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Picture Book Animals: How Natural a History?

Leonard S. Marcus

The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 7/8, 1983-1984

pp. 127-139

[10.1353/uni.0.0219](#)

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Picture Book Animals: How Natural a History?

Leonard S. Marcus (bio)

We find animal characters in children's picture books and think it natural that this is so. It somehow does not matter that the animals in many

such books live and behave in ways completely removed from the ways of their living counterparts; that their imaginary lives are far from natural in the naturalistic sense. Animals in large measure represent the fun of picture books, and are a main ingredient of the books' fantasy. Beyond this, no one need venture. So, the popular view of the matter stands.

That the very presence of animal characters in a story leads us headlong into a fantasy world is clear enough; that they automatically spell fun, however, is not clear. Think of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and its grotesque pig-police. Animal characters must not be inherently amusing. In fact, in Orwell's tale, the reader becomes increasingly uneasy in the face of the conscious violent distortion of reality implied by having pigs do the dirty work of men. The very unnaturalness of the role the pigs are compelled to play suits a story about authoritarian behavior and submission to the rule of force.

We will want to ask, then, if there are not some particular patterns to the kinds of animal characters that occur so frequently in children's picture books; and if so, what the patterns tell us of the author's ideas about childhood, society and its wants and needs, and the animal world's relation to human society.

If, as Roger Sale has said in *Fairy Tales and After*, animals are a "major source of the power of the best children's literature, a source that other kinds of literature had abandoned and forgotten well before the nineteenth century"¹—we will want to ask what more precisely, is the nature of that power that moves and delights children, and at times ourselves.

Looking at many animal picture books, one begins to ask certain questions. Does it matter much what kinds of animals occur in the stories? At first glance, there would seem to be a high degree of arbitrariness to the choices. Could not Babar as easily have been a giraffe as an elephant? Couldn't Daffy Duck have been Daffy Dog? Perhaps Sylvester, in William Steig's fantasy about family-feeling and magical transformation, might have been [End Page 127] a mouse or a moose or

a codfish instead of the well-brought-up, earnest donkey that we know him as.

Then, however, images and expressions come to mind: stubborn as an ox; a dog's life; an elephant's memory; a cat's nine lives; the fertility of rabbits; the wisdom of owls; sly as a fox; still as a churchmouse; bovine, bearish, reptilian.... One thinks of these things and realizes that taken altogether, animals as images in our everyday thought and expression are among the most association-rich of all classes of symbols. Just under the surface of picture book fantasies, cultural meanings may well be at work. So numerous and so commonplace are animal references, that one suspects children must know many of them early on.

But what special claims if any do animal symbols, animal characters, or animals themselves have on children of the picture-book age?

The *New York Times* recently cited a report by the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service, which found that, on the contrary:

Very young children were the most exploitative, harsh and unfeeling of all children in their attitudes toward animals....

These results suggest our cultural idealization of the relationship of very young children to animals is not only incorrect but may foster a distorted understanding of the needs of young people.²

One is not likely to accept this or any single study as the last word on so elusive and complicated a matter. Common sense—or is it merely habit?—objects, insisting that surely some basis must exist for making animals the focus of interest in stories for the very young. Does not the vulnerability that small children at times feel in the face of large, powerful, and not-always-caring adults...

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