

## EMMA QUAY

### CHARACTERS: ANIMAL OR HUMAN?

When I reflect on my work as an illustrator, I realise that so far my picture books have contained more animals than they have humans. I notice that the characters in my books are imperfect, but lovable. They are essentially very human, even when they are animals.

I am always mindful of what I am doing when I use animals in my picture books; I always have been. When I was eleven I wrote and illustrated a booklet, entitled *Ahh! How Sweet*. I had come up with a theory — or at least I *thought* I was the first to do so — that the animals we find most appealing are the ones that most resemble ourselves. I had drawn the outline of a man on tracing paper, which the reader was to place over illustrations of a mouse and a spider. The similarity between the outline of the man and that of the (deliberately elongated) mouse, and the contrasting dissimilarity between the man and the spider would supposedly prove my theory. I quote myself: ‘And then we dress them so they look even more like us. We think they look very sweet. In stories we make them talk and sing, dance and even live in little houses.’

Now, years later as a children’s book illustrator, I am guilty as charged. That is precisely what I did to Reggie and Lu in *Reggie and Lu (and the same to you!)*. I hoisted my two piglet players up onto their hind legs and made them act out my little drama for me.

But I was originally thinking of Reggie and Lu as two human children. However, I realised that as soon as readers looked at my illustrations they would know how old Reggie and Lu were, what colour hair they had, the colour of their skin, what kind of clothes they liked to wear. So much would have been decided at a glance, before a word of the story had been read. I decided that if I drew Reggie and Lu as animals instead, I could be far less specific.

A pig, a bear, an orang-utan or another animal can represent a child of any age or colour or size, and sometimes the gender is not specific either. It is easier for every child to identify with them.

Once I have chosen my animal characters, there is another decision to be made: to clothe or not to clothe? My pigs are nowhere near fully dressed — their piggy shapes are always very visible. Lu wears only a tutu most the time, and I regard her tutu as a prop rather than clothing. It helps to indicate her personality — somewhat of a prima donna. It also helps the reader to tell the two pigs apart: to know their gender. Perhaps it is the equivalent of the female Disney animal characters' bow on the head and long eyelashes, though I hope not! Reggie wears no clothes as such, but uses household objects as costumes — a fluffy bathmat and bedroom slippers as a mammoth pelt and feet, a sock as a mammoth trunk, banana tusks.

So far I have discussed animals that are really humans, but the two double page spreads in which Reggie becomes a mammoth in order to squash Lu's crown depict an animal masquerading as a human whilst also pretending to be an entirely different animal! What level of sophistication am I expecting of children here? Still, they *do* get it.

I feel extremely uncomfortable with the kind of illustration that has an animal's head transplanted onto a fully-dressed human's body: an essentially human shape with animal parts sticking out of the collar and cuffs. An example might be a female adult dog character wearing long trousers (over human-length legs which bend in the direction a human knee would), a sweater with visible breasts swelling beneath it (two of them—the human way) and full-length shoes to accommodate a bipedal foot with row of toes. Shiva's transformed elephant-headed son, Ganesh, of Hindu mythology managed to get away with it (as his story explains the miss-match), but in children's books I feel one should be able to undress the dressed-up animal and find a believable (even if not entirely realistic) animal body underneath. Although occasionally the opposite *can* work — usually when the illustrator has an ironic wit to their work.

In my opinion, the occurrence of anthropomorphic animal characters in books owning mute domestic pets also sends out confusing messages. But my work does not often contain pictorial ‘asides’ — I rarely add extra characters that aren’t mentioned in the text (such as pets). I often enjoy it when other illustrators do this, but I am usually trying to pare things back to the essential, so the reader is not distracted from the main story by peripheral elements.

Clothes can break up the shape of a character, if they are too overwhelming; they can distract with pattern and bulkiness and disguise. Often one cannot see the wood for the trees, and this is certainly true of some of my early illustrations. I feel that an illustration is successful when the action and the shapes of the characters are immediately apparent as soon as the page is turned. In my more recent illustrations, such as those for *Bear and Chook*, I tried to concentrate on what I want the reader to look at — the movement, the characters and their interaction — by having minimal background and not too much fussy, extraneous detail.

But of course, it wasn’t I who decided that Bear and Chook would be animal characters — the text had already dictated that — as the author, it had been Lisa Shanahan’s decision. And in fact, Bear and Chook were not real animals in my early sketches. As a real bear would be so much bigger than a real chook, at first I felt I should draw the two characters as toys — a teddy bear and a cloth chicken — so the two friends could be better matched in size and status. But I later decided that perhaps it didn’t matter if Bear were so much bigger than Chook. Some friendships *are* very unlikely and friends don’t have to be alike to get on.

Lisa Shanahan and I have found that many children identify with the characters of Bear and Chook; they recognise themselves in one or other, or even both, of the characters. We have received letters from children saying, “We feel like we are inside the book and friends with Bear and Chook”. I wonder, would this have happened if the two friends were human characters? Would Bear and Chook have been far enough removed and non-specific for the children to be able to identify with them?

When I made the decision to draw a real bear — a young polar bear cub — I was careful not to make it resemble any of the many bear characters that had come before. One of my early sketches was far too close to the shape of E. H. Sheperd's *Winnie the Pooh*. Once I have settled on the essential look of each character and I bring them together on the page, body language is another tool I use to convey the characters' emotions and relationships. With a bear this is fairly straightforward, as human body language can translate quite directly into its similar limbs, shoulders, neck, head and trunk. But in my most recent picture book, *Emily and Alfie*, written by Meredith Hooper, the body language was much more of a challenge. The story features two emperor penguin chicks and essentially a penguin chick is a solid, seamless shape, covered in fluff, with no discernible neck or shoulders or much leg visible. Their flippers do stick out, but even they don't have a great range of movement and don't bend much. It wasn't possible to droop Emily and Alfie's shoulders in the way a human's would when they were disappointed or scared, but I could make their heads hang down in defeat, and puff out their chests when they were feeling hopeful and courageous.

And of course, Emily and Alfie are penguins in their real natural environment — even though they have been given some human characteristics and emotions, they are not humans disguised as animals. And that makes a difference. Meredith Hooper is a research scientist with much experience working with penguins in Antarctica, and the faithful depiction of the emperor penguins' beautiful but harsh environment and their lives there was extremely important to her. A balance had to be found between Meredith's priorities (with her primarily nonfiction background) and my wish, as illustrator, to concentrate on the characters, their emotions and their experiences. The story of *Emily and Alfie* also involves an enormous land-locked iceberg, the shape of which resembles a whale. However, I purposefully did not imbue the iceberg with much character or life — it merely serves as a tempting and glittering object to lure the two chicks away from the safety of their colony. The penguins and one gloomy seal were the only characters I was interested in developing in this book.

But in my illustrations for *Good Night, Me* by Andrew Daddo, besides the two orang-utan characters acting as a universal baby and parent for me, I was thinking of one another player: The Dark. I knew that if one were to sit in a baby's bedroom watching it fall asleep, as night fell and the room gradually darkened, what one could see would diminish until it was completely dark, and one could no longer see the baby at all. However, I didn't want to show the baby being swallowed up by the dark.

I realised that I was giving the dark anthropomorphic qualities, but I was also aware that this is exactly what many children do. They are afraid of the dark. They are afraid of it consuming them, of disappearing into it. I made a conscious decision to make the complementary purple background in *Good Night, Me* deepen with each successive spread, but I decided to maintain the intensity of the colours of the orang-utan baby right to the end page. Not to wash the darkness over the whole picture, in a more realistic manner. I wanted to symbolise darkness falling, but not show it enveloping — to reassure the children sharing this book at the delicate hour of bedtime that even though night was creeping in and surrounding them, they were still whole and all of them would be there in the morning.

I know this is taking anthropomorphism to a whole other dimension: giving the background a role. But in *Reggie and Lu* I removed the background altogether, paring back the elements even more. I wanted to concentrate on the characters alone, to see the dominant shapes, to notice the characters' placement on the page, read their body language more efficiently.

We come to picture books with animals representing humans with our own 'baggage', and what preconceptions do adults & children have about pigs? Dirty? Greedy? We call someone a pig or piggy or a male chauvinist pig, and it is invariably a derogatory term.

And what about an orang-utan, or a bear, or a chicken? Books and soft toys have transformed the fierce and unapproachable wild bear into a cuddly and benign creature in our consciousness.

Of course, our preconceptions and associations are formed not only by books and toys, but also by film, TV cartoons, merchandising, advertising, pets and their roles in our lives, fables: the sly fox, the timid mouse, the faithful dog. I am always mindful of not stereotyping an animal in my illustrations. Around the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, bestiaries (collections of medieval animal lore) did not present animals as specimens of the natural world, but as models of morality. Like fables, they told us more about ourselves than they did about animals. But four hundred years later naturalists were combining observation with some of the fables of medieval times; they realised that the world and nature should be understood as it is, not as it is mythically perceived to be. At college I chose to illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (b. 43 BC), the ultimate collection of tales of change — mostly humans becoming animals. One of the subjects of my monoprints, a weasel giving birth to her young through her mouth, was originally Galanthis, a servant girl. Her pregnant mistress was in great pain to deliver her baby (who was to turn out to be Hercules), and the goddess of childbirth was preventing the birth from proceeding by crouching at an altar with all her limbs and fingers crossed and intertwined. Galanthis, the servant girl, had the wherewithal to announce the happy arrival of the baby, thus tricking the goddess into leaping up in consternation and uncrossing everything. The baby was born and the goddess was furious. She turned Galanthis into a weasel, and because lies issuing from Galanthis's lips had caused a baby to be born, all weasels' young are born by way of their mouths. Of course this isn't really true, but people did once believe that weasels gave birth in that way. The weasel's reputation was tarnished, and subsequently there has been many a conniving weasel in storybooks.

I try to break down such entrenched stereotypes when I illustrate, but sometimes wonder if I am in fact perpetuating them or even helping to create new ones. With this in mind, when I came to illustrate Colin Thompson's *The Puzzle Duck*, I was eager not to stereotype the fox character. Despite his wanting to eat the main character of the book, I felt sympathetic towards the fox. I wanted to capture his vulnerability. When he jumped into the water to swim to The Puzzle Duck's island, I puffed out his cheeks with air. He is desperately holding his breath. Perhaps he's not a great swimmer. Perhaps he swims with

his head high above the water like I do. Perhaps he struggles to feed his family. Maybe if he doesn't bring home The Puzzle Duck in his jaws, his family won't eat. I illustrated this thought in a tailpiece vignette on the wordless final page.

But, what of the humans in my illustrations? They first stepped into my picture books in *Thank You for My Yucky Present* by Meredith Hooper. This is my only picture book where animals and humans meet and interact. The rainbow sheep is still a sheep, despite its ability to hold a conversation with Charlie about the jumper created from its colourful wool. The sheep remains on all fours, still very firmly rooted in 'sheepness', but it smiles like we do. The rainbow jumper, too, can speak and feel and also fly. I could have drawn it with two eyes and a mouth, but I made the decision not to. Instead I used body language (despite the jumper not having a body as such). The neck of the jumper curls up at its edges when it is happy, or down to suggest dejection (when Charlie rejects the jumper and won't wear it). Hope and gentle suggestion (when Charlie is on the verge of finally slipping it on) are hinted at through a shrug of the jumper's sleeves.

My most recent picture book with human characters is *Daddy's Having a Horse*, again by Lisa Shanahan. Mum is expecting a baby, and her small son Lachlan is convinced that his dad is expecting a horse too. On the internal pages of *Daddy's Having a Horse* the wished-for horse is never depicted explicitly, and yet it is always present in some form (until Lachlan's hopes are dashed in the maternity ward scene, where all the horse signals disappear). There is no horse character, but there *are* horse references everywhere: in Lachlan's galloping around the kitchen and whipping his own bottom, in his riding a broom, in his drawings on paper and in the sandpit at playgroup, in his saddling up the couch, in the clouds.

In addition, there are horse elements hidden in the early kitchen renovation scenes of the book — parts from the old kitchen, which Sam the Handyman will later recycle to make Lachlan's surprise present of a rocking horse. The coloured ribbons of the old fly screen for the tail, the sawn up broom for the legs and mane, the top of the 1970s modular seating unit making the rockers, and so on. And yet the character of Sam the Handyman

was originally a butcher in Lisa Shanahan's early drafts. Whilst working on the rough pencil drawings for Sam the Butcher's scenes, I was struggling with the necessity to draw a counter full of cuts of meat. My thoughts were that it was all very well filling my picture books with animals that are really humans, or even animals as humans pretending to be other animals ... but animals as *sausages* was a completely different matter! I was having some difficulty coming to terms with this, although I didn't say so. I was trying to think of ways of playing down the meat, putting lots of reflection on the glass of the chiller cabinet, drawing more sausages than chops (as they are further removed from the animal from which they came, not having visible bones running through them). Also, as horse references were to be hidden throughout the book, I couldn't displace the rather distasteful thought that one of the characters might be on the chopping block, as horsemeat! So I was very relieved when Mark Macleod finally suggested Sam have another profession. His being a handyman led to the book's extra dimension of the rocking horse elements being hidden in the kitchen scenes.

So, which do I find harder, drawing human characters or animal characters? It's difficult to say. Perhaps it's the animals, because I have to get to know them. I must research them. I don't live with any animals, but I am surrounded by humans every day, and of course I *am* one! So the reference material is always there. I have done a lot of life drawing, sketching in parks, in dance studios, in cafés, in pubs. I can see humans in my head. I can conjure them up whenever I want to, after so much observational drawing ... and just observing all the time.

The drawings for the family of human characters in *Daddy's Having a Horse* came immediately, whereas with my animal characters there might be pages and pages of sketches. However I do find the animal characters less complicated in another sense: I am very conscious that, when drawing humans, I must be aware of representing many different kinds of people. I do not have to worry about such issues with pigs or bears or orang-utans. So in that regard some concerns are removed when I use animals.

Anthropomorphism is often seen as a dirty word. For me it is a tool. People are so used to it, they often don't even notice it — they don't think twice about it. I think about it a great deal. So, with all this going round in my head, it's a wonder I can manage to get anything out at all. But let me assure you that I love the process of illustrating, sketching ideas, exploring the different options, making decisions — whatever form my characters might take.

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