

Troubling the Waters: Using Stories to Complicate and Deepen our Connections to Water

Candance Doerr-Stevens, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Abstract

This article provides an overview of “Water as Resource, Relative and Place”: an online collection of eco texts including picturebooks, chapter books, YA novels, and media texts that illustrate a wide range of relationships with water. The article includes a brief history on how the online resource was started and reflects on how we all wear multiple hats in how we relate to water. In better understanding our multifaceted relationship to water, we can better position ourselves in our teaching about, caring for, and flourishing with water.

Keywords

Climate literacy, eco-fiction, ecocentric, interdependence

I was born in Minnesota, United States, known to many as “The Land of 10,000 Lakes.” I grew up canoeing on, camping alongside, fishing from, and hiking around many lakes and rivers. In many ways, bodies of water were playful companions in my childhood, an escape from the busyness of school and, later on, work. When I moved to the neighboring state of Wisconsin in 2013, I feared that I would have to give up my playful friendship with lakes and rivers. Hoping to preserve this connection in my own children, I sought out stories in the form of picturebooks to read to them. Titles such as *Up*

North at the Cabin (Chall, 1992) and *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987) shaped the relationship I wanted to preserve and pass on to my children.

As I've settled into my new home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my playmate connection to water has been troubled in several productive ways. Lake Michigan, the largest in surface area among the great lakes, is more than a playful friend to the city of Milwaukee. Lake Michigan's presence and impact on the city is humbling. More than a hard boundary of where human-dominated land ends and the vast mass of fresh water begins, the lake impacts several socio-political forces within the city and beyond. Less playful than the water stories I grew up with, I read in the papers and heard on the news how people argued over who has access to the lake and its waters. Health officials caution us about the lead or PFAS in the water and Business owners litigate over rights to dump sewage and build pipelines. Instead of the lake being a respected neighbor we care for, visit and honor, the lake is too often described as an object to be controlled and commodified, barring access to some, and building pipelines to others.

In her [2014 speech for the Bioneers convention](#), Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that hope for our environment begins with a shift in how we connect to our surroundings. She states that it is not the land or waters that are broken or in need of repair, but rather our relationship to them that is broken and needs healing. How we relate to each other matters. These relationships shape what Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) calls our relationality in the world, which is a shared sense of [interconnectedness](#) and accountability to other living beings both human and non-human. In thinking about how we relate to land and water, we begin to see them less as fixed objects and more as dynamic beings with needs for care and attention. Perhaps one of the first steps toward building healthy relationships with our shared environments is by asking whether we see the land and waters as our neighbors or our possessions.

One vehicle for shaping our relationships with each other and the living non-humans surrounding us is by developing climate literacy through engagement through stories. Climate literacy emphasizes the importance of story and its narrative capacity, "to create ecocentric ways of thinking, being, and acting." (Oziewicz, 2023, p. 35). Through stories we begin to see ourselves in relationship with our surroundings.

Diving into the Online Water Collection

In an attempt to cultivate a more dynamic and diverse set of relationships to water for myself, my children, and the many teachers I work with, I have begun collecting and sharing titles of water narratives that present bodies of water in different ways. Through my teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and my work with the UWM Writing Project, I work with hundreds of teachers who teach about water with their students. Their input has helped to jumpstart this collection and will continue to build and expand it. The collection currently includes picturebooks, chapter books, graphic novels and media texts that illustrate a wide range of relationships with water. Hoping to emphasize that our connections to water comprise so much more than water as an object to be bought and sold, I have organized the stories into three relational themes: water as natural resource, water as living relative, and water as place (Figure 1). The [full online list of 30+ titles can be accessed here](#) and on Table 1 located at the end of this article. Each theme is explained in more detail below.

The screenshot shows the UWM Libraries website. At the top, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee logo and 'UWM Libraries' are visible. Below the header, a breadcrumb trail reads: 'UWM Libraries / UWM Libraries Research and Course Guides / eco-literacies and place-based climate literacies guide / Water as Natural Resource:'. The main heading is 'eco-literacies and place-based climate literacies guide'. On the left, a vertical navigation menu has five buttons: 'Home', 'Water', 'Water as Natural Resource:' (highlighted in yellow), 'Water as Place and Identity Collection', and 'Water as Living Entity, Relative Collection'. The main content area is titled 'Water as Natural Resource:' and contains the text: 'The titles below explore water as a resource in need of protection and thoughtful stewardship.' Below this, a 'Books' section features a book titled 'A River's Gifts' by Patricia Newman; Natasha Donovan (Illustrator). The book's ISBN is 1541598709 and its publication date is 2022-09-06. A small book cover image is shown to the left of the text. The description of the book reads: 'A mighty river. A long history. For thousands of years, the Elwha river flowed north to the sea. The river churned with salmon, which helped feed bears, otters, and eagles. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, known as the Strong People located in the Pacific Northwest, were grateful for the river's abundance. All that changed in the 1790s when strangers came who did not understand the river's gifts. The strangers built dams, and the environmental consequences were disastrous. Sibert honoree Patricia Newman and award-winning illustrator Natasha Donovan join forces to tell the story of the Elwha, chronicling how the Strong People successfully fought to restore the river and their way of life.'

Figure 1: UWM Library Online Guide

Water as Natural Resource Worthy of Care and Protection

The first category of water narratives depict water as a natural resource essential for the life of many living animals and ecosystems, one that needs protection and thoughtful stewardship. The titles in this theme often feature humans who are working alongside water and/or with other humans to protect and honor bodies of water. Some familiar titles fitting into this theme include the classic, *A River Ran Wild* (Cherry, 1992), as well as other familiar titles such as *The Water Princess* (Verde, 2016), and *A Voice for the Everglades* (Conrad, 2021). Additional titles include *A River's Gifts: The Mighty Elwha River Reborn* (Newman, 2023; Figure 2).

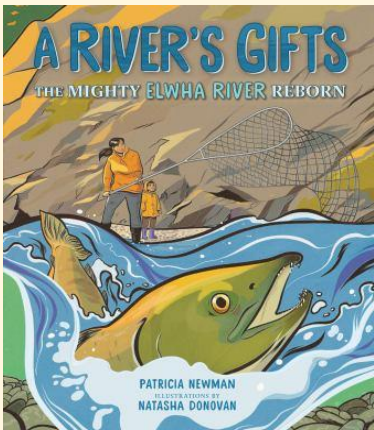
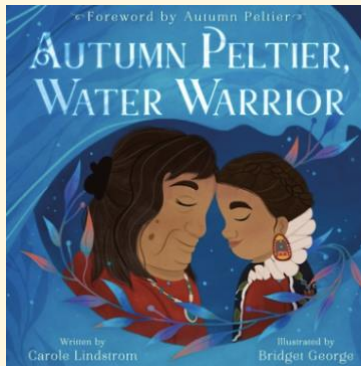
	<u><i>A River's Gifts: The Mighty Elwha River Reborn</i></u> by Patricia Newman; Natasha Donovan (Illustrator) ISBN: 1541598709 Publication Date: 2022-09-06 A finalist for the 2023 Orbis Pictus Award for children's nonfiction, this is a story of water and human interdependence within ecosystems. The book recounts the story of the Elwha River, in Washington State, and how it was dammed for over 100 years, disrupting salmon migrations and then restored to a flowing, vibrant ecosystem recently in 2011. Humans are presented as both exploitative of the water and restorative, showing persistence toward restoring the ecosystem.
--	--

Figure 2: Example Text for Water as Natural Resource Worthy of Care and Protection

Water as Living Relative

The second narrative category portray water as a living relative of humans. Whether positioned as a distant or close relative, water is represented as a non-human person with rights of its own. Recognizing water's personhood rejects human dominion over it, insisting on a kinship relation. In some titles such as in *My Mighty Journey* (Coy, 2019), *Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior* (Lindstrom, 2023; Figure 3), and *Hello from Renn Lake* (Hurwitz, 2020), water is given a voice to address the humans in the story or speak directly to the reader. In other cases, water is presented not as a speaking relative but

a living entity demanding attention, respect, and a space to thrive within the ecosystem.



[Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior](#)

by Carole Lindstrom; Bridget George (Illustrator); Autumn Peltier (Introduction by)

ISBN: 1250795273

Publication Date: 2023-09-19

This picturebook opens with the water speaking directly to the reader, “I am nibi. I have a spirit. I have feelings. I remember.” The water continues to tell the story of Indigenous women and their cultural and historical roles in protecting and stewarding water for future generations. Featuring water activists, Grandma Josephine and her great-niece, Autumn Peltier, young readers are called to care for and speak for water not only for themselves but for the health of animals and plants for the next seven generations to come.

Figure 3: Example Text for Water as Living Relative

Water as Place

The third category of narratives include descriptions of water as a place, rooted in memory and cultural practices. These stories feature humans as the central characters who turn to water as a mirror to reflect an understanding of themselves and their identities. In these stories, water is often positioned as a character or setting in the narrative, a key force that shapes how the humans see themselves and their lives moving forward. For example, Prema, the main character in *Ganesha Goes Green* (Thamizhmani, 2023), partners with friends to figure out a way to both honor the religious practices of her culture and protect the river that provides life-giving elements for her community (Figure 4). *Ganesha Goes Green* also suggests what many other narratives do, which is that children are better able to envision new ways to accomplish traditional practices. In these narratives, youth leadership helps adults reimagine their own relationships to history and culture.



[Ganesha Goes Green](#)

by Lakshmi Thamizhmani; Debasmita Dasgupta (Illustrator)

ISBN: 1646869974

Publication Date: 2023-09-05

Prema is concerned about how the Ganesha statues for the Hindu religious festival are thrown into the river after their use and polluting the community's water source. Prema suggests a change but receives pushback from local vendors who benefit from the sale of the statues. Working together with friends and community members, Prema devises a solution that benefits many stakeholders, even those who initially felt threatened by Prema's initial concerns.

Figure 4: Example Text for Water as Natural Resource in Need of Stewardship

Making Your Own Waves

I invite you to dive into your own exploration of water relations. While all water narratives listed here could fit into multiple categories, each story offers a unique doorway to reimagine relations with water. As students reconsider their own relationships with water, consider posing some of the questions below.

- *What is water? Who is water?*
- *How do we see water differently if we consider it a character, living being, or nonhuman person with its own needs?*
- *What needs does water have to maintain its wellbeing? To flourish?*
- *How do we care for water? How do we let water care for us or itself?*
- *If water had a voice in a given situation, what might it say or ask for?*
- *How would water describe its relationship with you now? as a child?*

Water is not an independent life force on its own. It depends on the reciprocity of many living entities to maintain its vitality. To that end, this collection of narratives is

not fixed. The [UWM Librarian Tiffany Thornton](#) and I hope for the collection to become a dynamic list of texts and resources that grows as both a repository of narratives and also a curation of resources that pushes us to ask critical questions of our relationships with water and other non-human relatives. Stay tuned for more collections of stories that ask us to be curious about our relationships to animals large and small, as well as our living plant and tree friends who reside above and below the ground. For now, I invite you to dive into the different ways you partner with water on a daily basis and how your own relationship with this flowing life-force shapes your world. In partnership with story, we can better position ourselves in our teaching about, caring for, and flourishing with water.

References

- Kimmer, R. W. (2017). "Take What is Given to You." *Bioneers*. Accessed August 5 at: <https://bioneers.org/robin-kimmerer-take-given-ztvz1709/>
- Oziewicz, M. (2023). What is climate literacy? *Journal of Climate Literacy in Education*, 1(1), pp. 34-37.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research Is Carmony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood.

Table 1: Text Set of Water Narratives: Water as Resource, Relative, and Place

Title, Year, and Author, Illustrator	Text Type
Water as Interconnected, Natural Resource	
<i>A River's Gifts</i> (2022) Patricia Newman; Natasha Donovan (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>The Great Lakes: Our Freshwater Treasure</i> (2024) Barb Rosenstock, Jamey Christoph (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>The Water Princess</i> (2016) Susan Verde; Georgie Badiel; Peter H. Reynolds (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Young Water Protectors</i> (2018) Aslan Tudor & Kelly Tudor	picturebook
<i>The Noisy Puddle</i> (2024) Linda Booth Sweeney; Miki Sato (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>A River Ran Wild</i> (2002) by Lynne Cherry (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Luz Makes a Splash</i> (2012) Claudia Dávila (Illus.)	graphic novel
<i>The Leak</i> (2021) Kate Reed Petty; Andrea Bell (Illus.)	graphic novel
<i>The Rime of the Modern Mariner</i> (2012) Nick Hayes	graphic novel
<i>Thirst</i> (2023) Varsha Baja	chapter book
"Water Flows Together" (2020) American Rivers Project, documentary (11:13)	video
"Mari Copeny: Water for Flint" (2022) Rebel Girls Podcast, (14:00)	podcast
Water as Living Being and Relative	
<i>The Water Walker</i> (2017) Joanne Robertson	picturebook
<i>My Mighty Journey</i> (2019) John Coy; Gaylord Schanilec (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Water Walkers</i> (2015) Carol Ann Trembath; David W. Craig (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>The Tree and the River</i> (2023) by Aaron Becker (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior</i> (2023) Carole Lindstrom; Bridget George (Illus.); Autumn Peltier (Introduction)	picturebook
<i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (2020) Carole Lindstrom; Michaela Goade (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Nibi's Water Song</i> (2021) Sunshine Tenasco; Chief Lady Bird (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Hello from Renn Lake</i> (2020) Michele Weber Hurwitz	chapter book
<i>Healer of the Water Monster</i> (2022) Brian Young	chapter book
"Stand Up: Stand n Rock #NoDAPL" (2016) Taboo (music), Jonny Lee (editor), Baxter Stapelton (filming), (5:13)	music video
Water as Place and Identity	
<i>Yaya and the Sea</i> (2024) Karen Good Marable; Tonya Engel (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>A Different Pond</i> (2017) Bao Phi; Thi Bui (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>Ganesha Goes Green</i> (2023) Lakshmi Thamizhmani; Debasmita Dasgupta (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>The 1619 Project: Born on the Water</i> (2021) Nikole Hannah-Jones; Renée Watson; Nikkolas Smith (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>River</i> (2019) Elisha Cooper (Illus.)	picturebook
<i>The Ocean Calls</i> (2020) Tina Cho	picturebook
<i>The Fishermen, the Horse, and the Sea</i> (2021) Barbara Joosse; Renée Graef (Illus.)	picturebook
"Alice's Garden" (2017) American Rivers Project documentary on Vimeo (9:13)	video