

HOW DO CHILDREN READ ABOUT ANIMALS, DEATH AND WAR?

Abstract: This paper attempts to question the flawed animal representation in classic children's novels due to the heavy usage of anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism and speciesism, while questioning the need for allegorical works. Using examples from Anna Sewells, Jack London, Dr. Seuss, as well as Sara Pennypacker, this work analyses old and new children's literature from an eco-pedagogical perspective, while challenging the way children become serious partners of conversation in eco-focused discussions.

Keywords: eco-pedagogy, anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, speciesism, children's literature

The rise of eco-criticism has greatly impacted the literary-ecological scene, reopening discussions on "the animal issue," amongst many others. The need for a specific field of praxis grew more relevant, allowing eco-pedagogy to emerge as a new branch of eco-criticism at the end of the 20th century. The 1999 ASLE conference in Kalamazoo was a turning point to what we know today as environmental writing, event which diversified the theoretical eco-critical entourage, encouraging non-white scholars to publish their essays, as well as other works of fiction. This event symbolizes one of the earliest modern eco-pedagogical events. The new field of eco-pedagogy emphasized civic engagement as a fundamental component. Although in the beginning much of this work focused on bringing eco-criticism to adults, soon, works exclusively for children began to be written. Particular attention had been given to animal fables, as they were the most predominant type of stories depicting human-animal relationships,

the concern having been animal's depiction in those stories.¹

Although eco-criticism became a fully materialized field in the late twentieth century, academic discussions began much earlier. One of the earliest eco-critical voices was Rachel Carson, with her work, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962. Carson researched the impact of pesticides and fertilizers on birds and insects, "citing dozens of scientific reports, conducting interviews with leading experts, and reviewing materials across disciplines."² Carson's work remains one of the earliest landmarks for the 20th century eco-critical movement, combining environmental awareness with literature. Her work opened discussions that eventually led to new policies related to pesticides, policies which led to safer air and water for the American people. An important aspect of her work being the negative impact on animals and humans alike, Carson focused on the physical well-being of the species, rather than looking at it through a philosophical angle.³

As for eco-pedagogical children's texts, Dr. Seuss wrote extensively comic books that focus on different ecological issues, with the *Butter Battle Book*, an anti-war allegory, and *The Lorax*, focusing on environmental destruction. Knowing that, writing ecological literature for children has been a much older practice, with authors contributing to the field of animal studies without meaning to. Anna Sewells's *Black Beauty* and Jack London's *White Fang* are perhaps the most recognized animal stories by children. Although London did not intend for *White Fang* to be a children's novel, over the course of time it has been adapted as such.

This case study adopts a qualitative meta-reading approach to existing academic papers on Sewell's *Black Beauty* and London's *White Fang*, arguing that anthropomorphic narratives in children's literature have gradually shifted toward less speciesist and more ethical representations. Furthermore, it illustrates how contemporary texts invite children to engage more directly with eco-war discourse: where earlier works, such as Dr. Seuss's *The Butter Battle Book*, relied on allegorical depictions of conflict, recent narratives like Pennypacker's *Pax* present war in a more explicit and raw form.

1. Greta Gaard, "Toward an Ecopedagogy of Children's Environmental Literature," *Green Theory & Praxis: The Journal of Ecopedagogy*, no. 4 (2008): 11.

2. Monika Jaiswal, "A Cognizant Study of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the Light of Ecocriticism," *ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities* 2 no. 2 (2025): 32.

3. See Jaiswal, "A Cognizant Study," 31–36.

A fable's limits, or lack thereof

In his contribution to the 2006 collective volume *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, Frank Palmeri, who is also the editor of the volume, recalls Derrida's critique on fables, "an anthropomorphic taming," in his own words.⁴ Fables have been criticized for not providing information about animals. They are guilty of anthropocentrism, using the animal as a means of commenting on human behavior. Palmeri highlights a different type of fable, exemplified by Jean de la Fontaine, John Gay, and Jonathan Swift, namely the anti-allegorical fable:

In these anti-allegorical narratives, a wolf does not represent a brutal human being; a lion does not represent a king; a monkey does not represent a fop; rather, each stands for its own species. Such fables do not escape representation (the animals remain verbal constructs); neither do they elude rhetorical figuration (representing others of their kind, the animals function as synecdoches). Nor do the animals here serve as the objects of scientific observation and classification (although La Fontaine's fables show awareness of the activities of early natural historians).⁵

However, those fables remain a minority, and although they offer critique of the general fables, their focus is less on animals and their behavior, and more on man's view of animals. Fabular animals have articulate language that other animals and humans can understand, while anti-allegorical fables express their own judgment on human's treatment of animals.⁶ While such fables may criticize anthropomorphism or other concepts related to "the animal issue," the criticism works within the anthropomorphic framework of the fable itself. In retrospect, a paradox is revealed, to criticize anthropomorphism, we must make use of anthropomorphic animals.

On the other hand, more recent studies have argued in favor of fables, particularly for those written with an eco-pedagogical perspective in mind. The 1996 fabular novel, *The Story of a Seagull and a Cat That Teaches It to Fly*, written by the environmental activist Luis Sepúlveda, demonstrates fables' potential for eco-pedagogical purposes. The story follows a cat, Zorba, who is being given a mission from a gul dying from an oil spill: first, that he won't eat her remaining egg, second, that he'll take care of the egg until it hatches, and third, that he'll teach the

4. Frank Palmeri, "The Autocritique of Fables," in *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, ed. Frank Palmeri (Routledge, 2006), 83.

5. Palmeri, "The Autocritique," 83.

6. Palmeri, "The Autocritique," 83–84.

chick how to fly. In his fable, three environmental aspects are present: the living environment, the animal world, and exploitation. The living environment is made up of the coastal area, representing the habitat of migrating birds. As an ecosystem, the coastal area provides a source of food, a location for gulls to reproduce and to hatch eggs. The other most important aspect in this fable is the exploitation of the environment, mainly the contamination of water with industrial oil:⁷

Often from high above she had watched as large oil tankers took advantage of foggy days along the coast to steam away from land to wash out their tanks. They spilled thousands of gallons of a thick, stinking substance into the sea, which then was carried along by the waves.⁸

Modern approaches demonstrate that fables can indeed serve as eco-pedagogical tools, teaching children about animals and the environment. This suggests a revival of fabular storylines, now without an anthropocentric goal.

Anthropomorphic animals, speciesism and anthropocentrism

Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* is one of the most important children's novels of the Victorian era, namely due to the author's intent to raise awareness on animal cruelty, more precisely the abuse of horses. Sewell wrote an animal "autobiography," giving horses a voice in an era that was slowly replacing them with engines.⁹ A note of Sewell said "I have for six years been confined to the house and to my sofa, and have from time to time, as I was able, been writing what I think will turn out a little book, its special aim being to induce kindness, sympathy and an understanding treatment of horses."¹⁰ Written from an eco-pedagogical perspective, *Black Beauty* is narrated through the first-person, marking the story as an anthropomorphic one, meaning that human characteristics are attributed to animals or objects, in this case, human-like thought and judgment.

7. Holy Ichda Wahyun, Agus Budiman, Ratno Abidin, and Elmi Tri Yuliandari, "Potential of Fables as Learning Resources for Environmental Education and Its Relevance to the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum," *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia Gemilang* 3, no. 1 (2023): 87.

8. Luis Sepulveda, *The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her How to Fly* (Alma Books, 2016), 20.

9. Nathan Poirier, Rebecca Carden, Hilary McIlroy, and Courtney Moran, "Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Fauna-Criticism and *Black Beauty*," *Animalia* 4, no. 1 (March 31, 2019): 4–6.

10. Anna Sewell in Susan Chitty, *The Woman Who Wrote "Black Beauty": A Life of Anna Sewell* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 178.

Anthropomorphism in children's literature has been a controversial topic, heavily criticized for misinterpreting animals, which may lead to a flawed understanding of animals through the lenses of both adults and children:

The realization that animals are not like the characters from the stories to which we are attached bears consequences. Many of our current animal husbandry practices are justified by evaluating the extent to which a given species is similar to humans. When expectations engendered by misguided representations are not met, the way we relate to real animals—in all contexts—is affected. Either we attempt to shape the object to meet our expectations or we abrogate the source of disappointment.¹¹

Another critique of anthropomorphism was brought up by Leesa Fawcett in her 1989 article "Anthropomorphism: In the Web of Culture," in which she criticized the way we ingrained anthropomorphism so deeply in our society and way of perceiving nature:

Anthropomorphism is not an isolated phenomenon. It is found hanging precariously in a web, connected to all the 'facts' and values, thoughts and feelings that we, as individuals, hold and collectively reinforce among ourselves as a culture... The dominant way of seeing the world is an anthropocentric one. Humans are generally thought to be the center of the world and the pinnacle of evolution. This type of thinking is reflected in the embedded concept of 'man as the measure of all things.' The anthropocentric view is expressed implicitly in the commonly reiterated ideas of 'dominance over nature' and 'nature valued as a human resource.'¹²

It is however challenging for humans to fully rid their stories of anthropomorphism when writing from an animals' perspective. Knowing that, there appears to be two types of anthropomorphisms. When adapting the second type, anthropomorphism becomes a powerful, necessary tool, in times when identifying and emphasizing with animals was the only logical solution to raise awareness to the abuse inflicted upon them by humans:

11. Anderson Marla and Antonia Henderson. "Pernicious Portrayals: The Impact of Children's Attachment to Animals of Fiction on Animals of Fact," *Society & Animals* 13, no. 4 (2005): 304.

12. Leesa Fawcett, "Anthropomorphism: In the Web of Culture," *UnderCurrents: Journal of Critical Environmental Studies*, no. 1 (1989): 14–20.

John Simons makes the contrast between 'trivial' and 'strong' anthropomorphism. The difference has to do with the presence of an intention: the former "treats animals as though they were people but [does] not seek to use this strategy to point [to] any moral or teach any example," whereas the latter confers upon animals human-like capabilities in order to emphasize a difference or to challenge the notion that there are any fundamental differences between humans and nonhuman animals.¹³

What makes *Black Beauty* an eco-pedagogical text is perhaps less about having an animal as a narrator and main character, and more about the call to action as a main message from the novel. Several characters speak up against animal cruelty throughout the novel, one of them being Joe Green, a character who earlier fails to treat Black Beauty's illness properly, but who is now seen pleading with a man who was whipping two horses. Later, Joe is praised for his initiative. This segment is viewed as Sewell's way of putting theory in practice using a literary device, urging readers to speak out against injustice, and not to be affected by the bystander's effect. In this context, the usage of anthropomorphism remains a necessity, as our knowledge does not extend to the point where we can naturally understand animal cognition.¹⁴ However, the text is not without its inconsistencies, one of them being Sewell's stance on what horses are allowed to be and what not. A reoccurring aspect being the one that, if horses are treated with kindness, they must work for man. In fact, the novels reveal that even horses are content with being under the dominion of man: "Straps here and straps there, a bit in my mouth, and blinkers over my eyes. Now I am not complaining, for I know it must be so"¹⁵ and "We horses do not mind hard work if we are treated reasonably."¹⁶

As for *White Fang*, the anthropomorphism issue is somewhat blinded by its anthropocentric nature and, above all, by its speciesism. Coined by Dr. Richard Ryder in 1970, speciesism is defined as the hierarchical and unequal treatment of non-human species.¹⁷ In *White Fang*, the superior nature of the man is evident from the very

13. Poirier et al., "Straight from the Horse's Mouth," 1-14.

14. Maija-Liisa Harju, "Anthropomorphism and the Necessity of Animal Fantasy," in *Towards or Back to Human Values: Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Contemporary Fantasy*, eds. Marek C. Oziewicz and Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 173.

15. Anna Sewells, *Black Beauty* (Jarrold & Sons, 1877), Project Gutenberg, 26.

16. Sewells, *Black Beauty*, 213.

17. Richard Ryder, "Speciesism and Painism: Some Further Thoughts", *ETYKA* 59, no. 1-2 (2023): 1.

beginning. First, the speciesistic nature of the novel minimizes White Fang's greatness in contrast with the one of the men. Second, the man's superiority throughout the novel is portrayed as a natural truth, one that not even half-wolves dare deny. Jack London very carefully enhances and establishes man's superiority, presenting him as a member of a superior species through the difference that White Fang realizes as he encounters man:

It was his first glimpse of mankind. But at the sight of him the five men did not spring to their feet, nor show their teeth, nor snarl. They did not move but sat there, silent and ominous. [...] A great awe descended upon him. He was beaten down to movelessness by an overwhelming sense of their own weakness and littleness. Here was mastery and power, something far and away beyond him.¹⁸

At the same time, White Fang feels powerless against this new, peculiar being called man, powerless enough that he accepts man's dominion over himself: "He could do nothing to defend himself. If this man-animal intended harm, White Fang knew he could not escape it. How could he spring away with his four legs in the air above him?"¹⁹ Throughout the novel, White Fang not only accepts man's dominion over him, but he also learns to appreciate the power that man holds, going as far as to consider them Gods. Like in *Black Beauty*, the author does not call for the freedom of animals, for their union with the wilderness. For as long as they are treated well, animals are obliged to work for humans. While White Fang still belonged to Gray Beaver, a savage God,²⁰ as the half wolf calls him, he attempts to leave his camp and escape to nature but realizes that he was no longer called to it and returned to his owner.²¹

Pax follows the story of the eponymous fox and his "boy," Peter. Pax, a male fox raised in captivity, now had to learn how to survive in the wilderness on his own. Peter, a 12-year-old boy, made his life's mission to get his fox back after being forced to abandon it. In Pennypacker's novels, the narration is made through a third person perspective, making use of different types of anthropomorphism. Similar to *Black Beauty*, Pax makes use of strong anthropomorphism

18. Jack London, *White Fang* (Macmillan, 1906), 114.

19. London, *White Fang*, 119.

20. London, *White Fang*, 165.

21. Hasina Wahida, "Romanticizing the Right to Exploit: Speciesism in Jack London's *White Fang*," *The Criterion* (2021), <https://www.the-criterion.com/romanticizing-the-right-to-exploit-speciesism-in-jack-londons-white-fang/>.

to portray the fox's feelings and thoughts. In the novel, Pax isn't communicating through human language: "Fox communication is a complex system of vocalization, gesture, scent, and expression. The 'dialogue' in italics in Pax's chapters attempts to translate their eloquent language."²² This note shows that Pennypacker is aware of her own limitations and does not seek to challenge anthropomorphism as a linguistic device. When interacting with other foxes, Pax relies on his sense of smell and his instincts:

This is my territory. Pax was so startled that he nearly toppled from the oak trunk he'd been drowsing on: all day he'd been keeping watch and seen nothing larger than a grasshopper, and now here was a bright-furred vixen. He had never seen another fox before, but he knew: younger and smaller and a female, but fox. Instinct told him also that the way she held her ears and tail erect meant she expected his submission. I hunt here.²³

In *Pax*, speciesism is notably challenged through its dual narrative, portraying the treatment of foxes and humans as equal co-existing beings, rather than establishing a hierarchy in which humans are inherently superior. Unlike *White Fang*, where the human-animal relationship reinforces man's dominion, *Pax* portrays animals as sentient beings capable of their own choices, feelings, and survival strategies. The foxes' worth is not tied to their potential desire of being working animals, in comparison with *Black Beauty*'s apparent innate purpose.

"What does War cost?": Capitalistic greed and war effects in *The Lorax*, *The Butter Battle Book*, and *Pax*

The question was posed to Pennypacker, when asked in an interview what made her write about destruction and violence for middle grade readers. Her response was the following: "Middle graders are the perfect audience—they are passionate about books, passionate about justice, and just opening up to the big questions in the world."²⁴ In *Pax*, war is not allegorized but depicted as a physical force that restructures every life it touches. Peter's father, initially believed to be merely "laying wire," is revealed to be directly involved in environmental destruction. This call to arms forces Peter to abandon Pax,

22. Sara Pennypacker, foreword to *Pax* (Harper Collins, 2016).

23. Pennypacker, *Pax*, 32.

24. Sara Pennypacker, "War Through a Child's—and a Fox's—Eyes: Sara Pennypacker on Her New Novel, *Pax* | Under the Covers", interviewed by Kierra Parrott, *School Library Journal*, January 17, 2016, <https://www.slj.com/story/war-through-a-childs-and-a-foxs-eyes-sara-pennypacker-on-her-new-novel-pax>.

setting into motion the novel's exploration of loss, fragmentation, and ecological trauma. The war's effects are visible everywhere, through the portrayal of abandoned towns, burned forests, poisoned rivers, signaling that conflict is not some abstract concept, but an active ecological disaster. Pennypacker's willingness to portray the intimacy and violation of killing reveals her pedagogical belief that children deserve honest depictions of violence, refusing to hide behind metaphors or allegories when portraying the effects of violence":

"I killed someone."

She looked up. Peter wasn't quick enough to cover his shock. She heaved a sigh, thick with disgust. "No matter what dyable man lines they feed you about learning trades and reaching your potential, you're there to kill people. Kill or be killed—that's the contract in war... probably killed a lot of people or at least contributed to their deaths. But this one ... this one I saw. After. I had to search his body. We were trained to look for weapons, anything we could use. I dropped to my knees. I had to touch him, looking for those weapons. I remember being shocked at the feel of him—I was a medic, but still I half expected him to be plastic, not real. The way they taught us to think of the enemy in our training. But of course he was ... he was warm. It was cold out, and he was giving off warmth. As if his life was steaming out of him. And I was touching him without his permission. I'd murdered him, but what bothered me was that he had lost the right to say yes or no about what happened to him."²⁵

Pennypacker's description may seem bold for her target audience of children between eight and twelve years old, however her decision tells us two things: first, that children should be treated as serious partners in heavy topics, and second, as reminded by Pennypacker herself, that war is not something happening in a faraway land, and that children must be aware of the destruction and loss caused by war: "Just because it isn't happening here, it doesn't mean it isn't happening."²⁶ At the very end of the first novel, Peter finds out that his father was not laying wire in the army but was part of the destruction of the environment, a scene that completely shatters the illusion that anyone who joins the war is innocent: "What are you doing here? You told me you would only be laying wire... And then he understood everything at once. Why the men hadn't advanced. How the grasses

25. Pennypacker, Pax, 97.

26. Pennypacker, Pax, 7.

had been burned and the trees uprooted and the river strangled with rocks. How there could be nothing left of a fox but a single leg.”²⁷

An important theme of *Pax* is loss. Each character loses something. In the first volume, Peter and Pax lose each other. In the wilderness, Pax, struggling with staying alive after being raised with humans, forms bonds with other foxes, becoming part of their family. Runt, one of them, is a direct victim of human intervention, losing one of his legs in an explosion. At the same time, there is loss of habitat, both for humans and for animals. Humans leave their homes, anticipating the war, while animals have no choice but to leave theirs as well, sensing human intervention and the incoming danger: “But then Bristle shifted and he saw: where Runt’s hind leg should have been, where the neat black-furred leg and the quick white paw should have been, there was only a shredded red mess on the blood-soaked leaves.”²⁸ Additionally, there is a loss of innocence for both Peter and Pax. Now part of the wild, Pax must learn how to hunt and how to defend his new family against foreign foxes and other predators. In *Journey Home*, Peter’s loss of innocence is even more striking. Now, an orphan after his father’s death, he denies himself the ability to let people in, including Vola, who became a mentor-like figure for him. His trauma manifests in a new toxic belief that being strong means not having any sort of relationship with people, during which he returns alone in his former town, now abandoned after the war.

Besides the loss of habitat, animals struggle with the loss of drinkable water, as seen in the sequel: “On the third day, she barely lifted her head off the prickly boughs ... She rose and blinked in the clear rays of the afternoon sun, but then crumpled onto her side, her left hind leg twitching. Puzzled, Pax checked her over thoroughly. Her paws had healed. He could find no other injuries.”²⁹ Following the end of the war, a group of activists called the Water Warriors, charged with repurposing the training and military equipment, began the journey of repairing the damage the war had caused, including cleansing waterways that have been poisoned. Peter joins them, and just like the purpose of eco-pedagogy, theory turns into practice. If the first volume rendered readers powerless in face of loss and war, the second volume gives them a chance to witness the change of what was destroyed and be an active part of restoring the environment.

27. Pennypacker, *Pax*, 165.

28. Pennypacker, *Pax*, 115.

29. Sara Pennypacker, *Pax: Journey Home* (Harper Collins, 2021), 75.

Pax departs entirely from the allegorical device often used to introduce heavier themes to children. Some authors, however, like Dr. Seuss, rely on allegory for this purpose. In his 1984 children's comic, *The Butter Battle Book*, Seuss uses allegory to portray the use of nuclear weapons:

Two neighboring cities argue, about which side of the bread is appropriate for buttering, the top or the bottom. This issue results in the neighboring cities' going to battle. The cartoonlike characters constantly oppose each other, with progressively more sophisticated weaponry. The story concludes with Grandfather (the leader of the Yooks) and Vanltch (the leader of the Zooks) standing on the wall that divides the cities. These characters are left deciding whether they should drop the Big-Boy Boomeroo—more familiarly, a nuclear bomb. Neither character has made this decision when the story ends.³⁰

The effectiveness of the allegory, however, remains questionable. Diane Barone's 1993 study examined how children from kindergarten through sixth grade interpreted the story without adult guidance. Out of the 1,187 participants, kindergarteners focused primarily on elements such as "the bread-and-butter war," "the wall," and "the flags." First graders concentrated more on the warfare itself, mentioning "bombs" and "guns." Second and third graders began making connections to real-world issues, with one child comparing the story to the Berlin Wall. Of the 489 children in grades four through six, only 21 were able to clearly articulate that the story functioned as an allegory for war and comment on it.³¹

Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* works as a more practical eco-pedagogical device, despite its allegorical usage. The antagonist, Once-ler, refuses to listen to Lorax's warnings about his destruction and waste, rendering the environment a tree-less land, devoid of any life, as animals disappear. He remains alone, gifting an unknown boy the last seed of trees, charging him with the task of bringing the world back to life. Once-ler is meant to portray the agent of capitalistic greed and industrialization, without a care of the native species of the land, the quality of water or air. The unknown boy we see can be interpreted as the readers, who have the power to fight against environmental injustice and replant the seed of hope: "'But now,' says the Once-ler, 'Now that you're here, the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear.

30. Diane Barone, "The Butter Battle Book: Engaging children's thoughts of war," *Children's Literature in Education*, no. 24 (1993): 123–135.

31. Barone, "The Butter Battle Book," 123–135.

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."³²

To conclude, I would like to make some final observations regarding how children read about animals, death and war. First, by portraying animals' experiences on an equal ethical footing with human characters, contemporary narratives implicitly promote an anti-speciesistic perspective, regardless of their usage of anthropomorphism. Pax's reality in the wilderness is not portrayed as less important than Peter's reality post-war, as one of the text's most important themes being the effects of war and who pays the price for it. Secondly, allegorical eco-pedagogical works seem to have their own limitations when it comes to sending a relevant ecological message to children, yet they have marked their own place in the eco-pedagogical space. Lastly, contemporary children's novels, like *Pax* and *Pax: Journey Home*, have the advantage of treating children as serious partners in eco-related discussions, while accurately portraying the realities of the world we live in. Based on the works examined so far, there seems to be a positive advancement in children's works of the eco-pedagogical field, reducing or removing completely the notion of human supremacy over animals, while also being mindful of the impact our species has over them.

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32. Theodor Seuss Geisel, *The Lorax* (Random House, 1971), 64.

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