Way Back When

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First published 2021

Published by Library For All Ltd
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URL: libraryforall.org

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This book was made possible by the generous support of the Education Cooperation Program.

Original illustrations by John Robert Azuelo

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ISBN: 978-1-922550-56-9
SKU01584
Annie’s ocean stretches out as far as she can see. It sparkles in the sunlight and reflects the stars at night time. Waves whoosh and wash to the sandy shore.

But Annie’s ocean isn’t perfect. She starts to wonder was there once an ocean free of plastic waste, oils, and pollution?

Annie asks her great-grandmother.

“Great-Grandmama,” says Annie. “Tell me about your ocean.”
“Way back when I was small, my ocean was bright and fresh,” Great-Grandmama says.

Great-Grandmama’s ocean sparkled and shone. Fish swam through the water, and nets were only for catching food.

In Great-Grandmama’s ocean, dolphins raced each other in dizzy circles. Starfish got tangled in seaweed, or they didn’t get tangled at all.
The ocean isn’t like that now. Annie’s ocean twists and turns in knots of plastic mesh. Sea creatures wind through messes. They find themselves tangled and stuck.

Surely, it doesn’t have to be this way.

Annie asks her grandmother.

“Nana,” she says. “Tell me about your ocean.”
“Way back when I was small, my ocean was clear and blue,” Nana says.

Nana’s ocean glittered and glimmered. Sea lions dipped and dived through the waves, and they didn’t get caught up or trapped by waste.

In Nana’s ocean, sea turtles coated their patterned shells with seawater and sand. Seabirds flew far into the distance, heading for the horizon.
The ocean isn’t like that now. Annie’s ocean fades from blue to grey, and the waves grow dark and murky. Whales become sick when they accidentally snack on plastic waste.

Surely, it doesn’t have to be this way.

Annie asks her mother.

“Mama,” she says. “Tell me about your ocean.”
“Way back when I was small, my ocean was clean and light,” Mama says.

Mama’s ocean twinkled and tumbled. The seals hurried out to play in the rolling, crashing waves.

In Mama’s ocean, sharks swam deep beneath the waves. Jellyfish were never mistaken for a floating plastic bag.
The ocean isn’t like that now. Annie’s ocean is full of plastic waste, with things like bottles and bags. Rubbish floats along the water’s surface and outnumbers the fish. It even ends up in the fishing nets! Surely, it doesn’t have to be this way.

Does it?
Can Annie make an ocean that is bright and fresh like Great-Grandmama’s? An ocean that is clear and blue like Nana’s? An ocean that is clean and light like Mama’s?
Annie can clear the plastic and untangle the sea creatures. Annie can remind her friends and family to treat her ocean with respect. Annie can fish for food and only take as much as she needs. Annie can clean the waste and rubbish away from her ocean and the animals who call it home.
If Annie is kind, clever and committed to saving her ocean, it can recover. And one day, Annie’s children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren might ask her to tell them about her ocean.
“Way back when I was small, my ocean was polluted and filled with plastic,” Annie will say.

“But because of all I did to care for it, your ocean is bright, fresh, clear, blue, clean, and light once more.”
You can use these questions to talk about this book with your family, friends and teachers.

What did you learn from this book?

Describe this book in one word. Funny? Scary? Colourful? Interesting?

How did this book make you feel when you finished reading it?

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