

The imagination infuses a certain volatility and intoxication. It has a flute which sets the atoms of our frame in a dance, like planets... But what is the imagination? Only an arm or weapon of the interior energy; only the precursor of the reason. Emerson

This book presents itself as 'the first in a series of guides that seek to reposition children's voices in our new public interpretation of place'. One of the foremost of the new interpreters, Robert Macfarlane, writes the introduction and reminds us that "a place is always somewhere you are in, never on" . The place in question, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, may appear to be 170 acres of meadow, woodland and marsh, and this book may appear, at forty pages in an A5 format, to be lightweight, even meagre. But appearances can be deceptive.

Ruby Class, thirty-one children and their educators, set out from Cromwell Park Primary School on ten wintry Monday mornings to journey 'physically and imaginatively through the woods' (p. 4). In mythic style, though wrapped up warmly against the cold, they "went to the park to meet the forest" (p. 4). Deb Wilenski and Caroline Wendling went too, observing, photographing and listening to the children as they made free and left the path and discovered their own ways and places. In the afternoons, back at school, the class re-visited 'the real and fantastical place that the park was becoming' (p. 4). Drawing, projection, sculpture and story helped map 'the land and what happened in it' (p. 4), and this subtly-designed, beautifully-produced text is one result, one end of all the exploring. It is written in the present tense, with an eye for detail and a sense of the rhythms inherent in the activities--physical and mental--husbanded and described, so that what happens in the park and back at school comes across with vivid immediacy. It is also alert to what the authors call children's "important conversations" (p. 4), to connections between moments, and to the ways in which under such conditions each child reveals aspects of who they are. The book offers not only a model of teaching, one in which children are encouraged "to leave paths... discover... return, go further, take time" (p. 4), but also a model of how to hold in mind, individually and collectively, a class of children.

The authors note that 'the dominant voices that explain our landscape are adult'. They construct their text differently, and ensure that conversation between children, or particular single comments, observations or assertions made by a child, are presented on almost every page. What children notice in the woods, and what they make of what they encounter there through all their senses and through their imagination, is seen as important in its own right, and as means to understand the place from the child's point-of-view. Under snow, the woods appear as a new land of whiteness, but Filip, even more fully engaged in the place, sees colours too: yellow in the bark of the trees beside the path, and green at their highest tips. Kian, Edward and Bryony find 'scratches and bits of fur' (p.15) when they look in the woods for signs of a snow leopard. Among the trees they find doors which they pass through, and zones which they name. Later, by following the arrows spray-painted on some trees, they find a city. Cody 'finds water all over the woods' (p. 20) and explains 'how [it] got there, where it came from, and where it will go to next' (p. 20). He resolves to find 'some secret water' (p. 20) and, across the central double-page of the book, does so. A lake brings home to Asad an understanding of reflections: "'You are in the water!'" he shouts suddenly to his friend standing on the bank.

The woods, marshes, hills and lake offer physical challenges and elicit from the children bodily skill: jumping over, climbing up, crouching down. Place is apprehended bodily, and some part of each child's thinking about place makes itself visible in gesture and action. Another part of that thinking is made visible in the work created back at school. The

children have mapped the park in many ways: 'by their naming and describing of places, by their models, drawings, paintings, stories and shared language of exploration' (p.34). And by their own cartography. At the project's culmination, each of their maps is brought together within a chalk outline of the Country Park to make a map-of-maps which spans 'real and fantastical worlds with authenticity' (p.36). Here the children's "sense of location combines the real place in front of them, who they are with, and what it feels like to be there... No map overlaid another, each child found a place. There is not just one specific place to look for hills or water or doors but a number of places. The reality is blurred but the mind is represented in its truest state. The children's imaginations galloped through the wild places; this big map is a way to map their minds' adventures." (p.36)

By now I hope something of the insight and consideration which the authors bring to this project will have made itself plain. Sentimentality and cutesiness, the first dangers in such an endeavour, are kept at bay by the quality of the authors' attention and perception. They notice and take seriously what the children say and do. By reflecting on action or utterance patiently and in ways informed by other observations, by adult experience and by reading, they present the children as dedicated meaning-makers who come to know a place through their own empirical and imaginative (or incipiently-theoretical) work.

It is also noteworthy that the children do this work together, as well as separately. Stories are communally shaped and developed: children enter the narratives of their peers and re-direct these, becoming 'accomplices in the story' (p. 23). Sometimes individual narratives coincide for a span and then separate out again. Spontaneously the children tell stories on the go about the place, to themselves and to their groups, and engage in dramatic exchanges which supply the woods with history and wildlife (wolves, snow leopards, polar bears) and explanation. In the park the children discover, narrate, interpret and name, exemplifying how space is, in the words of the archeologist Christopher Tilley, "a medium rather than a container for action...[Space is]socially-produced...[and] combines the cognitive, the physical and the emotional into something that may be reproduced but which is always open to transformation and change... [and is] constituted by different densities of human experience, attachment and involvement... What space is depends on who is experiencing it and how." (Tilley, 1994, pp 10-11)

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