

Cryptozoological Care in Fantasy Literature Series for Tweens

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This study examines the current trend of human characters interacting with magical creatures in fantasy literature series for tween readership: *The Spiderwick Chronicles* by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black (2003-09); *Imaginary Veterinary* (2013-15), written by Suzanne Selfors and illustrated by Dan Santat; *Unicorn Rescue Society* (2018-2021), by Adam Gidwitz with other co-authors and illustrated by Hatem Aly; and *Monster Fighter Mystery* (2018-ongoing), written and illustrated by Xavier Garza. These series are selected based on significance, inclusivity, and quality, with the literature interpreted through an interdisciplinary lens. Analysis of the four fantasy adventure series demonstrates how human characters meet, help, and may have conflicts with supernatural creatures. This article shows the intertwined existences of hidden creatures with humanity. Exploration of the chupacabras reveals cultural meanings represented by this cryptid, including celebrating Mexican American folklore, valuing family, and inhabiting two identities simultaneously. Thematic patterns show tween protagonists having a sense of wonder about the world, developing agency through facing danger, and helping each other. The series place value on knowledge and inquiry. An ethic of cryptozoological care includes understanding creatures as well as growing environmental awareness through learning to co-exist.

The speculative fiction series in this study can be categorized as works of low fantasy set in the real world with fantastic elements. Low fantasy takes place in naturalistic settings rather than “otherworldly settings” and has magical creatures and other supernatural elements (Watson 166). Main characters move beyond prior assumptions from “the rational, primary-world” worldview (Watson 170), for experiences in the secondary world uncover supernatural truths such as the reality of imagined creatures. The series can be classified within children’s literature as “magic adventure fantasy” in which ordinary people “come in contact with magical objects, creatures, or events” (Lynn 641). The books sometimes tiptoe along the edge of the genres of fantasy to touch horror, which creates emotional effects of fear, but most terror is brief, deflected, or rendered clearly as fantasy.

Early adolescent literature differs from older adolescent literature. This study focuses on the understudied format of multi-book series published for a targeted readership ages eight to twelve, also called intermediate. The term tween sometimes gets extended to encompass students in middle school grades, who range from 10 to 15 (Lesesne 10). Strong social messages are less common in early adolescent series, which do not address issues in the depth or length of books for older adolescents, and tweens

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have more adult involvement in problem-solving. Series books hold great importance for their influence as part of lifelong literacy development. Readers choose these books for entertainment, get invested in series characters, and build attachments “that cement connections to reading” (Miller and Kelley 152). Revisiting well-loved characters and places develops reading skill. Completing a series provides a sense of accomplishment and community. The content of childhood books can influence readers throughout their lives.

The Fascinations of Cryptozoology

These current tween series reflect a cultural preoccupation with cryptids, defined as animals or creatures whose existence is unsubstantiated. The history of cryptids is extensive, dating to ancient times, and “descriptions of sea monsters are as old as written language” (Loxton and Prothero 178). Cryptozoology refers broadly to “any purposeful search for unconfirmed animals” (Loxton and Prothero 17). Animals such as the okapi, the Komodo dragon, and the lowland gorilla are sometimes called “former cryptids” because they were known through folk legends before being definitively established (Loxton and Prothero 18). In the 1920s, alleged sightings created an interest in “anomalous primates,” and then a type of amateur naturalist emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, called a “monster hunter,” who was enthusiastic about wildlife and believed unidentified large primates could be found (Regal 54). With photographs of alleged footprints bearing resemblance to the fossil primate *Gigantopithecus*, this quest attained only brief “scientific respectability” (Regal 54). Today, cryptozoological beliefs are generally classified as paranormal. TV programs entertain with searches for cryptids, and nonfiction abounds for all age levels (Halls).

The allure of cryptozoology as a search for rumored entities is why scholars such as Peter Dendle say that cryptozoology “represents a quest for magic and wonder in a world many perceive as having lost its mystique” (Dendle 201). Cryptozoology reveals a desire for the existence of “large, sensational creatures that fill us with a fresh sense of wonder and surprise” (Dendle 192). The start of the twentieth century left few large-animal species to be discovered, and by the late twentieth century, people “developed a pronounced sense of guilt over the decimation of natural habitats and the elimination or near-elimination of numerous species” (Dendle 198). Adherents of cryptozoology voice “an overflowing of concern for the well-being of undiscovered species” (Dendle 200). Meanwhile, extinctions of known species continue, and biodiversity plummets. Popular culture reveals anxiety about what has been wrought during the Anthropocene—a term for the current geographic epoch in which humans have substantially impacted the planet’s ecosystems to the extent of jeopardizing humanity and other life forms.

Although cryptozoology is a pseudoscience and does not follow the scientific method, the subject has been approached through perspectives from fields such as

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philosophy, religion, anthropology, psychology, paranormalism, folklore, and literature. Jeff Meldrum advocates the “persistent multi-species hypothesis” claiming that “lingering populations of relict species could exist alongside *Homo sapiens* into the present” (362); the notion is that relict hominoids are the basis for accounts of human-like creatures. Despite claims for alleged “footprint evidence” of Sasquatch (Meldrum 371), the absence of “quality evidence” such as carcasses or bones shows that cryptids such as Sasquatch do not exist (Loxton and Prothero 23). Science fiction books and film known as “cryptofiction” have influenced people’s descriptions of cryptids (Mullis 240). Anthrozoologist Samantha Hurn suggests cryptozoology is not merely “the search for animals that are unknown to science. It can and should be about the process through which cryptids come to be known” (213). Cryptozoology thus elevates exploration and openness to discovery and is more about the conversations and the search than about what gets found.

The creatures appearing within these tween fantasy books emerge from cryptozoology, fairylore, and folklore. They are physically tangible beings and beasts in all their furry, feathery, or scaly reality. In *Spiderwick*, only humans with “The Sight” can perceive the Unseen Realm, also called the Invisible World. In *Imaginary Veterinary*, the beings live in the Imaginary World and erupt into the Known World. In *Unicorn Rescue Society*, the creatures are real and visible to anyone who sees them. In *Monster Fighter Mystery*, some creatures masquerade as everyday people and “turn” at certain times, and belief may be required to see them. Tween protagonists are generally thrust into interactions with the creatures with little to no preparation. Subsequent sections of this article identify key features of each of the four fantasy series featuring magical or unproven creatures, then interpret the chupacabras as one representative creature, and ultimately, highlight examples for the themes permeating these series.

Spiderwick Chronicles: The Faerie World Is All Around Us

The Spiderwick Chronicles, co-authored by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, begins with a five-book series about Jared Grace, his twin brother Simon, and their sister Mallory (2003-04). The Graces discover the faerie world and gain access to The Sight after moving into a dilapidated family house in Maine. Some of the fae help and befriend the Grace family members, while others resent and threaten them. In each book, opening letters by the authors and characters document the authenticity of the story being told. The Grace siblings’ tool to understanding magical creatures is the Field Guide made by their great-uncle Arthur Spiderwick. The elves wish to keep the book from humans to protect tenuous fae existence.¹ This influential series has spinoff items such as a feature film, video game, companion books, and sequels.

Jared, Simon, and Mallory Grace play only supporting roles in *Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles* (2007-09), set in Florida. The three books are numbered

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separately and are considered a second series or sequel series. The protagonist is Nicholas Vargas, who has help from his older brother Jules and his new sister Laurie after Nick's widower father has remarried. (Although Vargas can be a Spanish surname, the text and illustrations do not provide evidence for reading Nick as Latino, and human characters seem to present as white and not Hispanic.) When Nick gains The Sight and finds an injured nixie, his and Laurie's efforts to assist the fae lead to more adventures. Nick's growth shows the agency and strength tween protagonists can gain in magic adventure fantasy series. Nick realizes, "[E]verything was going to change. And somehow, he had to change, too" (DiTerlizzi and Black, *Nixie's Song* 162). With the support of family and friends, and by using skills from his hobbies of model boat-building and video games, Nick rises to the challenge, overcomes his fears, and solves a series of problems.

Imaginary Veterinary Series: Caring for All Creatures

In the six-book *Imaginary Veterinary* series (2013-15), written by Suzanne Selfors and illustrated by Dan Santat, ten-year-old Ben Silverstein is spending the summer with his grandfather in the small town of Buttonville, where he befriends Pearl Petal. The series alternates focal characters, with Ben the emphasis in the odd-numbered books—#1, #3, and #5—and Pearl in the even-numbered books—#2, #4, and #6. Dr. Emerald Woo uses an abandoned button factory as a hospital for Imaginary Creatures under the guise of a Worm Hospital. A secret portal allows travel between the Known World on Earth and the Imaginary World. Pearl and Ben become apprentices with Dr. Woo. Many creatures can speak and even become their friends. Appended material at the end of every novel gives ten or more pages of nonfiction content, including a Creature Connection, Science Connection, and Creativity Connection. This paratextual and educational component fosters cross-cultural understanding, scientific activity, and artistic self-expression.

Selfors, who is white, draws from many cultures and traditions. Demonstrating the range of creatures, Ben reflects, "Only one week into his apprenticeship, Ben had already met a wyvern hatchling, a black dragon, a rain dragon, a leprechaun, a lake monster, a kelpie, two unicorns, and a sasquatch" (Selfors, *Griffin's* 4). While Dr. Woo is a human who trained with her grandmother as an Imaginary Veterinarian, her assistant is Mr. Tabby, a bakeneko, or a cat-human shape-shifter, based on a Japanese legend (Selfors, *Griffin's* 210). The switchboard operators are satyrs. Participating only when medically needed, the Worm Hospital workers do not seek to interfere with or to "save" the Imaginary World but fulfill a professional duty to deliver health care to the creatures.

The Worm Hospital mission of helping magical creatures embodies an ethic of cryptozoological care. Even when the job is dangerous, healing creatures from the

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Imaginary World is the purpose. Confirming their contributions, each novel closes with Ben and Pearl receiving a Certificate of Merit from Dr. Woo and Mr. Tabby. These six certificates name and give credit for the work of “Sasquatch Catching” (*Sasquatch* 201), “Curing Lake Monster Loneliness” (*Lonely* 190), “Rescuing a Rain Dragon” (*Rain* 188), “Saving a Unicorn Foal” (*Order* 172), “Curing a Griffin King’s Grumpiness” (*Griffin’s* 193), and “Rescuing Sugar Fairies” (*Fairy* 217). The apprentices also perform more mundane duties such as flossing the Sasquatch’s teeth and scooping dragon poop. Pearl and Ben help Known World residents along the way, such as by keeping creatures in a safe place and distributing the cure for troll tonsillitis, a medical condition from the Imaginary World.

Pearl and Ben push far beyond their comfort zones to help creatures. In the third book, they finally get to visit the Imaginary World because they are urgently needed to cure a Rain Dragon (based on the tradition of a Chinese Horned Dragon) who is dying and cannot bring the rain. Ben worries, “But how could he and Pearl be responsible for a creature that was injured? Sure, he could put a bandage on a cut, but what if the creature needed brain surgery or a heart transplant?” (*Rain* 102). When they see the Rain Dragon’s declining condition, Pearl takes action: “We can’t sit here and worry about ourselves. We have a life to save” (*Rain* 136). Ben and Pearl release the dragon from a trap and use Wound Glue to salve where a horn has been severed. Ben has the idea that Metalmouth, the Black Western Dragon who is their friend, can solder pieces of chain link to make a silver horn. Animal poacher Maximus Steele is the antagonist who stole the Rain Dragon’s horn after having turned against Dr. Woo, his former mentor, to exploit creatures for his own financial gain and glory.

The Unicorn Rescue Society Series: “Defend the Imaginary and Protect the Mythical”

The motto of the Unicorn Rescue Society is “Defende Fabulosa. Protege Mythica,” which the six-book series expresses as a mission to “defend the imaginary and protect the mythical” (Gidwitz 158). This slogan conveys that each animal deserves to be treasured. The ethic of cryptozoological care in the multi-authored series headed by Adam Gidwitz includes respect for the creatures and for fellow people as well as opposing efforts by human antagonists to exploit creatures and people. Species shown to be real include a New Jersey devil, a herensuge (dragon), a sasquatch, a chupacabras, and a sea serpent. Uchenna Devereaux and Elliott Eisner become members of a society led by a cryptid hunter, the eccentric social studies teacher Professor Fauna. On a school trip to the Pine Barrens in their state of New Jersey, a jersey devil follows them home on the bus. This companion nicknamed Jersey has bright red and blue coloration and can turn “invisible in the shade” (Gidwitz 89). The fantasy world exists within a recognizable real world.

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The series honors culturally specific elements and has social justice messaging. Gidwitz co-authors each book after the first with a different person, *The Basque Dragon* is written with one of the series co-creators, filmmaker Jesse Casey, and is set primarily in Spain. Gidwitz and Casey are white, and other co-authors have various backgrounds. *Sasquatch and the Muckleshoot* is written with Joseph Bruchac, a Nulhegan Abenaki citizen, and takes place in the Pacific Northwest. *The Chupacabras of the Rio Grande* is written with David Bowles, who identifies as Chicano or Mexican American, and takes place on the Laredo, Texas border with Mexico. *The Madre de Aguas of Cuba* is written with Emma Otheguy, who is Cuban American, and takes place in Cuba. *The Secret of the Himalayas*, written with the Pakistani American author Hena Khan, takes place in Pakistan. The end of every book has statements by the authors about identities and issues. Egyptian-born illustrator Hatem Aly did drawings for the whole series. Gidwitz's deliberate selection of multicultural co-authors underscores how his purpose with this series goes beyond entertainment to encompass progressive messaging and global social justice.

Each novel contains an interval in which a character tells a story about inequity and resilience based on historical knowledge and lived experience. This educational content woven into the plotline contrasts to the resolutely non-political nature of most tween fantasy series. Social issues animating *Unicorn Rescue Society* include the diverse ethnic origins of the Pine Barrens; the deculturalization, removal and violations of indigenous rights in the past and present United States; opposition to border walls and policies; drought and economic needs in Cuba; and respect for religious diversity and concern about the poaching of the markhor, a formerly endangered species of Pakistan. The central human characters are diverse. Bilingual professor Erasmo "Mito" Fauna hails from Peru. Uchenna is African American, with her mother from Lagos in Nigeria, and her father from New Orleans, Louisiana (Gidwitz and Otheguy 66). Elliot has Jewish heritage. The concept of valuing inclusion, as shown by the authors, characterization, and plots, is further conveyed through imagery of a "medley" about people coming together (Gidwitz 66; Gidwitz and Otheguy 182).

Cryptozoological care requires opposing antagonists who hurt supernatural creatures. The sacrifices required in learning about and looking after creatures can involve serious danger. Billionaires Edmund and Milton Schmoke appear in every book to exploit humans and magical creatures, whom they seek only to use for their own financial gain, convenience, and a cure for baldness. Alluding to the United States billionaires Koch family, the fictional Schmoke Brothers, Edmund and Milton, are villains whose nefarious schemes get foiled by society members. Professor Fauna says the difference between the Schmokes and the URS is that "They harm, we rescue" (Gidwitz and Khan 135). This series urges readers to join Uchenna and Elliot as members of the URS working for social justice. A page at the beginning of each book depicts a heartfelt letter from Professor Fauna that invites readers to join the efforts of

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the society to protect creatures. What Fauna tells Elliot and Uchenna in the first book gets echoed in subsequent narratives: “Our secret society is on the verge of extinction, just as the animals we protect. We need help. We need youth. We need . . . you” (Gidwitz 161). Outreach for this series included events at which readers could receive URS membership cards and temporary tattoos of Jersey, tokens to signal affiliation with the cause.

Monster Fighter Mystery Series: Legends Are True

Setting the action of the *Monster Fighter Mystery* series (2018-ongoing) in the deep south Texas borderlands where he grew up, Xavier Garza, who is both author and illustrator, draws upon his Mexican American folklore. The bilingual flip books from Arte Público Press have opposite sides telling the story in English and in Spanish, translated by Gabriela Baeza Ventura. This series with three books so far shows that inclusive genre fiction series books entertain while representing culturally specific knowledge. Protagonist Vincent Ventura and his twin cousins, Michelle and Bobby, investigate when new neighbors move into the house next door at 666 Duende Street. Curious and persistent, Vincent does not take no for an answer when solving a mystery or protecting his cousins, his dog Kenny, and new friends. Vincent uncovers a chupacabras, a family of lechuzas (bewitched owls), and duendes (like goblins) tormenting a young boy. These beings are not entirely separate from humans but are incarnations of people who have “turned” between two roles. Such representations suggest that monstrous creatures are not necessarily villainous or separable from ourselves but could be part of humanity and manifestations of social problems. Along with Vincent’s learning about and understanding the beings, horror emerges in that the creatures pose serious threats.

Vincent saves the life of a lechuza in *Vincent Ventura and the Mystery of the Witch Owl*. Portrayed in Mexican American folklore and retellings as variously good, bad, and ambiguous, lechuzas are witch owls, or women with powers to transform into owls. Vincent’s new neighbor Zulema Ortiz is both a witch owl from her mother’s side and also a curandera, or healer, from her father’s side. While Vincent had thought of these roles as “archenemies,” he realizes Zulema has both identities (*Witch Owl* 32). Zulema resists her grandmother’s insistence on joining her flock because Zulema wants to be “the kind of witch owl who won’t use her power to hurt anybody” (32). Vincent, Michelle, and Bobby use their tools—salt, toy water guns filled with holy water, and the hair of a chupacabras—to help Zulema resist. Developing a crush on a girl who happens to be half a lechuza is just part of Vincent’s life in the borderlands. Vincent’s growing relationship with Zulema shows that the line between humanity and the “other” is not strictly demarcated, and creatures are not so much different from us after all.

Duendes prey upon vulnerable, lonely children to increase their ranks. They can shrink to hide and pull people through crevices. Duendes can be portrayed as goblins or variously as gnome-like beings, and they represent here the psychological struggles of children and adolescents. In *Vincent Ventura and the Diabolical Duendes*, Vincent and his cousins realize the duendes can be seen only by people who believe they exist. New neighbor Sayer Cantú has been “infected” by the curse and is becoming a duende because he is sad and feels isolated (*Diabolical* 43). Vincent and Michelle help Sayer escape from duendes attacking him, and they must rescue Bobby, who gets kidnapped by the irredeemable duendes. Sayer becomes part of their team of friends, as does Zulema.

The series title phrase *Monster Fighter Mystery* evokes the classic cryptozoological term “monster hunter” that denotes a cryptid seeker as well as referring to how mysteries are solved by revealing the existence of legendary figures. Each book develops a message of understanding that “not all monsters are evil. They have the power to choose, to break the mold and be good” (*Witch Owl* 59). When Michelle tells Vincent, “monsters just don’t exist in the real world,” Vincent’s reply sounds like a quintessential cryptid hunter: “That’s what monsters want you to think. People used to say that there were no such things as giant squids either. But they were wrong, weren’t they?” (*Chupacabras* 3). Vincent and his cousins learn about the beings through firsthand experiences and through library research. Each book contains a pivotal scene in its fourth chapter of doing library research with printed books. Garza’s creatures do not choose to be malevolent and are all inspired by Mexican American folklore that Garza updates in order to empower youth and show the uneasiness of coexistence among humans and other beings.

Comparing Depictions of El Chupacabras

Analysis of el chupacabras demonstrates the social significance cryptids can hold. The name is formed from the Spanish verb *chupar* (to suck) and *cabras* (goats). Influenced by depictions of vampires, the chupacabras consumes blood of its victims, which are animal and not human. Correctly spelled with the letter s at the end for both singular and plural, the name chupacabras denotes “sucker of goats” (Gidwitz and Bowles 13). Lore traces vampire imagery to Mayan culture, in which bats were significant and not evil, and sacred Mayan beliefs recorded in the Popul Vuh, an oral tradition later transcribed, include the *camazotz*, or “death bat” (Serrano 30), guarding the underworld. Contemporary chupacabras stories emerged in Puerto Rico and spread through Latin America then into Texas. The chupacabras tends to be depicted as a reptile with scaly skin, fangs, a row of sharp spines on the back, wingless, red eyes, and sometimes a shapeshifter. Firsthand reports of the chupacabras are deemed confabulation due to bearing an “uncanny similarity” to H. R. Giger’s Sil alien creature

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designs in the film *Species* (1995) (Radford 129). While the chupacabras may be termed a cryptid, there is no evidence for its biological existence, and it is also an urban legend, with the chupacabras label often applied as “a catch-all pop culture term for any strange animal seen or found” (Radford 177).

Scholar Jesse Alemán sees the chupacabras as representing for Mexican Americans a version of Dracula through a legend linking the sucking of blood with “concerns about the economic viability of livestock in relation to competing forms of economies (cattle, agricultural, agribusiness), environmental change and development, and, in, its most recent sightings, alien or mongrel bodies” (54). Financial issues raised by el chupacabras suggest injustice and resistance. Because authorities cannot contain the chupacabras, scholar William Calvo-Quirós suggests that “the Chupacabras creates a space of subordination, rebelliousness, irony, and insolence that emerges from the uncanny, one that is almost ridiculous—very humorous, sassy, and deadly scary—but for the most part outside state control” (213). The figure of the chupacabras carries subversive potential. Mexican American creators have reclaimed the chupacabras legend from media depictions that associated it with stereotypes and racism against Latino and Latina people.

Children’s books offer a range of representations of the chupacabras, from scary to helpful. Picture book *The Adventures of Chupacabra Charlie* is told from the perspective of a smart, ten-year-old chupacabras who crosses the border wall from Mexico to the United States in order to help a new human friend to free migrant children kept in cages (Aldama). Xavier Garza regularly included chupacabras characters in his literature for children long before *Monster Fighter Mystery*. In the illustrated picturebook *Juan and the Chupacabras* (2005), cousins Juan and Luz sneak into the cornfield at night in search of the chupacabras from the stories their grandfather tells them. In tales within his story collections for tweens, Garza has depicted the chupacabras alternately as a helpful, canine-like companion protecting his humans (*Donkey* 48), and as literal “space aliens” who are “green-skinned and red-eyed monsters” (*Creepy* 68).

Within the tween fantasy series under evaluation, two use the chupacabras figure as a creature to protect, a cause of fear, and a metaphor for social issues. Comparing its role in *Vincent Ventura and the Mystery of the Chupacabras* (Garza) and *The Chupacabras of the Rio Grande* (Gidwitz and Bowles), Garza’s chupacabras is a lonely human turned into a monster against his will. Gidwitz and Bowles characterize their chupacabras in *Unicorn Rescue Society* as a family-oriented creature and symbol of humans divided by national border restrictions. In both books, comparisons to vampire bites are made, as blood is sucked through punctures. In Garza’s book, he moves between animal and human forms, while in Gidwitz and Bowles’s book, the chupacabras is a pack animal that lives with other chupacabras.

A being or creature can have multiple identities. In *Vincent Ventura and the Mystery of the Chupacabras*, Vincent investigates the disappearance of neighborhood dogs and declares: “I did the research, and ‘Chupacabras’ fits both the description and the profile of what I saw” (5). Vincent and his cousins arrive at a theory, later proven true, that new neighbor Mr. Calaveras is “a human that transforms into a chupacabras. That would mean that the Chupacabras might not only be vampiric in nature, but part werewolf too” (17). Michelle’s question “How can you be two things at once?” is a profound observation that could be applied to the beings in Garza’s series and to many humans (17). Such insights build sympathy. The reader remains skeptical of whether Vincent’s theory is true until Mr. Calaveras captures the young investigators.

Mr. Calaveras verifies Vincent’s hypothesis that he is responsible for the Texas sheep slayings. He was bitten by a chupacabras in Puerto Rico where he was doing anthropological research and thus infected with a curse. Mr. Calaveras explains, “I survived the bite, but at night I become the creature you have seen lurking around your neighborhood. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anybody” (40). Still, Mr. Calaveras admits to having killed dogs and humans to silence those who discover the truth (44). Mr. Calaveras explains: “Monsters are real, Vincent. They do exist. They come in many forms and sizes. Those stories that many believe to be mere legends are real” (44). This message sets up the entire series in establishing that Mexican American lore holds truth and deserves to be respected.

Despite this understanding, the cursed Mr. Calaveras reaches the end of his existence. He admits that to protect his secret, he must kill Vincent, Bobby, and Michelle. The cousins have to fight him off and use a super soaker water cannon filled with holy water. After transforming back into chupacabras form, Mr. Calaveras is referred to by the pronoun “it” and loses his sense of self as he moves against Vincent “like a predator moving in for the kill” (47). In order for him and his cousins to survive, Vincent pushes the chupacabras into the font of holy water at the church, where Mr. Calaveras turns back into human form momentarily and then fades away. In the final chapter, the authorities deny Vincent’s account because “I guess it’s easier for them to believe that he was a lunatic with a killer wolf for a pet than believe he was a shape-shifting Chupacabras that fed on blood” (49).

In contrast, the mid-series *Unicorn Rescue Society* novel *The Chupacabras of the Rio Grande* (Gidwitz and Bowles) positions the chupacabras as pack animals and as symbols of families separated by national borders. The chupacabras live on both sides of a fence between the sister cities of Laredo, Texas, United States and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. Society members Fauna, Uchenna, Elliot, and Jersey go to Laredo because a rancher reports a cow killed by a chupacabras. Professor Fauna theorizes that it is similar to a vampire bat because the prey would sleep and not know the chupacabras had been there to feed on it (25). He mentions the famous incident in Moca, Puerto Rico with the loss of “much livestock to a being the residents called *el*

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vampiro de Moca” (Gidwitz and Bowles 23). Fauna describes how the borders and nations of the Southwestern United States changed and how “families have members on both sides” although moving between the countries became highly regulated (27).

The representation of the chupacabras leads to a social justice message. Gidwitz and Bowles criticize restrictive immigration policies through plot and dialogue. After seeing both sides of a border wall protest, the society members meet with the Cervantes family, including siblings Mateo and Lupita, whose father is an herbalist and mother a biologist who studies the chupacabras. After being recruited by Fauna years ago, Dr. Alejandra Cervantes had renounced her URS membership because of the worry that “all interference with animals and their natural habitats is wrong” (Gidwitz and Bowles 73). Dr. Cervantes explains her research on how it is perilous for chupacabras to get separated from the pack because the juveniles would “not know how to feed properly without their parents’ guidance” (112). The animals turn out to have a trait that might be preternatural: a whistle that works by “the power of hypnosis” and allows them to drain their prey of some blood without killing it (110). Elliot and Uchenna chase down the first chupacabras, whom they nickname Choopi, and thwart the Schmoke brothers’ attempt to acquire him.

The scene at the border fence overtly reveals the social justice message of opposing border walls while listening to multiple perspectives about the border. The society members release Choopi at the border fence where a dozen of his species await him on the Mexican side, and the humans watch “the ecstatic reunion of the chupacabras family” (180). Then they see six more chupacabras on the Texas side that charge at the fence in frustration due to separation from their pack. Dr. Cervantes points out that the chupacabras live in both nations, and “for families—of chupacabras and people—borders just keep them apart” (187). It appears that the wall or fence will get trampled down by the chupacabras, yet it remains standing. The goal to remove border walls comes through to the reader. The Schmokes even have to withdraw their contract for expanding wall construction. Dr. Cervantes rejoins the society, accepting Fauna’s argument that “if humans put these creatures in danger, then it is our responsibility to help them” (73). The society gains new members, including a rancher, to work for the safety of the chupacabras. The chupacabras holds importance in their own right but also as a symbol for human conflict regarding border separations.

As these two representations demonstrate, the chupacabras is a living creature, not just a legend, and it holds powerful yet disparate meanings. In *Monster Fighter Mystery*, the chupacabras is a man turned by a chupacabras bite against his wishes into a creature who cannot resist the curse to turn at night. The experience with Mr. Calaveras teaches Vincent that legends are true. In *Unicorn Rescue Society*, the chupacabras is an animal that needs protecting and also a symbol of family members separated by national borders. This message for social justice represents the subversive

ways in which many Mexican American and other Latina and Latino authors use the chupacabras legend.

Themes Across the Fantasy Series

These series showing tween characters interacting with magical creatures contain messages of keeping a sense of wonder about the world, going beyond one's comfort zone, valuing inquiry, supporting the peer team, respecting the rights of creatures to exist, and being aware of the environment. Such themes can stick with a reader into adulthood when a series has been loved in childhood. Creature encounters show that the unexpected can be amazing, so remaining open-minded can bring delightful, if sometimes hazardous opportunities. Illustrations enhance visualization of the cryptids and human protagonists. Frequent pen-and-ink illustrations, used as full-page, half-page, and spot illustrations, make it all seem real. As important as the words, drawings by Tony DiTerlizzi, Dan Santat, Hatem Aly, and Xavier Garza bring the fantasies to life.

Tween protagonists gain agency by going beyond their comfort zones. The adolescents interact with creatures they must understand. This both empowers and burdens young people with responsibility. Interactions elevate tween power because they achieve what has to be done to help and in some cases resist the creatures. Consider the sense of accomplishment earned by Pearl and Ben when they save a dragon's life (Selfors, *Rain*), or the way Elliott must overcome his fear of "imminent death. Doom. Disaster" when around the reckless Fauna (Gidwitz and Bruchac 17). Characters steel themselves and learn to be brave because it is necessary.

Relying on peers for support is crucial in all of these series. No tween is alone in the struggle. Pearl and Ben need each other and have complementary characteristics in *Imaginary Veterinary*, as do Uchenna and Elliott in *Unicorn Rescue Society*. The new friends bond and enable one another to do the work and get through it in one piece. Likewise, the Grace and Vargas family members rely upon each other in *Spiderwick Chronicles*, and the Ventura cousins could not survive without each other's help in *Monster Fighter*. In most cases, the tween characters also have support from adults and older siblings, even as they are providing essential help to the adults.

Another theme is that these series value inquiry and knowledge. Tween protagonists investigate and study creatures in person and through scholarship. The series represent the worth of written records and research housed in libraries. Books written by in-world characters appear with Dr. Woo's book *History of Dragons* and Arthur Spiderwick's *Field Guide*. The *Proceedings of the Unicorn Rescue Society* are discussed as records of past research. Every book of *Monster Fighter Mystery* includes a chapter with the tweens conducting library research. These protagonists value the search for truth and debate the questionable accuracy of sources about mythical creatures. While it may seem contradictory that imaginary beings are depicted as real in

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books valuing sustained inquiry, this paradox is inherent to the charm of supernatural series that celebrate magic and the unknown for tween audiences.

As sasquatch characterization shows, protecting magical creatures and their habitats is part of the environmental subtext. Sasquatches, the “wildmen of the woods” are one type of the “relict hominoids” believed to have survived around the globe (Meldrum 357). In *Sasquatch and the Muckleshoot*, the native community has been buying back their stolen land, including the habitat where sasquatches reside. The nefarious Schmokes buy a logging permit but, rather than selective logging, are planning to “level the entire forest” and clear-cut Sasquatch Valley “before the tribal council has time to get a court injunction to stop them” (Gidwitz and Bruchac 93). Elliott and Uchenna help URS members Mack and Raven foil the Schmokes’ scheme to destroy the valley, and they participate in furry costume-wearing hoaxes to misdirect people into thinking that all images of the sasquatch are fake. Preserving species like the sasquatch from exposure, exploitation, and habitat loss is a recurring topic. While *Unicorn Rescue Society* depicts the sasquatch as family-oriented beings who communicate by sign language and form domestic units like humans (Gidwitz and Bruchac 82, 130), in *Imaginary Veterinary*, the sasquatch is a mysterious, playful, otherworldly creature that does not have a gender and is notorious for love of chocolate and sweet treats (Selfors, *Sasquatch*). The sasquatch is in the Worm Hospital, not a home territory, and provides crucial assistance on Pearl and Ben’s quest to help the Sugar Fairies (Selfors, *Fairy*).

Another species needing protection is the unicorn, which gets preyed upon for its special qualities. In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, a unicorn approaches Mallory Grace to communicate telepathically a series of images about what unicorns have suffered from being hunted for their horns’ healing powers (DiTerlizzi and Black, *Lucinda’s*). In *Imaginary Veterinary*, villain Maximus Steele seeks to kidnap a unicorn foal to steal its horn, but Pearl releases the trap and guides the unicorn to safety (Selfors, *Order* 157). While unicorns are not proven to exist in the present-day setting of *Unicorn Rescue Society*, the supplemental flashback chapters appended at the end of the fifth and sixth books posit unicorns as living beings. In the sixth book of *Unicorn Rescue Society*, the Schmokes pursue the spiral-horned markhor in Pakistan (Gidwitz and Khan). These fictional representations of unicorns allude to the crisis of species extinction. Many species are disappearing while cryptozoologists seek evidence of unknown species.

The series demonstrate respect for the rights of creatures to exist. The authors show that creatures are not inherently good or bad but deserve their own existence. Speculative fiction often has a theme of “environmentalism and concern for endangered species” (Hogan 179). Middle-grade literature, along with children’s and young adult literature, frequently depicts animals as “catalysts” in young people’s lives (Hogan 173). But the mystical creatures in these fantasy series are important in themselves, not only in relation to humanity. The needs of magical beings permeating the series provide an

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environmental subtext. If people could take better care of the natural environment, there would be habitat for all species. However, environmental, pro-creature connotations remain inconsistent. The series do not depict actions such as adolescents refusing to eat flesh, advocating for policy change, or working toward animal rights. These adolescents are not environmental activists. Vincent Ventura even does violence in self-defense. Nevertheless, rather than replicating the tendency from classic British youth literature of needing to “conquer” or “subdue the magical world” (Jiménez-García 133), these series show adolescents working to understand and help.

As cryptozoological care involves coexistence, *Spiderwick Chronicles* conveys a conflict because human encroachment hurt the fae and crowded them out of territory. Elf elder Lorengorm tells Jared Grace, “We make our homes in the sparse forests left to us. Soon even those will be gone” (DiTerlizzi and Black, *Lucinda’s* 85). Nick Vargas realizes wetlands need to be kept, and his father’s land development has a negative side. Nick’s search for water in which the nixies can live points to the fragility of this balance. Scholar Antje vom Lehn comments that a concern of *Spiderwick* is the question “How do both humans and other beings find a way to live peacefully alongside each other?” (74). Humanity bears a responsibility to the Earth and the creatures on it. Villainy in the series often is located within human characters guided by selfishness and greed.

The billionaire Schmoke Brothers in *Unicorn Rescue Society* and the antagonistic poacher Maximus Steele in *Imaginary Veterinary* exploit animals, humans, and nature. In both cases, these embodiments of injustice were once friends with those who trained and trusted them, Dr. Woo and Professor Fauna, but they turned against the friendship due to greed. In the fifth book of *Unicorn Rescue Society*, the Schmokes capture the sea serpent known as the mother of waters and pollute the Cuban water supply so they can force everyone to buy water from a Schmoke corporation. Elliot and Uchenna take direct action to get evidence exposing the Schmokes. They publicly reveal the scheme, get farmers and business leaders to disinvest from the Schmokes, and release the madre de aguas to freedom. The *Unicorn Rescue Society* series has a more explicitly progressive agenda than the other tween series. While Pearl and Ben in *Imaginary Veterinary* work to combat the evil designs of Maximus Steele, his villainy is individual, not connected with larger socioeconomic problems in the way that *Unicorn Rescue Society* exposes the Schmoke Brothers’ depredations and links their selfishness to systemic social ills.

In Conclusion: Series Worth Reading

Fantasy books for middle-grade readership raise the possibility that many legends and myths are true. Something special hides behind the surface of everyday life. This study has examined the trend of four middle-grade series representing magical creatures and adolescent protagonists interacting with them in *Spiderwick Chronicles*, *Imaginary Veterinary*, *Unicorn Rescue Society*, and *Monster Fighter Mystery*. The

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protagonists do their best with their interactions with magical creatures even though guidance on how to do so is uneven or absent. These magic adventure fantasy series show that a person can be afraid but take action in spite of fear. Gaining agency through adventures and risks, the human characters learn about themselves as well as the creatures. The magical creatures are beings and beasts deserving of respect. An implication is that the fates of all human and non-human animals are intertwined. The representations of the chupacabras show the power of Mexican American folklore to carry multiple meanings and to represent human concerns and social issues, including the concept of being two things at once, like Mr. Calaveras (Garza, *Chupacabras*), and of deserving to be united with one's family and loved ones, as shown by Choopi (Gidwitz and Bowles).

An ethic of cryptozoological care means having knowledge and caring for threatened creatures. Seeing mythical beings as part of a larger ecosystem involves environmental awareness. Protagonists do the right thing in their interactions with magical creatures, unlike antagonists exploiting for profit. The tween fantasy series also show the importance of inclusion, social justice, and cultural specificity. The success of such books shows publishing companies that readers want inclusive literature and that diverse fantasy books (e.g., Cordova) will be purchased and enjoyed. By uncovering patterns and themes within current tween series, this study demonstrates the value of considering books for early adolescent readers as cultural artifacts and literary texts.

Despite the appeal of cryptozoological sentiments, a limitation shall be mentioned. It is one thing to suspend disbelief and to imagine for the sake of an entertaining fictional narrative that a creature from mythology or folklore exists in the real world; yet it is another thing to believe genuinely in conspiracies and to accept misinformation as truth. As historian of science Brian Regal notes, "Belief in Bigfoot has become a part of the rejection of knowledge all too many Americans engage in over the pronouncements of 'experts'" (57). Skepticism about official knowledge can lead to denial of science and medicine. This study has a premise that representations of imaginary creatures for tween readers are not harmful or undermining of science. While there is irony in that the book series value inquiry yet display pseudoscience, early adolescent readers can distinguish between fantasy and reality. Can adults do so as well?

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¹ Authors Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black published *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You* (2005), a bestiary that describes and illustrates in full color creatures such as boggarts, trolls, goblins, kelpies, merpeople, giants, and dragons. Attesting to the authenticity of this fae world, the book is presented as the actual text used by characters, with drawings redone by Tony DiTerlizzi because the manuscript was in disrepair. Naming the creatures in English and Latin gives the *Field Guide* a scientific patina, as if "the reader can now classify the creature according to modern biological methods" (Lehn 72).