



Goldilocks on Ice

Climate Literacy through The Three Snow Bears

Zahira Sánchez Madrero, University of Alicante, Alicante, Spain

Abstract

This essay examines Jan Brett's *The Three Snow Bears* (2007) as a retelling of the Goldilocks tale set in the Arctic and enriched with Inuit cultural elements. Drawing on Brett's visits to Iqaluit in the Canadian Arctic, the book uses detailed illustrations of polar landscapes, traditional clothing, and Inuit homes to immerse readers in a threatened ecosystem. The essay argues that Brett's illustrations operate as visual texts that teach ecological interdependence, allowing the book to function as a tool for early climate literacy. By integrating cultural specificity, ecological awareness, and visual storytelling, Brett's adaptation models how children's literature can cultivate ecological empathy and foster interdisciplinary climate education.

Keywords

Goldilocks, marginalized communities, endangered ecosystems, visual storytelling

Introduction: Climate Tales in Translation

Fairy tales have long adapted to reflect the anxieties, values, and cultural contexts of their time. As Zipes (2006) observes, the genre's evolution across centuries reveals its continual capacity for transformation (p. 169). This adaptability is evident in the shifting representations of the Goldilocks tale, from Eleanor Mure's violent 1831 manuscript to Robert Southey's 1837 didactic narrative, to Walt Disney's sanitized family-friendly version, and finally to Jan Brett's Arctic retelling, *The Three Snow Bears* (2007). Brett departs from earlier moralistic or domestic interpretations by embedding the narrative in ecological and cultural specificity. Inspired by her travels to Iqaluit, she integrates Inuit material culture and Arctic wildlife, creating a setting that is both culturally grounded and environmentally fragile.

This essay offers a concise overview of the narrative before examining how Brett's illustrations through visual detail, anthropomorphism, and ecological symbolism operate as an ecological narrative. It concludes with pedagogical applications, demonstrating how *The Three Snow Bears* can support climate literacy, empathy-building, and interdisciplinary learning.

A Retelling Rooted in Place

Brett's protagonist, Aloo-ki, is an Inuit girl who loses her sled dogs when they drift away on an ice floe. While searching for them, she encounters an empty igloo belonging to a polar bear family, Papa, Mama, and Baby Bear. Inside, she samples their breakfast, tries on their boots, and rests in the smallest bed. Meanwhile, in a visual side narrative unfolding in the page borders, the bear family rescues Aloo-ki's trapped dogs. When they return home and discover her, Aloo-ki awakens, reunites with her dogs, and runs to safety as the bears wave goodbye.

This retelling preserves the basic structure of the classic Goldilocks tale while reconfiguring its stakes. Instead of a forest representing danger or disobedience, Brett's Arctic environment highlights fragility and interdependence. Aloo-ki's intrusion stems from necessity, not mischief, reframing the story as a moment of mutual vulnerability between human and animal characters.

Reframing the Classic: From Morality to Ecological Responsibility

Traditional versions of Goldilocks often focus on themes of obedience, misbehavior, or punishment. Brett's adaptation reframes the tale around mutual vulnerability and environmental care. Aloo-ki's actions are guided by survival rather than reckless

curiosity, and the bears respond with surprise rather than aggression. This shift demonstrates how retellings can reshape a story's moral dimension.

By situating the narrative in the Arctic and foregrounding endangered species, Brett transforms the tale into an allegory of ecological fragility. The story invites readers to consider the impacts of climate change on both human and animal communities, blending folklore with contemporary ecological concerns.

Visual World-building: Illustration as an Ecological Text

Brett's illustrations serve as the primary vehicle for ecological storytelling. Her detailed representation of Arctic landscapes—glaciers, ice floes, tundra, and frigid water—creates a story world defined by sensitivity to environmental change. The igloo's curved architecture, Aloo-ki's fur-lined parka, and the decorative Inuit-inspired motifs reflect Brett's research into Inuit material culture. These details lend cultural specificity while reinforcing the adaptive relationship between people and place.

Animal life also plays a central role in the book's visual narrative. Foxes, seals, sled dogs, walruses, and snowy owls appear in elaborately illustrated borders that run parallel to the main text. These visual storylines introduce young readers to Arctic biodiversity without explicit exposition, allowing learning to emerge from observation. By visually structuring the Arctic as a dynamic ecosystem, Brett invites children to consider how each species contributes to environmental balance.

Given that Brett's message relies heavily on imagery, including select illustrations in classroom or essay contexts would further support visual literacy and emphasize the ecological dimensions of the narrative.

Ecological Empathy through Anthropomorphism

The anthropomorphism of Papa, Mama, and Baby Bear strengthens readers' emotional connection to Arctic wildlife. The bears walk upright, express human-like emotions, and live in a furnished igloo decorated with natural elements. Rather than diminishing their wildness, this blend of human and animal traits highlights their vulnerability. They simultaneously function as a family unit and as symbolic representatives of an endangered species. Scholars such as Kerslake (2016) and Burke & Copenhaver (2004) note that anthropomorphized animals help children grasp complex moral and ecological ideas. In Brett's retelling, the bears' emotional expressions and domestic spaces foster empathy, encouraging young readers to consider how climate change affects real polar bears who rely on melting and shifting ice.

Importantly, this anthropomorphic framing is reinforced visually rather than solely through the written narrative. Brett's illustrations invite readers to interpret facial expressions, body language, and domestic spaces as emotional and ecological cues. Through these visual strategies, anthropomorphism becomes a gateway to visual literacy, encouraging readers to read images as meaningful texts that communicate vulnerability, interdependence, and environmental risk.

Visual Literacy and Cultural Context: Illustrations as Ecological Narrative

The book's illustrations not only enrich the narrative but also model visual literacy. Children must interpret images to follow parallel storylines, understand character relationships, and recognize environmental cues. Through this multimodal structure, readers learn that images can function as ecological texts, conveying information about habitat, climate, and cultural practices. These visual details build an ecological narrative that complements—and sometimes exceeds—the written text.

Pedagogical Possibilities

The pedagogical value of *The Three Snow Bears* lies in its ability to bridge affective engagement with environmental understanding. Teachers can use the book across disciplines to introduce concepts of climate change, interdependence, and cultural respect. The igloo, Aloo-ki's clothing, and her sled dogs can introduce conversations about Inuit culture and Arctic lifeways. Pairing Brett's book with stories by Indigenous authors ensures cultural respect and accuracy. Students also develop empathy for species impacted by climate change when they connect emotionally with Aloo-ki and the bear family.

Using maps and photographs of the Arctic, educators can help students connect the illustrated setting to real habitats, leading to age-appropriate discussions of melting sea ice and endangered species. Art activities inspired by Brett's detailed borders—such as creating one's own ecological side panels featuring local wildlife support visual literacy and reinforce the idea of ecosystem interdependence.

By combining affective engagement, cultural respect, and ecological awareness, *The Three Snow Bears* becomes a multifaceted climate literacy resource. Furthermore, when using such texts in classrooms, teachers should incorporate authentic Indigenous voices so that students learn how traditional ecological knowledge contributes to climate resilience.

Conclusion: Storytelling as Climate Pedagogy

Jan Brett's *The Three Snow Bears* exemplifies how children's literature can integrate ecological education, cultural awareness, and visual storytelling. The book's illustrations and motifs immerse readers in a delicate Arctic ecosystem, cultivating empathy and responsibility. As climate change accelerates, retellings like Brett's remind us that stories can both reflect and reshape cultural values. Through interdisciplinary teaching and visual literacy, *The Three Snow Bears* becomes a powerful tool for nurturing early climate consciousness and encouraging children to imagine more sustainable futures.

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