

# Animals as People in Children's Literature

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*Books that use animals as people can add emotional distance for the reader when the story message is powerful or painful.*

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Ours is a highly literate culture, making use of written texts to organize thought, to test beliefs, to convey what is valued, and to attempt to influence the actions and thoughts of others. It is not surprising that for most of us, early childhood memories include a favorite story. From among the many stories that we have heard or had read to us, there is often one that spoke more directly to us than the others, a story that touched an emotional chord, somehow reflecting a keenly felt need, concern, or set of values. This story stays fresh and whole in our minds. Hearing it revives old experiences and feelings we may have forgotten. We are able to recreate, in detail, who we were, what we were doing, the values and beliefs that we were developing, and how we were coming to relate to others and to our world.

For Carolyn, that story is *Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 1985). The industrious mother and her chicks plant, weed, and finally harvest their wheat on their own when their animal friends continually make excuses for their lack of help. However, when the wheat is ground and baked into bread, these same friends eagerly volunteer to eat it. Then come the words that spoke directly to a young Puritan soul in development,

"No, I'll do it myself." This story and its resolution confirmed Carolyn's belief in the rewards of hard work, the need to take responsibility, and the consequences that befall the slacker. Reading and re-reading this

creatures would find a place in the stories that we tell. And they do. But when these animals begin to talk and scheme and learn to read, we have gone past their intuitive inclusion in a replication of reality

### Why do animals with human characteristics populate so many early childhood stories? What purpose do they serve?

story became an ethical dialogue and made conscious strongly felt but amorphous beliefs that were developing out of everyday experiences and decisions.

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.

More recently, we have come to notice yet another dimension of these early literacy experiences. This is the high frequency with which these personally significant stories involve animals possessing human capabilities and characteristics. Adventurous pigs, wily wolves, studious mice, and the like are the central characters in a significant number of the stories.

Most children are curious about and fond of animals. Many of us share our homes and our hearts with our pets. Certainly our local environments, whether we live in a city, a suburb, or the country, are filled with a vast variety of animals both large and small. So, it would seem rather intuitive that these same

and have put them to use in a purposeful distortion of reality. This use of anthropomorphism prompted the question: Why do animals with human characteristics populate so many early childhood stories? What purpose do they serve?

To consider anthropomorphism in children's stories, we need to first clarify the basic functions of literature, and to explore the needs that have propelled the use of anthropomorphism in world cultures. Then we can come to see how the recognition of childhood and the emergence of a literature for children draw upon these sources. We make use of a series of anthropomorphic stories to demonstrate how this device is used to introduce and deal with new and controversial topics. Finally, we consider the purposeful use of anthropomorphic stories in the curriculum.

### THE FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

All forms of writing—imaginative, critical, scientific, and reporting—are the tools of thought (Vygotsky, 1986). As a thinking device, the functions of literature (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001; Hunt, 1995) seem to have remained consistent through time, for both adults and children, and include the following:

- *The need to make sense of our lives and of the world.* Life is actually chaotic with multiple and disconnected events, decisions, and reac-

tions (Gleick, 1987). There is no pause button to life. Literature provides a device for grouping, organizing, and eliminating events and placing them within structured patterns. The structures actually create the meaning we come to give to the events (Rosen, 1986; Wells, 1986).

- *The preservation of our understandings, knowledge and social beliefs.* Life is not only chaotic, but also fleeting. Once having organized it into a meaningful interpretation, story structure allows us to remember and consistently preserve our decisions (Rosen, 1986).
- *Dialogue with ourselves and with others.* The structures of story become an agreed upon social tool. In this way, we can hold a mental discussion to reexamine decisions or converse with others concerning what the relevant events and issues are, how they relate to each other, and what impact this will have on our world (Vygotsky, 1986; Bakhtin, 1981). The structures then become the tools we need to make adjustments to our understanding.
- *Generate questions and new life alternatives.* Life and the reexamination of our stories both bring new issues and questions to the fore (Coles, 1989). Attempting to place these new issues within story structure has the potential to generate solutions.
- *Gain distance and transcend life threats.* Sometimes we can say to a dangerous and powerful person or institution, in story, what we would be afraid to say directly (Bettleheim, 1976). Sometimes we can dialogue with ourselves, in story, about something that we find so frightening or so debilitating that we cannot face it directly.
- *Savor and reflect on experience.* Living through an experience does not guarantee that we understand it.

The ability to first organize and then to reexamine opens the door to reflection. Not only do we come to understand, but we also come to understand with more depth and breadth (Bruner, 1994). Reflection brings intellectual flexibility.

- *Simplify and clarify a life circumstance.* All events are not relevant to or of equal value in understanding a life circumstance. Story structure provides the tools for deciding what gets discarded in formulating decisions (Coles, 1989). You can't solve a puzzle when you are working with too many pieces.
- *Formulate a plan to act on the world.* Reflection allows us to make decisions in the face of uncertainty and to know that if a first decision does not work, there are already processed alternatives that can be tried (Dewey, 1938). Life is uncertain; things are not always clearly right or wrong. The act of storying provides potential workable alternatives to the issues that we face. Being aware that we have and can generate alternative responses provides the impetus needed to take action.
- *Provide momentary escape from the current situation.* Sometimes we just need a break from our own issues and problems. Reading someone else's story can provide that relief. We can relax for the time being and let someone else organize. Just maybe, we might come across an idea or a structure that can actually be applied to our current problem (Rosenblatt, 1938). At the least, we will come away from the experience reminded that we are not the only person who faces constant decisions.

With the exception of the final function, these are life-determining and life-altering needs. We are in search of answers and strategies crucial to our well-being. This list offers an explanation for why we

sometimes feel the need to read some stories again and again.

Now, how do animals come to play so significant a role in this process? How does the use of anthropomorphism advance these needs?

## THE PROCESS OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Simply put, anthropomorphism involves assigning a human trait to an animal or object. Transmogrification, people morphing into animals, is a special case of anthropomorphism. This process has a long and respected history in many world cultures.

One anthropologist, Stewart Guthrie (1993), actually argues that all religions are systematic anthropomorphism—attributing human characteristics to non-human things and events. He goes on to explain that we live in an ambiguous world and our survival depends on

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our ability to interpret it. Recognizing people, where they exist, becomes critical to our survival and to our success. Visualizing the world as humanlike becomes a good bet. We organize our predictions to increase our potential to recognize what is of most importance to us. In this way, our successes will have pay-offs and our failures will not be as costly.

Anthropomorphism permeates the adult world. When the risks and rewards are high, when the signs are ambiguous, when we are up against powerful forces, we envision human intents and actions cloaked in the shapes of objects and animals, and we act accordingly. Intuitively then, we begin to see faces in the clouds,

a man in the moon, assign people's names to life-threatening storms, and watch our investments in bull and bear markets.

Aesop shared a personal philosophy through his animal fables, offering one view of the human condition and advice on the conduct of social exchange. So basic and so powerful are his interpretations of life that many of his tales have now been retold for children (e.g., McClintock, 2000).

In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell (1996) presented a costumed version of the promise and betrayal of the Russian Revolution set in a barnyard. And of course, we have *Planet of the Apes* (Boule, 1963) and science fiction as examples of the use of anthropomorphism in dealing with adult issues.

Political cartoonists have learned this lesson well. A check of any newspaper's editorial pages will no doubt show a world globe with arms, legs, and a voice; a political party led by a pachyderm; or the economy flat on its back in a hospital bed receiving a transfusion. When the political, religious, social, or personal risks are high, when we are standing close to the metaphoric fire, the use of animals has long provided intellectual and psychological distance and allowed us to critically explore that which we would not be comfortable exploring directly.

Operating under the same premise, many early peoples generated their creation stories through the use of anthropomorphism. Many children's stories are versions of these creation tales. *The Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest* (McDermott, 1993) tells of a time when people lived in darkness. Raven is sad for them and decides to search for light. Finding it in the Sky Chief's house, he proceeds through a series of tricks, which include

transforming himself into a boy child, to steal the sun. Quickly transforming back into a raven, he flies back to the people and offers them the sun to light their world.

If anthropomorphism has been an instrument of adult literacy for a long period of history, then how and when did we come to make use of this potent and powerful tool in children's literature?

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The first books generally agreed upon by contemporary scholars to fit the definition of children's literature were published in the 1740s, with the introduction of *The Pretty Little Pocket Book Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly* by John Newbery in England (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). The intent to amuse as well as to instruct children signaled the emergence of a revised cultural recognition of children and childhood, and with that, an interest in finding ways to give children pleasure as they were being instructed.

Before the mid-eighteenth century, the notion of childhood, as we know it now, did not exist. Children were dressed in the adult clothes of their social class soon after they left their cradles. They were treated as "short adults" with responsibilities and with productivity demanded to the limits of their physical capabilities. Without protection from the hardships of the work-a-day-world, children had few rights, privileges, or entitlements to happiness of their own.

As a middle or merchant class developed, every person was no longer needed to work at providing the family income. With leisure came the opportunity to recreate the place

of children in society. The emerging view declared that children needed extended time to develop before they would be able to take on the full responsibilities of adulthood. They needed guidance and instruction to maintain their safety and to allow them to grow into full membership in society. Play came to be viewed as child's work during which they were discovering and practicing lessons, and pleasure came to be seen as an enticement in this process. To heighten that enticement, animals with human characteristics began to appear in children's books.

Examining two books significant to Joby's childhood can give us an idea of how the early transition into a concern for childhood was handled and how two authors used talking animals to speak directly to everyday needs and concerns. The first is the 1845 *Struwwelpeter* by Heinrick Hoffman (1845/1995) and the other the 1940 *The Rabbits' Revenge* by Kurt Weise.

*Struwwelpeter* (or Slovenly Peter) is a series of silly stories intended to amuse those children who, unlike the characters in the book, are "Good at meal times, good at play. Good all night and good all day." Most memorable to Joby was "The Dreadful Story about Little Paula and the Matches." It takes place in an unlikely situation where Mamma and Nurse go out for the day, leaving little Paula alone with a box of matches on the table and the warning that if she touches those matches, she is sure to get a good scolding. Two cats explain to Little Paula that matches are dangerous; if she plays with them, she will burn to death. Little Paula lights a match and catches on fire, leaving only smoking ashes and her little red shoes.

And when the good cats sat beside  
The smoking ashes, how they cried!  
"Me-ow, me-ooo, me-ow, me-ooo

What will Mamma and Nurse do?"

Their tears ran down their cheeks so fast;  
They made a little pond at last.

The young reader learns the lesson: "Do not play with matches." But more important, she learns the price one pays for disobedience to one's parents, however foolish those parents might be. In the end, it's the cats' tears and sad song that elicit the strong emotional response from the reader, thereby demonstrating that even one transgression could be not only dreadful, but fatal.

In this book, children are presented as passive beings, totally dependent on their parents to keep them in line. When left to themselves, they make the wrong decisions. Their impulses are self-destructive. The mothers and nannies knew that children had to be told what to do, no questions asked. Only the cats were "human" enough to reason why. From repeated encounters with this book, Joby not only learned to value neatness, cleanliness, and quiet good manners, but she became so rule-bound that she often hesitated to take independent action, and relied, instead, upon her mother to make decisions for her.

*Struwwelpeter* is representative of a transition point in adults' perception of childhood. It was during this period that Froedrich Froebel was constructing a first social vision of childhood, inventing kindergarten as a vehicle for delivering moral messages, but now with a benevolent tone. Up to this time, most works available to children were dry pedagogic books. Heinrich Hoffmann, the author of *Struwwelpeter*, was a physician and director of a progressive mental hospital in Frankfort. From his work, he felt it necessary to soothe the deep anxiety he had seen among his child patients. He believed that children would find humor in the exaggeratedly gruesome consequences of misbehavior. In at least

## Books That Feature Animals Who Act Like People

Alborough, Jez. *Captain Duck*. (HarperCollins, 2003). Captain Duck takes over Goat's boat with hilarious results.

Bryan, Ashley. *Beautiful Blackbird*. (Atheneum, 2003). An adaptation of story from the Ila-speaking people of Rhodesia tells how the colorful birds of Africa ask Blackbird to decorate them with black highlights.

Falconer, Ian. *Olivia*. (Atheneum, 2000). Olivia, a pig, is very much like many children with high energy and a great enthusiasm for life.

Hartman, Bob. *The Wolf Who Cried Boy*. Illus. T. Raglin. (Putnam, 2002). A young wolf tricks his parents into thinking there is a boy in the woods who would make a delicious feast.

Henkes, Kevin. *Wemberly Worried*. (Greenwillow, 2000). Wemberly, a young mouse, worries about everything, especially starting school.

Hobbie, Holly. *Toot & Puddle: Top of the World*. (Little, Brown, 2002). When Toot goes off on a walk and doesn't come back, Puddle sets out to find him.

Lester, Helen. *Tackylocks and the Three Bears*. Illus. L. Munsinger. (Houghton Mifflin, 2003). Tacky the penguin has the starring role of Goldilocks in a play.

Reiche, Dietlof. *I, Freddy: Book One in the Golden Hamster Saga*. Illus. J. Cepeda. Translator, J. Brownjohn. (Scholastic, 2003). Freddy, an unusual hamster, learns how to read and write messages on a word processor.

Rylant, Cynthia. *Thimbleberry Stories*. Illus. M. Kneen. (Harcourt, 2000). Four short stories chronicle the lives of the creatures on Thimbleberry Lane.

Wells, Rosemary. *Timothy Goes to School*. (Viking, 2000). Timothy, a well-dressed raccoon, discovers how to make friends and be accepted.

—Marilyn Carpenter

three of the tales, Hoffman depicts animals giving lessons. Hoffman has fish that tease a boy for not paying attention and a rabbit that hunts humans. Hoffman depended on his exaggerated story lines, funny illustrations, and some use of anthropomorphic beings to teach with humor. Indeed, the title of the first edition of *Struwwelpeter* in 1845 was *Merry Stories and Funny Pictures*.

Another childhood book, written almost 100 years later, that had a powerful impact upon Joby is Kurt Weise's *The Rabbits' Revenge* (1940). Here again is an example of how anthropomorphism is the medium by which issues are presented. Old Man Shivers, fed up with being cold, decides he needs a suit of rabbits' fur and sets out to shoot every rabbit in the world. The rabbits make plans to stop him. Following directions from their friend, Crow, they dig a tunnel

from the beaver's dam to the cabin where Old Man Shivers lives. Rain Man obligingly fills the pond with rain, the beaver opens the dam, and water rushes through the tunnel to wash the cabin down the river. Old Man Shivers, clinging to his roof, is rescued when the townspeople toss him a rope from the bridge above. They suggest he get a suit of rabbits' fur, but Old Man Shivers says he doesn't want to have anything to do with rabbits; he'd rather have a woolen suit.

Joby struggled with this story:

*On the one hand, I'd shed many a tear over the fact that my dad went on hunting trips; I couldn't believe he would actually shoot animals. But then, I felt very sorry for poor Old Man Shivers. Certainly, I didn't want my father to be the object of the rabbits' revenge. Furthermore, I loved it when Daddy read the story again and*

*again and again. He would be Old Man Shivers. Between the times he would read it to me, I wore the cover off reading it to myself in the same shivery voice my father used. I'd study the final illustration of Old Man Shivers, defeated by the rabbits. And I was relieved that the rabbits would be safe, and Old Man Shivers would be warm.*

Hearing this story about a hunter going out to kill innocent rabbits, read by a well-loved father who also hunted (for food), brought tears and conflict. On one hand, the very idea of hunting would continue to be abhorrent to the young animal lover, and on the other hand, the poor old man did need to have warm clothes. It was easy to argue both sides of the issue, but seemingly impossible to reach a settlement. Because Old Man Shivers changed his mind, and the rabbits found a peaceful and clever solution

to the problem, the author provided some temporary resolution to the issue. Reading the book helped articulate a position in which hunting for survival could be seen as fair, while hunting for fun or killing out of anger was wrong.

*The Rabbits' Revenge* allowed a preschool child to enter into a conversation with her father about an issue important to both. By giving

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the rabbits the capacity to act with human reasoning, it was possible for Joby to reflect on hunting from the perspective of the hunter as well as the hunted. Years later, in revisiting the book with a more experienced adult mind, Joby could argue nature is opposed to hunting when the purpose is to annihilate a species. Still later, other lessons materialize. For example, we can now see that animals, and even the rain man, are much more fragile than portrayed in Weise's work.

Books can have a more powerful impact on a child than is sometimes imagined, and that impact can last a lifetime. Those lessons learned earliest are the most difficult to alter. We need to stop thinking about children's books as child's play and acknowledge that the body of children's literature reflects contentious issues that reside at the core of our culture. Children deal with these issues seriously through their reading and learning.

## **ANTHROPOMORPHISM: TRENDS, TOPICS, AND ISSUES**

Once the construct of anthropomorphism had been extended to chil-

dren's literature, it could be enlisted to instruct on topics and issues of knowledge and social belief. 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. We attempt, with the use of a few examples, to demonstrate what this phenomenon is like.

Our timeline starts in 1840 in England and Europe with the establishment of a middle class and the social invention of childhood. Financial security might have gained some children freedom from daily work, but it did not immediately alter adults' opinions that the children should be passive receivers of needed instruction.

*Struwwelpeter* represents the first attempts to add a touch of humor to the didactic messages that were being conveyed in children's books. From the distance of over 160 years, we might see these tales as harsh and heavy-handed. But people of the time appreciated both the exaggerated art and humorous messages as a relief from the straightforward harangues that usually conveyed social messages. It could be said that the key topic of the time was, "Thou Shalt Not."

**Morals and Responsibilities.** The primary message morphed over time as concepts of childhood developed and evolved, but the main message was still about morals and

responsibilities. You might note that as new topics emerge, they do not tend to displace those already established, but simply add to the richness of the messages being conveyed to our young.

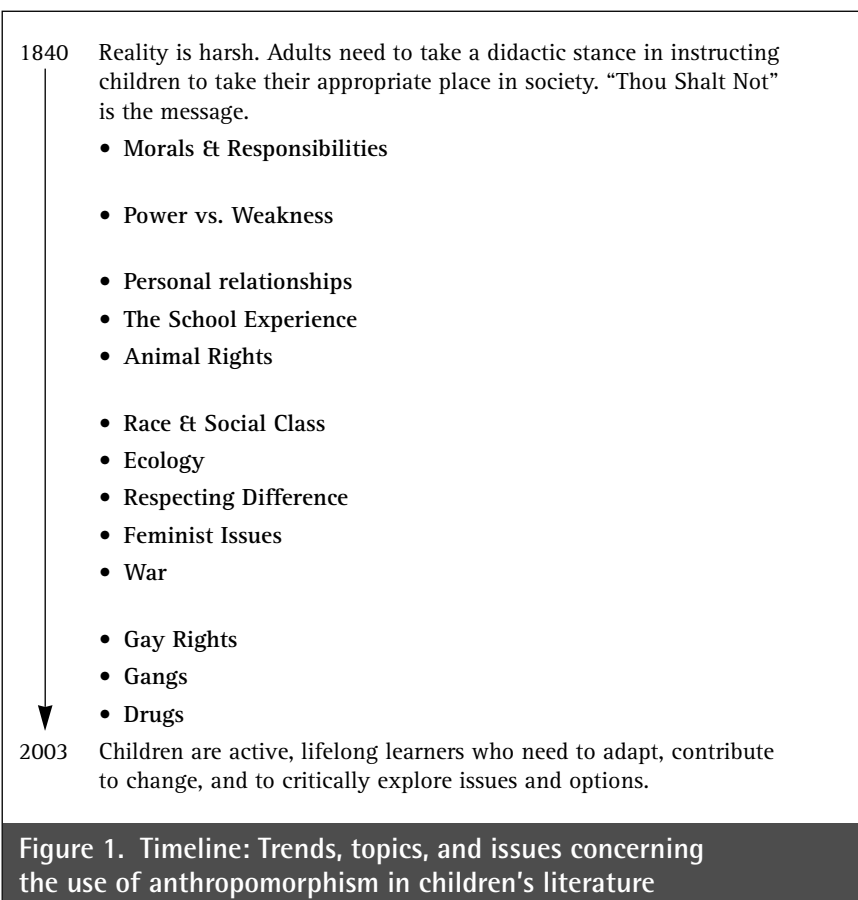
At the same time that established topics continue to flourish, they also evolve in synchronicity with our changing views of the meaning and needs of childhood. Carolyn's favorite book, *Little Red Hen*, is a fine example of this process. The social rules are still being taught by observing someone who violates them, but the characters tend to live to profit from their lessons.

This category is filled with those stories we think of as classic—*The Three Bears* and *Little Red Riding Hood*—but that have been constantly and prolifically added to over the years. Think of the popularity of *The Berenstain Bears* series.

**Power versus Weakness.** The topic of "Power versus Weakness" was one of the key messages of the creation tales from many cultures and probably was the determining factor in translating so many of these cultural myths from their adult versions to children's literature. They are prescientific attempts to understand a powerful and chaotic world. As such, they translate well into children's stories and highlight the weak (child) triumphing over the strong (adult) through trickery.

- Gerald McDermott's *The Raven* (1993) and fables like Aesop's speak directly to children's first explorations of the natural world and of their weak position in relationship to adults.

**Personal Relationships, the School Experience, and Animal Rights.** These topics in children's books deal with issues on which a culture is doing some re-thinking and testing out of new positions, so the books present potential alternative perspectives.



- Mem Fox's *Koala Lou* (1992). A little koala comes in second in the Bush Olympics and her faith in herself falters. Mom's hug and her refrain, "Koala Lou, I DO love you!" provide the needed reassurance. Being second, or simply being in the race, is success.
- Becky Bloom's *Wolf* (1999). A fierce vagabond wolf encounters a pig, a duck, and a cow that entertain themselves by reading. When he fails to frighten them, the wolf decides to learn to read. Wolf and the three other literate animals decide to travel and read to the people they meet.
- Sheree Fitch's *There's a Mouse in the House* (1999). A boy finds a mouse and determines that he should kill it. The mouse asks for three wishes, one of which is to tell her story. The boy learns that she, like he, has responsi-

bilities. They resolve that the mice can live in the home and that she will pay by telling stories to the boy. Compare this exploration of the competing rights between people and the animal world with how that same topic was handled in Joby's favorite story, *The Rabbits' Revenge*.

It seems that the amazing number of early childhood books dealing with literacy, success in school, testing, and the reading/writing process are as much vehicles for concerned adults to formulate, clarify, and advance their own positions as they are intended to open the debate to the young readers.

**Race and Social Class, Ecology, Respecting Difference, Feminist Issues, and War.** This set of topics is increasingly open to controversy and to heated debate, reflecting

more openness with children about the social and cultural debates of our time and admitting that adults do not always have the answers. Not all parents and teachers are equally comfortable exposing their confusions and conflicts to children. Nor do we find it easy to be faced with a child who has joined the debate and elected to hold a position different from our own. The discomfort is so great at times that individuals and groups sometimes support book banning.

- Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* (1998). Issues of social class surface when two families, characterized by guerrillas with human personalities, use the park and encounter each other. The encounters are interpreted differently by the parent and child of each family. The two children, with their pets, are more open to and accepting of difference, while the two parents are more narrow-minded and set in their views.
- Eric Carle's *"Slowly Slowly," Said the Sloth* (2002). A concern for the use and abuse of the Earth underpins the message in this tale. Sloth does not command the respect of the other animals who constantly ask him, "Why are you so . . . slow, quiet, boring?" His answer, "I am just how I am. I do things slowly, slowly, slowly."

Increasingly, personal and social variations of all kinds are being discussed and examined. There is a tension between being open and accepting and being discomforted and fearful of what is different and unfamiliar.

- Janell Cannon's *Crickwing* (2002). A cockroach, Crickwing, is different in two ways—he is disabled after rough encounters by other animals, and he is an artist, unique in his love for color and sculpting. When Crickwing meets the smaller leaf ants, he treats them poorly, as bigger animals

have treated him. The queen ant arranges for Crickwing to be the annual payment the leaf ants are obligated to offer to the army ants. The worker leaf ants set him free and Crickwing uses his artistic talents to save the leaf ants from the army ants.

- Anthony Browne's *Piggybook* (1998). Feminist issues are examined when a father and two sons make constant demands of the mother, showing her no consideration. Gradually pig faces begin to emerge in the décor of the home. Then, one day mother is gone, leaving only a note. Father and sons have fully evolved into pigs by this time. After the house falls into a total mess, the three males start to learn to do things for themselves.

disruption of our culture from internal forces. They raise the fear that by introducing an issue, we might actually be encouraging children to experiment. These are also issues with which many of us are most uncomfortable and where we might be aware of a difference between our intellectual positions and our gut reactions. Maybe this is why Elmer, in *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein, 2000), is called a sissy, but never gay.

- Harvey Fierstein's *The Sissy Duckling* (2000). Elmer is not like the other boy ducks; he likes to bake and to put on plays. When a hunter shoots and wounds his father, Elmer carries his father to safety and nurses his father through the cold northern winter. In the spring, the returning

new issues and concerns emerge and are added to the list of topics. Sometimes a new message and a new interest hijack a classic story, like *The Three Little Pigs*.

- Teresa Celsi's *The Fourth Little Pig* (1992). The three pigs have a sister who has been traveling around the world. The Fourth Little Pig visits and finds her brothers cowering in their house of bricks, terrified to go out lest the big bad wolf get them. She blows down their house, councils them in the face of real but controllable dangers, and continues her exploration of the world.

In each of these books, the basic principles hold, and we deal with issues of deep and lasting cultural significance, letting the animals try out our roles for us. We let them take the risks and absorb the punishments when plans fail or solutions fall through. The intellectual and emotional distance that the animals' role-playing allows children and their mentoring adults grants space in which to become reflective and critical concerning life problems and life choices.

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When mom returns, she gets respect and some help with the work.

- Mem Fox's *Feathers and Fools* (1996). Children's consideration of war and its underlying causes are considered through a pride of peacocks and a flock of swans living in a garden. The members of each group focus on the other group's differences and begin to see the other group as aggressive, so they both start planning defenses against attack. Panic starts the war in which all of the birds are killed. However, two eggs remain unbroken, and from them hatch a peacock and a swan. On seeing each other, they remark on how alike they are and the two birds join forces as friends.

**Gay Rights, Gangs, and Drugs.** This last set of topics opens up consideration of the potential change and/or

flock assumes he and his father have died. His father tells what Harvey did, and the sissy becomes a hero.

- *Willy the Wimp* by Anthony Browne (1989). A breakdown in the fabric of our society is considered when Willy, who is gentle and considerate, becomes the butt of the suburban chimpanzee gang. The gang gives him the nickname, "Willy the Wimp." So, when an ad for a body-building program appears, Willy jogs, takes aerobics, boxes, lifts weights, and goes on a special diet. Following his physical transformation, Willy meets the gang on the street in the process of attacking a young lady. He scares them away and becomes the young lady's hero.

**Topic Change, Topic Stability.** Some topics and messages have a long life and become classics. All the while,

## **PUTTING THE ANIMALS TO WORK IN THE CURRICULUM**

We have attempted to establish that anthropomorphism is a device that has been used over time and across cultures, and have offered examples to demonstrate that authors of children's literature have made extensive use of this device to open a dialogue with their readers. Much of this use has been intuitive. Reflective use in our classrooms could increase both the power and control learners can exert over their experiences.

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. Storying, both factual and fictional, becomes



the basis for all informal and formal education (Graves, 1989). Anthropomorphism, animal characters as people, can add a degree of emotional distance for the reader/writer/speaker when the story message is very powerful, personal, and painful. We most need to read about, write about, and talk about those things that are personally painful, embarrassing, and dangerous to us. Having animals do the acting and mistake-making allows the face-saving emotional distance often needed to be able to join the conversation (Applebee, 1978; Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

Both a democratic society and the informational culture in which we live demand an active, contributing, and critical citizenry. Education is no longer seen as controlling factual memory, but as the ability to imagine, create, and act. The more we place value on supporting learners as independent, critical, and flexible, the greater the value we will place on literature and its devices.

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