Hello and welcome to this discussion of 'Talking Animals in Children's Literature'. I am researching anthropomorphism for my PhD studies at the University of Western Australia and after one year I’m finding more questions than answers. Those who’ve completed a PhD say this is normal… The following presentation is intended as a conversation, in which I hope to not only share my love of ‘animal stories’, but to learn more about anthropomorphic stories from the Asia-Oceania region.

Anthropomorphism, the practice of giving human characteristics to animals and non-living objects, can be found in folktales from around the world, particularly in stories for children. Cautionary tales featuring talking animals have been popular in western culture since Aesop’s fables in the 6th century BC, whilst the Indian *Panchatantra* animal fables are thought to have been composed around the 3rd century BC. Anthropomorphism as a literary device continued via bestiaries of the Middle Ages, then authors such as the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson developed this tradition further, using big bad wolves, lions, mice, rabbits and even an ugly duckling as a means of entertaining, instructing and warning young people through anthropomorphic examples.

My PhD studies on anthropomorphism focus specifically on children's literature. I’m researching not only the spread historically and internationally of anthropomorphic stories, but I’m also keen to learn more about their purpose. What is so special about animal stories? Why do children love tales about dogs, pigs, monkeys and chickens that behave like humans? And why are some animal types portrayed as 'good' characters while others are often depicted as the bad guy? For example, wolves and dogs are physically not very different, they can interbreed, but historically, they have been presented very differently in children's literature. Given the role they play in real life - wolves eat villagers, dogs protect the hearth - such portrayals are not surprising.

In many stories animals act as a metaphor for linked human behaviours. Lions are usually portrayed as regal. Foxes are cunning characters; they often appear as the wily trickster. Monkeys are clever too, but in a more positive light. Owls are usually wise characters, and strangely snakes often are too (*Kaain the Jungle Book, Nagala in Harry Potter*). The roles of ducks, chickens and roosters vary.
Pigs are recurrent characters in children’s stories and they are usually portrayed as ‘good’, although in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Snowball and Napoleon are far more complex; more about those two pigs later… I am interested in research suggesting that the popularity of the pig as an anthropomorphic character is linked to their intelligence (similar to ours) or the curious fact that the pig is genetically very close to humans.

By extension, I am also curious as to whether authors consciously use anthropomorphic animals as a useful stereotype. When a dog is featured in a story, at a deep level, do we associate that character with trust and loyalty? An interesting example occurs in Margaret Wild’s, award-winning picture book, *Fox*. In this story, Dog befriends Magpie. Both animals have a physical weakness; dog is blind in one eye; Magpie cannot fly. But together they become something new.

“Hop on my back,” [Dog says.] “Look into the water and tell me what you see.” Sighing, Magpie does as he asks. Reflected in the water are clouds and sky and trees – and something else. “I see a strange new creature!” she says. “That is us,” says Dog. “Now hold on tight!” ‘Magpie feels the wind streaming through her feathers, and she rejoices. “Fly Dog, Fly! I will be your missing eye, and you will be my wings.”’

All goes well until Fox enters the story. ‘*Fox with his haunted eyes and rich red coat. He flickers through the trees like a tongue of fire, and Magpie trembles.*’

This confronting story of jealousy, betrayal and forgiveness has won numerous Australian and international awards. Ron Brooks’ illustrations and innovative use of lettering caused a sensation when it was published. The powerful themes in this masterwork remain accessible to young readers, I believe, because they are presented in animal form, forms which cross easily into metaphor. Dog is loyal, Magpie is seduced and Fox plays his traditional role of the crafty villain. It’s hard to imagine the same succinct impact if humans were used. In addition to exploring animals as metaphor, *Fox* is also an example of ‘the animal as buffer’ theory as to why children might enjoy anthropomorphic tales:

Some researchers suggest that one of the reasons anthropomorphism is an effective literary devise is that it gives distance to disturbing topics, creating a ‘space’ for children to explore challenging issues through literature. Animals are familiar and in many cases ‘safe’—they can thus be used to provide a bridge to difficult situations. Children can identify with a character but still maintain a certain detachment. For example, *The Rabbits*, John Marsden and Shaun Tan’s allegorical fable, tackles the controversial topic of colonization. The animals chosen by Marsden and Tan illustrated difference: numbats are an endangered native species, whilst the spread of ‘introduced’ rabbits has caused enormous environmental damage in Australia. Using animal characters in this story enables young readers more freedom to look at a complex issue without being caught up in societal attitudes and stereotypes. Similarly, David Miller’s picture book, *Refugees* allows young readers to engage with simple language and illustrations as they hear a story about homeless ducks. Older readers will probably see the ducks as portrayals of human refugees.

Major historic moments can be presented concisely to young readers through anthropomorphism. Although not written for children, a classic example now read widely in classrooms is George Orwell’s, *Animal Farm*. This book reflects the historical events in Russia during the years 1927 to the outbreak of World War Two. Russia is the ‘farm’, while the central pig characters; Napoleon and Snowball, represent Stalin and Trotsky. Orwell’s use of anthropomorphism highlights corruption,
greed and wickedness whilst ensuring the book’s accessibility to both adults and teenage readers.

*Call of the Wild*, set against the hardships of the Alaskan Gold Rush of the late 1890s tells the story of Buck, a St Bernard cross, which is stolen and sold to dog-sledders. Buck is given humanlike thoughts and emotions and London’s use of a non-human protagonist, allows readers to develop a more intense and sensory understanding of the savagery of this time. *Black Beauty* is another example. Anna Sewell’s anthropomorphic title explores the challenging conditions of London’s horse-drawn taxi cabs and changing attitudes to the treatment of animals in the late 1800s:

‘We call them dumb animals, and so they are, for they cannot tell us how they feel, but they do not suffer less because they have no words’

To my mind, the use of animal characters in each of these titles, deepens rather than simplifies our understanding of human nature.

Another of my favourite anthropomorphic books is Helen Manos’ picture book, *Samsara Dog* with illustrations by Julie Vivas. This story helps children understand the Buddhist concept of reincarnation in a gentle way. The double page spreads show the progression of the dog character through various lifetimes in a touchingly humble way that would be difficult to achieve using human characters.

Some of the other reasons researchers attribute the popularity of anthropomorphic stories to children include: the possibility that children identify with animal characters because of reduced societal power; both children and animals must do as they are told. Yet many children have power over pets and domestic animals. Perhaps children enjoy reading about animals behaving badly because animals feature even lower in the communal pecking order than themselves. This seems to be particularly true for ‘moralistic’ stories where the intent is for young readers to ‘learn a lesson’ via story? (visual examples: Aesop, Grimm, Asian & Oceania folktales). If so, I wonder, do children feel empowered whilst reading stories featuring anthropomorphic animals?

Another idea is that anthropomorphism is a way to explore ‘otherness’ and thus by extension, a way to explore what it means to be human (or not). For children, learning about the world and how they ‘fit in’, is an essential part of growing up. Maybe stories centring on anthropomorphic objects help young readers clarify their thoughts? (visual examples: Shaun tan’s *Lost Thing*, May Gibbs’ *gum nut babies*; ET, Japanese crane girl who shape-shifts, wolf boy...)

Or finally, another idea could simply be that children like animals!

**Activity:** These are some of the ideas that I am exploring. What do you think?
I’d love to hear your thoughts. Can I please ask you to turn to your neighbour and share details of your own favourite animal story; preferably one from your childhood.

Now please indicate whether your story featured a domestic animal if so, what kind of animal?

Audience feedback (dogs, chickens, pig, horse, cat...)

And now whose story featured a wild animal?

Can anyone now share with us why the story appealed to you? Did it fit one of the theories we have discussed? Did the story hold a moral? Do you think it helped you understand challenging problems? Are there other reasons we have not discussed?

Perhaps now as a group we can we make some observations...
As we've seen from this snapshot of story examples, there are degrees of anthropomorphism. Some animals are clothed and talk, (Wind in the Willows, The Tale of Peter Rabbit). In other stories, the author has limited the degree to which human feelings are projected onto animal characters. Whether animals can feel emotion is something a scientist may argue cannot be proven, but it is something many a pet owner will say they experience daily. Can a dog feel jealousy as we know it? Does a whipped horse feel pain the way a human would? When a dolphin saves a shipwrecked sailor is it displaying empathy?

We have run out of time to discuss this further, but I do hope this presentation has proved thought-provoking and that if you have not read many anthropomorphic titles recently, that you will seek out some of the books presented today.

Thank you

Q&A