



# Beyond the Secret Garden: Animal Fables and Dehumanization

Article Author:

[Darren Chetty](#) [1]

Article Author:

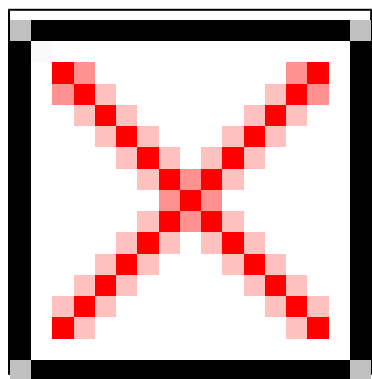
[Karen Sands-O'Connor](#) [2]

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Byline:

An examination of the use of animals in children's stories about racial and cultural diversity

September 2019 sees the release of the second [Reflecting Realities](#) [4] report by the **CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education)**. Whilst the first report has had a clear impact on conversations in UK children's publishing, there were a number of challenges, of varying thoughtfulness, posed in response. One of those was that many children's picture books depict non-human animal characters and that this is a positive, inclusive way forward for children's literature.



This link between children and animals goes back a very long time in many cultures, with scholars even noting similarities between the Indian ancient classic Panchatantra and the ancient Greek **Aesop's Fables**. Animal characters were often used to 'provide examples of good and bad behavior' (**Talking Animals** 73), as Tess Cosslett puts it, for child (and adult) readers in an indirect fashion. It is certainly a common trope, particularly in picture books. Excellent recent examples of fables drawing on Indian traditions include Chitra Sounder and Poonam Mistry's **You're Safe With Me** (2018), and Sufiya Ahmed's **Under the Great Plum Tree** (2019).

However, the use of animals in children's stories about racial and cultural diversity runs into major problems that do not always seem to have been given due consideration of historical context. "They are not people" - Mary Lennox's words about her Indian servants in **The Secret Garden** - goes some way toward capturing many British writers' attitudes to People of Colour in the Golden Age of children's literature. Beginning with **Robinson Crusoe** (Defoe, 1719), often regarded as the first novel in the English language, those racialised as other than white were deployed as dehumanized counter points to the humanity of white protagonists.

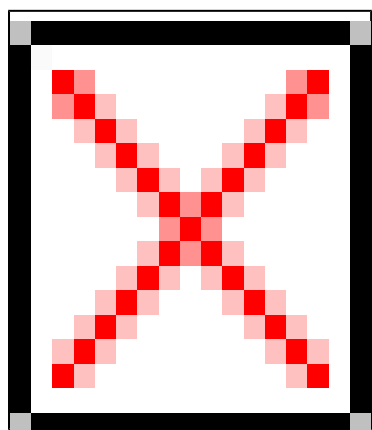
The dehumanisation of non-Europeans by white people has a long history. Many who engaged in it during the 18th century were regarded in Europe as the leading scientists, anthropologists and philosophers of their time - people whose work still impacts their disciplines. In the Age of Enlightenment we see a desire to classify the world along with a desire to justify colonialism and imperialism. An important factor in attempting to square the brutal inequality of slavery and

colonialism with the claim that 'all men are created equal' was the deployment of narratives that non-whites were not fully human. This ranged from Thomas Jefferson's reference to 'merciless savage Indians' in the US Declaration of Independence to the development of racial pseudo-science such as Franz Iganz Pruner's claim that African people has similar brains to apes. Whilst the latter is an extreme example, the development of scientific racism and offshoots like phrenology were part of mainstream European scholarship, culminating in the development of eugenics in the early 20th century. After the horrors of the Holocaust, much of this scholarship disappeared from public view. But racist connotations have a way of outliving the 'scholarship' from which they emerged - witness for example, the number of recent news stories about Black footballers in Europe subjected to racist abuse that includes monkey chants.

Amy Ratelle writes in **Animality and Children's Literature and Film** (2015) that comparing animals and people can 'marginalize certain groups as animalistic, atavistic and subhuman' (33) but at the same time 'the representation of animals as inherently subordinate to humans buttresses the cultural marginalization of people characterized by nonhegemonic identity traits' (33). While Victorian era publishing, such as the advertising campaign for Anna Sewell's **Black Beauty** (1877), made explicit comparisons between animals and enslaved African people (Sewell's novel was called 'The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the horse' according to Peter Stonely), later comparisons were both less direct and less focused on engendering sympathy. Take Hugh Lofting's **The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle** (which won the 1922 **Newbery Medal**); in this book, Chee-Chee the monkey delights in escaping from Africa by dressing up in stolen human clothes after he sees an African girl who 'looks just as much like a monkey as I look like a girl'.

In the USA, librarian and literary activist Edith Campbell has compiled a collection of 'books and articles about the racism and hatred expressed when people of African descent are equivocated with monkeys, apes or gorillas' along with 'children's books with anthropomorphic monkeys and apes that do nothing to end this racism' (Campbell). In the UK, one of the most prolific creators of books of this kind is the former children's laureate, Anthony Browne. Writing about his choice to draw so many gorillas in his books, Browne remarks that they are 'fascinating creatures?', 'they look so much like people' and 'they remind me of my father'. Earlier in the same book, he includes a picture he drew at the age of 14. Entitled 'That Old Black Magic', it is of his father playing an 'unpredictable, dangerous tribesman', blacked up and in a grass skirt for a performance of **Robinson Crusoe**. Whilst we should be careful not to draw too much from this, it is interesting to note that Browne does not offer any reflections on the racist connotations of **Robinson Crusoe** or of blacking up. Also interesting is that in the discussion of his decision to make a picturebook of **King Kong**, Browne does not have anything to say about the long-standing racist connotations of anthropomorphic apes and the criticism the original film received.

Things may be improving. In the US, New York Times bestselling author Mac Barnett and Geisel Award-winning illustrator Greg Pizzoli, recently gave an interview with Roger Sutton in which they explained that they changed Jack in **Jack Blasts Off** from a monkey to a rabbit because 'We didn't want anyone to associate the hero of our books with an offensive trope'. Yet in the UK, in as recently as 2016, Hodder and Stoughton published an updated version of Enid Blyton's **Noddy Goes to School** where the golliwog from the 1949 original - now seemingly acknowledged by the publisher as a racist trope - was replaced by a monkey.



A number of children's picture books have attempted to use animal characters to address stereotyping and racism in

ways that young child readers can understand. These books include Dr. Seuss's **The Sneetches** (1953), David McKee's **Tusk, Tusk** (1990) and Rosemary Wells's **Yoko** (1989). However, neither **The Sneetches** nor **Tusk, Tusk** actually confronts racism in any meaningful sense. Dr. Seuss's book has characters who discriminate based on outward appearance, but this outward appearance can easily be changed. And while McKee's elephants do have skin colour-based prejudice, it is apparently random and inherent – there is no depiction of power or any of the motivations witnessed in historical racism; no colonialism, no imperialism, no slavery no exploitation – just murderous, mutual hatred. The best fables reveal through animal narratives something true about human existence. **Tusk Tusk**, we suggest, conceals the history of racism by offering up an alternative creation myth for racism. In many reviews of Wells's **Yoko**, a book about a kitten who is made fun of for bringing sushi to school, the words "tolerance" and "acceptance" come up; anti-racism is not, however, about tolerance but about inclusion and understanding of other people and their cultures, and it is about examining the privilege that allows some people to have "normal" food (or clothes, or toys, or holidays, or behaviors) and others to be marginalized. Even though **Yoko** has a "happy" ending, the book is aimed at teaching white child readers tolerance; the Asian child reader who might identify with **Yoko** learns that her culture's food is "weird" and happy endings can only come with the acceptance of white society. More recently, Sarah McIntyre's **The New Neighbours** can be read as a fable about new arrivals, perhaps immigrants and how it can be wrong to prejudice. The arrivals are rats – the animals that the Nazis likened Jewish people to in propaganda such as *The Eternal Jew*. And if these new arrivals are understood as being racialised differently from other groups, then it is unfortunate that the story rests on the old historic comparison between pseudo-scientific races and species. What is gained and lost by attempting to address xenophobia and racism, uniquely human ideas, through non-human animals?

Recently, studies have suggested that using animals to promote prosocial behavior doesn't necessarily work; Larsen, Lee and Ganea, for example, found that "After hearing the story containing real human characters, young children became more generous. In contrast, after hearing the same story but with anthropomorphized animals or a control story, children became more selfish" ("Do storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviors in young children?" 6).

Notably, all the authors we discuss here are white. Writers from racially minoritized backgrounds tend to tell much different stories, and as a rule do not use animal characters as stand-ins for children from any background. Perhaps the best publishing can do is to open its door to more of such writers?

**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with **Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children's Book**, and has recently published **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

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