

Animal Protagonists in Children's Literature

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## Abstract

Animal protagonists, although a rare sight in adult novels, have been a staple in the childhood literary canon for centuries. A majority of the all-time bestselling books for children in both early and middle childhood contain animal characters, with a large percentage containing at least one animal protagonist. This paper seeks to examine two research questions:

- 1) Why do authors prefer animal protagonists to human protagonists if the desired emotional connection is a human one?
- 2) What is the purpose of placing childhood themes in an animalized literary context?

The paper provides a close reading of many popular children's texts, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *They All Saw a Cat*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Pokey Little Puppy*, *Black Beauty*, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, and *El Deafo*, among many others. Books were chosen for analysis based on their embodiment of popular literary themes, as well as their general popularity, sales, and awards won. An effort was made to include popular books written during different time periods. The paper includes supporting research from published books, literary criticisms, websites, journal articles, and newspaper articles.

Keywords: English, education, childhood education, early childhood education, animal protagonists, children's literature, children's books, animal stories, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Story of Babar: The Little Elephant*, *They All Saw a Cat*, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, *The Pokey Little Puppy*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Black Beauty*, *The Rainbow Fish*, *The Berenstain Bears' New Baby*, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, *El Deafo*, *Arthur's Nose*

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### **Introduction: Prevalence of the Underdog**

Children's books tend to overwhelmingly celebrate the underdog—or, in some cases, the undermouse, the underbird, and his other animal friends. Animal protagonists, although a rare sight in adult novels, have been a staple in the childhood cannon for well over a century. In fact, a *Publisher's Weekly* article from 2001 reveals that a majority of all-time bestselling children's books are about animals—at the time of publication, *The Poky Little Puppy*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* held the top three spots, selling a combined total of over 30 million copies (Turvey, 2001). Early childhood classrooms in particular are teeming with animal stories; just ask the researchers who conducted a survey of preschools and found that “Animals are the topic of three out of five picture books” (as cited in Melson, 2001, p. 14). Evidence of child-interest seems to support these publishing trends—when the researchers above asked teachers to choose their preschoolers' ten favorite books, “all ten featured animals, usually humanized or fantasy creatures, as main characters” (as cited in Melson, 2001, p. 14). The lasting popularity of childhood classics *The Cat in The Hat*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *Curious George*, among many others, speaks to the strong connection between early readers and animal protagonists. While books written for upper-elementary children have a reputation for exploring more complex themes than those written for younger children, animals still appear frequently. This is true even for children who have transitioned away from picture books in favor of minimally illustrated chapter books. Researchers Randall Lockwood and Frank Ascione noted the following patterns related to fourth-grade textbook publication:

As the reading level gets more difficult and the target audience older, animals appear more realistically, and overall their presence slightly declines. Even so, nearly a third of the stories in fourth-grade school readers published in the United States from 1900-1970

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have animal characters, and half of them are the main protagonists. (as cited in Melson, 2001, p. 14)

Students and teachers alike have embraced these trends, as animal-focalized novels like *The Tale of Despereaux* have become popular read-alouds in upper-elementary classrooms.

Books, both illustrated and non-illustrated, depend on a reader's relationship with characters in order to be successful. Whether a reader is intended to feel empathy or anger, love or disgust, he or she must feel some sort of emotional connection to the protagonist. Why then do authors prefer animal protagonists to human protagonists if the desired emotional connection is a human one? What is the purpose of placing childhood themes in an animalized literary context? The short answer is that children prefer it this way. Since the early days of psychoanalysis, those studying child development have prescribed to a general theory that "children tend to identify as much, or more, with animal figures than with human figures, and that this process of animal identification decreases with age" (Boyd, 1955, p. 367). That is, children are able to see themselves in animal characters in a way that adults simply do not. Research appears to support this hypothesis. In one study, for example, third-graders who heard stories featuring animal characters and identical stories featuring human characters substituted for the animals preferred the animal stories by a margin of 3:1 (Boyd, 1955). In another, children aged between five and ten were able to create more complex stories using animal characters than peer-aged human characters (Bills, 1950).

There is no shortage of evidence to suggest that animal-focalized books allow children to explore childhood themes in a relatable way. However, the evidence concerning exactly how animal stories achieve this relatability differs based on the themes themselves. This paper seeks

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to examine how the inclusion of animal characters in books aimed at preschool and elementary school aged children helps to present popular literary themes in a relatable way.

### **Growth: Animal Stories as Microcosms of Maturation**

Childhood, as we all know, is a time of exceptional development. During the preschool and elementary school years, children transition from toddlers, who are dependent on adults for nearly every aspect of life, to preteens, who are able to demonstrate responsibility, autonomy, and leadership in daily activities. Thus, it should come as no surprise that underlying themes of growth and maturation are present throughout much of the childhood literary canon. Take, for example, Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), a best-selling picture book that documents one caterpillar's growth and eventual metamorphosis into a butterfly. The caterpillar begins the story as a "tiny and very hungry" hatchling, immediately exploring the world around him in search of food (Carle, 1969, p. 3-4). Although his food consumption increases with the turn of each page, his appetite is never satiated; he remains in a state of constant hunger until the caterpillar stage of his life is complete. This narrative, while minimalistic, parallels a hunger for new experiences characteristic of early childhood. Much like the caterpillar in Carle's story, human children have an innate desire to consume the world around them, and what they consume becomes the basis for their future growth.

To a certain degree, even very young children understand that their daily experiences will eventually culminate in becoming *something*—ask any child what they want to be when they grow up and they will have a prepared response. However, these same children are typically unable to conceptualize a logical path from what they are to what they one day hope to be.

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According to Bruno Bettelheim's teachings on externalization, young children lack the ability to discern reality from fiction. He writes the following:

A young child's mind contains a rapidly expanding collection of often ill-assorted and only partially integrated impressions: some correctly seen aspects of reality, but many more elements completely dominated by fantasy. Fantasy fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information. (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 61)

Young children find comfort in their own perceptions and impressions, not in logical reasoning. This aspect of child development is, perhaps, one of the reasons for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar's* overwhelming success as a children's story. While adult readers view the life cycle of a caterpillar and the life cycle of a human as incompatible journeys, young children do not make the same distinction. When the caterpillar eventually transforms into "a beautiful butterfly," a creature that children have been socialized to associate positively with, they are able to take comfort in his growth (Carle, 1969, p. 23). Arguably, this comfort is greater than that which a human-focalized story could ever provide, since children all have different perceptions of what it means to be a growing child and where the journey ought to end. Simply put, a child reader can be comforted in the caterpillar's growth because the caterpillar becomes something that the universal child perceives to be good. On the other hand, a child may not be equally comforted by reading about another child's growth because the character may not grow to fit the reader's perception of what he should become. In Eric Carle's own words, "[*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*] is a story of hope. The story says that you, too, little caterpillar, can grow up and spread your wings and fly into the wide world" (*Instructor*, 2014). It is this impressionistic reassurance that draws children to the story.

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In contrast to the lighthearted representation of growth in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Jean De Brunhoff's classic book *The Story of Babar: The Little Elephant* (1931) takes a much darker approach. Babar, the aptly named elephant protagonist, first appears as a baby in the care of a loving mother. However, Babar's mother is soon killed by a hunter, a death that Babar is forced to witness. It is this event, as opposed to a natural progression through the life stages, that pushes the young elephant into an adult role. Brunhoff's depiction of such a sudden and morbid parental death, while unsettling, is not unusual within the realm of children's media—Cinderella, Bambi, Nemo, Harry Potter, Batman, and a host of other popular characters would certainly be able to commiserate with Babar. This trope, both in *The Story of Babar* and the other examples mentioned above, feeds off of childhood separation anxiety. According to Bettelheim, "There is no greater threat in life than that we will be deserted, left all alone. Psychoanalysis has named this—man's greatest fear—separation anxiety; and the younger we are, the more excruciating is our anxiety when we feel deserted" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 145). For most children, the idea of growing older invokes a complex mix of emotion. They desire increased autonomy, but also fear a departure from their parents' custody. *The Story of Babar* brings this fear to life, as Babar is left to fend for himself after his mother's death. Babar himself is cognizant of how suddenly his childhood was ripped away from him. While Babar establishes a new and relatively successful life in a faraway town, "[he] is not quite happy ... He often stands at the window, thinking sadly of his childhood, and cries when he remembers his mother" (Brunhoff, 1931, p. 22). In fact, it is not until Babar is able to return home to the forest that he is able to feel true happiness again.

Babar's initial foray into adulthood is not one of free will. It is an external force—the hunter and his gun—that propels the elephant into his next stage of life. This is consistent with literary analysis indicating that "in almost all of the animal biographies and novels, the world

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animals live in is controlled by or tremendously influenced by human beings” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 21). Like children in an adult world, animal protagonists often have their futures shaped by the actions of adult humans. In children’s books, “the relationship [between animals and humans] is [mostly] positive, involving the growth of trust, dependence companionship ... even a redemption—to the animal, the human, or both. But it may be a negative connection, involving the wild animal’s well-deserved fear of the human” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 22). In *The Story of Babar*, a negative animal-human connection is definitely present. The hunter’s actions caused Babar to fear for his own life and flee the forest. While he does successfully escape from the hunter, he does not escape from the control of adult society; the town, after all, is filled with humans. Despite being an elephant, Babar is made to wear clothing, walk on two legs, study, live in a townhouse, and generally conform to societal expectations—an idea made all the more ridiculous by Brunhoff’s illustrations.

For most of his life, Babar is not able to make his own choices concerning his transition into adulthood. However, toward the end of the story, Babar is visited by two of his cousins and chooses to return to the forest with them. Here, he is instantly accepted as he is by the other elephants and forest animals. From his return onward, Babar is depicted and described through positive connections. He becomes a friend to all creatures, a king to the elephants, and even a husband to his cousin Celeste, all of which makes him “very happy” (Brunhoff, 1931, p. 54). After years of separation from the animal world, Babar is finally able to reembrace the community he fled as a child. In doing so, his character shows child readers that it is possible to take control of life transitions, even if they have been previously forced by extenuating circumstances. According to Bettelheim, “the ultimate consolation is that we should never be

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deserted” (1976, p. 145). When Babar returns home, he realizes that his lack of parents does not mean he is alone, a mature perspective that evidences his growth.

### **New Perspectives: Animal Stories and Objectivity**

Psychologically speaking, children are egocentric creatures. Very young children, such as those in preschool and kindergarten, are generally unable to distinguish points of view. That is, “the egocentric child assumes that other people see, hear, and feel exactly the same as the child does” (McLeod, 2014). Even older children, those in middle childhood and above, sometimes struggle to empathize with others. These difficulties can be traced to what psychologists have termed theory of mind—“the simultaneous recognition that there is a single reality but that different people, or the same people at different times, may have different representations of that reality” (Frye, 2004, p. 4). Unlike algebraic facts or English definitions, children may not learn theory of mind by having it explained to them. Instead, they must learn it themselves by being presented with situations requiring its use. Children’s books, which show characters’ reactions to various symbols, settings, and situations, provide the perfect introduction to perspective. This is particularly true for books including animals, which often use illustrations and/or narrative voice to present common creatures in ways that children wouldn’t ordinarily perceive them.

Brendan Wenzel’s *They All Saw a Cat* (2016), for example, uses a domestic cat to show that who/what we are can impact even our most basic perceptions of those around us. The story itself begins in a child’s perspective, telling readers, “*the child* saw A CAT [sic]” (Wenzel, 2016, p. 4). This phrase is accompanied by an illustration of the cat as perceived by the child—a smiling, affectionate, cute, and nonthreatening creature. The image is one that most children can easily relate to. By introducing the cat in this context, Wenzel creates an opportunity for child

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readers to consider how they would view the animal. According to Janet Alsup’s article “It’s Raining Cats and Dogs in Children’s Books,” “A child seeing a dog or cat in a book might immediately lead to recognition, as the child sees something familiar in a text, something that looks like his or her own life or home (Alsup, 2014, p. 1). In *They All Saw a Cat*, the child is used as a plot device to introduce a familiar point of view, one which is challenged by the other creatures who see the cat. The mouse, who appears a few pages later, perceives the same cat as giant, ferocious, and threatening. The goldfish, looking out of a bowl, sees the cat as a blurry set of eyes. The bat sees the cat only as a series of spots sensed through echolocation. Outside of the book’s context, a young child would not recognize Wenzel’s illustrations as representations of the same creature—his or her underdeveloped theory of mind would not consider the role of perspective. However, *They All Saw a Cat* strings each representation together, as Wenzel shows and describes the cat walking from one creature to another. The cat, a familiar object, “becomes[s] a gateway into a vicarious narrative world, opening the child’s mind and emotions to new people, places, and ideas” (Alsup, 2014, p. 1). The inclusion of an animal helps make perspective, an abstract concept, accessible for young children.

*The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (1989), Jon Scieszka’s adaption of the similarly named fable, also uses animal characters to show the effects of perspective. In this case, the entire story is focalized through the wolf (traditionally portrayed as a villain) who destroyed the homes of and subsequently ate two of the little pigs. Formatted as spoken dialogue from “Alexander T. Wolf,” the book begins by stating the following:

Everybody knows the story of the Three Little Pigs. Or at least they think they do. But I’ll let you in on a little secret. Nobody knows the real story, because nobody has ever

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heard *my* side of the story ... I don't know how this whole Big Bad Wolf thing got started, but it's all wrong. (Scieszka, 1989, p. 1-2)

Immediately, readers are alerted that the text will provide an alternative account of the popular fable, an account that portrays the wolf's recollection and perception of events. The wolf's story is predictably biased in his favor—his huffing and puffing is reduced to an allergic reaction, the first pig is dead before he even arrives, and the third pig provokes him by insulting his grandmother. He is treated as a sympathetic narrator, and his carnivorous tendencies are treated as a natural expression of his wolf-ness. Assuming that child readers are familiar with the original fable, Scieszka's book presents a point of view that is likely quite different from their own. The very existence of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* forces readers to consider the influence of narrative bias on stories, a thought process that challenges the childhood tendency toward egocentrism. Even if readers do not believe the wolf's recollection of events as truth—and they likely will not—they must still consider why his version of the story differs so greatly from the original. The answer, at least partly, lies in the space between human and animal rationality.

As part of a published lecture on the topic of animality, J.M Coetzee once stated, “rational accounts are merely a consequence of the human mind ... animals have their own accounts in accordance with the structure of their own minds” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 91). If one follows Coetzee's train of thought, a wolf is a perfect vessel for teaching children how innate qualities can affect someone's (or something's) point of view. For example, a child is inclined to see wolves as bad creatures because they are carnivores who pose a threat to both humans and domesticated animals (like the pigs in the story). However, a wolf would not view these qualities negatively, but instead as neutral representations of wolf-ness. To a wolf, predatory behavior is

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as normal as supermarket shopping is to humans. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, the wolf's narrative bias is tied to his non-human status. At one point, for instance, he states, "Hey, it's not my fault wolves eat cute little animals like bunnies and sheep and pigs. That's just the way we are" (Scieszka, 1989, p. 3). Here, children are presented with the idea that dichotomies, such as that between cute animals and walking food, are subjectively constructed. This presentation, however passive and subconscious it may be, informs their developing theory of mind.

Not all animal stories that offer an alternative perspective do so by focalizing the narrative through any character at all. Instead, some authors chose to present the idea of perspective by utilizing an omnipotent narrator. Such is the case in Arnold Lobel's classic book *Frog and Toad are Friends* (1970), which presents a series of short stories about two aptly named anthropomorphized best friends. While each short story has an entirely different plot, the majority of them provide snapshots into the daily (and relatively mundane) lives of the protagonists. As characters, Frog and Toad do not actually do very much of interest—they mail letters, go swimming, lose buttons, and live overall trivial lives (Lobel, 1970). So, then, why has *Frog and Toad* maintained such popularity over decades of literary history? One answer is that the book's omnipotent perspective and simple plot lines allow readers to turn the book into whatever they want or need it to be at the time of reading. In "Animal Antics in Children's Literature," Pauline Zeece hypothesizes, "Perhaps young listeners and readers are drawn to animal stories and characters because they are afforded opportunities to study themselves at a safe distance" (Zeece, 1998, p. 35). In the case of *Frog and Toad*, the narration carries with it a sense of objectivity; there is no established antagonist, prevailing moral system, or authorial analysis of character behavior. Because of this, young readers do not have to contend with a

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personal bias that differs from their own in order to insert themselves into the story. Frog and Toad can be whoever the child needs them or wants them to be at the time of the reading. Their animality makes this process all the more easier, as they are from species relatively free from literary tropes. It is difficult for human characters to appear textually neutral, but frogs and toads are relatively unburdened by meta-textual associations.

### **Trust: Animals and Children as Dependent Parties**

Children, particularly those elementary school-aged and younger, are largely dependent on those around them. While the parameters of this dependency remain controversial, nearly everyone can agree that children require some level of physical and emotional support from the adults in their lives. This is especially true in the United States, where childhood is viewed as a distinct stage of life separate from adulthood. In *Why the Wild Things Are*, researcher Gail Melson further explains our national perception of childhood:

The image of contemporary childhood in the United States and other industrialized countries portrays children on the receiving end of care and nurture. Depending on one's perspective, that vast undertaking called childrearing—equal parts child protection, safety, stimulation, education, and training—is the province of parents, teachers, communities, government, and society at large. (Melson, 2001, p. 51-2)

The child/adult relationship outlined above shows an obvious power imbalance. Children, in their early lives, rarely occupy a position of individual power within society. However, there is one important exception to this rule—the relationship between children and (nonthreatening) animals. In a typical Western family, domestic animals are the only creatures that children can relate to in a caregiving role. Children feed, groom, entertain, and protect animals in way that

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parallels adult caregiving responsibilities; animals must trust their owners in the same way that children must trust their guardians. According to Melson, "When asked to tell us about their pets, children often begin by explaining the ways they take care of them ... What is remarkable about the theme of nurturing pets is how seldom children employ this vocabulary of caregiving when they talk about other children, parents, siblings, friends, relatives, or teachers" (Melson, 2001, p. 51). Thus, animal protagonists provide a perfect lens through which to explore trust relationships in children's literature. Since children already associate animals with human dependence, it is easy for them to accept stories where animal characters must trust their lives to humans. These stories, in turn, can be related back to their own childhood experiences.

Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941), for example, uses a family of ducks to reaffirm the trust that child readers have for police officers. In the book, the mother duck, Mrs. Mallard, and her eight ducklings attempt to cross a busy highway, which almost results in their being run over by a series of speeding cars. However, the family is saved when Michael, a local police officer, "plant[s] himself in the center of the road, raise[s] one hand to stop the traffic, and then beckon[s] with the other, the way policemen do, for Mrs. Mallard to cross over (McCloskey, 1941, p. 31). Michael's actions allow the ducks to cross unharmed, reinforcing that the family was indeed correct to trust in his guidance. To young readers, the entire scenario is quite a relatable one—how many times, after all, has the average child been lectured on the dangers of stepping into traffic? Like children, the ducks in the story cannot cross the street unaided. The ducklings, too young to fly, require the protection of a designated caregiver in order to successfully navigate their way across a town. It is important to note that these young ducklings are not treated as individually developed characters, but rather referred to only within the context of the pack. Famous French literary theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix

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Guattari have theorized that humans are able to share in an animal experience, rather than simply imitate it, only when they are able to understand the multiplicity behind that experience. They write, "A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity ... Virginia Woolf experiences herself not as a monkey or a fish but as a troop of monkeys, a school of fish, according to her variable relations of becoming with the people she approaches" (Deleuze, 2007, p. 39). In simpler terms, there is a shared experience among animals of the same species, and a person must embody that same shared experience in order to fully relate to the animal in question. *Make Way for Ducklings* presents the shared experience of ducklings to be one characterized by vulnerability and trust, two qualities also embodied by children. Whether consciously or unconsciously, child readers will be able to recognize the ducks' fear of being hurt on their journey and their relief at the protection supplied by the police. "The pack," according to Deleuze and Guattari, "is simultaneously an animal reality, and the reality of the becoming-animal of the human being" (Deleuze, 2007, p. 42). The ducks portrayed in the book require protection, which the adults are intrinsically motivated to give them. This is both the ducks' animal reality and the child reader's actual reality, and in either case the result is increased trust in adult guardians.

A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) also showcases the trust relationship between animals and humans. Pooh, the book's main protagonist and namesake character, often finds himself in need of assistance throughout his journeys in the Hundred Acre Wood. While Pooh has many animal friends within the wood, it is his single human friend, a child named Christopher Robin, who acts as his main source of support. When Pooh floats away on a balloon, it is Christopher Robin who pops the balloon and lowers him to safety; when Pooh gets stuck in Rabbit's front door, it is Christopher Robin who leads Rabbit's friends in pulling him out; when

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Pooh cannot put his boots on for the Expedition, it is Christopher Robin who pushes them on. Whenever anything goes wrong for Pooh (and, by extension, his woodland friends), the young boy is there to help. This pattern is made all the more interesting by *Winnie-the-Pooh's* meta-textual elements—the main narrative is contextualized within the novel as a story told by a father to his son (Christopher Robin) and his stuffed bear (Winnie-the Pooh). Essentially, the main narrative is written for a quasi-real boy named Christopher Robin, while also featuring a prominent character by the same name. Thus, *Winnie-the-Pooh* shows the author's take on how a young child would want to see himself in his own fantasy world.

In the words of Melson, “young children graft animals into their inner worlds and themselves into the imagined worlds of animals because of fundamental cognitive and emotional immaturity. Unable to sustain the intricacies of human friendships, a first-grader takes Winnie the Pooh for temporary best pal” (Melson, 2001, p. 158). *Winnie-the-Pooh* reflects this grafting twofold—Christopher Robin is able to insert Pooh into his life as a real creature and insert himself into the Hundred Acre Wood in order to bond with Pooh. Christopher Robin goes on to establish a relationship with his stuffed bear that mimics the hierarchal structure of a child/pet relationship; this, in turn, mimics the structure of an adult/child relationship. He is presented as the most capable resident of the wood, and is unquestionably trusted by its residents. He acts as a positive influence on his animal friends, who look up to him like he looks up to his father. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim writes, “When realistic stories are combined with ample and psychologically correct exposure to fairy tales, then the child receives information which speaks to both parts of his budding personality—the rational and the emotional” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 54). Rationally, the boy understands that the given narrative is a product of imagination, a way to

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emulate the behavior of his father. Emotionally, however, the narrative allows Christopher Robin to form a positive emotional connection with Pooh and his friends.

Much like *Winnie-the-Pooh*, E.B. White's bestselling novel *Charlotte's Web* (1952) explores the power dynamics between children and their adult caregivers. Throughout the story, Wilbur, the pig protagonist, finds his health and wellbeing are contingent upon the protection of others. His childlike dependency necessitates the existence of a maternal figure, and Fern, already established as Wilbur's initial savior, is quick to take on the role. Thus, White establishes a mother and child bond between the two characters. Developmental psychologists recognize the importance of such bonds between children and their animals, as they allow children to better understand their own family structures—"The 'one down' position of a pet as the only family member whom a child owns, coupled with the animal's constant presence and apparent responsiveness, makes it an ideal 'transitional object,' a being who can represent a child's wishes without fear of contradiction" (Melson, 2001, p. 17). In this sense, children are able to relate to both Wilbur and Fern as characters, comparing their own relationships to those portrayed in the book. Perhaps most importantly, Wilbur's expedited growth process (pigs, after all, take much less time to mature than human babies), helps children to see what Lucy Rollin calls the "essentially asymmetrical" bond between mother and child from an outside perspective; she notes, "a child's relationship to its mother is exclusive, whereas a mother's to her child is informed by many other concerns" (Rollin, 1990, p. 43). While Wilbur's early days are defined by Fern's presence, Fern has school and family duties that keep her away from him for extended periods of time. As Wilbur grows older, these periods of separation grow longer, until Wilbur is moved to a new farm altogether. Wilbur internalizes this move as one of maternal abandonment—readers are presented with a protagonist who feels "friendless, dejected, and

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hungry” and “[doesn't] know whether he [can] endure the awful loneliness anymore” (White, 1952, p. 30-1). Even though Wilbur is surrounded by other animals in the barn, they are unable to provide him the same level of comfort as his child former-owner. Children reading this scene are able to feel for both mother and child, since the mother character is still a child herself and thus still relatable. Aware of contextual details that Wilbur is not, they understand that Fern's gradual separation from him is inevitable and ultimately for the best. After all, “the child is in touch with animals, but only while she is a child” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 25). By using an animal figure to represent the novel's coming of age character, White is able to explore a universal truth—the progressive separation of mother and child into independent beings—inside one of the only dynamics where a child can realistically wield parental power.

### **Moral Character: What Animals Teach About Being Human**

The history of children's literature is one that finds its origins in moral instruction. Prior to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century “[books published for children] were almost always remorselessly instructional (spelling books, school books, conduct books) or deeply pious” (Grenby, 2014). While the books were written to appeal to children, their primary purpose was not to entertain. Instead, the books were intended to teach societal and/or religious morals, as well as the potential consequences of acting immorally. Since then, the field of children's literature has evolved immensely, and most books now contain a warmer, less didactic tone than their predecessors. However, some modern authors have still managed to carve out entire careers through the publication of moral texts disguised as leisure reading—just ask Jan and Stan Berenstain, coauthors of the of *The Berenstain Bears*. As a franchise, *The Berenstain Bears* has sold over 250 million copies, and there are over 300 individual books currently in print (The Berenstain

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Bears, 2018). Although the Berenstain family in the books is composed of bears, it serves as a thinly veiled (or, rather, furred) parallel to the image of a traditional American family, complete with traditional family morals. In *The Berenstain Bears' New Baby* (1974), for example, Small Bear is depicted as a perfectly behaved and selfless big brother. Despite having no time to process his mother's pregnancy—he only finds out Mama Bear is expecting a few hours before she gives birth—he is so welcoming toward the new baby that he gives up his childhood bed to her without even the slightest protest. From the moment his sister is born, Small Bear is nothing but happy and accepting. In fact, even when the baby punches him in the nose, he does not react with irritation; instead, he remarks, “She has a pretty good punch for a little baby” (Berenstain, 1974, p. 26). Small Bear, eternally agreeable, does not behave like a real child would in his situation. However, he does act like children are told they *should* behave after the birth of a new baby. According to a statement by the series' publisher, Random House, the main goal of the *Berenstain Bears* is “to teach kids some useful life lessons in an entertaining fashion” (as cited in Fraustino, 2007, p. 250). Whether or not one agrees with these lessons, one must concede that they exist overtly within the series.

What, then, makes the Berenstain Bears different than the instructional characters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? The answer is hidden in their furry exterior. In the words of Pauline Zeece, “Brief, plotless idea or concept books may be enhanced and enjoyed when the central character is an animal” (Zeece, 1998, p. 35). Simply put, the concept of good behavior is turned into an appealing book through the presence of animal protagonists. It is the protagonists' animality that transforms the text from a lecture into digestible literature. In their discourse on anthropomorphism in children's literature, Carolyn Burke and Joby Copenhaver support this claim, writing the following:

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The talking, thinking, acting animals could provide for children what they were already providing for their adult mentors—a buffered engagement with a message of cultural significance. The lively animals would soften the didactic tone and ease the tensions raised by dealing with issues not yet fully resolved or socially controversial. Because children's literature is a primary device used to inculcate and socialize, an examination of popular topics and story lines reveals trends in cultural beliefs and changing attitudes about children's roles in society ... Think of the popularity of *The Berenstain Bears* series. (Burke, 2004, p. 208)

By contextualizing their moral teachings within the lives of loveable bears, Stan and Jan Berenstain are able to convince young readers to engage with their central message. A boring statement about moral character becomes an entertaining story.

A similar tactic is employed by Marcus Pfister in *The Rainbow Fish* (1992), a classroom favorite for teaching the importance of sharing. The book's narrative follows the Rainbow Fish, named for his sparkling silver scales, as he journeys through the ocean to discover why none of the other fish want to be his friend. Eventually, he arrives at the cave of a wise octopus, who advises him to "Give a glittering scale to each of the other fish. You will no longer be the most beautiful fish in the sea, but you will discover how to be happy" (Pfister, 1992, p. 13). Following this advice, the Rainbow Fish distributes his scales equally among his fellow fish, who finally grant him the acceptance and friendship he has been seeking. However, while the book's message makes it clear that Rainbow Fish's scales are not his most important feature, they are the feature that draws children to the book in the first place. According to *Rainbow Fish's* original review in the *School Library Journal*, "Children will be immediately drawn to this book that features an iridescent, metallic-looking main character 'whose scales were every shade of

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blue and green and purple, with sparkling silver scales among them”” (Fader, 1992, p. 75).

Children do not read the book for its moral instruction, but instead for its visual appeal. The utilization of a fish protagonist gives young readers a reason to pick up the book, while its pro-sharing message gives parents a reason to encourage their choice.

The appeal that animal protagonists bring to moral texts, however, is not limited to picture books. In books like Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), the animal mind (exposed through a first person perspective) is used to re-contextualize old teachings about right and wrong behavior. In one literature review concerning the role of animals in moral education, researcher Jane Bone writes the following:

In early childhood education, the animal as teacher is a taken-for-granted pedagogical force ... [the field] increasingly recognises the importance of the animal in the social worlds of children. These connections take diverse forms and in early childhood may link to family life, to play and to learning that supports a blurred boundary between self and Other. (Bone, 2013, p. 57).

Essentially, children are able to see an animal's experience as socially relevant to their own, even when that animal is a work of fiction. They are more likely to be outraged by the blatant mistreatment of a horse (or dog or cat or other animal) than by the more nuanced injustices faced by human characters. Such is the case in *Black Beauty*, which shows the immediate impacts of moral and immoral treatment on the main character's health, attitude, and life outlook. *Black Beauty*, entirely dependent on the treatment and care of those around him, is a perfect vessel through which to explore the consequences that a child's actions may bring to others. Within the book, human characters can easily be categorized based on their treatment of the main character. Good people are those who make *Black Beauty* happy; bad people are those who bring *Black*

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Beauty distress. These dichotomies are not subtle, and children can easily distinguish which human characters they are supposed to act like. One of Black Beauty's owners, for example, is a drunk whose maltreatment causes the horse to fall and permanently injure her knee. Another is a young woman who reprimands others for their use of the bearing rein, saying "we have no right to distress any of God's creature without a very good reason" (Sewell, 1877, p. 211). Black Beauty, presented as an honest narrator, becomes the authority on who constitutes a moral human. In "What Makes a Good Horse Book?," reviewer Anita Burkam further praises Black Beauty's narration. She writes:

Anna Sewell's 1877 novel keeps its relevance and its pride of place in children's literature due in large part to Black Beauty's distinctive voice. Genteel and intelligent, willing to try his best under harsh circumstances, growing dull under cruel treatment but giving loyal and devoted service in response to kindness, Black Beauty embodies many of our wishes and desires surrounding the horse-human relationship" (Burkam, 2014, p. 60).

*Black Beauty's* overwhelming success as a novel—it is still being read and enjoyed by children 141 years after its publication—is a testament to readers' personal investment in the horse's wellbeing. As a dependent creature, the horse cannot advocate for its own moral treatment. Children intrinsically desire that Black Beauty be properly cared for, and form opinions of the book's other characters based upon how well they fulfill that desire. These opinions reinforce the moral commentary that underlies the entire story.

### **Testing Limits: When Animals Misbehave**

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Pushing boundaries, whether as a rambunctious toddler or strong-willed preteen, is an intrinsic part of the childhood experience. Even the best behaved children are prone to climb-up slides when their parents' backs are turned, sneak pieces of candy before dinner, stay up late on school nights, and otherwise test the limits of authority. In small doses, this is a normal part of childhood development, which teaches children about the connections between action and consequence. A child who climbs up the slide may fall down and get a scrape; a child who sneaks candy may get a stomachache; a child who stays up late may be punished by his parents. But what about major consequences? How can a child conceptualize the consequences of severe or dangerous misbehavior without performing it himself? The answer can be found in children's literature. In one *Horn Book Magazine* article, scholar Jessica Angotti wrote the following:

Although children like the reassurance of, say, the Berenstain Bears, they also want excitement, rebellion, *subversion* ... They always have the option of disobeying, but punishment is inevitable, and no one wants to sacrifice playtime for time in the "uncooperative" chair. So rather than try out true naughtiness, children turn to book characters who actually do what they themselves have only dreamt about. Living vicariously is the perfect alternative. (Angotti, 2010, p. 96).

Children do not have to look very far in order to find such disobedient characters—Peter Rabbit, the poky little puppy, and Curious George, for example, star in some of the best-selling picture books ever published. These characters, among numerous others, allow child readers to witness from afar the consequences of bad behavior.

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) begins, as many cautionary tales do, with an explicit warning by Peter's mother: "Now my dears,' .... you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden: your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by

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Mrs. McGregor” (Potter, 1901, p. 3). Peter, who has never seen or experienced the dangers of Mr. McGregor’s garden for himself, is expected to heed his mother’s warning and remain in the spaces she has deemed safe. Unsurprisingly, he ignores the warning. He sneaks into the garden, where, also unsurprisingly, he is almost killed by Mr. McGregor. While he survives the ordeal, he falls ill and misses dinner—a meal that his less naughty siblings are content to enjoy without him. From a narrative standpoint, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is an extremely predictable text. Peter does exactly what his mother warned him not to do and faces the exact same danger (Mr. McGregor’s murderous tendencies) that she provided as rationale. Yet the story remains a cornerstone of the childhood literary cannon, outselling nearly every other children’s book ever written (Turvey, 2001). One reason for its immense popularity lies in childhood appeal of Peter’s egregious misbehavior—both Peter and the reader understand that entering Mr. McGregor’s garden is wrong, but both parties desire to enter anyway. In the related article “Animal Antics in Children’s Literature,” Pauline Zeece theorizes that animal protagonists allow children to indulge in risky behavior without any actual risk of physical or emotional harm:

Perhaps young listeners and readers are drawn to animal stories and characters because they are afforded opportunities to study themselves at a safe distance. As such, children can test their conjectures, try out their secret thoughts and plans, and undergo the vicarious thrill of being scared, heroic, loyal, silly, or even mischievous, all in the context of a good story or book (Zeece, 1998, p. 35).

Child readers are curious about Peter’s fate, but not scared for their own. Mr. McGregor, after all, is only presented as a physical danger to rabbits; the child who accompanies Peter on his journey may sympathize with his plight, but falls short of empathizing with his fear.

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Following in the footsteps of Peter Rabbit, the protagonist of Janette Lowrey's *The Poky Little Puppy* (1942) also mimics the behavior of a mischievous child. In the story, the poky puppy and his four siblings dig under the fence surrounding their home, a behavior that is repeated despite a posted sign reading "DON'T EVER DIG HOLES UNDER THIS FENCE!" (Lowrey, 1942, p. 10). While Peter's misbehavior manifests in a desire to enter a forbidden space (the garden), the puppies' misbehavior is borne from their desire to leave a safe space behind. With the poky puppy as an instigator, the young siblings continuously leave their yard in search of new stimuli on a nearby hill. It is important to note, however, that the hill itself is free from tangible threats. The puppies understand that they are not allowed on the hill, but their lack of personal experience causes them to perceive the rule itself as arbitrary. Simply put, their curiosity concerning the outside world is stronger than their sense of caution. In this way, the puppies in Lowrey's book embody the perspective of her young readership. In one journal article concerning early literary experiences, educators Carolyn Burke and Joby Copenhaver write the following about their experience with future-teacher candidates:

As teacher educators, we have regularly asked our preservice language and literature students to use their own childhood stories to reflect on the power of literature. The majority of our students have formed a lasting bond with a story that seems to mirror the world, as they have perceived it. The few who have no or minimal conscious connections to story express their longing for such experiences, sometimes going so far as to describe a sense of emotional impoverishment. (Burke, 2004, p. 206)

Judging by the educators' findings, it should come as no surprise that *The Poky Little Puppy* is the most popular picture book ever sold, with over 14,000,000 copies in print as of 2001 (Turvey, 2001). The story resonates with children who, like the poky puppy and his siblings, see

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the boundaries placed on them as largely arbitrary. While the puppies do face a minor consequence for their behavior (ie. they are sent to bed without rice pudding), it is a punishment for digging under the fence; no natural consequences are presented during their exploration of the wider world. The world beyond the fence is the world as perceived by a child, offered in a way that young readers can traverse vicariously.

### **Humor: When Animals Act Childish**

Children's books, especially those written for very young children, often contain elements of absurdity— typing cows, pigs on parade, and creepy carrots are only a few of the ridiculous plot devices that have made their way into this century's literature. According to John McKenzie's article "Bums, poos and wees: Carnavalesque spaces in the picture books of early childhood," "Studies of children's preferences in book selection have consistently noted that humor is the primary criterion for children's pleasure in the presentation of a story" (McKenzie, 2005, p. 81). Across the board, children are more likely to self-select and engage with humorous texts than with other similar texts. This trend, while by no means exclusive to lower elementary school aged students, is most apparent in the book choices of children aged five to eight: "In raw numbers, children in the 5-to-8 age group chose almost four times as many humorous books as adults. Proportionally, half of all the books chosen by children in this age group were humorous, while only about a third of the adult's choices were humorous" (Munde, 1997, p. 223). Furthermore, "Children in this age group consistently chose story lines in which the main character was undervalued, underestimated, misunderstood, or had the distinct advantage of low status or small stature" (Munde, 1997, p. 224). The sheer volume of humorous animal books written for the age group, then, should come as no surprise. For every child reader who

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fantasizes about having more power, there is an animal protagonist who turns normalized power structures upside down. Oftentimes, absurdity is involved in this shift.

Take, for example, Laura Numeroff's *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (1985). Written as a circular tale, the book follows a nameless mouse as he asks a young child to give him a series of items; the need for each new item is created when the previous item is received. The story both begins and ends with the mouse seeking a cookie, indicating that the mouse will perpetually remain in his cycle of need. While there are no explicit comparisons made between the mouse and the book's young readership, his actions bare an unmistakable resemblance to those of a real-world child. His requests, such as that to hang his art on the refrigerator, are stereotypically childlike. His actions often result in a mess, which he never seems to clean up. Even his physical attributes—short stature, blue overalls, an uncanny ability to walk on two legs—serve to humanize his role in the story. In her scholarly article about anthropomorphism in children's literature, Jane Bone writes, "In picture books images of animals are often anthropomorphic and visual representations of the animal both reflect and construct cultural values" (Bone, 2013, p. 58). In *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, the mouse character reflects the culture of dependence that children are raised in. Child readers need to ask permission for nearly everything, creating a cyclic pattern of giving and asking that mirrors that of the mouse. The book, thus, allows children to laugh at the mouse's childlike behaviors in the same way an adult might laugh at their own. According to Gail Munde's aforementioned study, "Overwhelmingly, children in the 5-to-8 age group seemed responsive to humor resulting from situations in which the undervalued, underestimated, misunderstood, overlooked, low-status, or physically awkward protagonist turned the tables on the powerful, be it their own peer group, pirates, or imaginary monsters" (Munde, 1997, p. 226). Although the mouse in Numeroff's story requires the help of a caregiver,

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portrayed visually as a human child, his requests prevent the boy from making any choices of his own. Every time we see the child, he is helping the mouse, cleaning up after the mouse, trailing exhaustedly behind the mouse; he is never performing any actions for his own benefit. His entire existence, as we perceive it, is conditional on the mouse. While adult readers may not find this dynamic so hard to believe, children are regaled by the small mouse's power over the larger child. The book is both absurdly funny and emotionally fulfilling.

Mo Willems' *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* (2003) also plays on common power dynamics to establish humor, this time by placing the reader himself in a position of relational authority. The entire story is written in second person narration—an usual choice that implicates the reader as a character within the text—and revolves around stopping a pigeon from driving away in a bus that does not belong to him. At the beginning of the story, the bus driver directly asks the reader to prevent the pigeon from driving the bus while he is away. The rest of the book, thus, is filled with the pigeon's requests to drive, which grow both more comical and desperate with the turn of each page. He too speaks directly to the reader—"I'll be your best friend!," "How 'bout I give you five bucks?," and "I bet your mom would let me" are just a few of the ways he tries to convince the reader to let him on the bus (Willems, 2003, p. 23-4). However, he is never successful, and the bus driver eventually returns to thank the reader for keeping the pigeon away. The driver, both in his initial request and his final thanks, speaks to the reader as he would another adult. According to John McKenzie's article about carnivalesque spaces in picture books, texts that rely on absurd humor allow children to enter a world unconstrained by the normal social hierarchy. He writes:

In the medieval carnival, normal social order (social class hierarchies, gender relations, and social values) was disrupted, inverted and parodied in an orgiastic time of liberating

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freedom ... However, when the carnival is over, (and the covers of the book slammed shut and the teacher hush-hushing) order is restored and, after a collective sigh of relief, normal social relations and discourses resumed. (McKenzie, 2005, p.85)

*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* allows the child reader to explore a position of adult-like authority. As a character in the story, the reader is asked to uphold the bus driver's trust. Without any of the real responsibilities of adult life, the child is made to feel powerful within the book's pages. The pigeon, by contrast, assumes the role of a toddler. He spends each page begging for the reader's permission to perform a ridiculous and dangerous action—the pigeon, after all, does not even have hands with which to grip the bus's steering wheel. In one published review, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* is described as "A brilliantly simple book that is absolutely true to life, as anyone who interacts with an obdurate three-year-old can understand" (Ratterree, 2003, p. 132). The pigeon's behavior induces laughter, partially because of its absurdity and partially because of its relatability.

### **Feeling Different: Animals and Acceptance**

As children enter their school years, they become hyper-aware of the social pressures that surround them, especially in terms of how well they conform. In "Using Photographic Picture Books to Better Understand Young Children's Ideas of Belonging: A Study of Early Literacy Strategies and Social Inclusion," researchers note that "Social inclusion is a key component in developing social relations and a strong self-image among students" (Cleovoulou, 2013, p. 11). They go on to say, "Children's understandings of inclusion focus on the idea that others are welcomed or are actively part of the larger social group" (Cleovoulou, 2013, p. 16). Even young children are able to distinguish those who have been included in the social order from those who

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have been excluded. Furthermore, the above study revealed that “Children noted differences between themselves and others in a variety of ways, such as the clothes they wear, the number of letters in their names, and the colour of their skin” (Cleovoulou, 2013, p. 16). Children, thus, have a very physical idea of what makes people different from others, and they have the ability to recognize those differences in themselves. Perhaps this is why there are so many children's books written from the perspective of a *different* protagonist—a creature with some sort of blatant dissimilarity to other characters within the text. That creature, while sometimes represented as a human child, is most often represented as an animal.

Such is the case in Cece Bell's graphic novel *El Deafo* (2014). The novel, both written and illustrated by Bell, is an autobiographical account of her childhood experience with hearing loss, focusing mainly on how deafness impacted her self-confidence and peer relationships growing up. In the novel, all characters, including Cece herself, are drawn as anthropomorphized rabbits. However, this illustrative choice is never explained within the text, nor is overtly referenced by any of the characters. Why, then, was this choice made at all? The answer, perhaps, lies at least partially in Melson's theory that “A universal human urge turns to animal beings as a means of reflecting upon and understanding human emotions and social organization” (Melson, 2001, p. 144). By drawing everyone as rabbits, Bell effectively draws attention to the most prominent piece of the rabbit's anatomy: the ears. Aside from the obvious relationship between ears and hearing, the vertical orientation of rabbit ears means that anything dangling from them would be extremely visible to anyone in the surrounding area. Bell takes full advantage of this anatomical quirk in order to showcase her hearing aids. On one page, for example, readers can clearly see every part of Cece's hearing aid, even the earpieces that would likely be covered by hair in the real world. Furthermore, the thought bubble above her head

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features the text “Those cords though!,” which directs readers’ attention even more closely to the device (Bell, 2014, p. 22). In a recent interview, Bell had the following to say about this and similar drawings:

As a kid I was so ashamed of the cords that went from my hearing aid up to my ears.

When I look back at pictures of me wearing this hearing aid, however, it's really not that dramatic looking at all. By drawing myself as a rabbit, however, I can have the cords go all the way up past my rabbit head into my rabbit ears. This dramatic representation of me and my hearing aid is more closely in tune with how it actually felt to wear a hearing aid when no one else in my class was wearing one. (Danielson, 2014)

The use of anthropomorphism presents the Cece’s emotional struggles in an outwardly apparent way. As drawn, the characters in the book are an externalization of the author’s self-image. The drawings de-emphasize the aspects of Cece’s appearance that fit with ideal human beauty standards, instead emphasizing the aspects that made her feel most animal.

Additionally, all of the rabbits pictured in *El Deafo* look physically similar. While skin tones and hairstyles vary slightly from rabbit to rabbit, all other physical attributes remain relatively constant. Although real rabbits can look exceedingly different depending on breed and genetic factors—just look at a Holland Lop and a Lionhead side-by-side—this level of distinction is absent from the novel. Thus, one can assume that the rabbits are not meant to signify actual rabbits, but are rather the symbolic representation of rabbits as a pack. In the words of Melson, “Because man originally felt himself identical to all those like him ... he came to acquire the capacity to distinguish himself as he distinguishes them, i.e., to use the diversity of species as conceptual support for social differentiation (Melson, 2001, p. 144). Like the metaphorical man in the above quote, Bell uses rabbit illustrations as a tool to differentiate

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between herself and those present in her childhood. Since she is not concerned with how those who differ from her might also differ from each other, she simply draws them all as similar.

Similar to Cece Bell's novel, Marc Brown's classic book *Arthur's Nose* (1976) uses the protagonist's animality to draw extra attention to the feature that makes him most self-conscious: his nose. Arthur, a young aardvark, is embarrassed by how large his nose is in comparison to those of his non-aardvark classmates. While his nose looks exactly how it is supposed to—his entire aardvark family shares the same signature schnoz—his friends regularly mock him based on his physical appearance. Eager to fit in better with his peers, he goes to the rhinologist and tries on all kinds of different noses, hoping to find a new one to replace his aardvark nose. Ultimately, however, he elects to remain the same. He tells his friends, "I tried on every nose there was. I'm just not me without my nose!" (Brown, 1976, p. 25). This story's message—that our differences are intrinsic and acceptable parts of our identity—is one that empowers young readers who may feel self-conscious about their own physical characteristics. According to the article "Animals as People in Children's Literature," "When a life or imaginary incident is turned into a story, a single instance is transformed into a generalization that becomes available to be applied by all who encounter it (Burke, 2004, p. 212). Arthur's experience enables readers to embrace their insecurities. The story moves from being an isolated tale about an animal to a universally applicable narrative on self-acceptance. When Arthur tries on the noses of different animals, he illustrates the ridiculousness of an aardvark aspiring toward the characteristics of other creatures—an aardvark with a toucan beak or rhinoceros horn looks incredibly out of place. This visual experiment gives children the general idea that we should not try to change our appearance in order to look like others. Additionally, Brown's initial choice to portray Arthur as an aardvark (and not a human child) points to another benefit of animal protagonists: the use of a

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non-human creature lessens the potential anxiety that child readers may feel in relation to the plot. According to an analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> century children's literature, "Socially disapproved behavior by human characters apparently arouses more anxiety than such behavior by animal characters ... Human characters were most frequently depicted in favorable situations, while animal and fairy figures were most often portrayed in undesirable roles" (Boyd, 1955, p. 367). The insecurity that Arthur feels, coupled with the teasing and bullying he faces in school, could potentially induce anxiety in young readers. After all, many children actively fear the kind of social exclusion that Arthur faces at the beginning of the book. Arthur's animal status, then, allows children to dissociate from the negative experiences he faces, while still understanding the story's general theme.

### **Conclusion**

Children's books—or, at the very least, *good* children's books—are more complex than they appear at first glance. While the surface narratives are simply written, the books have a deepness, a cleverness to them that goes beyond verbiage. This is especially true for books that contain animal protagonists. Each of the texts analyzed in this paper depends on an animal character to place abstract themes and morals in a child-friendly context. Animals are socially unrestrained in a way that humans are not, and they can be placed into situations that would be too scary or inappropriate to host a human protagonist. From caterpillars and cats to pigeons and aardvarks, each animal allows for a slightly different journey into the child psyche. Some stories, like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Story of Babar: The Little Elephant*, allow authors to explore themes of growth and maturation in a way that makes sense to children who are still deciding how they want to grow in their own lives. Other stories, such as *They All Saw a Cat*, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, and *Frog and Toad are Friends*, help children to see life

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from new perspectives. *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and *Charlotte's Web* explore the power dynamics and trust relationships universal to childhood. *The Berenstain Bears* franchise, *The Rainbow Fish*, and *Black Beauty* allow for moral instruction, while *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Poky Little Puppy* allow children to safely experience the consequences of immoral behavior. Humorous books, like *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* and *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* give children the opportunity to laugh at their own behavior from a position of relational authority. Books about feeling different, such as *El Deafo* and *Arthur's Nose*, draw on well-known animal characteristics to visually represent bodily insecurities. There are countless other animal-focalized texts that build and expand upon the themes listed above.

This paper was not able to identify the purpose of animal protagonists in children's literature because there is no singular purpose. Each book is different, and each animal provides a different teaching opportunity. It is through this conglomeration of animal literature that children come to a better understanding of what it means to be human.

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