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Why do we use animals in children's books?

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Many children's books use animals as their main characters such as the Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson, Fantastic Mr Fox by Roald Dahl, as well as Frog and Toad by Arnold Lobel.

The Gruffalo was inspired by a Chinese folk tale about a fox caught by a tiger and convinces the tiger that he is a scarier animal. Fantastic Mr Fox was inspired by "Reynard the Fox" both tales are meant as lessons for children.

Animals are used in children's books often because they provide an easier way to understand a moral lesson.

We can see from early cultural traditions that animals were used to portray a character's personality. For example, the Egyptian god Anubis who was a man with a canine head was portrayed as a protector of graves, the Egyptian god Bastet was a woman with a cat's head and was portrayed as a protector of the home and guardian of women.

We can also see from Medieval Bestiaries, animals as moral metaphors, for example, a lion represented courage and a fox represented a trickster. The illustration for each beast usually represented a moral lesson.

Again, we can see in fables short moral stories usually with animals as characters for example, Aesop's Fable "The Tortoise and the Hare" and "The Boy who cried Wolf".

In the 18th and 19th century Beatrix Potter's illustration of animals was naturalistic yet humanised animals. John Tenniel illustrator to Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" anthropomorphised animals with human personality and characteristics such as the White Rabbit.

In early animation we also saw animals being portrayed with human personality and characteristics such as Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Bambi and Warner Bros' Bugs Bunny and Daffy duck. The use of animals was used for comedic value and social commentary.

In more recent animated films, we see how DreamWorks' Zootopia portrays racism and misogyny by using larger animals again as a moral message for example, the predators having more power over smaller animals depicting the inequality of women in the modern day workforce.

John Berger in his book "Why Look at Animals?" "Explores how the ancient relationship between man and nature has been broken in the modern consumer age, with animals that used to be at the centre of our existence now marginalised and reduced to spectacle." (Penguin, 2009)

According to Berger, when a human returns the look of an animal, the human "becomes aware of himself returning the look" hinting that animals can reflect something of ourselves.

In an article "The Role of Animals in Children's Stories: Why We Love Animal Characters" by Happy Designer it states "when a child reads about a kind-hearted bear or brave mouse, they can project their own emotions on the character, finding

solace and understanding in their struggles and triumphs. This emotional connection helps children develop empathy and self-awareness". (Wills, 2024)



Fig 1, The Gruffalo

The Gruffalo follows the story of a mouse using its wit to escape from its predators by making up a story about a Gruffalo (an imaginary monster) to scare them off, then uses the fear the other animals have of the Gruffalo to scare him off as well, as though the mouse was the scary one.

The Gruffalo follows a Chinese folklore called "The fox that borrows the terror of the tiger" which teaches children to overcome their fears and to use their intelligence as opposed to their physical strength.

Also in the sequel *The Gruffalo's Child*, the Gruffalo is warning his child of a scary mouse and exaggerates its features to stop the child from going into the woods and in to danger but the child's curiosity grows bigger so she ventures off on her own to find the mouse, as she goes through the woods she comes across the

same animals the Gruffalo scared off in the first book due to this the animals guide her away from themselves to another animal.

We can therefore see how the characters in both books use animal traits to communicate their respective personality quickly for example, the snake being sly and evil as he guides the child in the wrong direction towards danger, the owl being wise although scaring the child in fact warns her against looking for the mouse and effectively warning her of a danger.



Fig 2, Fantastic Mr. Fox

Fantastic Mr Fox follows a family of foxes the most relevant of them being Mr. Fox a writer, although in his first appearance it shows him and Felicity his wife breaking into a farm to catch squabs (birds) but eventually getting stuck in a fox trap and him being told by Felicity he needs to find a new line of work, he then starts working as a writer for a paper however its evident throughout the film that no one reads his articles and he eventually decides to go back to stealing chickens and birds from farms .

Also, Ash Mr. Fox's son is also portrayed as being different from the rest of his family throughout the film, almost being described as a black sheep as he's not as

good as Mr. Fox in sports no matter how much he tried, which made him bitter towards others however towards the end he overcomes this difference.

The book follows these animals although they act and talk very human like they often remind you that they are wild animals by certain gestures like the way they eat and interact with other animals or mention each animal's diets when finding food for the others, this teaches children about how animals diets vary from animal to animal.

The book demonstrates rebellion between the foxes and the farmers for example the hierarchy between humans and animals who in the main are vermin, class conflicts between lower and upper class, and the resourcefulness of animals for example, this could be interpreted as to how people in poverty search for ways to survive.



Fig 3, Frog and Toad

Frog and Toad is a children's novel by Arnold Lobel, about two friends Frog and Toad and follows their adventures throughout their friendship, as they do everything together such as sharing foods, going to the beach, they give gifts to each other.

The books also portray their different personalities Frog being happy and excited whereas Toad is more serious and anxious, due to Toad being more anxious Frog helps him work through his worries and makes things exciting.

The book also teaches children lessons like the concepts of posting letters, in this chapter they follow the journey of how post reaches your house.

Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in his book "The Uses of Enchantment" demonstrates the importance of fairy tales to children and how it helps them navigate fear and inner conflict. He states, "The child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of turmoil of his feelings".

Animals therefore allow children to project emotions onto non-human forms, which feels safer and less personal.

Animals also allow difficult themes such as danger or fear to be presented safely.

Perry Nodelman argues that anthropomorphic animals in picture books provide a form of aesthetic distance, allowing children to explore complex emotions and anxieties in a safer, more indirect way (Nodelman,1988).

Maria Nikolajeva states "Characters in children's literature tend to be strongly typified, often functioning as embodiments of particular human qualities" (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 5).

Animals continue to be important in children's books because they assist writers and illustrators with explaining big ideas in a way that feels easy and enjoyable for children to read. In stories like *The Gruffalo*, *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Frog and Toad*, animal characters face problems such as danger, fear, bravery, and friendship, but these challenges feel less threatening when shown through animals instead of humans.

Theorists like Bettelheim, Berger and Nikolajeva explain that animals can act as symbols, helping children understand feelings and situations that might be too complicated or frightening in real life. Illustrators also enjoy using animals because they can exaggerate shapes, expressions and personalities, making the characters more fun and easier for children to relate to.

Overall, animal characters remain popular because they allow stories to be meaningful without being overwhelming. They make difficult ideas and moral lessons easier to understand and keep children engaged through imagination, humour, and visual appeal.

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