

Into the Future Woods

A writing workshop on reimagining classic stories for sustainable futures



Contents

01

Intro

02

Detach

Exercises for
destabilizing your story

03

Excavate

Reflection questions to
uncover alternate
meanings

04

Amplify

Using the writer's tools
to develop alternate
meanings

05

Example

"Little Red Riding Hood"
for sustainable futures





01.

Introduction



Workshop Goal


To guide participants in creative exploration to reimagine classic stories in ways that are responsive to contemporary crises of sustainability and that move toward envisioning and enacting sustainable futures as outlined by the Earth Charter.

Participants will develop the seeds of a creative retelling of a classic story, which can be developed into a short story, novel, or another storytelling form.



First Steps

1. Choose a story to reimagine or retell. This workshop is designed for use with written stories, but can be adapted for oral or visual stories, too.
2. Read the story start-to-finish. Don't write anything yet, just get an intuitive understanding of the story.

The background is a light pink color with faint, large letters (A, B, C, D, a, b) scattered across it. There are several yellow starburst graphics. In the top left, there is a red heart. In the top right, there is a branch with green leaves and two red flowers. In the bottom right, there is a dark blue wavy shape. The text is centered in the middle of the slide.

The **detach/excavate/amplify** framework (drawn from narrative therapy) helps uncover and strengthen narratives outside of the often-damaging dominant narrative. This workshop will help you apply this framework to your chosen story, considering it from different angles and teasing out elements to weave into your retelling for a sustainable future.



02.

Detach

Exercises for destabilizing your story



Exploratory Annotation

Goal

- ★ Open dialogue with the text

Instructions

- ★ Annotate your story in an intuitive (rather than analytical) way. Be playful, speculative, questioning.

Suggestions

- Add sensory descriptions
- Bring in cultural or scientific knowledge
- Imagine backstory or worldbuilding elements
- Ask what-if questions
- Note personal responses
- Mark language that feels like it has untapped potential — places where a phrase could be explored or expanded

Logistics

- ★ Use a digital or paper copy of the story



Visual Mapping

Goal

To explore the story's dialogues and focal points

Instructions

Create a visual mapping of the story, exploring connections, movements, conflicts, and convergences between story elements.

Suggestions

You can include elements like...

- characters (human, non-human)
- settings (physical, temporal)
- actions
- plot points
- symbols
- objects
- any dialogue between humans, the more-than-human world, concepts or symbolic presences, and/or places

Logistics

Use pen and paper, a tablet, or a digital workspace like Miro



Doodling Movement

Goals

To bring your environment into conversation with the story; to recontextualize your engagement with the story

Instructions

Move through your physical environment while sketching or jotting notes as you consciously engage with aspects of the story.

Suggestions

- Use your imagination to place yourself in the story's setting, looking for connections between your space and the story's space.
- Put yourself in the shoes of a character, object, symbol, setting, etc.
- Pretend the story took place in your space, and you're a detective or archaeologist looking for its traces in your environment.

Logistics

- Larger scale: park, hiking trail, farm, city
- Smaller scale: house, classroom
- If needed, stay in your chair but consciously engage with the objects in your immediate space or the view out your window
- Draw and take notes by hand, or take photographs/videos



Speed-Round Storytelling

Goals

- To discover what you have internalized about the story; to experience the story in a dialogical mode

Instructions

Without consulting notes or taking much time to prepare, verbally (re)tell the story.

Suggestions

- Avoid memorizing the story word-for-word. Instead, tell it intuitively.
- You can incorporate movement or engage your audience with questions and direct addresses.

Logistics

Work in pairs or small groups, online or in person





03.

Excavate

Reflection questions to uncover alternate meanings



In the Excavate phase, you'll reflect on emerging alternate stories or perspectives. Try answering some or all of these questions, and also record any other reflections on what the process has uncovered:

1. What themes or narrative arcs emerge in your annotations if you consider them as a story in their own right?
2. How do you understand the characters and the story's dialogical relationships differently now?
3. What different understandings of place/space can you bring to the story?
4. Did telling the story to an audience highlight any unexpected aspects? Consider your tone, language use, where you lingered or sped up, where you diverged from the original story, and/or audience reactions.
5. List elements of the story that felt important throughout the exercises. What common themes do you notice? Which key points seem like productive sites for intervention?
6. What do the exercises reveal about assumptions inherent to the story? How might you critically examine them through the lens of the Earth Charter?
7. How do your emerging alternate versions of the story suggest new or different relationships between people, places, or concepts? Which strand of inquiry or (re)imagination is most fruitful here, if you've developed multiple strands?
8. How do the emerging alternate stories and themes connect to the Earth Charter?





04.

Amplify

Using the writer's tools to develop alternate meanings



Brainstorm how specific tools of writing craft could hone and highlight the alternate stories and ways of reimagining the original story that you've identified. If you have multiple potential directions in mind, it will be helpful to identify one direction — perhaps one that you noted in question 7 in the previous phase — to focus on for now. You can consider these writing tools, or any others:

- Setting (physical, temporal)
- Main character or protagonist
- Point of view
- Plot
- Genre
- Poetic and literary devices, including symbolism, metaphor, imagery, personification, flashback, foreshadowing, etc.





05.

"Little Red Riding Hood" for Sustainable Futures

A partial example of the workshop tools

Detach: Exploratory Annotation



LITTLE RED-CAP [LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD]

SENSORY
DESCRIPTIONS,
PERSONAL
RESPONSES,
ALTERNATE STORY
BRANCHES:

Source: Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Project Gutenberg, 2001, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2591>.

QUESTIONS:

Feeling of the cap:
the pile of the velvet;
it feels like
grandmother's love

Once upon a time there was a dear little girl who was loved by everyone who looked at her, but most of all by her grandmother, and there was nothing that she would not have given to the child. Once she gave her a little cap of red velvet, which suited her so well that she would never wear anything else; so she was always called 'Little Red-Cap.'

Smell of fresh cake.
One of those
mornings when you
can feel the heat
descending, even if
it's not oppressive
yet

One day her mother said to her: 'Come, Little Red-Cap, here is a piece of cake and a bottle of wine; take them to your grandmother, she is ill and weak, and they will do her good. Set out before it gets hot, and when you are going, walk nicely and quietly and do not run off the path, or you may fall and break the bottle, and then your grandmother will get nothing; and when you go into her room, don't forget to say, "Good morning", and don't peep into every corner before you do it.'

Courtesy to her
elders.

'I will take great care,' said Little Red-Cap to her mother, and gave her hand on it.

What is "giving her
hand on it"?

Stark divide when
you enter shadow of
the woods. It's cooler
here than on the
bare road from the
village.

The grandmother lived out in the wood, half a league from the village, and just as Little Red-Cap entered the wood, a wolf met her. Red-Cap did not know what a wicked creature he was, and was not at all afraid of him.

'Good day, Little Red-Cap,' said he.

Do wolves actually
approach humans?

'Thank you kindly, wolf.'

'Whither away so early, Little Red-Cap?'

She feels the weight
of the cake & wine
and the fabric of the
apron as she lifts it
up for the wolf to
see. The apron was
another gift from
grandmother; it also
feels like love.

'To my grandmother's.'

'What have you got in your apron?'

'Cake and wine; yesterday was baking-day, so poor sick grandmother is to have something good, to make her stronger.'

Bring grandmother
back home if she's
so sick, don't just
leave her in the
woods surrounded
by predators!

'Where does your grandmother live, Little Red-Cap?'

Oak trees are faerie
trees; are nut trees
the same? (What
kind of nuts?)

'A good quarter of a league farther on in the wood; her house stands under the three large oak-trees, the nut-trees are just below; you surely must know it,' replied Little Red-Cap.

No one said Little
Red was smart, but
surely she feels as
prickly at the back of
her neck as the wolf
trails her. Or maybe
there's a reason she
doesn't; maybe she's
been brought up not
to fear strange men
who ask her
questions and follow
her around.

The wolf thought to himself: 'What a tender young creature! what a nice plump mouthful--she will be better to eat than the old woman. I must act craftily, so as to catch both.' So he walked for a short time by the side of Little Red-Cap, and then he said: 'See, Little Red-Cap, how pretty the flowers are about here--why do you not look round? I believe, too, that you do not hear how sweetly the little birds are singing; you walk gravely along as if you were going to school, while everything else out here in the wood is merry.'

The prettiness is
overwhelming:
sunbeams
everywhere, flowers
everywhere, birds
everywhere; can't
even take a step
without stepping on
something pretty.
The flowers smell
strongly. The day is
getting warmer.

Little Red-Cap raised her eyes, and when she saw the sunbeams dancing here and there through the trees, and pretty flowers growing everywhere, she thought: 'Suppose I take grandmother a fresh nosegay; that would please her too. It is so early in the day that I shall still get there in good time'; and so she ran from the path into the wood to look for flowers. And whenever she had picked one, she fancied that she saw a still prettier one farther on, and ran after it, and so got deeper and deeper into the wood.

The house was once
neat, but now slightly
run-down, because
grandmother can't
do the upkeep
anymore

Meanwhile the wolf ran straight to the grandmother's house and knocked at the door.

'Who is there?'

'Little Red-Cap,' replied the wolf. 'She is bringing cake and wine; open the door.'

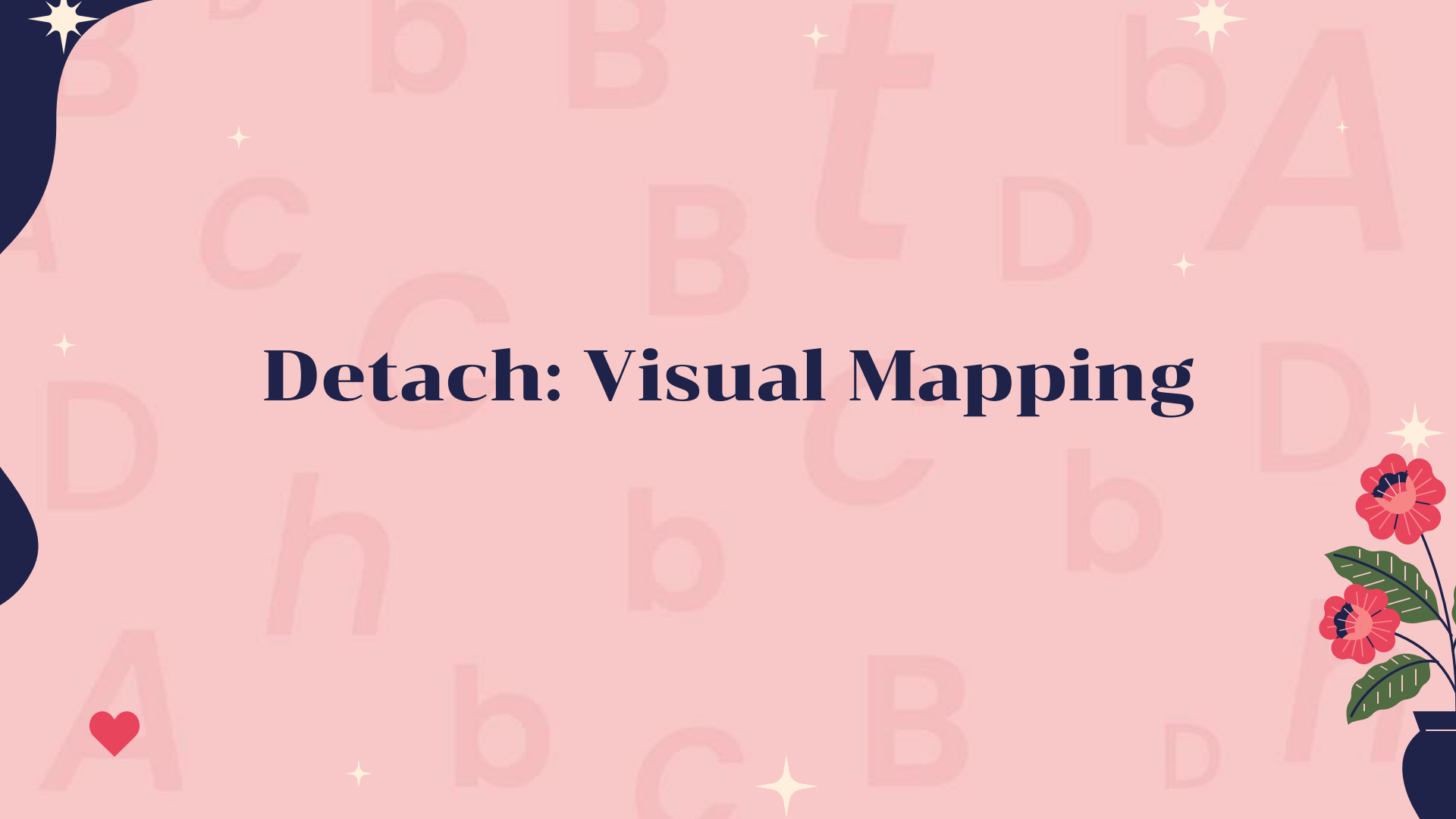
'Lift the latch,' called out the grandmother, 'I am too weak, and cannot get up.'

She has no one
living with her.
There's no
expectation of a
husband (even a
dead one). Little Red
and her mother also
live without a
husband/father. They
rarely encounter men
in daily life.

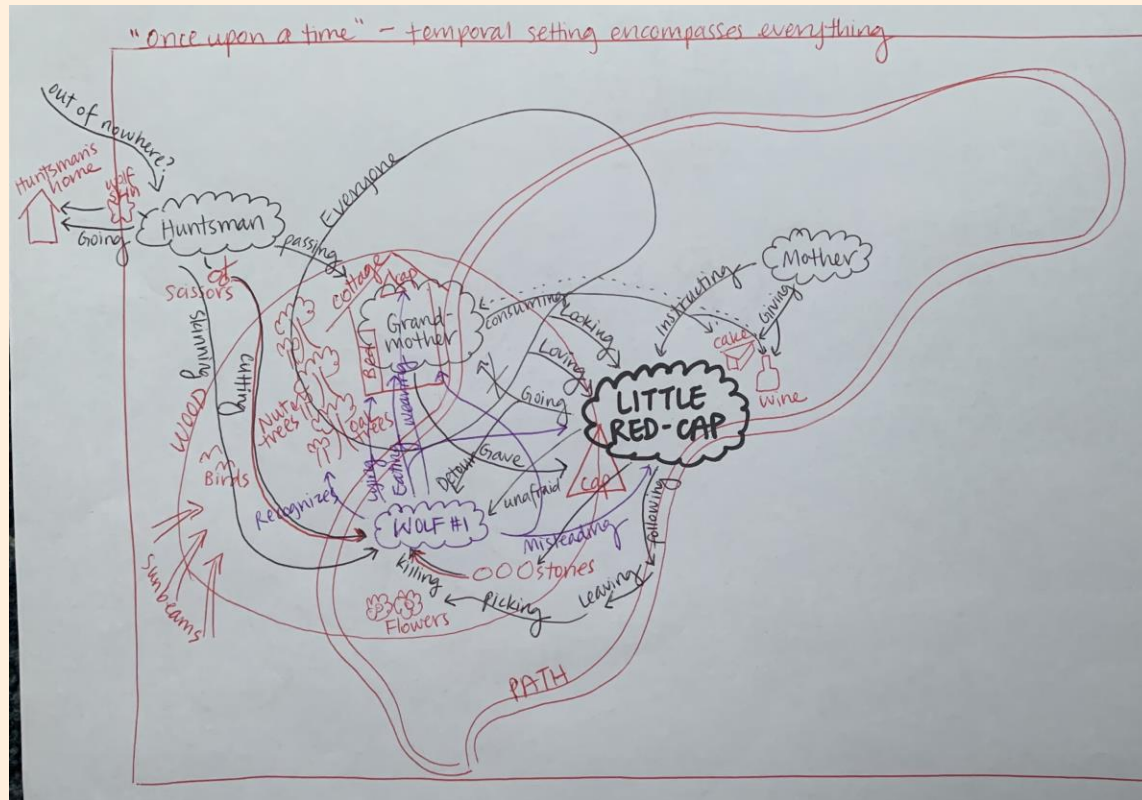
The wolf lifted the latch, the door sprang open, and without saying a word he went straight to the grandmother's bed, and devoured her. Then he put on her clothes, dressed himself in her cap laid himself in bed and drew the curtains.

Will wolves actually
eat humans?

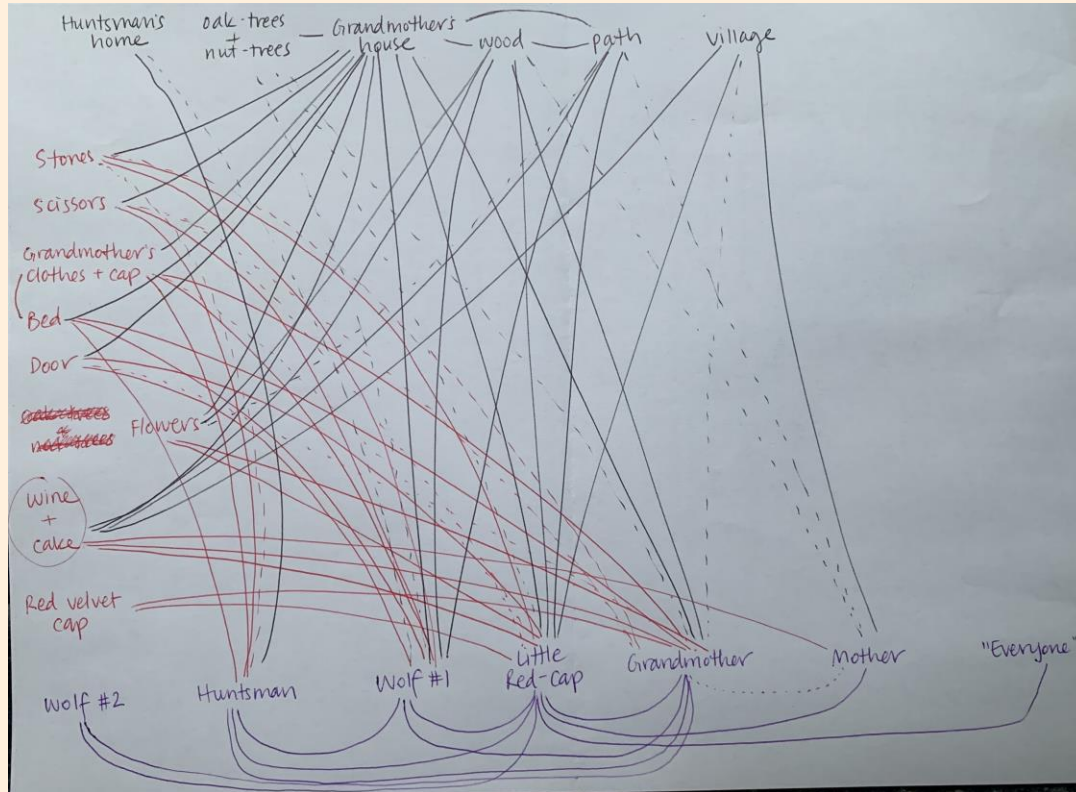
Detach: Visual Mapping



Potential Approach 1



Potential Approach 2



Detach: Doodling Movement

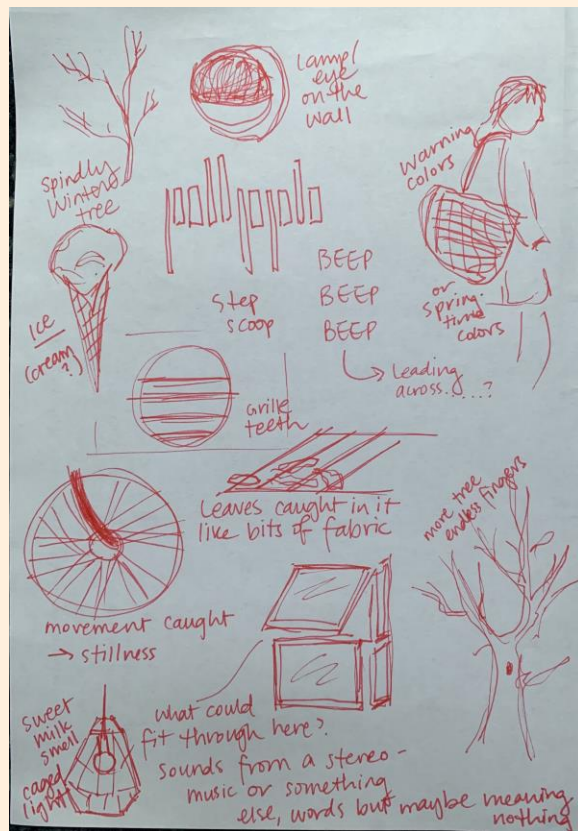
5-Minute Doodle Walk

Notes

I collected these observations in a one-block radius around my flat. I mentally placed myself into the story's setting, then wandered around, seeing what sights, sounds, and smells caught my attention, and what bits of language these sensory experiences sparked.



5-Minute Doodle Walk



Excavate

Example Reflections

Key Points

- family relationships (Little Red and grandmother; lack of relationship with mother, lack of fathers/husbands)
- questions about ecosystems and organisms
- disconnectedness of place (village vs woods vs huntsman's home)
- darkness, foreboding



Excavate

Example Reflections

New Understandings & Relationships

- Relationship between built human environments and woods (ecological, cultural/folkloric)
- More immediate scientific understanding of wolves and woods
- Families without assumption of male presence for protection or control
- Understanding of darkness (literal, cultural). Is darkness always negative?

Excavate

Example Reflections

Resonances with Earth Charter Principles

- Valuing more-than-human life (principle 1); respect for living beings (15)
- Gender equality, strengthening families (11)
- Strengthening local communities and responsibility to environment (13)
- Violence prevention (16)

Amplify

Focus: Wolves in "Little Red"

Setting

- Yellowstone National Park
when wolves were reintroduced
(or in a future when they've
grown widespread)

Main Character

- First wolf
- Second wolf (is the second
wolf related to the first?)
- The woods



Amplify

Focus: Wolves in "Little Red"

Plot

- Different ending: What would it look like to move toward a nonviolent relationship with the wolves?
- New "prequel" story that reveals how the antagonistic, violent relationship between humans and wolves developed

Amplify

Focus: Wolves in "Little Red"

Genre

- Eco horror: violence of the wolf/human conflict (situated in the wood)
- Solarpunk: imagines interconnected human-nature relationships
- Contemporary realistic: science around wolf sanctuaries, modern reintroduction efforts, scientific/cultural associations around wolves



Thank You!

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