

## Animal

**Cora Jaeger**

*Kansas State University*

### Abstract

*Tracking the depictions of animals in children's literature through history reveals not only what authors think about animals, but also what they think about the human experience and of childhood itself. As the word "animal" can be used both to mark the similarities and the differences between beasts and men, it makes sense then that animals depicted in children's literature may do the same. Animals in children's literature may be wholly animalistic, they may act as symbols, they may traipse around in human clothes and perform human actions, or they may also represent racial and other differences. Similarly, child characters may be so feral they act as animals or desire to be one. Considering such depictions of animals (and animalistic children) in children's literature provides the opportunity for thinking about how children understand and negotiate their identities in the world.*

*Keywords: animal studies, animal symbolism, humanizing child readers, human experience, racialized animals*

Cora Jaeger is a M.A. student studying English with a concentration in children's literature at Kansas State University. She also obtained her B.S. in Elementary Education at Kansas State University. Her research interests include representations of animals in children's and adolescent literature, literary maps, and using real-world pedagogical tools to measure representations of learning and knowledge in texts.

Email: [cmjaeger@ksu.edu](mailto:cmjaeger@ksu.edu)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) defines “animal” as “a living organism which feeds on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organs and a nervous system and able to respond rapidly to stimuli; any living creature, including man.” With origins from both French and Latin, the word “animal” as a noun first appeared in English in the twelfth century. By the mid 1500’s it was used to describe a person who is either “stupid or uncouth” (OED). The definition of “animal” crosses boundaries between man and beast in the way it began to be used as an adjective in the late sixteenth century, where, among other meanings, it described the way a human acts or functions in an animalistic fashion. French philosopher Jacques Derrida directly engaged with this ongoing issue in 1997 when he “outlined one of the problems facing post humanist humanity . . . what is it that defines the human as human (as opposed to animal, machine, and so on)?” (Fudge, 2002, p. 63). In response to these musings, Zoe Jacques (2015) stated that “negotiations of the animal within children’s fiction, as Derrida had hinted, are as complex as those found within any animal studies philosophy” (p. 105). Ultimately, the fine lines tracing the distinctions between humans and animals speak to the complex roles animals have held in children’s literature.

Though young children learning to read and infants with emerging literacy skills are also learning about what it means to be human through their interactions with literature, an overwhelming number of children’s books predominantly feature animals rather than humans. Leonard S. Marcus (1983) hypothesizes the distancing between people and nature in the mid-nineteenth century influenced the general market for children that capitalized on the desire to maintain a bond between child and animal. This desire for a bond has even affected literary critics, an issue noted by Amy Ratelle (2014) as she explores the ways in which critics working with E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952) struggle to view the farm animals simply as animals. Instead, “most analyses of the text retain the practice of seeing the animal body as a stand-in for human values, emotions, and experiences” (Ratelle, 2014, p. 327). Animals in children’s literature offer the experience to wander back into the uncannily familiar bond we have with nature, whether it be through depictions of animal experiences or animal symbolism.

In children’s literature, no matter how animalistic the animal character behaved, the narrative point was directed towards educating or humanizing child readers. Early animal compendiums for children featured extensive and thoughtful moral centric explorations of all non-exotic animals (Ritvo, 1985). Exotic animals offered limited lessons, whereas “domestic animals symbolized appropriate and inappropriate relationships between human masters and servants” (Ritvo, 1985, p. 85). Domestic animals in compendiums provided the opportunity for children to learn about their physical attributes as well as their morality, according to their role in serving humans. During the Victorian period, “the similarities between animals and people made it possible to teach children lessons about hierarchy and power that might have been unpleasant, even frightening if expressed directly. . . Only animals that had been humanized and sentimentalized could be admitted into Victorian nurseries as teachers” (Ritvo, 1985, p. 90). Whereas domestic animals in children’s literature can offer moral lessons through their service to humans, exotic animals buck the system through their distance from human society and thus their distance from the human experience.

The blurring of the boundaries between animal and human nature in children’s literature has a significant history, beginning with myths and folktales that invoked animal characters. In *Aesop’s Fables*, for instance, animal characters embody moral lessons. Though philosopher John Locke endorsed *Aesop’s Fables* for both child and adult readers, in his *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) they were ultimately “the only suitable reading matter for children he can find to recommend” (Cosslett, 2006, p. 10). Fables and their employment of animals to teach human

lessons ground a larger and lasting tradition within children's literature. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and the *Just So Stories* (1902) feature fables and origin stories respectively. Exploring both, Dieter Petzold (1987) notes how the animals in Kipling's works are at once animals *and* humans. One might wonder if Kipling's ability to capture his characters as both animal *and* human is part of the consequences of gifting animals with consciousness. Petzold (1987) seems to understand this on a level, noting that "humans and animals are subject to the same simple order, so that there is no real distinction between our all-too-human cousins and our all-too-beastly selves" (p. 19). While animals in children's literature might be difficult to read as truly "animal" given their humanization and their creation by human authors, the issue is perhaps negated by the fact that it is children rather than animals who are the consumers of this literature.

As well as ascribing human consciousness to animals, animals who are a part of the strong anthropomorphic tradition in children's literature are unable to escape humanization in once they walk upright, wear clothes, or speak. Perhaps one of the finest examples of this lies in Beatrix Potter's many works where animals perform all three modes of behaviour. In *Peter Rabbit* (1902), the rabbits are anthropomorphic and act as a family unit with human-like rituals. Most importantly, Peter Rabbit himself is in the most danger when he enters Mr. McGregor's vegetable garden to do just what rabbits do best: nibble on vegetables. Other humanized and anthropomorphic animals such as those who feature in Richard Scarry's *Best Word Book Ever* (1963) are human in all but species. They drive cars, brush their teeth, and deliver mail. With humanized animals in mind, it is helpful to consider Marian Scholtmeijer's idea that the truth of nonhuman animals is that "they are the 'blank paper' on which human beings write messages to themselves" (as cited in Walsh, 2003, p. 159). Humanizing animal characters simultaneously socializes children and teaches them to put aside childish and thus animalistic behaviour.

The relationship between human and animal in children's literature unfortunately becomes problematic when considered alongside the way it has been used to dehumanize real people. Frequently, children's literature has featured racialized animals, where the animals themselves take on stereotypical traits of marginalized groups of people. Perhaps more often, the civilization of animals mirrors the desired western civilization of people. Books like Jean De Brunhoff's *The Story of Babar* (1934) and Margaret and H. A. Rey's *Curious George* (1941) both feature jungle characters who must in some way integrate into human society in order to find success. This use of animals as a substitute for lessons of treatment or socialization of marginalized people demonstrates a complex history of racialized animals in children's literature.

In the case of texts featuring children who act wild and reject their humanity, the child characters are either liberated through their non-conforming animalistic behaviour or they are shameful and must be redeemed. Specifically, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) may find some of its success in the way the text leaves it up to readers to decide the significance of Max's wild rumpus. Should it be celebrated as an act of liberation or should it be exercised out of him in order for Max to return home as an obedient boy? Max's story is arguably linked to the long tradition of stories featuring feral children, in which "wildness was no longer a liability but an asset" (Kidd, 2004, p. 6). Alternatively, Emily Hughes' *Wild* (2013) points a clearer finger towards the rewards of animalistic behaviour. *Wild* not only raises questions of nature versus nurture, it also prompts consideration of who is really "animal". Is it the creatures who raised her or the ones who attempt to civilize her? Each option, either animal child as liberated or animal child as misbehaving, yields the opportunity to consider how children's literature positions the agency of the child characters.

The agency of the child is perhaps best demonstrated in children's literature which features

children who are, in a way, animals. For example, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) features characters with physical manifestations of their inner-selves called "dæmons". These dæmons can shift into a variety of animal forms until the human they are paired with reaches adulthood. While true shapeshifting characters (people who can turn into animals) typically play the trickster role in literature, they may also demonstrate the agency of individuals and the blurriness of their identities. In the case of child shapeshifters, the child and the animal identities have blurred so far that they have become one. Perhaps, this itself is representative of the distinct blurriness of what constitutes childhood. The titular heroine of Noelle Stevenson's graphic novel *Nimona* (2015) is a shapeshifter who significantly blurs numerous boundaries between child and adult, good and evil, human and animal. While *Nimona* and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy raise questions regarding the boundaries or lack thereof between child and animal, they also prompt readers to consider actual children as shapeshifters. Children, learning to negotiate their identities and their place in the world, continuously shapeshift and grow to meet the demands of society. Identifying the animal in us all allows us the opportunity to explore these expectations, shapeshift our identities, and rise to meet them.

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