

**A naturalist's guide to the environment**

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CHENNAI: Flitting dragonflies, tri-coloured butterflies, lazy toads or sly lizards - these are characters, albeit supporting ones, we find in many children's books. With children becoming the voice for the world's environmental struggle, it is only natural to bring these often-forgotten supporting characters under the spotlight.

Books that do just that have been effective in bringing environmental awareness and responsibility among kids. From stories that carry illustrations of long lost artistic traditions, forgotten words, and the world of birds to understanding different communities that live harmoniously with nature, naturalist M Yuvan lists some of his favourite page-turners that may sensitise children to embrace their environment.

**Riddle of the ridley by Shekhar Dattatri**

Every year, the coast of Chennai sees the migration of Olive Ridley turtles to nest on the beaches of the city. But a range of factors threaten the turtles — from the gravid females to the eggs to the hatchlings. Ghost nets, poaching, stray dogs, streetlights, plastic, etc., are among them.

For decades now the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network, a citizen-initiated group have been conserving turtles on these beaches and taking people on Turtle walks during their nesting season. Dattatri's little book charts the turtle's journey and the people's work in protecting them.

It is written in simple language along with evocative photographs depicting the life-history of the Olive Ridley. It is a book for each child who has been to the beach, to know that the coast is a profoundly shared space between various life forms.

### **The honey hunter by Karthika Nair**

This is a story about Shonu, a tribal boy in a family of honey collectors, living in the Sundarbans – the world's largest mangrove forest. The people here worship the bee goddess and co-exist with billions of bees. They practice moderation and a code of conduct when they harvest honey.

One day driven by hunger Shonu breaks a rule, heads into the forest and collects honey during nonharvest time, not realising that he could anger the demontiger which guards the trees. The Honey Hunter is a modern mythology exploring coexistence with the natural world, reciprocity, and indigenous conservation practices.

### **Adventures of the humongoose family by Zai Whitaker**

This is the story of Gundu and Keeri — a humongoose couple. They are hasty, they chatter non-stop using a variety of sounds from chirps to clicks, they eat rats... But they begin to take decisions. The biggest one being to move out of the jungle and into paddy fields.

The book is a look at mananimal interactions, environmental issues and little-known attributes of a creature which lives closely alongside us, crosses our paths, roams the edges of our attention and centre-spaces. Zai's other stories were a formative part of my own childhood reading, .

### **Biju spins some magic by Jaya Jaitly**

Biju is from rural Odisha hailing from a family of traditional weavers. This story is about how Biju travels to Urban Delhi with his father to sell saris and meets a city boy. The illustrations are of Patachitra style that is native to Odisha, and the narration beautifully explores the different realities of urban and rural children and the intersections. This book is published by Storyweaver.org.

### **Hope is a girl selling fruit by Amrita Das**

Illustrated in Mithila painting style, Hope is a Girl Selling Fruit is a moving story about a girl who traverses the difficult journey of independence and creative freedom. Amrita Das writes – "A girl's life is hard, especially if you're cursed to be poor. It's gone even before you start on it...If you dream for a moment, you're asked why you're twiddling your thumbs." It speaks of the reality of being a girl from a marginalised community and aspiring to be an artist. It explores questions of privilege and patriarchy, and the semi-autobiographical story makes it even more eloquent. Such a theme being made readable and accessible to a younger audience makes this and other books like it urgent and a necessity in the present political climate.

### **Shero to the rescue by Ashish Kothari and illustrated by Anusha Menon**

This is a beautiful story about ground-up citizen action told through animals, questioning our destructive model of development in a way any child can read into and relate. It is narrated in a context and tone relevant to India.

Anusha has beautifully painted the scenes of the Kachchh landscape, its creatures and their protests. How the book ends is in deep resonance to various student and citizenled campaigns happening in the country right now against environmentally destructive projects, which threaten our forests, grasslands, wetlands, rivers, etc., which are part of the very identity of communities living here.

### **The lost words and the lost spells by robert macfarlane and illustrated by jackie morris**

"Words are, in my not so humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic" is a dialogue that has stayed with me from Harry Potter. The Lost Words by Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris is a

collection of words, which the authors eloquently remind us of, so that they don't vanish from our language, hence vanish completely.

It is a delightful heap of acrostic poems interspersed with paintings of raw wilderness. The authors aptly call it a 'spell book'. Each spell and painting captures and conveys the spirit of a certain element of the natural world. Otter, lark, heron, adder, blue bell...

It is also a book of protest. Each word from nature chosen here was dropped out of the Oxford's children's dictionary because it was thought that children were using them lesser and lesser. These spells attempt to revive each of these creatures in our speech, or in Macfarlane's words – "to sing it back into being, and to sing one's being back into it". The Lost Spells, a sequel to The Lost Words, is smaller in size but with new spells and paintings for us to speak out loud.

### **Bird business by Rohan Chakravarthy**

This unique comic book illustrates, vividly, the quirky and idiosyncratic behaviours of nearly a hundred Indian birds - from bee-eaters to bitterns to flamingos to shaheen falcons. It has evoked so much interest in children to observe closely the daily lives of birds, beyond simply knowing their names.

Rohan's comics carry insight, a lot of humour and are - most of all - accessible to people across ages. Each bird is full of character and exudes its distinct personality in its habitat. A message of conservation and the need for a more-than-human kinship weaves as a subtext throughout the book.

### **Our toxic world by aniruddha sen gupta**

Questioning our patterns of consumerism and its consequences for us and for the planet needs to start as early in education as possible. How do we create in children this capacity to question, a practice that has become so ingrained and normalised in our modern living, though detrimental to our personal and ecological health?

Our Toxic World takes on this task. It shines light on products we use every day, describing what goes into making them and suggests safer alternatives. It is written and illustrated with humour and clarity in a story-like fashion. It is well-researched, uses simple non-technical language and is an important contribution to the non-toxics movement in India.

### **A Cloud Called Bhura By Bijal Vaccharajani**

A Cloud Called Bhura is about climate change and its complexities. It is written eloquently and with humour, while also confronting readers with difficult questions about caste, privilege, political action/ inaction — and how all this interacts with climate and environment.

It is, I think, the best work of climate fiction by an Indian writer and I also love how it portrays children as people with agency, having the capacity to challenge status-quos in our society and be crucial change makers. It is a book written for teenagers but is as important a read for adults of today as well.

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