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RAINFOREST by Helen Cowcher, Andre Deutsch £ 5.95 0 233 982 663

RAYMOND BRIGGS looks at planet conscious picture books

Green Good Causerly

Greenery is in; even Mrs Thatcher claims to be tinged with it. If nuclear power can be seen as Green then anything can; even children's books. So, the avalanche of Green books flows on remorselessly. The old joke about cutting down trees to build mental hospitals for the people driven mad by cutting down of trees, has come true. Now, forests of trees are cut down to make books protesting about the cutting down of trees. Perhaps we will soon need to build mental hospitals for the people driven mad by the tonnage of green books.

'Green Good Causerly' is fertile ground for all the traditional children's book formulae to flourish: the nice animals versus the nasty machinery, the pretty flowers versus the ugly buildings, the good little children who lead the way against the big bad men. Also, the "dear little" syndrome is given a new playground to romp in.

In this climate, the idea that a tractor could be magnificent (see Ted Hughes), that an industrial building could be superb, that a modernization could be an improvement, is never even whispered. It would be sacrilegious. The simplistic assertion is always made: nature good, industry bad; though where we would all be without industry is not made clear. There would not be any books for a start. If you are going to write books which purport to be ecological, you must at least get the ecology right. Even in this half dozen we have wolves eating corn, owls and kestrels ferrying mice across dangerous roads and thrushes nesting in Africa. You can't mix a present day concern for ecology with an olde world anthropomorphism. Badgers who use hurricane lamps cannot run away from industrial society; they need the paraffin. Nor are wild animals sweet and kind to one another. We know they are efficient and ruthless survivors and the predators are killers. Children need to know this and most of them know it already. These books are not in the same world as Pooh and Wind in the Willows. It is fatal to confuse one world with another.

RAINFOREST by Helen Cowcher avoids these pitfalls. The animals and birds are true to their own nature. They do not talk or help one another, but they sense approaching danger and communicate as the forest is smashed down. Even the mysterious picture of Jaguar hearing a voice saying "Go to higher ground" is believable. The loss of trees causes floods which sweep away the machines. The animals have survived, temporarily, but the book ends with the question of how long the trees will remain to protect them. Helen Cowcher has a reverence for her subject, respects the dignity of the wild creatures and even communicates some of the mystery of the rain forest.

Raymond Briggs

FAQ's about the book RAINFOREST

How did RAINFOREST come about?

As Henry Thoreau wrote: *"What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on"*.

When I started work on RAINFOREST in 1986 house prices got far greater attention in the media than the destruction of tropical forests. I chose not to do a straightforward information book but instead I created a dramatic story about the creatures of the rainforest losing their homes. It is a story based on reality. All of us can easily identify with losing one's home, and with the dramatic use of color and imagery I hope to reach out to hearts as well as minds!

I tell the story from the animals and birds point of view, to emphasise what we are losing when the forest is destroyed, not just trees, but also the 50% of all the world's living creatures that live in the tropical forests.

Why do you like using unusual words?

The story in RAINFOREST is simply told, but some of the words are unusual. This is because I like to use specific words that have a powerful sound which have an effect even when you might not know the meaning. For example 'deep foreboding' is what toucan feels.

How did you choose the characters to go in the book?

Each animal or bird is in the story for a special reason. Toucans, I chose because I love bright colours. Also I needed to include birds so that they could fly over the treetops and we could feel that we were with them and also look down upon the forest canopy. The canopy is like a huge green umbrella shaped of leaves and branches that shelters everything in the forest below. When the canopy is disturbed in my story, macaws and butterflies suddenly fly out from it. They show us some of the beauty within the forest, most of it hidden from view.

Jaguar is in the story because jaguars, as big cats, are very important animals. They are known as "kings of the jungle". If they can survive in the tropical forest it means that lots of other creatures will be living there too.

Howler monkey is another important creature. I needed an animal that has a strong voice, I made the monkey's mouth HUGE so that you could almost hear the sound coming out at you, when you look at the picture.

The most powerful character in the book is 'man & machine', which represents an ignorant force damaging the forest without any thought for long term consequences.

How do you paint the jungle pictures ?

As an artist I like to give my pictures a lot of atmosphere. So when I painted RAINFOREST I imagined that I was in a very hot damp forest , in my London studio, so that the backgrounds to the pictures have a very wet look. The first pages of the book are soaked in greens and full of drips and blobs. These can be 'happy accidents' and interesting texture to look at! If you look at the end papers to ANTARCTICA you can see that I love this technique. There 'white blobs & drips on blue' seem to be very icy.

www.HelenCowcher.com | Helen@helencowcher.com