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Good to love or good to eat? Ethical and ideological implications of hunting, killing and the consumption of anthropomorphic animals in popular picturebooks

Summary

This paper discusses the visual and narrative construction of species difference in a selection of *Little Golden Books*, as well as its ethical and ideological implications. I will focus on how certain picturebooks encourage thinking about species in terms of difference and hierarchy, while simultaneously blurring species boundaries through visual and/or verbal anthropomorphism. From an early age, children are taught that animals come in different categories, some of which are good to love, and should be treated with due respect (pets) and others that are good to eat, and, at least in Western cultures, less deserving of our compassion. Focusing on a selection of *Little Golden Books*, American merchandise books aimed at young readers, I investigate how children learn to distinguish between these two classes of animals.

Key words: anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, commercial picturebooks, Little Golden Books, Literary Animal Studies, species difference

Słowa kluczowe: antropomorfizm, antropocentryzm, komercyjne książki obrazkowe, Little Golden Books, literackie studia nad zwierzętami, różnice międygatunkowe

Introduction

Today is the day I will slaughter my pet and eat her.

I am a predator by nature, so it is perfectly alright for me to kill for fun.

It is permissible to hunt and eat your friends if you are hungry.

To most of us, these statements sound quite absurd. And in a sense, they are, because they contradict our basic assumptions about moral behavior. We do not eat our pets. In fact, one of our core conceptions of pethood includes that a pet *cannot* be classified as a food item. Neither do we hunt and kill our friends, and consuming their flesh would qualify as cannibalism. Mentioning such things is borderline taboo. However, in many picturebooks with anthropomorphised protagonists belonging to different species, these dilemmas become very real, and they demand real answers.

In this article I focus on the moral questions and dilemmas that are raised by the representations of predation in picturebooks for a young readership (preschool age). To this end I have selected two examples from the *Little Golden Book* series and one illustrated short story by Richard Scarry. This material is interesting because they are merchandise books: popular, commercial writings that are marketed for a broad readership. The ideology mediated in and through these texts is likely to be uncontested and can therefore provide a fairly accurate idea of mainstream notions surrounding hunting, killing, and meat consumption. The books highlight various problematic aspects of the representation of predation in anthropomorphic animal characters and interrogate the validity of the human-animal binary.

The characters in my selection of stories, all apex predators, are expected to make a moral choice and act in accordance with it. For this reason these picturebooks can be considered arenas of ethical significance. They show how species membership can be used as an argument for denying or allowing certain animals access to the moral community of the dominant species. Identifying the narrative and visual strategies that allow the naturalisation of species difference and hierarchy is a first step towards a re-evaluation of the category of species and the function of anthropomorphism in popular picturebooks. This article is an attempt to deconstruct the nature-culture and human-animal dichotomies that are active within the stories in order to reveal the social hierarchies that are built on them.

Our habits and their underlying values surrounding the killing and eating of animals are to a large extent culturally determined, and the way any individual picturebook represents such events is therefore highly contextual. Who can eat what/whom and under which circumstances is dictated by tacit, but unbending cultural conventions. Yet there is a tendency to naturalise these conventions, and one of the ways this happens is through the use of visual and verbal anthropomorphism.

Picturebooks and specicism

At the beginning of children's reading careers we commonly find primers or ABC books that construct a binary relationship between words and images. More often than not, these books include depictions of animals functioning first and foremost as specimens, representatives of their species. This indicates that one of the first things beginning readers learn about animals is how to categorise them into species, principally based on their visual characteristics. The socialisation process continues along these lines even as children progress to more advanced picturebooks. In a day and age where access to real animals is often limited (and if not limited, then at least highly regulated), animal representations inform the ideas entertained by young readers about the range and possibilities of human-animal interactions and relationships.

Amélie Björck (2013) argues that in contemporary children's literature, animals are predominantly depicted in an unreflective fashion: behaving, thinking and feeling as if they were human. This critique is valid for the picturebooks I discuss here, which encour-

age thinking about species in terms of difference and hierarchy. However, anthropomorphism simultaneously causes a blurring of species boundaries, and this can be a fruitful starting point for the exploration of the ethical and ideological content of these books. From an early age, children are taught that animals come in different categories, some of which are good to love, and should be treated with due respect. Pets are part of this group of animals. Others, like cattle, are good to eat, and, at least in Western cultures, considerably less deserving of our compassion. In this way, picturebooks contribute to children's conceptualisation of this division of animals into different classes, thus perpetuating speciesism rather than questioning or challenging it.

The representation of animals in children's literature has a long and rich history, yet in spite of this, there has been surprisingly little academic attention for the ideological and ethical implications behind their appearance. This is rapidly changing, however, with the advance of the fields of Human Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies, in which my approach to the picturebooks in this article is rooted. At the core of these new research areas lies a critique of the anthropocentrism that maintains that the human species is essentially different from and superior to all other species. Kari Weil explains how

for centuries nonhuman animals have been locked in representations authored by humans, representations that moreover have justified the use and abuse of nonhuman animals by humans (Weil 2012: 4).

We find that literary animals are now undergoing a process of emancipation, and this necessitates a reconsideration of the concept of species as being on a par with categories such as race, gender, and age. This project requires a radical rethinking of the binaries that, within Western thinking, appear to be fundamental and universal: nature-culture and human-animal. What research in the abovementioned fields has brought to light is that the discourse of species is fundamental to our conceptualisation of difference – both across and within species boundaries. Cary Wolfe explains how

[t]he effective power of the discourse of species when applied to social others of whatever sort relies, then, on a prior taking for granted of the institution of speciesism – that is, of the ethical acceptability of the systematic “noncriminal putting to death” of animals based solely on their species (Wolfe 2003: 7).

If we accept that children's literature can never be ideologically neutral, picturebook animals become highly political creatures. Therefore, understanding how the discourse of species is activated, justified and perpetuated in picturebooks for a young readership will not only further our understanding of the way we understand nonhuman animals; indirectly, it also addresses human otherness. Animal-centered readings of picturebooks for young readers are therefore likely to provide insight into both children's marginalisation as well as into the way in which children are socialised into a tradition of thinking that systematically values humanity over animality and naturalises the domination of animals by humans.

This explains why looking at picturebook animals as mere metaphors for (certain aspects of) humanity is insufficient to comprehend their full significance. We are in need of reading strategies that will allow us to reevaluate the human-animal relationship altogether, and to a certain extent this entails a blurring of the boundaries between the fictional and the real. Although this paper presents an analysis of books, and therefore, fictional representations of animals, real animals and child readers are always implicated, either as (future) moral agents or as objects of moral consideration. The way these fictional creatures are presented to their readers does have material consequences – therefore the relationship between real and fictional animals is by necessity a messy one.

The significance of food events

Food events are always significant, in reality as well as in fiction. They reveal the fundamental preoccupations, ideas and beliefs of society (Daniel 2006: 1).

In her discussion of eating practices in children's books, Carolyn Daniel emphasises the strong socialising function of mealtimes: it is at such times that young children learn what is expected of them if they want to qualify as full members of their culture. Because, to begin with, they are not: as if they were uncultured little savages, Western culture tends to put them alongside animals. The reason food can have this socialising function, according to Daniel, is because it is culturally specific: what is classified as 'good to eat' or taboo is culturally determined. There are rules that state *what* can be eaten and by *whom*, *when* and *how much*. And there are consequences for transgressing these rules (Daniel 2006: 12).

The adage 'You are what you eat' seems to be true in many children's books, where food is often used as a metaphor for human behaviour. In fiction, it is not unusual that we can recognise morally corrupt characters by their transgressive eating habits. This includes the eating of non-foods, such as, in Western culture: insects, dog meat, or contaminated foods. Consequently, otherness can be signaled through food choices. The coding of food can therefore promote racism, imperialism, as well as speciesism. (Daniel 2006) So how does this apply to anthropomorphic animals who eat other animals? In other words: what are the lessons children may learn from seeing animals eat, or attempting to eat, other animals in picturebooks? When we focus on anthropomorphised characters there appears to be a very fine line between norm and transgression, simply eating meat and cannibalism, and this reveals some fundamental societal tensions regarding the justification of meat eating.

Hunting, killing and meat consumption in *Pierre Bear*

In *Pierre Bear* (Scarry, Scarry 1954) hunting, killing, and eating other animals is a fairly unsentimental matter. On the contrary: it is described in positive, matter of fact terms. The answer to our question concerning which animals can be classified as food seems to be: any animal who is not a bear is a potential prey. The text does not call into question

whether these acts of violence against other animals are ethically justified. On the level of the images, however, we find limited room for the reader to develop empathy with the prey animals. And empathy, as we will see later on, can be a starting point for ethical consideration.

The story essentially revolves around the sequence of hunting, killing, and eating of other animals by protagonist Pierre Bear, whom we can see dressed in a trapper outfit, making a living on his own in the wilderness of the Northern United States or Canada. The text tells us that “when Pierre wanted a fish supper, he went fishing, all alone”. When his cupboard is empty, he hunts for moose, and when he needs a new coat, he hunts for seals. The activity of hunting permeates the entire book and serves as a catalyser for the action.

On the level of the images, hunting is equally omnipresent. From the cover, where Pierre and his son are depicted sporting rifles, to the house’s interior that is decorated with hunting trophies, to the furs that Pierre uses for a blanket, to the food he cooks. Hunting is at the very center of Pierre’s existence, and throughout the book, this is described as a self-evident, honourable, even civilising, activity. For a picturebook aimed at a fairly young readership, this level of pervasiveness of acts of violence is relatively unusual. Yet the narrative makes it appear unproblematic. How does this happen, we may ask.

The way anthropomorphism is used to distinguish the bears from the other animals lies at the core of the answer. First of all, there is a sharp contrast in the way the bears and the animals they hunt are depicted visually, and the reader is implicitly invited to accept that this justifies the killing. We see that the bears are highly anthropomorphised, while the animals they hunt are not. The bears are bipedal, wear clothes, speak to each other in what can be understood to be human language, and they live in humanlike conditions. There is an aura of civilisation, homeliness, and order surrounding the bears’ lifestyle.

The book motivates Pierre’s actions by relying on the discourse of subsistence hunting: “Next morning, when Pierre looked in his cupboard he saw that he needed more food. So he took his big rifle and headed for the wild woods to hunt the Terrible Moose, the biggest, wildest animal of the North.” Pierre hunts to fulfill his basic need for sustenance. This in itself may be justification enough, with Pierre being a bear, and a moose a natural prey. But there exists a confusion at the heart of this interaction. Pierre is *not* human, he has the body of a bear. Highly anthropomorphised, but still: a bear. The fact that he is a ‘natural’ predator serves as a justification for his acts. This confusion cannot be resolved by interpreting the bear as a metaphor, or a human in disguise.

The way Pierre handles his prey is human, and it is coded as civilised, which reinforces a positive reading. Unlike real bears, Pierre hunts with traps and a rifle. The activities surrounding the preparation of food are equally significant. We see that Pierre cooks and prepares his food, rather than eating it raw, as we might expect a bear to do. This confusion of human and animal, of hunting and predation, builds on a common misconception in the debate surrounding the practice of human hunting, as Garry Marvin explains:

Hunting cannot simply be explained as being triggered by something in the genetic makeup of humans nor as being motivated by a mystical link to a putative past. Human hunting is a set of cultural rather than natural practices, and it is important here to emphasize that it differs from predation in the nonhuman animal world with which it is sometimes compared. Human hunting certainly involves predation, but predation is not the same as hunting (Marvin 2006: 13).

The text then takes the argument even further. The capitalisation of the words describing the moose makes the reader even more aware of the fact that one is expected to view Pierre and the moose as worthy opponents, but not opponents within the same category of being, or even the same moral community. Pierre's actions are rationally explained, the text speaks of the moose as irrational, wild, terrible and aggressive, and therefore killing him becomes not only a way to sustain himself, but also a courageous act in the defence of civilisation: "But the brave little bear was not afraid. He shot him. BANG! And the Moose fell dead. For Pierre was the bravest hunter of all the North." We notice how the language of civilisation is contrasted with a vocabulary of wildness and ferociousness.

Furthermore, he hunts to acquire fur. There is no obvious practical reason why he would need fur clothing, being a furry animal himself, and the narrative doesn't explain the motive for this. However, Pierre also sells some of the furs at a local trading post, which activates the discourse of capitalism. The profits allow him to literally buy himself into the middle class ideal of a nuclear family: he marries the female bear who works at the trading post, and they have a son together.

What we have seen so far is that the aspects that qualify some animals in this story as food rather than companions or equals – something the reader might expect if the main character is also an animal – is the *degree* of anthropomorphism. The narrative creates difference on the level of species by attributing subjectivity and agency to the bears, while withholding it from the fish, the moose, and the seal. And this subjectivity is essentially a humanlike subjectivity. This is supported by the fact that Pierre categorically refuses to see other animals as persons. He is described as a lonely bear, who is desperately longing for company, yet his actions and words betray that 'company' is strictly limited to other bears: "He dreamt that he was with a lot of other bears who were laughing and singing and never lonely". Perhaps the most striking example of this radical distinction can be found in the scene after Pierre has killed the moose: 'From the Moose antler he made a big hat rack to hang upon the wall. Pierre hung his hat on one of the antlers. "Someone else's hat should hang on the other antler", thought the lonely bear.'

One of the lessons a child reader might learn from her encounter with these anthropomorphic bears is that there is a clear and fundamental difference between certain categories of animals, and based on this difference we decide which ones can safely be consumed. Some are more like us than others, and deserve moral consideration. The ones that are less like us have bodies that are merely useful, either as commodities or as food.

Readers may infer that differentiation on the level of physical appearance forms the foundation of ethical decision-making. From there on, it is only a small step towards an ideology that considers human beings in similar terms of difference.

It is also significant that the hunter is an adult, and moreover, an adult male. The gendered nature of hunting and killing as a masculinely coded activity is presented to the reader as a natural state of affairs, again, by employing anthropomorphism. The assumption is that culture mirrors the natural world where males are responsible for acts of violence that are necessary for survival. To maintain the status quo, one has to accept killing and meat eating as unavoidable. Therefore, the choice to abstain from eating meat becomes an interesting one, a choice that can ultimately be equated with the acceptance of a more civilised lifestyle. This is the case in the next book I would like to discuss: *The Tawny Scrawny Lion* by Kathryn Jackson and Gustav Tenggren (1952).

Giving up hunting as a sign of civilisation: *The Tawny Scrawny Lion*

As opposed to *Pierre Bear*, this narrative does not approve of the initial lifestyle of the protagonist. In this story, we are met by a different degree of anthropomorphism, which also serves a different purpose. Here, transformation is central: the characters display a gradual metamorphosis from wildness to civilisation that is signaled by increasing degrees of humanisation of their appearance and behaviour. Initially, the animals are depicted as senseless slaves of their instincts: the predator hunts and the prey animals try to escape. In the next stage of the story, they try to reason their way out of their predicament and negotiate a solution, and eventually they end up as members of the same moral community.

The initial inter-animal relationships are comparable to those in *Pierre Bear*, and predation is a key element of their interactions. In this story, the protagonist is a lion, which makes it appropriate for him to eat meat. Yet the cover already reveals that something out of the ordinary is about to take place: it shows the lion holding a carrot in his mouth and four bunnies in his lap, two of which are also munching on carrots. From the onset, food choices and the reversal of predation is presented as the book's core concern.

The central conflict revolves around the predator's constant hunger, which, the story explains, stems from chasing prey every day of the week. In a humoristic circular argument the lion explains how in his opinion, the prey animals themselves are to blame for their unfortunate fate: "It's all your fault for running away," he grumbled. "If I didn't have to run, run, run for every single bite I get, I'd be fat as butter and sleek as satin. Then I wouldn't have to eat so much, and you'd last longer!" Humour in children's books can serve diverse purposes, and in this case it reveals that there may be an unease, a friction, even a taboo connected to hunting and eating animals that are anthropomorphised to roughly the same degree as the predator.

Another inappropriate aspect of the lion's eating habits is his particular behaviour when he catches his food: the wildness of the chase is presented as unhealthy and ultimately unsustainable. He transgresses society's food rules by displaying a ravenous appetite and preying on other anthropomorphised animals. If we follow the internal logic of the story, these other animals should, on account of their ability to speak, be members of the

same moral community. This brings the act of hunting and eating them alarmingly close to committing cannibalism.

The prey animals in this story are not passive food items: they have agency and use it to speak up in protest. They get organised, but since they are afraid to confront the lion themselves, they trick the rabbit into negotiating with him. The rabbit's solution, rather than reasoning with him, is to civilise him in another way: he wants to turn the solitary lion into a full member of their society by way of altering his eating habits. The rabbit presents him with an alternative to meat: carrot stew and fish. At this point the reader encounters an animal that is apparently good to eat, in the sense that eating fish does not constitute a moral dilemma. The motivation provided by the narrative hinges on species hierarchy: while the large exotic animals are all given agency, the fish remains a passive, voiceless victim. The fish is also the only animal that is actually caught and killed in the images.

The story illustrates how a wild, unruly animal can be brought under the control of culture through the regulation of his food choices. The lion displays childlike {unregulated?} boundless behaviour, which needs to be addressed in order for him to become civilised. The narrative values properties such as self-discipline, impulse control and social behaviour. This reflects common Western attitudes about the education and socialisation of human children, as well as other groups of people who are considered "savage" in the eyes of the dominant culture.

The visual transformation of the animals reveals how their relationships evolve. Both predator and prey undergo a process of visual humanisation. Clothing, for example, is presented as an indication of culture: the rabbit is the only one to wear clothing in the beginning of the story. Eventually, the other animals also wear clothes. Body posture is another sign of civilisation: initially, the lion walks on all fours, later he walks on his hind legs. Bipedalism, clothing, and tool use are all common visual indicators of culture and civilisation in picturebook animals. On an ideological level, the message embedded in this story seems to be that mutual respect follows from a shared identity. One earns moral consideration if, and only if, one resembles the dominant culture.

It is significant that the lion doesn't stop eating his fellow animals because he empathises with them – he rather feels sorry for himself for having to chase them. He stops eating them because the alternative is healthier and more satisfying for himself, and only after he realises this does he begin to look at the other animals as possible members of the same community. Empathy is entirely absent as a motivation for moral consideration. That empathy can indeed be a powerful driving force behind the inclusion of an animal of a different species in the moral community of the protagonists can be seen in the final story I discuss.

Conflicting starting points for moral consideration in *The Goose That Stuffed Herself*

Richard Scarry's illustrated Christmas story *The Goose That Stuffed Herself* (2005) describes how a goose transforms from food item to pet to family member. As in *The Tawny Scrawny Lion*, the humour behind the double meaning of the title indicates that this story touches on a sensitive subject. In this rather unsettling story, the question of meat eating is problematised from the start when Tobias Tiger brings home a goose, which he intends to fatten for Christmas. But almost immediately, the tiger family starts to develop empathy for the skinny little goose, and instead of fattening her, feeding her takes the form of caring: "The goose began to eat. She ate until she was happy. She ate until she was warm. She ate until she could not keep one eye open, let alone two. Then she flapped happily into Mrs. Tiger's lap, tucked her head under the red shawl, and snored loudly. Mrs. Tiger rocked her gently. The little boy tigers talked in whispers. And Tobias tiger (ready for bed in his striped pajamas) said good night in a sort of snort and went upstairs. Before many days had passed, that goose had made herself one of the family" (Jackson, Scarry 2005: 52).

Even though the goose does not have the ability to speak, she clearly has the same range of emotions as the tigers, and the realisation that she is an animal who can suffer, who can be hungry and cold, convinces the mother and children that eating her would be wrong. It takes the father, Tobias Tiger, significantly longer to respond empathetically to the goose. He initially actively resists his family's attempts to include the goose in their moral community and insists on her status as food. Only after she does him a favour – by being a comfortable pillow – is he willing to reconsider his attitude towards her.

In a final act of defiance, she actively appeals to the tigers' sense of justice and empathy: when Tabitha Tiger places her on a plate to see what she would look like stuffed, the goose turns around and licks the plate, actively resisting a classification as food and suggesting she should be eating instead of being eaten. In the final image, we see how the goose, who is at this point also wearing clothing, has at last secured her place at the dinner table. But, shockingly, a turkey has replaced her as the dinner's main course. The irony of this replacement is not lost on the reader.

This story clearly suggests that personhood can be granted to some animals, but refused to others. But the reasons for viewing them as members of the same moral community may vary and may have different consequences. Tobias represents a perspective in which one can sympathise with some animals, while their consumption remains a real possibility.

The approach to this moral dilemma appears to be related to the gender and age of the characters: there is a clear contrast between the children and the mother tiger on the one hand, and the father on the other. Although empathy is suggested as a foundation for ethical decision-making, it is not extended equally to all creatures. Apparently, the reader again has to learn the lesson of species difference and hierarchy: the goose is more 'like us' than the turkey at that point of the story, justifying why the tigers can safely eat the turkey.

Conclusion

We have seen how an analysis of anthropomorphism helps to unlock the ethical dimension of the picturebook, and it does so, mainly, by putting into question where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman run. Precisely because the animal protagonists are anthropomorphised, they can provide us with insights regarding the very nature of the human-animal relationship, and the moral implications that follow from depicting species in terms of difference and hierarchy. The hybridity of these creatures confuses strict species boundaries, and this creates possibilities for the identification of fundamental frictions in our thinking about the human-nonhuman animal binary.

Visual and verbal anthropomorphism may uphold an anthropocentric worldview, while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between the human and the animal. What we have seen is how the representation of species difference in these texts is not purely a matter of biological classification. Nor is it a simple case of metaphorical imagery. In an intricate constellation of constantly shifting meaning, speciesist discourse informs the reader's possible interpretations of these narratives. Ideologically, species becomes the concept that motivates thinking in terms of difference and social hierarchies.

Anthropomorphic characters defy essentialist ideas about subjectivity, animal agency, and human superiority – while at the same time, their bodies are inscribed with attributes of speciesism. These animals become interesting because their very form challenge the nature-culture divide. Their bodies are meeting places of the natural and the cultural, and they cannot be considered separately without losing significant information.

Anthropomorphism, therefore, is not a straightforward projection of human properties onto fictional animals. It is complex, confuses boundaries, and cannot be resolved by solely relying on dichotomies.

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