

# A juvenile miscellany



We Can Never Have Enough Nature: Picture Books about Henry David Thoreau

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*"A Juvenile Miscellany" explores and evaluates the world of children's books, young adult literature, and graphic novels. Formerly known as "Thought Bubble," this column been expanded to include the world of children's and young adult literature. The new title is an homage to The Juvenile Miscellany: For the Instruction of and Amusement of Youth, one of the first major American literary magazines for children. The periodical was initially edited by Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880), the famous American author, abolitionist, and reformer. She is best remembered today for her children's poem "Boy's Thanksgiving," which opens with the famous line: "Over the river and through the woods/To grandfather's house we go."*

Few writers have written so eloquently about the spiritual power of nature as Henry David Thoreau. In the extraordinary journal *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (Ticknor and Fields, 1854), his enthusiasm for the natural world, liberty, simple living, and a life free from consumerism and its resulting financial burdens remains unsurpassed. Thoreau's thoughts on conformity, slavery, and governmental control in *Resistance to Civil Government* (probably better known by its variant title, *Civil Disobedience* [first published in the periodical *Aesthetic Papers*, May 1849]) have profoundly affected many twentieth-century writers and activists, including Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Frost. When one thinks of Transcendentalism and children's fiction, it is *Little Women* (J. Repath, 1868) by Louisa May Alcott and Jane Langton's Hall family saga that begins with *The Diamond in the*

*Window* (Peter Smith, 1962) that come to mind. However, a growing number of picture books provide young children with a exceptional introduction to Thoreau's ideas and unique approach to life.

## Transcendental Ursus Americanus

Donald Johnson's series of picture books, *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000); *Henry Builds a Cabin* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002); and *Henry Climbs a Mountain* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) feature Thoreau and his friends as anthropomorphic American black bears. The Henry books, as they are commonly called, will delight children with their combination of cubist artwork and playful stories. Using colored pencil and oils, Johnson populates each page with images of nature: a bird peeking out of a hole in a tree; a small beehive on the side of a cabin; cowpies underfoot in the pasture. Through the Transcendental bears Johnson tells stories of Thoreau's nature walks, his life on Walden Pond, and the night he spent in jail after refusing to pay taxes to protest slavery. Adult readers will recognize the appearance of famous writers and Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, and Lydia Maria Child.

## Thoreau and Louis May Alcott

In contrast to this playful anthropomorphism, Julie Dunlap and Marybeth Lorbiecki's *Louisa May and Mr. Thoreau's Flute* (Dial Books for Young Readers, 2002) portrays Thoreau through the eyes of a child, the young Louisa

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May Alcott. Thoreau leads children on a series of educational nature walks to discover huckleberries, frogs, and other Concord wildlife. Inspired by this gentle teacher and naturalist, Louisa writes her first poem, beginning the career of a distinguished children's author. The daily life in the Alcott home and the natural beauty of Concord are vividly recreated in illustrator Mary Azarian's evocative painted woodcuts. Authors Dunlap and Lorbiecki present Thoreau as patient and kindhearted, much like Alcott's Professor Bhaer in *Little Women*.

### In His Own Words

Both Steven Schnur's *Henry David's House* (Charlesbridge, 2002) and Jim Murphy's *Into the*

*Deep Forest* (Clarion, 1995) draw primarily on Thoreau's own texts.<sup>6</sup> In *Henry David's House*, Schnur weaves passages from the first edition of *Walden* into a narrative about Thoreau's life on Walden Pond. In contrast to the recognizable image of Thoreau as a bearded, mature thinker, Peter Fiore's vivid oil and watercolor paintings depict Thoreau as a wide-eyed, youthful idealist building his own cabin while recording two years of his peaceful life amidst the woods and inhabitants surrounding Walden Pond.

Murphy draws inspiration from Thoreau's writing, designing journal entries that chronicle Thoreau's visits into the deep forest of the Maine wilderness. Thoreau's words are accompanied by Kate Kiesler's pencil sketches of flora and

fauna in the margins, and atmospheric color plates of the New England landscape suggesting the romantic oil illustrations of N. C. Wyeth.

### Biographical Sketches

Robert Burleigh's *A Man Named Thoreau* (Atheneum, 1985) is a serviceable juvenile biography that provides a brief yet comprehensive introduction to Thoreau's life and thought. Lloyd Bloom's series of black-and-white pencil sketches are especially memorable. In one scene Thoreau's neighbors watch him walking in a rainstorm, framed by the windows of their home. The turbulence of the storm, which scatters leaves against the window, contrasts strikingly with Thoreau's obvious enjoyment of walking outside. Such images create a unique interpretation of American Romanticism.

New England's natural beauty is most artfully captured in Thomas Locker's colorful oil paintings in *Walking with Henry* (Fulcrum, 2002). Romantic in approach, with great attention to color and nuance, these paintings provide beautiful and accurate New England landscapes. As Thoreau travels through the vast wilderness surrounding Concord, the reader walks alongside him, seeing the world through Thoreau's eyes.

Collectively these picture books introduce children to one of America's greatest thinkers. Their diverse approach to storytelling and artwork provide a series of snapshots about Thoreau that are as varied as the elements of the natural world he loved to inhabit. As Thoreau once said, "we can never have enough nature," a central message that is artfully illuminated in each of these books. ●

### Recommended List

Burleigh, Robert. *A Man Named Thoreau*. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

Dunlap, Julie, and Marybeth Lorbiecki. *Louisa May and Mr. Thoreau's Flute*. Illus. by Mary Azarian. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2002.

Johnson, Donald. *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

———, *Henry Builds a Cabin*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

———, *Henry Climbs a Mountain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Locker, Thomas. *Walking with Henry: Based on the Life of Henry David Thoreau*. Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 2002.

Murphy, Jim. *Into the Deep Forest with Henry David Thoreau*. Illus. by Kate Kiesler. New York: Clarion, 1995.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Henry David's House*. Ed. by Steven Schnur. Illus. by Peter Fiore. Watertown, Mass.: Charlesbridge, 2002.