

Book Review: *Children of the Rainforest: Shaping the Future in Amazonia* by Camilla Morelli

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“I could vividly imagine myself as one of the Matses children as the book was so relatable,” wrote undergraduate student Rebecca Sherlock after reading the ACYIG Inaugural Book Prize winner Camilla Morelli’s *Children of the Rainforest*. For Rebecca, herself a member of a minority ethnic group in Ireland, Morelli’s book helped her see and conceptualize her own experiences of unspoken cultural change—and the role her own child might play in such transitions.

I made Morelli’s ethnography the centerpiece of my newly developed *Global Childhoods* course before I was even halfway through my first read. For these second-year undergraduate Children’s Studies students, Morelli’s book was their first taste both of reading ethnography and of a truly holistic view of how childhoods are produced, reproduced, and change in local contexts. A challenge of teaching the only anthropology course in an interdisciplinary Children’s Studies program is guiding students to identify, dismantle, and reconstruct their ethnocentric, Eurocentric, or positivist views of childhood—views that are often actively reinforced in their contemporaneous courses from other disciplines, let alone their own society—all within just ten classes. For this reason, I was delighted to outsource some of the work of unsettling worldviews to Morelli’s ethnography. Students were required to read a chapter most weeks, and by loosely following the book’s themes with the teaching curriculum, we could connect elements from the ethnography—from children’s play and work to the cash economy and globalization—to the anthropological concepts (e.g., culture; cultural relativism; holism; structure) introduced in class. In our final class, students acquired their “participation mark” by completing a short activity: to write a two-sentence “mini-review” of Morelli’s ethnography. With their permission, I incorporate some of their reviews, like Rebecca’s above, to support my strong recommendation of this text for use with students, along with my endorsement as a valuable contribution to the anthropology of childhood.

Morelli’s remarkable ethnography traces how Indigenous Matses children are actively driving cultural change in their communities in a globalizing world, addressing old questions about children’s agentic roles in generational cultural shifts, and suggesting provocative new questions about what anthropology may have been overlooking about the cultural and global significance of children’s imaginings, affective attachments, and aspirations. Students emphasized the book’s structure as a key ingredient to conveying a sense of how cultures change. As Kamile Briedyte describes, “The way Morelli begins the book discussing the previous generations’ lives among the rainforest, working her way towards today’s generation, portrays the differences fantastically. This layout does a great job of showing just exactly how the Matses people became who they are now.” Student Tia Gallagher agreed, “This ethnography is beautifully written to show the continuous shifts in culture within the Matses community. Morelli brings us along in her journey with the

Matses children, giving us the opportunity to have an insight into the lives of this evolving community.”

These evolving cultural practices were brought to life through detailed depictions of children’s lives, activities, imaginings, and desires. These details present a rich ethnographic picture of a lifeworld radically different from students’ own childhoods. Emma Jordan summarised the vividness that had stuck with her, “I found their change in how [the Matses] hunt over the years from the forest to the water fascinating. The next generation are more driven toward making money and aiming to live a lavish lifestyle amongst the *chotac* [non-indigenous], all while their elders force poison on them.” The immersive experience of following Morelli’s child informants seemed to more effectively destabilize students’ assumptions about who children are and should be than any evidence I could present from the lectern. As Sinéad Lawless described her experience, “Not only did reading this book provide a deeper perspective on how life varies so much in different cultures, but also shed light on my culture, how we live, and how strange or obscure some things that are considered normal or day to day really are. I think what made the book so compelling is it is about real life and real experiences.”

Morelli's book is visually enriched with children's drawings and photographs, making this an engaging and accessible text for a wide readership. Student Hazel Shevlin noted, “I enjoyed the pictures throughout this book, giving me a clearer image of what’s being described. Especially the image of the boys holding up a fish, and now only for the picture, I never would have been able to imagine a child that age to be capable of that skill.” Morelli's clear and compelling storytelling makes it appear that ethnographic research with children in a remote forest setting is easy. It is not. To so effectively trace the processes of cultural change from local to global levels *from children's perspectives* takes an ethnographer of impressive skill and demands tremendous emotional and physical labor.

Students suggested they would recommend this book to parents (Sinéad Lawless suggested, “I think it would greatly impact new parents’ views and that it’s important to let children have independence even if the outside world is scary.”), anyone working with children, and “18-20-year-olds.” I would also suggest anthropologists or social scientists—particularly those without a strong background in the anthropology of childhood—will derive value from this fresh perspective on the classic question of how cultures change. In a globalizing world where Western systems are rapidly colonizing Indigenous cultures and epistemologies—including with Western assumptions about children as passive reproducers of adult culture—children and childhoods must be liberated from their silos as niche areas of study and re-visibility as central players in global culture change.

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