
‘We’re a little bit lost aren’t we?’: outdoor exploration, real and fantastical lands, and the educational possibilities of disorientation

DEB WILENSKI

ABSTRACT This article advocates an approach to outdoor exploration that begins by welcoming the unknown and quite possibly disorientating aspects of wild places. It proposes that one of the major ways in which young children make lasting connections with landscape is through imagination and the power of invention, and argues for the rights of children to experience two fundamental freedoms in the wild outdoors – physical freedom to adventure into the land, and freedom of the imagination, to make cultural meaning from their experience. The project described here took place in spring 2013, and was a ten-week collaboration between Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) and Ruby Class (Reception) from Cromwell Park Primary School in Huntingdon. Two CCI creative practitioners, Deb Wilenski and Caroline Wendling, worked with thirty children, their teacher Ben Wilson, and assistants Karen Lewin and Kelly Smith. They spent each Monday morning in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, and in the afternoon returned to school to continue their explorations.

Snow Shifts the World

It is the first day of our project with Ruby Class from Cromwell Park Primary School, and snow has fallen overnight. Lots of snow. Most of the primary schools in Huntingdon are closed and to be honest, part of me is wishing Cromwell Park had decided to close too. I am driving from Cambridge via the notorious A14, and Caroline is coming from a village twenty miles away. I’m not convinced either of us will actually arrive to meet this committed class of four- and five-year-olds and their educators, and I admit I am worried about what will happen when we do. It is going to be a cold morning, children are

often woefully underdressed, freezing fingers and toes can put you off the wild outdoors for a long time.

But the snow turns out to be an astonishing gift. It recasts the known world and the disorientation is fantastic. Although this class has already been visiting the woods with their teacher and assistants, today the paths and tracks are gone; the trees are reshaped with snow; the woods are *stroked by silence* – a phrase from a story I read long ago but carry with me into these new woods, this new morning. The whole world feels new, and exploration is both inevitable and irresistible. We arrive and mark our base with a blue curtain strung as a flag, striking against the white of the snow and the black of the branches. We run through the ‘rules’ of the woods – common sense thoughts about dogs, rubbish, staying in contact and when to come back. And we offer an open invitation: to explore, with children leading the way, adults accompanying and observing. There are no activities, no equipment, no pre-prepared routes or ideas – we want to find out what comes alive in these children when they are allowed to meet the woods with slow time, uncluttered space and quiet attention.

Worlds in the Woods

One large group of children has gone with Ben, others are still close to the base. Bryony and Harvey are remarkable for their separateness and they intrigue me. They walk off into this new white world at a measured pace without looking back, and I go along with them trying not to interrupt their adventuring. And, for me, this is where the project suddenly and so clearly begins – in the conversation that builds between Bryony and Harvey as they travel together, and in Harvey’s first phrase spoken quite ordinarily into the cold air – *we’re in the secret forest*. The children’s words reproduced here need space like snow between them. There was more silence, anticipation and exploration between the phrases, and the sound of the snow, freshly fallen, crunching underfoot:

Harvey: We’re in the secret forest. This is someone’s house. It’s someone’s creature’s house. Someone’s going to come in here and say ‘get out of my house!’

Bryony: Hide!

Harvey: We’re really in a wood aren’t we?

Bryony: We’re lost!

Harvey: Yeah we are a little bit aren’t we?

Bryony: They’re trying to find us. Hide!

Worlds from Words

Even as I write down this short conversation between Harvey and Bryony, I know it is significant. It tells me they are already exploring big ideas in the woods – secrecy, ownership, resistance, the unknown. There is a developing

drama of being lost, of hiding, being somewhere you shouldn't be and escaping. There is the provocative use of the word 'really' that opens up questions about actual and imaginary worlds and experiences: what does *we're really in a wood* mean, especially on this day of snow and endless white space, when nothing feels quite real, yet everything is as sharply focused as a cold in-breath of air? There is a growing narrative, and a game, and protagonists to play in both. Only five, maybe ten minutes have passed and we are already in a secret forest with *someone* and *someone's creature*, in an archetypal story of danger and bravery but voiced in a singular way; we are in a strange landscape and language too, a language of architecture – *it's someone's creature's house* – in a place where there are no man-made structures or buildings.

In the pre-schools and infant-toddler centres of Reggio Emilia children's words are used as vital documentation in a process of ongoing and often radical research. They are a source of further questions and explorations not only for the children but for the enquiring group of adults too. This is what we are determined to do here – we are scribing words not to annotate photographs or wall displays, but to discover children's thinking and fascinations. In this process, experience in previous projects has told us, we will discover much about our own thinking too. And so I need to dig deeper into the exchange between Bryony and Harvey, and bring that research to the other practitioners in the project – what does it remind me of, what does it sound like? What does it tell me about the process of exploring and about children's relationship with worlds within worlds?

Remembering Snow and Other Stories

These are some of the places to which Harvey and Bryony's words take me:

- To stories from my childhood, and from my children's childhoods, in which one world opens into a second secret one – to the door in the wall in *The Secret Garden*, the back of the wardrobe in the Narnia sequence, the clock striking thirteen and the unlocked door in *Tom's Midnight Garden*. These are all portal stories too, where an ordinary object or entrance opens extraordinarily into altered realms of adventure. Children on one side of the portal (often sent like parcels to stay with relatives in the country) pass through and become protagonists. Is there something of this sense in Harvey's assertion that *We're really in a wood aren't we?* Are we really there because it feels more intense than ordinary life, more adventurous, more dangerous – because we don't know where we are and we could be anywhere, because a story has started?
- To old cultural narratives of the forest – the folk and fairy tales in which children get lost and often make extraordinary escapes, to stories of strange houses in the deep woods and the temptation to go in – the gingerbread house, the house on chicken legs belonging to Baba Yaga (a *someone's creature's house* if ever there was one), the house of the Three Old Men of the Wood which lets the generous sleep comfortably through the night but

causes the mean-minded to fall crashing through the floor. There is something about the transformation of a land by snow too that wakes such extraordinary possibilities. Perhaps because it comes so quietly, often when we are sleeping; maybe because it so completely covers the known land. It is other-worldly and elemental and puts us in touch with timeless, lucid tales.

- To the contemporary phenomenon of urban exploration – urbexing for short – in which explorers seek out and enter, often through trespass, disused man-made structures above and below ground – the urge to enter *someone's house* and the impulse to go undetected, the bravery of doing dangerous things for fun, the calm expertise and willingness to go further into unknown places and chart what is found.
- To a sudden and powerful conviction that there is great value in getting *a little bit lost*. We are a contradictory species – we like to know where we are and have developed ever more detailed maps of the world and most places in it, but we also want to be somewhere else, literally and conceptually. The twin freedoms of physical adventure and intellectual exploration go hand in hand. We go repeatedly in search of the unfamiliar and unexpected, and if we don't go ourselves, we read about the worlds discovered by other adventurers through books, which are of course another kind of portal into and out of extraordinary worlds.
- To the conversation with which Caroline and I started the project – part of an introduction and reflection session with Ben and Karen in which we used image cards to explore the many worlds in the woods and our own experience of wild places. When Ben turned over a card with a picture of a deer in soft autumn light, he said this wasn't the real woods, it was too much like a fantasy; but Karen added that for some children this was how they saw the woods, they spent all their time there looking for fairies and magic. Whose real is most real?

Thinking and Reflection – Am I Going Too Far?

As I describe these connections a small part of me wonders if I am making too much of fifty-one words, spoken by two children, one morning, in one wood. Is this reference to ideas in literature and contemporary society and culture more a reflection of my interests than those of the children? It is easy for adults to take over the subtle curiosity of children and make of it something more obvious or laboured, and although it takes imagination to be a reflective practitioner, it also takes intellectual discipline. As the weeks go by, however, we find that all these ideas are indeed powerfully alive in the children's discovery of the park: the multiplicity of worlds, the possibility of magic doorways or portals, the power of being a protagonist, the physical daring of exploring dangerous places, encounters with magic and unexpected worlds, the relationship between disorientation, discovery and contentment, an acute understanding of the shifting relationship between real and imaginary worlds.

And in our first afternoon in the classroom following the snowy morning in the woods, these ideas begin to find expression in the subtle and dramatic language of drawing. Caroline, Ben and I meet over lunchtime and decide to offer large pieces of dark or white paper with chalks and wax crayons. The offer is deliberately simple, as it was in the morning, so we can work in a way that is uncluttered and allows us to see more clearly the images and experiences the children choose to represent. We also pick up Harvey's idea of the 'secret' forest – I read back that part of my notes to the class so they can hear his actual words – and before we offer the drawing materials, we invite the children to imagine the woods at night, taking a place they know into a time and space that makes it unfamiliar again, with its own secrets. With eyes closed we imagine the snow in the dark, what night sounds like, who is sleeping, who is waking.

Amazing worlds come to life through the afternoon. Between the negotiations for space to draw, and getting used to working on a large scale, and learning not to tread on each other's pictures, and how to hear each other in the excitement, a forest of giant pink trees grows; a delicate starry land appears with a bright moon and foxes; there is a giant glowing beanstalk and rabbits that climb up it to touch the moon; polar bears roam the woods and the snow still comes down.

Remembering the idea of fantastical travelling between worlds, and noticing that foxes appear in Fareedá and Caitlin's forest as well as Crystal's drawing, I ask if they would like to meet. Crystal cuts out her little foxes and they come to visit the big fox curled under the tree in Fareedá and Caitlin's woods. I ask Crystal if she also wants to go into this forest, and although she is unsure, saying *I be so scared*, she is also intrigued. She draws herself and comes to meet the foxes. And as with any good portal story, once she is in, the narrative can begin:

They say a naughty word – that's what foxes do. Now they are a mum and kids. They say kind words – fun, and that he loves them. He loves even the snow. It was windy and cold – her couldn't find her way. And I have to run back home. And the mum's all on her own and the foxes were so cold, and the foxes don't know where to stay with. I said 'follow me little foxes'.

Through the drawings of the forest at night-time, and through coming in and out of worlds, Crystal who was tentative in the woods becomes brave. She makes a *dad fox* and when we join Thomas's drawing of the pink forest to Caitlin and Fareedá's woods, it becomes the place to encounter danger. Fareedá draws herself and comes in to rescue Crystal and her mum from the giant prickles that grow there. We share this story with the whole class to end the day and Ben notices Thomas's pride in seeing his drawing brought into the narrative. The following week, however, when we again offer dark paper and chalks as well as a new medium of projection, Thomas begins the afternoon looking lost, not knowing where to start. I offer Thomas some pieces of paper where he is sitting and to my amazement he begins joining them together,

eventually using eight large pieces, on which two of the tallest, most astonishing and beautiful trees I have ever seen come to life. When a child looks lost it is tempting to jump straight in and find a quick solution, but we have seen many times in these projects how disorientation can in fact precede startling creativity, and the results are often more beautiful than we would ever have imagined.

The Freedom to Make Meaning

Why this emphasis on the woods as many woods? Why welcome the disorientation the snow has brought? Why value a language which makes one place many places? We have some specific reasons in this project for wanting to explore the world of the Country Park as a place of multiple possibilities.

Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination has been working in the wild outdoors with young children, their families and educators for a long time. We know that children are profound and inexhaustible explorers of the wild, yet the voices that usually explain and document our landscapes are adult. In our project with Ruby Class, and more specifically in the publication that grows from it – *A Fantastical Guide to Hinchbrooke Country Park* – we want to reposition children’s voices in our public interpretations of place. We want to make space alongside guidebooks, and signs, and other discussions of landscape and the imagination, for the stories, speculations and secrets of this class of four- and five-year-olds. We think they deserve to be there. We believe they can begin new and important conversations.

We also want to use the multiple and surprising worlds children discover to investigate a question Ben, their class teacher, had asked in our introductory session: how can more space be made for the fantastical ideas of children, which are often dominated by the ‘realists’ in his class – those who decide what is possible with reference only to the known and observed world? By supporting an exploration of multiple worlds and giving valuable status to explanations of all kinds, we open up space in classroom conversations for children to deepen their abiding interest in what is real and what is not real, what is known and what is unknown. And in the park, especially by the water with its fascinating relationship between surface and depth, seen and unseen worlds, there are clear statements of the right to both first-hand and fantastical knowledge:

Mikaela: I think I heard a dolphin. It was in my imagination. When Cody was swishing and swishing the water I just heard one. It’s doing it again. It’s doing it more.

Caitlin: When I went to Godmanchester swimming yesterday I saw a seal. Mummy didn’t take a photograph of it. She didn’t see it, only I did – it’s a secret.

The *Fantastical Guide* documents in detail what can only be touched on here. How the children develop over time a language of discovery which

communicates the rich unpredictability of the park as well as its familiar places; how they find many doorways in the woods and name many lands – Denland, Snapland, the Jungle, Mario Land, Yellow Zone (*it means we're not in red zone and we're not on fire*); how the language of old tales mixes with the terminology of virtual games and computer graphics; how the lands children discover and describe are never fought over or given boundaries, though there is intricate knowledge of places and how to find them; how children search for and find visible and invisible traces of secret water, the Mud Princess, the witch in the woods, the wolves in the mountain; how physical adventure leads to *leaping over the whole world*, and discovering, in brilliant urbexing style, on our last morning together, that Under-Tunnel Land goes *all the way to the A14*.

Observing and Inventing the World

As soon as [a child] learns a language well enough, and before he is told he cannot invent the world, he will explain everything ... The five or six year old is at a singular period. He is not a captive of his illusions and fantasies, but can choose them for support or stimulation ... He has become aware of the thinking required by the adult world, but is not yet committed to its burden of rigid consistency. (Paley, 1981, pp. 31, 80-81)

Perhaps the most extraordinary moment in this project comes in our morning conversation in the woods as we begin our eighth visit. We are sharing plans for the morning when Fareedá tells us with a wide sweep of her arms *I'm going to find the big city*. It is extraordinary for many reasons: because Fareedá is not a child who makes big announcements, and yet this is the biggest we ever hear in the woods; because we are in the woods, in what could reasonably be called the opposite of a city, yet the idea of a city waiting to be found is accepted immediately by other children, who offer to search for it; because the idea of a city in the woods isn't just accepted by the children, it makes sense to the adults too. Although I know there is no city in these woods, I also know, as soon as Fareedá speaks, that there might be. It convinces me once and for all that truth and invention can be equally alive in our relationship with the world – they need not be opposites or contradictions.

As Fareedá searches with her friends for the city, she finds signs that they are going the right way. When one of the signs points straight up a towering tree, the city Fareedá describes rises to meet it:

The city is like houses and a great big castle and a lot of little houses. And there's a little boss and a great big boss. Of course there are a hundred and ten people. There's a hot sun and a cold sun. And there's a hot moon and a cold moon. There's hills made of paint. There's a shop that buys anything and anything, everything and anything.

There is an accuracy of the imagination here which makes the language of architecture just right, even in this place with no buildings, even in a wood with no cities. Going in search of fantastical possibility – explaining the world as much by inventing as observing it – is, as Vivian Gussin Paley explains, a habit of children who know but don't yet accept the rules of *rigid consistency*. But it is also more than this. It is a fundamental characteristic of human exploration of the world. We have always looked for the fantastic in the real, we always will, and we will always need to. If one of our most pressing questions is how to reconnect children with the wild outdoors, here is an answer: through physical adventuring and by giving them enough freedom of the imagination to make new meaning from their experience.

We're Really in a Wood Aren't We?

Why should we listen to children exploring the woods? Because they not only have fascinating things to tell us about being a child, they have serious things to say about being human. They remind us that we are complicated and contradictory. We like clarity and patterns, and rules to navigate by, we like to know where we are, but we are also drawn to ambiguity, to the tracks of possibility, and to breaking our own rules.

Children can take us to extraordinary places when we give them the chance. We can't order snow for the beginning of all our projects, nor would we want to. But we can decide to begin by getting just a little bit lost, and seeing what happens next. We can resist the temptation to offer activities in the woods in case children don't know what to do straight away. We can accept and live with the uncomfortable feelings we might have when children have not immediately engaged with their surroundings. We can leave the known paths and let children take the lead, and trust that in the end they will take us somewhere we have never been before, and are unlikely ever to forget.

In our first invitation into 'wild conversation' we ask Robert Macfarlane, author of *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*, to write a foreword for the *Fantastical Guide*. He responds directly and beautifully to the children's real and fantastical travelling, to their language of architecture and magic doors, and to the many worlds they discover by going through them:

Seen through the eyes of these four- and five-year-olds,
Hinchingsbrooke Country Park ceases to be 170 acres of meadow,
woodland and marsh, lying 2 km west of Huntingdon and bounded
on one side by the A14. It is instead a limitless universe, changeable
in its textures, and endlessly replenished in its originality. It is a wild
compound of dream, spell and substance.

His words take me back to the snow where everything started, and to a story I took with me that morning. Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* is a story of protagonism, and a story about willingness to enter into the unknown. Will Stanton, the seventh son of a seventh son, wakes on his eleventh birthday to

snow and an altered world. He walks into it in a passage that I can never read without recognising and being moved by this startling ability of children – to walk, as Bryony and Harvey did, into the unknown, to enter the story that is waiting for them:

The strange white world lay stroked by silence. No birds sang. The garden was no longer there, in this forested land. Nor were the outbuildings nor the old crumbling walls. There lay only a narrow clearing round the house now, hummocked with unbroken snowdrifts, before the trees began, with a narrow path leading away. Will set out down the white tunnel of the path, slowly, stepping high to keep the snow out of his boots. As soon as he moved away from the house, he felt very much alone, and he made himself go on without looking over his shoulder, because he knew that when he looked, he would find that the house had gone.

He accepted everything that came into his mind, without a thought or question, as if he were moving through a dream. But a deeper part of him knew that he was not dreaming. He was crystal-clear awake, in a Midwinter day that had been waiting for him to wake into it since the day he had been born, and, he somehow knew, for centuries before that. (Cooper, 1973, p. 31)

References

- Cooper, S. (1973) *The Dark is Rising*. London: Chatto & Windus.
Paley, V.G. (1981) *Wally's Stories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

DEB WILENSKI is an independent woodland/outdoor projects leader, early childhood educator and consultant, and creative practitioner working with Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination and Sightlines Initiative. She is the author of *37 Shadows: listening to children's stories from the woods* and *A Fantastical Guide: ways into Hinchingsbrooke Country Park* (with Caroline Wendling). With a background in biological anthropology and the arts, she is inspired by the preschools and infant-toddler centres of Reggio Emilia, by the woodland nurseries of Scandinavia, and by projects which value children as makers of culture and meaning. She is particularly interested at the moment in 'wild conversation' – exchanges between explorers of all ages, scientists, artists and people who don't easily fit into any of these boxes.

A Fantastical Guide to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and *37 Shadows* can be purchased or read online via the Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination website: <http://ccifootprints.org.uk>

The Hinchingsbrooke project and *A Fantastical Guide* were made possible through support from the Arts Council England, Cambridgeshire County

Deb Wilenski

Council Early Years Service, Ernest Cook Trust, Norfolk and Norwich Festival Bridge. Many thanks also to Hinchingsbrooke Country Park.

Correspondence: dwilenski@gmail.com