



Fauna as Storied Matter for Trauma Recovery in the Children's Picture Book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) by Suzanne del Rizzo

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ABSTRACT

The issue of ecological crisis and armed conflict within the landscape of contemporary children's literature demands new critical approaches that can reposition narrative settings into more than acting as a passive background or inert entities. This study aims to analyze how the fauna in the children's picture book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) by Suzanne del Rizzo operates as a material agency within the process of trauma recovery. This research employs the framework of material ecocriticism developed by Iovino and Oppermann to examine how nonhuman material, specifically birds, functions as storied matter, integrated with Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory to analyze the main character's psychological development through the phases of acting-out and working-through. Although material ecocriticism has been applied across diverse media and literary genres, previous studies have rarely addressed the specific role of fauna as an active mechanism for trauma recovery. Employing a descriptive-qualitative method, the data were gathered through close-reading and note-taking techniques, categorized according to fauna as a repository of memory and trauma-healing mechanisms, and analyzed using narrative technique. The findings reveal that fauna acts dynamically as storied matter through its diversity of species and vibrant colors, which simultaneously preserve traumatic memory and facilitate psychological healing across acting-out and working-through processes. This study contributes to the broader discourse of children's literature by establishing the narrative as an effective medium for psychological reconciliation facilitated by nonhuman material agency, while offering recommendations for future research to expand the analysis into visual elements to gain a deeper understanding of material agency in children's texts.

Keywords: fauna, storied matter, trauma recovery, children's picture book

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism in children's literature necessitates a re-examination of how matter and nature are represented—moving beyond mere settings or superficial didactic functions. This shift intersects with pressing global challenges—specifically ecological crises and armed conflicts—that are frequently overlooked in children's narratives. Certain literary works have begun to deconstruct traditional representations by positioning the environment as a subject possessing agency and traumatic memory. In Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (2001), a surreal

material landscape blending organic and industrial elements maps a child's psychological state, allowing nature to function simultaneously as a mirror of trauma and an agent of healing. Meanwhile, Flush (2005) presents nature through the lens of concrete ecological activism, highlighting an environmental crisis in Florida's waters caused by illegal waste dumping and thereby encouraging active engagement in ecological politics. The concept of material agency is further explored in *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (2006), where the physical vulnerability of a porcelain rabbit serves as a medium for processing suffering

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and teaching empathy and resilience. he Underneath (2008) positions a Texas swamp ecosystem as "storied matter" that preserves traces of past trauma and memories of violence through interspecies relationships. Collectively, these four works from the early 2000s demonstrate that the environment and non-human objects can serve as mirrors for complex psychological states, arenas for concrete ecological activism, and mediums for processing human suffering through their material vulnerability. This study focuses on fauna as both the central subject and the primary material for analysis, examining how animals and physical matter act as "storied matter" that aids in processing trauma resulting from war and displacement, while also exploring the mechanisms of reconciliation. Material ecocriticism is a field within literary studies fundamentally shaped by the framework of new materialism. This theory seeks to deconstruct anthropocentrism by shifting the focus from the representation of nature toward an understanding of material agency—encompassing inanimate objects, biological bodies, and geospheric elements—as entities possessing vitality, meaning, and the capacity to tell stories independently of human language. A central concept of this theory is "storied matter," which defines matter as a physical substance capable of narrating stories through processes of storage, transmission, or expression, thereby playing an active role in shaping meanings that influence human events and behaviors (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014:7). Storied matter operates through the process of "intra-action"—a concept adapted from Karen Barad—to explain that the meaning and identity of an entity emerge from constant, reciprocal relationships. Matter is not viewed as an isolated object but rather as part of a web of life capable of expression and the documentation of events (acting as material-semiotic nodes). This positions matter as a co-narrator capable of conveying overlooked stories, such as the traces of violence embedded within specific objects. On the other hand, the trauma theory developed by Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between two primary psychic mecha-

nisms for responding to traumatic events: acting out and working through. Acting out is a condition in which the subject becomes trapped in the repetitive re-enactment of trauma, as the past constantly resurfaces and appears to merge with the present reality, lacking critical distance or a coherent narrative understanding. Working through is a transformative process wherein the subject is able to process memory fragments into a coherent narrative. This process enables the subject to establish distance from the trauma and integrate past experiences into a new sense of self-identity.

Studies on material ecocriticism have been conducted across a wide range of contexts, materials, and media. In literary works such as novels, material ecocriticism has been employed to explore flora as a form of resistance against patriarchy (Prieto, 2025) and as a vehicle for the transformation of memory (Dedinová, 2025); food as a means of family unification (Liu, 2022); urban objects and landscapes as sites for fostering a sense of belonging (Cavalcanti, 2025); water as a shaper of memory, historical trauma, migrant displacement, and colonialism (Agir, 2025; Jabar Mohammed et al., 2024; Jiang & Cui, 2024); pollution and greenhouse gas emissions as repositories of narratives regarding industrial history and colonialism (AlSuhaibani & AlQahtani, 2023); and forests as agents of destruction during wartime (Zhao & Liao, 2025). In the study of other material objects—such as films, plays, and poems—material ecocriticism has been employed to analyze approaches to discussions regarding the human body (Rust, 2014), the interaction between physical game-table objects (like tokens and peacock feathers) and character dynamics (Baker, 2025), and flora as a medium for recording history amidst species destruction and colonization (Dawson, 2022). Based on this body of research, it can be concluded that studies examining fauna as a mechanism for "acting out" and "working through" have yet to be conducted, particularly within the context of contemporary war-themed children's literature.



This study aims to analyze the fauna featured in the story *My Beautiful Birds* as "storied matter"—acting as a medium for the mechanisms of "acting out" and "working through"—in the context of coping with life as a refugee following the Syrian war. The research questions formulated are: how is material in the form of fauna manifested within the narrative, and how does fauna serve as a medium for the mechanisms of "acting out" and "working through" as a means of trauma healing?

METHOD

The material object of this study is the picture book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) by Suzanne del Rizo, which also serves as the primary data source. This work was selected because it uses the war in Syria as its setting—a context far removed from the typical portrayal of children's literature as merely didactic. Furthermore, the book incorporates polymer clay to create a tactile experience, allowing children to feel the textures of the bird figures and natural landscapes. The work has also garnered recognition, winning the 2018 SYRCA Shining Willow Award and appearing on the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for Kids. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method grounded in material ecocriticism theory to identify and elucidate the agency of fauna as "storied matter." It examines how fauna mediate trauma and memory through the narrative structure and foster psychological recovery amidst war for the characters—specifically the child protagonists. This analytical approach allows the material elements of the story to be viewed not merely as passive background or objects, but as entities holding a strategic position in the storytelling. Moreover, the study of trauma and memory is grounded not only in abstractions but also in concrete objects.

Data collection was conducted using the "listen-and-note" technique (*simak-catat*), involving repeated, in-depth readings to fully grasp the narrative—manifested through characters, plot, and material elements—and to understand the story's context in its entirety. The next step involved re-

cording every excerpt containing material elements related to fauna. Subsequently, the data were mapped according to the analytical categories under study: fauna as a medium for remembering the homeland, and fauna as a mechanism for "acting-out" and "working through" trauma. Finally, the data were presented and linked to the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism to examine how fauna function as storied matter.

RESULTS

1. Faunal Diversity in the Story as "Storied Matter"

Fauna—dominated in the story by birds—appear at various points in the narrative. Examples include the protagonist, Sami, leaving home for a refugee camp and recalling the house where he interacted with his pet birds, as well as a bird approaching him while he is lost in thought. A variety of bird species are featured, including pigeons, canaries, doves, and rose finches. Beyond merely identifying the species, the plumage colors of the birds are depicted through both visuals and narration, even if the narrative does not describe them in minute detail.

"A canary, a dove, a rose finch, and a pigeon. Like feathered brushes they paint the sky with promise and the hope of peace. Plumes of yellow, rose, shimmering turquoise, and white all in harmony."

The bird appearing in the story is not merely depicted physically but is also illustrated through paintings Sami creates—featuring black wings painted with a medium that inevitably stains her hands and clothes.

"Smoky black smears from edge to edge, swallowing everything underneath. I tear my painting piece by piece. Black paint stains my hands and my clothes..."

The bird is also portrayed through sound—when Sami and her father sit enjoying the evening sky—and through cloud formations that resemble a dove.

“On bad days they know just what to say—Chitter, chitter cooo, cooo—and what to do—nuzzle, nibble, cuddle...and when it is best just to be.”

“Now, when the smoky nightmares boom, I watch the clouds. Sometimes, fluffy cloud-pigeons take shape.

Spiraling.

Soaring.

Sharing the sky.”

2. Fauna as a Medium for Acting Out and Working Through

Sami’s process of acting out begins when she recalls her habits at home, prior to the time she and her family were forced to flee to a refugee camp—a journey that took a day and two nights to complete. He recalls a warm, happy home by remembering how he used to feed his pet pigeons with grains.

“I remember filling my pigeons’ food bowl, then—in a flash—my neighborhood, and all that was gazing at the sky from the roof of the camp building.

“Sometimes the dry wind wafts soft music through the camp. I shiver, remembering the songs I would hum to my birds.”

“Sometimes the dry wind wafts soft music through the camp. I shiver, remembering the songs I would hum to my birds.”

“I wish it were like it used to be, just me and my pigeons up on our rooftop with the wind and the boundless sky. Happy Free.”

“If I close my eyes, sometimes I can see my birds, and sometimes I daydream that I hear them.”

The process of “working through” his emotions is depicted through various activities undertaken by the character Sami—ranging from flying kites and cooking dishes he used to make at home, to attending school in a refugee camp with limited facilities. However, to soothe his longing for his pet bird, he chooses to color the kites he flies in the afternoon to match the hues of both his pet and a bird that had unexpectedly visited him.

“I paint feathers of yellow, rose, and turquoise. Mixing my pigeon-gray paint, I use just one dab of black.”

Towards the end of the story, Sami is also shown drawing birds and other objects—such as high-rise buildings, two people boarding a plane, and a heart shape—using a variety of colors on a wall; this scene is visually presented at the story’s conclusion.

DISCUSSION

Colors and Sounds That Tell a Story: Reading the Materiality of Birds Before and After the War

The diversity of bird species presented by the author is not merely an aesthetic choice. The pigeons introduced early in the story as Sami’s pets are biologically known for their strong navigational abilities and deep attachment to their place of origin, owing to a material-biological capacity to detect the coordinates of their nest or home as the spatial center of their lives (Wallraff, 2005; Heinrich, 2014). This material nature makes the pigeon a potent ecological articulation of dislocation, alienation, and the search for a lost ‘home’ (Jerolmack, 2013). Sami’s bond with the pigeons represents a material resonance—part of the domestic ecosystem of his home prior to its wartime destruction—such that the loss of the birds is tantamount to the loss of the home itself. Barad (2007) explains that meaning is not intrinsically inherent in objects but emerges through the mechanism of *intra-action*—a mutually constitutive engagement between human and non-human entities. The relationship between Sami and his birds is forged through daily interactions—feeding them, singing songs, and sitting together gazing at the sky—allowing both the birds and Sami to construct their identities through repeated, shared engagement. Beyond the choice of birds, a prominent dimension of the story is the depiction of plumage colors using the phrase “feathered brushes,” which paint the sky in shades of yellow, pink,



shimmering teal, and white. From the perspective of material ecocriticism, color constitutes both visual information and a material quality capable of shaping human perception by interrupting, slowing, or diverting human movement—a phenomenon termed "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010). The birds' vibrant colors, held in Sami's memory and imagination, disrupt the visual dominance of the refugee camp—a landscape defined by the grays and blacks of rubble and war-induced smoke. This relationship underscores that the birds are not merely external entities; they have permeated and helped shape Sami's psychological and physical state. Beyond the physical dimension, the auditory aspect of the birds reinforces their status as "storied matter." The recurring vocalization—"Chitter, chitter cooo, cooo"—transcribes the physical sound waves Sami heard. Environmental sounds exert neurobiological effects on humans, including lowering cortisol levels and triggering episodic memory (Krause, 2015). The birdsong etched in Sami's memory constitutes a sonic material that preserves and retells the experience of living in a place from which he was forcibly displaced by war. This sound resurfaces unexpectedly on the wind in the refugee camp, causing Sami to shiver—an indication that auditory matter possesses an independent agency. This argument aligns with research by Richardson and Zolkos (2022), who assert that materiality can serve as a medium of testimony, storing and re-transmitting traumatic experiences in ways that transcend the limits of verbal language. "Storied matter" also manifests through secondary material objects—items Sami created or modified in response to the physical absence of his birds. His paintings—characterized by "smoky black smears" that stained his hands and clothes—were initially intended to depict the birds but ultimately came to narrate destruction. This scene illustrates the material narrative of trauma that has yet to be integrated. Grilli (2025) explains that material objects in children's visual narratives possess the

capacity to "see" and "speak" beyond the conscious limits of their creators.

Painting as Healing Trauma and a Reminder of a Happy Home

In *My Beautiful Birds*, fauna serve as a material medium that simultaneously facilitates a dynamic trauma-healing process, indicating that the processes of "acting out" and "working through" are not merely psychological in nature but are also mediated by the material presence of birds—with their specific colors, sounds, and physical qualities. Sami's "acting out" is rooted in a profound material attachment to the pet birds he lost. This acting out manifests as melancholia—a psychological state characterized by the subject's inability to relinquish a lost object and undergo a healthy mourning process (LaCapra, 2001). The food bowl Sami last used before the war holds affective energy and maintains a persistent presence, constantly drawing him back to the moment that triggered his traumatic experience. Within trauma studies, such material underscores that objects associated with loss function as transitional objects between the subject's internal and external worlds; a failure to let go of such an object signifies a stagnation in the mourning process. In Sami's memory, the empty bowl is an element that refuses to remain in the past, continually pulling him into a temporal loop where the loss feels as though it has just occurred. This dynamic is evident in the painting scene: the black paint represents psychological failure and memories of destruction that enter Sami's body through the medium itself, thereby transforming a creative act into a repetition of traumatic memory. Furthermore, when Sami tears up his painting, it serves as a further expression of acting out, resulting from the material's inability to fully contain the traumatic experience he has endured. The failure to fully represent the trauma demonstrates that the material—in this case, the painting—acts as the most honest medium for conveying an experience that the subject cannot yet adequately articulate through narrative.

The transition toward "working through" begins when Sami starts interacting with fauna through different materials and with more controlled intent. The most significant turning point occurred when Sami painted the kite in shades of yellow, rose, and turquoise, while adding a touch of black to the depiction of the dove. LaCapra (2001) explains that the process of "working through" is characterized by the subject's ability to maintain a critical distance—one that allows them to acknowledge the past without the risk of being overwhelmed or consumed by it. That single spot of black amidst the bright colors serves as a material representation of loss and grief—acknowledged, yet no longer dominant as it had been in earlier paintings characterized by an overwhelming use of black. The kite—a fusion of paint, paper, wind, and Sami's imagination regarding his birds—becomes, in flight, a metaphor for a bird moving through the air, propelled by the wind, and connecting humanity to the sky. Beyond the act of painting the kite, the process of working through was also facilitated by the presence of small wild birds that would spontaneously approach Sami as he sat daydreaming in the refugee camp. Colebrook (2014) explains that when an animal approaches a human of its own volition, it can create a relational space that allows the human to regain a more complete sense of aliveness. For Sami, who had been uprooted from his home, such an encounter demonstrated that he remained part of a broader web of life and that a sense of belonging was still possible, even though his physical home had been destroyed. This illustrates that the process of "working through" does not always arise from adult intervention; it can also emerge through encounters with the non-human world, enabling a form of unconditional existential recognition (Strekalova-Hughes, 2019). This working-through process is not linear; as LaCapra explains, it involves overlapping and repetitive phases. After the scene where he painted a kite, Sami reverted to a phase of "acting out" upon hearing music that reminded him of the songs he

used to sing to his birds, or when he fantasized about returning to life as it was before the war. These moments reveal that the trauma of losing his pets and home could not be resolved by a single event, but rather through an accumulation of repeated material interactions with the traces of the birds—manifesting in memories, sounds, and colors. The culmination of this working-through process is embodied in Sami's act of painting images on the refugee camp wall—depicting birds, high-rise buildings, human figures flying in planes, and colorful hearts—signaling that he was painting not to restore a lost past, but to envision a future. The camp wall, initially a boundary that confined him, was transformed into a material medium for disseminating a new narrative. The mural demonstrates that the fauna were no longer merely objects of loss triggering melancholia, but had become narrative agents articulating hope.

CONCLUSION

The narrative capacity of birds—as "storied matter"—serves as a material prerequisite for the trauma healing achieved by Sami through the mechanisms of *acting out* and *working through*. From the outset, the birds are portrayed as material entities possessing the agency to tell stories, harbor memories, and perform actions independent of the human subject's will. Sami's success in the *working through* process at the story's conclusion is made possible only by the presence of the birds. These findings indicate that non-human material agency functions not merely as a symbolic backdrop, but as an active participant that shapes the psychological trajectory and possibilities of the human subject.

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