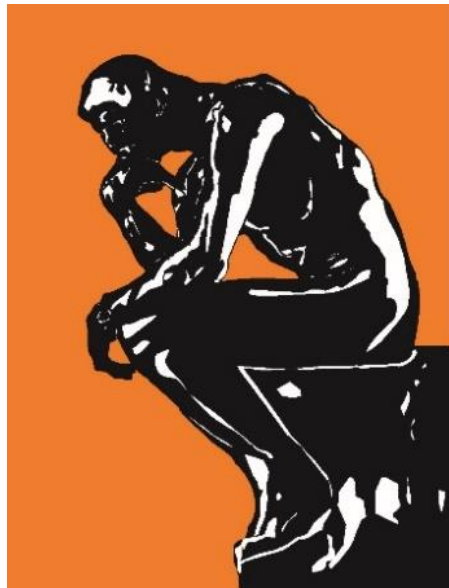


Natural absurdity: How satirical fables can inform us of a vision for sustainability?

Dr. Minh-Hoang Nguyen

Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research, Phenikaa University, Yen Nghia Ward, Ha Dong District, Hanoi, Vietnam

* Correspondence: hoang.nguyenminh@phenikaa-uni.edu.vn



October 29, 2024

* * *

Book Review: Wild Wise Weird, by Quan-Hoang Vuong, AISDL, Hanoi 2024.

About author of this review:

- Recipient of Blaze Journalism Prize (2024) and author of *Better Economics for the Earth* (2024).

In today's era, with the climate crisis intensifying and planetary boundaries nearly breached, achieving any form of sustainability—whether economic or social—first demands environmental sustainability. Despite the substantial body of research underscoring its importance, a large segment of society remains apathetic and skeptical toward the value of nature. Achieving a fundamental shift in societal thinking—encompassing worldview, values, and beliefs—requires more than just media campaigns, education, and regulatory measures (Abson et al., 2017). The presence of meaningful cultural and artistic works that awaken society is also essential. *Wild Wise Weird* is a typical work, guiding readers to recognize blind spots in their perceptions of the human-nature relationship and helping to restore and revitalize these connections (Vuong, 2024).

Wild Wise Weird by Quan-Hoang Vuong is a social commentary collection featuring 42 fictional fables centering on the character Mr. Kingfisher, who leads readers through diverse stories involving other birds in the bird village. With wit and wisdom, the book offers readers a blend of meaningful social critiques, justifying its title as both “Wild” and “Wise.” Unlike most moral books, which deliver straightforward lessons, *Wild Wise Weird* presents readers with the absurdity in human thinking, prompting them to draw their own conclusions about wisdom. Such a “Weird” approach can enable readers to recognize and explain unthinkable issues humans are facing, including Jared Diamond's observation that, without external threats, humans may trend toward self-destruction by destroying ecological systems that nurture them (Diamond, 2011).

The absurdity of the human-animal relationship is subtly highlighted in the story “Family Legacy...”. The tale begins with large pelicans who, seeming at first like villains due to their excessive, gluttonous fishing, threaten the fishing grounds of Kingfisher for generations. Surprisingly, the pelicans hold a “Certificate of style and ethics in fish catching” and a “Permit to catch fish everywhere,” while Kingfisher eventually recognizes that his family and he have fished “illegally” for generations. Though humorous, the story invites us to consider a deeper perspective. When we substitute “pelicans” with “humans” as the culprits, the story offers an authentic perspective from the animals whose habitats—forests, ponds, rivers, and more—are overtaken by humans to do agriculture, industry, mining, and urbanization for their livelihood. Meanwhile, the animals who have lived there for generations become the “illegal” inhabitants, lacking the documentation to prove their right to exist and survive?!

In the final story, “Titles of Nobility,” Vuong humorously portrays Kingfisher’s excitement upon being awarded two noble titles given by humans: (1) “Bird with high research value, as an ecological indicator” and (2) “Rare bird, requiring priority protection.” This honor makes Kingfisher feel exceptional among other birds, only to realize later that these titles are reserved for species facing high extinction risk and qualify for the IUCN Red List. This detail gives readers a laugh at Kingfisher’s naive thirst for prestige while prompting reflections on humanity’s absurd relationship with nature. Who are humans to bestow “protection-needed” titles on other species? And why has Kingfisher’s species declined to the point of needing such protection?

Sometimes, we must find wisdom by confronting foolishness, and it seems that in environmental matters, humanity is doing just that. *Wild Wise Weird* speaks this truth in part.



Watercolor painting by Bui Quang Khiem. Retrieved from *Wild Wise Weird* with the author’s permission.

Additionally, *Wild Wise Weird* takes a unique approach compared to most social commentaries aimed at critiquing regimes, societal norms, or ideologies, like *Animal Farm*

(Orwell, 1945), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), or *Laugh or Lament* (Nesin, 2002). *Wild Wise Weird* focuses on individual information processing, making it ideologically independent and socially and culturally transcendent. This independence enables the book's messages to cross socio-cultural boundaries more easily, which is crucial for environmental issues that require both global consensus and local cooperation. Since the mid-2000s, climate change literature has surged in English-language publishing, aiming to foster broader climate awareness and inspire more progressive environmental policies. However, Schneider-Mayerson (2018)'s survey of readers of 19 climate fiction novels reveals that while these works effectively reinforce the urgency of human-caused climate change among concerned liberals and leftists, they have limited success in persuading skeptics and deniers to reconsider their views.

Moreover, most climate fiction messages cause readers to associate climate change with intensely negative emotions, such as the "doomsday scenario" and "dystopian" (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018). These emotions could result in climate "doomerism," which could depress and demoralize the public and further lead to climate inaction (Campbell, 2022; Ritchie, 2024). Although *Wild Wise Weird* is also climate fiction and even has a story called eco-horror fiction (i.e., the "Ghosts" story), it reminds readers of failures and predictions of climate and environmental destruction crises' consequences through brain-twisting, symbolic, and humorous fashion. For example, when illustrating the inaction and the superficial, performative efforts of governments and corporations, satirical language was creatively employed:

"*Grand conclusion: The report is still completely honest, trustworthy, and ethical, even though the data are fabricated and measurements are falsified. The methane emission reduction campaign has achieved phenomenal success. Therefore, the bird village approves the inclusion of the report in Kingfisher's lifetime achievement archive."

In "GHG Emissions"; *Wild Wise Weird* (2024)

Wild Wise Weird illustrates that conveying environmental messages does not necessarily require strong slogans, radical activism, or vandalism but can instead engage readers through the rationality and emotions of a personified protagonist like Kingfisher (Vuong, Nguyen, Duong, & La, 2024). The character's humor and wisdom invite readers to embrace it, encouraging them to reconsider their own thoughts, choices, and actions to reduce environmental impacts and contribute to ecological sustainability. When blended

with natural knowledge (e.g., nesting habits of kingfishers, sparrows, and flowerpeckers in the “Mansions” story or the impressive physical attributes and eating habits of kingfishers in “Miracle”) and beautiful pictures, this way of communicating can effectively serve as a memorable way of engaging and educating children about our planet’s inhabitants. Affinity for these characters can stimulate imagination and engagement with environmental information, helping children—especially those born in urban areas with limited opportunities for interaction with nature—develop an awareness of nature’s value (Paulsen, Jagodzinski, & Hawke, 2022; Reason & Gillespie, 2023; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b). This is an ideal starting point for building an eco-surplus culture in society (Nguyen & Jones, 2022).

In fact, I am also someone inspired by this book and have shifted from an economic-centric to an ecological-centric mindset. Growing up in an urban area and a business-oriented family, I was not inclined to environmental matters and even felt distant and wary of wildlife. *Wild Wise Weird* was one of the major reasons that helped rebuild my connection with the natural world and sparked my journey toward researching how to restore and revitalize the human-nature link (Nguyen, 2024; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024a).

With wit, wisdom, and a “weird” approach through absurdity, *Wild Wise Weird* fosters readers’ awareness, self-reflection, informational connectivity, and even inspires them to confront stupidity to uncover wisdom. It may even inspire some readers to take up the pen. This book has the potential to resonate with readers, especially younger ones, embedding ecological sustainability in their humanistic values through the humor, vibrancy, and absurdity of its bird characters, as well as the wisdom woven throughout.

References

- Abson, D. J., Fischer, J., Leventon, J., Newig, J., Schomerus, T., Vilsmaier, U., . . . Jager, N. W. (2017). Leverage points for sustainability transformation. *Ambio*, 46, 30-39. doi:10.1007/s13280-016-0800-y
- Campbell, S. (2022). Recent readings on climate ‘doomerism’ and science. Retrieved from <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2022/04/recent-readings-on-climate-doomerism-and-science/>
- Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: Macmillan.
- Diamond, J. (2011). *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed: revised edition*: Penguin.
- Nesin, A. (2002). *Laugh or Lament*: Turkish Ministry of Culture.

- Nguyen, M.-H. (2024). A life-long humanistic journey to conservation practices. *Current Conservation*, 18(3).
- Nguyen, M.-H., & Jones, T. E. (2022). Building eco-surplus culture among urban residents as a novel strategy to improve finance for conservation in protected areas. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), 426. doi:10.1057/s41599-022-01441-9
- Orwell, G. (1945). *Animal Farm*: Secker and Warburg.
- Paulsen, M., Jagodzinski, J., & Hawke, S. M. (2022). *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Rewilding education for a new earth*: Springer Nature.
- Reason, P., & Gillespie, S. (2023). The teachings of mistle thrush and kingfisher. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 39(3), 293-306. doi:10.1017/aee.2023.4
- Ritchie, H. (2024). *Not the end of the world: How we can be the first generation to build a sustainable planet* Random House.
- Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2018). The influence of climate fiction: an empirical survey of readers. *Environmental Humanities*, 10(2), 473-500. doi:10.1215/22011919-7156848
- Vuong, Q.-H. (2024). *Wild Wise Weird*: AISDL.
- Vuong, Q.-H., & Nguyen, M.-H. (2024a). *Better economics for the Earth: A lesson from quantum and information theories*: AISDL.
- Vuong, Q.-H., & Nguyen, M.-H. (2024b). Further on informational quanta, interactions, and entropy under the granular view of value formation. doi:10.2139/ssrn.4922461
- Vuong, Q.-H., Nguyen, M.-H., Duong, M.-P. T., & La, V.-P. (2024). Radical climate activism: motivations, consequences and approaches. *Visions for Sustainability*, 21, 11-25. doi:10.13135/2384-8677/10237