

*The earth is old and we are not,
and that is all you must remember . . .*

—from *Willodeen*, by Katherine Applegate

Dear Reader,

What inspired my new middle grade book, *Willodeen*? A coyote who decided to stop by one night and mark our back porch. That's right. My inspiration was coyote pee.

A couple years ago, we moved to a house in Los Angeles, and we were quickly reminded that even in the most urban environments, wildlife can flourish—or at least try to. L.A. is home to many species, including bobcats, coyotes, hawks, rattlesnakes, wild parrots, bears, and the usual suspects: raccoons, deer, skunk, opossums, rats. I was delighted when I discovered so many coyotes in the neighborhood—that is, until I started hearing the near-daily reports of small pets snatched away by hungry coyotes.

When our backyard camera caught grainy video of our coyote visitor, we thought it was pretty cool. (A friend even told us it was a “blessing” bestowed on our new abode.) Still, we knew we'd have to make some compromises and we quickly created a safe, screened area for our two cats and appetizer-sized dog.

All of this started me thinking a lot about “backyard biodiversity,” environmental justice, and about our uneasy relationship to the natural world. Most vividly, of course, we see this playing out with the looming threat of climate change, an existential danger that we are only beginning to acknowledge.

And by “we,” I mean we adults. I've been endlessly heartened when I visit schools to see students hugely engaged on the issue of climate change. So many young activists, like Greta Thunberg, are reminding us that we need to act, and act quickly, to save our lovely planet.

Willodeen, the hero of my novel, is a bit like Greta: idealistic, courageous, an outsider. When Willodeen notices the disappearance of screechers, a much-maligned species, from her village, she starts to search for reasons. Screechers are my invented homage to coyotes. But there's another species that's important to this story: hummingbears. They're gentle animals who make bubble nests that glow all night, and migrate each year to blue willow trees in Willodeen's village. (I had in mind monarch migration when I created hummingbears.)

We're still navigating our coyote issues. There's a den with pups in the field right next to us. Sometimes we hear them yipping to the moon at night, and I'm reminded that, like the screechers and hummingbears in *Willodeen*, they are absolutely part of the fabric of nature, and the magic of the beautiful planet we call home.

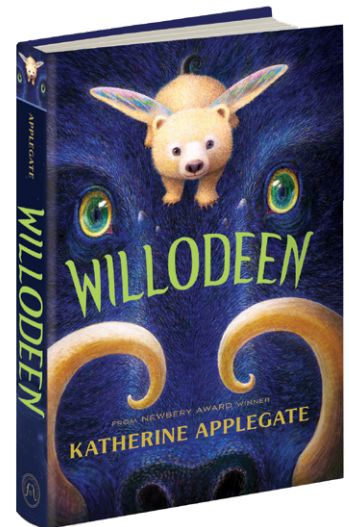
Katherine Applegate

Go Green with *Willodeen*

HOW TO BECOME AN ECO ACTIVIST IN THREE SIMPLE STEPS

Books are not the destination but the vehicle to the destination unknown, and Newbery Medal winner Katherine Applegate's *Willodeen* is an ideal example of a book that could lead readers to destinations they might not have anticipated. In the same way that her book *Crenshaw* motivated some readers to take action to address poverty and food shortages, it is likely that readers of *Willodeen* will become interested in ecological and biodiverse themes and the balances found in nature.

Applegate has woven a tale where one of the central themes is the relationships between nature and humans. While *Willodeen* bridges the fantastical world, it is also very grounded in reality with fires, predators, and complex relationships among humans and between humans and the natural world.



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READ AND DISCUSS WILLODEEN

Use these questions to guide reader engagement.

- Why do you believe that Willodeen is so invested in the well-being of screechers?
- What did she learn from her father that motivated her to want to protect screechers?
- We know what screechers look like, but what would be an ideal environment for a screecher?
- As you read the novel, what are your hypotheses about the relationship between the screechers and the hummingbears?
- Willodeen is a child of her environment and more comfortable and curious in the natural world than in school. What might she be able to learn outside of a school setting that will help her survive?
- After Willodeen and Connor make a discovery about the hummingbears, Willodeen asks Connor if they can wait a day or so to share their news because “I feel like there’s something I need to figure out. There are these pieces, and if I can only look long enough . . . I know it doesn’t make sense, I can’t explain it.” This is a wonderful way to address the idea that science and scientific discovery is not linear, and that as information is gathered, connections and relevancy may evolve. How do scientists know that they need more information?
- Willodeen follows her own path exploring the puzzles of the world around her. Connor created puzzles that he describes as ideas that need room to breathe. How can this approach help guide young scientists to explore, investigate, and connect to ways to sustain the natural world?

LEARN AND GROW

The middle-grade text is ideal for interdisciplinary science explorations. Here are a few ideas for readers to take action. In particular, Willodeen provides a wonderful gateway to teaching Next Generation Science Standard (NGSS) [Grade 3-Interdependent Relationships in Ecosystems: Environmental Impacts on Organisms](#).

- Are there any animals and plants that used to be native to where you live and are no longer native or are in danger of being eradicated?
- How have changes in climate impacted the natural world where you live?
- How have humans impacted the animals and plants where you live?
- Are there certain instances where, for example, a change to the vegetation in the area may have impacted animal life?
- How does habitat impact the success or failure of animals and plants?
- Citizen scientists are people who volunteer their time and energy to scientific research. What are your interests as a citizen scientist?

Resources for Continued Learning

Reference the digital Go Green with *Willodeen* kit to access links.

Biodiversity Resources

[Project Learning Tree](#)

[American Museum of Natural History](#)

[Plum Landing: Biodiversity](#)

[Plum Landing: Mission Diversity](#)

[Biodiversity Bingo](#)

[Species Diversity](#)

[TED Talks About Biodiversity](#)

[Science Journal for Kids and Teens](#)

Habitat Resources

[Skyenimals](#)

[Habitat Primary Resources](#)

Citizen Scientist Resources

[Citizen Scientist Projects](#)

TAKE ACTION AND SHARE

Many readers of *Willodeen* may be motivated to take action, much like Willodeen herself. This is a relevant way to integrate meaningful persuasive writing into the curriculum as per the [Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts](#), state standards, or district standards.

There are lots of ways to communicate your ideas, and writing a letter or postcard is an effective way to share your perspective. Use the *Willodeen* postcards or letterhead provided in your Go Green with *Willodeen* kit for sending messages related to biodiversity topics. Postcards provide a direct and effective way to communicate ideas. There is a limited amount of space on the postcard and letterhead, so consider writing a draft of what you want to say first and then editing it to be very clear. Ideally, your text should be between three and five sentences. You want to be persuasive and maybe a little bit personal. If you have a specific story to tell, tell it. Make an impassioned plea.

Dear Senator _____,

I am ten years old and I care about the planet. I live in a rural part of our state but worry about the impact of litter on the environment. I hope that you will support efforts to make recycling easier so that people will be inspired to take better care of the environment and I can have more time to care for the animals on my farm rather than picking up empty bottles and other litter that is left in the park and by the side of the road.

Thank you.

[YOUR NAME]

[DATE]

TIPS FOR WRITING A GREAT LETTER

Reference the digital Go Green with *Willodeen* kit to access links.

1. Identify a problem in nature. This may be related to the environment, vegetation, animals, or how humans impact the environment and the natural world.
2. Research the problem to gather factual information. Be sure to evaluate your sources of information. You may already have knowledge about the topic, but verify that your facts and information are up-to-date.
3. Identify an organization or a person that might be able to use your support to solve the problem. This may be an environmental company or a nonprofit organization, or it may be someone who works in science or is an elected representative, official, or civil servant at the local, state, federal, or international level. Be sure to note the information that you need to send them in a letter, postcard, or email, including their name, position, address, etc.
 - a. [UNICEF lists five things to know about biodiversity.](#)
 - b. A list of organizations with biodiversity missions is located on the [EnvironHeroes website](#).
 - c. To get involved with biodiversity issues, you may be interested in the Earth Rangers. Find information at the [Earth Rangers website](#).
 - d. To learn more about climate change, check out [Climate Kids](#).
4. Using the information you have found, write a draft of your ideas, thinking about how to persuade the recipient to consider your perspective.
 - a. Share your draft with friends and others who can help you revise your writing for clarity.
 - b. Revise and edit what you want to say. You may want to read it aloud to someone to get feedback and advice. And be sure to proofread the text as you want it to be clear, concise, personable, and persuasive.
 - c. Write your letter, postcard, or email. Then address it, date it, and sign it. If you are mailing it, add the correct postage.
5. You may want to write more than one letter, postcard, or email, and you may be able to send the same note to multiple people within an organization or to people in different organizations.
 - a. See if any of your friends, family members, or others want to join you in a writing campaign. Successful persuasion campaigns are about collective participation, so if you can host a writing party, that might be a great way to get the word out about a position or a cause.
 - b. You may want to send your letter or postcard to a local newspaper that could help you motivate others in your community to care about an issue.
6. Remember that you can send postcards either in the mail or virtually via email.



Thanks for sharing your love for *Willodeen* and being a biodiversity advocate. There are so many ways that you can make a difference and help sustain nature habitats and ecosystems where animals and vegetation thrive.

If you want to share how you took action after reading how Willodeen and Connor advocated for biodiversity, and specifically how screechers and hummingbears need each other in Perchance, use the hashtag #GoGreenwithWillodeen and tag us @MacKidsSL.

Susannah Richards is an associate professor of education at Eastern Connecticut State University where she teaches courses on literacy and literature for youth. She randomly [tweets about books and education @SussingOutBooks](#).

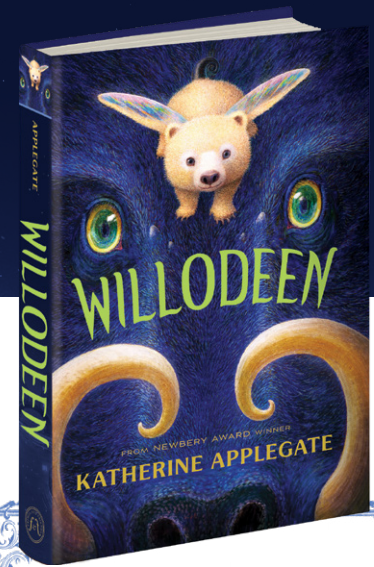




WILLODEEN

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. When Willodeen wonders why screechers howl shrilly at night, Pa responds by saying, "Nature, Willodeen, knows more than we do, and she probably always will." What do you think Pa meant?
2. In Chapter 5, Willodeen brings up how she is missing a clock in her head. What does she mean by this, and how has this influenced her relationships with people and nature? Are there times that you feel the same way?
3. The residents of Perchance are worried that there are fewer hummingbears each fall but hardly notice when the screechers disappear. Why do you think this is? Have you seen similar biases being applied to things in your life?
4. Willodeen tries her best not to think of her old home and her family, saying that "pain was best packed away" or "covered up." Do you think this is true? How do you think this affects Willodeen's relationship with Birdie and Mae?
5. Understanding and acceptance are central themes to the story. What roles do they play when it comes to the way the villagers view hummingbears and screechers? Discuss how their closed-mindedness influences the way they think of Willodeen, Mae and Birdie, and Connor.
6. When Willodeen cries after thinking of Sir Zurt's death on her birthday, Mae says, "There's great power in tears born of anger." How have you seen Willodeen's anger compel her to move forward throughout the story? Has there ever been a time when your anger propelled you into action?
7. Birdie and Mae say that being different is a useful thing, but Connor's father says being different makes life more difficult. Who do you think is right, or do you think both can be true? Discuss whether you think being different is a positive or negative trait and why.
8. How do you think fear has played a role in *Willodeen*? Do you think that fear of the unknown and of differences is a valid reason for the imbalance between the way the villagers treat hummingbears and screechers? Has there ever been a time that you found yourself prejudiced against something or someone because of a fear over differences or the unknown?
9. At the village council meeting, Willodeen compares the relationship between people and nature to knitting a sweater and that if you pull one string too hard, the whole thing starts unraveling. What does she mean by this? Discuss how the actions of humans have impacted the environment (biotic and abiotic) throughout history.
10. How has Willodeen changed from the start of the story to the end? How has her perspective on friendship and family changed? Consider how the fire acted as a catalyst for her character development.



ABOUT THE BOOK

*The earth is old
and we are not,
and that is all you
must remember . . .*

From #1 *New York Times* bestseller author Katherine Applegate, *Willodeen* is a timely and timeless tale about our fragile earth, and one girl's fierce determination to make a difference.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katherine Applegate is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wishtree*, *Crenshaw*, and *Home of the Brave*, all from Feiwel & Friends, as well *The One and Only Ivan*, winner of the Newbery Medal, and its sequel, *The One and Only Bob*. She lives in Southern California with her family.
katherineapplegate.com

