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# International literary conference explores the ‘ecologies of childhood’

Writers, artists and scholars from around the world will convene at UC Santa Barbara to explore diverse literary perspectives on the harmful environmental threats impacting the planet’s arguably most-precious resource — children.

“Rising generations will be impacted the hardest by climate change,” said Sara Pankenier Weld, a professor of Slavic and comparative literature at UCSB. “But in those same generations is where things can happen and the agents of change will exist.”

The multi-day research conference “Ecologies of Childhood” will explore the overlap of ecology and childhood in language, literature and education. Hosted by UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies in collaboration with the Center for East Asian Studies at Stanford University, this year’s theme examines environment, ecology, culture and literature in the context of pressing environmental issues.

Taking place for the first time in the United States, the event (Aug. 12–17) marks the 26th biennial congress of the International Research Society for Children’s Literature. In-person speakers and attendees represent 32 countries on six continents, and an additional 10 countries are represented via the conference’s “green stream” digital access, according to current registration numbers.

While unpacking the connections between children and nature is nothing new, the conference broadens the scope to include children's literature and culture in relation to ecocriticism, ecofeminism, decolonial environmentalism, posthumanism, environmental justice, activism and education and the increasingly overarching existential threat of climate change.

But with the harsh realizations that often arise with environmental problems also comes an optimism toward revelatory solutions. One of the conference's main goals is to provide a gathering place where participants can meet, exchange ideas and initiate collaborations. It's also an opportunity for UCSB to help "spearhead a new wave of scholarship in children's literature," Weld said.

Registered participants will have access to a full program of speakers, panel sessions, roundtables, book events, research collections and artist-author plenaries.

Artist-author plenary speakers include: Gene Luen Yang, comic book and graphic novel writer, reading diversity advocate and 2016 MacArthur Foundation Fellow; prize-winning poet and picture book author Jorge Argueta, a Pipil Nahua Indian from El Salvador; Maya Gonzalez, an award-winning children's book artist, author, activist and progressive educator; and Eugene Yelchin, a Newbery award-winning writer and illustrator of books for children and young adults.

Keynote speakers include Fikile Nxumalo, an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning and the director of the Childhood Place Pedagogy Lab at the University of Toronto. Her talk, "Thinking with Black Ecologies in Early Childhood Studies," will draw from research with Black families and young children in urban North America and aims to disrupt anti-Blackness in environmental early childhood education.

Lara Saguisag's keynote, "When Oil and Childhood Mix: Children's Literature and (or as) Petroculture," will show how children's books, films and comics are used to minimize — and even deny — the role of the petrochemical industry in the climate crisis. Saguisag is an associate professor and the inaugural Georgiou Chair in Children's Literature and Literacy at New York University.

Orna Naftali, who earned her PhD in cultural anthropology at UCSB and is now an Asian studies senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, will discuss “Protecting Children, Protecting Nature: The Rise and Contestation of Environmental Education in China.”

As part of the conference’s public programming, keynote speaker Sara Schwebel, a professor and director of the Center for Children’s Books at the University of Illinois, will also appear on an expert panel to reexamine Scott O’ Dell’s widely read children’s novel “Island of the Blue Dolphins” — set on San Nicolas Island, off the coast of Santa Barbara — at a free event held at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. “Revisiting Island of the Blue Dolphins,” takes place from 5–7 p.m. on August 15 in the museum’s Fleischmann Auditorium.

A free screening of “Whale Rider” begins at 7 p.m. on Aug. 14 at UC Santa Barbara’s Pollack Theater. The 2002 award-winning film follows a 12-year-old Māori girl who dreams of becoming a tribal leader despite traditions that have long reserved that role for men. The screening will be followed by a discussion with Māori author Witi Ihimaera, upon whose 1987 novel the movie is based.

Another free event will feature Barbareño Chumash elder Ernestine Ygnacio-De Soto sharing “Chumash Storytelling” on Aug. 13. Her talk begins at 7:30 p.m. at UC Santa Barbara’s Multicultural Center.

There is limited seating for all public events; advanced sign-up is recommended.

UCSB students, faculty and staff with campus ID at registration are invited to attend keynotes, panel talks and artist-author plenaries for free. Same-day registration takes place daily from 8–8:45 a.m. in the Corwin Pavilion plaza.

Tags
Climate Change
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.