

Proposal for 2019 Children’s Literature Association Conference

Title: “Through tangled bushes”: The Intersection of Anthropomorphism and Multicultural Literature

Abstract:

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center demonstrated that in 2015, there were about as many children’s books published depicting animal and other non-human characters as there were depicting all people of color and Native Americans combined, and this ratio is even lower among picturebooks. Furthermore, it is no secret that children’s books have been significant contributors to the painful and enduring history of dehumanizing people of color and Native Americans by associating them with animals. For those who care about varied, authentic, and abundant depictions of diverse people, an understandable response to these troubling trends may be to avoid animal books altogether in favor of those with minoritized human characters.

And yet, there are at least two reasons why I argue that we cannot ignore the intersections of anthropomorphism and multicultural literature, especially in early childhood. First, the categories cannot be so neatly divided; many multicultural books have anthropomorphic characters in them. Second, children—especially young children—tend to be fascinated by anthropomorphic characters, whether through natural affinity or socialization, and inevitably encounter and gravitate toward them. In this paper, I offer a framework for bringing anthropomorphism and multicultural picturebooks into conversation. I employ the framework by highlighting the role of tigers in multiple books, placing them on a spectrum from dehumanizing to humanizing. Bringing in my work with a preschool class, I argue that nonhuman characters can function as an additional “way in” to both engagement and critical analysis of multicultural books for young readers.

Keywords: multicultural; diverse; anthropomorphism, picturebooks; tigers