Amerah’s Garden:
An Ecocentric Approach to
Animated Storytelling Using Six Elements of
Hayao Miyazaki’s My Neighbor Totoro as a Model

by

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Abstract

Science and environmental journalist Andrew Revkin frames the climate crisis as a grand challenge. International and federal reports on climate change released in 2018 from the US Global Change Research Program, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and The Lancet warn that time is running out for our Earth’s ecosystem if we fail to cap the rise of global temperatures to within 1.5°C of pre-industrial levels. If we fail to meet this grand challenge, our children and grandchildren will experience the impact of the climate and ecological crisis in ways that we can’t possibly imagine. Children’s stories are one of the building blocks of our adult belief system. A well-crafted animated ecocentric fairy tale can reframe a child’s relationship with nature from anthropocentric to ecocentric. The Japanese master animator Hayao Miyazaki’s 1988 feature-length animation My Neighbor Totoro is internationally recognized for its powerful ecological message. I use My Neighbor Totoro as a model for an ecocentric fairy tale and identify six elements that I believe make it such an effective ecocentric fairy tale. I identify these elements and use them to create my own ecological fairy tale, Amerah’s Garden.

Keywords: animation, children’s stories, climate crisis, deep ecology, ecocentric fairy tale, ecological intelligence, Hayao Miyazaki, modern fairy tale, My Neighbor Totoro
Acknowledgments

The family at the center of the story of *Amerah’s Garden* is based on my neighbors, Patricia and Ricardo. Their young family and their vegetable garden were the inspiration for the characters and settings in the animatic. The little girls in my story, Amerah and Anyah, are loosely based on their daughters Efe and Elle Michelle. In earlier versions of the story, Patricia’s older sister Miriam played a central role. She and several other characters had to be written out in order to shorten the script.

I would like to thank TJ O’Donnell for encouraging me to create an animation for my thesis project, and Julie Simon for seeing my thesis through to the finish. I am grateful to the animator and educator Corrie Francis Parks for her recommendation to reduce the number of characters and shorten the story. This advice was a reality check and led to a complete rewrite of the story. My thanks to author Marion Winik, who reviewed the story through several iterations until it reached the final version.

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### Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................. i
Acknowledgments ...................................................................... ii
Table of Contents ....................................................................... iii
List of Figures .............................................................................. v

**Chapter 1 ................................................................................. 1**

Introduction ................................................................................ 2
Climate Change: A Grand Challenge .......................................... 2
The Power of Children’s Stories ................................................ 3
The Need to Change Our Cultural Mindset .............................. 4
Animation’s Potential ................................................................. 4
Japanese Artistic and Spiritual Traditions ................................. 5
Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* ................................. 7
Six Elements of a Modern Animated Ecocentric Fairy Tale ....... 9
  One: Celebrate nature’s beauty .............................................. 10
  Two: View of the earth from the sky .................................... 11
  Three: Establish a convincing sense of place using careful
        observation of the real world ...................................... 12
  Four: Linger on details of the natural world ......................... 12
  Five: Show communities (both human and non-human)
       that care for each other .............................................. 13
  Six: Tell a gentle story with compassion for all characters...... 14

**Chapter 2 ................................................................................. 16**

Amerah’s Garden ...................................................................... 17
The Story ..................................................................................... 17
Other Themes Addressed in Amerah’s Garden ....................... 18
  African American Characters .............................................. 18
  Suburban Setting ................................................................. 19
Six Elements of an Animated Ecocentric Fairy Tale in *Amerah’s Garden* ............. 19

| One: Celebrate nature’s beauty | 20 |
| Two: View of the earth from the sky | 21 |
| Three: Establish a convincing sense of place using careful observation of the real world | 22 |
| Four: Linger on details of the natural world | 23 |
| Five: Show communities (both human and non-human) that care for each other | 24 |
| Six: Tell a gentle story with compassion for all characters | 25 |

Conclusion ................................................................. 25

Endnotes for Thesis .......................................................... 27

Appendix ................................................................. 29

Appendix A: Process .......................................................... 30
Appendix B: Studio Set Up .................................................. 34
Appendix C: Story Outline .................................................. 36
Appendix D: Storyboards ................................................... 40
Appendix E: Color Palette .................................................. 48
Appendix F: Backgrounds ................................................... 50
Appendix G: Character Sheets ............................................. 54
Appendix H: Dolls, Maquettes, & Puppets ................................ 60
Appendix I: Sound Attributions ........................................... 64

Endnotes for Appendix .......................................................... 68

References ................................................................. 69
List of Figures

Figure 1  This example of a Ukiyo-e block print, *Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom at Arashiyama*, is from the series Famous Views of Kyoto by Utagawa Hiroshige. ........................................ 6

Figure 2  The Kusakabe family drives a truck piled with their belongings toward their new home. .................................................... 7

Figure 3  Satsuki, Mei, and Totoro wait at the bus stop. .................... 8

Figure 4  Totoro takes Mei and Satsuki on a flying trip across the fields near their home. .......................................................... 9

Figure 5  Satsuki looks out over the fields searching for her little sister Mei. 10

Figure 6  Satsuki runs along a country road as she searches for Mei. ........ 11

Figure 7  Mr. Kusakabe follows his daughters Mei and Satsuki as they run toward their home. ....................................................... 12

Figure 8  A toad walks through puddles in the rain. .......................... 12

Figure 9  Mei, Satsuki, Totoro and the little totoros perform a dance that makes the seedlings grow. ............................................. 13

Figure 10  Mei tickles Totoro’s nose. .............................................. 14

Figure 11  The crow flies over Amerah’s neighborhood. ..................... 20

Figure 12  A birds-eye view of Camilla, Amerah, and baby Anyah walking in the park. ............................................................ 21

Figure 13  Amerah and Camilla pushing baby Anyah in a stroller cross a neighborhood street. ............................................... 22

Figure 14  A rabbit hops out of its hiding place next to Amerah’s garden. 23

Figure 15  The sparrows Pip and Tuft invite Amerah and Russell to follow them. ................................................................. 24

Figure 16  The sparrows Pip and Tuft wake Casey the dog from her nap. 25
“It would seem awfully difficult to intentionally abuse nature while being held by its wonder. How can you do anything but care for nature, while astonished by its beauty, complexity, and interrelatedness?”

John A. Vucetich
Introduction

Modern animated fairy tales written with ecological intelligence have the potential to transform children's perspective of their role in the world from anthropocentric (humans are separate from nature) to ecocentric (recognizing humans are part of nature). If we assume that the premise above is valid, then animated stories that change children's view of their relationship with nature can be used to help address our looming ecological crisis.

In the pages that follow, I explain why I believe the feature-length animation My Neighbor Totoro, by Japanese master animator Hayao Miyazaki, can be used as a model for creating a modern ecocentric animated fairy tale. The Japanese artistic and spiritual traditions at the heart of the story of My Neighbor Totoro provide the fundamental ingredients for transforming our cultural mindset.

I identify six elements that I believe make My Neighbor Totoro a powerful ecocentric fairy tale and use these elements to create my own animated fairy tale, Amerah's Garden.

Climate Change: A Grand Challenge

The website Yale Climate Connections lists a dozen significant climate change reports that were published in 2018, including the US Global Change Research Program's Fourth National Climate Assessment, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C, and the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change.

Despite over 60 years of increasingly urgent warnings about the impact of human-caused carbon emissions on the planet, we haven't done enough to reverse the trajectory of an impending crisis. The IPCC report gives us a little over a decade to cap the rise of global temperatures to within 1.5°C of pre-industrial levels. This report and the others mentioned above portray a future of sea level rise; climate shifts that will bring unaccustomed drought to some regions and heavy rains to others; a severe decrease in geographic range for many insects, animals, and plants; and mass extinctions.

These scenarios are scary and overwhelming. The problems seem so huge that it's
easy to feel like there is very little that individuals can meaningfully do, and that the responsibility for addressing the climate crisis lies only in the hands of energy companies and governments. However, the American science and environmental journalist Andrew Revkin presents the climate crisis as a grand challenge with a role for everyone. He wrote the following in the July 2018 issue of the National Geographic:

*Climate change is unlike any environmental problem we’ve ever faced. We can’t “fix it”… with circumscribed regulations and treaties and limited technological changes… the climate crisis is really more of a grand challenge, like the wars on cancer or poverty, that people work on over a lifetime, even generations, with a mix of urgency and patience… Anyone with motivation and perseverance can make a difference — as a teacher or engineer, an artist or investor, or simply as an engaged planetary citizen.*

We may not be able to bring our planet back to the way it was before we tipped the balance on climate change, but I believe we can transform our attitudes and adapt, starting with the next generation.

**The Power of Children’s Stories**

Fairy tales, religious stories, and myths have been refined over centuries of retelling to pass on a culture’s values and expectations. In her book *Touch Magic*, children’s book author and scholar Janet Yolen discusses the four functions of children’s stories: introducing children to the world of imagination, inducting them into a coherent cultural mythology, providing them with tools to respond to reality, and exposing them to the “accumulated wisdom” of their society’s culture. She and others argue that children’s stories are not just flights of fancy; the stories we learn as children form part of our personal ideologies as adults.
The Need to Change Our Cultural Mindset

We need to connect what has been disconnected to address the climate crisis. I believe we need to change the kind of stories we tell ourselves and our children. For centuries, Western and predominantly Christian traditions have promoted the belief that human beings exist as separate from and superior to our environment and that it is our right, even our responsibility, to bend nature to our will. This belief system has driven us to invent miraculous things, from highways that cross continents to the International Space Station. But the fundamental flaw in this belief system is its underlying notion that there are no limits and no real consequences.

Animation’s Potential

“... Japanese animation, like other forms of Japanese art, has the potential to encourage direct experience of natural systems, and to open people up to the sense of wonder ...”

Aaran Stibbe

I believe the approach to narrative and representation of the environment found in Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki’s feature-length animation *My Neighbor Totoro* can be a model for storytelling that can cultivate an appreciation for the natural world in our children and provide an antidote for our anthropocentric traditions.

Ecocentric animated stories like *My Neighbor Totoro* can broaden children’s awareness of the natural environment by creating an immersive experience set in a world they can relate to.

I was delighted to discover that my thoughts about the potential of Miyazaki’s approach to nature in *My Neighbor Totoro* were shared by the British ecolinguist and educator Arran Stibbe.

In his book *Animals Erased*, Stibbe describes two different approaches to ecology, shallow environmentalism and deep ecology. He describes shallow environmentalism as
addressing the physical symptoms of our impact on the environment such as pollution and acid rain, while ignoring the cultural roots of our abuse of the planet. This approach allows us to maintain our rate of consumption by applying technical fixes to the environmental crisis while, at the same time, leaving the underlying values that cause and perpetuate the crisis untouched.\(^{10}\)

On the other hand, he describes \textit{deep ecology} as a nature-centric worldview that challenges the premise of human superiority over nature and gives equal weight to the needs of humans and to other living beings.\(^{11}\) He argues that traditional Japanese culture has core beliefs that are consistent with the ecocentric approach of deep ecology and believes that, \textit{“although it is necessary to be selective, aspects of traditional Japanese culture can be drawn on as a source of inspiration for ways of interacting more sustainably with natural systems.”}\(^{12}\)

**Japanese Artistic and Spiritual Traditions**

\begin{quote}
\textit{“Nature for the Japanese has not traditionally been an object of man’s investigation or of exploitation for human benefit, as it has been for Westerners. For the Japanese and for other Oriental peoples, man was considered a part of nature, and the art of living in harmony with nature was their wisdom of life...”}
\end{quote}

\textit{Masao Watanabe}\(^{13}\)

As Eric Reinder reminds us in his book \textit{The Moral Narratives of Hayao Miyazaki}, when \textit{“we see a certain detail in a film, it’s been put there intentionally — even more so in animated films than live action, because literally everything has been created from scratch.”}\(^{14}\)

In \textit{My Neighbor Totoro} and his other films, Miyazaki combines the Japanese contextual way of seeing (characters and their surroundings are of equal importance) with a reverence for nature inspired by the Shintō belief that sacred energy is manifest all around us.

In many of Miyazaki’s films, he shows us our world from the air. From a vantage point high above a scene, the people below become elements of the landscape. His use of this
high parallel perspective has both aesthetic and spiritual origins.

This bird’s-eye view was used by Japanese landscape painters and printmakers of the Ukiyo-e period (Figure 1). The Japanese religions of Buddhism, Zen, and Shintō foster a belief in the interconnectivity of things. Humans are perceived as “merely an element of nature.”  

Shintō, the ancient animistic religion indigenous to Japan, teaches that powerful divine spirits, called kami, inhabit all manner of things: our ancestors, living beings, forests, rocks, and rivers. Landscape painting takes on a sacred role when elements of the land itself are venerated.

Figure 1: This example of a Ukiyo-e block print, Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom at Arashiyama, is from the series Famous Views of Kyoto by Utagawa Hiroshige (1834). http://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc134799. Access date: 5 May 2019.

This reverence for nature led to the prominence of landscape painting in traditional Japanese culture. Ukiyo-e (translated as pictures of the floating world) was a woodblock print and painting style developed in Edo (now Tokyo) that flourished from the early 17th to late 19th century. Ukiyo-e genres included folk tales, travel scenes, landscapes, and natural phenomena. The Library of Congress explains the Ukiyo-e aesthetic approach to nature as follows: “Natural beauty was... expressed in microcosm through the detailed depiction of birds, plants, shells, and insects.” Two of the most widely recognized artists of the Ukiyo-e are Utagawa Hiroshige (Figure 1) and Katsushika Hokusai.

The detailed way nature is depicted in the Ukiyo-e landscape painting tradition has been carried forward into the newer mediums of film and animation in Japan.
Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro*

I saw *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) for the first time with my young daughter in 1995, soon after it was released on video in the United States. I thought I had rented a cartoon that would entertain us for a few hours and leave no lasting impression. I was unprepared for the impact the film had on me. As a landscape painter by training, I was enchanted by the film’s exquisitely rendered background paintings of the Japanese countryside (Figure 2). As a parent of a young girl, I was grateful that the film featured ordinary little girls as leading characters, whose only superpowers were curiosity and a willingness to experience enchantment. But what I found most striking was the way the film touched me on an emotional level, in a way similar to dreams or memory.

![Figure 2: The Kusakabe family drives a truck piled with their belongings toward their new home. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).](image)

The story takes place in a farming community on the outskirts of Tokyo sometime in the late 1950s. We meet the Kusakabe family as Mr. Kusakabe and his two daughters move to the countryside to be close to the hospital where Mrs. Kusakabe is recovering from an unidentified illness. There is a wooded hilltop just beyond the house with an ancient camphor tree rising like a protective umbrella from its center. The father, a university professor, takes care of his two girls with the help of an elderly neighbor they call “granny.” The two daughters, Mei and Satsuki, are four and eleven-years old. Satsuki soon goes to school, leaving Mei to explore the environs around the house and grounds by herself, while Mr. Kusakabi prepares for his classes in his study.
A spirit world of benevolent creatures inhabits the house and wooded hilltop nearby. Mei and Satsuki have yet to reach the age where they can no longer see these creatures. First Mei, and then later Satsuki, meet Totoro, a large round furry forest spirit who lives in the heart of the ancient camphor tree. Totoro is the keeper of the land surrounding his wooded home. One evening, Satsuki and Mei wait at the bus stop near the camphor tree for their father to return from work. It’s raining and they’ve brought along their father’s umbrella. Totoro joins them at the bus stop with only a single leaf to shield him from the rain. Satsuki offers their father’s umbrella to Totoro (Figure 3). He is intrigued with the new gadget and expresses his thanks for what he thinks is a gift (he is unfamiliar with the concept of borrowing things) by giving the girls a gift of nuts and seeds wrapped in a bamboo leaf. Totoro leaves before the girls’ father arrives, flying away on the Catbus, a magical twelve-legged furry bus with a smile like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*.

Satsuki and Mei plant the nuts and seeds and impatiently wait for them to grow. In a dream-like sequence, Totoro appears at dusk with two smaller totoros. The girls join them in a dance around the garden plot. With each gesture the sprouts break the earth and grow larger and larger producing a camphor tree that dwarfs the Kusakabe’s home. The huge tree may only be a dream shared by Totoro and the girls, since its presence fails to register with their dad who we see hard at work in his study. Totoro flies the girls to the top of the tree and across the fields (Figure 4). In the morning, the girls wake up to find that all of their plants have sprouted.
The girls’ final encounter with Totoro occurs when Mei is missing. The whole community searches for the little girl. Satsuki returns to the camphor tree and tearfully asks for Totoro’s help. He summons the Catbus, who knows exactly where Mei is. They find little Mei beside the road. She tried to walk to the hospital by herself after becoming afraid that her mother was dying. The Catbus takes the sisters to the branch of a tree right outside of their mother’s hospital window, where they can see that she is okay.

Six Elements of a Modern Animated Ecocentric Fairy Tale

“My Neighbor Totoro aims to be a happy and heartwarming film, a film that lets audiences go home with pleasant, glad feelings. Lovers will feel each other to be more precious, parents will fondly recall their childhoods, and children will start exploring thickets behind shrines and climbing trees to find totoro. This is the kind of film I want to make.”

Project Aim for My Neighbor Totoro: Hayao Miyazaki

I have chosen to use My Neighbor Totoro as a model for creating ecocentric animated fairy tales, including my own. As Miyazaki states in the quote above, his aim for this film was to create a mood of pleasant, glad feelings in people of all ages and to inspire children to explore nature. The film is still achieving this aim thirty years after its release.
In this section, I identify the combination of elements in Miyazaki’s film that I believe create its warm mood and love for the environment. These elements are ones that I believe can be used to create ecocentric children’s stories that take place in the present day.

**One: Celebrate nature’s beauty**

![Figure 5: Satsuki looks out over the fields searching for her little sister Mei. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).]

This first element can be found in *My Neighbor Totoro*’s expansive landscapes. Japanese aesthetics includes the concept called *yūgen*, which is difficult to translate into English. An approximation of the word’s meaning might be “wonder” or “awe.” *Yūgen* encapsulates the experience of contemplating nature, “an expansive feeling, a mystical awareness, an almost soaring reverence for existence that is summoned forth by a poignant confrontation with the ineffable details of reality.” \(^{20}\) An example of *yūgen* is watching the sunset from the top of a hill crowned with wildflowers, as Miyazaki has us do when Satsuki is looking for her sister Mei (Figure 5). This scene made an indelible impression on me the first time I saw it, as it panned from left to right across a beautiful watercolor of the Japanese countryside at sunset. The serenity of the landscape and the inevitability of nightfall contrasted starkly with Satsuki’s heightened concern for her missing sister.

The experience of watching a scene like this can become a memory nearly indistinguishable from a memory formed by a real place. It heightens a viewer’s connectivity with nature.
Two: View of the earth from the sky

Figure 6: Satsuki runs alone a country road as she searches for Mei. Scene from My Neighbor Totoro, Studio Ghibli (1988).

Miyazaki’s use of bird’s-eye view recalls the panoramic landscape paintings of the Ukiyo-e tradition (Figure 1), which established human beings as elements of a larger world by presenting people from a point of view that shows them in context with nature.

He uses this point of view in two ways in his films. One of his favorite things to do is have his characters fly, as the girls do during their nighttime adventure with Totoro (Figure 4). Scenes like this are exhilarating and freeing. As Miyazaki says in the documentary The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness, “When you look from above, so many things reveal themselves to you.”

He also uses the bird’s-eye view to show people within the landscape, as he does in the scene above of Satsuki running alone on a country road as she searches for her sister Mei (Figure 6).

When a person is viewed from the sky, their human form shrinks in relationship to the vast expanse of the land. From this vantage point there is no escaping how small we humans are. It puts us in our place, wedded and inseparable from the Earth, while also reassuring us in that we are joined with something beautiful and greater than ourselves.
Three: Establish a convincing sense of place using careful observation of the real world

Creating a believable place grounded in reality helps us buy into the world an animation has built for us, even if fantastical things happen in that place.

Details in each scene convince us of their reality. The peeling paint and moss-covered shingles of the Kusakabe’s aging country home seems both real and endearing. The Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* at work here. It is an aesthetic concept that finds beauty in the way things are transformed by time, such as patina on metal or, in this case, an old farmhouse that creaks in a windstorm but is still a home.

Four: Linger on details of the natural world

Figure 7: Mr. Kusakabe follows his daughters Mei and Satsuki as they run toward their home. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).

Figure 8: A toad walks through puddles in the rain. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).
There are scenes in *My Neighbor Totoro* where we see the world as though through a child’s eyes. It’s another device Miyazki uses to deepen our emotional connection with the story.

Miyazaki creates pauses that allow us to become momentarily absorbed, as little children often are, by small things. For example, when we momentarily follow a leaf swept along by a stream’s current or when we watch a toad walk through puddles in the rain during the children’s long wait at the bus stop (Figure 8).

The slower pace of these moments, rather than causing a break in the story, are some of the most poignant in the film. The change in pace stands in for a passage of time and exemplifies how the experience of time is not consistent. During these moments we are returned to the pure joy we felt as children the first time we noticed details like this in nature.

**Five: Show communities (both human and non-human) that care for each other**

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 9: Mei, Satsuki, Totoro and the little totoros perform a dance that makes the seedlings grow. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).

Ecocentric fairy tales should aim to encourage children to seek out connections in their own lives — to their families, to their neighbors, and to the wildlife, plants, and trees around them — in order to engender an expansive sense of community.

In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the girls are surrounded by love. The sisters love each other, they have loving parents, and they are accepted into two communities that support and
nurture them — their neighbors in the rural farming community and the spirit-creatures of the forest.

In the sequence above (Figure 9), the girls experience the world they live in, not in human time, but in the expansive time span of the tree their seedlings will become. They join Totoro and the smaller totoros in a dance around their garden as their plants emerge, entwine, and grow into a gigantic camphor tree. Perhaps this tree is the successor to Totoro’s home. From its highest branches, they fly with Totoro above the land, and see the land their tree will preside over decades into the future.

**Six: Tell a gentle story with compassion for all characters**

![Figure 10: Mei tickles Totoro’s nose. Scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*, Studio Ghibli (1988).](image)

In the scene above (Figure 10), Mei meets Totoro for the first time, and they form a bond. Totoro may be a gigantic forest spirit, but instead of defending his dwelling, he is both bewildered and charmed by the little girl who has literally dropped into his home.

There are moments like this in this film that could be scary, but they aren’t. None of the characters act out of malice or have ulterior motives.

The conflict in the story is situational rather than character-driven, with the main turning points set in motion by the mother’s illness. After all, the Kusakabe family has left the city to be near the hospital where she is convalescing. It is implied that country life will help her achieve a full recovery after she leaves the hospital. And this is confirmed when we see Mom at home with her girls in the film’s closing credits.
The climax of the film comes when the children learn that their mother is unable to come home for a much-anticipated visit, and they worry that she might be dying. Resolution is achieved when Mei and Satsuki, with the help of Totoro and the Catbus, are able to see for themselves that she is okay.

Without character-driven conflict, our attention is never taken away from the natural environment. The relationships between the characters and the film’s strong sense of community is never disrupted. This unbroken connection between characters provides the film with its balance and warmth.
Chapter 2

“Perhaps we have been speaking the wrong language, seeking a change of mind when really what we need is a change of heart.”

Charles Eisenstein 22
Amerah’s Garden

The University of Baltimore’s MFA degree in Integrated Design requires candidates to produce both a written thesis and a creative work in either web, video, or print. The medium I have chosen is animation. My creative work is an animatic (a moving sequence of storyboard images) for a five-minute-long hand-drawn animated film based on an original story, Amerah’s Garden. My purpose in creating the story and animatic was to provide an example of how the six elements outlined in Chapter One can be used to create new ecocentric fairy tales.

In this chapter, I introduce the story of Amerah’s Garden and outline how I used the six elements. Descriptions of the process for creating the animatic are contained in the Appendix (pages 29–67).

The Story

Amerah’s Garden is set in a contemporary suburban neighborhood, where a little girl, Amerah Allen, and her family are befriended by the wild creatures living in their neighborhood.

The story takes place in the month of May in the mid-2000s. In the opening sequence, seven-year-old Amerah plants lettuce seedlings in a small garden plot in the back yard of her family’s home. Her mother, Camilla, places a row of tomato cages in an adjacent plot. Anyah, Amerah’s baby sister, plays with her favorite toy on a blanket in the grass.

When her planting is finished, Amerah places a sign in her garden expressing her desire to share what’s growing there with the wild creatures who visit her back yard.

After Amerah, her mother, and baby sister go inside the house, the birds and animals emerge from the trees and underbrush to gather around the sign. Written on the sign are the words, “We share this garden with our animal neighbors.”

A short time later, Amerah and her mother emerge from the house with Anyah in a stroller. The animals fade back into the landscape but continue to watch over the family. Camilla, Amerah, and baby Anyah head toward a nearby park where the girls play on the
swings and feed the birds. On the way back, Anyah falls asleep. Her toy elephant slides out of her hands and drops to the sidewalk. Casey, a friendly dog who lives in a house beside the park, sees the toy fall and happily brings it into her yard to add to her growing collection of found objects.

On the walk home, Amerah’s dad, Russell Allen, waves hello from the family minivan. He’s returning from a trip to the grocery store. He gets home ahead of everyone else and is there to greet Camilla and the girls at the front door. It’s only when the baby wakes up that they discover that the elephant toy is missing. Russell and Amerah rush back to the park to look for it.

Meanwhile, the sparrows Pip and Tuft have seen Casey take the elephant. The sparrows, a crow, and squirrel devise a rescue mission to return the toy to the Allens.

The two sparrows distract Casey, giving the squirrel time to grab the toy and scramble up a tree to a branch where the crow is waiting. The crow flies the toy to Amerah’s back yard and places it on top of the sign. The family shows their gratitude by stringing the backyard fence with garlands of popcorn for the birds and animals to enjoy.

A description of story development for Amerah’s Garden and examples of the storyboards can be found in the Appendix: Appendix C: Story Outline (pages 36–39) and Appendix D: Storyboards (pages 40–47).

Other Themes Addressed in Amerah’s Garden

African American Characters

The human characters in Amerah’s Garden are African American. I wanted to address the lack of diversity in animation for children by creating a fairy tale that provides young Black girls with a story about little girls who look like them.

Children feel empowered when they can identify with the characters in an animation. This was my observation while teaching a course on the history of animation to Black undergraduate students at Maryland’s oldest HBCU (Historically Black College and University) in 2019. All of my students were either African American, mixed-race, or
from countries on the African continent. My students wrote about how pivotal their first experience seeing Black characters in an animation had been in their young lives. Seeing animated Black characters was the spark that led each of my students to learn the craft of animation and led to their desire to create new stories with diverse characters.

Suburban Setting

I live in a suburban community outside of Washington, DC. Amerah’s Garden is set in my neighborhood and the characters in the story are based on the family that lives across the street from me.

The story’s suburban setting goes beyond the convenience of my having easy access to the real people and places that inspired me. I wanted my story to celebrate the abundance of nature in the suburbs. The American Housing Survey reports that 50 percent of Americans identify the place where they live as suburban.23 Despite our being a nation of suburbs, it has been my observation that the suburbs are often overlooked as a setting for modern American children stories. I have watched hundreds of animated shorts and full-length animated films in preparation for teaching a course on the history of animation and I have yet to see an American animation that celebrates the abundance of nature in our suburbs.

A child doesn't have to travel to a zoo or national park to develop an appreciation of nature, their relationship with the natural world can start in their own back yard.

Six Elements of an Animated Ecocentric Fairy Tale in Amerah’s Garden

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I identified six elements from My Neighbor Totoro that I believe can be used by other storytellers to create new ecocentric fairy tales. In the section that follows, I take each element and explain how I used them in the animatic for Amerah’s Garden.
One: Celebrate nature’s beauty

The story begins as Amerah and her mother, Camilla, tend to their garden plots. The first sequence in the animatic focuses on the human characters and is set within the confines of the back yard of the Allen home. The following sequence shifts attention to the community of animals as they gather in the back yard after the family leaves. It begins with a crow soaring high above the Allen family home (Figure 11).

This aerial scene allows me to present Amerah’s suburban neighborhood as a place filled with its own kind of natural beauty, inhabited not only by humans, but by animals and plants. By creating this and other scenes from the vantage point of the birds, I am able to present the audience with a view of Amerah’s neighborhood they would be unable to see visiting on foot or by car. From the air I can show how nature is woven into the neighborhood’s fabric. Grassy lawns are dotted with leafy shrubs and large trees crowned with foliage rise above the rooftops. If greenery forms this suburb’s warp, then the neutral grays of its sidewalks and streets are its weft.

Amerah’s neighborhood is colorful. The houses show their individuality by alternating in color and shape, and details such as Amerah’s red back door create a splash of color that contrasts with the greens of the foliage, browns of the earth, and grays of the tree trunks and sidewalks.

The color palette for Amerah’s Garden can be found in Appendix E: Color Palette (pages 48–49).
Two: View of the earth from the sky

In the scene above (Figure 12) from the third sequence of the animatic, Camilla and her daughters are shown in the middle of the frame as they leave the park, while the dog Casey, in the lower right corner of the frame, watches the family from her yard. We are so high above the park that the family and the dog are tiny dots in comparison with the trees that rise over their heads.

By creating scenes of Amerah’s neighborhood from a bird’s-eye of view, I hope to encourage children to imagine what their own suburban neighborhood or network of city blocks would look like if they were to fly overhead. I would like them to imagine what it would be like to be a bird, or a squirrel, or a neighborhood dog, or any of the animals that coexist with them in their neighborhood. By encouraging children imagine their world from the air, I hope they will see themselves as part of the world around them and feel more connected to it.

From on high you can also see what is on the other side of a fence. I also used an aerial view for this scene to show that there was another character in the scene as the family was entering and leaving the park. Although they are unaware of her, Casey the dog has taken an interest in Anyah’s toy and is hopeful that the sleepy baby will let it fall to the sidewalk.
Three: Establish a convincing sense of place using careful observation of the real world

Figure 13: Amerah and Camilla, pushing baby Anyah in a stroller cross a neighborhood street. Screenshot from the animatic for Amerah’s Garden.

This is a modern fairy tale, that takes place in a neighborhood similar to those where many American children grow up. I wanted the neighborhood to feel genuine and familiar, so that children will have further reason to identify with Amerah and her family.

In order to establish authenticity and create a sense of time and place, I included details like street signs, placement of doors and windows, sidewalks, and cars and trucks that I observed in a real place. That place is my own neighborhood, the Somerset section in the city of Bowie, Maryland. The scene above (Figure 13) shows Amerah, her mother Camilla, and her baby sister Anyah crossing a street called Starlight Lane.

I took hundreds of photographs over several summers and used them to create over 50 background drawings for the animatic. Quite a few backgrounds, such as this one of Starlight Lane, are as faithful as I could make them to the actual place.

Examples of background drawings and photographs of their real-life counterparts are shown side-by-side in Appendix F: Backgrounds (pages 50–53). Character drawings and examples of the dolls, maquettes, and puppets used for the creation of Amerah’s Garden’s characters can be found in these Appendix sections: Appendix G: Character Sheets (pages 54–59) and Appendix H: Dolls, Maquettes, & Puppets (pages 60–63).
Four: Linger on details of the natural world

The animatic includes scenes where I provide the audience with the opportunity to share a moment in time with a single character. These moments allow the audience to focus on that character’s action and consider a new perspective.

The second sequence of the animatic starts with a series of short scenes that follow the animals coming out of their hiding places after Amerah, her mother, and baby sister go inside the house. A crow has been perched in a tree high above the house, two sparrows have been watching the gardeners from the backyard fence, two squirrels have been sitting in the branches of the young apple tree next to Amerah’s garden, and the rabbit lives in the ground cover at the base of the tree. In the scene above (Figure 14), the foliage rustles, the rabbit’s nose appears, then its head and ears, and finally its body as it hops out to join the others gathered around the sign.

Up until then, the focus of the previous sequence had been on the humans with Amerah and her mother as they worked in the garden and baby Anyah as she played with her toy elephant. But in this sequence, I encourage the audience to see that the humans have never been alone, the animals were there all along.
Five: Show communities (both human and non-human) that care for each other

There are two communities in *Amerah's Garden*, the Allen family, and the wild animals that live in and visit the Allen family’s back yard. I had many opportunities to show how much the members of the Allen family love and care for each other. For example, in the first sequence, Amerah runs to pick up Anyah’s toy elephant when she drops it.

Over the course of the story, each family extends its circle of love to include and care for the other. Amerah plants a garden to share with her animal neighbors. Pip and Tuft watch over their human neighbors on their walks through the neighborhood. But until the elephant toy is lost, these two families don’t interact directly.

In the park when Amerah thinks the elephant is lost forever, she breaks down in tears. She doesn’t know that the animals have rescued the toy. Yet. The sparrows want Amerah to be happy again. In the scene above (Figure 15), Pip and Tuft fly close to get Amerah and her father’s attention and lead them to the back yard where the elephant has been placed atop Amerah’s sign.

In the final frames, I present the possibility that these gestures of friendship will continue and evolve. The Allen family shows gratitude for the elephant’s return by hanging popcorn strands along the fence. In the last frame, the rabbit sits in Amerah’s garden eating lettuce.
Six: Tell a gentle story with compassion for all characters

There is no clash between characters to disrupt the sense of love and community in my story. There are no villains in my story, just good-natured, likeable characters. Even the dog, Casey, who I could have portrayed as a “bad guy,” does not possess malice for the other characters. She lives near the park and collects objects that people drop as they pass by. She is joyful in her obsession. At the turning point in the story, when baby Anyah drops her beloved toy elephant, Casey picks it up. It never occurs to her that she might be stealing. She loves and is proud of her abandoned objects, including the elephant toy. When the birds and squirrel come to rescue the toy, she enjoys their visit, and is delighted to join them in a game of chase (Figure 16).

Conclusion

There is an abundance of animated stories for children being spun by the big animation studios that take place in fantasy worlds. There are plenty of children's characters that are superheroes or have magical powers. But where are the animated stories about real children who live in apartment buildings in the city, or in houses in the suburbs, or in trailer parks, or in rural towns? It is rare to find animated children's stories that are set in the present day with characters modeled on the lives of real children. I believe this is hole
in our storytelling “warehouse” that needs to be filled.

In this thesis I maintain that stories that reconnect children with nature in a nuanced way should be part of our arsenal for addressing the climate crisis. I put the idea out there that we can reinvent the fairy tale for this new uncertain era. My idea is that the humble fairy tales can tackle one of the biggest problems we face as a society, changing our cultural mindset toward nature.

Although I have tried my hand at creating an ecocentric fairy tale, the main goal of this thesis has been to examine My Neighbor Totoro, which I consider to be one of the best ecocentric children’s stories ever told, in order to find its universal elements and share them with the hope that our “warehouse” of stories will fill up with ecocentric fairy tales.
Endnotes for Thesis


7 Revkin, Andrew. “Climate Change First Became News 30 Years Ago. Why Haven't We Fixed it?” National Geographic, vol. 234, no. 1, July 2018. (p 17)


11 Stibbe, Arran. Animals Erased. (p. 131)

12 Stibbe, Arran. Animals Erased. (p. 137)


Appendix
Appendix A: Process

The process I describe below is not typical of how most hand-drawn animations are made. It was what worked for me. Given the demands of my full-time job, I fit creating the animatic for *Amerah’s Garden* around my job. Time to work on the animatic was broken up into short chunks — drawing in the early mornings before work and on weekends.

**Digital 2-D Animation**

Traditional mid-twentieth-century 2D animation was hand drawn on individual sheets of paper that were then transferred to transparent acetate cells, hand colored, and photographed for insertion into a film. This is the process that Studio Ghibli used to create *My Neighbor Totoro*.

The animatic for *Amerah’s Garden* was hand-drawn using digital tools. Instead of pencil on paper, I used digital pens and tablets to draw the keyframes and backgrounds, which were then imported into the animation program TVPaint.

**Why I Chose to Create an Animatic**

I chose to create an animatic because I realized it would take me as long as eight to ten years working as a solo animator to complete a five-minute-long fully-animated film. Even then, the animatic for *Amerah’s Garden* has been five-years in the making.

Animation is a time- and labor-intensive craft. At 24 frames per second, a minute of animation consists of approximately 1,440 frames. A five-minute-long animation — the length of *Amerah’s Garden* — has over 7,000 frames. The number of drawings required for a hand-drawn animation is exponentially higher than its frame count. A single frame is made up of drawings for every character, prop, and background in the shot. In addition to the drawings that make it into the film, there are countless other preliminary drawings during character and background development and storyboarding, as well revisions while animating.

Animation tricks the human eye into converting a series of static drawings set in motion into the illusion of movement. The fluid movement of an animated film is created
by placing a drawing in each frame (on ones) or in every other frame (on twos). The greater the distance between these drawings (on threes, on fours, etc.) the choppier the motion becomes until the illusion of movement disappears and you have what looks more like a slideshow than an animation.

This slideshow is what you have with an animatic. It provides a gist of what the finished film will look like. Keyframes are placed along the story track at widely-spaced intervals that are timed to the expected length of the final film. An animatic allows for the order, sequencing, and timing of the animation to be adjusted and confirmed before the meticulous and lengthy task of drawing inbetweens begins.

Keyframe drawings for *Amerah’s Garden* were placed into TVPaint between six to twelve frames apart. The exception is the initial 40 second sequence at the beginning of the film. This part of the film was fully animated, on twos, to satisfying requirements set out for this project by the director of the Integrated Design MFA program.

**Story Development**

It is one thing to invent a story and quite another to tell it in a medium as visual as animation. Early on, I attended a one-day screenwriting workshop presented at Morgan State University by David Warfield. In the workshop, I learned how to break my story down into beats and create a story structure by following a narrative arc.

In order to understand animated storytelling, I watched a number of Studio Ghibli’s full-length animations, returning repeatedly to three: *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, and *Ponyo*. In order to learn how to construct a shorter story, I repeatedly watch Pixar’s animated short *Feast* and *The Bear and the Hare*, the John Lewis department store’s 2013 Christmas promotional short.

The story for *Amerah’s Garden* went through several rewrites to get to its present form. When I started, I had only the concept of a little girl who develops a special relationship with a magical animal in her neighborhood. But as I learned in Warfield’s screenwriting workshop, my concept lacked a narrative arc. In my first attempt at developing the concept into a story, it became overblown. It was nearly 15 minutes long with a large cast of characters, complex scenes taking place both inside and outside of the Allen family home,
and dialog. Narrowing the focus to the rescue of the toy elephant provided the story with tension and a turning point. It also made it possible to remove two main characters and several secondary characters.

Although it shortened the film, removing characters created gaps in the story. I used the lessons from Warfield’s workshop to break the story into beats. Next, I arranged the beats into an outline of acts, sequences, and clips. As the structure began to come together, I realized that the whole story could take place entirely outdoors. Any indoor scenes were eliminated or re-imagined outside.

A third rewrite became necessary as I transitioned from writing the outline to storyboarding (see Appendix C: Story Outline, page 36–39).

**Storyboarding**

I relied heavily on the examples of comprehensive production schedules in Catherine Widner and Zahra Dowlatabadi’s book *Producing Animation* to understand how to break down the animation process into its component parts.⁷

Widner and Dowlatabadi’s book describes a three-step storyboarding system consisting of thumbnails, a rough pass, and clean-up. I ran through these steps several times, tightening and refining the storyboard with each pass (see Appendix D: Storyboards, page 40 – 47).

As I moved from writing to drawing, I was presented with an unanticipated challenge. I was unable to start storyboarding at the first frame. After several failed attempts, I found it was easier to work on the parts of the story I could visualize the best. The first frames I completed were from a sequence in the middle of the story, where the animals rescue Anyah’s toy elephant from Casey the dog.

The process of drawing also revealed weaknesses in the story. I discovered that I needed to introduce essential elements earlier. For example, the importance of baby Anyah losing her favorite toy in the middle of the story only made sense if I established how much the toy meant to her in an earlier scene. I therefore had to add Anyah dropping her toy in the first act. The scene in the park where Amerah feeds the birds is another example of the need to add an essential element earlier in the story. I realized that the sparrows had
to be with the family in the park so that they could see baby Anyah drop her toy in the next scene and instigate its rescue.

The pair of sparrows, Pip and Tuft, were added throughout the story as a way to tie one scene to the next. The sparrows and the crow also provided opportunities to use birds-eye view (Element Two: A view of earth from the sky, page 21).

**Motion**

For the reasons I have explained at the end of the section “Why I Chose to Create an Animatic,” the first 40 seconds of the animatic for *Amerah’s Garden* has been fully animated. The keyframes and inbetweens were placed on ones and twos to create the illusion of movement. The example shown below is a preparatory sequence for the clip where Amerah plants lettuce seedlings in her garden plot.
Appendix B: Studio Set Up

Hardware

The only way I could afford to set up a home animation studio was to spread out the cost over several years. I assembled the hardware and software for concepting, storyboarding, and animating over a three-year period. Payments continued into a fourth year.

The first year, I purchased a MacPro computer, Wacom Tablet, and stand. The following year I purchased two RAIDs: one to process the animation and supporting drawings and to store the multiple iterations of the animation, and the other for on-site backup. At the recommendation of the then-director of the Integrated Design MFA program, I also purchased offsite back-up. The redundant backups proved their worth when my computer’s logic board and graphics cards failed in the winter of 2016. The failures caused a brief pause in the project while my computer was in the shop, but no work was lost.

In January 2016, I made the final purchase of a first-generation iPad Pro and an Apple Pencil, which were used exclusively for drawing storyboards.

Drawing Software

Drawings for Amerah’s Garden were created on an Apple iPad Pro and a 27-inch Wacom Cintiq. I used the smaller iPad Pro for drawing the storyboards. The portability of the tablet made storyboarding very organic. I could draw curled up on my couch or sitting outside on the patio. This freedom of movement gave me greater access to my imagination, which I needed for storyboarding. Whenever I worked on the Cintiq, I felt as though I was tethered to my desk. One the other hand, I found the Cintiq’s surface was best suited for drawing large backgrounds, character sheets, and key frames.

The storyboards were drawn with the Procreate application on the iPad Pro. I loved the gestural controls, but the drawings were too low-resolution to be used in the animation. The characters, props, and backgrounds were created in higher resolution using the Adobe software program Photoshop.
Animation Software

I chose to use the French 2-D animation software TVPaint to create the animatic because of its compatibility with Photoshop.

Video Production Software

I originally tried to use the camera and sound tools in TVPaint, but I found the controls clumsy and tool small for me to use effectively. After some experimentation, I developed a process that allowed me to stitch the clips together outside of TVPaint. I exported each clip out of TVPaint as .mov files. The clips were color corrected in Adobe After Effects, where I also added virtual 3D cameras to zoom, pan, and tilt within each clip. After Effects was also a convenient way to create the opening title and closing credits for the film. The processed clips were then exported out of After Effect for their final destination in Adobe Premiere, where I added the sound bed.
Appendix C: Story Outline

LENGTH: 5 minutes (including credits)
PREMISE: Amerah plants a garden for the neighborhood wildlife and the animals return the favor by rescuing a lost toy.
THEMES: In this story, the world of humans and the world of suburban wildlife are connected through sharing and good deeds.
TONE: Heart-warming
SETTINGS: The story takes place entirely outside. Most scenes are in the back yard of the Allen family’s home.
MAIN CHARACTERS (9): Amerah Allen (six-year-old), Camilla Allen (Mom), Anyah Allen (baby), Russell Allen (Dad), two sparrows (Pip and Tuft), a dog (Casey), a squirrel, and a crow.

ACT 1

Sequence 1: Two gardens

We see Amerah’s hands patting the earth around a young plant. Behind her, we see her mother, Camilla, positioning tomato cages. On a blanket in the grass nearby, Amerah’s baby sister Anyah plays with her red stuffed elephant toy.

The garden that Camilla is planting is for the family. But the one belonging to Amerah is planted to share with the wild animals. Amerah places a hand-lettered sign in front of the plot for the wild animals, “We Share our Garden with the Neighborhood Animals.” She steps back to admire her work.

Sequence 2: The animals

Amerah, her mother, and the baby go inside the house. Several animals gather in front of Amerah’s garden. The two sparrows, Pip and Tuft, land on the sign, while the crow, two squirrels, and two rabbits gather around the sign.

The door opens. The rabbit scurries off. The sparrows take to the air and the other animals fade back into the landscape.
Sequence 3: The park

Camilla and Amerah emerge from the house with baby Anyah in a stroller. The baby waves her stuffed elephant happily. Amerah skips ahead, leading the way to the park.

Camilla and Amerah cross an intersection and then follow a path into the park. As they pass a house, Casey, a very acquisitive neighborhood dog, watches the procession from a gap in the fence.

Once in the park, Camilla pushes the girls on the swing set. A little later, sitting on a park bench, Camilla and Amerah share scraps from their sandwiches with the sparrows.

They head back home pushing Anyah in the stroller. Casey watches through the fence and wags her tail. The baby girl starts to doze off and her grip loosens on her favorite toy.

ACT 2

Sequence 4: Dropped

The toy slips unnoticed from Anyah’s hand. The toy elephant lies on the sidewalk as the stroller fades into the distance.

The dad, Russell, approaches traveling in the same direction driving the family’s minivan. He waves to get their attention. Amerah and Camilla wave back. Baby Anyah is fast asleep. Russell continues toward home, as do mom and the girls.

Sequence 5: Casey’s collection

The sparrows land on the sidewalk where Anyah dropped her toy. They try to pick up the elephant but it’s too heavy.

Casey squeezes through the fence. She snuffles the toy elephant, happily picks it up, and trots off with her prize.

The sparrows follow the dog as she goes back to her yard. The sparrows fly off to get help.
Sequence 6: The plan

We follow the sparrows as they fly across the neighborhood. They land in the Allen family’s backyard. The sparrows excitedly gesture, and the animals gather around. The crow, squirrel, and the sparrows come up with a plan to rescue the toy elephant.

As the sparrows take to the air, we see Anyah and her mother walking home pushing Anyah’s stroller and Russell unloading groceries from the minivan.

ACT 3

Sequence 7: The rescue

The dog is lying contentedly on the back-porch step in her backyard with the toy elephant between her paws. On the step below we see other objects that Casey has collected: sunglasses, car keys, a cellphone case, and a baseball cap.

The two sparrows distract Casey while the squirrel carries the toy elephant to the top of a tree where the crow is waiting. The crow picks up the toy and flies off.

Sequence 8: Lost

Camilla and Amerah arrive back at the house with Anyah sleeping in the stroller. Dad greets them at the front door.

As Camilla lifts Anyah from the stroller, the baby begins to cry. Amerah realizes what’s wrong. She points to the empty stroller where the elephant should be. Dad and Amerah run back to the park.

Amerah and her dad search the park but can’t find the elephant. Amerah is upset that she can’t find her sister’s toy and begins to cry. Her dad gives her a comforting hug, they walk home hand-in-hand.

Sequence 9: Found

We see Amerah and her dad from the perspective of the sparrows. Amerah notices the sparrows. Pip and Tuft lead Amerah and her dad into the backyard of the Allen home. The
elephant toy is balanced on top of the sign. Anyah smiles and picks up the elephant. Dad places a hand on her shoulder. The camera zooms in on the sign’s message.

Credits
- Camilla shows the girls how to string popcorn garland
- The family places the garland of popcorn on the backyard fence
- The crow, squirrel, and sparrows help themselves to the popcorn
- The rabbit helps herself to lettuce from Amerah’s garden
Appendix D: Storyboards

ACT 1: Two Gardens (Sequence 1)

Page 1

Page 2

ACT 1: Two Gardens (Sequence 1)
## Appendix E: Color Palette

### Drawing

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</table>
Appendix F: Backgrounds

For authenticity (Element Three: Establish a convincing sense of place using careful observation of the real world, page 22), the places depicted in my story are based on actual places in my own neighborhood in Bowie, Maryland. I used Google Maps to get an idea of what my neighborhood looked like from the air. For other settings, I took photos of my neighborhood. Some backgrounds are partially imagined, but most are fairly faithful to the photographs.
Juniper Lane
The Neighborhood
The Park
Appendix G: Character Sheets

Amerah Allen

Six and a half years old, she is the oldest of the two Allen family children. She is bright, curious, and loves tending her garden plot.
Camilla Allen

Camilla is thirty-nine years old. She was born in Trinidad and Tobago and still has an island accent. She met her husband, Russell Allen, in graduate school. She works in the city. She’s fond of gardening and vegetarian cooking.
Anyah Allen

Anyah is the youngest child in the Allen family. She is a bubbly, happy baby. She is under a year old and isn't walking yet. She is inseparable from her favorite toy, a red stuffed elephant.
Russell Allen

Russell Allen is forty-one years old. He met his wife in graduate school in Chicago. He’s a Vice Principal at Amerah’s elementary school. His experience working with grade-school children has given him patience and empathy with his own children.
Pip & Tuft

Pip and Tuft are male and female house sparrows. They keep watch over the neighborhood and have taken special interest in the Allen family.
Other Characters

**Squirrel:** An Eastern Gray Squirrel who lives in the Allen’s neighborhood

**Elephant:** A plush toy made of red terry cloth that belongs to Anyah

**Casey:** An acquisitive Jack Russell Terrier whose home is next to the park

**Crow:** An American Crow who lives at the top of the tallest tree in the Allen’s yard

**Rabbit:** An Eastern Cottontail Rabbit who lives under a tree in the Allen’s back yard
Appendix H: Dolls, Maquettes, & Puppets

I used several strategies for figuring out how to draw each character’s movements. My first approach was to act out the character’s movements in front of a mirror. But there were times where I couldn’t stand in for a character, such as scenes with bird’s-eye views.

The stroller, which appears in many scenes, was a challenge to draw from any angle. I considered buying a full-sized umbrella stroller, until it occurred to me to look for toy strollers. Lundby, the Swedish dollhouse maker, sells a 1:18 scale miniature stroller. I looked for a dark-skinned doll family to go with the little stroller, but the company currently only offers Caucasian dolls at that scale. I purchased a 1:18 scale Caucasian mother, father, and baby. When I couldn’t find a 1:18 scale six-year old girl, I found a slightly larger 1:12 scale African-American toddler from the American toy makers Melissa & Doug. Although the head is a little too big, the height of the doll works well with the rest of the family. I used the miniatures for reference when drawing characters from above (see page 61).

I made maquettes, small three-dimensional models, of each character’s head as a reference for how each character looked from different angles (see page 62).

Puppets, drawn in Photoshop, were an assemblage of basic geometric shapes for a character’s head, body, arms, and legs that could be rearranged to mimic the character’s movements. Using the puppets helped maintain a consistent size relationship for each character’s body parts as well as establishing consistent size relationships between the characters (see page 63).
Dolls
Maquettes
Puppets
Appendix I: Sound Attributions

Ambient Sounds


“Footsteps on Grass.” Recorded by Morgan Gilpatrick. 16 September 2016.


Dialogue

CELESTE FOR THE VOICE OF ANYAH ALLEN (BABY)


NAOMI GABRIEL FOR THE VOICE OF AMERAH ALLEN (YOUNG GIRL)


“We're Coming.” Recorded by Jeremy Gabriel and Erica Gabriel. 2 November 2020.

**PATRICIA HUDSON-HENRY FOR THE VOICE OF CAMILLA ALLEN (MOTHER)**


**RICHARDO HUDSON-HENRY FOR THE VOICE OF RUSSELL ALLEN (FATHER)**


**Music**


Endnotes for Appendix


3 Walt Disney Home Entertainment presents a Studio Ghibli film, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. *Kiki’s Delivery Service*. Burbank, California: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, Distributed by Buena Vista Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

4 Walt Disney Home Entertainment presents a Studio Ghibli film, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. *Ponyo*. Burbank, California: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, Distributed by Buena Vista Entertainment, 2010. DVD.


References


