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## Narrative Constructions of Waste, Cleanliness, and Social Order: A Comparative Study of Select Children's Picture Books

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**Abstract:** Children's literature on environmental awareness plays a vital role in shaping young readers' perceptions of waste, cleanliness, and ecological responsibility. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the works *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle* and *The Adventures of an Aluminum Can* by Alison Inches alongside *Michael Recycle* and *Litterbug Doug* by Ellie Bethel, focusing on how they construct contrasting environmental narratives. While the former texts celebrate recycling through object animation and life-cycle storytelling, the latter enforce moral binaries by portraying waste as socially deviant and cleanliness as a virtue imposed through heroic figures. Drawing on theoretical insights from Waste Studies and Thing Theory, the study examines how emotional value is assigned to waste objects or, conversely, how these objects are marginalized within a throwaway culture. Grounded in critical and semiotic approaches, the analysis reveals that although both approaches aim to foster ecological awareness, they convey different cultural values: one celebrates reuse by humanizing discarded materials, while the other frames environmental responsibility within binaries of clean/unclean and included/excluded. This comparison highlights how children's literature can both promote sustainability and inadvertently reinforce social hierarchies by moralizing dirt and associating cleanliness with virtue.

**Keywords:** *Children's Literature, Waste Studies, Recycling Narratives, Object Narratives, Throwaway Culture*

## Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Children's literature has conventionally been associated with pastoral and rural backgrounds untouched by urbanization and ecological degradation. In today's world, however, we live in what scholars such as Marco Armiero term the "Wasteocene," an epoch in which waste is seen as the defining planetary mark (2), shaping landscapes, communities, and cultures through its excessive production and pervasive presence. Within this reality, children's literature serves as a potent means of environmental education, fostering ecological awareness from an early age. Most children now experience nature vicariously through reading, television, and the classroom (Kellert), which makes picture books, primary vehicles for cultural transmission, especially influential in shaping young readers' perceptions of their material world, environmental responsibility, and social order. Within this context, narratives about waste, cleanliness, and recycling function not merely as educational tools but also as complex cultural texts that encode specific values about consumption, disposal, and social belonging. The relationship between environmental consciousness, cultural values, and moral education in children's literature has therefore emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry. By contrasting certain children's recycling narratives that humanize discarded materials with narratives that frame waste as deviance, this study argues that children's literature on environmental awareness simultaneously cultivates ecological responsibility and risks reinforcing social hierarchies through moralized notions of cleanliness and exclusion.

To examine how children's literature negotiates the themes of waste, cleanliness, and ecological responsibility, this study foregrounds Waste Studies as its principal analytical method. Mary Douglas's seminal conception of dirt as "matter out of place" provides a critical framework for understanding how waste is not an inherent property of objects, but a socially constructed category that reflects and reinforces systems of order. Within this perspective, discarded materials in children's stories become markers of social and moral boundaries, often revealing as much about societal values as about the objects themselves. Bill Brown's Thing Theory and Arjun Appadurai's work on the "social life of things" provide secondary points of reference, clarifying how objects accrue, lose, or transform value across contexts. The study compares two distinct narrative approaches to waste in children's literature: Alison Inches' *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle* and *The Adventures of an Aluminum Can*, which humanize discarded objects through first-person diary narration, and Ellie Bethel's *Michael Recycle* and *Litterbug Doug*, which construct waste as socially undesirable and cleanliness as integral to moral and civic belonging. This comparative analysis highlights how divergent storytelling modes shape children's understanding of recycling-either as an empathetic process of transformation or as a moral obligation linked to maintaining social order.

## The Life of Objects: Transformation and Renewal in Alison Inches' Picture Books

In contemporary children's literature, "object life" narratives use anthropomorphism and autobiographical framing to trace the material and emotional journeys of inanimate things. Rooted in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of *it-fiction*, these stories follow an object as it moves through different hands and contexts, accruing new meanings and values along the way (Peñas-Ruiz). Alison Inches' *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle* (2009) and *The Adventures of an Aluminum Can* (2009) adapt this structure to environmental themes, replacing satire with affective engagement and inviting young readers to empathize with discarded materials. Framed as diaries, these narratives allow waste objects to speak directly to young readers, recording their transformation from raw material to consumer product, through use, disposal, and eventual rebirth. In giving the bottle and can a voice, Inches removes them from the mute category of "matter out of place" (Douglas 50) and relocates them within a personal and emotional continuum. Here, waste is not inert detritus but an active subject with a biography—one whose transformations invite readers to reconsider its place in the material and social order.

In *The Adventures of an Aluminum Can*, the protagonist's life begins within the confines of a bauxite rock, from which it is soon extracted. Its opening remark, "I will miss it here, but I'm excited to see where they are taking me" (Inches 2) blends a sense of separation anxiety with anticipatory curiosity, signaling from the outset that transformation is both inevitable and imbued with the promise of renewal. The subsequent depiction of industrial processing is conveyed through vivid sensory detail: "I got crushed and ground into a fine powder... turned into a mushy paste... after a steam bath and superhot oven dry, I became a beautiful white powder called aluminum oxide" (Inches 4). Recurrent references to colour and orderliness— "white," "neat," "tidy" function as markers of purity within a classificatory framework. Even the "chemical bath" is narrated as a preparatory rite, "I feel neat, tidy, and ready to go" (Inches 5) recasting what might otherwise be viewed as a process of decontamination into a ritual of self-betterment. In this way, the can's transformation is aligned less with the eradication of impurity than with the attainment of an idealized state of refinement. The humanization of object in the narrative fosters an affective bond between the reader and the object, reframing recycling not as an abstract civic duty but as a lived journey. Such a narrative strategy aligns with waste theory's view of waste as a mutable social category: what is considered "matter out of place" at one stage can re-enter the cycle of value at another, resisting the tendency to treat waste as inherently contaminating.

However, embedded in this celebration of renewal are subtle references to consumerist culture. The can's life depicted in the work is a sequence of short-lived roles—raw material, fruit container, trophy—each replaced by the next without resistance. Kennedy warns that recycling can become a

righteous excuse for ongoing production, and Inches' narrative gestures towards this risk (85). The trophy episode in the work is an ample testimony to this: the can is not broken or unusable, but an ant infestation renders it socially unacceptable, prompting the daughter's mother to place it in the recycling bin. Here, obsolescence results from a change in context rather than material exhaustion. Thus, the can's journey reveals both the redemptive promise of recycling and the persistent cultural habit of redefining functional objects as "waste" once they fall out of alignment with prevailing norms of cleanliness and appropriateness.

Inches' *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle* parallels this arc but locates its origin in crude oil, narrating extraction, refinement, and manufacturing with a similar blend of humour and technical detail. "I was pumped into an oil refinery... machines will clean me and change me into a form that people can use" (Inches 4) The industrial stages are described almost affectionately, reinforcing the idea that processing like cleanliness is a precondition for entry into human use. Once produced, the bottle enjoys life as a container, is repurposed as a flower vase, and eventually enters the recycling stream, where it is transformed into a fleece jacket for an astronaut. The final reincarnation carries Appadurai's notion of the "reclassification of value" (17): the bottle moves from container to gift to clothing, traversing distinct regimes of meaning and worth.

The visual treatment in Inches' works-through colour schemes and spatial composition-reinforces these transformations. Factory scenes are rendered in bright, saturated tones, with machinery appearing orderly and almost playful-inviting rather than intimidating. In domestic scenes, the bottle or can is centred, with human characters often cropped or partially visible, keeping the object's perspective dominant. Spaces are visually "clean" when the object is in use or newly recycled, with uncluttered backgrounds and balanced compositions. By contrast, disposal scenes use denser layouts, overlapping forms, and slightly muted colours to signal a transitional state. This visual coding supports Douglas's view that spatial order and purity are intimately linked.

While Inches' narratives are rich in ecological process detail, they do not challenge consumerist logic directly. The emphasis is on proper disposal and joyful reincarnation, not on reducing initial consumption. The enthusiastic embrace of transformation of bottle and can depicted in the narratives-culminating in their hope to avoid recycling "for a long time" in their new forms-suggests a desire for stability that mirrors human attachments to possessions, but it also subtly affirms the inevitability of reprocessing as a desirable end.

The textual and visual strategies in Inches' works, therefore, construct a narrative of waste as mutable and redeemable, framing recycling as both a technical process and a social reintegration. The humanization of discarded objects resists the moralization of dirt as inherent deviance; instead, dirt is

situational, resolved through transformation and reclassification. In the Wasteocene context, such narratives can be read as pedagogies of hope, offering children not the fear of contamination but the promise of renewal.

### **Heroic Interventions: Waste, Cleanliness, and Moral Order in Ellie Bethel's Picture Books**

Stories of heroic figures battling evil have long enchanted children, shaping their understanding of right and wrong and their sense of moral order. Echoing this tradition, Ellie Bethel's *Michael Recycle* (2008) and *Litterbug Doug* (2009) cast waste not as a protagonist but as an antagonist to be vanquished, with the narrative perspective centred on a heroic figure who intervenes to restore the community. This shift from the object-centred diaries of Alison Inches to a saviour-led narrative reframes recycling as a moral crusade rather than a material transformation, appealing to children's enduring attraction to super-heroic interventions.

In *Michael Recycle*, the titular green-caped hero descends upon the fictional town of Abberdoo-Rimey, where “the garbage was left out and grew rotten and slimy” and “the water and sky looked brown.” These descriptors are not neutral environmental observations; they activate Douglas's definition of pollution as “a threat to social order” (44). As Gillian Pye notes, when assorted discarded materials in varying states of decay become visible together, they can destabilize established categories of order and classification, crossing boundaries and provoking feelings of contamination, contagion, and disgust (Pye 6). By presenting waste as an omnipresent sensory assault like ‘rotten’, ‘slimy’, ‘brown’, the text encodes dirt as both a physical and moral contaminant. The town's state is not simply untidy; it is symbolically unfit for habitation, a condition requiring immediate purification.

Michael's intervention is portrayed in apocalyptic terms, with piles of trash “reaching the moon” and “giant bugs” taking over the town. This exaggerated imagery heightens the sense of urgency while simultaneously shifting responsibility onto the townspeople, who are depicted as negligent rather than as participants in a broader system of overproduction. The narrative's arc is linear and unequivocal-pollution is eradicated, water and sky turn blue, and the hero departs satisfied. The restored town's cleanliness, rendered in bright, open landscapes that replace the earlier murky palette, visually enacts Douglas's point that purity signifies the re-establishment of proper order, each element returned to its rightful place, unconfused and complete (54).

If *Michael Recycle* frames pollution as a shared civic problem, *Litterbug Doug* narrows it to a single deviant, whose domestic space is described as “a garbage dump full of old stuff that was rotting and moldy and smelly enough to make your eyes water”. The catalogue of decayed items - “rotting banana,” “moldy old cheese,” “faulty fridge freezers,” “smashed-up TVs,” “chewed-up old candy”-

functions as overloading” of waste. Ironically, many of these objects-ripe fruit, edible cheese, functional appliances are not inherently unusable; they are deemed waste due to neglect, mismanagement, or shifting notions of desirability. The rotting banana signals unused fruit left to spoil, the smashed television indicates deliberate destruction rather than inevitable decay, and the half-eaten candy, “no longer sweet,” literalizes a preference for new ones. Together, these examples reveal a throwaway culture that prioritizes immediacy and convenience over durability, or repair. This particular narrative emphasizes removal and disposal rather than questioning the underlying production and consumption practices that create surplus. This perspective reflects a broader critique that highlights the displacement of responsibility: focus is placed on managing waste after it is produced, rather than addressing the systemic drivers of overconsumption. In effect, *Litterbug Doug* reinforces the habitual logic of use-and-discard, presenting waste management as a matter of tidiness rather than encouraging critical reflection on underlying consumption practices.

Societies tend to avoid confronting disorder, preferring to keep it out of sight, smell, and touch. Viewed as dirty, waste is discarded or hidden through processes designed to render it invisible, as though to cleanse society from the very act of production. The removal of waste thus takes on the status of a ritualistic act of purification, imbued with moral and political connotations. This is reflected in the narrative’s repeated emphasis on Doug’s isolation: “alone on his throne Doug thoughtlessly threw all manner of litter” (5). This solitude marks him as liminal-outside the social order and thus dangerous to its integrity. His eventual reformation is staged as a ritual cleansing. When Michael Recycle arrives, Doug is not merely persuaded; he is physically washed, his smell removed, and his appearance made “neater.” Only then is he reintegrated into the community with a job, ironically, as the “Litter Police,” signaling the restoration of order through his transformation from outsider to conforming insider.

*Litterbug Doug* also sharpens this binary through spatial composition and colour. Doug’s dump is rendered in browns, greys, and sickly greens, with crowded, tilted perspectives that evoke instability. The town, by contrast, is drawn in balanced compositions with bright blues and greens, indicating harmony. When Doug is “cleansed,” his figure is modified and repositioned in the visual centre, surrounded by smiling townsfolk. The visual narrative mirrors the textual one: cleanliness is both the prerequisite and the evidence of belonging.

Bethel’s works individualize environmental responsibility, framing both the problem and its resolution in terms of personal behaviour. Doug’s transformation resolves the immediate issue without interrogating the structural conditions that produced his “hill of waste” in the first place. The narrative’s moral triumph is secured through the elimination of visible disorder, positioning cleanliness

as the primary marker of environmental virtue. While Bethel's superhero narratives are effective in engaging young readers and fostering a sense of civic duty, they risk reducing environmental ethics to an equation of morality with surface-level cleanliness, thereby diverting attention from the systemic forces that underwrite ecological degradation.

### Comparative Analysis

When placed side by side, Alison Inches' and Ellie Bethel's approaches to waste in children's literature illuminate two different pedagogical methods. Inches' *Plastic Bottle* and *Aluminum Can* adopt what could be called a "biographical" mode, where discarded materials are narratively rehabilitated through humanisation. Bethel's *Michael Recycle* and *Litterbug Doug*, in contrast, deploy a "purification" mode, framing waste as a moral contaminant to be eliminated through intervention.

Inches' narratives challenge conventional moral frameworks around waste, portraying dirt and discard not as inherently corrupting but as contextually defined. Her characters, bottle and can, are not inherently polluting; they move fluidly between categories, demonstrating that what counts as "matter out of place" (Douglas 50) is context-dependent. Recycling here is an inclusive act, restoring the object's utility and reintegrating it into social life. The focus is on transformation and second lives, a perspective that resonates with Bill Brown's assertion that objects gain visibility and a kind of agency precisely when their original function is disrupted. In this way, Inches' stories also align with Appadurai's concept of the "commodity situation," in which an object's social relevance derives from its exchangeability; the bottle and can pass through shifting phases of "commodity-hood," their value redefined as they enter new social and cultural contexts (Appadurai 13).

Bethel's works, by contrast, treat waste as an existential threat to community order. This aligns with Douglas's observation that practices of separation and boundary-making often serve to enforce social order (69). In *Litterbug Doug*, spatial segregation between the clean town and Doug's hill of waste creates a moral geography where inclusion depends on visible conformity to cleanliness norms.

Inches' life-cycle approach situates waste within a continuous process of material change, subtly encouraging children to see discarded objects as potential resources. Bethel's narratives, while promoting recycling, risk perpetuating the individualization of environmental responsibility. By focusing on the behavior of individual polluters, these stories obscure systemic drivers of waste such as industrial overproduction and consumerist design. Despite their distinct narrative strategies, both bodies of work exhibit a notable gap, i.e. they largely overlook the imperative of minimizing waste. In Inches' work, the joy of reincarnation may implicitly normalize cycles of production and consumption;

in Bethel's, the celebration of cleanliness may reinforce aesthetic norms that drive disposal of the old and worn objects.

## Conclusion

Children's literature shapes young readers' understanding of the environment while transmitting broader societal values (qtd. in Ismail 594). The picture books examined in this study demonstrate that representations of waste are concerned not only with teaching children about recycling and environmental responsibility, but also with larger questions of value, order, cleanliness, and belonging. Inches' object-centred diaries and Bethel's superhero narratives offer contrasting approaches to these questions: the former presents waste through transformation, renewal, and the changing significance of objects, while the latter associates environmental responsibility more closely with cleanliness, proper behaviour, and the restoration of social order.

The representation of waste in children's literature extends beyond the simple task of teaching young readers how to recycle or keep their surroundings clean. As the comparison of Alison Inches' and Ellie Bethel's picture books demonstrates, narratives of waste also communicate ideas about value, order, responsibility, and belonging. Inches' *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle* and *The Adventures of an Aluminum Can* approach discarded materials through their changing lives and uses. By giving the bottle and the can voices, memories, and expectations, the narratives allow waste to remain within a continuing material biography rather than treating disposal as the end of an object's existence. Their movement from raw material to commodity, discarded object, and recycled form illustrates the instability of the category of waste itself. Read through Douglas's understanding of dirt as "matter out of place," these transformations suggest that an object becomes waste not because it possesses an inherent quality of worthlessness, but because its position within a particular material and social order has changed.

Bethel's *Michael Recycle* and *Litterbug Doug* construct a markedly different relationship between waste and social order. Here, accumulated rubbish appears as disorder that must be removed before communal harmony can be restored. The polluted town in *Michael Recycle* and Doug's isolated hill of waste in *Litterbug Doug* establish visible boundaries between cleanliness and contamination. These boundaries acquire a moral dimension when environmental responsibility becomes associated with cleanliness, proper behaviour, and civic belonging. Doug's transformation is particularly significant in this respect: his movement from an isolated litterer to the "Litter Police" occurs only after both his body and his surroundings have been cleaned. Waste therefore functions not simply as an environmental problem but as a means through which the narratives distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviour and inclusion from exclusion.

The distinction between these narrative modes has important implications for the environmental education offered by children's picture books. Inches encourages an understanding of waste through transformation and renewed value, whereas Bethel emphasizes correction, removal, and the restoration of order. Yet neither approach entirely escapes the assumptions of a consumer culture. The repeated reincarnation of objects in Inches' books can make recycling appear capable of resolving the consequences of continued consumption, while Bethel's emphasis on eliminating visible disorder places responsibility primarily on individual behaviour. In both cases, considerably less attention is given to reducing consumption, extending the life of existing objects, or questioning the systems through which waste is continually produced.

These texts therefore reveal both the possibilities and the limitations of environmental narratives written for children. They can encourage care for the material world and make recycling meaningful to young readers, but they also participate in cultural decisions about what is valuable, what is disposable, what should remain visible, and what must be removed. Within the conditions of the Wasteocene, such distinctions become especially important. Reading children's recycling narratives through Waste Studies shows that their significance lies not only in the environmental practices they promote, but also in the social and moral meanings through which those practices are imagined. Children's literature about waste is thus a site where ecological responsibility is learned alongside ideas of order, value, cleanliness, and belonging, making the representation of discard itself an important subject of environmental and cultural inquiry.

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