



Julianna Litkei

Julianna Litkei is an illustrator and maker of things – a designer with a big heart for children’s culture, storytelling and sustainability. Through her work, she seeks to highlight unseen details, convey meaningful stories and celebrate the wonderful complexity of the world around us. She aims to use her visual language to express and trigger kindness, compassion, joy and playfulness. She has a background in Graphic Design and she graduated with an MFA in Child Culture Design from HDK- Valand in 2022.

Something's Growing On...

A Wordless Book for Children to Celebrate Unseen Microcosms & the Nature of Nature

Julianna Litkei

'Something's Growing On...' will be published by Les Editions La Joie de lire in 2023

Abstract

The 'Something's Growing On...' project explores how a picture book for children can celebrate and highlight the complex beauty of nature and its unseen microcosms. It is a design-initiated attempt to evoke awareness and appreciation for the other-than-human worlds — and through this — to address the anthropocentric view of our times.

The book 'Something's Growing On...' is an illustrated, wordless story that introduces an 'unusual event' that takes place in a bustling-buzzing residency of many. As this 'unusual event' happens to be a sprouting potato, the characters — a motley team of different bugs, beetles, insects, small mammals and worms — follow and celebrate the growth of this familiar crop through the pages of the book.

The story aims to be a humble and truthful, yet inviting and accessible representation of the portrayed creatures' perspectives and the nature of nature. It intends to provide its readers with space for in-depth observation, perceptive exploration, and personal interpretation — and, through this, hopes to be a source of motivation for a self-initiated understanding and a sense of

stewardship and care for the world's outstanding entanglement. The picture book seeks to represent constancy and change, joy and sorrow, care and cruelty, growth and decay.

This article aims to provide an insight into the background, intentions and details of the project.

"We need to allow children to develop their biophilia, their love for the Earth, before we ask them to save it."

— R. White

Keywords

child culture design, picture books, illustration, nature

Introduction



Something's Growing On... Book Cover

The 'Something's growing on...' project explores how a picture book for children can celebrate and highlight the complex beauty of nature and its unseen microcosms. It is a design-initiated attempt to evoke awareness and appreciation for the other-than-human worlds — and through this — to address the anthropocentric view of our times.

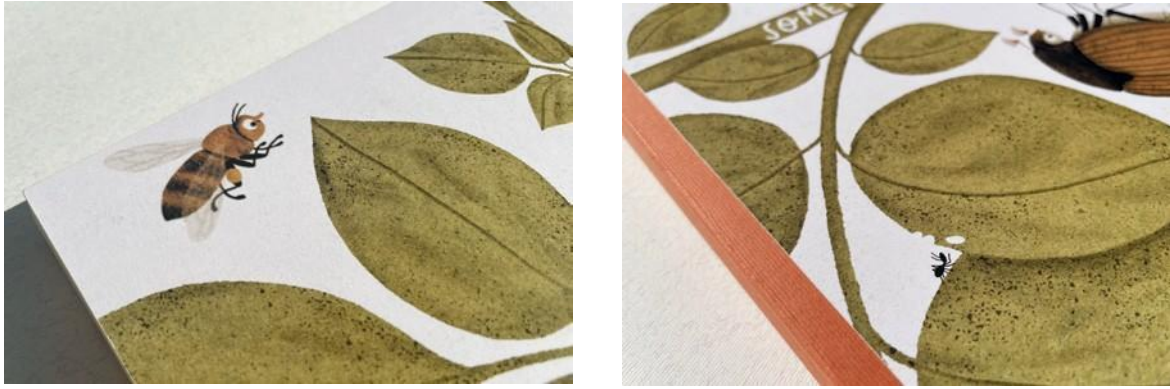
Today, the need for holistic change has become undeniable. Human-centred attitudes and activities — the unbalanced nature-human relationship — threaten not only the harmonious planetary co-existence but also our future survival. Thus, expanding our perception and connection with nature, recognising our kinship, and cultivating enhanced care and responsibility for the needs and well-being of all living and non-living beings is an urgent global mission.

Childhood is a crucial formative period in one's life, when, among many others, the attitudes and relations towards nature are founded. Therefore, it is essential to provide young people with spaces where they can nourish their attention, care and sensitivity to the other-than-human world.

This project is the result of an investigation to explore if a picture book can trigger such values in children in a way that avoids the imposition of predetermined convictions and leaves room for readers' interpretation and meaning-making.



Something's Growing On... Book Title Detail



Something's Growing On... Book Cover Details

One of the key moments of this investigation was to explore how visual communication can be a means to “translate” and yet truthfully represent the nature of nature in a children’s book. The aim was to develop a mode of mediation that is inviting, accessible and provides imaginative triggers for a young reader and that, at the same time, humbly embodies the complexity of the reality presented.



Close up of one of the characters on the cover of Something's Growing On...



Close up of one of the characters on the cover of Something's Growing On...

The project's outcome — an illustrated wordless book about a bustling-buzzing community — intends to supply its readers with a space for in-depth observation, perceptive exploration, and personal interpretation — and, through this, hopes to be a source of motivation for a self-initiated understanding and a sense of stewardship and care for the world's outstanding entanglement.



Front and Back cover

Extract from the back cover:

"The Pile is home to many smaller and bigger residents. Life goes on underground, on the surface and in the air. Everyone lives their busy lives, and they always know what to do. But one sleepy morning, something 'unusual' happens... What is this 'unusual' event, and what happens to the Pile-residents afterwards? Flip through the pages of the book and find out..."



A full page spread of Something's Growing On...

Self-led Meaning-making through Exploring the Story without Words

The story consists of multiple simultaneous actions of the *Pile-residents* and their vibrant environment. Most of the happenings of the book — the tiny movements, and processes; joy and sorrow —, are framed by the evolving potato plant in the middle. Besides this, “potato-independent” events also take place multiple times.

As there is no written text in the story, — so the happenings are not narrated, — the readers are invited to explore, interpret and by using their imagination, create their own self-cultivated stories, and meanings based on the merely visually portrayed scenarios.



Details of happenings in Something's Growing On...

Potato as a 'Connector'

The story is framed by the development and changes of the potato: the plant is the "excuse" that drives the events. Nevertheless, the book primarily focuses on the life events of the tiny creatures that surround the plant. The potato, of course, still

has an important role to play: it is a familiar 'being' from the kitchen whose aim is to act as a link between readers and the other-than-human world through its well-known nature.

Furthermore, the presentation of the potato as an element that is celebrated and treasured by the characters and the insight into the beautiful and invisible-to-humans growing process of the plant is intended to support readers in appreciating the potato as a food in their daily lives.



The potato in Something's Growing On...

The 'Demanding Details'

Although the pictorial translations are not even close to the true complexity and simultaneity of such a scene in real life, it is still a demanding challenge to notice and follow all the nuanced moments of the story. The demanding nature of the images is intended to encourage the reader to practice careful observation and patient attention to detail. The attentiveness of the book aims

to evoke such attitudes in real life.

Additionally, the simultaneity and details of the images intend to motivate the readers to read the book multiple times, to look at it again, to discover new details and to re-interpret meanings.



Subtle detail changes in Something's Growing On...

Semi-realism of Story

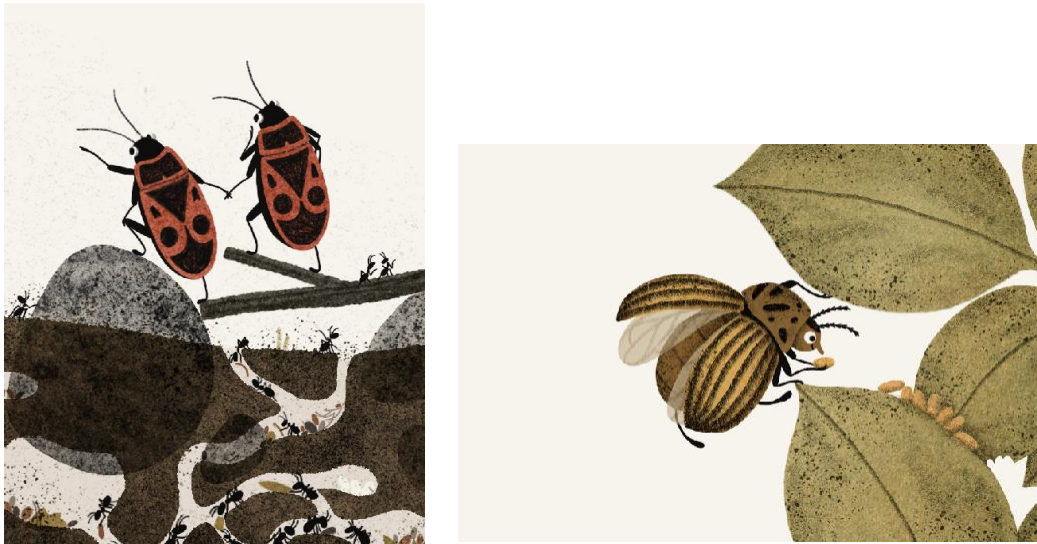
Blend of Reality & Imagination

The book's content — the processes and actions, the characters, their habits, gestures, and colours — is based on and inspired by nature's reality. Yet, the illustrations are a "blend of reality and imagination" — mixtures of real characteristics and imaginary features and expressions.

This pictorial mediation or semi-realism aims to create a visual context that can trigger attachment, appreciation and wonder, fade away distrust, and be inviting and accessible to children

while striving to embody and authentically represent the reality portrayed.

For example, it's true that you can see Firebugs "clinging" to each other (that's how they mate), but I've *translated* this habit into a handhold (fig 1).



(Fig 1) Firebugs

The 'babies' of the Potato Bug — real-life eggs

Unseen Micro-actions: The 'Highlighters' of Complexity

The bigger characters, such as the Cockchafer, the Firebugs, the Dungbeetle, the Potato Beetle, and the Vole, take a larger space in the story, however, the small micro-actors of the book, like the Ants, Earthworms, Woodlice, are also essential "components" of the picture as a whole. The presentation of such small and barely visible moments is meant to support the idea of representing the complexity and vividness of nature's processes. Besides this, the micro actors also intend to invite the readers to look deep into the details.



Micro-actions and barely visible moments



Are They Feeding on Each Other?! The 'Cruelty' of the Book

There are several moments in the story when some creatures or plants are disappointed or “harmed” (chewed, eaten, etc.) by each other or by other *actors* such as the wind, the storm or natural destruction itself (wilting).

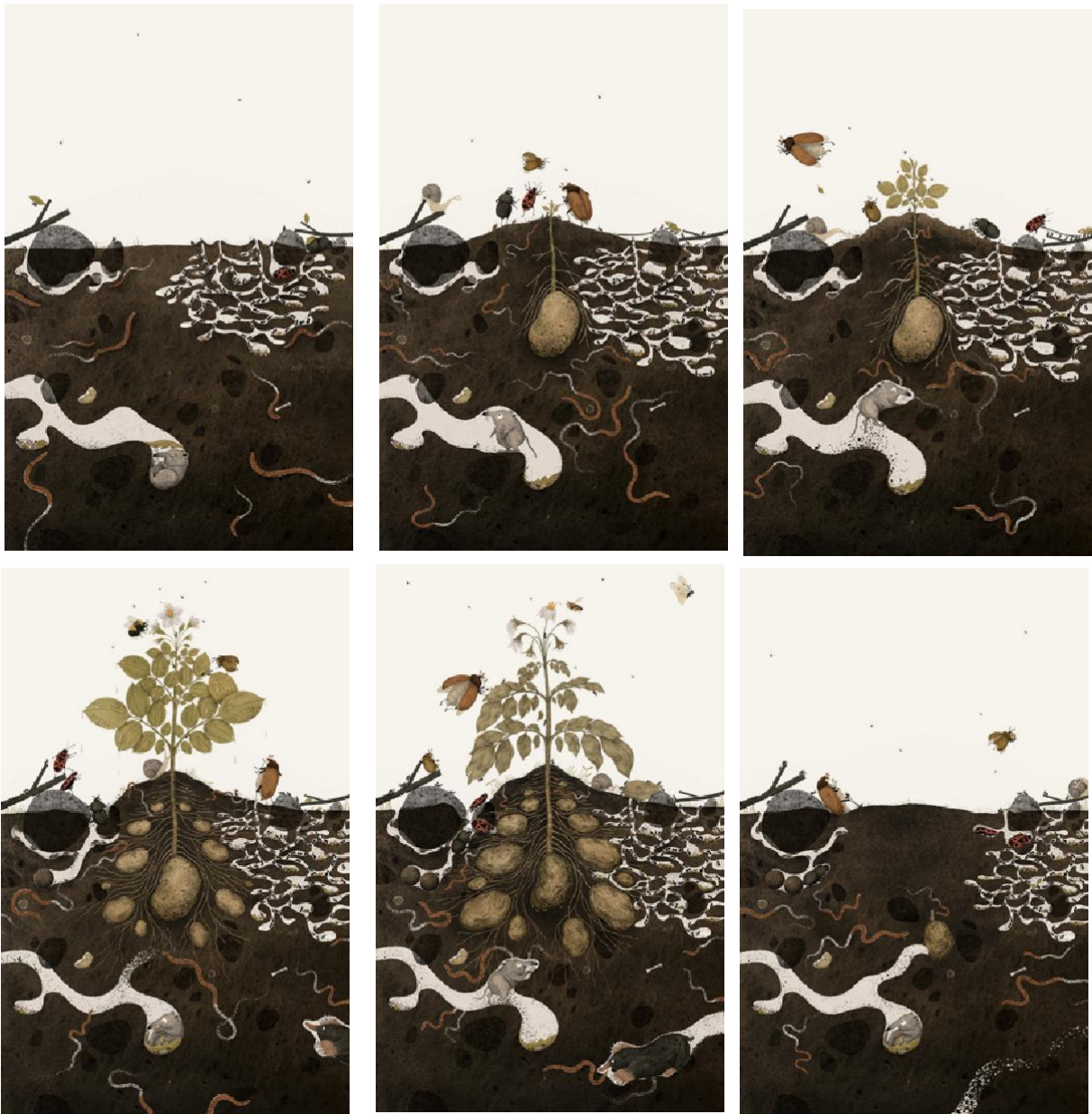
Although these points can be painful to see, the plot is deliberately enriched with these moments of “cruelty”. These acts are portrayed as part of the “normal course of things” to which the characters react but quickly move on. This is an essential means of depicting the reality of nature.



Details depicting the "cruel moments"; the reality of nature

The Endless Circle of Life: The End...or is it?

The story begins and ends with almost the same scene: after the potatoes are taken from the ground, everything starts all over again, and the creatures are portrayed as having adapted to the "tragic" endgame (the loss of the celebrated potato). However, one potato is seemingly "accidentally" left in the ground and on the very last page, it starts to sprout... These moments — and the book as a whole — aim to represent the Circle of Life and the eternal balance of growth and decay.



Bustling-Encyclopedia

At the end of the book, there is a brief introduction to each character in the story, explaining some of the creatures' main attributes and habits. The appendix is designed to give readers an insight into the true nature of the creatures presented and to provide important information that can help them embrace the content of the book.



Page spread of The Bustling Encyclopedia

Natural Pigments

The colourful textures of the illustrations are painted with pigments made only from natural materials such as charcoal, coffee, black tea, spinach, beetroot, grass, onion peel & turmeric. The illustrations are a mix of these analogue bases and digital methods.



Development of natural colour pigments used in Something's Growing On...

Conclusion

The 'Something's growing on...' project was created with the aim of providing children with a free space to explore, observe, connect to, empathise with and celebrate the nature of nature. It is a design-initiated attempt to subtly address the anthropocentric mindset of our times through the culture of children. The book intends to expand this human-centric perception through the celebration of the complexity and wonder of the other-than-human world. Naturally, the illustrations – being made by a human – can never be compared to the inimitable reality of the pictured reality. As a human-created book, it will always stay a mediation of nature's irreplaceable beauty, however, the story hopes to be an opportunity to get a glimpse into a microcosm that otherwise is unseeable.

Creating an engaging picture book in today's overflowing visual culture and being able to draw and sustain the attention of children is certainly a challenging call. At the same time, offering *peaceful islands* for young people is a very important task for today's parents, educators and designers – for which, in this project, a picture book is shown to be a good means.

"It is not our job to teach the rising generation convictions. Instead, we must support them in using their own judgement, their own understanding. To learn to see the world through their own eyes." (Steiner, as cited in Carlgren and Klingborg, 2006)

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