclipse local spiritual narratives as the two work hand in hand to teach children ecocritical thinking in their local African contexts. As Chitando explains,

> spirituality communicates the insightful truth that human beings are accountable to forces beyond them when it comes to addressing climate change. African children's literature, by accepting the importance of spirituality, equips children and young adults with the appropriate knowledge and attitude toward creation. (2017: 375)

In fact, she asserts that the sacredness of nature in African children's literature opposes destructive, extractive and abusive ways of relating to the environment (2017: 377). Chitando argues that this distinctly African approach bears "a message of healing the world in the face of climate change", and that the hegemonic Global North would do well to pay careful attention to "Africa's voice of reason" (2017: 380).

While Chitando urges the global community to listen to Africa, and Alvinius and Holmberg implore world leaders to mark the words and actions of child activists, this raises

the question: where exactly are *African* voices in children's climate activism? And more specifically, where are they within the corresponding corpus of ecocritical children's literature and media? While Thunberg's activism has inspired thousands of African schoolchildren to join her advocacy—the Fridays for Future movement has gained particular momentum—she nonetheless remains the dominant figurehead of climate activism within scholarship, literature, and social and public media. Indeed, protagonists, narratives, and approaches from the Global South are needed within children's literature and literary scholarship, especially through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. The final section of this chapter will review contemporary primary texts, specifically children's literature and picturebooks, that are thematising the global environmental crisis from different perspectives: from the Global South, the Global North, nonhuman, and human perspectives.

## Primary Texts of Ecocritical Children's Literature

The corpus of primary texts explored in this section are predominantly picturebooks. As *The Striped Catshark* is a picturebook itself, it certainly makes sense to review relevant works from the same genre. In *How Picturebooks Work* by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006), the authors explain that picturebooks rely "on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal" (1). However, picturebooks are not to be confused with illustrated books: here, the text is self-sufficient without illustrations, which perform merely a decorative function (2006: 6). Studies and theories on the text-image relationship in picturebooks have increased since the early 2000s, and relevant approaches to the genre that have informed both the creation and analysis of *The Striped Catshark* will be outlined in the theory chapter of this dissertation. For the moment, it suffices to mention the visual-verbal interplay of picturebooks and that they have been, and remain, a popular and powerful component within children's literature.

Since 2019, the corpus of picturebooks (as well as some illustrated books) featuring Thunberg as the main protagonist has proliferated. Besides Thunberg's (2019) own collection of speeches *No one is too small to make a difference*, recent titles include Jeanette Winter's (2019) *Our House Is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet*; Zoe Tucker and illustrator Zoe Persico's (2019) *Greta and the Giants*; Valentina Camerini and illustrator Veronica Carratello's (2019) *Greta's Story: The Schoolgirl Who Went on Strike to Save the Planet* (translated by Moreno Giovannoni); Valentina Giannella and illustrator Manuela Marazzi's (2019) *We Are All Greta: Be Inspired to Save the World*; Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara and illustrator Anke Weckmann's (2020) *Greta Thunberg (Little People, Big*

*Dreams)*; and Devika Jina and Petra Braun's (2020) *The Extraordinary Life of Greta Thunberg*. Comparable texts about other young climate protagonists, especially from the Global South, hardly exist.

One African environmentalist who is certainly celebrated in children's nonfiction is Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. Picturebook titles about Maathai include Jeanette Winter's (2008) *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa*; Claire A. Nivola's (2008) *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai*; Jen Cullerton Johnson and illustrator Sonia Lynn Sadler's (2010) *Seeds of Change: Planting a Path to Peace*; Donna Jo Napoli and illustrator Kadir Nelson's (2010) *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*; and Franck Prevot and illustrator Aurélia Fronty's (2015) *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees*. Strikingly, the authors and illustrators telling Maathai's story of environmental justice in Kenya are all from the Global North, mostly from the United States, and predominantly White. Within postcolonial and multicultural discourses, this positioning of the creators brings up strong concerns regarding voice, authenticity, and representation (these concepts will be revisited and elaborated on in the theory chapter of this dissertation). Furthermore, the texts were mostly published between 2008 and 2010; that leaves over a decade of near silence for African climate activists in children's literature, not to mention the complete lack of child activists. Nonetheless, the gap in children's literature and media focalising young environmentalists in diverse and authentic ways—with both protagonists and authors/illustrators from the Global South—needs to be addressed and filled as part of postcolonial ecocriticism's larger project of directing culture and society towards an ecocentric paradigm.

Moving away from anthropocentric focalisation towards an alternative, more inclusive and/or broader perspective are children's picturebooks that take nonhumans, or indeed the ecosphere as a whole, as their protagonists. *The Stranded Whale* by Jane Yolen and illustrator Melanie Cataldo (2015) tells the story of children who find a whale stranded on the shore near their home. Although the story is told from the perspective of the children, the whale takes centre-stage. Readers are moved to empathise with the suffering animal, which dies at the end of the story. Although the picturebook is heart-breaking in its rendition of the children's connection with the whale and its suffering, it is certainly realistic. The focus remains on the whale and its plight, with humans being only part of the cast; in this way, the perspective moves toward biocentricism. The main protagonist of Nicola Davies' (2020) *Last: The Story of a White Rhino* is clearly and indisputably the nonhuman character of the rhino. However, Davies arguably assigns the animal human-like qualities: as the

narrator, the rhino expresses thoughts, emotions, and desires in a way that humans would. In this sense, although the animal is visually depicted in a realistic manner, its inner world is anthropomorphised to make it understandable and relatable for young readers. *Last* is thus another example of meshing anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives. *Home* by author and illustrator Victoria Furze (2019) comes even closer to offering a purely nonhuman, biocentric focalisation—not only from the perspective of one protagonist, but of an entire marine ecosystem. The picturebook uses minimal text and relies almost exclusively on painted images to tell the story of plastic bag pollution in the ocean. Only at the end of the book does a page of text, factually written, explain the extent of plastic pollution in the ocean according to facts and statistics. At no point does the story feature a human character, or offer a perspective outside of the underwater realm. This powerfully encapsulates the effect of humans on biospheres, in this case the ocean, told from the perspective of turtles, rays, and the affected ecosystem as a whole.

Overall, powerful ecocritical picturebooks that offer anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives do exist. However, there are few, if any, that explicitly connect environmental degradation with social justice issues such as the "slow violence" experienced by vulnerable communities. Moreover, environmentally-themed children's texts tend to lack authentic representations of and perspectives from the Global South. The next chapter will first develop a customised theoretical lens in order to further investigating this concern, and thereafter outline the appropriate methodology for my research and analysis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will outline the theoretical framework and methodological approach that together form the basis for my analysis of *The Striped Catshark*. The essential theoretical approaches include picturebook theory; multiculturalism and diversity; and ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Furthermore, I will emphasise in what ways these approaches overlap and by weaving their relevant elements together, I will create a customised theoretical lens through which to analyse my picturebook. Figure 1 visually presents this proposed lens, or rather pair of lenses, through the metaphor of glasses. The frame of the glasses is indicative of the theoretical framework, which in turn frames the lenses that allow the wearer to have an adjusted vision, or critical perspective. However, the

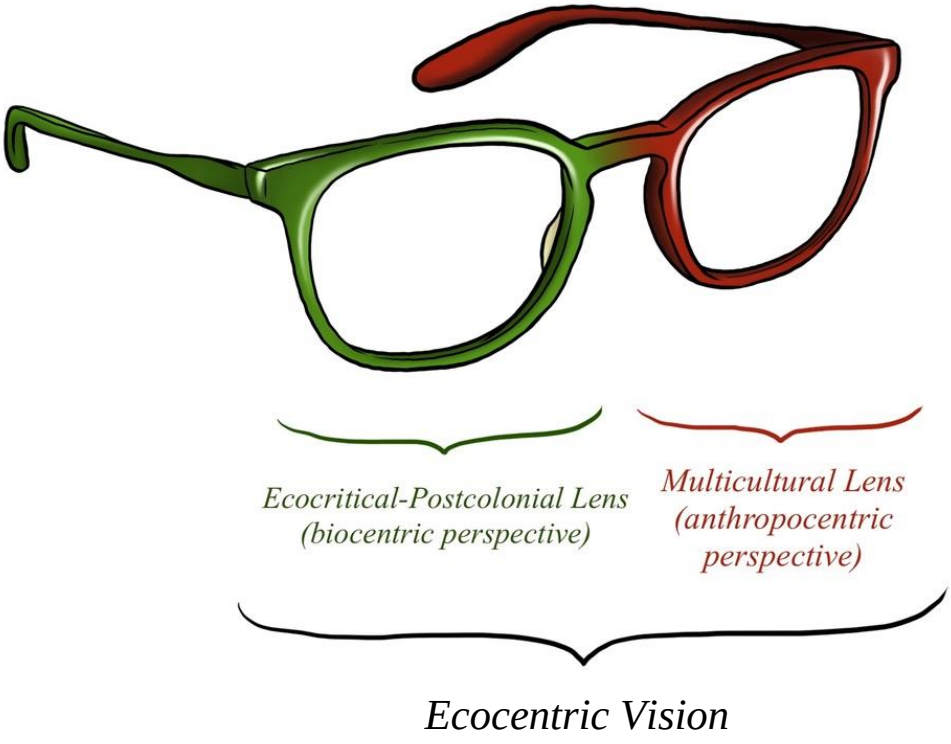


***Figure 1:*** *The Ecocentric Vision Glasses*

two frames and their respective lenses are not identical; the one lens is framed by ecocriticism and postcolonialism, while the other is framed by multiculturalism and diversity. The former casts a predominantly biocentric perspective, which includes postcolonial (and thus human) aspects; the latter's focus is significantly anthropocentric. Both offer valid and important concerns, yet taken together, they provide the wearer with a holistic vision of an ecocentric perspective. Thus, this pair of theoretical glasses will enable me to examine my

picturebook through a critical perspective that includes both ecological and human concerns within its focused range of vision. The following sections will further delineate this focus by concentrating on each theoretical perspective, starting with picturebook theory and then moving on to each "frame" of the glasses. The last section will outline the methodology of critical content analysis that further determines the content and structure of the picturebook analysis. In addition to critical content analysis, my discussion of *The Striped Catshark* will also include a reflection on the creation process of the picturebook and implications for future research.

## Picturebooks

The decision to create specifically a *picturebook* for my dissertation was a deliberate one. Combining verbal and visual semiotic systems, the picturebook is an impactful medium within children's literature that lends itself particularly well to perpetuating, as well as challenging, hegemonic representations of the world. Since the turn of the millennium, picturebooks have increasingly attracted attention from theorists and scholars who have shown it to be a unique and complex literary medium. Lawrence Sipe (2011) provides a useful definition of picturebooks based predominantly on their word-image relationship. He argues that picturebooks constitute "a new literary/ visual format" as the images add new information to the written text so that together they create a narrative "greater than the sum of its parts" (2011: 238). According to Sipe,

> The words tell us things that the pictures omit, and *vice versa*; in addition, readers/viewers must fill in the gaps that neither the words nor the illustrations contribute. This, in a nutshell, is the art of the picturebook. (2011: 239)

This allows for a myriad of possible interactions between and meanings to be derived from the words and images. Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) offer one of the most comprehensive and useful typologies for this word-image relationship. The authors explain that these two sign systems—the verbal and the visual—can work together semiotically in several different ways. Excluding wordless picturebooks and texts without pictures, Nikolajeva and Scott propose the following five categories for text-image relationships: symmetrical (text and images tell equivalent narratives); complementary (text and images fill in each other's gaps); expanding/enhancing (the verbal and visual elements enhance or depend on each other); counterpointing (text and images are independent and may create irony); and sylleptic (the text and images tell independent and possibly contradicting narratives) (2006: 12). Their typology is one of the first to focus deliberately on the nature of the verbal-visual interaction,

and is particularly useful in offering a deeper understanding of the ongoing negotiation of meaning making and rereading that occurs when young children encounter picturebooks. I will apply their typology in my analysis of *The Striped Catshark*.

Besides the word-image relationship, another primary reason for researching and theorising picturebooks is to question ideological ideas that they may contain, or conversely, to highlight how they may offer a counternarrative to ideological assumptions. As Sipe explains, "all art has an ideological, political, and social dimension" as it is created within a cultural context determined by commonly held beliefs that establish and reinforce the status quo (2011: 239). Because language, including the visual language of imagery, is embedded within a society and its culture, it reflects the hegemonic ideology of its particular context; hence, "[t]here is no such thing as value-free art", and this no doubt includes the verbal-visual art of the picturebook (2011: 244). Politics and ideology are embedded in picturebooks for children in the way that the story world, and by inference the real world, is (re)presented. Thus, ideological portrayals need to be exposed and addressed precisely because of their potential impact on young audiences (ibid.). As Sipe urges, however, picturebooks can also offer a reimagining of the world. As "art should be a spur to political and social action" through such critical engagement, picturebooks can play a part in this action by "provid[ing] a catalyst for shifts in our thinking" (2011: 246).

In his paper 'Picturebooks and Ideology' John Stephens (2018) argues that beyond shaping verbal and visual language, ideology acts "as a cognitive framework" for "norms, values, and goals which […] constitute the best kind of society" (137). As a necessary component of society, this foundational function of ideology works silently through tacit assumption and thus permeates all spheres of social life from public politics to children's picturebooks. What this spells for child audiences is that the texts they consume are imbued with the common social values and beliefs that structure their society, which in turn prescribe how these young people are to construct their identity and find their place within their societal context (ibid.). As Stephens explains, children's texts implicitly exert this ideological function through

> the assumptions an author makes about the nature of the world, of good and evil, of what is valuable and desirable human experience, and of what kind of person a child should aspire to be. (ibid)

In other words, children's literature has a socialising function aligned with the given society's underlying ideology. The range of ideological dimensions in children's books has been increasingly overt regarding otherness (as Stephens stresses: "especially the marginalized or

excluded 'other'"), focusing on issues such as race and ethnicity, multiculturalism, gender, and the environmental crisis (2018: 138). Engagement with the 'other' through children's texts performs the socialising function of introducing children to the wider sphere of the world, of the diverse global community, and thereby encouraging empathy towards others, especially minority, marginalised, or neglected groups (2018: 138-144). These evoked feelings of empathy are, yet again, products of social ideology.

This power of the picturebook was a significant motivation for me in choosing it as the medium for *The Striped Catshark*, which intends to present a worldview of ecological harmony. In the analysis I will argue that my picturebook suggests a counternarrative to the political, sociocultural, and ideological status quo regarding anthropocentric-biospheric entanglements. Although on one level the book engages with environmental 'otherness' and evokes empathy for an animal, I will also show and argue that the book is limited in addressing 'otherness' as cultural diversity. It presents yet another White protagonist, when in fact authentic representation of diverse protagonists and characters is needed in children's publishing. Within recent research, addressing ideology also involves explicitly stating the researcher's positionality in relation to the sociocultural context framing the study. As such, my analysis of *The Striped Catshark* will unpack my choices regarding plot, representation, and ideology through the lenses of multiculturalism, diversity, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism in relation not only to theory, but also to my positionality and authenticity as a White Euro-African researcher and storyteller within a South African postcolonial context.

## Multiculturalism, Diversity, and Authenticity

Closely imbricated with sociocultural and ideological dimensions are the theoretical approaches of multiculturalism, diversity, and authenticity. The abovementioned concepts of 'otherness' and representation are significant features within these theories, and their strong and obvious connection to postcolonial studies will prove useful in honing my theoretical lens. Nonetheless, I have decided to group postcolonialism apart from these theories in order to explore its less overt (but equally strong) proximity with ecocriticism in the subsequent section. Hence, this current section will cast an anthropocentric focus on otherness and representation as these concepts pertain to culture, ethnicity, and diversity—among *humans*. Naturally, postcolonialism shares these concerns as well; yet it is also closely concerned with environmental atrocities which form the foci of ecocritical studies. While multiculturalism meets its limitations when considering the environmental and nonhuman 'other', postcolonialism functions as a bridge between the human and the ecological spheres so that,

together with multicultural and ecocritical approaches, they conjoin to form a holistic lens that considers the entire ecosphere.

Multicultural children's literature, as well as multiculturalism within schools and curricula, should be a valued standard. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, authentic and diverse cultural representations are an important means of engaging children with a spectrum of different voices and worldviews. Research in this field has proliferated, with several scholars making significant contributions to shaping a deeper understanding of how multicultural texts can catalyse deep-rooted and lasting societal shifts in attitudes and behaviours towards others. Kathy Short (2011) regards international and multicultural literature as a means of "building bridges of understanding" that connect cultures and nations (131). Short argues that multicultural and diverse representations in books are necessary for children to "envision alternative ways of thinking and living" and to be "challenged to confront global issues" (2011: 145). Evelyn Arizpe, Maureen Farrell and Julie McAdam (2013) similarly argue that children make fundamental and meaningful connections between the stories they encounter and their own lives. This meaning-making process allows children to form a sense of identity, selfhood, and cultural belonging (2013: 245). Arizpe et al. also point out, however, that as research on multicultural (children's) literature has become more pronounced, the meaning of the term itself has attracted closer scrutiny (2013: 247). Debra Dudek's (2013) explanation of "multicultural" as a hybrid of national, cultural, ethnic, and racial concerns aimed at promoting cultural diversity within and across nations (155) is compatible with most uses of the term in current research, and aligned with the meaning that I will be using here. This definition of the multicultural approach foregrounds sociocultural inclusion by recognising and celebrating diversity within nation-states.

In fact, the origin of multiculturalism can be traced to human rights and social justice movements. Ambika Gopalakrishnan (2011) emphasises this essential aim of multiculturalism: to represent "the lives of all previously underrepresented groups" by giving "previously silenced groups a voice to be heard" (2-4; 13). In this sense, issues of power, authenticity, and authority are central concerns of multiculturalism. Asking "who has the right to tell whose stories?" is the critical question that defines the multicultural approach (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 14). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "authenticity" is defined as "the fact or quality of being true or in accordance with fact; […] accurate reflection of real life, verisimilitude" (OED). This definition emphasises fact, truth, accuracy, and reality as key tenets of authenticity; applied to cultural representations, "authentic" may thus be understood as accurately reflecting the reality of members of that community.

Painting an entire culture with the same brush and thereby assuming that individual members share identical values and outlooks on life goes contrary to this notion of authentic representation. Furthermore, having the authority to authentically represent a culture or group depends on genuine knowledge of and lived experience in that culture—such as a cultural insider would have. And yet, some multicultural texts have been criticised precisely for inauthentic, inaccurate, superficial, or stereotypical representations given by cultural outsiders. As Dudek points out, the issue is that "until recently, representations of cultural diversity were written and illustrated by white artists" (2013: 160). Gopalakrishnan goes to the core of the issue when she explains that

> controversy comes about when authors tell stories about a different culture based on their imagination and perhaps only their experience and may make innocuous mistakes along the way. One has to wonder if these were innocuous mistakes or watering down or misrepresentation of the facts for motives such as authorial imagination, publishing choices, and demand. (2011: 12)

Authenticity within multicultural children's texts is therefore incredibly important and "goes far deeper than the dichotomous insideroutsider perspectives" (ibid.). Having access to a wide scope of culturally diverse representations is only effective and meaningful if those representations are genuine and authentic, originating from members or cultural insiders of the group itself. Truly authentic multicultural texts are hence powerful tools that may perform a number of functions, from representing minority or marginalised identities to teaching and fostering mutual cultural understanding.

The objectives of multicultural children's texts are especially crucial given the perpetuation of racist representations within children's literature throughout history. Thus, a closely related approach that warrants serious mention here is race theory. In the context of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, 'otherness', and certainly South Africa, the notion of race is neither a small nor simple topic. In fact, truly engaging with race theory and the impacts of racial thought throughout history and literature is a mammoth task that I could not do justice within the limitations of this dissertation. Therefore, while I do not wish to downplay or ignore the severity of race within wider society nor children's literature, I must state outright that it is not intended as a primary focus of this thesis. Moreover, while multiculturalism offers wider and more inclusive concepts of 'otherness' that go beyond race alone, race theory's centrality to multiculturalism should nevertheless be recognised and highlighted. The following passages will thus acknowledge race theory's importance and connection to

the discourses of multiculturalism and postcolonial studies, yet admittedly without offering deeper engagement.

Katharine Capshaw (2013) writes about the concept of race as a social construct; yet while critics "have worked to displace the idea of race from biology", the term has conversely been employed by communities themselves to unify and express "shared history, culture, and political goals" (191-192). Within children's texts, racial ideology can incorrectly cast middle-class Whiteness as universal, when in reality there is a "multiplicity of expressions of identity within communities" (Capshaw, 2013: 193). In *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* by Philip Nel (2017) the importance of representing this multiplicity through ethnically diverse protagonists—specifically *Non-White* lead characters—is strongly emphasised precisely because children are vulnerable to the influences of racial ideology (14-16). Nel claims that

> racist ideologies persist in the literature and culture of childhood, frequently in ways that we fail to notice on a conscious level. […] race is present especially when it seems to be absent. (2017: 4)

When race goes unnoticed in this way, it is due to the pervasive effect of structural racism (ibid.). As Nel explains, those who are used to encountering positive portrayals of characters ethnically similar to themselves in literature, media, and culture are the least likely to perceive structural racism because it does not noticeably affect their lives (2017: 5). Essentially, Nel is here referring to "White people – the people who hold nearly all the positions of power in children's publishing, and who write the vast majority of children's books" (ibid.). Considerations of race, diverse ethnic representation, and authenticity should thus be central to children's book publishers, regardless of their own identity, so that the self-perpetuating cycle of structural racism can be broken. What is most significant to mention here, for the purposes of both my dissertation and the recognition of the pervasiveness of racial ideology, is that while my picturebook—a story set in South Africa featuring a White middle-class family—engages with ecological 'otherness', it regrettably ignores the racial dimensions, tensions, and realities of predominantly Black and Non-White citizens of the country. Thankfully, my picturebook is an unpublished sketch; hence, its shortcomings regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity are issues that I can reflectively and self-critically unpack in the analysis and reflection, even more so under the broad scope of multiculturism and diversity.

Overall, what this means for *The Striped Catshark* is that it is limited by the conundrum of multicultural representation versus authenticity in the case of my White

authorship. Given the concern of racial ideology, why did I choose a White protagonist and perspective in the first place? In the analysis of and reflection on the picturebook I will use the lens of multiculturalism and diversity to address the tension between writing and illustrating from a place of authenticity, while simultaneously having an awareness that yet another story imbued with Whiteness does little to support and encourage the flourishing of multicultural and diverse children's literature—least of all in a postcolonial and racially tense context such as post-apartheid South Africa. Certainly, the fact that I refer to *White* authorship and state my positionality as a *White* researcher already indicates the ideological and sociocultural discourse of race. Moreover, in relation to the multicultural project one may well ask to what extent White characters and White perspectives should continue to be published at all? Although I cannot claim to have a perfect answer, I will venture a tentative response to this question in the final reflections on my picturebook.

## Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism

In this section I will turn to the other lens in the "pair of glasses" metaphor: the ecocritical, biocentric perspective that decentres the human and instead focuses on the biosphere. Coupled with postcolonialism, this view takes on an approach that values ecologically enmeshed, often (but not necessarily) Indigenous ways of life whereby humans have a deep-rooted connection with nature. There are several theoretical approaches and tools that I will outline for application in my analysis of *The Striped Catshark*. One such analytical tool is the NatCul Matrix developed by Goga et al. (2018). As briefly mentioned in the literature review, the matrix allows for an interpretation of children's literature (or relevant data) according to whether it celebrates or problematises nature, and to what extent it provides an anthropocentric or ecocentric perspective. The position of "celebrating nature" takes Rousseau's notion of the "romantic" or "pure" child attuned to nature as its base, while the "problematizing nature" position takes a more critical stance towards nature by focusing, for example, on environmental degradation and challenges (Goga et al., 2018: 12-13). The latter position is thus typically ecocritical. In the diagram below, the matrix is visibly encircled by the component "techne". Goga et al. explain this feature of the matrix as "the art of shaping and manufacturing" that brings attention to "the fact that all children's and YA texts and cultures are already mediated, hence are crafted, representations of nature" (2018: 13). Although the tool was developed specifically for ecocritical analyses and examinations, it has nevertheless found wide and versatile applicability within this highly interdisciplinary

field. I will apply it to selected units of *The Striped Catshark* for an ecocritical analysis of the picturebook's overall position towards the ecosphere.

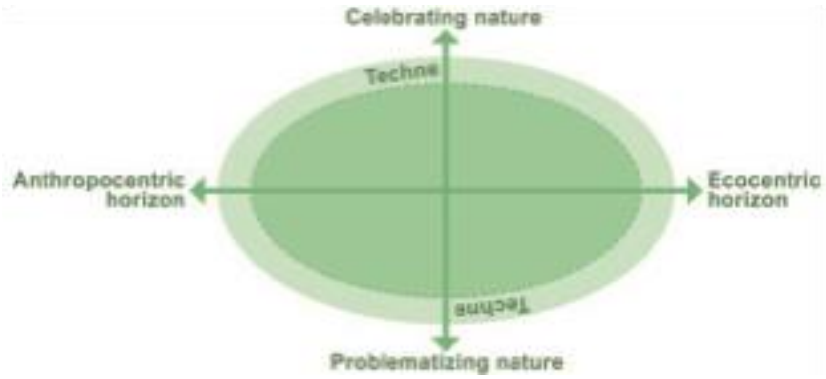


***Figure 2:*** *The Nature in Culture (NatCul) Matrix (Goga et al., 2018: 12)*

The project of adapting a specifically South African ecocriticism will be taken up in my analysis, too. The coupling of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism is essential to this adaptation, in particular through Nixon's concept of "slow violence". Environmental violence persists over time as a remnant of colonialism; indeed, it is what keeps colonial acts of the past alive in the present. For this reason Nixon argues that environmental violence "needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time" (2011: 8). As environmental degradation and climate change through, for example, fossil fuel consumption and poor environmental policy constitute primary focal points within ecocritical theory, so do unequal socio-political structures as a result of colonial conquests form core sites of enquiry in postcolonial studies. Both are types of "slow violence" that have been perpetrated in the past and kept alive through their slow unfolding over time, into the present day and beyond. It is a small step to make the connection between colonial atrocities and the abysmal effects these have had (and continue to have) on local environments: this is the key intersection between ecocriticism and postcolonialism. The case of South Africa poses a primary example of this collision, which Nixon describes as particularly serious given the country's high natural biodiversity. With its "traumatic history of colonial conquest, land theft, racial partition, and racist conservation," South Africa thus combines "extreme ecological wealth and a postapartheid legacy of extreme economic and territorial inequity" that requires urgent attention (2011: 175-176). As Anthony Vital points out, the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories paradoxically renders postcolonial ecocriticism somewhat anthropocentric (2005: 299). Vital proposes that

the human and the ecological should not be regarded as opposing poles, but instead united through democratic processes to ultimately confront South Africa's past and present struggles of oppression and domination. In this way, he suggests that an approach that values both the human and the ecological

> can enrich the struggle to promote community well-being. And this form of understanding can in turn supply the means for a specifically South African literary and cultural critique, a specifically South African ecocriticism, one in which writing from both past and present can be read in dialogue with the evolving discourses of the new environmentalism. (ibid.)

Significantly, culture and nature can enrich each other, and certainly do in the South African context. Ecocritical enquiry thus need not be contrasted with humanitarian causes, such as postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and social justice activism. As Twidle asks, "how do the concepts of ecology, toxicity, and "slow violence" […] play out in a space like South Africa?" (2013: 52). This is a leading question for constructing a local ecocritical approach. Twidle proceeds by taking his surrounding environment of the University of Cape Town into account and exploring "how the physical (and even geological) context here might shape our conditions of intellectual enquiry" (2013: 55). I will follow Twidle's lead by considering the physical setting of Misty Cliffs, the coastal settlement that inspired the backdrop for *The Striped Catshark*, to identify the distinctly local aspects that shape the ecocritical perspective of the picturebook, while also taking sociocultural factors into account through a postcolonial and multicultural lens. This is a crucial step in imagining a South African ecocriticism due to "the complexity that is entailed in thinking through the various cultures of nature in a place like South Africa" (Twidle, 2013: 57).

A further relevant approach is Roman Bartosch's (2013) concept of 'EnvironMentality', which relies on the imaginative power of fiction as a means of considering 'otherness' both in human and nonhuman form. Bartosch explains that 'EnvironMentality'

> manifests itself in a process that is determined by the human capacity to think beyond a given hermeneutic situation. This process encompasses the dialectics of understanding the other (which may be nature, nonhuman animals or 'simply' our fellow human beings) by means of literary exegesis, and, finally, it helps us as readers of fiction to learn from the books we read that which can only be learned by means of reading: to 'think like a mountain' (Leopold) and to know 'what it is like to be a bat' (Nagel) – *EnvironMentality.* (2013: 17)

His call to engage our imaginative capacities to empathise with and think like the 'other'—indeed, like an animal or even a geological entity—lends itself particularly well to the visual-verbal medium of the picturebook, and certainly to a young and imaginative audience still learning the complex relationship between nature and culture, empathy and 'otherness'. The notion of imagining the 'other' is in fact a central feature within *The Striped Catshark* that leads to a moment of deep realisation and compassion for an animal 'other' on the part of the protagonist. I will further expand on this in my analysis.

Overall, ecocriticism and postcolonial theory offer sophisticated tools that will prove useful in analysing *The Striped Catshark*. In particular, the NatCul Matrix provides an effective way of gauging the text's general position concerning its environmental focus, while a closer examination of the story's South African elements will further work towards cultivating a distinctly local ecocritical approach. Throughout, the 'other' emerges as a theme that connects multicultural concerns with ecocritical ones, albeit from different angles: the anthropocentric and the biocentric. My hybridised theoretical framework is an attempt to combine these approaches into a comprehensive ecocentric perspective that considers human concerns in modest, but serious, proportion to the ecological sphere as a whole.

## Methodology: Critical Content Analysis and Reflection

Now that I have constructed, metaphorically speaking, the theory-framed glasses that will endow the wearer with ecocentric vision, the method for my research and analysis will be outlined. My chosen methodology is critical content analysis with the overall purpose of qualitatively examining the ecocritical and multicultural standpoint of *The Striped Catshark*. In her chapter 'Critical Content Analysis of Visual Images', Kathy Short (2019) describes critical content analysis as a research method that adopts a decidedly critical stance throughout the study (5). Short explains that "the researcher uses a specific critical lens as the frame from which to develop the research questions, select texts, analyze the data, and reflect on findings" (ibid.). As already determined, the "specific critical lens" that I am using in this research dissertation is the hybrid of ecocriticism and postcolonialism coupled with multiculturalism.

Due to the political dimension of critical content analysis, it demands that the researcher make their critical stance and positionality explicitly clear. Short argues that openly stating one's positionality calls attention to "the biases and experiences" that could affect the analysis (2019: 15). This in turn reiterates the awareness that "the world and texts are socially constructed" and are thus not free from socio-political conditioning and ideology

(Freire, cited in Short, 2019: 5). Significantly, a critical position interrogates how the world is represented, with particular focus on "whose values, texts, and ideologies are privileged or considered normative" (2019: 6). This in turn strongly relates to voice and authority, often with the aim of emphasising minority, marginalised, disadvantaged, neglected, or oppressed groups within society (ibid.). In other words, critical content analysis exposes and critically engages with ideological standpoints, both of the object of study and its researcher. Overall, such method and inquiry can lead to greater transparency within research.

Working in both the visual and verbal planes, picturebooks are immersive entry points into visual culture for children. As Short argues, visual culture—a culture "in which images are central to how meaning is created in the world"—is fast becoming a primary means of understanding and experiencing contemporary life (2019: 7). This visual immersion has a strong and direct impact on children's perceptions of the world (ibid.). As discussed before, picturebooks are especially potent in conveying ideological meaning—precisely due to their visual-verbal interplay. Critical content analysis is thus highly suited for interrogating the power dynamics at play within picturebooks, and in this way strongly aligns with my research purpose in this dissertation.

As a research methodology, critical content analysis seeks to apply a critical theory framework to the study as a whole, from early research developments to final reflections. In applying critical content analysis, Short stresses the importance of continued immersion into and interweaving of theory, data, and analysis so that the critical theoretical framework "becomes integrated into our thinking as a constant lens through which we interact with data" (2019: 12). She recommends filtering the main theoretical outlooks into 3 to 5 tenets that are most relevant to the research question and texts, a process which in turn leads to a deeper analysis (2019: 14). As outlined so far, I have done this by constructing a theoretical framework through the metaphor of glasses, which comprise the lenses of multiculturalism and diversity on the one side, and ecocriticism and postcolonialism on the other. These theories are further disassembled to yield the following main tenets: 1) the NatCul Matrix; 2) the adaptation of ecocriticism to the local South African context; and 3) the concepts of authenticity and authority in regard to ethnicity, race, and cultural diversity. My theoretical "glasses" have thus informed my research on *The Striped Catshark* from its conception and creation through to its analysis and critique.

Next, the following passage will outline the process of selecting appropriate units for analysis from the text. Botelho and Rudman (2009) suggest an initial broad application of critical content analysis to the text in order to consider the narrative and its verbal-visual

composition as a whole (cited in Short, 2019: 6). The broad issues under consideration include power dynamics in the narrative, so as to uncover the perspective of focalisation, positions of power and agency, and assumptions regarding the closure of the story (ibid.). A close analysis of selected units will follow, whereby relevant pages and double page spreads from *The Striped Catshark* constitute units of analysis. Critical content analysis will be applied to the verbal and visual elements represented, as well as to their interplay. However, bearing in mind that the images are merely sketched references and not final, print ready renditions, this work-in-progress element renders the picturebook particularly suitable for analysis, critique, and reflection. In fact, the images may well be reworked and developed (for example, as a future project outside of this dissertation) to incorporate the findings. The analysis chapter will be divided into two sections: critical content analysis and reflective engagement. The main interpretation and analysis will be undertaken on the picturebook (as presented in the appendix), using critical content analysis as described, whereas the prior creation of the text and images will be discussed by reflecting on the production process. This reflection will also draw on the relevant critical theory discussed, and will include reflections on possible developments and future implications of the picturebook. Moreover, through critical content analysis and subsequent critical reflection, I will examine in what ways *The Striped Catshark* may work to communicate and inspire an ecocentric worldview that considers nonhuman 'otherness'. Simultaneously, I will also take into account how the theme of 'otherness' could (and, as I argue, *should*) be used to dismantle colonial and oppressive pasts.

## CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

This chapter will critically analyse and reflect on *The Striped Catshark* through the ecocentric vision "glasses" of multiculturalism and ecocritical-postcolonial theory in order to address and engage with my central research questions. My dual positionality as the creator and literary critic of the picturebook is significant only insofar as my anticipated theoretical framework influenced authorial decisions during the creative process. For the most part, this concerned core aspects such as the theme, setting, and story resolution rather than the finer details and nuances of the story. Moreover, my chosen theoretical approaches predetermined the picturebook's rough outline to fall under the umbrella of ecocriticism and postcolonialism. Thus, my two roles are—for the most part, although not entirely—separable. In the role of the author-illustrator, I immersed myself in the creative process of producing an environmental picturebook, and I will now take on the objective position of an academic scholar in analysing the product in light of my research questions. As a reminder, these questions are: firstly, to what extent can children's literature (especially picturebooks) contribute towards encouraging environmental engagement and ecologically sustainable behaviour? And secondly, how can it simultaneously work towards dismantling historically colonial, harmful, and one-sided representations by amplifying a multitude of cultural and ethnic voices from southern Africa?

The picturebook is attached in the Appendix as a reference. This version of the picturebook is admittedly a work-in-progress with rough sketches instead of refined illustrations. Therefore, as the illustrations are more indicative than final, the analysis will be limited to the content and primary meaning imparted by the images, while artistic elements such as line, style, texture, colour palette, etc. will not be considered. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the role of aesthetic elements within picturebooks precisely because they play a key part in creating ambience and visually setting the scene. Features such as colour, line, and style can convey strong emotions and meanings, hidden clues, and information that is less easily expressed in words. Thus, aesthetics is deemed central to picturebook analysis. My picturebook and its ensuing analysis pose as exceptions due to the reliance on tentative sketches. The verbal text, on the other hand, is taken to be complete. The picturebook's pages are numbered for ease of reference in my analysis, although they would not necessarily appear numbered in a published version of the book. The brief synopsis below provides an overview of the narrative before delving into the critical content analysis. An initial broad analysis will offer an ecocritical, postcolonial, and multicultural reading of the

book as a whole, and hence deduce its stance on matters of environment, local context, and diversity. Thereafter, a closer analysis of selected pages and double page spreads will direct the focus to specific elements in the picturebook that add further substance to the broad findings. Finally, reflections on the creative process of producing the book, as well as on implications for future research and environmental storytelling, will be explored in the last section of this chapter.

### Synopsis of *The Striped Catshark*

A young girl named Paula lives in a South African coastal village with her family. After a ferociously stormy night, Paula awakens to find the ocean calm and still. She and her dog Laddie take a walk along the beach and explore the marine ecosystem. At the far end of the beach, they find a striped catshark trapped in a tidal rockpool. Paula and Laddie rush back home, where Paula excitedly tells her parents that she wants an aquarium to keep a large, stripy fish. But to her dismay, her parents refuse, and she is distraught for the rest of the day. That night, Paula goes to bed feeling miserable and has a mysterious dream: she hears waves crashing against her bedroom door and opens it to an oncoming torrent of seawater. Paula finds herself underwater enveloped in a large air bubble and is carried along by the current. It takes her to a kelp forest where she discovers and marvels at the beautiful marine life living in the Cape waters: an octopus, a cowshark (broadnose sevengill shark), a striped catshark, a Cape fur seal, and an array of sea urchins and small species of fish. While gazing in wonder, Paula notices her air bubble growing smaller and pressing in on her, and she starts to feel trapped—until the bubble suddenly bursts. She desperately tries to swim to the surface for air. At that moment she is awoken from the dream to find Laddie licking her face. The dream is in fact a revelation, as Paula realises that the catshark must feel desperately trapped in the rockpool. She asks her parents to help her rescue “the big stripy fish”, and the four of them—mother, father, Paula and Laddie—set out with snorkelling gear and a large net to free the trapped animal. Once at the rockpool, Paula’s parents identify the fish as a striped catshark, then proceed to catch it in the net and release it into the open ocean. The catshark immediately darts off. Paula is distressed at its rapid disappearance, but her parents reassure her that the wild animal is finally safe and free in its natural home, the ocean.

## Broad Analysis

Picturebook Typology

Before peering through the ecocritical/postcolonial and multicultural/diversity lenses of my ecocentric "glasses", I will briefly revisit Nikolajeva and Scott's picturebook typology. According to the authors' five categories, *The Striped Catshark* is straightforwardly identifiable as "complementary": the narrative leaves very few gaps unfilled, whereby the text and images complement each other and thereby complete the narrative as a cohesive, rounded whole. However, Nikolajeva and Scott explain that complementary picturebooks leave "nothing […] for the reader's imagination, and the reader remains somewhat passive" (2006: 17). I would argue that while this may be the case regarding verbal-visual relationships in picturebooks, it does not necessarily hold true when considering the content, emotional engagement, and immersive qualities of a picturebook. These latter components may stir the imaginative and emotional capacities of the reader and thus demand an active rather than passive engagement. Moreover, the complementary categorisation of *The Striped Catshark* is useful and relevant in describing the dynamic of the images and text: while there are some gaps that the verbal and visual tend to fill for each other, the main focus of the book is not to engage the reader primarily on a metatextual plane by exploring the complexities that verbal-visual interplay can conjure. Instead, the picturebook primarily functions by evoking empathy for the nonhuman 'other' in its entirety, from the trapped catshark to the marine ecosystem that Paula explores along the shoreline and in her dream. Thus, it works on a narratological and emotive level rather than on a metatextual one. The story shifts the focus from the human protagonist to the perspective of the catshark, the nonhuman 'other'. In this sense, the complementarity of words and images supports the narrative in evoking emotions such as empathy, imagination, and care, rather than humour or curiosity about a disparity between words and images (as is the case in counterpointing and sylleptic picturebooks: "as soon as words and images provide alternative information or contradict each other in some way, we have a variety of readings and interpretations" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006: 17)). I did not consciously create the picturebook to be complementary; rather, the intention was to tell a compelling environmental story that may evoke and teach empathy for nonhuman species and an appreciation for healthy ecosystems. In connection with this, I will briefly mention here that I deliberately avoided overburdening the narrative with environmental facts and step-by-step prescriptive behaviour. Although children's texts may serve a socialising function and are inevitably imbued with underlying ideologies, the extent to which they should be explicitly didactic is nevertheless an arguable point. This is especially so in regard

to art and literature serving as cultural artefacts rather than as instrumental tools and educational textbooks. In the critical reflection this point will be taken up in more detail. Moreover, complementarity between the verbal and visual elements, though not open to highly complex and variable verbal-visual interplay, nonetheless provides a cohesive format for conveying powerful messages that stimulate the mind, imagination, convictions, and emotions of the reader.

The NatCul Matrix

Applying the NatCul Matrix by Goga et al. to the picturebook as a whole yields pertinent insights regarding its position as an ecocritical text. I broadly categorised the verbal and visual elements on each page according to whether they celebrate or problematise nature, as well as to whether they focalise the narrative from an anthropocentric or ecocentric point of view. This included looking at descriptive language, narrative devices, dialogue, and voice on the verbal plane; and facial expressions, body language, composition, and overall message of an image on the visual plane. I found that the picturebook depicted the ocean and marine ecosystem, on the one hand, as "wild", stormy, "raging", "fierce", "rough", "frightening", worrisome, threatening, and dangerous; and on the other hand, as "calm", "soft", "still", peaceful, "gentle", joyful, awe-inspiring, teeming with life, flourishing, magical, worthy of respect and consideration, liberating and freeing, open and expansive, and a safe haven and home. According to this coding exercise, among the text and images I found 35 instances of celebrating nature and 18 instances of problematising nature (and several neutral or ambivalent valuations, which I exclude from my findings here). This corresponds to almost twice the number of celebrating instances as problematising instances, and thus positions the picturebook decidedly on the celebrating spectrum of the vertical axis. In regard to the horizontal axis, I coded the pages according to whether they predominantly impart an anthropocentric or ecocentric (or ambivalent) perspective. Overwhelmingly, anthropocentric focalisation dominates throughout the picturebook with 19 pages out of 28 (68%). In contrast, merely 4 pages (14%) clearly assume an ecocentric perspective, while 5 pages (18%) seem neutral or are not clearly determinable, and are thus considered ambivalent in my analysis. The pie chart in Figure 3 visualises these findings in percentages, with the red section representing the anthropocentric perspective and the green section representing the ecocentric perspective. Therefore, it may be concluded that *The Striped Catshark* broadly positions itself as a picturebook that predominantly celebrates nature and adopts a mostly anthropocentric perspective.

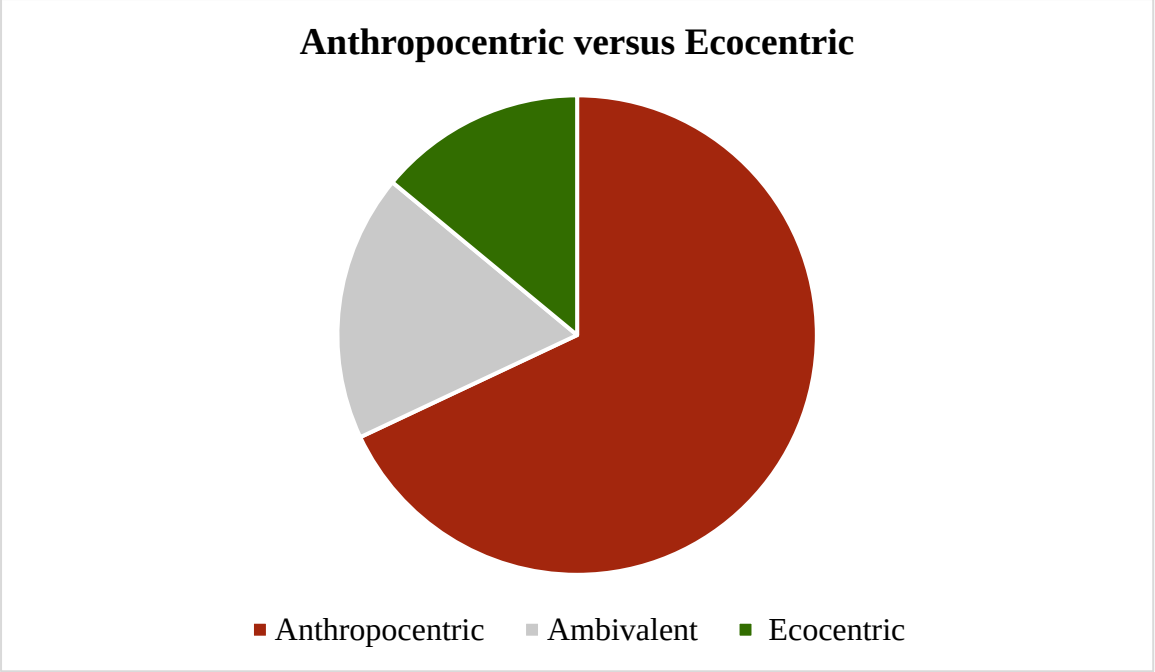


***Figure 3:*** *Percentage of pages (out of 28) in the picturebook that adopt an anthropocentric versus ecocentric perspective*

South African Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Biocentric Perspective

Bearing this celebratory-anthropocentric position in mind, these next paragraphs serve to explore the specifically South African ecocritical stance of *The Striped Catshark*. I follow Twidle's approach by investigating the physical local context as the next step in my broad critical content analysis, with a particular focus on the indigenous biodiversity and invasive species portrayed in the picturebook. The setting depicted in the illustrations is recognisably South African from the typical coastal landscape and native fauna and flora of the Cape Peninsula, and these features in turn play a part in shaping the text's local ecocritical stance.

Already the cover image and title of the picturebook use a native animal as a prominent marker of place: the striped catshark. When Paula first encounters the small shark on pages 12 and 13, she describes it as "a huge stripy fish", thus revealing her naivety. Only by the end of the story is the "stripy fish" identified as a striped catshark by Paula's parents. This species, also commonly known as the pyjama shark, is endemic to South Africa's coastline from the north-western coast to the southeast (Shark Research Institute, n.d.). Often sighted by local fishermen, the striped catshark is abundant in numbers and can be found dwelling in the intertidal zone as well as in depths of up to 100 meters (Bester, n.d.). Reaching an average adult size of 60 to 80 centimetres, this small shark poses no danger to humans (ibid.). My reason for choosing a striped catshark as a central animal character is

twofold: it provides a positive counterimage to the dangerous, threatening, man-eating stereotype of the predator shark; and, as an endemic species, it indicates the uniquely South African setting and marine ecosystem.

The construct of the shark as a bloodthirsty human killer has manifested itself within popular culture due to films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), and has been further reinforced through decades of negative news coverage focused on shark attacks. A study by scientists Bret Muter, Meredith Gore, Katie Gledhill, Christopher Lamont, and Charlie Huveneers (2012) investigates the portrayal of sharks in news media across the United States and Australia. The study finds the media guilty of "amplifying public fear through newspaper stories and documentaries with sensationalistic headlines and imagery" (2012: 188), whereby shark attack stories "were reported at least 5 times more than conservation concerns or any other shark-related topic" (2012: 194). This negative portrayal of sharks is thus "one of the greatest barriers to shark conservation efforts" and requires urgent rectification (2012: 188). As apex predators, sharks play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy ecological balance within marine ecosystems. The authors identify commercial fishing, shark finning, environmental pollution, habitat loss, and climate change as the main factors that pose a serious threat to sharks (ibid.). In South Africa, sharks are similarly hampered by negative publicity, especially as the local coastline is home to three species that attract some of the most negative media coverage: the great white shark, the tiger shark, and the bull shark. However, these three types represent only a fraction of the 117 different species of sharks that live in South African waters (Two Oceans Aquarium, 2020). Of these, the vast majority pose no significant threat to humans. Therefore, a much more realistic and appreciative portrayal of sharks is vital—and the harmless and no less beautiful striped catshark is an ideal representative of sharks as animals worthy of care, respect, and protection.

Furthermore, given the shark's abundance and its preferred habitat of rocky reefs up to the intertidal zone, encountering a catshark trapped in a rockpool after a stormy night is no unrealistic or improbable scenario. In fact, my picturebook's narrative was inspired by a similar incident involving the rescue of a broadnose sevengill shark in Strand, South Africa (Sinclair, 2015). Finding a small species of shark in a coastal pool is thus not improbable, and this possibility renders the picturebook's story realistic and believable. The striped catshark further acts as a specific locator for the setting of the story and provides an ideal and realistic entry point for human-animal interplay as a central focus within the narrative. In this way, sharks—and especially endemic species—are central to an ecocriticism that is sensitive to

South Africa's coastal and marine environment and dedicated to shaping the ways in which shark species are understood, respected, and deemed worthy of conservation by the public. For this reason, my picturebook places a striped catshark at the heart of its narrative and celebrates its release into the ocean.

Another significant marker of the distinctly South African context is the landscape. Although deliberately kept unnamed in the picturebook, the beach and surrounding mountains are based on a real place: the village of Misty Cliffs. Situated along the Cape Peninsula's western coast, this small village consists of a handful of houses and is considered a hidden gem among locals. Many of the plots are holiday houses rather than full-time occupied homes, and the residents are predominantly White and middle-class as represented in the picturebook. My paternal grandparents owned one of the houses directly on the beach, and I have many fond memories of holiday visits during my early childhood. The surrounding natural environment forms part of the Table Mountain National Park, and is thus mostly protected and pristine with wildlife such as baboons, caracals, small antelope, and dassies roaming the fynbos-covered mountain slopes (Misty Cliffs Village Association, 2010: 22-23). The unique and richly biodiverse Cape floral kingdom consists of fine but hardy shrub and bush vegetation endemic to the region. The mountains roll down to sandy beaches interspersed with rocky reefs and outcrops, which are met by the cold Atlantic Ocean. The double page spread on pages 14 and 15 depicts this iconic landscape, with the sunrise over the mountaintops as an indicator of east (and thus positioning the ocean westwards). The illustration shows typically local environmental markers such as the fynbos shrubbery covering the steep slopes, the characteristic silhouette of the mountains, and the beach scattered with boulders and rocks. Seagulls, a common bird with various species found along the Cape, are also depicted on the double page spread. However, the landscape is portrayed almost devoid of houses and urban development; this is not a realistic rendition of the current state of the village. Rather, I tried to remember and depict what the area looked like when I used to visit it as a little girl: there were far less houses, and certainly very modest ones. While my decision to ignore the increase in urbanisation and human impacts over the past two decades may provide a false reflection of contemporary reality, it nevertheless works to reinforce the vagueness of the locality. The deliberate ambivalence of the setting thus makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly where along the Western Cape's coast the story plays out—although, paradoxically, it is unmistakably recognisable as South Africa's western coast. Furthermore, in a nostalgic sense, my outdated rendition of Misty Cliffs allows for the

preservation (at least in images) of a landscape and area that should be kept as pristine and natural as possible for current and future generations.

In reality, however, this seemingly natural haven is not untouched by human interference, nor by colonizing and invasive species. Urban expansion and developments in the area have increasingly impacted on the natural habitat of flora and fauna, while alien invasive plants such as the Port Jackson, Rooikrans, Manatoka, and Kikuyu grass have become widespread (Misty Cliffs Village Association, 2010: 20). Another problematic foreign species is the Mediterranean mussel (Mytilus galloprovincialis), which was introduced in the 1970s and has since proliferated and covered large expanses of the shoreline. These invasive mussels appear on page 8, when Paula examines a large rock covered in marine life. Nevertheless, the endemic African black oystercatcher acts as a marker of the coastline's health by feeding on the Mediterranean mussel and thus reducing its population growth and spread; this in turn allows native mussel populations to rise, as they have less competition for resources from the alien species (Seiphetlho, 2015). Page 10 depicts two African black oystercatchers as they forage for mussels among the rocks. The text remains simple and does not identify the species of bird nor mussel, and instead describes the iconic features of the oystercatcher. In this way, the image and words are straightforward enough for a young reader to grasp alone, while simultaneously offering an interesting and complex entry point into species identification for an advanced reader, or if read together with an adult. The intention is to arouse curiosity to learn more about the species depicted in the picturebook in an independent manner; as a work of literature, it is not the picturebook's purpose to function as a factual textbook. Besides the African black oystercatcher and the striped catshark, the coastline is home to numerous other indigenous animal species whose populations and health are indicative of the wider ecosystem's wellbeing, including the Cape fur seal (see page 21) and the great white shark. Moreover, while human developments and foreign species continue to affect South Africa's coastal ecosystem, Misty Cliffs exemplifies an iconic, mostly pristine, and flourishing natural haven that is typical of the region. Thus, the picturebook's setting represents, celebrates, and fosters a uniquely South African biodiversity.

South African Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Anthropocentric Perspective

The next points of analysis in connection with the picturebook's South African eco-critique are conducted through the lens of multiculturalism and diversity. This perspective brings relevant sociocultural factors into focus, thus also considering the country's

postcolonial context. As Twidle's question regarding the relationship between "ecology, toxicity, and "slow violence" […] in a space like South Africa" suggests, a local ecocriticism must also take cultural, political, and social concerns into account (2013: 52). In an analytical reading of *The Striped Catshark*, such factors are detectable both in what is portrayed and what is *not* portrayed in the picturebook.

The protagonist's ethnic and cultural context is White and middle-class, as indicated by several explicit and implicit markers within the text. The illustrations show Paula and her parents' skin to be fair, and they have recognisably Caucasian features. They live comfortably within walking distance to the beach, which indicates their middle-class status. Furthermore, Paula wanders along the beach unsupervised in the early morning, accompanied only by her dog (see page 7). This suggests that the surrounding neighbourhood is relatively safe and far removed from impoverished and crime-stricken areas. This is a significant point within the context of South Africa as many areas are considered dangerous, especially for young children to visit alone. Even Laddie the dog implies Paula's class, culture, and ethnic context: having a dog as a companion and guard is common practice among (White) South Africans. Within other South African cultural and ethnic contexts, relationships with pets and domestic animals may differ and not necessarily be intimate and friendly. The family constellation of mother, father, child/children, and pets (such as a dog, cat, or both) is a typical and commonplace depiction of White middle-class families not only in South Africa, but in Western culture in general. Moreover, it is an ideological component that enforces a stereotypical family composition. However, it is not representative of all families and does not reflect the realities of most South African children.

While I have witnessed a wide range of cultural and ethnic diversity among my fellow South Africans, I remain a cultural outsider to most of their lived realities. I cannot feign to know what it is like to be Black in a country that is still deeply scarred by the "slow violence" of oppression, segregation, and domination. Thus, as a White storyteller I am seemingly limited to the perspective that I can authentically present to readers. This connects to the concepts of authority and authentic storytelling from a cultural insider perspective. The family presented in *The Striped Catshark* closely echoes my own lived experience, as I grew up in a family with mother, father, an older sibling, and numerous dogs and cats (besides other pets and farm animals). In this sense, the portrayal of family life in the picturebook is firmly rooted in my own experience of childhood. Thus, on the one hand, this positions the story as authentic; while on the other hand, it depicts a version of reality that does not hold true for a large number of South African children, and which furthermore has been overused

in children's texts for decades. What is missing, or overridden, are the realities and experiences of Black and other non-white children living in the Cape Peninsula.

A local example illustrates the vast sociocultural chasm between communities of different racial backgrounds and classes within the area. The township of Khayelitsha, situated in False Bay approximately 40km west of Misty Cliffs, provides a stark contrast to the tranquil and affluent depiction of Paula's surroundings. According to a census from 2011, Khayelitsha's population is predominantly Black and Xhosa-speaking, and half of its residence are below the age of 25 (City of Cape Town, 2013). Here, the neighbourhood is a sea of shacks that rolls over degraded land and through ragged dunes towards Baden Powell Drive, the road that separates the township from the shoreline. I have never entered Khayelitsha, yet like any Capetonian, I am well aware of the area's danger due to high rates of poverty and crime. Driving along Baden Powell Drive is best done during daylight hours, and preferably not alone. And yet, Khayelitsha is also known to be a vibrant, lively neighbourhood characterised by its inhabitants' warmth and zest for life. I cannot pretend to know the daily life of the estimated 400.000 people living there. It is a wholly different world compared to the safe haven of Misty Cliffs, yet only a mere 35-minute drive away. The realities of children living in either part of the peninsula could not be more contrasting. For a child from Khayelitsha, would *The Striped Catshark* perhaps read like magic realism rather than a relatable childhood experience? The divide between such a child's reality and that of Paula may pose a hard challenge for the picturebook's aim of encouraging environmental stewardship, especially insofar as the culture and life portrayed in the picturebook seem reserved for only the White privileged. However, Non-White South African children, such as the Black Xhosa-speaking population of Khayelitsha, *must* be able to find themselves reflected in books about environmental engagement and activism, too—more so than the White minority that already has access to innumerable books featuring protagonists in their likeness.

By casting the protagonist as White, I have rendered the story culturally exclusive and inaccessible to the majority of children in South Africa (and further afield), who are *not* White nor middle-class. And yet, how could I—White, privileged, and educated as I am—tell stories about those whose lives I could only superficially and inadequately understand and imagine? What authority do I have to fabricate a glimpse into the life of a child whose life is culturally, socially, and economically different from my own, not to mention systematically disadvantaged due to past oppression? While I deem these questions highly relevant and worthy of urgent attention, they stretch and exhaust the sphere of my analysis by diverging

into the realms of philosophy, imaginative guesswork, and reflection. Thus, in the critical reflection following the critical content analysis I will further imagine and argue for ways of solving the conundrum of authority and authenticity that appears to hinder me in serving the need for diverse and multicultural representations in ecocritical children's texts.

## Critical Content Analysis of Selected Units

In order to provide further evidence and examples for my arguments discussed in the broad analysis, I have selected four double page spreads and one single page for a closer critical content analysis. The selected double page spreads on pages 6-7, 12-13, 20-21, and 30-31 each constitute a selected unit of analysis, while page 26 is selected as a single page. The selected units include key moments in the narrative, significant ecocritical perspectives, and notable shifts in focalisation. Not every theoretical tenet discussed within the broad analysis—picturebook typology, the NatCul Matrix, local South African ecocriticism, postcolonial and multicultural lenses—is applicable to each selected unit of analysis. Thus, each unit will be used to deepen and substantiate precisely those tenets that are most relevant to it. As I analyse and discuss each unit, I will further justify my choice of selection as needed.

### Unit 1: Double Page Spread 6-7

The illustration on this double page spread depicts the beach at dawn, with a vast expanse of ocean and sky that draws the reader's attention to the glowing horizon. Page 6 is almost free from any indication of human and animal presence, both in its verbal and visual elements. Only a few pawprints and footprints in the sand suggest that Paula and Laddie have walked there, yet even their prints are already being washed away and erased by the waves. Laddie and Paula are depicted on page 7 as small figures from above as they walk towards the shoreline. Apart from them, there are no other living creatures to be seen and the illustration suggests that the beach was quite untouched before they wandered onto it. Thus, the magnitude of the ocean and sky, accentuated by the ambient dawn, acts as the main subject and creates an atmosphere of expansive tranquillity.

In this way, the spread provides an ecocentric point of focalisation, which is the main reason I selected it for closer analysis. This ecocentric perspective is further supported by the high angle and distant point of view, almost as if the scene were being surveyed from above by a coastal bird such as a seagull. The verbal text works to destabilise an anthropocentric focalisation by dismantling hierarchies between the human and nonhuman: Laddie leads

Paula, and the dog is equally included as the focaliser in the text when experiencing the seawater "on their paws and feet" (page 7). This ecocentric perspective does not permeate the rest of the picturebook, as already established in the broad analysis. Coding the book's pages according to the NatCul Matrix showed only four out of 28 pages to adopt an ecocentric perspective, and pages 6 and 7 count towards this result. Nevertheless, this double page spread is representative of the picturebook's overall tendency to celebrate nature. This is especially evident in the words on page 6, which attribute positive, celebratory features to nature such as the soft sand and the "gentle glow" of the early morning sky. The magic of exploring and discovering the world at the break of dawn is evident in the illustration, again due to the fact that there is no living creature about except for Paula and Laddie. The latter is portrayed as particularly eager to splash about in the waves, thus showing his joy and splendour in experiencing the cold seawater. Moreover, this early morning beach scene is one of serenity and wonder. Thus, applying the NatCul Matrix to this double page spread yields an ecocentric perspective that celebrates nature.

This spread is also relevant for a multicultural analysis from a South African ecocritical position. As mentioned in the broad analysis, beaches and coastal areas in South Africa are not ordinarily deemed safe for a young child to explore alone. Misty Cliffs is arguably a relatively safe beach, and demographically comprises a small and predominantly White population. Thus, Paula and Laddie's early morning adventure is not a realistic representation for many children living in other coastal areas. I will again refer to the case of Khayelitsha as a comparison. Khayelitsha's nearest beach, Monwabisi, is considered dangerous due to high crime rates and strong rip currents (see Fisher, 2020; Palm, 2018) and would thus not be a realistic nor appropriate setting for a local child to experience a comparable early morning adventure. Thus, the depicted scene on pages 6 and 7 of a White girl and her dog exploring a South African beach alone at dawn is culturally and experientially limited to address only a small part of the population, and thus fails to include the realities and lived experiences of the majority of South African children.

Unit 2: Double Page Spread 12-13

This spread portrays a key moment within the narrative: the discovery of the striped catshark trapped in the rockpool. Laddie notices the "dark figure" at the bottom of the rockpool first and brings it to Paula's attention. She in turn interprets the figure as "a huge stripy fish" and points a finger at it in amazement. The verbal and visual elements work together in a complementary way to reveal the striped catshark to the reader. Furthermore,

this double page spread is decisive in positioning the story within a South African context and thereby colouring the picturebook's ecocritical stance as distinctly local. The following paragraphs explore these claims in more depth.

The interplay between the verbal and visual elements across pages 12 and 13 demonstrate the picturebook's complementary categorisation under Nikolajeva and Scott's picturebook typology. The words on page 12 leave the reader in suspense regarding the "dark figure swimming at the bottom" of the rockpool, while the words on page 13 fill this gap only partially. By describing what she sees as "a huge stripy fish", Paula exposes her naivety to the reader as she does not recognise the "fish" to be a shark. Taxonomically, she is not wholly incorrect as sharks are a class of fish; however, the term "fish" seems too wide and nondescript for an animal that has as distinct an appearance and as crucial a role within marine ecosystems as a shark. The illustration shows an anatomically correct and recognisable striped catshark, thereby complementing the words by filling their gap. However, not every reader would necessarily recognise and interpret the illustration correctly, as a young reader might not be able to identify the species from the image either. In this way, Paula's description may echo that of a child encountering a depiction of a striped catshark for the first time. Alternatively, an experienced reader mediating the child's reading experience may identify the species and thus fill the gap for the child. Nevertheless, while the illustration complements the words and reveals the species, it remains possible that this gap may only be truly filled when Paula's parents reveal it to be a striped catshark on page 28. The picturebook's complementarity thus runs throughout the narrative and reserves the final revelation of the mysterious fish's true identification for the final pages of the story.

Apart from the cover image and title, this double page spread marks the first appearance of the striped catshark in the text and is thus significant in colouring the story as distinctly South African. As outlined in the broad analysis, the striped catshark is endemic to South Africa's coastal waters, meaning that it is found nowhere else on earth. Its presence thus solidifies the setting as being in South Africa. The various species featured in preceding pages also strongly suggest a setting along Africa's south-western coast, yet this could be as extensive as the geographical range from South Africa's Western Cape up to Angola's coastline. It is precisely the appearance of the striped catshark on pages 12 and 13 that unmistakably anchors the story's setting to South Africa, the only coastline on earth where the striped catshark dwells. As mentioned in the broad analysis, further markers of place such as the distinct rolling landscape and fynbos vegetation (endemic shrubland) conjoin with species indicators such as the striped catshark in bringing the unique Cape Peninsula to life.

Therefore, pages 12 and 13 are particularly significant in determining the book's distinctly South African ecocritical position.

Unit 3: Double Page Spread 20-21

The scene unfolding across pages 20 and 21 is a sequence from Paula's dream and displays the underwater marine ecosystem. Paula is enveloped in an air bubble and portrayed from behind as she gazes at the kelp forest teeming with life. This perspective positions her as the central figure in the image and provides a view of the scene from a vantage point similar to her own. Visually, this may suggest an anthropocentric perspective with the human at the centre surrounded by the animal kingdom. Yet the image may also be argued to adopt a strongly ecocentric focus. The bubble surrounding Paula emphasises that she is out of her element as a human under the ocean, and thus decentres the human as the locus of power and attention. The image may instead be interpreted as taking the marine ecosystem, in its full and thriving splendour, as its main subject. In this reading of the image, Paula's position places her as an outsider and intruder in the kelp forest. The ocean's intricate and beautiful balance of life is thus upheld without human interference, and it is best kept pristine and healthy in this way. The spread thus invites convincing interpretations from both anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives, and for this reason is coded as ambivalent under the NatCul Matrix.

On the matrix's vertical axis of celebrating and problematising nature, the double page spread evokes wonder and curiosity for the underwater world. It depicts the seascape as beautiful, pristine, harmonious, and otherworldly. If interpreted through Paula's eyes from an anthropocentric perspective, the scene is imbued with magical splendour as she beholds the rich and healthy biodiversity. Similarly, from an ecocentric perspective the ecosystem appears to be thriving, and is untouched from environmental degradation as brought on by human interference as an effect of the Anthropocene. Hence, the spread celebrates nature from both an anthropocentric and ecocentric perspective.

Another significant feature of pages 20 and 21 is that they contain no words. This stylistic feature, the absence of words, is found throughout Paula's dream sequence and thus acts as an indicator that this is a different realm and mode from her daily life. In other words, the absence of verbal text signifies to the reader that these pages belong together to form a sequence, namely that of Paula's dream. Furthermore, this stylistic choice echoes the reality of being submerged in the ocean, a domain devoid of speech, as there are no words underwater. This further underscores that this is not a human territory or domain, and is thus

ruled by the natural environment and ecosystem. Moreover, the absence of words serves to communicate and echo this submersion under the ocean and immersion in the dream, and thereby demands a deeper engagement and developed visual literacy from the reader in order to recognise and understand the dream sequence.

Unit 4: Page 26

Page 26 presents a crucial turning point in the narrative regarding empathy for the nonhuman 'other', which renders it especially significant for closer ecocritical analysis, albeit brief. This is the first instance in the story that Paula demonstrates her compassion for the "big stripy fish" and decides to take action. She realises that it is within her power to alert her parents so that together they can rescue the trapped animal. This is a key moment of empathy for the nonhuman 'other', as Paula is finally able to understand and imagine the distress of the shark and thus wants to help it. Although she could not empathise with nor relate to the shark's circumstances when she first found it in the rockpool, the dream of being trapped under the ocean caused Paula to experience feelings of distress which now enable her to relate to the shark. Particularly Bartosch's (2013) concept of 'EnvironMentality' is relevant and applicable here: as a work of fiction, the picturebook invites the reader to tap into their imagination and consider the 'other' both in human and nonhuman form. In other words, the reader imagines themselves into both Paula and the shark's worlds respectively, thus thinking and feeling like the girl and the trapped animal. Similarly, Paula's empathy for the shark may further spark empathy within the reader. It is this ability to empathise with the 'other' that spurs Paula's decision to act and thus creates the decisive turning point in the story.

Unit 5: Double Page Spread 30-31

A close up of the striped catshark is the main focal point of this double page spread. Page 30 depicts Paula and her family standing on the shore and looking out over the ocean as they envisage the little shark swimming away. The verbal text suggests Paula's continued empathy and care for the shark as she is worried about its wellbeing, while the illustration depicts her waving and smiling. Her parents' reassurance that "[t]he shark is home now" implies that it is safe within its natural habitat. Page 31 portrays the striped catshark at eye level as it swims towards the reader and out to sea, free at last. This interplay between the words on page 30 and the image on page 31 underlines the picturebook's complementarity. The image serves to confirm that the shark is in fact safe, thus pacifying the worry in Paula's words. Visually, page 31 in particular (and the spread in sum) is interesting in its composition

and shift in perspective when compared to previous pages in the picturebook. The following passages will explore this shift by juxtaposing the double page spread with units 1 and 3, as well as analysing its ecocritical stance according to the NatCul Matrix.

Unit 1 (pages 6 and 7) provides a stark contrast to unit 5 as the former is cast from a high angle that overlooks the vast ocean and sky. The view stretches out over the ocean towards the distant horizon, thus drawing the reader out into the distance and suggesting a large and expansive world to explore. Pages 30 and 31 reverse this perspective by looking back at the shore from a point in the ocean. The angle is low and on eye level with the shark, and is furthermore split between water and land as the rolling sea plunges part of the view underwater. This low angle suggests a position of equality and familiarity between the shark and the reader, especially insofar as the family standing on the shore cannot see and locate the shark as easily and directly as the reader can. Visually, the close up of the shark thus suggests that the reader is accompanying it rather than standing alongside the family and surveying the scene from their perspective. In this way, the reader witnesses first-hand the shark's return to the open ocean, and can see that it is indeed free and safe. Interestingly, this in turn suggests a strong similarity between units 1 and 5: they both provide an ecocentric perspective that grants the reader access to the natural environment from a nonhuman perspective. However, in my application of the NatCul Matrix, I decided to code pages 30 and 31 differently to each other despite their unit as a double page spread. Page 30 is decidedly anthropocentric in its verbal text, whereby Paula expresses her concern for the shark and its swift disappearance. Her worry and fear are human reactions within this context, and her parents' reassurance seems to follow a 'happy ending' script that is common within children's narratives. Page 30 is thus coded as anthropocentric, while page 31 aligns with the ecocentric perspective found in unit 1.

Another interesting and relevant contrast is detectable between unit 5 and unit 3 (pages 20 and 21). In the latter double page spread, the point of view is located behind Paula and positions her as an observer in the underwater realm of her dream. Her enclosure inside the air bubble further emphasises that she is an outsider within the marine environment. In contrast, unit 5 restores the natural order by depicting Paula and her family on dry land, while the previously trapped shark is returned to its natural environment of the open ocean. Thus, the human and the animal are depicted in their respective natural habitats. Despite their separation, the narrative ends positively by celebrating the striped catshark's return to the ocean and the ensuing restoration of nature's harmonious balance. Therefore, under the NatCul Matrix pages 30 and 31 are coded as celebrating nature.

## Analysis Conclusion

Considering the critical content analysis in sum yields profound findings given the picturebook's position as an ecocritical text within a postcolonial and culturally diverse South African context. The research questions set out at the start of the dissertation have been partially answered by analysing *The Striped Catshark* through the ecocentric vision "glasses", while further aspects of the questions are still to be addressed in final critical reflections. The first question asks in what ways children's texts may encourage an affinity with nature and a behaviour of environmental stewardship. In this regard, the critical content analysis demonstrates that *The Striped Catshark* imparts a strong environmental message that stems from its core ecocritical ideology. Application of the NatCul Matrix shows that the book celebrates nature from a predominantly anthropocentric perspective. The young girl Paula acts as the main anthropocentric focaliser in this regard. While discovering the wonders of the marine environment, she develops empathy and understanding for the striped catshark and takes decisive action to rescue it. In this way, she is cast as a role-model of environmental stewardship. The picturebook makes use of fiction's prime tool, the imagination, to teach and foster empathy for the nonhuman 'other' and thereby connects child readers with the natural environment. Furthermore, through the specific locality of the South African setting, the picturebook promotes an ecocriticism that is sensitive to and appreciative of native species and ecosystems. Especially endemic species, such as the striped catshark itself, root the story in a rich history of local biodiversity that may cultivate young readers' interest in and care for the environment. The analysis also reveals how the picturebook functions as a literary work that relies on the complementary interplay between words and images, thus further positioning it as a cultural and artistic artefact rather than a didactic textbook. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that *The Striped Catshark* is an ecocritical construct that deliberately aims to stimulate young readers' minds, imagination, curiosity, and emotional capacities by introducing them to the natural world through an immersive narrative that fosters empathy, care, appreciation, and respect for the environment. In response to the first research question, therefore, it is well within the scope of children's literature to encourage an appreciation and care for the environment through ecocritical narratives that celebrate the natural world, especially by role-modelling environmental stewardship within the narrative and employing realistic fiction as a means of developing empathy for the ecological 'other'. As ideological messaging is an inextricable component of any text, children's literature and media are therefore crucial vehicles for communicating a worldview of a healthy, harmonious, and flourishing ecosphere.

The second research question explores how ecocritical children's texts may simultaneously serve as a means for social justice by providing diverse representations in relation to postcolonial, cultural, racial, ethnic, and socio-political concerns, especially stemming from southern Africa. This question is particularly relevant insofar as environmental degradation and societal oppression have a close-knit history, as is the case in South Africa and numerous other nations subjected to the "slow violence" of colonialism. The critical content analysis finds that, due to the protagonist's White and middle-class demographic, *The Striped Catshark* does not present a culturally, racially, and economically relatable reality for the vast majority of South African children. The picturebook is thus limited in its ethnocultural scope and reach, rendering it insufficient under the aims of multicultural and diverse children's literature. However, the analysis brings this shortcoming into focus by acknowledging the tension between multiculturalism and (White) authentic representation. The reality depicted in the picturebook strongly reflects my personal reality of being a White South African, and in this sense, it aligns with the concepts of authenticity and authority. Yet the fact remains that White perspectives and representations are overused and dominant within the realms of children's publishing and media. The analysis draws attention to the representations of South African lives and experiences that remain side-lined and invisible within the picturebook. By taking the nearby neighbourhood of Khayelitsha as a contrasting example, the analysis shows just how disparate the realities of children living in the Cape Peninsula can be, and thus underscores the need for cultural diversity and sensitivity within children's texts that thematise the environment. Further reflective and imaginative engagement with this research question will ensue in the critical reflection.

## Critical Reflection

In this critical reflection I intend to offer perspectives and insights beyond the delimitations of the critical content analysis. The reflection is divided into three parts: 1) the impact of my White positionality on the creation of the picturebook; 2) possible developments and improvements to the book; and 3) implications for the future of ecocritical and postcolonial children's texts and related research within these fields. These aspects will further address the research questions (especially the second question) and cover key points, such as the refinement of illustrations and aesthetic elements as a crucial component of the book, the questionable use of explicit didacticism in environmental messaging, and the urgent need for a truly multicultural and diverse range of ecocritical children's literature and media.

Creation of the Picturebook and the Issue of White Privilege

First, I would like to offer insights into the making of the picturebook and reflect on my authorial decisions in relation to my position as a White and privileged South African. Environmental picturebooks and ecocriticism have been central tenets of my dissertation project form the outset, well before I started to conceive the narrative for *The Striped Catshark*. Through coursework and additional research projects I became increasingly aware of the close intersections between environmental activism and social justice issues, especially concerning race and systemic marginalisation, diversity, and postcolonialism. Hence, I decided to connect these issues explicitly in a practice-based dissertation. It was clear to me that the environmental picturebook I wanted to produce would be set in South Africa and focalise the perspective of a local, young, and Non-White protagonist. I was convinced that a White perspective could not do justice to the severity of environmental and social challenges faced by many South Africans on a daily basis.

My idea was thus to collaborate with Ayakha Melithafa, a youth climate activist from Cape Town, in order to tell the story of her activism in her own words. A participatory and collaborative method would have allowed us, together, to portray this adolescent's voice, agency, and struggle. My role would have been to facilitate, guide, and illustrate Melithafa's story so that the result would be a picturebook authentically told from a cultural insider's perspective who's racial, socioeconomic, and cultural background is nevertheless distinctly different from my own. However, several circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic and Melithafa's final high school exams, made my envisioned collaborative project impossible within the dedicated time frame. Hence, I revised my picturebook idea to fit parameters that I could fulfil alone without a collaboration, which ultimately meant resorting to my own background and cultural milieu to tell an environmental story from an authentic perspective. The characters in the picturebook are inspired by my family members as well as by my own imagination, and thus the representations in the book are an authentic rendition of my worldview. Although presenting a White perspective contradicts my initial intention, I did not want to commit the fallacy of misrepresenting a cultural group's lived experience in the name of multiculturalism and diversity. In other words, I did not want to be a White author misrepresenting a Black person's story.

What remains is the unresolved tension between authentic, but White, authorship and the need for multicultural and ethnically diverse representations. While a primary focus of my picturebook is its ecocritical component, I nevertheless remain determined to incorporate and explore its connection with multiculturalism and postcolonialism through this

dissertation. This raises the question which I brought up earlier in the chapter on theory and methodology, and which I wish to address further now: to what extent should White perspectives in children's texts continue to be published, particularly within a highly diverse and postcolonial context such as South Africa?

White protagonists have received, and continue to receive, a disproportionate amount of coverage and portrayal as the 'universal' perspective in children's publishing (see Nel, 2017; Dudek, 2013). Given this imbalance, the argument advanced by proponents of multiculturalism is that an urgent push for the equal representation of diverse voices is required in children's publishing, both in texts and within the industry itself, so that inauthentic perspectives and misrepresentations are eradicated and replaced by authentic, multicultural, and diverse ones (see Gopalakrishnan, 2011). Yet practically, this is a shift that cannot be brought about instantaneously, no matter how fervently the publishing industry would commit to the task. Nevertheless, as White readers continue to represent a part of the population and cultural context, and a sizeable share of the western market, they arguably warrant consideration and representation within children's texts. I suggest that a more collaborative, just, and strategic approach to this conundrum is necessary in order to rectify and rebalance the scales. White authors and publishers who have the access and means to be seen, heard, and read should, as a matter of urgency, use their positions of privilege and power to collaborate with and make visible the stories of those who have been and continue to be underrepresented, marginalised, ignored, erased, and/or rendered invisible under the "slow violence" of oppressive and colonial pasts. More than this, the privileged and powerful in children's publishing should make it a main priority to pursue authentic perspectives and stories that need to be amplified in the name of multiculturalism and diversity. While prominent South African writers such as Beverly Naidoo have written children's fiction from Black and Non-White perspectives in opposition to the apartheid regime and other injustices, these were necessary, valuable, and highly laudable efforts given the difficulty, in fact near impossibility, of directly working and collaborating with the people whose lives they were intending to portray. Naidoo's debut novel *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) questioned apartheid and was banned in South Africa, while Black writers had insurmountable obstacles to overcome in attempts to voice their stories, struggles, and perspectives under the oppressive regime. In the so-called free and democratic South Africa of today, interracial collaboration is no longer a crime—which means there is no excuse for poor renditions and misrepresentations of multicultural and racial groups' realities. Although nearly 30 years have passed since the fall of apartheid, literacy rates and economic buying power within

previously oppressed and disadvantaged households remain severely compromised. Without serious educational and socioeconomic upliftment, families across the spectrum of racial and cultural diversity will not be in equal positions to buy and support multicultural books. Naidoo (cited in Travis, 2008) argued over a decade ago that it is

> ironic at a point when there has been so much talk in publishing about diversity, that a predominantly white western market remains the driver. Literature has an important role to play in our cultural life. (6)

Her point still rings true in contemporary South Africa. In addition, schools, libraries, and other educational and cultural institutions are significant stakeholders that need to increase their support of multicultural children's publishing, especially in the South African context.

Collaborative storytelling in particular could thus provide a crucial step towards increasing culturally diverse and authentic representations within children's texts. Beyond this, systemic barriers of structural racism and inequality need to be annihilated so as to provide an equitable and fair socio-political playing field for all groups and cultures to find their voice through authentic representations in children's texts. This is precisely the point that I want to make in this dissertation through my analysis and reflection—a point that I knowingly failed to make in my picturebook by giving up multicultural and diverse representation in favour of my own White cultural authenticity. Ideally, a collaboration with a cultural insider would have provided a means of authentically portraying and amplifying a local perspective; yet failing this, I opted to rely on my own perspective instead, which paradoxically has led me to a deeper critical engagement with the problem of power and diverse representations within postcolonial contexts.

Possible Development and Improvement

The above reflection on my initial vision for the picturebook, given my position as a White author, opens up a plethora of possible improvements and developments regarding the book's perspective and focalisation, underlying cultural positioning, and overall plot. Such developments or alterations could vary widely in their proximity to or departure from the current version of the book. One may well wonder how the story might change if the protagonist were a Black child living in Khayelitsha near Monwabisi Beach. Would the words and images still exude a celebratory perception of nature if the protagonist finds herself in an environmentally degraded landscape that is overcrowded with dilapidated houses, shacks, pollution, livestock, and human and animal effluent? In this case, I speculate that under the NatCul Matrix the environment would be cast as problematic and riddled with

waste, decay, and ill health. From this example it becomes strikingly clear that the concept of celebrating nature as a beautiful space for leisure, recreation, exploration, and wonder is often reserved for privileged classes. Therefore, a stark change of perspective would probably upturn the story and its ecocritical stance completely. Another possibility could be to include or contrast a Non-White perspective alongside Paula's focalisation. This would also jar the reader by demonstrating how disparate and diverse the lives of children in South Africa can be, and how these children have different perceptions of and interactions with nature depending on where they find themselves on the spectrum of privilege versus disadvantage. However, as argued in the previous section, focalising the story from a Non-White perspective necessitates a close collaboration with a cultural insider. Since my intended collaboration was not possible at the time of crafting the story, I remain unable to offer an authentic and genuine account from a different focal perspective and will thus not dwell on this trajectory further.

Another early idea I had, again as an attempt to avoid writing from a racially and culturally specific viewpoint, was to create a folk of ocean-creatures similar to mermaids, who dwell in the Cape Peninsula's underwater kelp forests. To tell the story from such a creature's perspective could offer a way around the conundrum of race and culture, although it could also risk having the opposite effect by veiling White ideology and assumptions under the guise of fantasy. Similarly, the creature in *Greenling* by Levi Pinfold (2015) appears to be an anthropocentric embodiment of nature itself who is devoid of a recognisable race, ethnicity, and cultural background. However, the creature is positioned within a White culture and context, and thus the story subliminally adopts a White perspective. Furthermore, would a non-racialised ocean-creature truly offer a relatable perspective for child readers, or would it instead push my story irrevocably into the realm of fantasy? Moreover, the point of the picturebook is to ground the fictional narrative in what is possible, real, and relatable so as to inspire environmental care and stewardship in the real world. Thus, a close proximity to nature and reality is necessary for the story to serve its purpose. For this reason, I decided not to venture into the world of the fantastical with my picturebook, and thus abandoned the idea of ocean-dwelling creatures.

Beyond these concerns of cultural perspective and plot, I would like to consider the illustrations and overall aesthetic of the picturebook for further development. Visual and artistic features are integral components of picturebooks and can play significant roles in their analyses. However, due to the limited time frame of this dissertation project I was unable to perfect the images for *The Striped Catshark* and had to make do with sketches for the

purposes of the analysis. Thus, the analysis limited itself to considering only the main messages and content of the illustrations, and I now intend to explore the images regarding their unfulfilled aesthetic potential. In this case, I accept the plot and words of the story to be complete, and turn my attention only to the visual elements. The sketches-cum-illustrations lend themselves well to reflection and critique that can be actively incorporated in future. Undoubtedly, they require enhancing and refinement regarding line, style, and colour. The current sketches exhibit a restricted and subdued colour palette; the dawn scenes would benefit from a wider selection of gentle pastel hues, while an increase in vibrancy and contrast across the colour palette would greatly enhance the daytime scenes. Furthermore, I would like to develop the style to contain more detail, as this is particularly suitable for an environmental picturebook that seeks to offer recognisable and accurate representations of native and endemic species. Adding finer details to the illustrations of the landscape would make the floral kingdom come alive and thereby render it more readily identifiable as the iconic fynbos bushland of the Cape. The same holds true for the depictions of the shoreline with its abundance of marine and bird life. Improving the level of detail and artistic refinement in the illustrations of the characters, especially of Paula and Laddie, would add more depth and dynamism to their gestures, body language, and facial expressions. Overall, an illustration style reminiscent of David Wiesner's marine-themed picturebook *Flotsam* (2006) would work particularly well in bringing the landscape, underwater world, fauna and flora, and characters of the picturebook to life. While I am in no position to emulate Wiesner's artistic genius, I appreciate and recognise his art as an excellent source of inspiration in directing and refining the illustrations of *The Striped Catshark*. Moreover, through continued artistic dedication I intend to polish the illustrations of my picturebook until they offer a realistic, accurate, and detailed rendition of the Cape Peninsula and its wondrous biodiversity.

Implications for Future Children's Texts and Research

As my suggestions for the picturebook's further development and improvement demonstrate, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction can become blurred in environmental storytelling that seeks to engage and inspire young readers. *The Striped Catshark* is deliberately a work of realistic fiction and decisively *not* a fact-laden textbook. In the critical content analysis I alluded to the risk of being overly didactic in environmental messaging, and I would like to emphasise this point through further reflection on what it means to create stories that serve the vision of a flourishing, harmonious, sustainable, and

balanced ecosphere. My argument is that future ecocritical children's texts should seek to embed pro-environmental attitudes, habits, and behaviours within cultural products such as literature and art, with the picturebook being an exemplary medium. Although formal education on climate change and environmental degradation plays a crucial role in understanding and cultivating a healthy conception of humanity's role and limitations within the ecosphere, environmental children's texts need to exist outside of and beyond the didactic concepts taught in schools and factual textbooks. In other words, an ecocentric vision needs to extend past the classroom and become embedded in culture and societal thought through literature, art, language, and other forms of storytelling. Fiction's strength lies in stirring the heart and imagination, and hence offers an exceptionally strong entry point for teaching young readers empathy and compassion for the natural world, which are in fact essential emotional capacities for confronting the environmental crisis. While studies exist on the development of cognitive and emotional literacy through fiction (for example, see Nikolajeva, 2013), more research is required specifically on the ability of children's fiction to foster the development of empathy and care in connection with pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes.

In addition to this, social justice issues are deeply implicated in environmental crises and climate change, and should thus not be cast as separate, unrelated concerns. More literary, artistic, and cultural texts that thematise the ecosphere, above all the environmental and climatic crises, are needed in order to create and promote a global societal culture of environmental care and stewardship among current and future generations. For this cultural paradigm shift towards environmental sustainability to be truly global, universally resonant, and deeply embedded, environmental narratives need to be represented as relatable realities for a multitude of diverse cultures, nations, communities, and groups. Especially vulnerable communities such as those suffering the effects of "slow violence" are implicated first hand in the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation that heavily impact on water and food security, weather, local infrastructures and economies, and a plethora of other sociocultural factors. Thus, authentically mirroring the realities and lived experiences of afflicted communities, especially through an emotively engaging and immersive medium such as the picturebook, plays a vital part in providing a cultural means of understanding, reacting to, and ultimately combatting threats to the environment. Further research is thus required on how the pro-environmental ideology of harmonious, respectful, healthy, and resourceful interactions with nature and the ecosphere at large can lead to lasting shifts in behaviours and attitudes that support and sustain the Earth. A new story of how humanity

relates to the world is needed, one that rewrites and redirects the exploitative, carbon-burning consumption of the Anthropocene. Moreover, as storytelling enables the construction of children's identities and their ways of cultural belonging, it is of utmost importance that future children's texts and research serve to create an attitude of care and stewardship towards the Earth.

# CONCLUSION

My dissertation project "Creating Children's Literature for an Ecocentric Future" has explored, analysed, and reflected on the environmentally themed children's picturebook *The Striped Catshark* using the critical theoretical framework of ecocentric vision "glasses". The guiding research questions throughout the critical content analysis and reflection have been: firstly, how can ecocritical children's literature encourage pro-environmental behaviour and attitudes? And secondly, how could such narratives furthermore decolonise representations of the Global South, and in particular of southern Africa, by offering authentic multicultural perspectives instead?

The following passages summarise the essential tenets and main findings of my dissertation. The literature review provided an overview of ecocriticism and its interdisciplinary overlap with the fields of children's literature and postcolonial theory. I argued that the latter's close imbrication with ecocritical concerns and its hitherto focus on adult literature necessitates its expansion into the realm of children's texts. The literature review also surveyed examples of primary texts within ecocritical children's literature, thereby emphasising the lack of literature that offers authentic representations from the Global South. In the subsequent chapter on theory and methodology, I developed a hybridised theoretical framework comprising ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism and diversity, which I called the ecocentric vision "glasses". This metaphorical pair of glasses combines anthropocentric and biocentric lenses to provide the analyst with a holistic ecocentric vision through which to conduct critical content analysis. The chapter also included picturebook theory and argued for the importance of this medium in challenging and changing dominant ideologies through storytelling. The methodology section outlined the structure of the ensuing analysis of *The Striped Catshark* as comprising a broad critical content analysis, in-depth analyses of five selected units, and a critical reflection. The analysis and reflection have each yielded results that, taken together, offer a holistic response to my research questions.

The findings of the critical content analysis underscore the picturebook's pro-environmental position that celebrates the unique local biodiversity. *The Striped Catshark* has been shown to possess a specifically South African ecocritical stance, predominantly recognisable through a host of native and endemic species, that relies on fiction and the child protagonist to foster empathy for the nonhuman 'other' and role-model environmental stewardship. The first research question has thus been extensively addressed through the

critical content analysis, with selected units from the picturebook providing substantiating evidence and examples. The second research question has been only partially addressed in the critical content analysis and has thus required further imaginative and reflective engagement in the critical reflection. The analysis drew attention to the picturebook's limited cultural perspective by offering a comparison between the experiences of children living in affluent Misty Cliffs versus impoverished Khayelitsha. Through the critical reflection I was able to further unpack concerns surrounding White authorship, authenticity, and multicultural representations within the highly diverse context of South Africa. My suggestion for the future of children's publishing thus prioritises embedding ecocritical storytelling within multicultural and diverse representations, which in turn speak to a wide and diverse audience of young readers. Insofar as White authors and publishers retain control over whose stories are told, they remain responsible and accountable for diversifying cultural representations through collaboration with cultural insiders. In this way, ecocritical children's texts should offer authentic perspectives that also mirror the realities of marginalised, silenced, and underrepresented groups.

The critical reflection has offered implications for the future development of both *The Striped Catshark* and the ecocritical-postcolonial-multicultural trajectory of children's literature and related research. While my research questions have thus been answered, they nevertheless indicate the urgent need for ecocritical children's literature that fosters environmental empathy and stewardship while simultaneously reflecting a multitude of children's cultures and realities. Therefore, if ecocritical children's texts are to be successful catalysts in the paradigm shift towards a global culture that is empathic, nurturing, respectful, and sustainable towards the natural environment—in essence, ecocentric—they need to permeate society as cultural, literary, and artistic artefacts that authentically represent the realities and experiences of a diverse range of individuals and their respective communities. Given the mounting urgency of environmental, climatic, and social crises, children's literature and media of the twenty-first century cannot afford to ignore the link between ecocritical concerns and social injustices. Instead, texts for children should demonstrate cognisance of the imbrications of environmental, climatic, postcolonial, multicultural, and social justice issues and employ creative strategies that evoke empathy for both the human and nonhuman 'other'. In conclusion, children's publishing is thus in need of powerful storytelling that immerses children of all cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in the wonders of the natural world and inspires them to nurture and care for the Earth.

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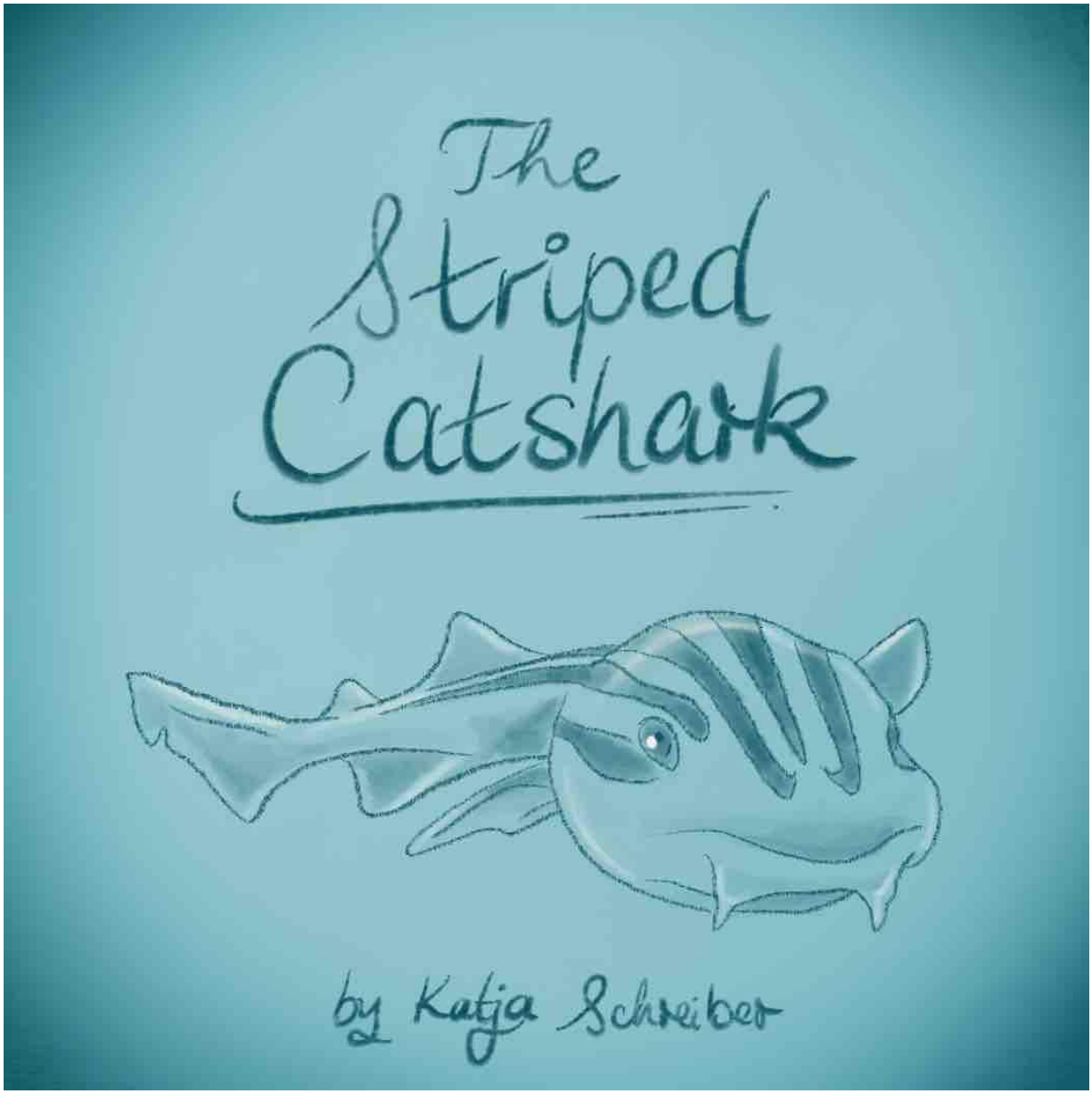
**APPENDIX**



The Striped Catshark

by Katja Schreiber

*For James*

*In loving memory of Pauline Schreiber*

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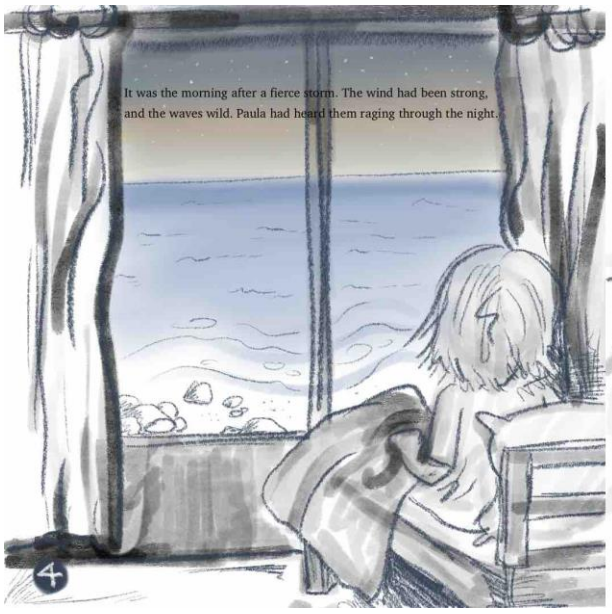
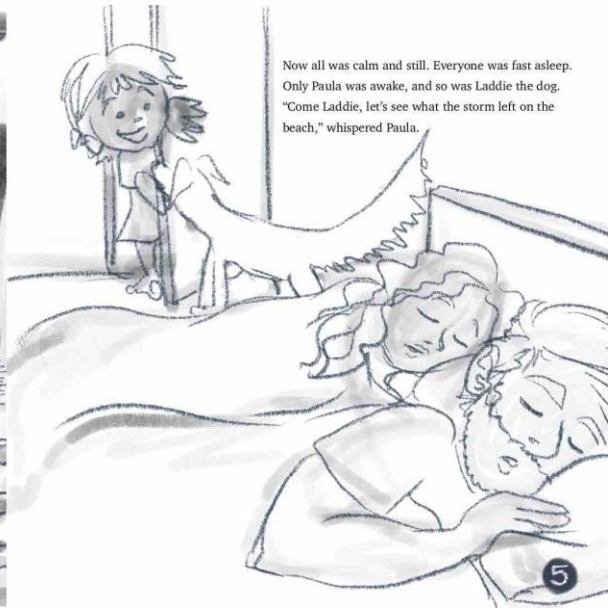
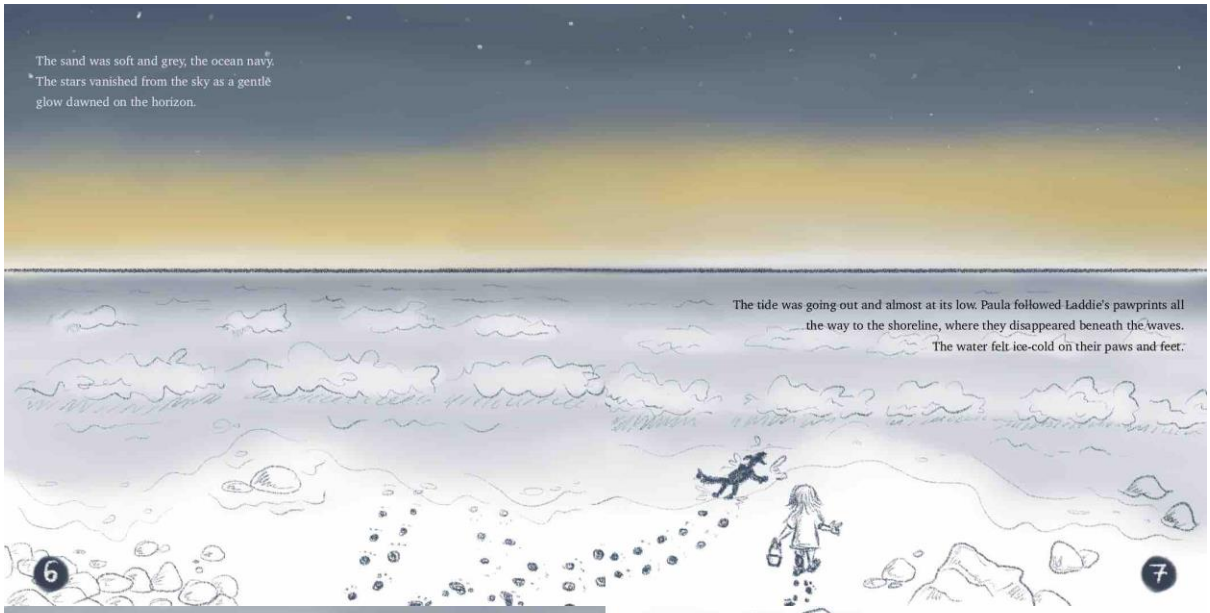
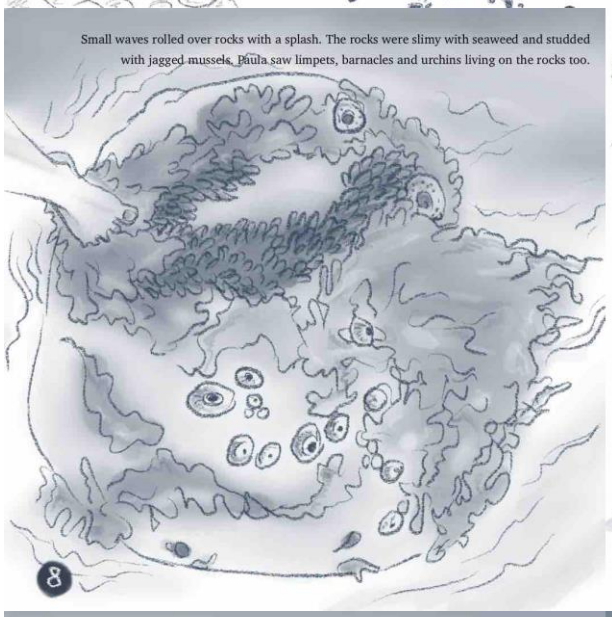
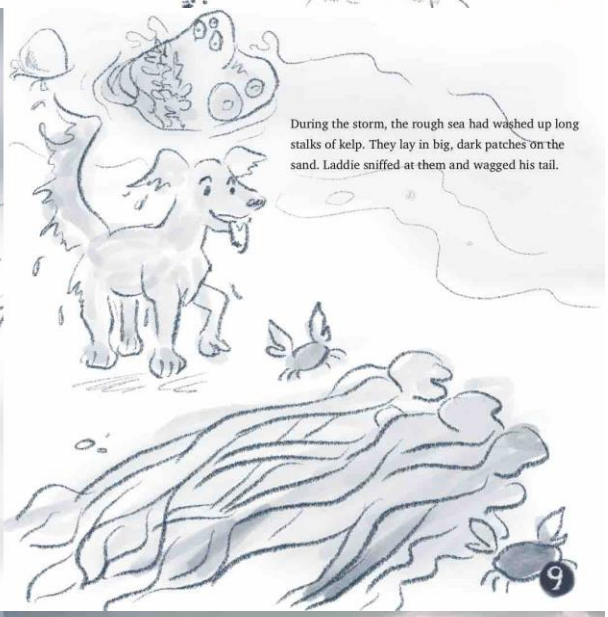


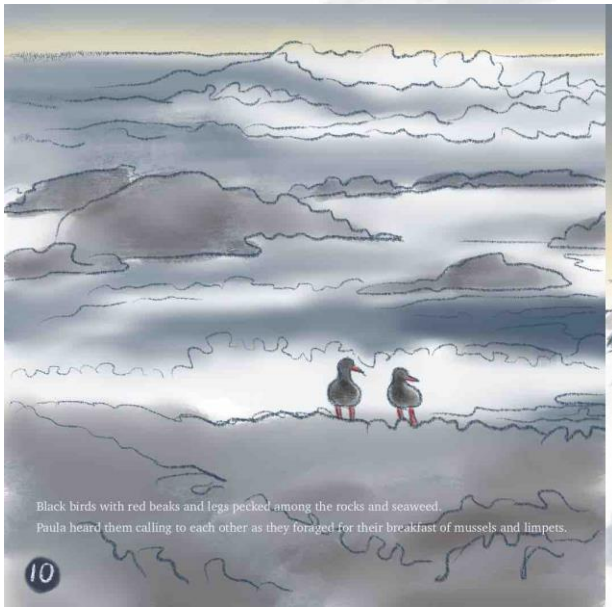



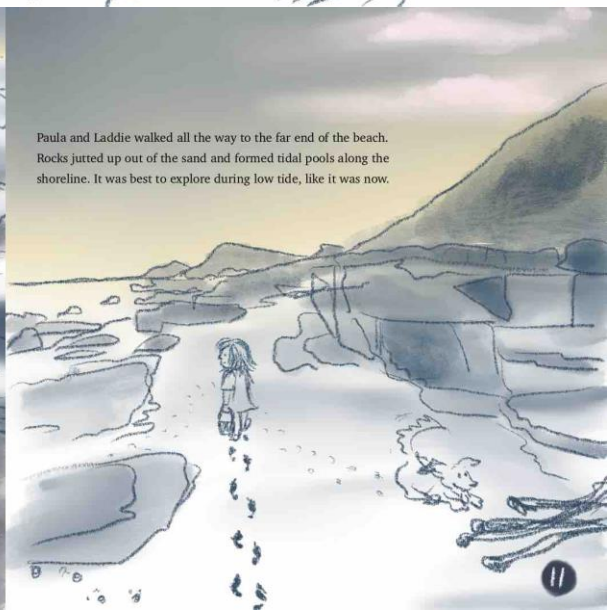

The sand was soft and grey, the ocean navy.
The stars vanished from the sky as a gentle glow dawned on the horizon.
6

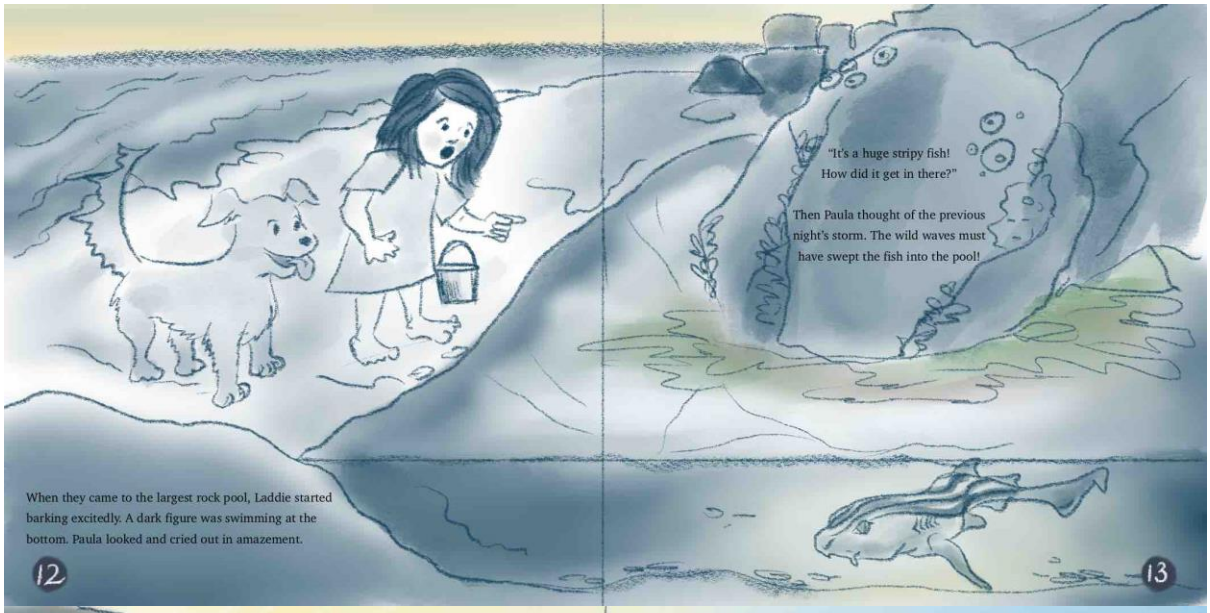

The tide was going out and almost at its low. Paula followed Laddie's pawprints all the way to the shoreline, where they disappeared beneath the waves. The water felt ice-cold on their paws and feet.
7

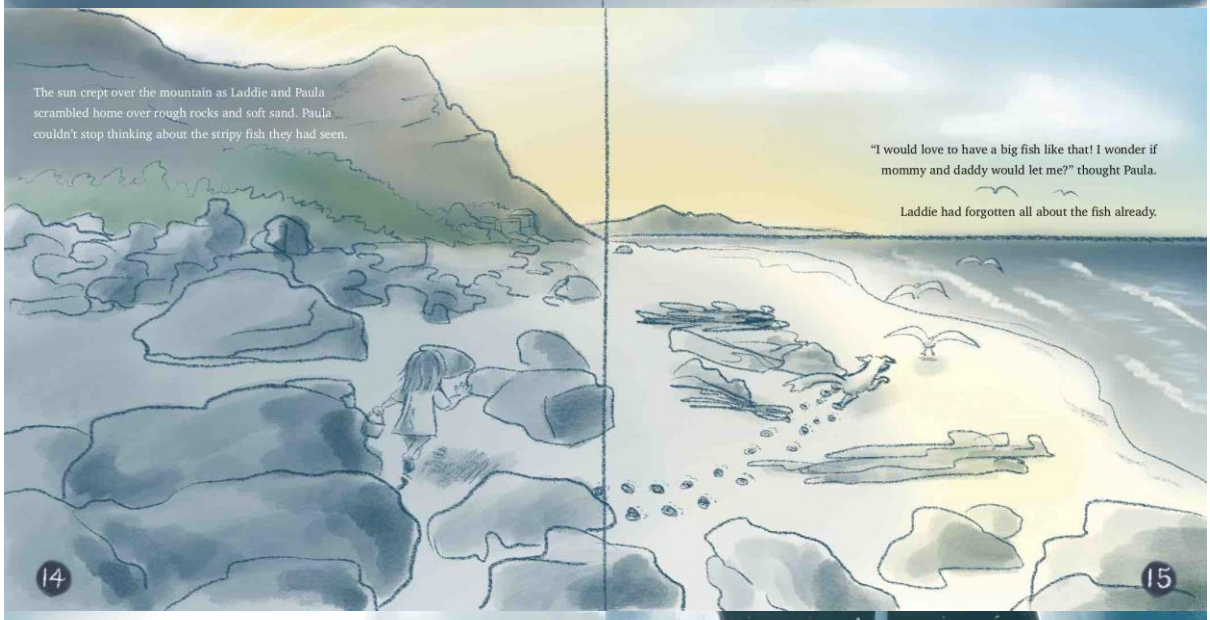

Small waves rolled over rocks with a splash. The rocks were slimy with seaweed and studded with jagged mussels. Paula saw limpets, barnacles and urchins living on the rocks too.
8


During the storm, the rough sea had washed up long stalks of kelp. They lay in big, dark patches on the sand. Laddie sniffed at them and wagged his tail.
9


Black birds with red beaks and legs pecked among the rocks and seaweed.
Paula heard them calling to each other as they foraged for their breakfast of mussels and limpets.
10


Paula and Laddie walked all the way to the far end of the beach. Rocks jutted up out of the sand and formed tidal pools along the shoreline. It was best to explore during low tide, like it was now.
11

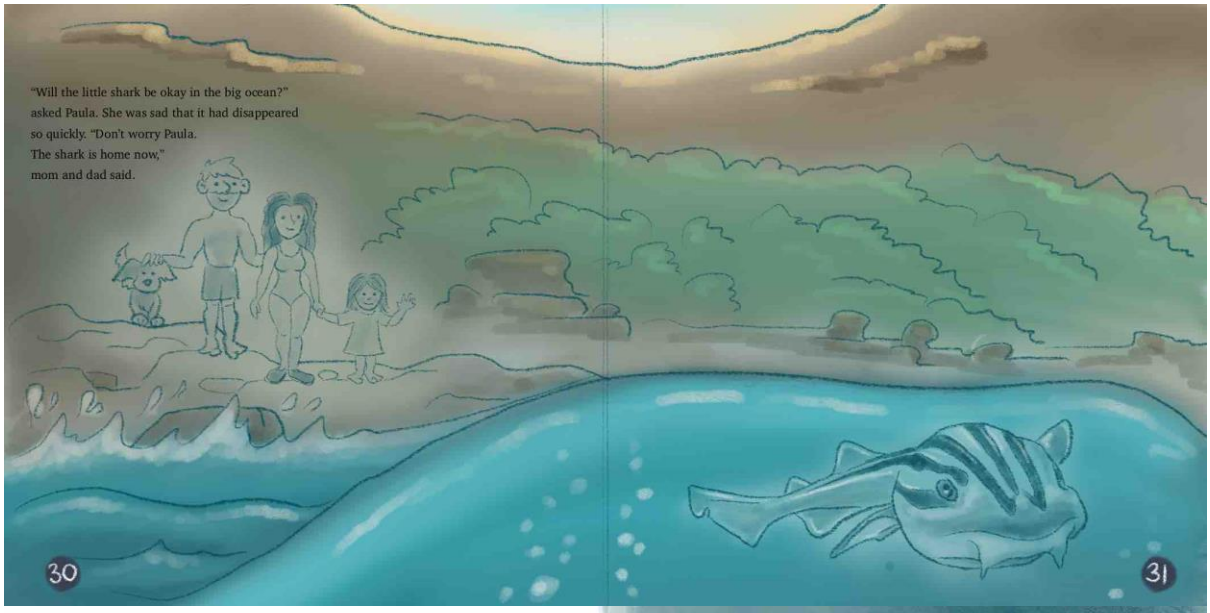

When they came to the largest rock pool, Laddie started barking excitedly. A dark figure was swimming at the bottom. Paula looked and cried out in amazement.
12
"It's a huge stripy fish! How did it get in there?"
Then Paula thought of the previous night's storm. The wild waves must have swept the fish into the pool!
13


The sun crept over the mountain as Laddie and Paula scrambled home over rough rocks and soft sand. Paula couldn't stop thinking about the stripy fish they had seen.
14
"I would love to have a big fish like that! I wonder if mommy and daddy would let me?" thought Paula.
Laddie had forgotten all about the fish already.
15


In her excitement Paula announced, "I want an aquarium for a big, stripy fish!"
Mom and dad shook their heads. "Fish are happiest living in their natural habitats," they explained.
16
"How would you like being imprisoned in a tank?" they asked. Paula didn't like their answer and was upset for the rest of the day. That night she went to bed feeling miserable.
17


All of a sudden, Paula awoke
from the sound of crashing waves...
crash
splash
18
19
20
21
POP!
22
23


24
"Oh Laddie, thank goodness it's you!
I had such a frightening dream," said Paula.
25
Paula realised how trapped the stripy fish must feel in the tidal pool. "Daddy, Mommy, we must help the big stripy fish! It's stuck in a rockpool and can't get out."
26
Dad and mom grabbed their snorkelling masks and a large net. The four of them rushed to the largest rockpool at the far end of the beach.
27
"This isn't an ordinary fish, Paula. This is a species of shark. It's called a striped catshark," said mom. Paula was amazed. "Not all sharks are dangerous to humans," said dad.
28
Mom and dad firmly held the catshark in the net. It thrashed about, trying to get free. They released it into the open ocean, and it swam away in an instant.
29


"Will the little shark be okay in the big ocean?"
asked Paula. She was sad that it had disappeared
so quickly. "Don't worry Paula.
The shark is home now,"
mom and dad said.
30
31

The End.

After a stormy night Paula and Laddie find a large, stripy fish in a tidal pool. Paula wants to keep it, but her parents refuse. She has a dream of exploring the ocean in a bubble, but it soon turns into a nightmare. When she wakes up, Paula realises how caged the fish must feel. Will she find a way to help the trapped animal return back into the open ocean?