

The perils of presenting animals as humans to kids

From [PHAIR Society](#)

September 2021



An interview with Dr. Anastasiya Andrianova

As a vegan mother of three, I often wonder if the way we depict animals in children’s books and film creates a disservice to our children. In children’s literature, we often encounter animals that can talk, have human emotions and desires, and face human challenges and obstacles; for example, in the hugely popular picture book series, “Tales from Acorn Wood”, the animals need help finding their friends, Pig and Hen, so they can enjoy a picnic together. These anthropomorphic depictions might be useful for teaching children how to navigate human relationships. But what do they teach children about animals themselves, when little of what children see or read about makes any contact with the realities animals face at the hands of humans?

In her provocative article, “[To read or not to eat: Anthropomorphism in children’s books](#)” (*Society & Animals*, 2021), Dr Anastasiya Andrianova, Associate Professor of English at North Dakota State University, considers some of the perils of presenting children anthropomorphic depictions of animals. The article spotlights and interrogates some of the “contradictory cultural messages” children receive about animals from books.

Jared and I were intrigued by the article as a potential counterpoint to some research in psychology that suggests animal anthropomorphism may, at times, help people feel connected to animals. Might anthropomorphising animals have a darker side? When used in children’s books, might it be a lost opportunity to teach children honest lessons about how society treats animals? Might such depictions “muddle” important distinctions between humans and animals?

To answer these questions and more, Dr Andrianova kindly agreed to chat with us about her article, ways to reconstruct the way we talk to children about animals and much more. Here is our conversation...

Dr. Andrianova, would you briefly introduce yourself for our readers?

My background is in comparative literature, especially British, Russian, and Ukrainian literatures. Starting with my dissertation on vitalism in 19th-century literature and philosophy, I have been interested in ecocriticism and human-animal relations, most recently examining the intersections of critical animal studies and critical disability studies. My recent publications include an analysis of nonhuman animal intersubjectivity in Ivan Turgenev’s story “Mumu” (*Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, 2020), a critical disability reading of Mikhail Lermontov’s “Taman” (*Disability Studies Quarterly*, 2021), and the article most relevant to PHAIR, on the anthropomorphic depiction of animals in children’s literature (*Society &*

Animals, published online ahead of print 2021). I am currently working on vegan children's literature as well as on teaching literary theory through children's books at the college level.

What inspired you to carry out this research on animals in children's lit?

My research on anthropomorphism in children's literature reflects both personal and academic interests: as a vegan parent of a young vegetarian child, a literary animal scholar, and a feminist, I was struck and disheartened by the depiction of animals in the books I was reading to and with my daughter. In these books, talking animals are used to tell human stories and teach human children lessons; they are often misrepresented and/or stereotyped, thereby communicating strange or outright false ideas about these fictional animals' actual counterparts (e.g., that frogs and storks can become a loving couple in *What I Love About You: Frog and Stork*), or presenting idealized and sanitized versions of farms (e.g., Lindsey Craig and Marc Brown's *Farmyard Beat*) that largely ignore the realities of factory farming, the rearing, use, and slaughter of animals for human consumption. Some books and rhymes are objectional in their trivialization of animal suffering and even death.

As much as my daughter loves the French song "Alouette," the titular lark's defeathering reminds me, each time, of what typically follows the plucking of a bird: cooking and eating that animal. Or speciesism compounded with ableism in "Three Blind Mice." Even "Baa Baa Black Sheep," one of my daughter's most favorite songs which magically puts her to sleep at naptime, of course instrumentalizes animals, suggesting to children that their fur, skins, and secretions are solely for human use and enjoyment. Most of these books, moreover, perhaps with the exception of Ian Falconer's *Olivia* series and Olivier Dunrea's *Gossie & Friends* books, predominantly feature male characters, as is the case with many children's books. I want my daughter to identify with animals (and animal characters) and learn to empathize with them, not use them for her benefit.



"My goal is to encourage children and their adult mentors to start a conversation about animals, and why we are so keen on seeing them act like humans rather than letting them be themselves."

– Dr. Anastasiya Andrianova

What are the dangers of a lack of distinction between humans and animals in children's literature?

In *Our Children and Other Animals* (2014), Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart offer empirical analyses of how children “grow to feel emotionally attached to animals while simultaneously enjoying the vicarious privileges of their domination through consuming their bodies [and] bodily secretions.” The authors note, for example, that children would cry their eyes out over the orphaned piglet in the movie *Babe* (1995), but then happily chow down on bacon. Several of my friends recall being deeply saddened by *Charlotte’s Web*, yet have no problem eating meat. All of this confirmed for me the pernicious effects of anthropomorphizing animal characters and the link between reading and consuming: human children learn to consume animal characters as metaphors at the same time as they learn to physically consume their flesh, skins, and secretions.

In my article “To Read or Not to Eat: Anthropomorphism in Children’s Books” (*Society & Animals*), I expose the speciesist depiction of animals in mainstream children’s literature and its connection to children developing anthropocentric views later in life. Those in favor of anthropomorphism argue that difficult subjects, like religion and death, can be made more accessible through animals, without recognizing that this requires the denigration of animal life, suffering, and death—the latter, in the words of one writer, is “sad, but not traumatic.”

The nonhuman animal is humanity’s most proximal and natural other; however, making this other lesser through humor and other literary techniques has broad ideological ramifications: it rears carnivores. Further, I draw attention to overt and more subtle animal violence, but also to seemingly innocuous “cute” representation of animals that has serious implications for children’s understanding of gender (girls being socialized into caring for “cute” puppies and kittens), dis/ability (disabled animals depicted as victims who inspire pity rather than empathy), and conservation (charismatic megafauna with neotenic features, like polar bears, privileged over other, less “attractive” species).

How can we go about addressing these issues and “make animals matter”?

In “To Read or Not to Eat,” my goal was not to do “vegan policing” or to suggest that we bowdlerize or ban children’s texts about animals; that is both counterproductive and futile. Rather, I want to encourage children and their parents, guardians, and teachers to talk about animals and the specific ways we can appreciate and celebrate their difference. To this end, I conclude the article with several questions about how animals are depicted, what sorts of messages such depictions convey, and how we might act upon them to help real animals:

- How is the animal represented in this text?
- What does this representation tell us about the actual life and conditions of the individual animal or the species of which they are member?
- If this animal is recognizably anthropomorphic (beyond “speaking” human language as a narrator and/or character in the story), does this representation tell us more about humans and society than it does about other animals?
- If so, what can we glean from such anthropocentric representation about both humans and nonhumans?
- If, furthermore, such a representation caricatures, reduces, or otherwise belittles the animal (associating chickens with avoidance and fear, asses with stupidity and obstinacy, foxes with cunning, etc.), how can we improve on it?

- Finally, what real-life changes to help the lives of animals does the story suggest?

And because I am not only a parent but also a university professor, I include animal-centered texts in my literature courses and ask my students some of the same questions about human-animal relations. Most of my work has a pedagogical component. In my article “[Teaching Animals in the Post-Anthropocene: Zoopedagogy as a Challenge to Logocentrism](#)” (*JAEPL*, 2019), for example, I invite others to “promot[e] inquiry and writing which interrogate the human-nonhuman boundary” as a way to “help students develop critical thinking and empathy.”

“I am not suggesting that we stop reading books that feature animals, but I am suggesting that we read them critically and talk to children about what such representations mean.”

What are the implications of your research findings for animal advocacy?

Cole and Stewart note one striking objection to vegan children’s literature: “a registered dietician in Atlanta” alleged that Ruby Roth’s *Vegan Is Love* (2012) could “easily scare a young child into eating vegan.” In Dan Bodenstein and Ronald Robrahn’s *Steven the Vegan* (2012), a book that takes up the tiresome objection that without meat-based protein children cannot build muscle, the eponymous Steven manages to successfully “convert” at least one of his school friends. If only I had as much power in my research and teaching about animals! By focusing on children’s literature and asking how early is too early and how early is *too late* to introduce children to the realities of industrial factory farming and anthroparchy, I draw attention to the serious role that children’s literature plays in early childhood development and how the kinds of books, nursery rhymes, and songs that children consume determine, to a large degree, the choices they make and the relationships they forge as adults. Reading to and with young children is, to me, a form of animal advocacy.

Any other research relating to animal studies that you have been involved in?

I am a literary animal scholar, so I offer new critically informed, animal-centered close readings of literary texts from an animal standpoint, challenging traditional interpretations that allegorize animal experience to make a point about human society. I think of this as putting the animal back into the text. In “Narrating Animal Trauma in Bulgakov and Tolstoy” (*Humanities*, 2016), for instance, I refuse to understand the dog in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* (1925) as merely a symbol for the oppressed Russian masses; in my recent two articles on Ivan Turgenev’s “Mumu,” I similarly challenge the allegorical reading of the canine characters; I also underscore how not only animality but disability is thus erased by being transformed into a metaphor. In my other projects on ecocriticism and ecofeminism, I draw attention to the climate crisis which threatens both the human and the nonhuman.

My work on anthropomorphism in children’s books in particular has led me to vegan children’s literature, Roth’s, Bodenstein’s, and others’ countercultural children’s texts marketed to young vegans, vegetarians, and other vegan-friendly or vegan-curious readers. I have a manuscript under review on this subject and some ideas for further exploration—in large part to promote these texts otherwise overshadowed by speciesist landmarks like *The Rainbow Fish*. *Reading to and with young children is, to me, a form of animal advocacy.*

Which picture book do you think should be on every child’s bookshelf?

This is a tough question. I think that Ezra Jack Keats’ *The Snowy Day* (1962) is a must-have, the first children’s book with an African-American protagonist to win the Caldecott Medal in 1963; remarkably, the text makes no mention of the child’s race, but the accompanying illustrations tell his story in a powerful manner. Another more recent book I adore is Jessica Love’s *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018), which is about a gender nonconforming child who is fascinated by and wants to be a mermaid; the visuals are

stunning, and the confluence of queer, animal, and disability studies (if understood as a revision of H.C. Andersen's "The Little Mermaid") makes this a gem both for children and academics.

When selecting a book specifically about positive human-animal relationships, my recommendation would be Robert Neubecker's *Linus the Vegetarian T. Rex* (2013) and Leslie Crawford and Sonja Stangl's *Sprig the Rescue Pig* (2018), especially for the youngest vegan and vegetarian readers. The former features a brave and inquisitive female protagonist on an adventure at the natural history museum; through her meeting and befriending the titular dinosaur, she learns the value of nature, history, and museums, as well as of a healthy vegetarian diet. The latter similarly centers on a relationship between a young girl and a nonhuman animal, while commenting on the dire conditions of "unhappy" farmed pigs and celebrating animals' sensory experiences.

Dr. Anastasiya Andrianova is Associate Professor of English at North Dakota State University.
Email: anastasiya.andriano@ndsu.edu

Authors: Victoria Simpson and Jared Piazza