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## **Talking Tigers: Concepts of Representational Ethics Applied to Non-Human Characters in Writing Children's Fiction**

**Mimi Thebo**

### **Abstract**

This is a paper to open discussion about the representation of animals in children's fiction. Arguing that the destruction of animal habitats and the reduction of non-human species intersect with colonial practice, the author looks at the tradition of animal characters in children's fiction from a practitioner's point of view. While appreciative of the emotional experiences animal characters provide, the author asks if ethical concepts of representation might be fruitfully applied to writing animals for young readers.

**Keywords:** *Representational Ethics, Storytelling for Climate Justice, Writing Animals, Writing for Societal Change*

It's impossible to imagine children's fiction without animal characters, and they often form the most memorable of our early reading experiences. Names like Aslan, Tarka, Charlotte and Fiver can evoke powerful emotions of wonder, yearning and grief as we remember co-creating the creatures of our early narrative adventures.

Authors write animal characters for many different reasons – author-illustrators often say that bears or in Jill Murphy's case, elephants (Murphy, 2016) are simply easier to draw. Talking animals might also provide a way of portraying something sensitive, like class difference in *The Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 1908), or personality types in *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne & Sheppard, 1926). An author might endow a creature with the power of speech in order to explore the experience of another species – and here I'm thinking of stories like *Black Beauty* (Sewell, 1877), *Charlotte's Web* (White & Williams, 1952), *Watership Down* (Adams, 1972) and *Varjak Paw* (Said, 2003).

At their best, when the depiction of the animals are informed by patient observation and research into a given species' behaviour, concerns and life cycle, non-human characters promote reader empathy. Child readers are able to inhabit the otherness of, say, a pig's intimate friendship with a spider, to the point where readers become emotionally involved in the spider's ability to set her nest before she dies. This can become an experience of accepting profound difference. That textual acceptance may even allow us to overcome possible revulsion when a real eight-legged, many-eyed Charlotte scuttles across our floor.

At least, such is the theory (Hammond, 2019). At times, this actually works; after the publication of *Black Beauty*, the treatment of horses in Victorian British society radically changed (Kean, 1998). At times, it doesn't: *Bambi* (Salten, 1923) did not prevent the mismanagement of roe deer populations; *The Call of the Wild* (London, 1903) did not prevent the near-extinction of timber wolves; Gill Lewis' tireless campaigning for UK birds of prey in relation to her wonderful hen harrier novel *Sky Dancer* (Lewis, 2017) is continually undermined by the economic and social capital associated with grouse shooting.

As someone who frequently writes the non-human myself, I have begun to wonder about my own motivations and desires when creating animal characters. Nearly ten years after philosopher Thomas Nagel discussed the impossibility of truly imagining inhabiting the body and mind of a bat, and some five years deeply invested (both as writer and teacher) in the complicated questions of identity and representation referred to as Own Voices, I have been thinking about how, why and if humans should reach so easily for the experiences of other species when writing our texts.

Let me put this enquiry into context; in the last fifty years – during my own lifetime – humans have wiped out over seventy percent of the earth’s wild animal population (WWF, 2022). We are facing a profound challenge with the climate crisis, and, thinking purely instrumentally, biodiversity is important to slowing and reversing the destruction of the earth’s natural systems. Thinking more about how writing can affect societal change, it seems that reading experiences that radically accept difference may be exceptionally useful for our readers. Child readers today will need to navigate global cooperation if they are to help solve the global problem of climate collapse. Concepts of acceptance of radical difference acquired in their early reading may help them when encountering profound difference in other stakeholders during this process. Understanding how those reading experiences are most powerfully formed seems, therefore, a useful area of investigation.

The link between animal representation and the identity issues associated with the term Own Voices is not as far-fetched as you might think. Habitat destruction and colonialism are co-dependant processes of exploitation. One of the assets stripped during the colonisation processes is the natural world of the colonised place. The *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder – particularly *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (Wilder, 1937) – and Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (Kipling, 1894) detail this process. Indeed, the animal characters in *The Jungle Book* stand in for indigenous people – both ‘good’ ones like the wolves, who acknowledge the superiority of Mowgli’s human gaze and rebellious ‘bad’ ones like the tiger Shere Khan, who must be killed by the human who has moved into the tiger’s wild place. Kipling’s deep ambivalence about the colonial project is seen when the elephants trample the indigenous village, ‘letting the jungle in’; but the stone buildings of the colonisers won’t, of course, be trampled.

In contemporary fiction, this link is seen in more invidious ways. I am particularly reminded of a Guardian article about the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) report of 2020 (Flood, 2020). The article and the report concerned the number of books featuring animals versus the number of books representing people of colour – animals were eight times as likely to appear in a children’s book than were people of colour. The report authors state, “This fixation on animals diverts the attention, energies and efforts of stakeholders from addressing the real issue.” The “real issue” is equal participation in writing and publishing by people of colour.

This idea that the representation of animals “fixation” is a way to evade representational ethics is yet another reason it might be time to think more seriously about issues of representation in regard to our animal characters. Writing animals should not be an ethics-free zone of representation that allows the diversion of attention, energy and efforts from more diverse books, authors and publishers. In the context of the wholesale slaughter of other species, this fixation on animals can also be seen as yet another way for normative authors to ‘speak for’ beings who have been marginalised and dispossessed and to appropriate the experiences of those beings.

It’s not easy to establish some kind of scope for these issues nor to determine where our concepts of enquiry might or might not apply. Clearly, many animal

characters are just humans in furry suits and not intended to represent the species they resemble in any way – I'm thinking here of David Litchfield's wonderful examination of the creative life, *The Bear and The Piano*. Fine, we might think, we won't bring these questions to bear on picture books. But some picture books do introduce the idea of other species to very young readers, and not always in useful ways. Given that, with decreasingly few opportunities to encounter wild animals in real life, textual and illustrated representations may form lasting concepts of what another species is, picture book practitioners may want to think about these issues as much or even more than middle grade authors. Several picture books come to mind where realistic animal species are depicted in very unnatural ways, ways that completely ignore concepts of the food chain or habitat.

Faced with difficult questions regarding representation, I always find myself turning back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak is an interesting figure in representational ethics and what we used to rather blindly/hopefully call 'Postcolonial' criticism. Some of her most useful writing, the essay, 'Can The Subaltern Speak', was published in 1988 and remains a classic text in the field, even if it is the kind of writing that can take you over thirty years to understand. In the article, she observes Deleuze and Foucault in conversation about representation and comments about the result.

The conversation often mentions people who are acting, yet textually silent: prisoners, labourers, etc. These people Spivak names 'subaltern' after a rank in the army of the British Raj. There are obvious corollaries here for the non-human; animals are also textually silent. Spivak acknowledges the desire to speak for those who can't speak for themselves may seem and feel like an urgent and compelling need. The problem, she points out, lies in the act of authorial mediation. That desire to *speak for* is intimately connected to our own interests and privilege, in ways that may be invisible to us when we are caught up in the desire. This can result in 'ventriloquism', which, in animal writing, equates to the writing of furry puppets that act in ways unnatural to their species in order to enrich our own bank balance, reputation, or to feel we have saved the species in question.

Considering that a) our imaginations and ideas are mediated by our complicity in consuming all the resources of the natural world and b) that we have been taught to consider ourselves as the end product of evolution, the entire concept of children's authors as able to unproblematically relate other species' experiences is ethically compromised at best and absurd at worst.

How this mis-representation looks in practice might be best examined through that idea of the acceptance of radical difference – after all, the individual reader's empathetic response to animal representation only leads to societal action if the individual can feel the impulse to act themselves. So, let's go back to Charlotte. In the text, we know she's got lots of glittery eyes and eight legs and also that she's a bit disgusting when she eats flies. When the real spider scuttles across our floor, with her eight legs and all her eyes and her little gross fangs, we are prepared for that. We know that's what spiders *are* because that's what Charlotte was. And hopefully, if our terror

is not too great, we are able to use the old cup/paper method and relocate our Charlotte away from the area rugs, bookcases and cracks in the floorboards where she must never, never be allowed to set her nest of eggs.

However, let's imagine that we've read Hannah Gold's beautifully written polar bear in *The Last Bear* (Gold, 2022), and in the text, learn that polar bears can be fed peanut butter crackers (instead of, say, upping their protein consumption by eating the defenceless main character) and ridden like a horse. If we encounter a real polar bear, either in person or on film, who is a ruthless predator and violently resents any attempt to invade her personal space, this will *not* be the animal we have co-created whilst reading. We may well not have empathy for this vastly different animal, acting in ways we have not been prepared to accept.

You might expect me here to talk about accuracy and research. But these concepts won't be useful if we still represent animal characters without thinking about the ethical issues of doing so. I suggest we think about ridding ourselves of the idea that our own experiences can be easily transcended by an exercise of will and that our imaginations are transparent and privilege-free vehicles for stepping entirely away from the circumstances of our lived human experiences. I don't think we can pretend that Thomas Nagel never published his watershed work and continue to think we can easily imagine ourselves into a bat.

It's not that human authors can never represent animal characters accurately, or portray them in ways that are useful to the reader and the animal. It's more a question of acknowledging the difficulty of what we are doing and examining our own motivations for trying to do so before we attempt to represent.

Here, it might be useful to look at Professor Sunny Singh's checklist for writing, which she famously offered as handy to JK Rowling (Singh, 2022). She asks:

1. Why do you want to write this? What is your motivation?
2. What is your personal emotional, psychological and ethical investment in writing it?
3. Can someone else tell this story better? Is it someone else's story to tell?
4. What does YOUR telling of the story do? Does it replicate prior violence/oppression/injustice? Does it provide new understanding or insight?
5. What is your power balance/imbalance as a writer to the subject matter?
6. Finally, should you write/publish this at all? As with most ethical questions, the key is not can one, but should one.

These are questions for writers, from the inside out, not questions for readers to apply from the outside in. That said, they explain why I am comfortable with, say, sea mammal conservationist Chris Vick's writing about whales (Vick, 2022), or a book about snow leopards from Jess Butterworth (Butterworth, 2018), who'd heard stories about the Himalayan animals when living with her grandmother in India. And to praise Gill Lewis

once more, why a former veterinary surgeon writes so beautifully about a stray dog (Lewis, 2022). All these authors have a deep personal investment in their stories and it shows in how they painstakingly respect the non-human elements of their non-human characters.

But perhaps the most important elements of this checklist are items four and five. All representation is messy, as is all writing in general, and I would hate to suggest that people not write about the animals that move them. But the relationship to power and the re-enactment of prior violence seems key to me, as we attempt to widen our child readers' empathy to include the non-human beings this generation stands little chance of actually encountering. The relationship of those two questions also seems key to check we are not attempting to escape from representational ethics by hiding our representational difficulties in furry puppets – not humans in furry suits, but putatively real animal characters solely there to enact our own desires in our own interest.

I have been sorely tempted, throughout this discussion, to look with a cold eye on books where animals talk. Language is a very human thing, at least the very vocal way humans do it. And, as you know if you've ever studied a foreign language, a language is not just a way of communicating, but a way of thinking. It is a tricky thing to give animal characters human language and still represent with respect anything like the possible thought processes of their species. It can be done, and I've praised several books already that have done it, yet it is a kind of fudge. Often, I suspect it's done to make the plot easier to tell and the characterisation easier for the reader to understand; reasons wholly to do with making things easier for the writer and nothing to do with the species being represented.

How irritating, therefore, that two of the most memorable, wild, and distinctly not-human representations of animals I have recently read are both talking tigers. Nicola Davies' Skrimpsli in *The Song that Sings Us* (Davies & Morris, 2021) is a sea captain – a very tigerish tiger who has nonetheless been so compromised with human contact that he has mastered our language. And then there is SF Said's heartbreaking *Tyger* (Said & McKean, 2022), who embodies not only her species but all the wild things we have lost. One is more like a Malcolm X who managed to avoid assassination (and quite gratifyingly eats his would-be assassin) and the other is more like a Martin Luther King who does suffer assassination, but both tigers embody resistance to the injustices of the human world, even as they speak human language. Both are utterly terrifyingly powerful as well as beautiful – exactly as big cats really are. Despite the fact that they both talk, they represent the radical differences between their species and ours. Their readers will know exactly what to expect from tigers – or any other apex predator, if they encounter them in real life or on film. Both provide new insights and understanding of 'tiger' for young readers.

Their young readers will also have a bit more knowledge and understanding about collective action to resist injustice in the human world. And I suppose this speaks

to the first and last of Singh's checklist and our unique position as children's authors.

What is our motivation for writing our animal characters? And should we?

It seems time to start asking ourselves these questions.

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### Author Biography

Dr Mimi Thebo is a multi-nominee for the Carnegie medal. She writes mainly for young readers, often about recovery from trauma and our connection to the natural world. Her books have been translated into 12 languages, adapted for a BAFTA Award winning film and signed for deaf children on ITV. Her 2017 OUP novel, *Dreaming the Bear*, was a Book Trust Future Classic. In the academy, Thebo leads Creative Writing for English at the University of Bristol, where she is Programme Director for the Masters in Creative Writing and the PhD in Literature with Creative Writing. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Authority, a Royal Literary Fellow and the leader of the Brigstow Institute's international research group on Storytelling for Climate Justice.