

EVERYONE OUTSIDE: A CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE WINNERS FOR THE NATIONAL OUTDOOR BOOK AWARDS

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By

Ashley Farris

Director: Dr. Andrew J. Bobilya
Professor of Experiential and Outdoor Education
College of Education and Allied Professions

Committee Members: Dr. Courtney Shimek, Education, West Virginia University
Dr. Paul Stonehouse, Experiential & Outdoor Education, Western Carolina University

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"To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go." ~ Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods"

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ABSTRACT

EVERYONE OUTSIDE: A CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE WINNERS FOR THE NATIONAL OUTDOOR BOOK AWARDS

Ashley Farris, M.S.

Western Carolina University (May 2025)

Director: Dr. Andrew J. Bobilya

Children's literature has long been recognized for shaping societal attitudes and promoting inclusivity (Bishop, 1990; Shimek, 2021). However, there has been a notable gap in research regarding how race, gender, class, and ability are represented in outdoor-themed children's books (Shimek, 2021). While the outdoor field is increasingly working toward greater diversity and inclusivity, it remains primarily shaped by a narrow, dominant narrative (Bobilya et al., 2024; Warren & Breunig, 2022). This lack of diversity in portrayal not only limits children's understanding of the outdoors but also reinforces exclusionary norms, making it essential to explore how different identities are depicted in outdoor contexts and how this impacts young readers' perceptions. This study examined the children's literature category winners of the National Outdoor Book Award (NOBA) from 1997 to 2024 and focused on representations of race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation. Through the application of Critical Literacy Theory (Freire, 1970), the research investigated how these influential texts reflected and reinforced societal norms, such as the underrepresentation of marginalized groups and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, which contributed to biases in portraying outdoor experiences and identities (Bradley, 2022; Roberts, 2018). The study considered the unique

power of children's picturebooks in normalizing diverse narratives (Nguyen, 2021) and their potential to inspire outdoor participation among marginalized groups (Martin & Mills, 2022). It also aimed to contribute to the broader dialogue on equity in children's literature and outdoor participation, addressing Shimek's (2021) call for more research on outdoor play representation in U.S. children's books. Analysis of the 23 awarded picturebooks revealed a significant disparity in representation, with authors, illustrators, and publishers being predominantly White and concentrated in the northern United States, despite some progress in gender representation and regional outdoor knowledge. Based on these findings, recommendations include creating a partnership between outdoor organizations and diverse, independent publishing houses to commission inclusive outdoor picturebooks, establishing diversity-focused review committees within award organizations, and conducting further research to examine the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and ability in outdoor children's literature through a critical lens. The findings demonstrated a narrow portrayal of outdoor experiences that systematically excluded marginalized perspectives and reinforced problematic assumptions about who belongs in natural spaces, highlighting an urgent need for more diverse narratives. Through critical analysis of these NOBA winners, this research sought to promote more inclusive narratives in children's outdoor literature and support the continued creation of a more equitable outdoor community.

Keywords: children's literature, outdoor representation, National Outdoor Book Award (NOBA), equity in outdoor narratives, diversity in children's picturebooks

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A book can sometimes be a window. The view from the window can be imagined or real, familiar or new, panoramic or narrow. Usually, the window is also a door, and a reader has only to walk through in imagination to become a part of whatever world has been created or re-created in the book. When lighting conditions are just right, a window can also be a mirror, reflecting back to us the joys and sorrows, the loves and hates, the pain and pleasure of living. One of the reasons literature exists is to transform human experience, and reflect it back to us so that we can better understand it. (Bishop, 1990, p. 1)

Books have power. Bishop (1990) attests they shape our perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of the world. Children's literature wields significant influence on society serving as a playful bridge connecting adults and children across generations. According to McCallum and Stephens (2010) and Taxel (2002), children's books differ from other literature because they are deliberately crafted by adults to shape children's worldviews and instill specific moral values. The underlying assumption is that all aspects of a story, from its plot to its language, are influenced by societal beliefs and values, even if these ideologies are not explicitly stated in the text (McCallum & Stephens, 2010; Taxel, 2002). However, it is crucial to recognize that many authors of children's literature actively challenge these societal norms and values but are not being recognized by National Awards (Kidd & Thomas, 2016; Shimek, 2021).

The impact of children's books is so profound that various stakeholders recognize their importance of instilling social values and shaping young minds, influencing how children perceive their place within society (Bishop, 1990). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2024)

supports pediatricians to encourage reading as an early intervention because it significantly contributes to a child's language development, cognitive skills, social-emotional well-being, and overall school readiness by exposing them to new words, concepts, and promoting bonding with caregivers, all while laying the foundation for future literacy skills, starting from infancy; this practice is considered crucial for a healthy child. Policymakers allocate funding to promote access to books, as exemplified by initiatives like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (Stone, 2024). This power of literature to shape human experience is most clearly seen in the longstanding efforts to censor or remove books from public and school libraries. These actions, often initiated by teachers, parents, and policymakers, stem from concerns about the perceived power of certain works to challenge established societal norms (American Library Association, 2017). Such censorship attempts aim to control the narratives children encounter, recognizing the force to either strike fear or spark a revolution (Stallcup, 2002). According to Stone (2024), we all have stories, and those stories can be both/and dangerous and beneficial. Beyond recognizing the profound influence of children's literature on societal values and development, it's crucial to understand how these books can create space for voices and experiences that have traditionally been marginalized.

Cairo (2021) in *Holding Space* , expresses that stories can stir something deep within us, and she “holds space for the stories that are normally overlooked, silenced, marginalized, or dismissed” (p. 23). She advocates for embracing the entirety of human experiences. To do this, we must hold space for people to stand and “have their stories heard without censorship, judgment, ridicule, or silencing” (p. 23). Children's picturebooks, as powerful tools for shaping young minds, can play a crucial role in holding space for diverse narratives and challenging societal norms.

This concept of inclusive storytelling aligns with broader scholarly discussions about representation in literature. In her TED Talk, "*The Danger of a Single Story*," Adichie (2006) describes how limited portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and shape assumptions based on incomplete perspectives. Building on this understanding, Bishop (1990) emphasizes the importance of providing children from marginalized groups with literature that reflects their experiences while offering children from dominant social groups a window into diverse cultures and perspectives. Children's literature, guided by this principle, can contribute to developing a more inclusive society that benefits both current and future generations.

Within the outdoor education field, scholars have identified the prevalence of a single story: the white, heteronormative, middle to upper-class, able-bodied male as the dominant representation in the field and its leadership (Bobilya et al., 2024; Kennedy & Russell, 2020; Warren, 2019; Warren & Breunig, 2022). Books can be one way that an unintentional "single story" of who belongs in the outdoor field is either perpetuated or broadened. When teachers and outdoor educators thoughtfully select books for children, they often turn to award-winning book lists as trusted resources (Kidd & Thomas, 2016). These prestigious literary awards, as Shimek (2021) notes, can shape how generations understand race, gender, class, and ability. In the outdoor field, the National Outdoor Book Award (NOBA), specifically focuses on outdoor literature and presents an opportunity to examine and expand the stories being told in this field.

With the power of story in mind and the need to challenge the dominant narratives in the outdoor field, this study aims to implore Critical Literacy Theory to critically analyze how race, gender, class, and ability are represented in the children's literature category winners of the NOBA from its inception in 1997 to 2024.

Before examining how children's literature might challenge exclusionary outdoor narratives, it is essential to understand both the persistence of dominant outdoor culture and its historical roots, followed by exploring how award-winning children's books can either perpetuate or disrupt these patterns.

Dominant Narratives in Outdoor Spaces

Dominant narratives in outdoor spaces (white, upper-class, able-bodied, men) continue to be prevalent in outdoor and adventure-based activities, despite people of diverse backgrounds participating in outdoor activities (Bobilya et al. 2010; Kennedy & Russell, 2020; Loeffler, 2021). Warren & Bruenig, (2022) and Warren (2019), highlight this issue in both participation and leadership, emphasizing the absence of diversity and representation in these environments and the pressing need to address these challenges.

The origins of these narrow narratives can be traced back to the ideals of the Romantic period that glorified exploring pristine wildernesses, rugged individualism, and sublime nature experiences (Beames & Brown, 2016; Wald, et al., 2019). While contributing to environmentalism, these Romantic works were largely produced by and for affluent white males, venerating travel, physical challenges, and conquest of "uncivilized" lands (Roberts, 2018; Wald et al., 2019). Fueled further by American settler colonialism's ethic of imperial expansion, this culture of privilege, individualism, and exploitation in outdoor participation persists today (Wald et al., 2019). Consequently, if the dominant culture in the outdoors continues to be white, affluent, heteronormative males with ability, children's picturebooks will likely reflect these depictions, raising the question: Who belongs outdoors?

Children's Literature: A Potential Response to Dominative Narratives

Research involving critical content analysis of award-winning children's picturebook collections has demonstrated representations of the dominant culture across four areas: race, gender, class, and ability (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Freire, 1970; Harris, 1999; Shimek, 2021; Short, 2016). Award-winning books are especially important because of their influential role in what families, libraries, and schools select to read to children and students (Kidd & Thomas, 2016; Stone, 2024). Those responsible for deciding which books receive this prestigious recognition must be highly cognizant of the depictions presented in the awarded books. Botelho and Rudman (2009) assert that picturebooks tend to reflect the societal norms and values of the culture in which they are produced.

NOBA

The National Outdoor Book Awards (NOBA) is the outdoor field's largest and most prestigious book award program (Watters, 2024). NOBA is a non-profit educational program sponsored by the NOBA Foundation, the Association of Outdoor Recreation, and Idaho State University. Its purpose is to recognize and encourage outstanding writing and publishing in the outdoor field (Watters, 2024). The awards encompass ten categories, including children's literature, which accepts books on nature, natural history, or outdoor pursuits aimed at children from preschool to teens. The program claims very high standards of fairness and objectivity by having no connection whatsoever to any publisher or publishing business interest and obtaining a panel of judges consisting of educators, academics, book reviewers, authors, editors, and outdoor columnists from throughout the United States. Once selected, the books are publicized through social media, press releases, and announcements at related websites (Watters, 2024). While NOBA'S prestige and reach in the outdoor field are evident, it is essential to examine how its

children's literature selections align with the growing need for diverse representation in outdoor narratives. By critically analyzing the literature awarded by NOBA, the goal, then, is to cultivate outdoor spaces where every visitor feels valued, respected, and free to connect with nature on their own terms (Orozco, 2024).

Few studies have considered the representation of characters in children's literature in the context of race, gender, class, and ability, especially in the outdoors (Shimek, 2021). This study aimed to begin to fill that gap by conducting a critical content analysis of the children's literature category winners of NOBA from its inception in 1997 to 2024. Utilizing Critical Literacy Theory (CLT) as a framework, the research addressed the question: How are race, gender, class, and ability represented in the NOBA's children's literature category winners over this period? Through this analysis, the study sought to highlight marginalized voices and provide actionable insights for systemic change in how we represent, discuss, and facilitate outdoor experiences for all children. By critically examining these award-winning texts, this research aspired to foster a more inclusive narrative that reflected diverse experiences and perspectives in children's literature.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the representation of diversity in the NOBA-winning outdoor-themed children's literature, explores the importance of inclusive narratives in shaping perceptions of outdoor spaces, and provides context for the current state of diversity in the outdoor field. I begin by discussing the power of children's picturebooks in influencing societal attitudes and the concept of holding space for diverse stories. Next, I delve into the current state of diversity in outdoor participation and leadership, focused on the intersections of race, gender, class, and ability. Then, I explore the role of award winning books, particularly NOBA, in shaping dominant narratives and potentially promoting inclusivity in outdoor literature. I conclude this review by identifying a significant gap in the literature: few studies have examined how race, gender, class, and ability are represented in award-winning outdoor-themed children's books, especially in the context of NOBA.

Books Have Power

Books have power. A power that can illicit liberation or oppression. They often convey the message of this power in their meanings, words, and characters. In Mark Edmundson's (2004) book *Why Read?*, he explores how literature not only reflects our current reality but also reveals the world we aspire to create. He states, "Reading also shows us the world we wish to live in" (p.117). "The heart refuses to be imprisoned," he continues, "and asks: What will you be? What will you do?" (p. 82). These questions challenge us to envision possibilities beyond our present circumstances. An example of this power is seen in such books as *Jayden's Impossible Garden* by Mélina Manzal and illustrated by Ken Daley (2021). In this transformative story, young Jayden, a Black child living in an urban neighborhood, is convinced that a garden is

impossible without a yard. Through Jayden's journey of discovery with his elderly neighbor, Mr. Curtis, the story challenges traditional narratives about where gardens can grow and who can be a gardener. As he transforms from a skeptic into an enthusiastic urban gardener, Jayden learns to see possibilities in unlikely places: growing plants in milk cartons, old boots, and other containers. His initial solitary pursuit gradually draws in other neighborhood children who were once doubtful about growing things in their concrete surroundings.

Daley's vibrant illustrations complement Manzal's text, capturing both the initial starkness of the urban environment and its gradual transformation into a vibrant community garden space. The artwork brings to life the subtle changes in the neighborhood as butterflies appear, birds return, and the community comes together around their shared green spaces. Every page shows the delicate balance between urban life and natural growth, with detailed depictions of container gardens, vertical planters, and the diverse community that forms around them.

These words, meanings, and characters create a powerful counter-narrative to the single story often told about urban spaces and nature. This story demonstrates how children's literature can challenge assumptions about where gardens belong and who gets to be a gardener. By presenting urban gardening through the eyes of a young Black child, the book expands perspectives on environmental engagement and shows young readers that nurturing life is possible anywhere. The story serves as a testament to the power of community, intergenerational relationships, and the transformative impact that reimagining spaces can have on individuals and neighborhoods.

However, these words, meanings, and characters can also create a single story, limiting our possibilities. This "single story" is not just an abstract concept; it has real-world consequences. hooks (2003) argues that the dominant narratives in media, culture, and literature

often reduce marginalized groups to stereotypes, reinforcing a narrow understanding of their experiences. She writes that these representations serve to "maintain the status quo" by presenting only one version of reality, often erasing the complexity of diverse identities. For example, in early children's literature, books like *Tintin in the Congo* by Herge (2016), reinforced colonial stereotypes, depicting African characters through a simplistic and harmful lens. Such portrayals limit not only how others see marginalized groups but also how those groups see themselves in relation to the dominant culture. So, where do we begin to dismantle the acceptance of this single, dominant narrative?

Stories Hold Space

As Orozco (2024) emphasizes, true inclusion requires ongoing effort and a willingness to learn and adapt. By acknowledging the complex relationship between race, gender, class, ability and outdoor recreation, the aim was to break down barriers and ensure that the restorative power of nature is available to all, regardless of their race, gender, class, or ability. The goal then, is to cultivate outdoor spaces where every visitor feels valued, respected, and free to connect with nature on their own terms (Orozco, 2024). By holding space for diverse experiences and perspectives, a richer, more vibrant outdoor community for everyone can be created (Orozco, 2024).

Cairo (2021) introduces the concept of holding space as a creative environment where individuals can express themselves fully, without judgment or interruption. It involves active listening, empathy, and validation of one's experience without others imposing their opinion. For instance, when a Black female hiker shares her experience of feeling unwelcome on certain trails, or a helmet that does not fit, holding space means listening without immediately defending or dismissing her perspective. It involves creating an environment where she can express her full

experience, from her anticipation of the hike to her interactions with other hikers, without others interrupting to explain or minimize her feelings.

She further explains how holding space serves to "affirm one's humanity and transcend an oppressive system that denied a people's humanity so fiercely. To hold space for each other to use and acknowledge all of our humanity" (Cairo, 2021, p. 302). This might manifest when an adaptive athlete describes the barriers they face at popular climbing spots, and their story is received with genuine attention rather than immediate suggestions for solutions.

Stories like these bridge personal experiences with broader systemic issues. For example, when a Latinx family shares their multi-generational camping traditions that differ from dominant Western outdoor practices, their narrative helps others understand both their specific family culture and the wider context of diverse outdoor engagement. However, Cairo (2021) acknowledges that sharing such stories requires trust, as many have experienced dismissal or invalidation of their outdoor experiences. She describes the careful work of gathering and sharing these stories as "love-work" (p. 302).

In the context of outdoor spaces, this storytelling becomes revolutionary when it amplifies voices often missing from mainstream outdoor narratives (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Consider a photo essay in an outdoor magazine featuring an all-female, Muslim hiking group, or a children's book depicting a wheelchair user leading a nature walk. These stories challenge the traditional image of who belongs in outdoor spaces.

As Orozco (2024) demonstrates through case studies of inclusive outdoor programs, creating truly welcoming spaces requires ongoing practical actions. For example, when an outdoor education center revises its marketing materials to show diverse participants, adjusts its scholarship policies to address economic barriers, and modifies its programs to accommodate

different ability levels, it demonstrates how holding space moves from concept to practice. These steps help ensure that nature's benefits are accessible to all, regardless of their background or circumstances.

By holding space for these conversations and actively working towards true belonging, outdoor educators and participants can create outdoor environments where everyone feels this sense of belonging and connection to nature. To understand why this work is necessary, we must examine the historically dominant narratives in outdoor education.

Dominant Narratives in the Outdoor Field

Warren et al. (2014) explains the field of outdoor experiential education has frequently come under scrutiny for its roots being entrenched in a culture dominated by white, male, middle/upper-class, able-bodied individuals. This historically privileged demographic has prompted criticisms about the lack of diversity and representation in the outdoor field (Aylward & Mitten, 2022; Loeffler, 2021; Mitten et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2014). As a result, outdoor education professionals and programs have been compelled to reexamine their practices and philosophies through the lens of social justice. Warren et al. (2018) further explains they have had to confront how the field's origins and traditional participant base have created systemic barriers and inequities for marginalized groups.

Addressing these concerns about inclusivity, accessibility, and equity has become an important issue for those working to evolve outdoor experiential education into a more just and inclusive space (Bobilya et al., 2024; Mitten et al., 2022; Warren & Breunig, 2022; Warren et al., 2014).

Lack of Diversity in Outdoor Participation and Leadership

Personal and commercial uses of recreation continue to tell a single story as these areas glaringly lack diversity in both participation and leadership roles (Bobilya et al., 2024). While exploring nature and being immersed in outdoor environments provides immense benefits for physical and mental well-being (Louv, 2008; Timko Olson et al. 2020; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018), the opportunity to experience these advantages is not equally accessible across all communities (Bobilya et al., 2024; Harrison et al., 2022; Mitten et al., 2022).

Outdoor education programs, which aim to foster connections with nature and teach valuable skills, have historically suffered from a lack of diversity among participants and leaders (Rogers & Rose, 2019). Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other underrepresented groups have had limited presence in these programs, especially in leadership and instructional roles. (Bobilya et al., 2024; Mitten et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2014). This dearth of representation reinforces a culture of white privilege, masculinity, and exclusion within the outdoor education field. During the 1990s, scholars began critically examining these inequities, shining a light on the experiences and barriers faced by marginalized groups (Roberts, 2018; Roberts & Rodriguez, 1999). However, while the academic discourse advanced, many argue that concrete actions to dismantle discriminatory systems and reshape the predominant culture have lagged in implementation (Mitten et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2014). Progress has proven difficult as the field continues to grapple with providing truly equitable access and fostering an environment of genuine inclusivity for all. In sum, despite growing awareness, the lack of diversity persists as an obstacle to overcome (Mitten et al., 2022; Rogers & Rose, 2019). This lack of representation extends into children's outdoor literature, where protagonists and stories continue to

predominantly feature a limited range of outdoor narratives available to young readers from diverse backgrounds (Crisp et al., 2016; Shimek, 2021).

Warren and Breunig (2022) argue that despite some progress, such as increased participation by women and people of color in outdoor programs and their entry into mid-level employment, the highest levels of leadership and decision-making authority remain concentrated among the traditionally privileged groups. While inroads have been made in influencing educational policies, the major positions of power that dictate the overarching direction and administration of outdoor experiential education continue to be controlled through a myopic cultural lens that lacks diversity (Warren & Breunig, 2022). The failure to meaningfully include voices from underrepresented populations, including within outdoor children's literature, has allowed one monolithic narrative to become deeply entrenched as the prevailing force.

To address this, it was crucial to examine how dominant narratives in outdoor education and the children's literature associated with it either upheld or challenged these inequities. The question remained: How can outdoor education programs, leadership and children's outdoor literature move beyond a single, exclusionary narrative to more fully represent the diverse communities that interact with the outdoors?

Race

Racial inequality is deeply embedded in societal structures, including its relationship with nature and outdoor recreation. Finney (2014) reinforces this perspective by highlighting how historical and cultural factors have shaped the relationship between Black Americans and outdoor spaces. She argues that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism has profoundly influenced how Black Americans perceive and interact with nature (Finney, 2014).

Finney (2014) also emphasizes that traditional media and environmental organizations have predominantly portrayed the outdoors as a white space, effectively excluding or misrepresenting Black American experiences (Finney, 2014). This lack of representation in both physical outdoor spaces and cultural narratives about nature contributes to the ongoing cycle of exclusion and underrepresentation described by Bobilya et al. (2024). They assert that systemic barriers rooted in a history of exclusion and discrimination have prevented equitable access to the outdoors, making it an unwelcoming space for marginalized racial and ethnic groups, especially Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

This lack of representation extends to the leadership ranks as well, where the vast majority of outdoor educators, guides, and programming decision-makers come from white backgrounds (Bobilya, et al., 2024). Without diverse lived experiences and cultural perspectives being centered, outdoor programming often fails to be inclusive and culturally relevant for BIPOC communities. This historical and cultural exclusion of Black Americans and other marginalized racial and ethnic groups from outdoor spaces underscores the importance of critically examining how children's literature represents race and whether these texts contribute to or challenge the ongoing cycle of exclusion in outdoor education and recreation.

Research has shown that Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians are underrepresented in national parks and public lands despite growing interest in outdoor recreation within these communities (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Flores & Kuhn, 2018; Thomas & Thomas, 2022). Would this underrepresentation be revealed in the NOBA children's literature corpus also? According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), the nation is becoming more diverse faster than expected, with nearly four in 10 Americans identifying with a race or ethnic group other than white. In 2023, the non-Hispanic White population made up the largest share of the total population at 58%. These

demographic realities strongly suggest that diverse representation within the NOBA literature is not only warranted but necessary to reflect the actual composition of American society.

These factors perpetuate a cyclical lack of diversity, as those underrepresented groups don't see themselves reflected in an industry focused on outdoor pursuits (Bobilya, 2024; Bower, 2016). To create a more equitable and welcoming outdoor culture, deliberate efforts must be made to dismantle systemic inequities, amplify BIPOC voices, and increase representation across all levels, from participants to organizational leadership and including children's outdoor literature (Bobilya, 2024; Bower, 2016, Shimek, 2021; Warren, 2022). Otherwise, the outdoors risks reinforcing its reputation as an elite, exclusive space disconnected from large segments of the population (Bobilya, 2024). This ongoing cycle of exclusion prompts the research question: How are race, gender, class, and ability represented in the children's literature category winners of NOBA from 1997 to 2024, and do these books reinforce or challenge the systemic inequities in outdoor education and recreation?

Gender

Large-scale studies have identified a gender gap in nature engagement, with men visiting natural environments more frequently than women (Colley et al., 2022). According to Parsons & Halstead (2022) this disparity may be rooted in childhood, as children's access to outdoor activities is largely controlled by “gatekeepers” such as parents, teachers, and community leaders. These gatekeepers' personal relationships with nature and their gender-based perspectives significantly influence the opportunities they provide or restrict for children, potentially perpetuating gender biases in outdoor access and participation from an early age (Parsons & Halstead, 2022).

Outdoor children's literature plays a critical role in shaping these early perceptions. Books that emphasize traditional gender roles can reinforce the notion that outdoor spaces and adventurous activities are primarily for boys, while girls are either excluded or relegated to passive roles (Imhoff & Hoffmann, 2023; Kennedy & Russell, 2020; Rogers & Rose, 2019). These gendered portrayals not only shape children's understanding of who belongs in outdoor spaces but also influence their participation and engagement with nature.

Butler (2004) suggests gender identity is socially constructed, with dominant roles associated with cisgender males and subordinate roles with women and non-binary individuals. These patriarchal norms are perpetuated in outdoor children's literature, where male characters often take the lead in outdoor adventures, embodying traits of strength, leadership, and independence, while female characters are more often placed in supportive or secondary roles (Humberstone, 2000; Lorber, 2018; Imhoff & Hoffman, 2023). The representation of gender in outdoor children's books, therefore, has a powerful impact on how children internalize gender expectations and their place within the outdoor world. In fact, research has shown that children as young as three years old begin to form gendered preferences for certain activities, with outdoor exploration and adventure often being categorized as male-dominated pursuits (Bradley, 2022).

Class

As previously discussed, outdoor recreation and education have historically favored privileged groups, creating barriers for lower-income participants (Mowatt, 2018; Warren, 1998, 2005). With one in six American children living in poverty, approximately 11 million children, and increasing rates of extreme poverty due to the pandemic, access to outdoor programs remains a significant challenge (Childstats.gov, 2019; Hitchcock et al., 2018). This economic

disparity directly influences which narratives and experiences might be reflected in children's outdoor literature.

While the field has progressed toward inclusion, class-based inequality remains a persistent challenge (Warren & Breunig, 2022; Timko Olson et al., 2020). Economic barriers manifest in multiple ways that could impact how outdoor experiences are portrayed in children's literature. Higher-income individuals often have paid time off for outdoor recreation, while lower-income families may lack this flexibility (Bower, 2016; Dashper & King, 2021). The outdoor industry's emphasis on expensive gear and remote locations creates additional obstacles for those with limited resources (Bower, 2016; Dashper & King, 2021; Lee et al., 2001). Furthermore, rural and underserved urban areas often lack resources for outdoor education programs (Mitten et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022), potentially limiting the contexts and settings represented in children's literature.

Organizations like Outdoor Afro, Girls Who Hike, and Latino Outdoors have worked to increase diversity in outdoor recreation, though geographical factors and funding limitations can restrict their impact (Schwartz & Corkery, 2011). The National Recreation and Park Association advocates for inclusive outdoor spaces through low-cost initiatives and community-based education (NRPA, 2022).

These socioeconomic barriers directly informed this study's examination of NOBA's children's literature winners from 1997 to 2024. By analyzing how class was represented in these texts, the research sought a better understanding of whether award-winning outdoor children's literature reinforced or challenged existing barriers to outdoor access. This analysis is particularly relevant given that children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping young people's

perceptions of nature and their place within it, potentially either perpetuating or disrupting cycles of exclusion in outdoor education and recreation.

Ability

Wendell (1996) states,

"We are all disabled eventually. Most of us will live part of our lives with bodies that hurt, that move with difficulty or not at all, that deprive us of activities we once took for granted or that others take for granted, bodies that make daily life a physical struggle" (p. 263).

While outdoor and adventure education programs strive to recognize the diverse needs of all potential participants, including those with disabilities, systemic barriers often impede these efforts (Dillenschneider, 2007; Grinbergs, 2023; Loeffler & White, 2022; McAvoy, 2001; Sugermen, 2002).

According to the 2022 U.S. Census, more than 27% of the adult population and 21.7% of children 18 and under have a disabling condition, making people with disabilities the single largest minority group in the country. This substantial demographic highlights a critical challenge: while outdoor educators generally demonstrate strong commitment to inclusion, chronic underfunding from federal, state, and local sources often limits their ability to implement comprehensive accessible programming (Hradsky, 2021). Non-profit educational outdoor programs frequently struggle with basic operational costs, even in wealthy communities, making extensive accessibility modifications particularly challenging without dedicated governmental support.

Studies have shown that people with disabilities share similar preferences for natural settings and outdoor activities as those without disabilities, seeking comparable challenges and

adventures in outdoor environments (Loeffler & White, 2022; Sugarman, 2002). However, the gap between intention and implementation often stems from systemic issues beyond individual educators' control. Limited funding from Congress and the Department of Education, coupled with inadequate infrastructure support, creates barriers that even the most dedicated outdoor educators struggle to overcome (McAvoy, 2001; Rubuliak & Spencer, 2021).

Children with disabilities have historically been underrepresented in research literature (Dalki, 2023), and their stories in children's literature may similarly reflect this gap. The field is populated by notably empathetic and dedicated professionals working within significant institutional limitations. Rather than a lack of effort, the slow pace of inclusion often reflects broader societal and structural challenges (Dillenschneider, 2007; Grinbergs, 2023). This context was particularly relevant to the examination of the NOBA children's literature winners. Analysis of how disability was portrayed in these texts, sought to reveal whether they acknowledged both the commitment of outdoor educators and the institutional obstacles they face.

The following section examines how diverse outdoor narratives empower marginalized children while fostering inclusive perspectives, followed by an analysis of representation patterns in award-winning children's books.

Why Children's Picturebooks?

Children's picturebooks serve as powerful cultural mirrors that reflect societal norms, values, and belief systems to young impressionable minds (Bishop, 1990). According to Shimek (2021), these books possess the ability to either reinforce or challenge prevailing attitudes surrounding race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and disability. Picturebooks that embrace diverse representation can foster a sense of inclusion and acceptance for all children,

validating their lived experiences (Shimek, 2021). Conversely, a lack of diversity in these stories risks perpetuating marginalization and inequity.

Children's picturebooks have the power to promote authentic narratives that confront privilege, challenge stereotypes, and dismantle harmful prejudices (Crisp, 2016; Shimek, 2021). When they authentically depict the richness of human experiences across race, class, gender, and ability, these books can break down societal marginalization. They provide a holistic perspective by holding space" for diverse experiences beyond the societal norm, rather than presenting a singular narrow vision. Ultimately, picturebooks that instill values of acceptance and appreciation for diversity can inspire current and future generations to reshape society into a more equitable and just space for all (Shimek, 2021).

Picturebooks offer a uniquely powerful medium for addressing issues of bias, marginalization, and social injustice with young children (Bishop, 1990; Crisp, 2016; Nguyen, 2021; Shimek, 2021). Nguyen (2021) emphasizes the combination of engaging stories and vivid illustrations captures children's attention while normalizing diverse narratives and representations. Too often, children from minority backgrounds rarely see themselves positively depicted, while majority children are overexposed to narratives centering on whiteness and Eurocentrism (Nguyen, 2021).

Rather than merely celebrating surface-level diversity, anti-bias picturebooks directly confront systemic issues like racism, classism, ableism, and genderism through authentic stories with marginalized characters at the center (Nguyen, 2021). These books become powerful conversation starters when used skillfully through strategies like interactive read-alouds. They raise critical consciousness, provoke meaningful reflection, and foster active listening around vital social justice topics (Nguyen, 2021).

By providing counter-narratives that hold space for oppressed voices, anti-bias picturebooks can break the silence too commonly surrounding these issues in early childhood classrooms, communities, and homes. They disrupt biases and dismantle marginalization by presenting a fuller, richer range of human experiences (Crabb, 2011). Ultimately, exposing children to these narratives plants seeds of awareness, empathy and positive identity development from an early age (Paciga & Koss, 2022). This lays the crucial groundwork for nurturing a more just, equitable society in future generations. Nguyen asserts that,

“At the heart of picturebooks lies the powerful concept of representation: whose stories are told, how characters are presented, what kind of problems are posed, and how problems are resolved. Picturebooks, hence, can function to marginalize as much as to include, to oppress as much as to empower.” (p. 746)

Why Outdoor Picturebooks?

According to Martin and Mills (2022), when stories depict diverse characters engaging with nature and outdoor spaces, they do more than entertain, they inspire. For children from marginalized backgrounds, seeing characters who look like them exploring the wilderness or enjoying outdoor adventures can be profoundly empowering. These narratives challenge the notion that such experiences are off-limits, instead encouraging readers to claim their right to these spaces in real life (Martin & Mills, 2022).

Moreover, when children from majority groups encounter stories featuring diverse protagonists in positive, nature-centric roles, it helps shape a more inclusive worldview (Martin & Mills, 2022). This representation can foster a generation that inherently understands and supports the idea that children of all races, genders, class and abilities have an equal claim to outdoor experiences and adventures (Martin & Mills, 2022). In essence, diverse outdoor-focused

literature can be a catalyst for social change, promoting equality in access to and enjoyment of natural spaces for all children.

According to Loeffler and White (2022), outdoor educators, with their adaptability and responsiveness to diverse challenges, are uniquely positioned to leverage these literary tools and drive meaningful change in addressing barriers to outdoor participation. Their multifaceted role at the intersection of education, environmental stewardship, and community engagement equips them to develop innovative, inclusive programs and advocate for policies that increase access to outdoor experiences (Loeffler & White, 2022). By combining the power of diverse outdoor picturebooks with the expertise and activism of outdoor educators, we can catalyze social change, promoting equality in access to and enjoyment of natural spaces for all children, regardless of race, gender, class, or ability.

Representations of Dominant Culture in Award Winning Books

Award winning children's literature, often perceived as high-quality, requires critical examination to ensure authentic representation of experiences. While such books can be valuable for introducing quality diverse texts to young readers, the assumption that literary merit equates to accurate cultural representation is problematic (Crisp, 2015; Crowe, 2023; Leininger et al., 2010; Paciga & Koss, 2022). Studies spanning decades have consistently revealed disparities in representation within children's literature, particularly in award-winning texts.

For instance, an analysis of South Carolina Picture Book Award nominees from 2005-2012 demonstrated a significant overrepresentation of white characters and creators, failing to reflect the state's demographic reality (Kurz, 2012). Similarly, Taxel's (1986) examination of Newbery-winning novels found that even acclaimed books can perpetuate stereotypes about people of color. Gomm et al. (2017) identified specific criteria for authentic representation of

Latino characters in picturebooks, while Leininger et al. (2010) found that representations of characters with disabilities in Newbery Award-winning books were not proportionate to the actual school population of children with disabilities.

The lack of diversity extends beyond racial and ethnic representation. Kurz (2012) noted the complete absence of Latino protagonists in the South Carolina nominees, despite Latinos constituting 7.5% of the state's youth population. This underrepresentation of marginalized groups in award-winning literature normalizes whiteness and perpetuates a narrow view of American society (Kurz, 2012).

To address these concerns, scholars advocate for the application of various critical lenses when examining children's literature. Johnson et al.'s (2017) edited work provides frameworks for analyzing illustrated texts, considering aspects such as identity, agency, and the portrayal of psychological conditions. These approaches can help educators and parents more effectively evaluate the quality of representation in award-winning books, ensuring that young readers are exposed to diverse narratives that reflect the complexities of contemporary society.

Role of Award Recognition in Shifting Narratives

Bickmore et al. (2017) emphasize that award-winning picturebooks play a vital role in shifting dominant narratives in children's literature. This insight is central to my research examining representation in diverse outdoor narratives within award-winning picturebooks, as these texts have unique power to either challenge or reinforce existing barriers to outdoor participation. As prestigious recognition within the literary world, these award recipients contribute significantly to the overall representation of diverse voices and experiences (Kurkjian & Livingston, 2007; Shimek, 2021). They reflect the current state of the literary landscape and

signal an acknowledgment of marginalized stories deserving to be highlighted (Kurkjian & Livingston, 2007).

The books that earn major awards shape the reading habits and preferences of young audiences, influencing the narratives they are exposed to from an impressionable age. A critical analysis of award-winners provides insights into how diverse characters and themes are portrayed and represented within these influential stories (Shimek, 2021). Importantly, award-winning picturebooks have the powerful potential to impact societal attitudes and promote a more inclusive cultural climate (Bickmore et al., 2017; Kurkjian & Livingston, 2007). By celebrating books that center perspectives from varied races, genders, class and abilities, these awards legitimize and amplify narratives that counter traditional dominant viewpoints.

As highly visible exemplars, analyzing award-winning diverse picturebooks allows an avenue to assess the progress being made in representative and authentic storytelling. Understanding how outdoor spaces and nature-based activities are depicted in these texts, and who is shown accessing them, is crucial for my investigation into how picturebooks can promote more equitable outdoor participation. This examination also identifies areas still lacking inclusion, empowering members of society to advocate for even greater diversity in recognized children's literature. Ultimately, prioritizing picturebooks with acclaimed diverse narratives can shape young minds and shift society towards greater acceptance and equity. To date, I have only located NOBA and no other national book award exclusively focused on the outdoors.

National Outdoor Book Awards (NOBA)

NOBA is a prestigious non-profit program that annually recognizes outstanding writing and publishing related to the outdoors. Each fall, a panel of independent judges from the outdoor writing and education fields selects winners across ten categories including history, literature,

children's books, nature guides, and classics. Both authors and publishers are eligible to submit works for consideration.

According to the website (Watters, 2024), the program maintains rigorous standards of fairness and objectivity in its selection process. Award-winning books receive widespread publicity through media outlets and online announcements. Beyond its role in recognizing literary excellence, NOBA serves as an educational resource through its website, which provides comprehensive lists of past winners, reviews, cover images, and links to additional information. The program's dual mission is to encourage exceptional outdoor literary works while providing a useful guide for readers seeking quality books in this genre (Watters, 2024). Additionally, NOBA offers a unique service, allowing website developers to use its reviews and cover scans, provided they include links back to the original site (Watters, 2024).

NOBA's Children's Literature Category

NOBA was founded in 1997, initially offering five award categories for outdoor literature. The following year, in 1998, they restructured and expanded the categories. For instance, the single "Guidebooks" category from 1997 was divided into two separate categories in 1998: "Nature Guidebooks" and "Outdoor Adventure Guidebooks." Additionally, NOBA introduced new categories or replaced existing ones in 1998, though the specific reasoning is not provided. Then, in 1999, NOBA further grew by adding a ninth category dedicated to children's outdoor literature. Nine categories remain today.

NOBA's Eligibility, Selection Process and Criteria

According to their website (Watters, 2024), NOBA have specific eligibility requirements for entries. All books must be full-length works related to outdoor adventure activities and the natural environment, including topics such as climbing, hiking, fishing, nature studies, and other

outdoor pursuits beyond just simply getting outside. To be eligible for the awards each year, books must have been newly published and released after June 1 of the previous year up until the submission deadline, which is typically sometime in late summer before the awards are presented. Revised editions of older books are also eligible as long as the revised edition contains new material related to outdoor activities. Books entered must be full-length works, not simply guides to getting outside in general.

To enter a book for consideration, publishers or authors must submit nine copies of the final published work, along with a completed entry form. An entry fee of \$95 must accompany each title submitted. If a single book is being entered into multiple award categories, additional entry forms, book copies, and fees are required for each extra category entered. All submissions must be received by the final deadline, typically in late August before that year's awards are presented. Only finished, published books are accepted - no manuscripts, galleys, or ebook files. The required book copies and entry materials are sent to NOBA's central office at Idaho State University. By following these submission guidelines, eligible books from publishers and authors are properly entered into consideration by the judging panels for that year's awards.

There are nine award categories, for the purpose of this paper I only looked at the specifics regarding children's books. Per the website (Watters, 2024), the Children's Books category can consist of any children's book dealing with nature, natural history or outdoor activities. Age orientation may range from pre-school to teens.

NOBA Benefits

Winning titles from the National Outdoor Book Awards receive several valuable benefits and promotional opportunities (Watters, 2024). All submitted books are displayed at the national conference of the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE), providing visibility

to attendees. Winners are announced through press releases sent to major newspapers, websites, periodicals, wire services, and corporate buyers. The awards website and social media platforms also feature the winning books along with cover scans, reviews, and publisher information.

Perhaps most significantly, publishers of winning titles receive permission to use the prestigious NOBA medallion on the book's jacket and in other marketing materials. This official seal serves as a major promotional tool, distinguishing the book as exceptional writing celebrated by the top program recognizing outdoor literature. The NOBA medallion is displayed on the covers of winning books. Overall, winning a NOBA provides books with national exposure, critical acclaim, and a powerful way to drive sales.

Judging Process

As outlined on the website (Watters, 2024), NOBA's program upholds rigorous standards of fairness and objectivity in its judging process. Once the nominated books are received at the central NOBA office at Idaho State University, where they are prepared and distributed to the appropriate judges from across the country. According to the website (Watter, 2024), this diverse panel is carefully balanced in makeup and backgrounds, including educators, trade representatives, authors, reviewers, and columnists, all serving voluntarily without compensation.

Over a six-week judging period in the fall, judges independently evaluate books using pre-printed criteria forms and are supposed to score entries solely on literary merit rather than author reputation or publisher. The books with the highest accumulated scores across the judging panel are named winners. Award recipients are then announced in mid-November through the NOBA website, press releases to major media outlets, and notifications to corporate/industry

buyers. This extensive process aims to remove potential biases and ensure books are judged equitably based on their quality and contribution to the outdoor literary field.

Need for Study

According to Shimek (2021), there is little research on how and which children participate in the outdoors, especially in award winning picturebooks. She states, “to date, I have yet to find another study that examined outdoor play, specifically in children’s books published in the United States” (p. 53). There is a significant gap in our understanding of how children's outdoor activities are portrayed in literature and few studies have considered how characters are represented in children's literature in the context of race, gender, class, and ability, especially in outdoor settings (Shimek, 2021; Stone, 2024).

While the outdoor field has made great strides to create positive changes, it is still currently dominated by a single narrative, and diversifying representations in outdoor literature is crucial for broadening perspectives and making the field more inclusive (Bobilya et al., 2024, Shimek, 2021; Warren & Breunig, 2022). Given the importance of the influential nature of children's literature, there is a pressing need to investigate how outdoor participation is portrayed in award-winning children's books through the lens of race, gender, class, and ability (Shimek, 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze how race, gender, class, and ability are represented in the children’s literature category winners of NOBA from its inception in 1997 to 2024.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

The purpose of this study was to critically analyze how race, gender, class, and ability are represented in the children's literature category winners of NOBA from its inception in 1997 to 2024. Following Shimek's (2021) response to Botelho & Rudman's (2009) request for a more thorough examination of how particular ideologies manifest in children's literature, I used Short's (2017) critical content analysis as a methodology framed by Freire's (1970) Critical Literacy Theory (CLT). This methodology and method are particularly suited for children's literature research as it allows for a deep examination of power dynamics and representations within texts (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). The data was collected from the book's text and illustrations using Stone's (2024) Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric.

The theoretical framework for this study was twofold. CLT served as the primary lens, guiding the analysis of power relationships within texts and images. This approach allowed for examination of how texts position readers, analysis of whose stories are centered or marginalized, and questioning of dominant narratives about outdoor spaces (Freire, 1970). Supporting this primary framework is Bishop's (1990) concept of "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors." This concept complemented the critical literacy approach by specifically addressing representation in children's literature, providing a framework to analyze how diverse children see themselves in outdoor settings (mirrors), how different experiences of outdoor spaces are presented (windows), and how books invited different readers into outdoor experiences (sliding glass doors).

The research design aligns with the question "Who belongs outside?" through three main analytical approaches: representation analysis, access analysis, and belonging analysis. This

multifaceted approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the selected texts, considering both explicit and implicit representations of diverse identities, barriers to access, and indicators of belonging in outdoor spaces (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). In this methodology, analysis and procedures occur simultaneously.

Critical Content Analysis

According to Short (2017), critical content analysis is a qualitative research methodology that takes an explicit critical stance in analyzing texts through the lens of a specific critical theory. The researchers ground themselves deeply in the selected critical theory, such as postcolonialism, critical race theory, feminism, or others, as well as the socio-historical and cultural contexts surrounding the texts. This theoretical immersion provided the framework for conducting close readings of the texts, examining issues like whose perspectives were centered (focalization), how power dynamics played out between characters, and how marginalized groups were depicted.

The analysis process was recursive, with revisits to the texts and theory multiple times as themes and issues emerged from the interplay of data and theory. Rather than just interpreting the texts, critical content analysis aimed to locate representations of inequity, oppression, and marginalization in order to deconstruct and challenge them. The goal is social transformation by using rigorous analysis to critique the power structures and oppressive narratives manifested within the texts being studied (Beach et al., 2009; Harris, 1999; Short, 2016, 2017). Additionally, the analysis considered how the absence or erasure of particular races, genders, classes, and abilities from these award-winning books symbolically represented the marginalization of those identities within outdoor participation.

In their book, *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors*, Botelho & Rudman (2009) propose critical multicultural analysis of children's literature as a vehicle for social justice education. This book is instrumental for researchers interested in analyzing children's literature with a sociopolitical context in mind. Drawing on critical theory, the authors focus on the importance of reading beyond the text itself and the value of making connections between the local and global, the personal and the political, with special attention to locating "how power is exercised, circulated, negotiated, and reconstructed" (p. 31).

History of Critical Content Analysis

According to Short (2017), content analysis as a method for analyzing texts has roots going back to the 17th century when religious scholars examined newspapers for immoral content. It became more widely adopted in the 20th century, particularly in communications studies for quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing mass media texts like newspapers, radio, and television. However, the "critical" aspect involving an overtly political stance focused on power, inequity, and questioning dominant narratives emerged from the critical theory work of Paulo Freire and others in the 1970s (Short, 2016).

Critical content analysis developed more systematically in the 1970s and 1980s as communications scholars began applying critical theory lenses like postcolonialism and critical race theory to analyze the underlying messages and ideologies in media texts (Krippendorf, 1980). Researchers in children's and young adult literature adapted these approaches from communications and cultural studies, using critical content analysis with critical theories to examine representations of marginalized groups in texts. Over time, this work emphasized deeply grounding the analysis in theoretical framings and combining critique with investigating

counter-narratives that challenge inequities and explore possibilities for social change (Beach et al., 2009; Short, 2017).

Methods

I selected a sample from the 42 books that received the NOBA for children's literature from 1997 to 2024. This sample encompassed the award winners during this 27-year period, with generally one winner per year, except for 2001, 2003, and 2006 when two winners were chosen.

Critical Literacy Theory was the overarching framework for this analysis, revealing and challenging power structures and inequalities. This approach informed the initial research questions, text selection, identification of theoretical tenets for close reading, and the writing of analytical memos connecting theory and findings. CLT's tenets asserted that literacies are multiple and varied, operate as sites of power dynamics, can be used as tools of oppression, privilege essayist literacy through race, gender, and class discourses, represent controlled forms of cultural capital, and disguise power through capital transference (Bourdieu, 2018; Gee, 1989; Yosso, 2005).

I examined how social norms and practices contributed to oppression and marginalization with the goal of cultivating natural areas where every visitor, regardless of their background, ability, or life experience, can forge meaningful connections with nature in ways that honor their own cultural perspectives and personal needs. This transformation required not only physical accessibility but also a fundamental shift in how I thought about, designed, and stewarded outdoor spaces to ensure they reflect and celebrate the full spectrum of human diversity.

To conduct the critical content analysis, I used Stone's (2024) Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric. This rubric is a deductive analytic framework designed to code representations of cultural factors such as race, gender, class, and ability in the book illustrations

and text. The tool facilitates the identification of explicit labels and implicit representations based on dominant cultural assumptions. Additionally, I added an "outdoor participation" dimension to the coding framework, indicating the outdoor setting, purpose (activities undertaken outdoors), and any equipment used for these experiences. This adaptation allowed for a more nuanced analysis of how outdoor experiences are represented in relation to diverse identities (Crisp, Gardner, & Almeida, 2018).

Short's (2016) critical content analysis structured the questioning of each of the 23 book winners awarded by NOBA, providing a structure for discovering the dynamics of power and oppression. Through the CLT lens, I examined how social norms and practices contributed to oppression and marginalization, aiming to illuminate these often-overlooked barriers to inclusion and equitable access to nature.

Analysis Framework

The analysis framework consisted of three phases. The first phase involved a descriptive analysis, focusing on immersing in the story and documenting basic content, including character identification, setting documentation, and activity cataloging. This initial reading provided a foundation for deeper analysis in subsequent phases (Short, 2016).

The second phase, which included the coding process, involved a critical analysis of both visual and textual elements. The visual analysis examined character positioning and prominence, analysis of main characters (limited to four as recommended by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2024), nature and setting depiction, activity representation, access visualization, body language and facial expressions, color and space usage, representation of diverse identities in outdoor settings, and visual cues of belonging or exclusion (Sipe, 1998; Schwartz & Corky, 2011). Textual analysis focused on language choices and character descriptions, nature

interactions and dialogue analysis, narrative perspective, and textual representation of access and belonging (Sipe, 1998).

The third phase incorporated an intersectional analysis, examining how the books function as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors for diverse readers. This phase also included an examination of power dynamics in outdoor narratives, identification of dominant and marginalized stories about outdoor experiences, and patterns in race, gender, class, and ability representations, as well as their intersections (Beach et al., 2009; Johnson et al, 2017; Short, 2016, 2017).

Throughout the process, I maintained reflexive memos to acknowledge my own observations, biases, and complicity. With this approach, analysis and procedures occurred simultaneously, allowing for recursive revisiting of theory and texts as themes emerged.

Sample Selection

The sample was selected because the NOBA award represents a prestigious recognition for children's books focused on outdoor themes and experiences. By analyzing the entire set of award winners through a CLT lens, I examined how representations of race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation were constructed within this influential collection of literature. Analyzing this complete set of award winners provided comprehensive insights into the narratives and ideologies promoted within this prominent category of outdoor-themed children's literature over an extended period.

Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Stone's (2024) Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric, which is shown in the forthcoming pages, was used as a deductive analytic framework to code representations of cultural factors such as race, gender, class, and ability in the book illustrations and text. This tool

facilitated the identification of explicit labels and implicit representations based on dominant cultural assumptions (Stone, 2024). To extend the analysis, the “outdoor participation” dimension was added to the coding framework, indicating outdoor setting (whether the main characters are outside and if so, where), purpose (activities undertaken outdoors), and any equipment used for these experiences.

The character analysis coding system tracked the presence or absence of specific markers across the seven categories, with numbers indicating whether traits like hair texture appear for each character as indicators of implicit assumptions. To improve clarity, I added notes explaining that numerical values (such as "1") signified the presence of a particular marker and provided context about how these markers collectively revealed underlying character assumptions within the narrative.

Stone (2024) intentionally noted and problematized her own acceptance of visual and linguistic markers associated with these cultural factors, recognizing the socially constructed nature of these categorizations. The tagging process involved identifying explicit and implicit representations of these cultural characteristics based on dominant cultural assumptions while acknowledging her unique perspective and implicit biases (Stone, 2024). Given my foundation of CLT in this work, I, too, worked to notice my biases in analyzing these books and noted these thoughts in my analytic memos during analysis.

Book Information

I began by coding the book’s author, illustrator, publisher, title, year of publication, and award year. After the analysis, I recorded the main character or characters based on their names, roles, or identities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Book Data Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Book #	Book Title	Publication Year	Award Year	Photo	Character
1	Good Morning, Loon	2014	2014		Mom
1b					son
1author					Elizabeth S. Varnai
1illustrator					Kate Hartley

Humanity

The character or characters were coded in the humanity section as either human, animal as animal or anthropomorphic (e.g. Winnie-the-Pooh), or object as object or anthropomorphic (e.g. Thomas the Tank Engine) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Humanity Data Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Humanity				
Human	Animals		Other	
	As Animal	Anthropomorphic	As object	Anthropomorphic
Human	Humanity: Animals: As Animal	Humanity: Animals: Anthropomorphic	Humanity: Other: As Object	Humanity:Other: Anthropomorphic
1	0	0	0	0
1				

Race/Ethnicity

For the race/ethnicity sheet, if the race or ethnicity was not specifically stated, the characters were coded based on the following factors informing implicit assumptions: skin color, facial features, hairstyles/texture, names, religion, food, iconography, language, country of origin, and other (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Race/Ethnicity Sheet of Intersectional Analysis Picturebook Rubric

Race/Ethnicity									
Book #	Explicit	Implicit	Factors informing assumptions						
	Label(s)	Assumption(s)	skin color	facial features	hair style/texture	names	religion	food	iconography
Book #	Race/Ethnicity: Explicit: Label	Race/Ethnicity: Implicit: Assumption	Race/Ethnicity: skin color	Race/Ethnicity: facial features	Race/Ethnicity: hair style or texture	Race/Ethnicity: names	Race/Ethnicity: religion	Race/Ethnicity: food	Race/Ethnicity: iconography
1	0	White	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
1b	0	White	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
1c	0	White	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
1d	0	White	1	1	1	0	0	0	0

language	country of origin	other	race/ethnic
Race/Ethnicity: language	Race/Ethnicity: country of origin	Race/Ethnicity: other	race/ethnicity notes
0	0	0	
0	0	0	
0	0	0	
0	0	0	
0	0	0	

Gender

For the gender sheet, the characters were coded explicitly or implicitly as male or female. The factors informing implicit assumptions for gender are names, body/facial features, clothing, accessories, hairstyles, activities, sexuality, family structure, occupations, and others (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Gender Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Gender								
Explicit	Implicit	Factors informing assumptions						
Label(s)	Assumption(s)	names	body/facial features	clothing	accessories	hairstyles	activities	sexuality
Gender: Explicit: Label	Gender: Implicit: Assumption	Gender: names	Gender: body/facial features	Gender: clothing	Gender: accessories	Gender: hairstyles	Gender: activities	Gender: sexuality
Mama	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dad	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sister	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
he	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

family structure	occupations	other	gender notes
Gender: family structure	Gender: occupations	Gender: other	gender notes
0	0	0	Indicated
0	0	0	
0	0		
0	0		
0	0	0	

Class

For the class sheet, if the characters' class was not specifically stated, they were coded based on the following factors informing implicit assumptions: occupations, economic capital, housing, transportation, belongings, appearances, and other (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Class Data Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Class						
Explicit	Implicit	Factors informing assumptions				
Label(s)	Assumption(s)	Occupations	economic capital (debt/investment)	housing	transportation	belongings
Class: Explicit: Label	Class: Implicit: Assumption	Class: occupations	Class: economic capital	Class: housing	Class: transportation	Class: belongings
0	Middle/Upper	0	0	0	0	0
0	Middle/Upper	0	0	0	0	1
	Middle/Upper	0	0	0	0	0
	Middle/Upper	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	1

appearance	other	class notes
Class: appearance	Class: other	class notes
1	0	I assume
1	0	
1	0	
1	0	
0	0	

Ability

For the ability sheet, the characters were coded explicitly or implicitly. The factors informing implicit assumptions for ability are mobility, communication, sensory, cognitive, emotional, developmental (age/size), and other (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Ability Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Ability									
Explicit	Implicit	Factors informing assumptions							
Label(s)	Assumption(s)	mobility	communication	sensory	cognitive	emotional	developmental (age/size)	other	ability notes
Ability: Explicit: Label	Ability: Implicit: Assumption	Ability: mobility	Ability: communication	Ability: sensory	Ability: cognitive	Ability: emotional	Ability: developmental	Ability: other	ability notes
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	I based my
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Outdoor Participation

For the outdoor participation sheet, the characters were coded explicitly or implicitly indicated in the following three phenomena: outdoor setting (outdoor/built), purpose, and equipment (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Outdoor Participation Sheet in Intersectional Analysis of Picturebooks Rubric

Outdoor Participation											
Setting (Natural/Built Environment)				Purpose				Equipment			
Explicit	Implicit	Number	Description	Explicit	Implicit	Number	Description	Explicit	Implicit	Number	Description
Phenomenon: Setting: Explicit	Phenomenon: Setting: Implicit	Phenomenon: Setting: Number	Phenomenon: Setting: Description of Implicit	Phenomenon: Purpose: Explicit	Phenomenon: Indicator 2: Implicit	Phenomenon: Indicator 2: Number	Phenomenon: Indicator 2: Description of Implicit	Phenomenon: Equipment: Explicit	Phenomenon: Indicator 3: Implicit	Phenomenon: Indicator 3: Number	Phenomenon: Indicator 3: Description of Implicit
Mountain	0	1	0	Pick blueberrie	0	2	0	Bucket	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Backpack	0	1	0
								Bucket	0	1	0
								Bucket	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Procedures

To begin this critical content analysis, I secured original print copies of all 23 NOBA awarded children's literature winners from 1997 to 2024. This collection served as the foundation for a systematic analysis using the established framework and additional outdoor participation codes. As part of the initial documentation, I cataloged the authors' and illustrators' races and genders by examining information provided in the books themselves, their personal websites, and the publishers' websites.

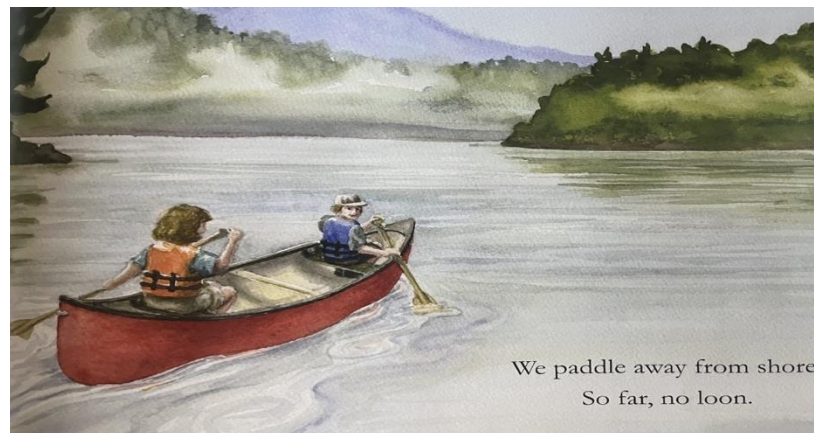
Coding

The coding process identified both explicit labels (her, son, canoeing) and implicit representations based on dominant cultural assumptions. Research suggests that individuals from culturally dominant, privileged groups often do not explicitly name their privileged identities, as these identities are commonly perceived as the societal "default" (Crisp, 2016). Therefore, a lack of explicit labeling of race as white or gender as cisgender was interpreted as implicit. For instance, in the illustration from *Good Morning Loon: It's Early Morning. What's Happening on the Lake?* by Elizabeth Varnai (see Fig. 8), both characters are canoeing and were coded

explicitly able-bodied. Both characters were implicitly coded “White” due to my observation of skin color, facial features, and hair.

Figure 8

Sample Page From Good Morning Loon: It’s Early Morning. What’s Happening on the Lake? (15), by E.S. Varnai, 2014, Vista Court Books, Copyright © 2022 by Diane Schmidt



Data Organization

To facilitate systematic analysis, I developed a tiered spreadsheet system that adhered to qualitative data analysis best practices (Saldaña, 2021). This system consisted of multiple tabs within a single master spreadsheet. The primary tab tracked essential metadata for each of the 23 NOBA award-winning books, including title, author, publication year, and genre, following content analysis protocols established by Krippendorff (2018). The additional tabs contained the detailed character analyses, allowing for easier visualization and organization of the data across the complete collection. The secondary tier delved deeper into analytical elements, housing detailed documentation of thematic coding, character development tracking, narrative structure analysis, and outdoor participation patterns, aligned with Short's (2016) approach to critical content analysis.

The analysis synthesized findings across multiple dimensions of representation, examining patterns in race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation. Throughout all tiers,

the system integrated three categories of analytical memos: theoretical memos connected observations to CLT frameworks proposed by Freire (1970) and Bishop's (1990) *Mirrors, Windows and Doors*, examined power structures and social inequalities in outdoor participation narratives. Methodological memos documented coding decisions and analytical processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and reflexive memos examined researcher positionality and potential biases (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). This comprehensive approach strengthened the study's credibility by creating a thorough audit trail that demonstrated the systematic nature of the analysis process (Schwandt et al., 2007).

Data Generation

With the organizational system in place, the data generation process began through repeated close readings as recommended by Short (2016) and Botelho and Rudman (2009). This iterative process allowed for continuous analysis through the CLT lens, ensuring that theoretical insights emerged organically from the data. The critical stance guided how I interpreted the texts, identified themes, and made connections between theory and findings in an ongoing cycle during coding and analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

As patterns emerged from the initial coding, the analysis deepened through constant comparison across texts and categories. This analytical process was documented through the memo system, which created a comprehensive audit trail that strengthened the study's trustworthiness (Guba, 1982; Schwandt et al., 2007).

Results

The culmination of this systematic analysis was presented through a comprehensive qualitative analysis that reflects the study's grounding in CLT. Drawing on established methodological approaches (Harris, 1999; Krippendorff, 2018; Short, 2016), the findings

synthesized multiple layers of analysis that provided a nuanced understanding of representation in outdoor children's literature. The presentation begins with a detailed thematic analysis of recurring patterns identified across the 23 NOBA award-winning books, which uses specific examples and quotes that illustrate representations and intersections of race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation.

Evidence is presented, along with critical interpretation tying back to the theoretical framework (Tyson, 2015). Tables, charts, and graphs are interspersed throughout to provide visual representation of key findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The overall result is a comprehensive, critically informed analysis that examined both explicit and implicit representations in the NOBA award-winning books and their broader implications in the context of power structures and social inequalities in outdoor participation narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the representation of race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation in the children's literature category winners of NOBA from 1997-2024. I investigated how these books shaped perceptions of outdoor spaces while considering questions of representation and access. The central question guiding this analysis was: Who is represented as belonging in outdoor spaces?

Several significant themes emerged from the analysis: a lack of diversity across multiple dimensions of representation; a narrow geographic focus predominantly centered in the Northeast, Upper Midwest, and Northwest United States; and limited portrayal of varied outdoor experiences. The findings are organized into seven key areas: (1) authors and illustrators, (2) publishers, (3) character types, (4) racial representation, (5) gender representation, (6) class representation, and (7) outdoor participation, settings, and equipment. Through this systematic examination, patterns emerged, revealing how these award-winning books presented a limited view of who belongs in outdoor spaces and how these representations might influence young readers' perceptions of outdoor engagement.

Drawing from established research methodologies (Crisp, 2015; Crisp et al., 2016), the results are organized and presented through multimodal data representations with charts, tables, and graphs.

Corpus Determination

Forty-four books were NOBA Winners and Honorable Mention Titles, as NOBA's Master List presented them without differentiation. These 44 books were examined for inclusion or exclusion of this study. Twenty-one books were excluded for not meeting picturebook criteria,

including field guides, due to their lack of narrative. According to Bader (1976), picturebooks can be defined as a unique art form that combines visual and verbal narratives in a sequence where the relationship between pictures and words creates meaning that neither could fully convey alone, requiring the reader to negotiate between these two sign systems. This resulted in a final corpus of 23 books, which are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Books Analyzed

Book Title	Author's Name	Illustrator's Name
1. <i>Blueberry Shoe</i>	Ann Dixon	Evon Zerbetz
2. <i>Jellies: The Life of Jellyfish</i>	Twig George	
3. <i>Coyote and Badger: Desert Hunters of the Southwest</i>	Bruce Hiscock	Bruce Hiscock
4. <i>What Does the Sky Say?</i>	Nancy White Carlstrom	Tim Ladwig
5. <i>Ladybugs: Red, Fiery and Bright</i>	Mia Posada	Mia Posada
6. <i>Wild Wings: Poems for Young People</i>	Jane Yolen	Jason Stemple
7. <i>Jam & Jelly by Holly & Nellie</i>	Gloria Whelan	Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen
8. <i>Whose Garden Is It?</i>	Mary Ann Hoberman	Jane Dyer
9. <i>The Leaf Man</i>	Lois Ehlert	Lois Ehlert
10. <i>The Little Green Island With a Little Red House: A Book of Colors and Critters</i>	Sharon Lovejoy	Sharon Lovejoy
11. <i>Kelly of Hazel Ridge</i>	Robbyn Smith van Frankenhuyzen	Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen
12. <i>Whistling Wings</i>	Laura Goering	Laura Jacques
13. <i>An Egret's Day</i>	Jane Yolen	Jason Stemple

14. <i>Camping With the President</i>	Ginger Wadsworth	Karen Dugan
15. <i>To Market, To Market</i>	Nikki McClure	Nikki McClure
16. <i>For the Birds: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson</i>	Peggy Thomas	Laura Jacques
17. <i>Good Moring, Loon</i>	Elizabeth S. Varnai	Kate Hartley
18. <i>Wake Up, Island</i>	Mary Casanova	Nick Wroblewski
19. <i>Pup the Sea Otter</i>	Jonathan London	Sean London
20. <i>The Lost Forest</i>	Phyllis Root	Betsy Bowen
21. <i>Something Wonderful</i>	Matt Ritter	Nayl Gonzalez
22. <i>Alaska is for the Birds! Fourteen Favorite Feathered Friends</i>	Susan Ewing	Evon Zerbetz
23. <i>What goes on Inside a Beaver Pond?</i>	Becky Cushing Gop	Carrie Shryock

Authors and Illustrators

The analysis of race and gender regarding the authors and illustrators of the 23 books revealed that most authors were White females, with no racial diversity in authorship or illustrator, and most illustrators were White males. Authors' and illustrators' genders were explicitly coded based on the pronouns used in the biographies in the book, their personal website, or the publishers' website. Race was implicitly coded based on photos from the biographies in the book, their personal website, or the publishers' website.

Among the books analyzed, 20 authors were explicitly coded as female and 3 explicitly coded male (see Figure 9). This female predominance aligns with broader trends in children's literature, where women constitute the majority of authors, reflecting the feminization of

professions related to childcare and education (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Drudy, 2013). Of the 23 female and male authors, 23 (100%) were implicitly coded White. There were 17 White male illustrators (though it should be noted that nine of these illustrators were photographers from a single book, *Jellies* (George, 2000) and 13 White female illustrators (see Figure 10). One female illustrator was possibly from Hispanic influence, however, there was not enough evidence from the publisher's website or her personal websites to form a conclusion.

Four individuals served as both author and illustrator, while 1 author and 3 illustrators were awarded in two separate years. One of the authors and one of the illustrators were related as mother and son and one author and illustrator were married.

Figure 9

Author's Gender

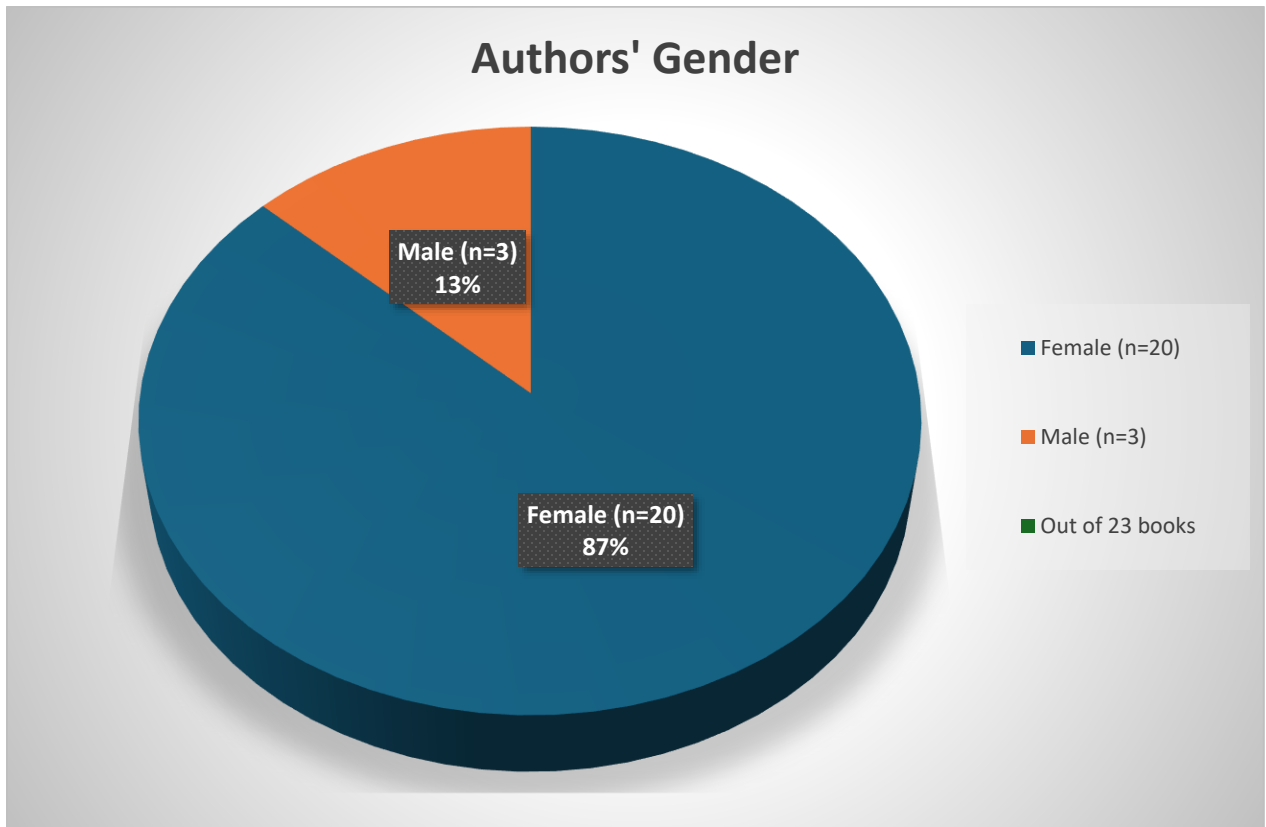
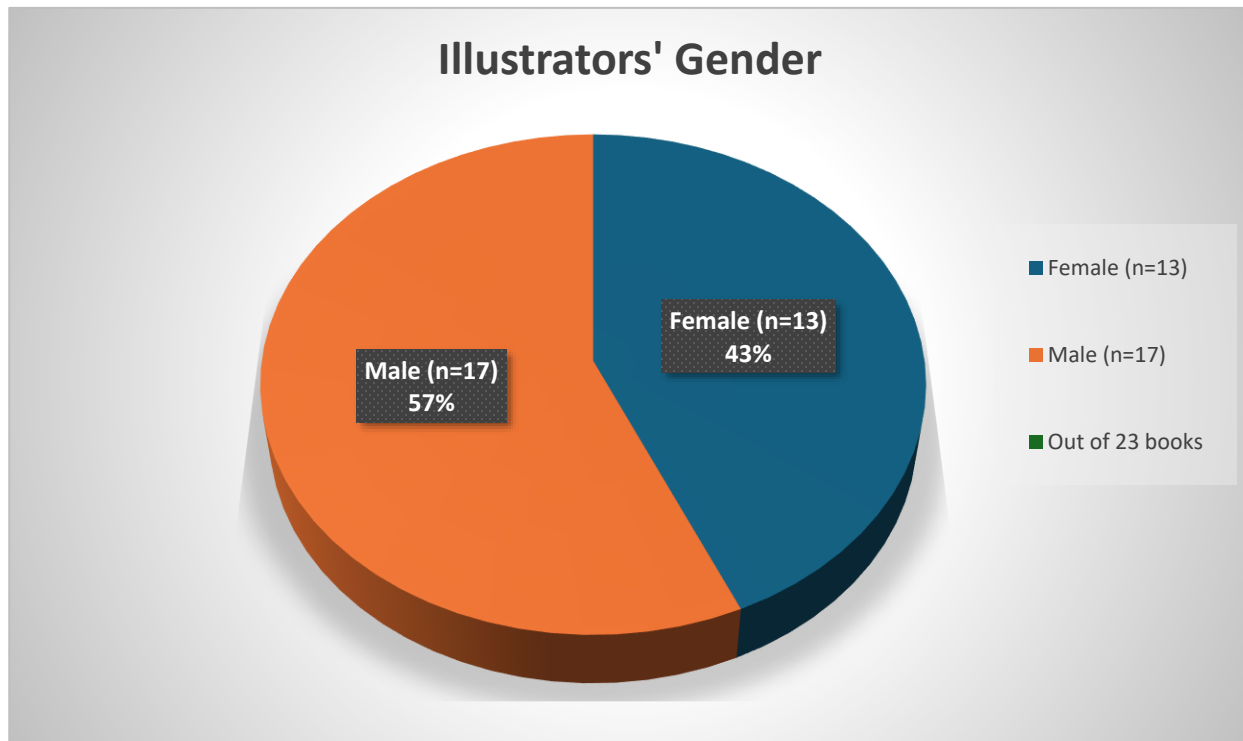


Figure 10

Illustrator's Gender



Publishers

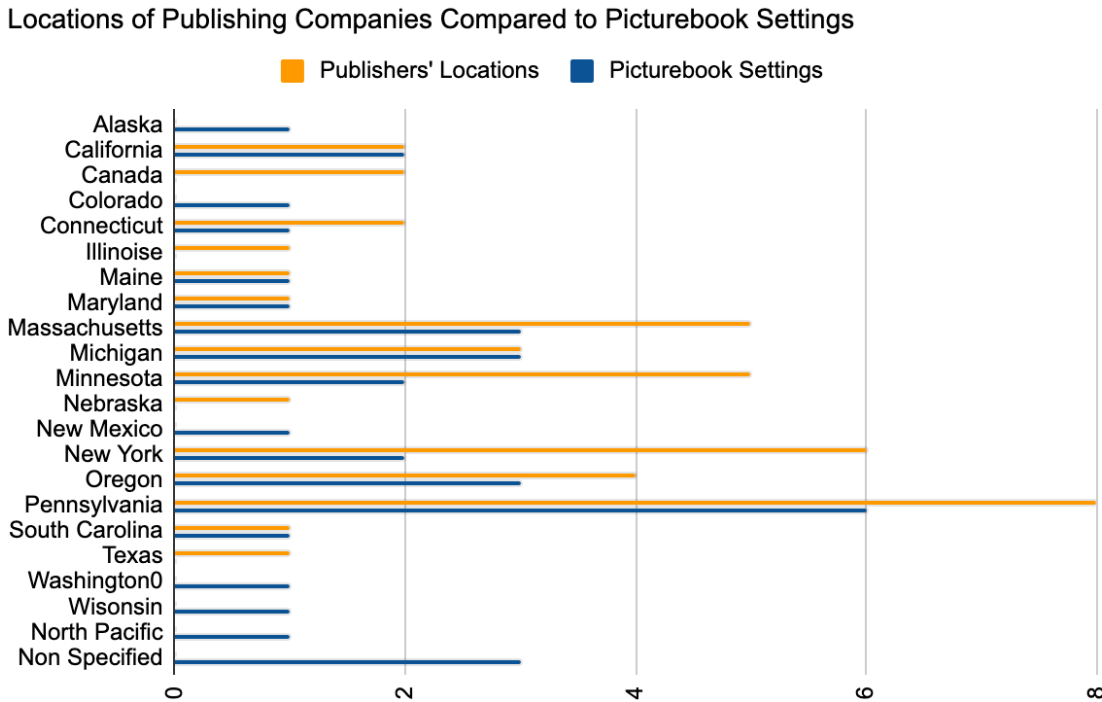
To determine if there were any patterns between the NOBA award selection committee and certain publishing companies, I examined NOBA's entire children's literature collection (44 winners from 1997-2024). This broader analysis helped contextualize my findings about representation in picturebooks while highlighting the significant influence of Northeast-based publishers and regional storytelling perspectives. The data revealed that NOBA, based in Idaho, predominantly selected books from northern United States publishers, such as Alaska Northwest Books, Millbrook Press, and Boyds Mills Press, demonstrating a clear preference for regional and specialized publishing houses over major commercial publishers like Harcourt and Abrams. Several of these publishing companies appeared multiple times among the winning titles (See Figure 11).

While this pattern demonstrated NOBA's commitment to authentic regional representation, it also created geographical limitations in their selections. However, this geographic pattern reflected the books that ultimately received awards, though without information about rejected titles, I cannot determine whether this distribution stemmed from selection preferences or simply mirrors the regional composition of submitted works. The comparison between publisher locations and story settings in Figure 11 highlighted a need for further investigation into both the publishing companies and their publication choices.

University presses, particularly the University of Minnesota Press and University of Nebraska Press, emerged as significant contributors, frequently publishing works that showcased regional landscapes and wildlife. Dedicated outdoor publishers like FalconGuides and Adventure Publications also featured prominently. Regional publishers such as Alaska Northwest Books and Michigan-based Sleeping Bear Press consistently produced winning titles that highlighted their local environments. Cool Springs Press (Beverly, MA) and Storey Publishing (North Adams, MA) further reinforced this trend toward specialized, regionally focused publishers. This distribution pattern suggests that NOBA prioritized works demonstrating deep expertise and authentic regional knowledge. While this reflected their commitment to geographically informed outdoor literature for children in the north, it also limited the geographical diversity of settings in these awarded picturebooks. For an organization that claims to be nationwide, large portions of the country are overlooked, which could leave readers feeling isolated as a result.

Figure 11

Locations of Publishing Companies Compared to Picturebook Settings



Character Representation

The analysis of character types across the twenty-three eligible books revealed diverse forms of representation through both human and non-human characters. Specifically, 33 human characters were identified, alongside 20 animals as animals, 5 anthropomorphic animals, 1 object portrayed realistically, and 1 anthropomorphic object (see Figure 12).

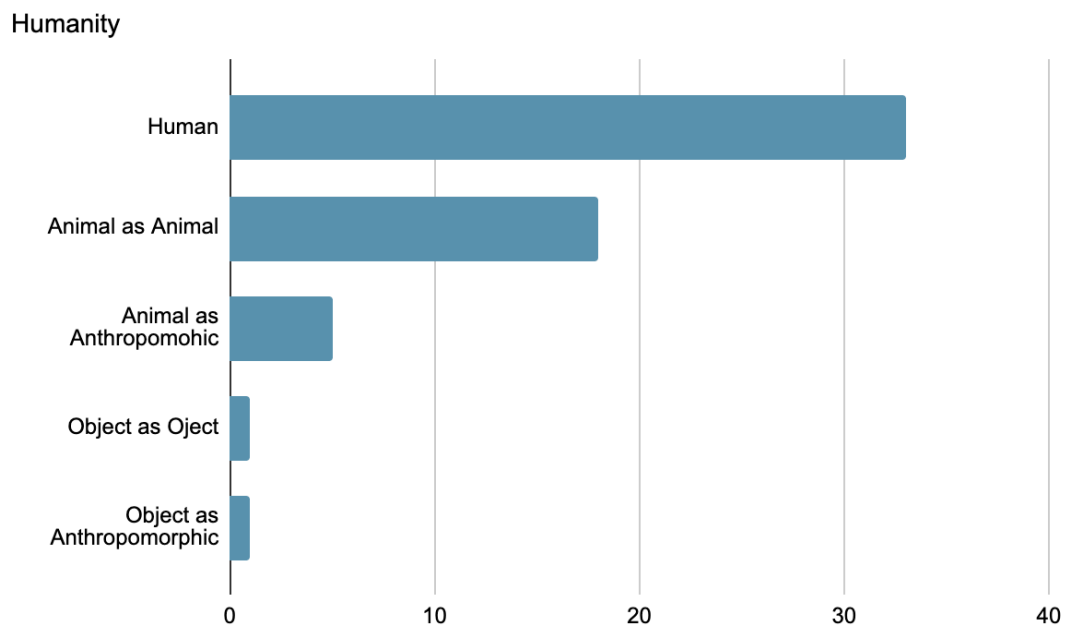
The depiction of non-human characters provided unique perspectives on the natural world, with the fig seed representing itself and the leaf representing an anthropomorphic figure. For example, in *Something Wonderful* (Ritter, Gonzalez, 2021), readers follow the journey of a fig seed, exploring the interconnected life cycles within a tropical rainforest ecosystem. Similarly, *The Leaf Man* (Ehlert, 2005) employs an innovative approach by personifying autumn leaves, following the journey of Leaf Man as he travels wherever the wind carries him. These

non-human protagonists served as vehicles for exploring natural phenomena and environmental connections while maintaining distinct character identities, some remaining true to their natural properties (like the fig seed) and others taking on more humanized characteristics (like the Leaf Man).

The balance between human and non-human characters demonstrated the books' varied approaches to engaging young readers with outdoor and natural themes. These approaches used both human characters and characters that represented nature or symbolized larger concepts, helping to convey the books' messages. This mix of character types suggested an effort to present the outdoor world through multiple narratives, though the subsequent analysis of these characters' specific attributes revealed important patterns in how they were portrayed and what messages these portrayals conveyed about who might belong in outdoor spaces.

Figure 12

Humanity Representation



Race

The analysis of racial and ethnic representation across the books revealed a stark lack of diversity. Of the 33 human characters depicted, 29 were implicitly coded as White, 2 were implicitly coded as Asian, 1 as Black, and 1 character presented an ambiguous racial identity (See Figure 13). This limited representation demonstrated a significant gap in the portrayal of diverse racial and ethnic identities in outdoor-themed children's literature.

What Does the Sky Say? (Carlstrom, Ladwig, 2021), emerged as a particularly complex case study in racial representation. The book's female child protagonist defied clear racial coding due to no explicit mention of her race, inconsistent depictions of physical features throughout the illustrations, including variations in hair texture, facial features, and skin tone. The book stands out because of its obvious difference to what society considers the “norm,” a default assumption of whiteness in racial representation, and the difficulty I experienced coding the character’s race. I was reminded of Crisp’s (2016) research that people rarely label traits society sees as “normal” or standard since these privileged characteristics are assumed to be the default unless otherwise stated.

My struggle continued throughout the narrative, as the protagonist created paintings of what appeared to be a White girl engaged in outdoor activities, presumably self-portraits, or potentially exemplifying Adichie's (2009) concept of the "single story:" the idea that individuals or groups are often reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes based on a single narrative. In this case, the protagonist's artwork seemed to reinforce a limited and homogeneous portrayal of her identity, suggesting a single, White, Western-centric story of who she might be. However, the book's final painting introduced an unexpected shift: it depicted a Black girl alongside a clearly

White boy (identified by skin color and red hair), a white Woman (with yellow hair), and a man whose race was ambiguous (portrayed with slightly darker skin than the boy and woman).

This inconsistency in representation created multiple possible interpretations of the protagonist's racial identity and familial relationships, including possibilities of mixed-race heritage, adoption, or a visiting relationship. While the illustration suggested a family unit, the book offered no explicit confirmation of these relationships.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed subtle, yet significant Christian theological influences woven throughout the book's narrative and visual elements. The author and illustrator, whose biographical information reflects their Christian theological foundations, provided initial context for understanding the book's deeper spiritual themes. The inclusion of Psalm 19:1-4 on the final page, paired with the family image, suggested an intentional theological subtext that remained largely unspoken within the primary narrative. The racial ambiguity of the characters appeared deliberate, potentially serving to create a universal spiritual experience that transcended specific cultural boundaries.

The book's concluding text, with its poetic dialogue between the girl and the sky, took on a more nuanced meaning when viewed through a Christian interpretive lens. The lines "The little girl hears with her heart and knows what the sky says is true. I still believe. Don't you?" (Carlstrom, Ladwig, 2021, para 17 & 18) and the sky's affirmative whisper of "Yes" (Carlstrom, Ladwig, 2021, para 19) could be read as a metaphorical representation of faith, divine connection, and spiritual continuity. This layered approach allowed the book to communicate its spiritual message without overt religious language, creating a more inclusive and subtle exploration of faith and belief. The connection to the outdoors, where the girl is physically and spiritually aligned with the vastness of nature, reinforces the idea of a transcendent relationship

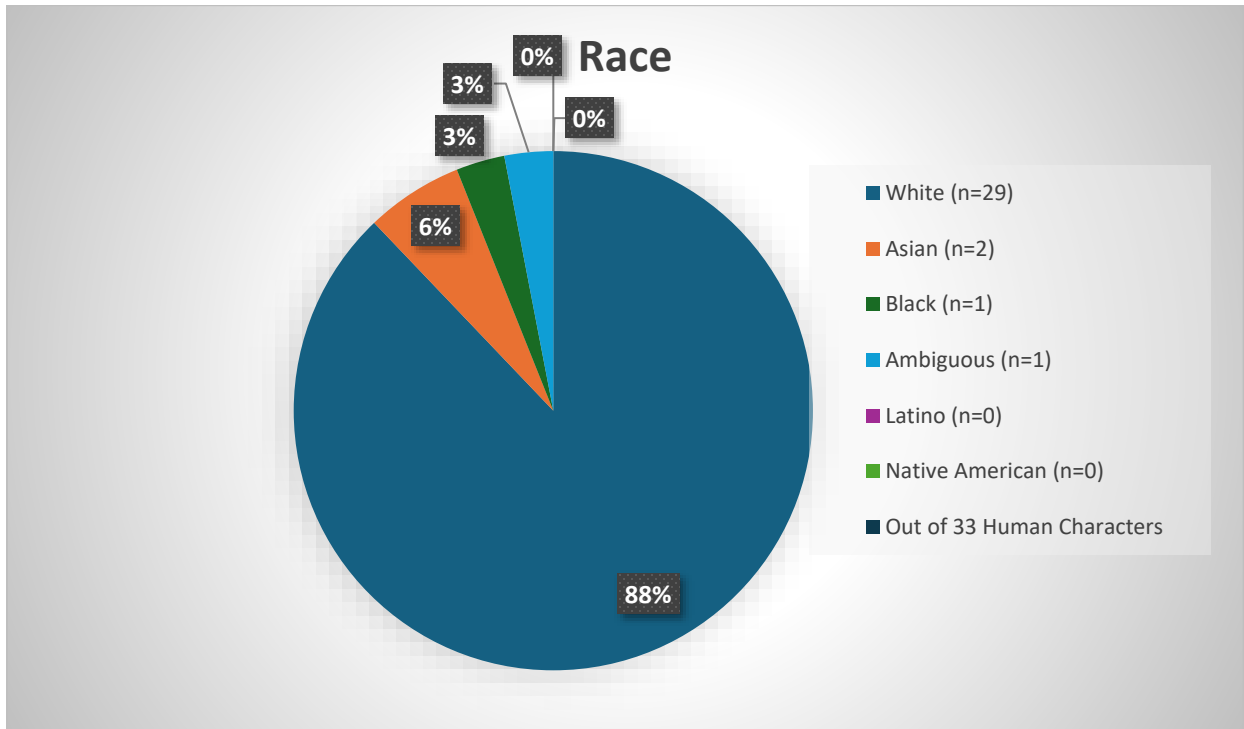
with the world around her, highlighting how belief and connection can extend beyond traditional religious settings into the natural world.

The two instances of implicitly coded diverse race were in *To Market, To Market* (McClure, 2011) and *Ladybug: Red, Fiery, and Bright* (Pasado, 2002). Asian representation appeared in *To Market, To Market* (McClure, 2011), where woodcut illustrations depicted two main characters, implicitly noted as a mother and son, with Asian features as they explored their local market. In the beginning of *Ladybug: Red, Fiery, and Bright* (Pasado, 2002), and appearing in a single, full page, a Black girl is depicted playing with a ladybug. These representations stood as two of only three instances of implicit non-white character depiction in the entire sample of books analyzed.

This data underscored a significant lack of racial and ethnic diversity, which highlighted the need for more inclusive representation to reflect the diverse experiences and identities of young readers in the outdoors. By offering characters who reflect a wider array of racial and ethnic backgrounds, books can foster a deeper connection with readers from various communities, helping them see themselves in outdoor settings and reinforcing the idea that nature belongs to everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity. At the same time, this inclusion benefits the majority reader by broadening their understanding of different perspectives, encouraging empathy and a more inclusive view of the world around them.

Figure 13

Representation of Race in Human Characters



Gender

For the gender analysis, I examined gender representation by identifying explicit and implicit gender markers in both text and illustrations. Following Stone's (2024) framework for content analysis, indicators of gender included textual references (pronouns, gendered terms like "mother," "father," "boy," "girl"), visual cues in illustrations (clothing, physical characteristics, activities portrayed), character roles and behaviors in relation to gendered expectations.

I looked for both explicit gender identification and implicit gender coding through behaviors, relationships, and visual representation. For example, in illustrations, I noted whether characters were depicted with traditionally gendered clothing, hairstyles, or engaged in stereotypically gendered activities.

Examples of these indicators included explicit references in *Whistling Wings* (Goering, Jacques, 2008) where the text identifies "his father" and "his mother," and visual representations in *Jam & Jelly by Holly and Nellie* by (Whelan, van Frankenhuyzen, 2002) where female characters wore dresses while the male character wore pants and had shorter hair.

Gender representation across the analyzed books revealed a relatively balanced distribution of explicitly gendered characters, with 27 male and 23 female characters among the 60 characters with clear gender identification. Of the 10 characters coded unspecified, 9 were animals as animals and one was object as an object explicitly coded as male due to the pronouns (see Figures 14 & 15). While this initial count suggested near parity, a deeper examination of gender representation across different types of books revealed additional patterns worth noting regarding gender norms. The gender representation in the poetry collections was addressed separately in a later section, as these works presented unique approaches to gender that warranted distinct analysis.

Figure 14

Gender Representation

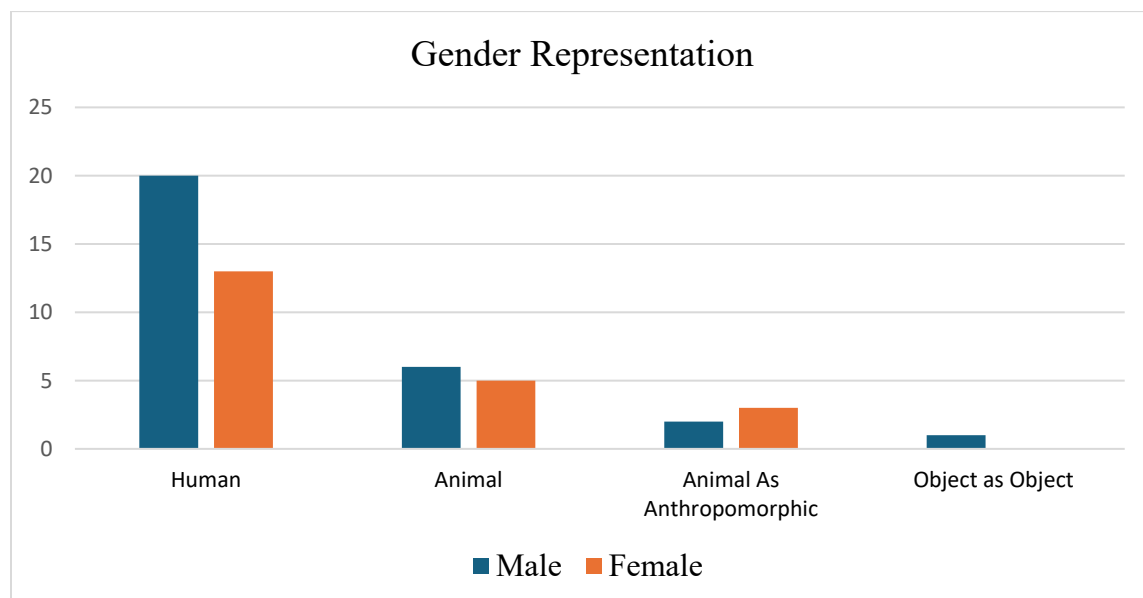
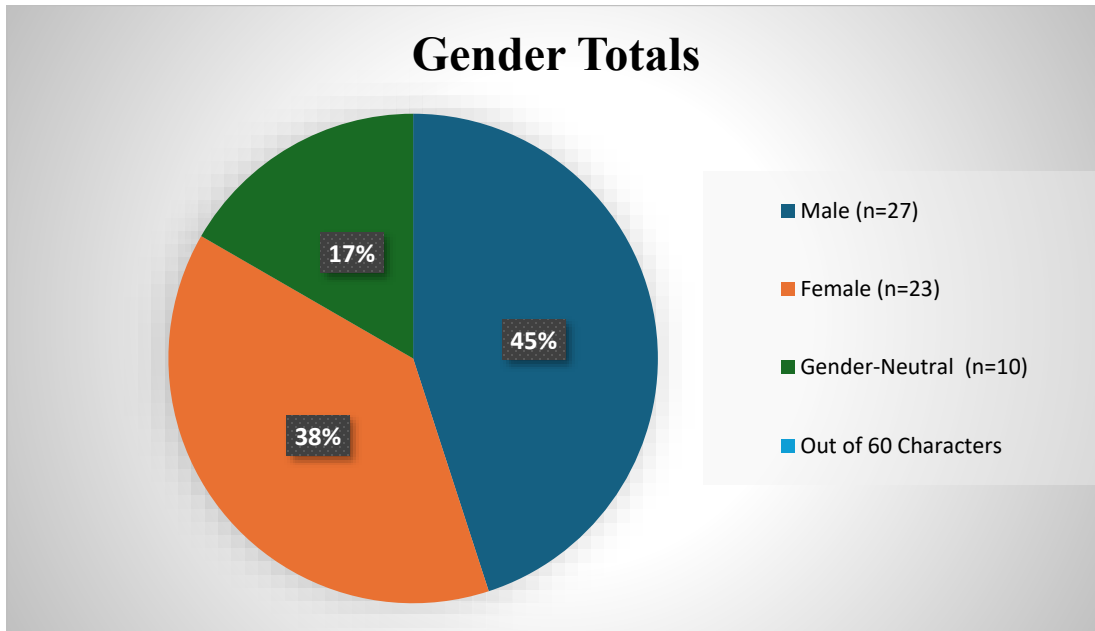


Figure 15

Human, Animal, and Object Gender Representation Totals



As I analyzed the characters, I found that of the 23 female characters (both human and animal), 10 were explicitly portrayed as mothers, while 1 had implicit maternal roles. Of the 10 explicit mothers, 5 were human, and 5 were animals, both portraying heteronormative roles and family structure. The implicitly coded woman who displayed motherly roles was a human. Among the 27 male characters, 6 were depicted as fathers. All 6 portrayals of fathers occurred within heteronormative family structures and mostly perceived male roles, with 1 being an anthropomorphic animal, 1 animal as animal, and 4 as human. Four of the female characters, both human and animal, were shown alone while they cared for their children. I noticed that no male fathers were depicted alone with a child. Within each human family, I observed that traditional gender norms were prevalent, as well as mutual parenting and shared roles appearing in 4 of the stories.

An example of this is seen in *Kelly at Hazel Ridge* (Smith van Frankenhuyzen, van Frankenhuyzen, 2006) which provided a significant example of traditional heteronormative gender roles in family interactions. This book, illustrated by the author's husband, Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen, is based on their real-life experiences at Hazel Ridge Farm in Michigan. The story portrays the family dynamics that align with Colley et al.'s (2022) findings about persistent gender gaps in nature engagement. The farm is described as a "refuge that revives the tired soul," and through the narrative, traditional family roles are reinforced through the interactions between parents and children.

An animal representation appears in *Pup and Otter* (London, London, 2017), Pup's mother is shown comforting her baby, illustrating the contrast in parental representation across the sample. While this book depicted a single mother, at the conclusion of the book when Pup turns eight months old, "he's learned all he needs to know from his mother" and is now "with a raft of young males." While this book depicted a single mother, this portrayal reinforced the recurring theme of maternal caregiving followed by male independence, further underscoring the persistence of traditional gender roles in animal representation within children's literature.

This analysis of gender distribution was complicated by the study's methodology of analyzing only the first four main characters in each book, which potentially obscured broader patterns of gender representation. However, the explicit attention to gender in certain books, particularly the poetry collections, suggested an emerging awareness of gender representation issues in outdoor-themed children's literature. *To Market, To Market* (McClure, 2011) provided another interesting case study in gender representation. The book's seven sections, each focused on a different market stand, and portrayed 8 male and 4 female vendors, reflecting what Lorber (2018) describes as persistent occupational gender segregation. Within the parameters of the

study's character analysis (which counted only the first four main characters per book), this translated to 4 implicitly labeled male and 2 female characters. This pattern of male-dominated professional roles, even in a contemporary setting, suggested persistent gender biases in occupational representation.

Gender in Poetry Corpus

Contrary to the initial data, I found the 3 poetry collections, all of which centered around birds, offered unique approaches to gender representation (See Figure 16). As a result, I decided to analyze these poems as a distinct corpus to better represent the overall data. This approach allowed me to explore each poem individually rather than the first four main characters, as suggested by the CCBC (2024). Consequently, the poetry data remained separate from the gender data in picturebooks. Since each poem initially analyzed the first four birds, and the majority of the poems only featured one main character, I analyzed gender based on each poem within the picturebook.

Wild Wings: Poems for Young Readers (Yolen, Stemple, 2002) contained 14 poems that maintained gender neutrality. *An Egret's Day* (Yolen, Stemple, 2010) presented 15 poems with varied gender representation: 5 portrayed male characters, 3 female characters, and 1 deliberately gender-neutral poem that explicitly questioned the challenge of determining an egret's sex. The 6 remaining characters were gender neutral.

Alaska is for the Birds (Ewing, Zerbetz, 2022) featured 15 poems with 8 male, 6 female, and 1 gender-neutral characterizations. There were 44 poems across the poetry corpus, with half of the remaining gender neutral and the other half portraying 13 males and 9 females. These poetry collections appeared to demonstrate a greater awareness of gender representation and sometimes confronted gender assumptions, adding to the overall gender representation in the

picturebook analysis. For example, in *An Egret's Day* (Yolen, Stemple, 2010), one poem directly addressed gender identification asking, "Boy or girl? How can we tell? The egret keeps its secret well." This explicit acknowledgment of gender ambiguity stands in stark contrast to the picturebooks where gender was typically assigned without question through clear visual or textual markers.

Similarly, in "Rufous Hummingbird" from *Alaska is for the Birds* (Ewing, Zerbetz, 2022), the poem deliberately uses male pronouns for the tiny, delicate, jewel-colored hummingbird, characteristics typically associated with femininity. This conscious subversion of gender stereotypes was rarely observed in the narrative picturebooks analyzed, where gender roles tended to follow more conventional patterns.

In conclusion, the overall analysis revealed a relatively balanced gender distribution among both human and animal characters, with 104 gender-neutral representations, 40 male characters, 32 female characters, and 32 gender-neutral representations (see Figure 17). However, this numerical balance masks persistent traditional gender role representations, particularly in family structures where heteronormative roles predominated. While initial gender representation appeared relatively balanced numerically, deeper analysis revealed persistent traditional gender norms in heteronormative parenting roles, affirming the existing work of Bradley (2022), Crisp (2016), Lorber (2018), and Imhoff and Hoffman (2023).

Figure 16

Gender Representation of Poetry Picturebooks

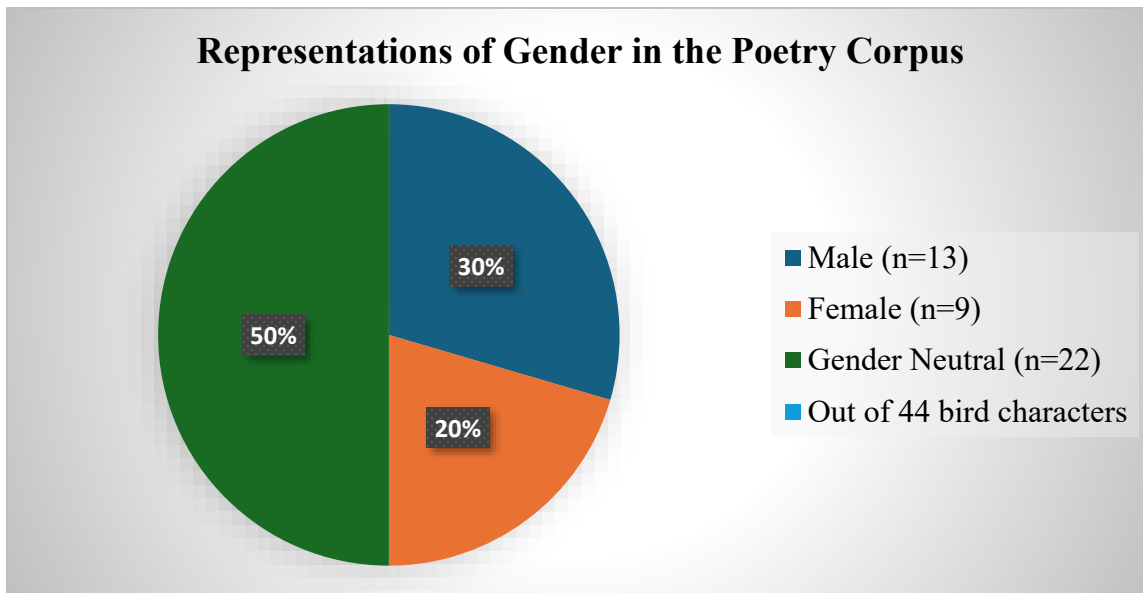
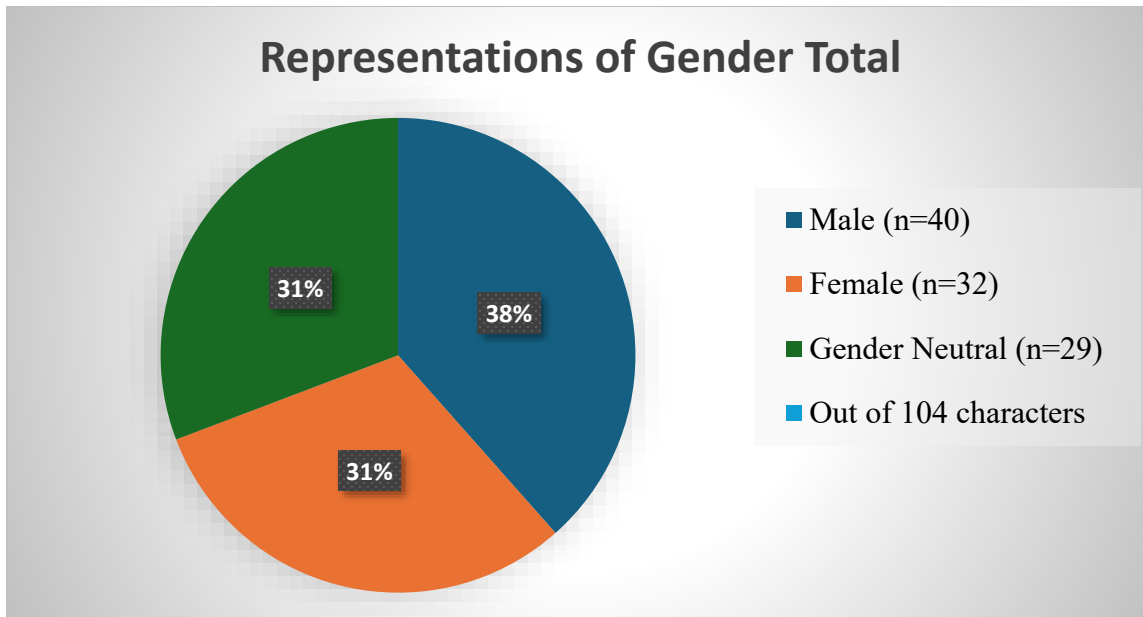


Figure 17

Representation of Gender Totals



Class

In children's literature, poverty is often portrayed as a temporary state to be overcome, reflecting middle-class perspectives (Bothelo & Rudman, 2009). Socioeconomic backgrounds

are typically left unspecified, with dominant characters implied to be middle or upper-class, while marginalized characters are more likely to have their status explicitly named or highlighted (Crisp, 2016).

This category builds on Stone's (2024) framework for analyzing representations of class, which identifies several key indicators of socioeconomic status: occupations, economic capital (debt/investment), housing, transportation, belongings, and appearance. Each of these indicators provides a lens through which to understand how class differences are depicted, both in the text and through illustrations. For example, occupations may be highlighted through characters' jobs or lack thereof, revealing their economic standing. Economic capital is reflected in references to wealth, debt, or investments. Housing indicators could include the description of a character's living conditions, while transportation might be portrayed through the accessibility or quality of the means of travel. Belongings can be depicted through material possessions or the lack thereof, and appearance often reflects a character's financial situation, from clothing to overall presentation.

In this analysis, I examined both textual and visual representations of these class indicators. The texts were analyzed for descriptions of characters' socio-economic traits, while illustrations were reviewed for visual cues such as the depiction of modest or affluent living environments, the presence of luxury items or necessities, and the portrayal of characters' physical appearance as markers of their social class.

Class representation was notably skewed toward more privileged backgrounds. Of the 31 human characters with sufficient textual or illustrative information to implicitly determine class status, 25 were portrayed as middle to upper-class, while 3 were undetermined. Only 3 characters appeared to have fewer privileges, as exemplified in *Jam and Jelly by Holly and Nellie* (Whelan,

van Frankenhuyzen, 2002), where the family's financial constraints were explicitly addressed through their reuse of containers and the need to sell homemade goods (see Figure 18). The inside front cover's paratextual elements further shed light on the family's financial situation, stating, "Holly's family lives a simple life and times are hard. Without a warm coat, she will not be able to start school." The supplementary paratextual elements provided compelling evidence for a representation of lower socioeconomic class.

As Dashper & King (2021) attest, the outdoor industry's emphasis on expensive gear and remote locations creates additional obstacles for those with limited resources, a finding further supported by Lee et al. (2001). This representation highlighted a critical gap in the depiction of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, which potentially limited the ability of children from less privileged backgrounds to see themselves reflected in these stories and reinforced societal biases about who belongs in outdoor spaces. This exclusionary narrative contrasts with recent research by the NRPA (2022), which advocates for inclusive outdoor spaces through low-cost initiatives.

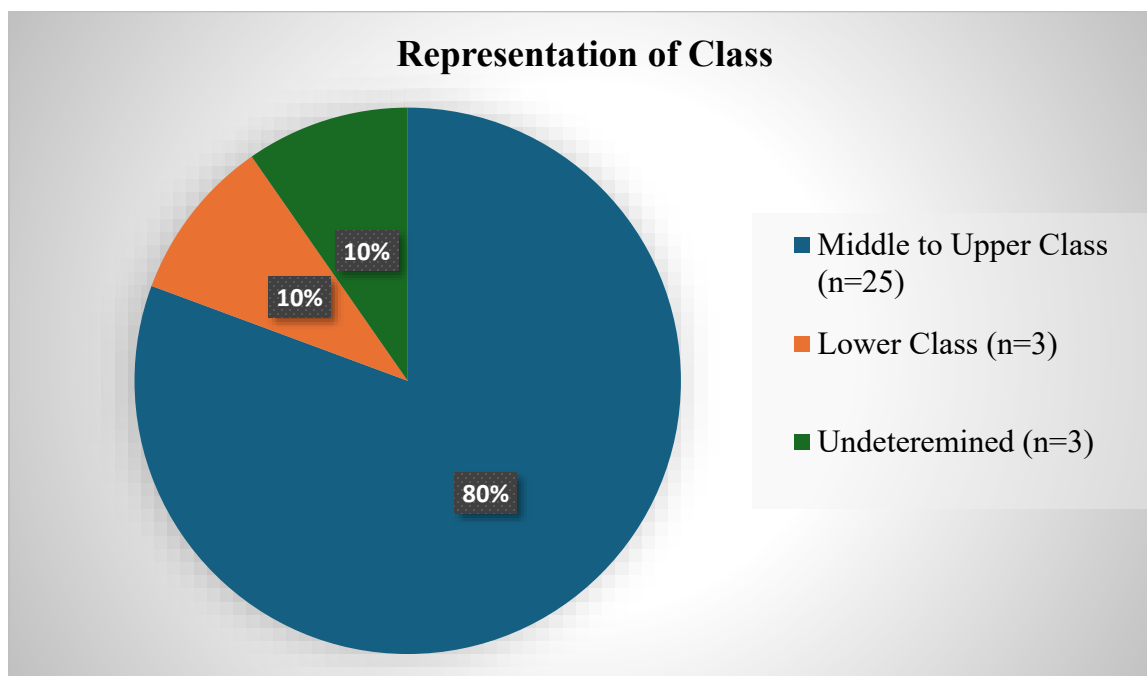
The predominance of middle to upper-class perspectives in these books mirrors broader societal assumptions about outdoor recreation and access, aligning with Warren's (1998, 2005) and Mowatt's (2018) research on how outdoor recreation has historically favored privileged groups while excluding others. The limited representation of economic diversity, with only three characters portrayed as having fewer economic privileges, fails to acknowledge the varied ways people from different socioeconomic backgrounds engage with outdoor spaces. This finding adds to the ongoing discussion of economic barriers to outdoor participation, as documented by Bower (2016) and Hodge et al. (2016).

The emphasis on specialized equipment and private property access in the books further reinforces exclusionary narratives about outdoor participation, which contrasts with recent

NRPA (2022) research advocating for inclusive outdoor spaces through low-cost initiatives. Furthermore, these representations fail to reflect the reality that approximately 16% of American children live in poverty (ChildStats.gov). This suggests that children's literature continues to perpetuate idealized portrayals of outdoor participation, rather than representing the diverse ways in which children from all socioeconomic backgrounds engage with the world.

Figure 18

Representation of Class



Ability

In the analysis of ability representation in children's literature, I focused on how disability and ability are portrayed, particularly in outdoor-themed stories. This category draws on Stone's (2024) framework for analyzing texts, which identifies several key indicators of ability or disability: mobility, communication, sensory, cognitive, emotional, and developmental (age/size). Each of these indicators offers a lens through which to understand how characters'

abilities or disabilities are represented, both in the text and through illustrations. For example, mobility can be indicated by descriptions of movement or limitations in a character's ability to navigate the environment. Communication might be represented by a character's ability to speak, listen, or interact with others. Sensory indicators could include references to hearing, sight, or touch. Cognitive representations include intelligence or processing capacity, while emotional portrayals reflect how a character manages or expresses feelings. Lastly, developmental indicators speak to age or physical size, which often shape a character's abilities or limitations.

In this analysis, I examined both textual and visual representations of these abilities. The texts were analyzed for descriptions of characters' traits that indicated any of these abilities or disabilities, while illustrations were reviewed for visual cues, such as the presence of assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs, hearing aids) or passive representations of characters (e.g., lack of agency).

Ability representation was minimal, with only 4 books that indicated potential disabilities (see Figure 19). These representations varied from an aging coyote described as "Old Hunter" in *Coyote and Badger* (Hiscock, 2021, para. 4) and the difficulty of hunting while also trying to keep up with the young badger. A man who wore glasses as he worked in his garden in *Whose Garden Is It?* (Hoberman, Dyer, 2004), to a more problematic portrayal in *Jellies: The Life of a Jellyfish* (George, 2000) which presented jellyfish as inferior to humans due to their lack of a brain and heart. The author explicitly states that jellyfish "have no brain, no heart, and no bones," using these absences to position jellyfish as less evolved and less capable than humans, reinforcing a hierarchical view of abilities rather than celebrating diverse forms of existence.

Ehlert's *Leaf Man* (2005) uses the protagonist's passive journey on the wind as a metaphor for a lack of personal autonomy. The character's inability to control its movement

symbolizes powerlessness and isolation. This absence of agency in the narrative aligns with Beames and Brown's (2016) framework, emphasizing agency as a crucial element in adventurous learning. The story's portrayal of a character at the mercy of external forces can be interpreted as a critique of systems that limit individual choice and self-directed action in outdoor adventures.

The limited and sometimes problematic portrayals observed in the books I analyzed emphasized the need for more nuanced and diverse portrayals of disability in children's literature, particularly in outdoor-themed stories. For instance, the majority of books (96%) featured characters with full mobility who could run, climb, and navigate outdoor spaces without limitation. All human and anthropomorphized animal characters could communicate verbally, with no representation of alternative communication methods. Characters consistently demonstrated full sensory capabilities, seeing birds flying overhead, hear animal sounds, and feel textures in nature.

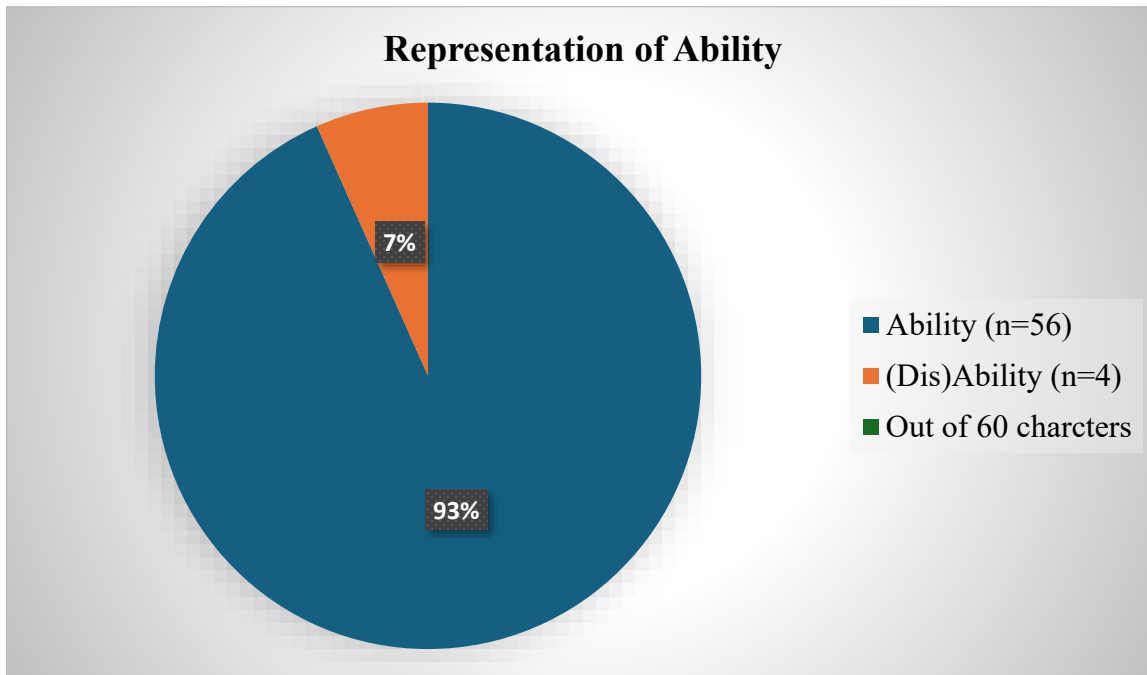
In the United States, approximately 21.7% of children live with a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), yet this significant portion of the population remains underrepresented in children's books, particularly in outdoor narratives. This exclusion not only marginalizes children with disabilities but also reinforces societal stereotypes about ability and worth. By broadening the scope of representation to include a more diverse range of abilities, authors and illustrators have an opportunity to challenge harmful narratives and create more inclusive stories that resonate with all children.

The impact of such representation is far-reaching. Children with disabilities are less likely to see themselves in the stories they read, and as a result, may struggle to envision themselves in active, adventurous roles. More authentic portrayals of disabilities in outdoor contexts could foster empathy, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, these stories

have the potential to encourage readers, both with and without disabilities, to advocate for greater accessibility in outdoor adventures and other environments.

Figure 19

Representation of Ability



Outdoor Activities and Access

Outdoor participation was predominantly centered on leisure activities and family recreation. Most human characters were shown engaged in activities such as picking berries, canoeing, or feeding animals, swinging, or playing on their farm. Refreshingly, books depicting human characters primarily placed them outdoors, with about 99% of the illustrations showing outdoor scenes and only approximately 1% depicting indoor settings. All characters accessed well-maintained equipment for their outdoor activities.

Animal characters were primarily depicted in their niche, engaging in behaviors and characteristic of their species. For instance, birds were shown nesting in trees, beavers swimming

in rivers, and deer grazing in fields. These settings highlight the ecological roles of the animals and reinforce the idea they are best suited to their respective environments.

The following sections will provide specific analysis for each of the outdoor participation discourses.

Outdoor Settings

In my analysis of outdoor settings, I found a geographic concentration in the Northeast and Upper Midwest United States, with most human characters situated on private properties like farms and yards. Only one book, *Blueberry Shoe* (Dixon, Zerbetz, 1999), depicted a family hiking outside their immediate environment, specifically on Ptarmigan Mountain in Colorado's White River National Forest, which subtly emphasized public land accessibility.

Regarding setting diversity, the 2 objects, a fig seed and a leaf, along with 9 animal characters were predominantly shown in their respective niches, including one in each of the following environments: oceanic, desert, and rainforest. 2 were depicted in rivers and lakes, while the remaining 2 animals were in their specific ecological environments (see Figure 20). *Something Wonderful* (Ritter, Gonzalez, 2020) traces the journey of a fig seed through the rainforest, illustrating a thriving ecosystem where all elements are interconnected, and each plant and animal relies on one another for survival, while in *What Goes on Inside a Beaver Pond* (Cushing Gop, Shryock, 2023), a beaver family navigates the Yokun Brook waterways, using their natural skills to build a lodge, create a wetland habitat, and adapt to seasonal changes in their ecosystem. Interestingly, the limited range of human outdoor engagement reflects a cultural assumption that, unlike animals, humans, particularly children, require structured, controlled spaces for their experiences in nature. As Morgenstern (2020) argues, contemporary discourse

often imagines wildness as an attribute exclusive to animals, whereas human children are positioned as vulnerable and in need of adult supervision, even in outdoor settings.

The 33 human characters appeared in more limited contexts. Two characters were portrayed in a lake; 2 characters were in their neighborhood, while 11 were in forests or on private property. One was shown on an island, 2 were inside, and 5 were in town (see Outdoor Purpose section for a more thorough description). Notably, 7 of the 10 books featuring humans also included indoor scenes. Five separate books portrayed 12 characters in both indoor and outdoor settings, all within their own property (see Figure 21). In *Jam & Jelly by Holly and Nellie* by (Whelan, van Frankenhuyzen, 2002), Holly and her mother prepare jam and jelly in their kitchen and shared meals together in the dining room.

This analysis highlights a contrast in the portrayal of human and animal engagement with nature. While animals are shown thriving independently in their natural niches, human experiences are largely confined to structured, controlled environments, reinforcing cultural perceptions of human vulnerability in the wild and portraying the outdoors as merely a place for play and leisure. This trend in children's literature underscores the importance of offering readers diverse representations of outdoor experiences, allowing them to see themselves not only in structured environments but also exploring, adventuring, and engaging with nature in a variety of settings beyond private spaces and limited geographical locations.

Figure 20

Animal Outdoor Setting

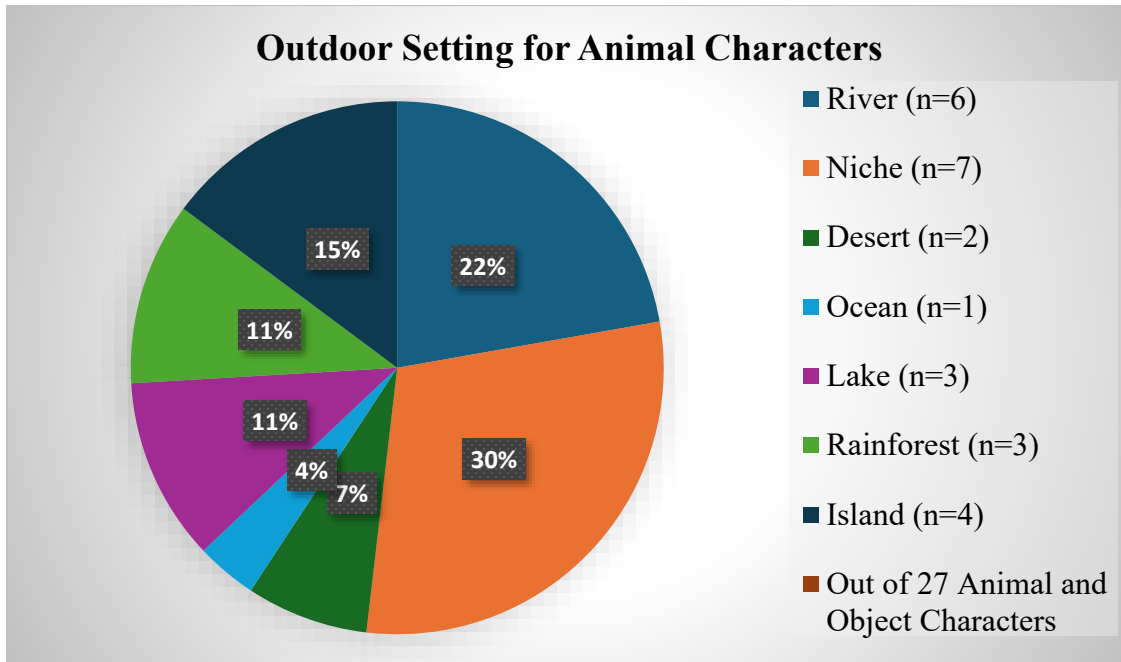
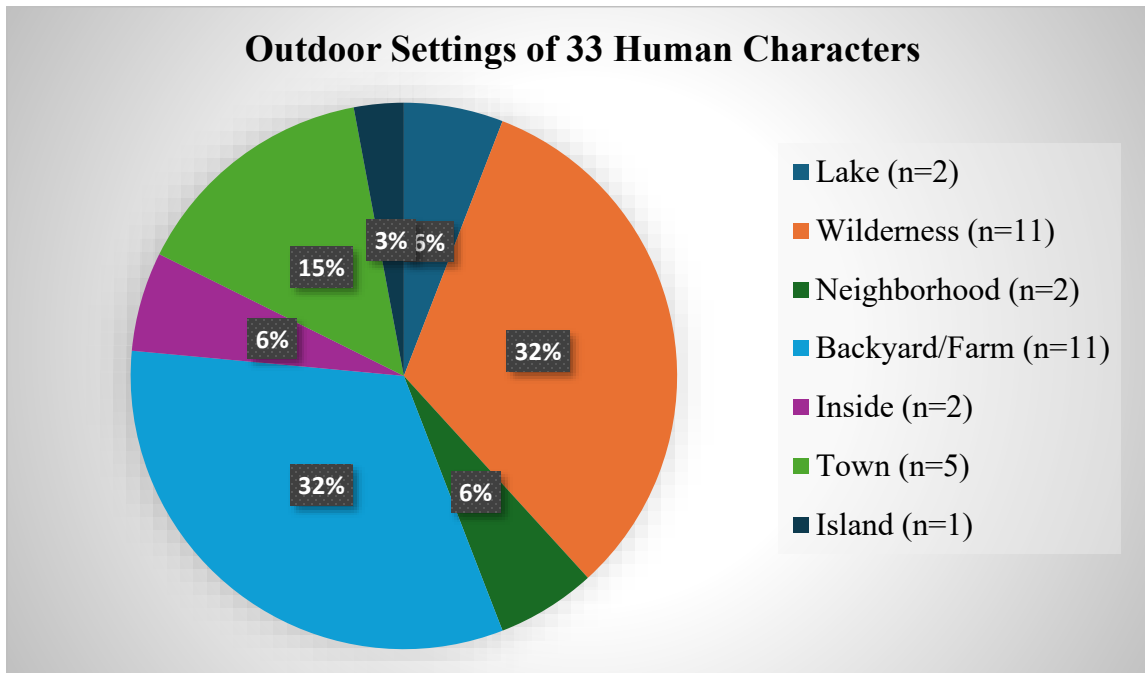


Figure 21

Outdoor Setting of Human Characters



Outdoor Purpose

The portrayal of outdoor activities differed markedly between animal and human characters in the books analyzed. Animals were consistently shown in their niches, engaged in instinctive behaviors essential for survival. In contrast, human characters displayed a broader range of activities, with leisure being predominant, appearing in nine of the twelve books featuring human characters.

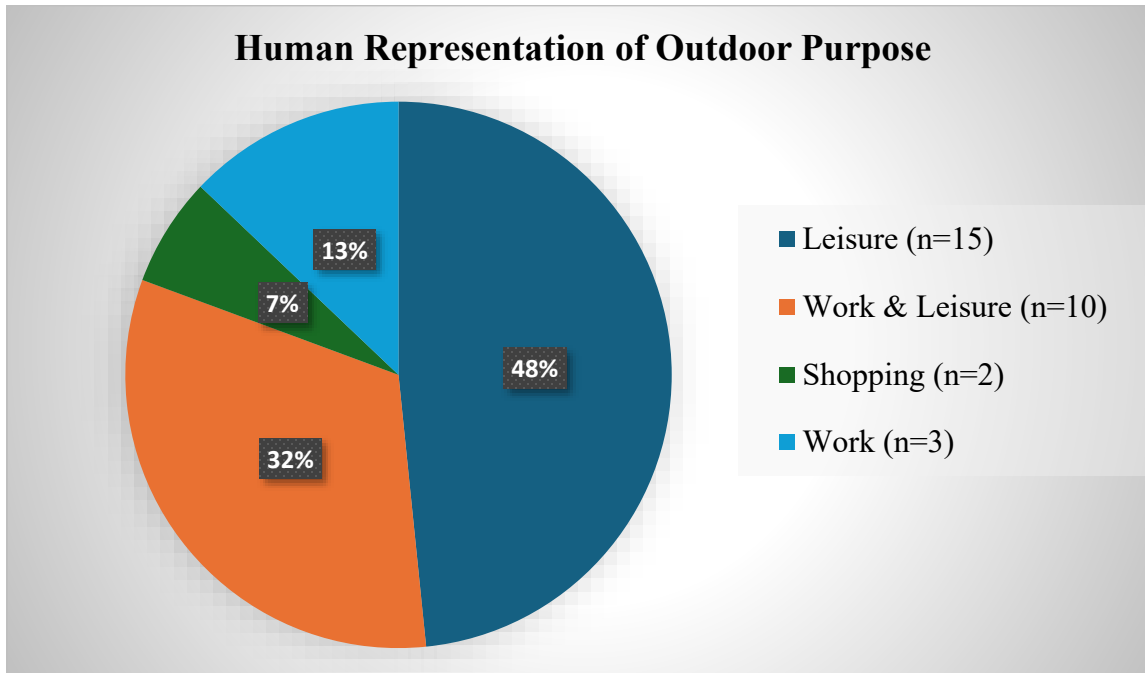
Among these books, leisure activities were the primary focus, with only one book exclusively showing work-related activities (see Figure 22). This data aligned with Bower (2016) and Hodge et al. (2016), regarding higher-income individuals often having paid time off for outdoor recreation, while lower-income families frequently lack this flexibility.

The selections largely reflect regional narratives, as many of the publishers are known for highlighting specific geographic areas, which may contribute to a limited representation of outdoor experiences. This focus overlooks urban green spaces and the diverse ways children in cities engage with nature, from community gardens to public parks. Expanding the range of outdoor settings and experiences in children's literature could provide more inclusive opportunities for readers to see themselves in nature, whether through work or play, and regardless of their geographic or socioeconomic background.

Several significant themes emerged throughout the collection, including environmental conservation, indigenous land acknowledgment, environmental education, and family bonds. Notably, among the 23 books reviewed, one stood out for its universal appeal, creating a distinct sense of belonging for readers of all backgrounds.

Figure 22

Human Representation of Outdoor Purpose



Conservation and Land Acknowledgment

Conservation themes appeared in three books, each approaching environmental protection and land history differently. *Camping with the President* (Wadsworth, Dugan, 2009) chronicled Theodore Roosevelt's transformative camping expedition with John Muir to California's Sequoia trees, which documented the journey that would lead to the establishment of Yosemite National Park and highlighted themes of environmental advocacy, the protection of natural landmarks, and the role of national parks in conservation.

I found *The Lost Forest* (Root, Bowen, 2019) presented an unusual conservation story that focused on surveyor Josiah King's fortuitous mistake in Minnesota that ultimately resulted in the preservation of what would become the Chippewa National Forest. I noted that this book specifically acknowledged Indigenous people's connection to the land and the historical context of land acquisition, as evidenced in paragraph 7: "Native people had lived and hunted on the land

for thousands of years most of the land had been taken from Native people.” Through my analysis, I observed that the book emphasized the value of accidental conservation and the need for broader environmental stewardship.

Environmental Education and Family Connection

In my continued analysis of *What Goes on Inside a Beaver Pond* (Cushing Gop, Shryock, 2023), I found specific acknowledgment of land taken from Native peoples in the paratextual elements:

Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary is located on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican Nation, the Indigenous peoples of the region....Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from their home...We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building more inclusive and equitable space for all (Cushing Gop, Shryock, 2023).

Environmental education was also portrayed in *Kelly of Hazel Ridge* (Smith van Frankenhuyzen, van Frankenhuyzen, 2006) through the protagonist's life on a 10-acre family farm. The narrative intertwined environmental learning with familial knowledge transmission, as her father's historical accounts profoundly shaped Kelly's understanding of the landscape. This approach demonstrated how environmental education could be integrated into everyday family life and local history. However, the end acknowledged this property being cared for and passed down to future generations, which caused me to question its potential accessibility to others in the future.

Representation of Outdoor Equipment

Seven books in the collection featured outdoor equipment, with characters equipped appropriately for their specific outdoor occupations or activities. The equipment depicted

included canoes, paddles, life jackets, strollers, child carrier backpacks, tents, bicycles with safety helmets, cameras, binoculars, horses, hats, and gardening tools.

Among the picturebooks, two portrayed families with multiple homes, one explicitly described as a second property, while the other was coded as implicit. While the presence of this equipment and property alone doesn't definitively indicate socioeconomic status, it was the specialized equipment, coupled with the purpose, that most clearly coded characters' physical abilities and access needs in outdoor spaces.

Approach to Belonging

In my analysis of *Green Island with a Little Red House: A Book of Colors and Critters* (Lovejoy, 2005), I found a charming story of a small island teeming with colorful creatures, which used vibrant illustrations to introduce young readers to different colors and animals in an engaging way. I observed on the next to last page of the book, the author made an invitation to include the reader as a character by encouraging them to "look into the tidal pool to see yourself on the island." I also noted a letter from the author inviting readers to put down the book and go outside and see the colors.

Through my analysis, I found this approach welcomed everyone to the island regardless of race, gender, class, and ability while inviting them to step outside and see the colors around their environment, effectively removing the narrowing of the setting and including wherever the reader resided.

Summary

The comprehensive analysis of 23 awarded picturebooks revealed complex patterns in representation. While initial findings showed promise in the portrayal of gender, primarily through the forty-four poems, regional outdoor knowledge, and children's outdoor play, a deeper

examination exposed profound representational gaps across critical dimensions. The literature predominantly featured a narrow, privileged perspective of outdoor engagement, depicting White, middle to upper-class individuals with access to leisure activities, specialized equipment, and optimal physical capabilities. Further gender analysis, despite initial promise, revealed persistent stereotypical norms, particularly in the portrayal of parenting roles.

Conspicuously absent were meaningful representations of urban outdoor experiences, southern United States settings and activities, substantive discussions of environmental sustainability, and diverse outdoor participation that authentically reflected marginalized communities' multifaceted experiences. The systemic exclusion extended beyond racial and socioeconomic boundaries to also limit representations of individuals with diverse abilities. This restricted narrative not only diminished the richness of outdoor experiences but also perpetuated problematic assumptions about who belongs in natural spaces and how those spaces can be meaningfully engaged.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conducting this research, I set out to understand who belongs in outdoor spaces as represented through children's literature. My investigation of the NOBA winners from 1997 to 2024 revealed insights into representation and exclusion within outdoor children's picturebooks. While these results were largely expected, they did not reflect the current efforts of outdoor educators to create a more diverse and belonging outdoor community.

The data exposed a landscape of marginalization. Of the 33 human characters analyzed, 29 were implicitly coded as White, reflecting a narrow perspective that perpetuated dominant cultural narratives. The representation of socioeconomic backgrounds was equally limited, with 25 of 31 characters portraying middle to upper-class experiences. These findings resonated deeply with Adichie's (2009) critique of single-story representations and Crisp's (2016) research on how dominant identities remain uninterrogated.

Despite this limitation, I was encouraged by NOBA's apparent goal to invite children to explore their own yards, towns, and communities. The inclusion of field guides to the larger corpus and the focus on local exploration seemed to encourage engagement with nearby natural spaces. The books' portrayal of animals in nature, through poetry, encounters, and anthropomorphizing, offered a range of entry points for children to connect with the outdoors.

Publishing Industry Impact and Geographic Representation

The geographic focus in these books remained predominantly centered in the Northeast, Upper Midwest, and Northwest United States, further constraining the narrative landscape. Regional and specialized publishing houses, including university presses and outdoor-focused publishers, consistently contributed to the winners, suggesting a preference for works

demonstrating deep regional expertise. While this reflected NOBA's commitment to authentic regional representation, it also created limitations in perspective and setting diversity, reinforcing what Finney (2014) describes as the media's role in shaping perceptions of which outdoor spaces are legitimate or worthy of representation.

Significant geographical areas were absent from representation, with urban and coastal settings largely excluded, and the southwest United States appearing in only one picturebook, excluding most of the southern regions. This pattern of exclusion echoes Taxel's (1986) findings that even acclaimed books can perpetuate limited perspectives and fail to reflect the full diversity of experiences and settings. Martin and Mills (2022) argue that children's literature serves as a critical tool for learning about diverse lives, highlighting the urgent need for more varied regional, environmental, and outdoor representations. These findings affirm Bobilya et al.'s (2024) research on how systemic barriers, including geographic representation in literature, continue to prevent access to outdoor spaces and experiences.

Patterns of Representation

The results strongly reinforced key concerns raised in the literature review. The dominant "single story" that Adichie (2009) warned about was evident in the findings, with the majority of human characters coded as white and nearly all portrayed as middle/upper class. This aligned with Warren et al.'s (2014) critique of outdoor education being entrenched in a culture dominated by white, middle/upper-class, able-bodied males. While the presence of several female authors was encouraging, half of the narratives emphasized female representation in some form of family structure, either animal or human. Most significantly, while the literature review highlighted the power of children's books to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion (Nguyen, 2021), the results suggested that NOBA winners largely reinforced rather than challenged existing barriers

to outdoor participation, with minimal representation of diverse racial, economic, or ability perspectives.

However, several contextual factors must be considered when interpreting these findings. First, without data on which books were submitted but not selected, determining whether selection bias exists within the NOBA committee remains difficult. Second, structural barriers such as submission requirements (entry fees and multiple book copies) may disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged authors, potentially limiting submission diversity from the outset. Third, upstream gatekeeping by publishers themselves might be filtering out diverse voices before they reach award consideration, as publishers may reject manuscripts from authors representing varied racial, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. Finally, these patterns might reflect broader societal inequalities where historically marginalized communities have had fewer positive or accessible experiences with natural environments, potentially resulting in fewer nature-themed stories from diverse perspectives entering the publishing pipeline altogether.

Racial and Ethnic Representation

The stark lack of racial diversity in both authorship and character representation emerged as one of the study's most significant findings, aligning with Finney's (2014) research on how historical and cultural factors have shaped who is represented in outdoor spaces and narratives. The overwhelming dominance of White authors, illustrators, and characters reinforced existing barriers to diverse representation in outdoor literature, a pattern that Bobilya et al. (2024) identify as perpetuating systemic barriers that prevent equitable access for BIPOC communities. This uniformity is particularly striking when compared to current U.S. Census data showing that nearly 42% of Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than white. The few instances of racial diversity, such as in *To Market, To Market* (McClure, 2011) and *Ladybug*:

Red, Fiery, and Bright (Posada, 2002), stood out precisely because of their rarity, highlighting the broader systemic issues of representation in outdoor-themed children's literature. These findings affirm Warren and Breunig's (2022) research showing that despite some progress in participation rates, the power to shape narratives and make decisions about representation remains concentrated among traditionally privileged groups. The results also support Nguyen's (2021) assertion that children from minority backgrounds rarely see themselves positively depicted in literature, while majority children are overexposed to narratives centering on whiteness.

Gender Dynamics and Family Structures

In my analysis of gender representation, I found significant examples of traditional heteronormative gender roles in family interactions. As previously examined in Chapter 4, *Kelly at Hazel Ridge* (Smith van Frankenhuyzen, van Frankenhuyzen, 2006) exemplifies these traditional gender dynamics, where the family structure and interactions at Hazel Ridge Farm reflect conventional heteronormative roles. These findings align with Colley et al.'s (2022) research on persistent gender gaps in nature engagement. This pattern extends beyond individual texts like *Kelly at Hazel Ridge* to broader trends across the literature sample, as evidenced by the gender distribution findings discussed here.

This pattern also emerged in depictions of professional roles. *To Market, To Market* (McClure, 2011), as discussed in Chapter 4, illustrates occupational gender segregation, through the predominance of male vendors, reinforcing persistent biases in how work is gendered in children's literature.

Similarly, the animal representation in books featuring families reinforced these gendered patterns mentioned in Chapter 4. *Pup the Sea Otter* (London, London, 2017) reinforces

traditional gender norms through its emphasis on maternal caregiving and the eventual transition of the male pup to independent life, reflecting a familiar pattern of gendered family roles.

While initial gender representation appeared relatively balanced numerically, deeper analysis revealed persistent traditional gender norms in heteronormative parenting roles affirming the existing work of Bradley (2022), Crisp (2016), Lorber (2018) and Imhoff and Hoffman (2023). These findings support Nguyen's (2021) argument that children's literature often reinforces rather than challenges traditional gender roles. The portrayal of mothers primarily in nurturing and domestic roles, while fathers dominated instruction and adventure scenarios, perpetuated limiting stereotypes about gender roles in outdoor spaces, aligning with Crisp's (2011) research on how dominant identities remain uninterrogated in children's literature. The poetry collections offered a more nuanced approach to gender representation, suggesting potential pathways for more inclusive storytelling.

These findings contrast with demographic realities in the United States, where approximately 23% of children live in single-parent households, with 80% of those headed by mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The near-absence of single fathers or same-sex parents in the analyzed books fails to reflect the diversity of family structures in contemporary America.

When children consistently see mothers as primary caregivers and fathers in provider or playmate roles, they may internalize these expectations for their own lives and identities, as noted by McCabe et al. (2011) in their longitudinal study of gender representation in children's books. This reinforcement of traditional gender roles through children's literature has complications for how children understand their own potential and place in outdoor environments.

Class and Access

The predominance of middle to upper-class perspectives in these books reflected broader societal assumptions about outdoor recreation and access, aligning with Warren's (1998, 2005) and Mowatt's (2018) research on how outdoor recreation has historically favored privileged groups while excluding others. As discussed previously, in Chapter 4, books such as *Jam and Jelly by Holly and Nellie* (Whelan, Van Frankenhuyzen, 2002) offered one of the few portrayals of lower socioeconomic status, with clear indicators of financial constraint shown through textual references to reused containers and paratextual details emphasizing hardship. The limited representation of economic diversity, with only three characters portrayed as having fewer economic privileges, failed to acknowledge the varied ways people across socioeconomic backgrounds engage with outdoor spaces.

As noted in Bower (2016) and Hodge et al. (2016), economic barriers can restrict access to outdoor experiences, and these texts largely reinforced that divide. The emphasis on private land ownership, specialized gear, and implicit affluence within both illustrations and narratives created a vision of outdoor participation that was both idealized and exclusionary. These depictions stand in contrast to recent National Recreation and Parks Association (2022) advocacy for low-cost, accessible outdoor opportunities. Additionally, with nearly 16% of American children living in poverty (ChildStats.gov), the absence of economic diversity in these stories suggests a continued disconnect between the realities of children's lives and the narratives they encounter. As outlined in Chapter 4, this gap may influence how young readers perceive their own ability to access nature, ultimately shaping their sense of belonging and identity within outdoor spaces.

Ability and Representation

The NOBA award-winning books revealed a stark absence in their portrayal of varying abilities. This gap in representation reflected patterns revealed in Chapter 4, where only a handful of books even hinted at the presence of disabilities, and those that did often relied on stereotypical tropes or treated disability as a mere literary device. In *Coyote and Badger* (Hiscock, 2021), the aging coyote is referred to as the "Old Hunter," while *Whose Garden Is It?* (Hoberman, Dyer, 2004) offers a man who wears glasses while tending his garden. These examples, though minimal, are not fully developed and lack the depth needed to represent disability in a meaningful way. More concerning is the portrayal in *Jellies: The Life of a Jellyfish* (George, 2000), which depicts jellyfish as inferior to humans due to their lack of a brain and heart, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and reducing complex identities to simplistic, negative traits.

This pattern of minimal or problematic representation in children's literature reinforces systemic barriers, as it fails to capture the diverse ways in which individuals with varying abilities navigate and experience outdoor spaces. Loeffler and White's (2022) and Sugarman's (2022) research shows that people across the ability spectrum share similar preferences for natural settings, yet the books analyzed in Chapter 4 and those reviewed here continue to perpetuate the notion that outdoor adventures are primarily for able-bodied children. This exclusion is a missed opportunity to apply Wendell's (1996) disability theory, which emphasizes how social structures, rather than individual conditions, create disability. The absence of meaningful portrayals of children with disabilities in outdoor contexts further cements the idea that they do not belong in these spaces, reinforcing societal stereotypes about who is "fit" to explore and enjoy the outdoors.

As Dalki (2023) has documented, this literary gap mirrors a broader pattern of underrepresentation in children's literature, which is particularly troubling given that people with disabilities represent the largest minority group in the United States. The U.S. Census (2022) indicates that 21.7% of children live with disabilities, highlighting a significant disconnect between demographic reality and literary representation. This absence is not just an issue of representation; it has real-world implications, as illustrated by Hradsky's (2021) work on funding challenges for accessible outdoor programming. The literary erasure of children with disabilities reflects and potentially reinforces the real-world barriers they face in accessing and enjoying outdoor experiences.

The exclusion of children with disabilities from literary narratives and outdoor spaces is not just a matter of missed representation; it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and social structures that limit opportunities for those with disabilities. By broadening the scope of representation to include a more diverse range of abilities, authors and illustrators can challenge these harmful narratives, create more inclusive stories, and ensure that all children, regardless of ability, see themselves as active participants in outdoor adventures. More authentic portrayals of disability in outdoor contexts could foster empathy, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging, ultimately encouraging readers to advocate for greater accessibility in both literature and real-world environments.

Environmental Education and Land Acknowledgment

While some books addressed conservation themes and land acknowledgment, these discussions often remained surface-level. The few examples of meaningful engagement with environmental education and Indigenous land recognition, such as in *The Lost Forest* (Root,

Bowen, 2019) and *What Goes on Inside A Beaver Pond* (Cushing Gop, Shyrock, 2023), demonstrated the potential for more nuanced approaches to these critical topics.

Geographic and Setting Limitations

The concentration of settings in the Northeast and Upper Midwest United States, combined with the emphasis on private properties and maintained natural spaces, presented a limited view of outdoor engagement. This geographic focus excluded diverse regional perspectives and failed to acknowledge the variety of ways people interact with outdoor spaces across different environments and contexts.

Belonging and Representation Gaps

While I observed these books made important contributions to environmental awareness and land protection history, they maintained the pattern of limited character diversity found throughout the sample. Through my analysis, I identified a disconnect between acknowledging historical inequities and representing diverse participants in contemporary outdoor experiences. I found they generally failed to connect these themes to contemporary issues of access and representation in outdoor spaces.

Researcher Reflexivity

As I went through this analysis, I found several instances where I was complicit in assumptions about race, gender, and class that were worth noting. During the four readings, I documented my wonderings and observations in reflexive notes to record my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. As a heteronormative, White, middle-class woman with a hidden disability who grew up in Eastern North Carolina, my implicit perceptions were unique to my experience. I recognized that by describing them, I risked reinscribing the oppressive discourses I sought to disrupt by failing to notice erasures and misrepresentations (Freire, 1970).

When I approached implicitly categorizing gender, I immediately thought of stereotypical male and female attributes. In *Blueberry Shoe* (Dixon, Zerbetz, 1999), my first indicators were to look at the character's hair and clothing. I made the assumption that a female would wear a headband, pink, and clothes adorned with flowers. I also assumed a female would have long hair and braids. Immediately after I analyzed these characters, I challenged my assumptions about headbands, pink, flowers, braids, and long hair due to my experience with my son, who, as a child, favored pink and comfortably wore clothes with flowers.

My deepest reflection emerged from confronting my class-based assumptions during the coding process. Initially, I found myself using markers like the cleanliness of characters, the condition of their equipment, and the appearance of their homes to code for socioeconomic status. This realization was particularly troubling as an outdoor educator who celebrates risky play and wild parenting (Morgenstern, 2018). I was dismayed to discover myself equating cleanliness with class status. The irony of this assumption struck deeply, given that meaningful outdoor experiences often involve getting muddy, messy, and fully immersed in nature, contradicting the pristine portrayal found in these narratives. This disconnect fails to acknowledge the many individuals who choose to embrace simple and sustainable lifestyles that prioritize environmental connection over material accumulation.

Further reflection revealed the presumptuous nature of coding class based on material possessions or setting. My own privilege had led me to make sweeping assumptions about the relationship between outdoor equipment, living conditions, and socioeconomic status. However, experience has shown that outdoor enthusiasts across the economic spectrum may possess high-end gear, while seemingly affluent appearances can mask financial strain or unsustainable spending habits. This recognition forced me to confront how my own biases potentially

influenced the interpretation of the data and highlighted the importance of approaching class representation with greater nuance and humility.

This self-critical moment served as a powerful reminder of how deeply ingrained class assumptions can be, even for researchers actively working to challenge systemic biases. It underscores the necessity of constant vigilance in examining my predetermined notions and their potential impact on qualitative analysis. It also suggests the individuality of the results as well, highlighting how research findings are shaped not just by methodology but by the unique lens and positionality of the researcher themselves.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were also influenced by my above-stated positionality. This privileged perspective likely impacted the analysis and interpretation of the data, potentially overlooking nuances in representation that someone with different lived experiences might have identified. My background could have influenced the coding process, particularly in areas of implicit bias related to race, class, and ability. Additionally, the focus on picturebooks and the first four main characters in each book may have limited the scope of the analysis, potentially missing broader patterns of representation within the texts.

As an outdoor educator, my strong desire for greater diversity across all discourses often skewed the analysis and created tension between expected outcomes and hoped-for results. This emotional investment in the subject matter may have influenced the interpretation of data, potentially leading to over-emphasis on certain aspects of representation or disappointment-driven scrutiny of others. Again, while reading *Blueberry Shoe* (Dixon, Zerbetz, 1999), I noted the father carrying the toddler in a backpack while the mother walked leisurely with their daughter. I initially viewed this as a gender norm based on males being seen as possessing more

strength than women. However, upon reflection, I realized if the roles had been reversed, I would have noted the mother having to take care of everything and wondered why the father wasn't carrying the son.

Recommendations for Practice

To help create a more inclusive outdoor community, individuals and organizations must take deliberate and strategic actions. Creating partnerships between outdoor organizations and diverse publishing houses, especially beyond major publishing companies to more independent publishing houses, such as Lee and Low, Groundwood Books, and Make Me A World. While these three publishing houses intentionally publish books for and about marginalized communities, they could be encouraged to commission outdoor-themed children's picturebooks featuring underrepresented groups. These partnerships could also include establishing grants or funding opportunities for authors and illustrators from marginalized communities. To further support this initiative, outdoor retail companies and gear manufacturers could support diverse outdoor literature through sponsorship or publishing initiatives, creating a more comprehensive approach to representation in the outdoor community.

The transformation of existing structures is equally important. Establishing diversity-focused review committees for existing outdoor literature award organizations, such as NOBA, would help evaluate selection criteria and ensure active representation across multiple dimensions. In fact, I did not write to NOBA directly to propose these changes, primarily because I wanted to first develop a comprehensive framework supported by research before approaching established institutions with recommendations.

Another initiative could be forming partnerships with diverse outdoor organizations, such as Unlikely Hikers, Outdoor Asians, Latino Outdoors, Diversify Outdoors, and Native Women's

Wilderness. Together, these groups can collaborate to launch an outdoor book club, creating a space where people from varied backgrounds can connect, learn, and share their experiences. This idea could be expanded further by incorporating outdoor activities alongside discussions, promoting cultural exchange, and encouraging members to share stories from their respective communities, thus deepening the sense of belonging and connection within the outdoor space.

Educational initiatives also play a crucial role. Partnerships with teachers and librarians could include the creation of professional development programs specifically focusing on identifying and promoting diverse outdoor-themed children's literature. These programs would extend the reach of these materials into educational settings and should include comprehensive resource guides and reading lists while also designing writing programs that encourage students, especially those who do not feel represented in the existing literature, to create their own outdoor stories.

To improve accessibility, an online platform or database specifically cataloging diverse outdoor literature would make it easier for educators, parents, and readers to find these resources. Such a platform could be integrated into curriculum development, helping to systematically broaden participation. It could also support publication opportunities for emerging writers, ensuring diverse voices are heard.

Additionally, research projects like this one can play an important role in raising awareness. By sharing findings with broader audiences, this can encourage people to think critically about the media they consume and the biases that may be present or assumed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is poised to explore several critical areas to deepen our understanding of outdoor literature, including further investigation within NOBA, the role of publishing companies in book awards, and the trends and issues within children's outdoor picturebooks.

To establish the trends and issues and their effects on who "belongs" in the outdoors, a comprehensive longitudinal study examining changes in representation within outdoor children's literature over the past several decades would help identify significant trends and patterns in diversity and inclusion. This research could lead to a study investigating the impact of diverse children's literature on children's attitudes toward and participation in outdoor activities, particularly in underrepresented groups, and the correlation between diverse outdoor literature and actual participation rates among different demographic groups. This study should include analyzing the role of book cover art and illustrations in shaping the perceptions of belonging and the explicit and implicit messages.

Based on my analysis, I identified avenues for further research of NOBA that could expand upon and deepen the findings of this study. An analysis of the inclusion of the NOBA Field Guides or all texts excluded from this study may offer additional insights into representation patterns in outdoor literature for children. Additionally, future studies could examine the intersectionality of race, gender, class, ability, and outdoor participation discourses in NOBA's children's literature winners to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis through a critical lens. This study would incorporate a page by page analysis compared to the book by book analysis used in my study. Another research avenue would be to analyze the judging committee's composition and explore ways to enhance its diversity.

Reflecting on Taxel's (2010) work, a deeper investigation into the influence and responsibility of publishing companies in outdoor children's book awards and the economic factors that are prevalent in the publisher's decision-making. This could include an examination of the intersection between market forces, sales data, and narrative choices, exploring how award-winning picturebooks reflect and respond to societal shifts in diversity, educational needs, and the evolving preferences of young readers.

Furthermore, research could consider the emerging role of digital platforms and new media in promoting diverse outdoor narratives, as well as the influence of social media and online communities in shaping outdoor representation. The potential impact of translated works from other cultures and countries in diversifying outdoor literature, along with the intersection of environmental education and diversity in outdoor literature, represents important areas for future investigation. This comprehensive research agenda would significantly contribute to our understanding of how literature shapes and reflects diversity in outdoor spaces.

Conclusion

The journey through outdoor children's literature reveals complex interplays between representation, privilege, and the natural world. While this study illuminated important patterns in how diverse identities are portrayed in award-winning outdoor picturebooks, it also underscored the profound influence of researcher positionality and institutional structures on both analysis and outcomes. The tensions between objective analysis and passionate advocacy for change highlighted the deeply personal nature of this work and also demonstrated how critical self-reflection can deepen understanding of representation in children's literature.

Looking ahead, this research opens pathways for meaningful change across multiple dimensions, from the individual choices of educators and parents in selecting diverse outdoor

literature to systemic shifts in publishing and award recognition. The recommendations offered here aim to bridge the gap between analysis and action, suggesting concrete steps toward creating a more inclusive outdoor narrative that resonates with all children's lived experiences.

Future research opportunities abound, particularly in examining the complex intersections of identity, power, and outdoor spaces in children's literature. By expanding the analytical lens to encompass broader collections of texts and deeper explorations of publishing dynamics, we can better understand and ultimately redefine how outdoor stories shape young readers' understanding of who belongs in nature.

This work ultimately reminds us all that the stories we share with children about the outdoors do more than entertain; they help shape perceptions of belonging, identity, and possibility in natural spaces. As we continue to examine and evolve these narratives, we move closer to an outdoor literature landscape where every child can see themselves reflected and belonging in adventures under the open sky.

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