Essays – *peer-reviewed* Encyclopaideia – Journal of Phenomenology and Education. Vol.30 n.74 (2026)
https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1825-8670/23404 ISSN 1825-8670

Landscapes of harm: Environmental crime and the passive witness in children's graphic narratives

Chang Hasheminezhad-Li*

Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy)

Submitted: December 1, 2025 – Accepted: March 25, 2026 – Published: June 9, 2026

Abstract

Unlike traditional narratives that follow crime-solution-restoration patterns, environmental crime manifests as pervasive, ongoing, and unresolvable conditions that saturate landscapes and lived experience. This paradigm operates through contaminated spaces and child protagonists who transform from active agents to passive witnesses of systemic harm. This study examines how Simon Stålenhag's visual narratives challenge conventional crime representation in children's literature. Through analysis of *Things from the Flood* (2016), *The Electric State* (2018), and *The Labyrinth* (2021), I propose "environmental crime" as a new critical framework for understanding contemporary children's texts that address systemic harm and environmental crisis. My analysis reveals how Stålenhag's works position children as witnesses to environmental disasters and institutional failures that exceed individual comprehension or response. The environmental crime framework offers new directions for children's crime literature studies and eco-critical approaches to children's texts. This study contributes theoretical insights for understanding how contemporary children's literature represents systemic crises that exceed traditional resolution patterns. More importantly, the urgency of this framework is underscored by ongoing cases of environmental harm affecting children worldwide.

A differenza delle narrazioni tradizionali che seguono lo schema «reato-soluzione-risanamento», il crimine ambientale si manifesta come una condizione pervasiva, continua e irrisolvibile che permea i paesaggi e l'esperienza vissuta. Questo paradigma si concretizza attraverso spazi contaminati e protagonisti infantili che si trasformano da agenti attivi a testimoni passivi di un danno sistemico. Questo studio esamina come le narrazioni visive di Simon Stålenhag sfidino la rappresentazione convenzionale del crimine nella letteratura per l'infanzia. Attraverso l'analisi di *Things from the Flood* (2016), *The Electric State* (2018) e *The Labyrinth* (2021), propongo il "crimine ambientale" come nuovo quadro critico per comprendere i testi contemporanei per l'infanzia che affrontano il danno sistemico e la crisi ambientale. La mia analisi rivela come le opere di Stålenhag posizionino i bambini come testimoni di disastri ambientali e fallimenti istituzionali che superano la comprensione o la risposta individuale. Il quadro del crimine ambientale offre nuove direzioni per gli studi sulla letteratura poliziesca per l'infanzia e approcci eco-critici ai testi per bambini. Questo studio fornisce spunti teorici per comprendere come la letteratura per l'infanzia contemporanea rappresenti crisi sistemiche che superano i modelli di risoluzione tradizionali. Ancora più importante, l'urgenza di questo quadro è sottolineata dai casi in corso di danno ambientale che colpiscono i bambini in tutto il mondo.

Keywords: Environmental crime; Child agency; Graphic narratives; Ecocriticism; Simon Stålenhag.

* chang.li@phd.unipd.it

Copyright © 2026 Chang Hasheminezhad-Li
The text in this work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY License
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

1. Introduction

Contemporary children's literature faces unprecedented challenges in addressing environmental crises and systemic institutional breakdown that exceed traditional narrative solutions. Traditional children's crime fiction, which typically targets middle-grade readers aged 8 to 12, usually operates through established patterns of detection, investigation, and resolution (see Veldhuizen, 2024; and Van Nahl, 2019, ch. 3). When confronting environmental disasters and systemic violence that exceed individual control, these narrative frameworks encounter new challenges.

This study examines three of Simon Stålenhag's visual narratives, whose hybrid form of illustrated storytelling and speculative world-building has attracted a significant crossover readership including young adults, to propose "environmental crime" as a new critical framework for understanding how contemporary children's literature should address systemic harm and environmental crisis.

Following the introduction, the discussion unfolds in four main parts. The first examines traditional patterns in children's crime literature, clarifying the conventional frameworks that the notion of environmental crime challenges. The second introduces the concept of environmental crime through analysis of how Stålenhag's works present landscapes of systemic harm and environmental degradation. The third develops this framework further, examining how these works position children as witnesses to forms of harm that exceed individual comprehension or response. The final part discusses the broader implications that environmental crime might have for children's literature scholarship and its relevance to contemporary environmental and social crises.

This analysis seeks to offer a fresh interpretive lens for children's literature studies. By proposing environmental crime as a critical framework, this study aims to enrich current understandings of children's crime narratives, particularly in relation to environmental crisis and systemic breakdown. This framework may open new avenues for examining forms of wrongdoing in children's texts that existing approaches have only partially explored.

2. Crime and the child in children's literature

Crime has been a persistent theme in children's literature, taking many forms. Classic mystery adventures feature child detectives who treat crime-solving as a kind of game or adventure. As Veldhuizen (2023) observes, "the child detective approaches the crime like a serious game, with set rules, roles, and expectations. The act of detection is framed as exciting, occasionally dangerous but generally fun" (p. 167). This tradition of child-led investigation traces back to foundational texts like Erich Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives* (1929), extending through the decades to iconic figures like Nancy Drew, who has headlined an American mystery series since 1930, and the TKKG gang, a German quartet solving crimes across various media. Across these varied contexts, young protagonists consistently approach the pursuit of justice as an intricate, engaging puzzle. The narrative typically goes back to order once the culprit is caught. Some other works invert the formula by casting children as criminals, including child thieves and con artists. Some of the most well-known examples include the street urchins of the Victorian era, such as the Artful Dodger in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838).

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly examined the darker turn in children's crime narratives, focusing on how literature for young readers addresses severe forms of violence and criminality, including sexual violence, theft, and murder. Ramona Caponegro (2021) examines narratives involving the incarceration of children and highlights how such stories depict young characters as subjects of carceral control (p. 30). Aiyana Altrows (2016) analyzes adolescent fictions that frame female bodies as "rape spaces," where the absence of the rapist shifts narrative focus to the victim's body as the site of violence (p. 52). In contrast, Carla Plieth (2023) explores how male rape victims are portrayed in young adult fictions, challenging the silence around male vulnerability. In examining lethal violence, Michelle Ann Abate (2013) documents the presence of murder, as the most extreme form of crime, in children's literature. She argues that homicide is often stylized into a narrative device that initiates a mystery or restores moral order, rather than being treated as traumatic realism (p. 11). Together, these studies show how children's literature engages with a spectrum of criminal themes, ranging from institutional regulation and bodily violation to symbolic death.

While the above studies focus on the representation of serious crimes, another line of inquiry examines how crime narratives engage readers through interactive structures, particularly in detective fiction. As Veldhuizen (2024) notes, these stories frequently adapt the principle of fair play, allowing young readers to engage directly with clues and suspects alongside the characters (p. 350). The act of detection is framed as cognitively stimulating and emotionally immersive, yet ultimately playful, positioning the reader as an active participant in both the process of detection and the pursuit of justice.

Although children's crime narratives demonstrate considerable diversity in both themes and reader engagement, they typically maintain similar plot structures. Such stories tend to individualize crime: a specific wrong, such as theft or kidnapping, is committed by a recognizable perpetrator and finally resolved, often through the cleverness of a child protagonist or detective team. Even when addressing heavier subjects like abuse or incarceration, the narrative typically focuses on personal harm and offers some hope for understanding or redress.

All these patterns may reflect an underlying assumption in children's literature: crime, however serious, is always treated as a problem with clear limits and a definite solution, such as providing narrative closure or assigning moral responsibility to a single agent. The genre usually frames crime as a self-contained episode with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Its causes are traceable, its effects individualized, and its resolution assured. This framework sustains the belief that justice would be achieved, that moral clarity will prevail, as well as that order could be restored.

However, this conventional framework is precisely what Simon Stålenhag's works put into question. Stålenhag shifts the lens from individual wrongdoing to systemic failure, from crime as a moment to crime as a pervasive condition that saturates the characters' everyday world. In his stories, crime is environmental rather than episodic. The result is that the usual roles of detective, victim, and culprit are blurred or absent. To clarify this reconfiguration, it is necessary to first understand Stålenhag's unique narrative strategy.

3. Landscapes of environmental crime: Stålenhag's visual narratives

Simon Stålenhag's graphic novels have garnered attention for their unique retro-futuristic aesthetic and distinctive storytelling. His books blend science fiction, visual art, YA narrative and memoir into hybrid works that resist traditional categorization. Each book combines sweeping landscape paintings with first-person narrative vignettes, often presented as memories or observations by young protagonists.

However, despite their unconventional form, these works warrant inclusion in discussions of crime literature for children and young adults. While this study employs "children's literature" in its title as a broad academic umbrella term, Stålenhag's narratives effectively operate within a crossover space. By blending picturebook aesthetics with mature thematic complexity, they engage a spectrum of implied readers ranging from middle-grade to young adult (YA) audiences. This fluid age categorization is particularly suited to the concept of environmental crime, which itself transgresses clear spatial and moral boundaries.

Thematically, these works consistently focus on young protagonists navigating systemic injustice and environmental destruction. While situated within the broader context of Nordic children's literature, which frequently explores the ecocritical entanglement between human subjects and their environments (Goga et al., 2018), Stålenhag's narratives push this relationship into a distinctly dystopian and criminalized register. The focus on systemic wrongdoing and accountability aligns these stories with crime literature's broader concerns, not only thematically in their engagement with responsibility, harm, and justice, but also structurally in the way wrongdoing is investigated, framed, and responded to within the narrative. Therefore, I argue that they should be included in scholarly conversations about crime in children's literature. Moreover, the dominance of youthful perspectives occurs in both text and image. This makes these works relevant for examining how contemporary narratives present children's relationships with wrongdoing and justice, even when presented through unconventional narrative formats.

Through examination of *Things from the Flood* (2016), *The Electric State* (2018), and *The Labyrinth* (2021), I will show how these visual narratives position children as passive witnesses: they can only observe and endure systemic harms which dwarf any single individual's agency. This passivity is framed critically, representing a clear departure from the active, problem-solving child protagonists typical of conventional crime narratives. This shift matters because it challenges the genre's usual assumption that young protagonists can ultimately restore order through their own initiative.

Things from the Flood (2016) is set in an alternate 1990s Sweden, continuing the narrative of Stålenhag's earlier work *Tales from the Loop* (2014). In this imagined world, a massive underground particle accelerator known as *the Loop* once filled the rural landscape with technological marvels. By the 1990s, the government has shut the project down, but the Loop begins to leak, flooding nearby towns with mysterious brown water. This contamination causes machines to malfunction grotesquely, scientists to suffer mental breakdowns, and former employees to exhibit symptoms of what is termed Loop Disorder. The young narrator and his friends navigate this transformed landscape where familiar suburban life intersects with technological disaster.

The Electric State (2018) shifts to a fictional United States in 1997. The protagonist, Michelle, is a teenage runaway traveling west across a ravaged America with her small robot companion. An unexplained drone war has devastated the nation, followed by mass distribution of VR headsets called Neurocasters that created an addiction epidemic. Michelle's journey takes her through desolate locations marked by crashed drone warships, wandering addicts, and collapsed social order. Her goal is to find her lost younger brother while navigating through this technological wasteland.

The Labyrinth (2021) presents a post-apocalyptic future where Earth's surface has been devastated by mysterious black globes. The narrative follows an expedition involving two scientists, Matt and Sigrid, and 13-year-old Charlie. Through Sigrid's narration, the story reveals that their underground society, Kungshall, was established through systematic violence against surface refugees. Charlie, raised within this environment, discovers the truth about his brother's murder and ultimately seeks revenge. In this case, Charlie transforms from apparent victim to active agent of revenge.

4. The child as witness to environmental crime

Across these three works, a clear pattern emerges in how Stålenhag positions children in relation to crime. In contrast to conventional patterns in children's crime fiction, where young characters often take active roles in resolving criminal situations (Veldhuizen, 2023, p. 166), Stålenhag's characters primarily exist as witnesses to what might be termed environmental crime. This represents pervasive harm with no clear beginning or end, diffused through landscapes and institutions. This is a significant departure from the conventional framework discussed earlier, where crime narratives typically involve identifiable perpetrators, traceable causes, and achievable resolutions.

In the following analysis, I identify four recurring strategies through which Stålenhag's visual narratives construct the child as a witness to environmental crime. These strategies include environmental crime and contaminated landscapes, cognitive vacuum and authority failure, the transformation from passive witness to active agent, and the visual encoding of powerlessness. Together they illustrate how his works conceptualize environmental crime as a pervasive and unresolvable condition shaping young people's lives.

4.1. Environmental crime and contaminated landscapes

In each narrative, the landscape itself becomes a contaminated crime scene where past transgressions seep into present reality in physical form.

The brown floodwaters in *Things from the Flood* represent more than environmental disaster. They embody the material consequences of governmental negligence and abandoned scientific responsibility. As the narrator observes: "I felt something ominous move inside me. Something had just changed in the world" (p. 16). This contamination creates what might be called criminalized living space where harm is omnipresent but its sources remain systematically obscured.

Similarly, *The Electric State* presents a landscape littered with evidence of societal self-destruction. For example, crashed drone warships larger than buildings lie abandoned across the countryside (pp. 31–32). Michelle's reflection that "there was no safe everyday life behind us, no normal zone to return to" (p. 101) captures the totality of environmental crime's reach. The crime scene encompasses the entire known world, making escape or restoration impossible.

The Labyrinth extends this concept to an even more extreme form, revealing how environmental crime can be literally foundational to society itself. Kungshall's underground civilization rests upon systematic genocide, as the adult character Sigrid acknowledges: "We swept through the zone like a giant search party hunting for trespassers" (p. 93). The surface wasteland serves as permanent testimony to these foundational crimes, while the underground society represents their ongoing institutional legacy.

4.2. Cognitive vacuum and authority failure

A crucial element of Stålenhag's reconfiguration of crime narratives lies in the systematic absence of explanatory authority. Traditional children's crime fiction depends upon what McGee (2010) describes as the acquisition of information and revelation of truth (pp. 46–48) to propel narrative progression and facilitate character development, yet Stålenhag's young protagonists find themselves trapped within cognitive vacuums. They can perceive threats and changes but cannot transform these perceptions into comprehensible knowledge or actionable understanding.

This cognitive limitation extends beyond individual capacity to systemic failure. In *Things from the Flood*, traditional authority structures including parents, schools, and police departments exist in a state of absence, unable to provide children with either explanation or protection. The text itself, presented as first-person memoir, refuses to supply information about the fundamental causes of disaster. Similarly, in *The Electric State*, Michelle encounters no functioning institutions capable of explaining or addressing the catastrophe that surrounds her.

The absence of explanatory authority serves a dual function in these narratives. First, it positions child characters as isolated passive witnesses and locks them in a cycle where their inability to comprehend prevents response, enabling environmental crimes to escalate, which makes understanding even more elusive. Second, it simultaneously critiques the adult institutions responsible for creating these criminalized landscapes. The failure of adults to protect or inform children contrasts with traditional crime fiction, where, as Löwe (2025) notes, adult authority figures often ultimately reassert their role in maintaining order and providing resolution, despite their limitations (p. 148).

4.3. From passive witness to active agent: The case of Boy Charlie

While *Things from the Flood* and *The Electric State* maintain their protagonists in primarily witness positions, *The Labyrinth* suggests a darker evolution of the witness paradigm established in Stålenhag's earlier works. Charlie's transformation from apparent victim to active agent of revenge represents this evolution.

Charlie's concealment of "the knife was taped to the inside of the tape recorder" throughout his time at Kungshall (p. 131) reveals that he had been planning his revenge for years. This discovery, made by Sigrid only after Matt's murder, suggests that environmental crime may possess a transformative power that produces more than just passive witnesses. His transformation raises the question of whether prolonged exposure to environmental crime might potentially reshape young subjects in fundamental ways, converting victims into new agents of violence.

Crucially, Charlie's revenge does not restore moral order or provide traditional narrative closure that definitively resolves the criminal process. As Sigrid reflects: "In a way we are even now. We took his brother and he took mine" (p. 122). Stålenhag's narrative design invites readers to consider whether environmental crime may potentially transform its youngest witnesses into new participants in cycles of violence, rather than simply offering moral justice through Charlie's actions.

4.4. Visual encoding of powerlessness

Stålenhag's visual compositions powerfully reinforce these concerns about environmental crime and passive witnessing through consistent imagery of small human figures dwarfed by towering wreckage and vast landscapes of destruction. His illustrations frequently depict children and teenagers at the margins of colossal tableaux of devastation. These figures sometimes appear unusually tiny on the page relative to the technological ruins that surround them. This visual strategy cultivates feelings of vulnerability and awe rather than excitement or triumph, positioning both readers and characters as observers trying to understand overwhelming circumstances.

In *Things from the Flood*, visual compositions consistently emphasize scale disparity between human habitation and technological infrastructure. Images show lone cars dwarfed by massive cooling towers in empty fields, and residential areas where mysterious objects possibly related to the Loop lie scattered beneath looming industrial structures (pp. 13–14). These compositions underscore how ordinary life continues in the shadow of incomprehensible technological remnants. The visual emphasis on scale reinforces inhabitants' powerlessness to comprehend or address the contamination surrounding them.

The Electric State employs similar visual rhetoric through recurring images of Michelle's lone car on empty highways with enormous derelict drones looming like mountains on the horizon (pp. 31-32, 95–97). These compositions highlight her insignificance relative to the remnants of societal collapse. This reinforces her position as a witness navigating through rather than actively engaging with the evidence of systemic crime.

Similarly, *The Labyrinth* frequently shows Charlie's silhouette in the confined spaces of Kungshall or against the vast desolation of the surface world, conveying a profound sense of diminishment whether in the underground enclosure or facing the empty wasteland. I suggest that the visual emphasis on enclosure and limitation reflects his trapped position within environmental crime that predates and encompasses his existence. Such imagery not only shapes the protagonist's experience but fundamentally alters the positioning of the young implied reader. In traditional children's detective fiction, the reader is often invited to participate in a cognitively stimulating "fair play" puzzle alongside the protagonist. In contrast, Stålenhag's visual and narrative strategies deliberately deny this active participation. By visually dwarfing the characters and withholding explanatory text, the narrative forces the implied reader into the same cognitive vacuum as the protagonist. Consequently, the young reader is no longer positioned as a co-investigator, but as a secondary witness, experiencing firsthand the profound disorientation inherent in systemic environmental crime.

Taken together, these four strategies demonstrate how Stålenhag reframes the role of the child in crime narratives by situating young characters within environments of pervasive harm that resist resolution. The contaminated landscapes, failures of authority, shifts from witness to agent, and visual encodings of powerlessness collectively construct environmental crime as an enduring condition rather than a solvable episode. This synthesis provides the foundation for considering the broader implications of environmental crime for the study of children's literature, as explored in the next section.

5. Environmental crime: Broader implications

My analysis of Stålenhag's three works reveals his bold reconfiguration of how crime operates within children's narratives. Beyond the specific textual examples, I wish to discuss whether what is termed "environmental crime" might possess broader potential for discussion and its significance for understanding children's crime literature.

As established in the earlier discussion, many children's crime novels operate through relatively fixed patterns. Within this framework, criminal acts function as discrete events with identifiable beginnings, clear perpetrators, and achievable solutions. The criminal disrupts order, child detectives or detective teams investigate, and justice restores balance. This pattern reflects a prevalent assumption in children's literature that crime is controllable, solvable, and ultimately manageable through individual agency.

In contrast, environmental crime in Stålenhag's works may exemplify a paradigm that reflects patterns observable in broader representations of environmental harm. It is not a discrete event but manifests as pervasive, ongoing conditions that permeate landscapes, institutions, and lived experience. It

lacks clear temporal boundaries, identifiable villains, or achievable solutions. Most importantly, environmental crime transforms the very environment in which subjects must develop and exist. As demonstrated through Stålenhag's works, this type of crime does not invite investigation or resolution but demands survival, adaptation, and witnessing.

I believe this paradigmatic distinction offers new perspectives for understanding children's relationships with crime. While environmental crime presents a relatively pessimistic vision of children placed within uncontrollable systemic harm, this narrative mode retains its unique depth of thought and expressive potential. It reminds us to attend to complex realities that traditional crime narratives overlook.

Building on this analysis, the following discussion considers the broader significance of environmental crime for children's literature from two interrelated perspectives. First, "Witnessing and Perpetuation" examines how the witness paradigm in Stålenhag's works complicates traditional notions of agency and resolution in children's crime narratives, and how it may lead to cycles of harm across generations. Second, "Contemporary Contexts and Critical Reach" situates the concept of environmental crime within present-day realities, exploring its resonance with children's lived experiences under systemic environmental and institutional crises. Together, these perspectives illuminate both the narrative and real-world stakes of integrating environmental crime into children's literature scholarship.

5.1. Witnessing and perpetuation

This theoretical framework necessitates expanding our understanding of children's crime fiction. Not only Stålenhag's works, but increasingly many children's texts suggest that contemporary narratives may be grappling with forms of transgression that cross traditional generic boundaries (see Serafini and Reid 2020; Shi 2019), which also encompass broader forms of wrongdoing and harm that exceed traditional generic categories. It may be necessary to reconsider how crime is defined within children's literature. Environmental destruction, technological overreach, and systemic institutional failure can become "crimes" not because they involve individual malicious acts, but because they cause harm to communities and future generations.

The concept of environmental crime, derived from Simon Stålenhag's works, aligns with scholars' discussions of crime forms in the Anthropocene era. Rob White (2011) argues that the multi-scalar, transnational nature of environmental harms means any characterization of environmental crime must exceed conventional definitions used by states, who are often perpetrators or complicit in perpetuating these harms (pp. 4–5). David Farrier (2017) further develops Deborah Bird Rose's concept of "Anthropocene noir," in which "there is no single body, culprit, scene or event which definitively identifies the 'crime' of the current extinction crisis" (p. 2). This concept reveals characteristics of Anthropocene crime: widespread harm that is delocalized in its causes, incalculable and potentially irredeemable in its effects, where the time and scene of crime cannot be limited to particular moments or locations.

Against this backdrop, children become witnesses to environmental crime. Their primary function is not solving mysteries but bearing witness to forms of harm that adults have created but cannot or will not resolve.

More importantly, Stålenhag's progression from passive witness to potential perpetrator in The Labyrinth suggests darker possibilities for environmental crime: whether it possesses self-perpetuating and reproductive qualities. Charlie's revenge raises profound questions: does prolonged exposure to environmental crime reshape young witnesses into new participants in violence? This transformation from victim to perpetrator reveals how environmental crime might transmit and perpetuate across generations.

The absence of traditional endings in these narratives reflects their deep alignment with ongoing environmental and institutional crises in the real world. Unlike classic detective fiction where criminals are caught and order restored, environmental crime cannot be resolved through single narratives. It continues beyond story endings, just as environmental crises persist in reality. I argue this refusal of solutions challenges children's literature to address ongoing, unresolved harm rather than containing it within neat narrative packages.

5.2. Contemporary contexts and critical reach

The concept of environmental crime resonates powerfully with contemporary children's lived experiences. One must acknowledge the sobering reality that today's children are growing up amid climate change, environmental pollution, and systemic institutional failures. Stålenhag's fictional disasters serve as extreme mappings of these real crises. For instance, children in Flint, Michigan experienced years of lead-contaminated drinking water beginning in 2014. Local government officials changed the water source to reduce costs, causing lead pipes to corrode and exposing thousands of children to toxic lead pollution. However, this environmental disaster mirrors the mysterious brown floods in *Things from the Flood*. There are no clear explanations, visible perpetrators, or immediate solutions. All lawsuits against accused officials ultimately ended without resolution. Even ten years later, investigative journalist Jordan Chariton's 2024 nonfiction work *We the Poisoned* continues tracing the sources of this crime:

> I found that what I was investigating was tormenting and damaging the lives of good people. [...] As one source put it, the Snyder administration had "committed conspiracies of ongoing crimes—like an organized crime unit."
>
> The children, parents, and grandparents who experienced unfathomable suffering through no fault of their own. I've met children whose entire life trajectories were altered due to being permanently damaged, physically and mentally. Once healthy and active, they've gotten sicker as the years go on.
>
> How do I tell a story that doesn't have a traditional beginning, middle, and end?
>
> (Chariton, 2024, pp. 12–13)

Through such real-world cases, it becomes evident that environmental crime has become a survival reality that contemporary children must confront directly. I believe the scope of children's crime literature may require further expansion. Can incorporating environmental disasters into the critical perspective of children's crime literature make it more relevant to contemporary children's actual circumstances? Can it expand the moral and political discussions within this field? These remain important questions worthy of future exploration.

It is also necessary to examine how contemporary works address childhood under conditions of systemic harm. How do narratives help young readers understand their position within larger systems of power and violence? What forms of resilience, adaptation, or resistance do they model? Such discussions might reexamine questions of agency and limitation in children's literature from the perspective of environmental crisis, providing new critical approaches for understanding contemporary childhood.

Regarding educational practice, introducing the concept of environmental crime aligns with contemporary educational scholars' focus on ecological literacy. As Campagnaro and Goga observe, contemporary children's literature should help young readers develop "eco-critical engagement," cultivating critical thinking about environmental issues through literary works (Campagnaro & Goga, 2022, p. 308). Works like Stålenhag's achieve this critical engagement precisely through visual narrative and first-person retrospective storytelling. These works do not offer simple environmental preaching but may invite readers to experience the genuine feelings of surviving within ecological crisis. This witness-based narrative mode can prompt readers to confront irreducible complexity, which in turn may foster more mature and realistic ecological awareness. When young readers recognize that environmental crises may not have fairy-tale perfect endings, they may develop more resilient and critical environmental ethics.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how Simon Stålenhag's visual narratives challenge conventional approaches to crime representation in children's literature. I propose "environmental crime" as a new critical framework for understanding contemporary children's texts that address systemic harm and environmental crisis.

Through close analysis of *Things from the Flood*, *The Electric State*, and *The Labyrinth*, I identify environmental crime as a paradigm that differs fundamentally from traditional crime narratives. Conventional patterns rely on discrete criminal acts with identifiable perpetrators and achievable solutions. Environmental crime, by contrast, manifests as pervasive, ongoing conditions that saturate landscapes and lived experience. This paradigm operates through dispersed agency that extends beyond individual actors, disrupted temporality without clear beginnings or endings, contaminated spaces that become permanent crime scenes, and repositioned child protagonists who transform from active agents to passive witnesses of systemic harm. This framework may reveal a broader transformation in how contemporary children's literature addresses problems that exceed individual solutions.

This study acknowledges significant limitations. The analysis relies on only three works by a single author. The cultural scope remains limited to Western contexts. I may have overlooked forms of resistance and resilience that these narratives enable. However, the concept of environmental crime still opens productive directions for children's literature scholarship. For children's crime literature studies, it suggests expanding analytical frameworks to address collective responsibility and systemic violence. For eco-critical children's literature studies, it encourages attention to environmental trauma and ecological grief rather than simply nature appreciation.

More importantly, this study proposes the concept of environmental crime as theoretical inspiration for future research in children's crime literature and children's eco-critical studies. This framework may help scholars reconsider the complex relationships between wrongdoing, childhood, and crisis in contemporary children's literature. The profound cultural resonance of this narrative paradigm is further evidenced by the successful international screen adaptations of these works, such as *Tales from the Loop* (2020) on Prime Video and *The Electric State* (2025) on Netflix, which have introduced his vision of systemic environmental breakdown to a global audience.

The urgency of this theoretical framework is underscored by ongoing real-world events. Even as this conclusion is being written, a kindergarten lead-poisoning incident in July 2025 in Tianshui, China, left more than 230 children with dangerously high blood lead levels after food was deliberately contaminated with industrial paint. Though it is harsh to acknowledge, it must be recognized that from Flint to Tianshui to countless other unexposed locations, environmental crime continues to infiltrate and shape children's lived experiences across global contexts. As reported, investigations revealed that institutions from the kindergarten to the education bureau to testing hospitals were "tacitly" covering up the incident, yet when it came to accountability, all responsible parties vanished (Gan & Rivers, 2025). When a mother states that "ordinary folks like us probably have no clue [...] knows what's really going on," she articulates the same cognitive vacuum that Stålenhag's narratives explore fictionally. These recurring patterns of institutional failure, systemic harm, and childhood vulnerability make the concept of environmental crime not merely an academic construct but a necessary lens for understanding contemporary childhood.

References

Abate, M. A. (2013). *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.21981

Altrows, A. (2016). Rape scripts and rape spaces: Constructions of female bodies in adolescent fiction. *International Research in Children's Literature*, *9*(1), 50–64. https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2016.0182

Campagnaro, M., & Goga, N. (2022). Material green entanglements: Research on student teachers' aesthetic and ecocritical engagement with picturebooks of their own choice. *International Research in Children's Literature*, *15*(3), 308–322. https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2022.0469

Caponegro, R. (2021). Portraying issues of incarceration and (in)justice for young readers. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, *46*(4), 351–356. https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2021.0045

Chariton, J. (2024). *We the Poisoned: Exposing the Flint Water Crisis Cover-Up and the Poisoning of 100,000 Americans*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Dickens, C. (2023). *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1838).

Farrier, D. (2017). Animal detectives and 'Anthropocene noir' in Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime*. *Textual Practice*, *32*(5), 875–893. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1275756

Gan, N., & Rivers, M. (2025, July 11). Over 200 children poisoned by lead in China as public mistrust grows. *CNN*. Retrieved November 19, 2025 from https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/11/china/lead-poisoning-china-public-mistrust-intl-hnk

Goga, N., Guanio-Uluru, L., Hallås, B. O., & Nyrnes, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90497-9

Halpern, N. (Creator). (2020). *Tales from the Loop* [TV series]. Amazon Studios.

Kästner, E. (1931). *Emil and the Detectives* (E. Delisle, Trans.). London: Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1929).

Löwe, C. (2025). Power! No doubt about it: Power structures in Swedish crime fiction for children. In S. Planka & C. Löwe (Eds.), *Cultural Perspectives on Sweets in Children's Literature and Media* (pp. 139–154). New York: Routledge.

McGee, C. (2010). The power of secrets: Backwards construction and the children's detective story. In M. Cadden (Ed.), *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature* (pp. 44–62). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Plieth, C. (2023). The unacknowledgement of rape? Female sexual perpetrators and boy victims in young adult fiction. In K. Karshner (Ed.), *Voices from the Wreckage: Young Adult Voices in the #MeToo Movement*. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press.

Reynolds, J., & Kiely, B. (2015). *All American Boys*. New York: Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books.

Russo, A., & Russo, J. (Directors). (2025). *The Electric State* [Film]. Netflix.

Serafini, F., & S. F. Reid. (2020). Crossing boundaries: Exploring metaleptic transgressions in contemporary picturebooks. *Children's Literature in Education*, *51*(2), 261–284. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-019-09382-9

Shi, X. (2019). Crossover literature: Transcending cognitive-affective boundaries—Exemplified with a close analysis of Anthony Browne's *The Big Baby*. *Language and Semiotic Studies*, *5*(2), 101–118. https://doi.org/10.1515/lass-2019-050205

Stålenhag, S. (2016). *Things from the Flood*. Culver City, CA: Design Studio Press.

Stålenhag, S. (2018). *The Electric State*. Los Angeles, CA: Skybound Books.

Stålenhag, S. (2021). *The Labyrinth*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Van Nahl, R. (2019). *Jugendkrimis im 21. Jahrhundert: Eine Typologie*. Baden-Baden: Tectum Verlag.

Veldhuizen, V. N. (2023). The curious case of children's detective fiction: Analysing the adaptation of the classic detective formula for a child audience. *Crime Fiction Studies*, *4*(2), 162–178. https://doi.org/10.3366/cfs.2023.0096

Veldhuizen, V. N. (2024). The detecting child TKKG and adapting fair play for young audiences. *Adaptation*, *17*(3), 349–364. https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apae009

White, R. (2011). *Transnational Environmental Risk: Towards an Eco-global Criminology*. London: Routledge.

Chang Hasheminezhad-Li – Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy)
chang.li@phd.unipd.it
Chang Hasheminezhad-Li is a PhD researcher at the University of Padova. His doctoral project develops a critical perspective on the conceptualisation of hope within picturebooks originating from European borderlands over the last decade. An Erasmus CLMC scholar and IYL fellow, he was awarded the Arqus grant for research concerning picturebooks and democratic narrative training.