



## **AMERICAN SCIENTIST** November/December 1993

[The Picture-Book Rain Forest, Science Books for Young Readers](#)

**WHISTLING THORN** Scholastic 1993

Is an interesting case. Its author, Helen Cowcher, seems to be retreating from stridency in stages. Cowcher's first picture book *RAIN FOREST*, ends with the drowning of the bulldozer driver. Her second book *ANTARCTICA* (Farrar Straus and Giroux 1990), ends with a ship looming on the horizon. "The seals and penguins cannot tell yet whether they (the new arrivals) will share or destroy their beautiful Antarctica...." In *TIGRESS* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), her third book, herdsmen work with a forest ranger to scare a marauding tigress back into an animal sanctuary. *WHISTLING THORN*, Cowcher's latest book, tells how the acacia tree came to grow thorns with galls that harbor stinging ants. Like nature itself, this story has no moral.

I'd like to say a few words in praise of *WHISTLING THORN*, even though it has nothing to do with the rain forest. Most nature books for children are illustrated lists of facts. There are 30,000 kinds of spiders. Spiders are not insects. A male spider is smaller than a female spider, and so on. *WHISTLING THORN* is a drama, the story of the life-and-death struggle between an animal and a plant. To put it another way, most picture books present nature as it was understood in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *WHISTLING THORN*, on the other hand, introduces children to nature as it is understood today.

Not that being modern is easy. *WHISTLING THORN* is a deceptively simple book. To understand it, children have to apply rules of interpretation that are quite different from those that apply to other stories. When the book is read to preschoolers, the initial response is

disappointing. But an adult need only ask a few questions to provoke an intellectual free-for-all in which the kids vigorously defend all sorts of readings, many of them highly entertaining. One conclave I attended detected the author in several factual errors and solemnly concluded that WHISTLING THORN is a “pretend story” After all they’d met a thorn or two in their time and none of their thorns had whistled.

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