2018

# Beginning Readers' Interest in Animal Books: An Analysis of Data Collected from the Children's Choices Project

Petros Panaou
*University of Georgia*

Eun Hye Son
*Boise State University*

Maggie Chase
*Boise State University*

Stan Steiner
*Boise State University*

# Beginning Readers' Interest in Animal Books: An Analysis of Data Collected from the Children's Choices Project

**Petros Panaou.** University of Georgia, USA, ppanaou@uga.edu

**Eunhye Son.** Boise State University, USA, eunhyeson@boisestate.edu

**Maggie Chase.** Boise State University, USA, maggiechase@boisestate.edu

**Stan Steiner.** Boise State University, USA, stansteiner@boisestate.edu

## Abstract

This article describes a reading interest study, which analyzed 330 titles selected over a ten-year period by beginning readers (Grades K-2) across the United States (U.S). for ILA's Children's Choices project. Its aim was to determine if young children's reading interests have changed since earlier studies were conducted in the US. Specifically, a team of four researchers analyzed Children's Choices books selected by 5,000 beginning readers (K-2) every year, from 2005 to 2014. This article illuminates the study's methodology, its findings, and implications for understanding the reading interests of contemporary young children. By examining and comparing the books that were selected by children as their favorites and looking for possible patterns and trends, the study found that animals (66%) was the prevailing feature. Researchers then examined and identified distinct ways in which animals are represented in the selected titles, creating a spectrum from totally human-like animal characters to animals that are true to their animal forms.

Key words: Reading interest study, Children's Choices project, Beginning readers, Animal books, humor

## Resumen

Este artículo describe un estudio sobre interés en la lectura que analiza 330 títulos seleccionados sobre un periodo de diez años por primeros lectores (grado K-2) a lo largo de Estados Unidos por el proyecto Children's Choices. El objetivo era determinar si los intereses lectores de los niños y niñas habían cambiado respecto de anteriores estudios llevados a cabo en EEUU. Específicamente, un equipo de dos investigadores y dos investigadoras analizó los libros seleccionados cada año por un total de 5000 lectores (K-2) de 2005 a 2014. Este artículo arroja luz sobre la metodología de estudio, los hallazgos e implicaciones para comprender los intereses lectores del alumnado contemporáneo. A través del examen y la comparación de los libros que fueron seleccionados como favoritos por este alumnado y buscando posibles patrones y tendencias, el estudio encontró que los animales (66%) eran la característica preferida. La investigación, pues, examinó e identificó distintas maneras en las cuales los animales son representados en los títulos seleccionados, creando un espectro que comprende desde animales totalmente humanizados hasta animales representados en su forma animal real.

Palabras clave: Estudio sobre interés lector, Proyecto Children's Choices, Primeros lectores, Libros de animales, humor

**Resum**

Aquest article descriu un estudi sobre interès en la lectura que analitza 330 títols seleccionats al llarg d'un període de deu anys per primers lectors (grau K-2), al llarg d'Estats Units pel projecte Children's Choice. L'objectiu era determinar si els interessos lectors dels infants havien canviat respecte d'anteriors estudis duts a terme als EUA. Específicament, un equip de dos investigadors i dos investigadores va analitzar els llibres seleccionats cada any per un total de 5000 lectors (k-2) de 2005 a 2014. Aquest article fa alguns aclariments respecte de la metodologia d'estudi, les troballes i implicacions per tal de comprendre els interessos lectors de l'alumnat contemporani. A través de l'examen i la comparació dels llibres que van ser seleccionats com a favorits per aquest alumnat i tot buscant possibles patrons i tendències, l'estudi va concloure que els animals (66%) eren la característica preferida. La investigació, doncs, va examinar i identificar distintes maneres en les quals els animals són representats en els títols seleccionats, tot creant un espectre que comprén des d'animals totalment humanitzat fins animals representats en la seua forma animal real.

Paraules clau: Estudio sobre interés lector, Proyecto Children's Choices, Primeros lectores, Libros de animales, humor

## Introduction

Based on distinctions set forth by Getzels (1966) and Spangler(1983), our work can be described as a reading interest study that focuses on the following research question: What can we learn about the reading interests of contemporary beginning readers (Grades K-2) in the U.S, by looking closely at the specific texts that thousands of children have been identifying as their favorites over the course of a decade.

In the past, several studies in the U.S. have focused on children's book interests and preferences, but not many in recent years and very few regarding this age group. In fact, most of the findings that include this age group's reading interests could be considered outdated (Byers, 1964; Chiu, 1984; Grant & White, 1925; Lauritzen, 1974; Smith, 1962; Sturm, 2003). We wondered if American children's interests have changed since these studies were published.

As explained in more detail in the methodology section, the Children's Choices project is co-sponsored by the International Literacy Association and the Children's Book Council. Each year, thousands of school children from five different regions of the U.S. read hundreds of newly published trade books donated by North American publishers and choose 100 favorites. Three different sections of the book list are created by the three different age groups that participate: Beginning Readers (Grades K-2), Young Readers (Grades 3-4), and Advanced Readers (Grades 5-6).

The current investigation looks at the books beginning readers (K-2) selected as their favorites over ten years. We initially set out to investigate if there were any patterns or themes we could discern in the books that garnered children's highest rating. In the process, we discovered an

overwhelming number that included animals, both realistically portrayed and anthropomorphized. This article illuminates the study's methodology, its findings, and implications for understanding the reading interests of contemporary young children.

## Literature review

Over the decades, since children's literature first became an area of study, scholars, practitioners, and publishers have sought to answer a basic question: What do children [of various ages] like to read? Sturm advises that, "Each child develops unique interests, and any attempt to track trends runs the risk of trivializing these individual differences" (2003, p. 1). Nevertheless, he goes on to address a variety of reasons why our curiosity about children's reading interests and preferences persist, not the least of which involves our desire to serve children's needs through library collection development in classrooms, schools, and public facilities. This also holds true for scholars, practitioners, and publishers who endeavor to better

**Our study should be read in the same spirit: It addresses the need for current research on beginning readers' interests by identifying an overall trend in contemporary young children's choices; and, it does so by analyzing information from a largely unexamined source of rich data, the Children's Choices project.**

serve children's reading interests in order to facilitate their reading engagement. Our study should be read in the same spirit: It addresses the need for current research on beginning readers' interests by identifying an overall trend in contemporary young children's choices; and, it does so by analyzing information from a largely unexamined source of rich data, the Children's Choices project. In utilizing this data source, our study is unique in its span across time (10 years), space (nation-wide), and number of participants (5,000 children each year).

Though numerous studies about children's reading habits, preferences, and interests have been conducted and reported through the years, very few U.S. studies have focused exclusively on primary-aged children and the books they prefer; and, these studies do not represent the broad range of titles, topics, and choices available to children today. Smith (1962) looked at free-choice selections by first-graders over fourteen library visits. A total of 566 books were checked out by 113 children, and of those titles, the topics or genres selected were, in order of frequency: humor-fantasy; real animals; nature-science; holidays-birthdays; and fairytales. Zimet and Camp (1974) conducted a study of seven- to twelve-year-old boys and girls, using a Reading Interest Form that included open-ended questions asked of the children about the reasons they had for liking or disliking a book they read in an area of interest. Results from their survey revealed that

seven-year-old girls and boys preferred books with animals and humor. Sturm's (2003) study of North Carolina children also confirmed that young children, both girls and boys, showed a strong preference for animals in the six- to seven-year-old age group, a preference that declined considerably in the older groups.

The same researcher (Sturm, 2003) reviewed nineteen other studies, spanning from 1899 to 2001. These studies vary by children's age, number of children involved, context of the study, data collection method, and purpose of the analysis. Recognizing the difficulties in comparing studies with such diverse data sets and methods, Sturm still asserted that certain interesting trends were evident: "The subject of animals is a consistent favorite with children of all ages, appearing on 13 of the 19 studies included in this literature review and usually within the top ten choices" (p. 3).

Some researchers have used questionnaire techniques to measure children's reading choices (e.g., Estes, 1971; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Lewis & Teale, 1980). Others have used guided interviews (e.g., Guthrie & Seifert, 1983) or diary techniques, reading logs, and daily activity records (Anderson et al., 1988; Greaney, 1980; Taylor et al., 1990). Literature recognition measures (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990, 1991; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992; Stanovich & West, 1989) and library circulation records have also been used (Moss & McDonald, 2004). Studies that have analyzed titles selected by American children to read are somewhat similar to our study (Boraks, Hofman, & Bauer 1997; Grant & White, 1925; Kimmins, 1986; Seegers, 1936; Smith, 1962; Vostrovsky, 1899), yet they do not include the broad, nationwide range of readers that the Children's Choices project represents.

## Methodology

Children's Choices is a reading list in which children themselves evaluate books and write reviews of their favorites. It serves three main goals:

- To give young readers an opportunity to voice their opinions about books written for them;
- develop an annual annotated reading list of new books that young readers enjoy;
- and help teachers, librarians, booksellers, parents, and others find books that will encourage young readers to read more. (ILA)

Since 1974, Children's Choices has been a trusted source of book recommendations. The project is co-sponsored by the International Literacy Association and the Children's Book Council. Each year, school children from five different regions of the U.S. read hundreds of newly published

children's trade books donated by North American publishers and choose 100 favorites. Three different sections of the book list are created by the three different age groups that participate: Beginning Readers (Grades K-2), Young Readers (Grades 3-4) and Advanced Readers (Grades 5-6). These are the five evenly represented regions of the U.S.:

Area 1: Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington

Area 2: Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont

Area 3: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas

Area 4: Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming

Area 5: Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

Numerous factors are considered in the selection of participating sites and leaders, such as geographical representation, number of students, type of population, and interest from and support of selected schools. At each site, the main task for teachers is to make the books accessible to the children and to encourage them to vote on a title in one of three ways: really liked, liked, or did not like. Each vote is weighted from 3 to 1, with 3 points awarded to books that were "really liked." The voting takes place over a five and a half month period. Teachers are asked not to single out a particular book or use it as a read-aloud unless a student selects it, unprompted, and asks to have it read to the class. Teachers also make sure the books get rotated on a regular basis, make ballots readily available, and encourage students to vote. Votes are tallied and collected at each site and then submitted to the Children's Book Council, whose staff combines and tabulates the totals across all sites in order to finalize the lists of selected titles. Each year's results are made available on the International Literacy Association's website.

It is important to note that several previous studies do not make a clear distinction between reading preferences and reading interests. Getzels (1966) distinguishes between reading interest and reading preference in that reading interest is based on a direct reading behavior, while a preference is simply an expressed attitude. Spangler (1983) explains that interest studies describe actual reading behavior; they are naturalistic and ask questions about what children actually read, often involving large numbers of subjects who are asked to name books or types of books they have read. Tools used in interest studies include interest inventories in which

children name books or types of books they have read, checklists, rating scales, interviews, library withdrawals, and children's independent reading records (Spangler, 1983, p. 876).

Preference studies, on the other hand, look at children's expressed attitudes about hypothetical situations; they are experimental and give indications of possible actions when readers are given new choices. According to Spangler, "preference studies tend to yield more specific but less generalizable information than interest studies" (p. 877). Kincade, Kleine, & Vaughn (1993) have shown that studies in which children are asked to express their reading preferences can be unreliable, as the method of assessment influences children's responses, both in type and number of categories reported; this explains their tendency to be specific (because of the specific categories provided to children) but less generalizable, as they are compromised by the assessment method they use.

In this sense, reading interest studies that are based on specific titles read and assessed by the participants can be more reliable. The results produce information such as lists of popular titles or ratings of favorite genre or content areas. Based on these distinctions set forth by Getzels and Spangler, our work can be described as a reading interest study, which focuses on the following research question: What can we learn about the reading interests of contemporary beginning readers (Grades K-2) by looking closely at the specific texts that thousands of children have been identifying as their favorites over the course of a decade?

Our team of four researchers (Authors 3 and 4 having been actively involved in the project) conducted a mixed methods study, analyzing Children's Choices books read and selected by children every year, from 2005 to 2014, totaling 330 titles. By examining and comparing the features of the books that were identified by children as their favorites, we aimed to identify prevalent patterns or trends among beginning readers.

Prior to beginning our analysis of the books, we decided to use an inductive rather than deductive approach. Instead of starting with a hypothesis or a specific set of reading interest categories to test a theory, we opted for generating new theory and categories as they emerged from our analysis. In order for this emergence to occur, we implemented the qualitative strategy of Constant Comparison. Keeping an open mind, all four researchers individually analyzed the books children had chosen in 2005 (a year we selected randomly) looking for features the selected titles might have in common. We then shared our notes and observations with each other, generating a list of identified features. Using this list of initial categories, the researchers collaborated in pairs to analyze the rest of children's choices for the remaining nine years (2006-2014). Two researchers analyzed the 2006-2009 selections and the other pair did the same with

the books chosen by beginning readers from 2010 to 2014.Paired researchers each separately coded the books and then compared codes to find consistencies and differences, as well as possible omissions or inconsistencies. When we did not agree, we reread the books and discussed until we reached consensus. We regularly reconvened as a group to review our findings, thus ensuring consistency in coding.

As we coded and discussed the various features found in the books, we agreed that animal characters were overwhelmingly the most common feature among the selected titles. While we were aware that other, less prominent features could also be studied, we opted to focus exclusively on the one, overwhelmingly prominent feature for the purposes of this study. We used the following criteria to finalize our identification of "animal books":

One or more animals should have a central role in the book. For instance, a book with a dog depicted in a single illustration would not make the cut, but a book with a canine protagonist or co-protagonist, or a nonfiction book about puppies, most certainly would.

The animals in the book should be creatures that exist, or used to exist, in nature. Cats, dolphins, spiders, and dinosaurs made the cut, while dragons, unicorns, monsters, imaginary creatures, animated objects, or stuffed toys did not.

As long as a book satisfied the above two criteria, it should be included in the "animal books" category, regardless of its genre or format.

Keeping the above definition in mind, we began to count and analyze the selected titles that featured animals to determine the various ways animals were represented in the books. While examining animal characters, we started to wonder what attributes about animals attract young readers. We discussed and made a list of different characteristics of animal characters. Then, based on the list, we developed animal categories that exist in children's chosen books, which will be discussed in the discussion section.

## Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of animal books relative to the total number of selected titles. With the exception of one year, which was slightly below, in all other years animals were featured centrally in more than 60% of the children's choices.

| Year | Number of Animal Books | Percentage of Animal Books |
|---|---|---|
| **2005** | 36 of 56 | 64% |
| **2006** | 30 of 47 | 64% |
| **2007** | 20 of 32 | 63% |
| **2008** | 20 of 23 | 87% |
| **2009** | 16 of 29 | 55% |
| **2010** | 21 of 28 | 75% |
| **2011** | 16 of 23 | 70% |
| **2012** | 21 of 33 | 64% |
| **2013** | 27 of 33 | 82% |
| **2014** | 17 of 26 | 66% |
| **Total** | 218 of 330 | 66% |

**Table 1. Selected titles that feature animals**

The maximum and minimum percentages (87% in 2008 and 55% in 2009) may prompt one to talk of inconsistency, but the rest of the data decidedly points to the exact opposite. The mean and median are 69% and 65% respectively, and standard deviation shows that on average, yearly selections were about 9% over or below the mean. Both numbers and percentages confirm our initial identification of an overwhelming presence of animal books in Children's Choices (K-2).

**With the exception of one year, which was slightly below, in all other years animals were featured centrally in more than 60% of the children's choices.**

One of the researchers hypothesized that the prevalence of animals in young children's choices could be attributed to the fact that book companies primarily publish books about animals or animal characters for this age group, leaving fewer titles from which to choose that were *not* animal-related. We set out to determine if that was a factor, which presented a daunting task, since over the past ten years more than 2,000 books have been submitted by publishers to Children's Choices, Grades K-2. In order to make the task more manageable, we looked closely at the total books submitted by publishers during three years: 2010, 2011, and 2012. We selected these three years because the percentage of animal books chosen by children was almost identical to the mean (69%) in 2011 (70%), above the mean in 2010 (75%), and below the mean in 2012 (64%); in this manner, all types of years were represented in our sample.

Testing the hypothesis that young children choose animal books because that is primarily what publishers provide, we found that during these three years a total of 885 books for beginning readers were submitted by publishers to the Children's Choices project and animals were featured centrally in 449 of these books, representing a percentage of 51%. We determined that children had selected a much higher percentage of animal books than were provided by publishers, an average of 69%. Table 2 indicates the percentage of animal books submitted by

publishers as compared to the percentage of animal books selected by children for each of the three sample years.

| Year | Number of Animal Books | Percentage of Animal Books |
|---|---|---|
| **2010** | 54% | 75% |
| **2011** | 47% | 70% |
| **2012** | 52% | 64% |
| **Average** | 51% | 69% |

**Table 2. Animal books submitted by publishers compared to animal books selected by children**

As shown above, children chose up to 23% more books with animals compared to the overall animal books submitted by publishers in the three years we sampled. This tells us that children's selection of animal books proportionally exceeds by far the number of books provided by publishers for the project. Young children are even more interested in animal books than publishers think they are.

## Discussion

May Hill Arbuthnot (1964) lists three categories of animal stories: (1) stories that tell of animals that dress and act like people, as in The Wind in the Willows; (2) stories in which animals talk, but act otherwise naturally, as in Bambi; and (3) stories in which animals are objectively/ realistically described, as in Marguerite Henry's horse stories. Categories one and two display varying degrees of anthropomorphism, while category three does not.

After examining animal characters in selected titles, we found that grouping stories under Arbuthnot's categories is somewhat limiting because of the complexities found within the books. Instead, we found it necessary to broaden the categorization of ways in which animals are depicted in Children's Choices titles. The following discussion focuses on Children's Choices books that fit neatly into Arbuthnot's categories, as well as on those that require more nuanced identifiers. Identifying the distinct ways in which animals are represented in this set of texts, we created a spectrum of animal characters, spanning from totally human-like to absolutely true to their animal forms.

*Where's My Sock?* (Dunbar, 2006) is a perfect example of Arbuthnot's first category: stories about animals that dress and act like people. The mouse character, Pippin, and her friend, a cat named Tog, work together to search for a missing sock. In the real world, it is nearly impossible that a mouse and a cat would be friends, but it is not a problem in this story since the animal characters act completely like humans. While there is no trace of their animal nature, their

antithetical animal appearances (cat ≠ mouse) are used as a symbol of friendship among humans who look very different from each other.

In *How to Be a Good Dog* (Page, 2006) on the other hand, a big white dog, Bobo, acts mostly like a human but still has minimal dog characteristics. He strives to be a good pet, trying to interpret and perform dog commands like fetch, shake, and roll over; he fails because he keeps performing them like a human, not a dog. And while his posture and behavior resemble those of a human, he is still humorously portrayed as a pet trying to please his master. He does not wear human clothes and continuously strives to improve his dog behavior. For these reasons, Bobo is not a completely anthropomorphized animal character and *How to Be a Good Dog* cannot be grouped under Arbuthnot's first category. This text cannot be grouped under Arbuthnot's second category either (stories in which animals talk, but act otherwise naturally) since Bobo does not act like a natural animal; he sits up on a couch like a human, he converses with his cat friend, and he enjoys a piece of cake in a very human-like manner. Thus, *How to Be a Good Dog* should be positioned somewhere between Arbuthnot's first and second categories.

In *Letters from a Desperate Dog* (Christelow, 2006) Emma, a brown and white dog, also has both canine and human characteristics. She acts like your typical dog by barking, chasing a cat, and getting into the garbage, but at the same time, she also types up emails, auditions for acting, and sits straight to eat with her owner at the dinner table. Reading her email correspondence with a canine advice columnist, evokes laughter because it is beyond human expectations of typical dogs. This story is also positioned between Arbuthnot's first and second categories, but somewhat closer to category two in comparison to *How to Be a Good Dog*, in which Bobo is more human-like.

*Hippo Goes Bananas* (Murray, 2006) is an animal book that can be placed in Arbuthnot's second category, with some reservations. Hippo and all other animals perform jungle animal movements such as jumping, flying, climbing trees, etc. They also use human language to communicate, but other than that they act quite naturally. The reason we hesitate to place it squarely in category two is that Hippo is displayed in some decidedly "un-hippo-like" postures, such as sitting on his rear end and standing on two feet when he suffers from a toothache.

*Hi! Fly Guy* (Arnold, 2006) is yet another tricky example that should probably be positioned between Arbuthnot's second and third categories. Fly Guy acts like a normal fly and does not use human language, but in the narrative he seems to understand his human friend and somehow interact with him. Again, the humorous aspect of the story resides in Fly Guy's disruption of our expectations from flies. Furthermore, if we read the story as a mere result of

the human characters' misinterpretation of Fly Guy's behavior and buzzing sounds, then the book becomes even funnier and could be grouped under Arbuthnot's third category: stories in which animals are objectively described.

Fergus in *Good Boy, Fergus!* (Shannon, 2006) is a realistically depicted dog behaving like a dog, which is a great example for Arbuthnot's third category. He only carries out typical dog tasks, such as chasing cats and bikes, scratching, digging, begging for food, and riding in a car. Even though the story is fictional, Fergus is not anthropomorphized at all. Finally, while Arbuthnot's categories apply only to fictional stories, young readers' favorite animal books in Children's Choices also include non-fiction books with realistically depicted animals, such as *Puppies, Puppies Everywhere!* (Urbigkit, 2006).

Animal characters in Children's Choices, then, cover the entire human-animal spectrum. At least four new categories would need to be added to those described by Arbuthnot in order to capture this spectrum:

- Animals dress and act like people (Arbuthnot)

- Animals act like humans, but show some animal characteristics

- Animals act naturally, but talk and/or have some human characteristics

- Animals talk, but otherwise act naturally (Arbuthnot)

- Animals act naturally, but understand humans and/or have human-like interactions

- Animals are objectively/ realistically described (Arbuthnot)

- Real animals are objectively described in nonfiction texts

The books' exact positioning along this spectrum depends on the degree to which their animal characters are anthropomorphized. Figure 1 places the books we discussed above on such an animal-human spectrum.
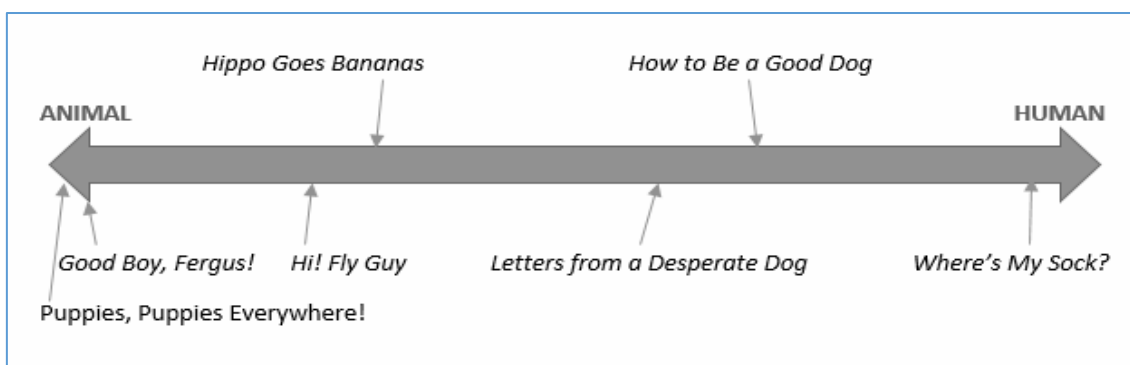
**Figure 1. Animal books on animal-human spectrum**

Importantly, the above graphic also visually represents how most of the selected titles cannot be placed on the purely animal end of the spectrum. In fact, the vast majority of books with animals in Children's Choices K-2 depict animals with anthropomorphic elements and are positioned somewhere between the two ends of the animal-human spectrum, depending on the degree of anthropomorphism.

This observation made us wonder why animals with human characteristics populate so many favorite early childhood stories and what purposes they may be serving. Blakey Vermeule (2010) and other cognitive critics postulate that anthropomorphizing is the brain's learning strategy to make sense of the world. Approaching the issue historically, Burke and Copenhaver (2004) point to three important factors that have influenced the proliferation of anthropomorphic animal characters in children's stories. To begin with, they cite anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, arguing that as humans evolved, being able to recognize other people where they existed became critical to human survival and success. Visualizing the world as humanlike meant organizing their predictions in a way that increased their potential to recognize what was of most importance to them, other humans. Thus, anthropomorphism became a human instinct, humanizing even the face of the moon. Secondly, Burke and Copenhaver purport that Aesop had a profound influence on Western civilization, as his animal fables communicated basic and powerful interpretations of life that remain relevant to this day. Thirdly, they argue, the emergence of Children's Literature as we know it, with its intent to amuse as well as to instruct children, brought about the incorporating of animals with human characteristics in children's stories as a means to heighten the enticement and amusement of the child.

While the above are important factors, Burke and Copenhaver also convincingly describe a different main purpose served by anthropomorphic animals:

> Anthropomorphism, animal characters as people, can add a degree of emotional
> distance for the reader/writer/speaker when the story message is very powerful,

personal, and painful. We most need to read about, write about, and talk about those things that are personally painful, embarrassing, and dangerous to us. Having animals do the acting and mistake-making allows the face-saving emotional distance often needed to be able to join the conversation. (p. 212)

They argue that, compared to human fictional characters, anthropomorphic animals allow for a greater intellectual and emotional distance, which enables children and their mentoring adults to become reflective and think critically about life problems and choices.

On the other hand, Nikolajeva (2016) maintains that in fictional negotiations within the hybrid human/animal body such as Babar, the implied author often seems to claim that humans are superior to animals and that the uncivilized animal/ child is expected to abandon her/ his animality and become human/ adult. She refers to this discriminating view of adulthood as the norm and childhood as an abnormal state that needs to be left behind as aetonormativity (Nikolajeva, 2010). Posthuman theorists have also critiqued problematic anthropomorphic representations of animals in children's literature, interrogating humanism as a philosophy that gives supremacy to the human being over all other species (Jaques, 2015). While we find these critiques valid, we will refrain from expanding on them as they are beyond the scope of the present study.

Juliet Kellogg Markowsky poses the question: "What are the reasons that an author of children's books may dress animals or make them talk?" (1975, pp. 460-461). In addition to catering to children's tendency to find delight in animals—whether they may be their pets, wild creatures, or animals in zoos—she also proposes the following possible reasons:

- To enable young readers to identify with the animals

- For the flight of fantasy itself, as animals that talk can let us in on another world which we may not be able to see without their help

- To develop a great variety of characters with few words, as no elaborate description or character build-up is necessary if an animal is used to express attributes commonly assumed to represent the creature

- To achieve humorous effects, as animals who are caricatures of certain types of people are funny to adults and children alike

We found that Markowsky's fourth reason was central in many Children's Choices titles. Markowsky observes that humor often stems from how the animal character looks or what the

animal character says. McGhee (1979) identifies incongruity as an additional, usual source of laughter: incongruity between an animal's stereotypical traits and its actual personality and behavior in the story. Using Toad from *The Wind in the Willows* as an example, she explains that his funniness stems from the discrepancy between his being a toad, often a symbol of ugliness in literature, and his being a fop and a dandy (p. 461). As discussed earlier, it is a similar incongruity (subversion of expectations) that also makes us laugh with Bobo in *How to Be a Good Dog*, Emma in *Letters from a Desperate Dog*, and Fly Guy in *Hi! Fly Guy*.

Through her work with children and children's literature, Katherine Kappas (1967) found that incongruity "is the basis of all forms of humor though it pervades each one with differing degrees of emphasis" (p. 69). People tend to laugh when they encounter incongruity; when something odd or unexpected, out of keeping with the normal state of affairs, occurs (McGhee, 1979). Kerry Mallan (1993) observes that animals as pets and as characters are quite popular in humorous books for young children. She explains that "The animals and toys which are childlike, if not completely anthropomorphized, can provide humor for young children. The antics of such characters often put them at odds with the established order" (p.12). In quite a few of the animal books in Children's Choices, animal characters engage in mischief and disguised subversiveness. It could be that substituting the human child with a young animal makes mischief or subversion more acceptable, both for adult mediators and for child readers who can more easily distance themselves from the main character.

Our discussion here partly explains beginning readers' attraction to anthropomorphic animals in the stories they choose, but more reading interest studies are needed in order to be able to pinpoint specific reasons for their selection of so many of these texts as their favorites. We believe that the study of reading interests is a significant and promising area for future research, which can be combined with empirical studies of young readers' responses to children's literature to bring about important results. Learning more about beginning readers' interests can help us better serve children's needs through library collection development in classrooms, schools, and public facilities, keeping their interest in and engagement with reading high.

> **It could be that substituting the human child with a young animal makes mischief or subversion more acceptable, both for adult mediators and for child readers who can more easily distance themselves from the main character.**

## Limitations

As with all studies, ours was also bound by certain limitations. Spangler (1983), for instance, acknowledges that there will always exist problems with measurement techniques, but she purports that the scope and generalizability of the results of interest studies are limited only by the size and nature of population sampled and the availability of books to the children surveyed. The availability of books was checked by studying all the books submitted by publishers in three sample years and comparing them with the ones that children chose during these years. In regards to the population sampled, we do have a large size and a wide geographical spread, but we have no way of knowing the demographic diversity within this sample, as the participating readers' gender or ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds were not identifiable.

## Conclusion

We acknowledge the different interests among individual beginning readers, but we continue to wonder what is behind the ratings and choices young children give the various books they read. What do they consider in giving a Children's Choices book a "3," as opposed to a "2" or "1"? Do they perceive social/ emotional issues experienced by anthropomorphic animal characters as similar to their own experiences with these issues? What makes them laugh with and about animal characters? What characteristics about animals and animal books are they attracted to? Studying young children's actual responses to the books in relation to the major elements we have identified would further enrich our findings.

While these questions remain open to further exploration, this study does add to the conversation through a contemporary analysis of American children's interests. By looking closely at the specific texts that thousands of children have been identifying as their favorites over the course of a decade, our research provides some important insights into the reading interests of contemporary child-readers (Grades K-2) in the U.S. It confirms the findings of older and more limited in scope studies about young children's (K-2) strong interest in reading material that focuses on animals, especially stories with anthropomorphic animal characters. Additionally, it demonstrates how these characters cover the entire animal-human spectrum and will not fit neatly into the three categories proposed by Arbuthnot (1964); it thus proposes a new categorization, adding four more categories and placing all seven categories along a spectrum. Our study also reinforces Sturm's 2003 finding that a chronological comparison of studies "shows little change over time, suggesting that, while popular psychology and social trends may vary over time, children's interests and preferences for reading and information

remain fairly constant" (p. 4). Both our literature review and the discussion of our findings, support that beginning readers' interest in animal books seems to be constant.

## References

Anderson, R. C., Wilson, P. T., & Fielding, L. G.(1988). Growth in reading and how children spend their time outside of school. *Reading Research Quarterly, 23*, 285-303.

Arbuthnot, M. H. (1964). *Children and books* (3rd ed.). Chicago: Scott, Foresman.

Boraks, N., Hofman, A., & Bauer, D. (1997). Children's book preference: Patterns, Particulars, and possible implication. *Reading Psychology, 18*(4), 309-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/0270271970180401

Burke, C., & Copenhaver, J. (2004). Animals as people in children's literature. *Language Arts*, *81*(3), 205-213.

Byers, L. (1964). Pupils' interests and the content of primary reading texts. *Reading Teacher, 17*, 227-33.

Chiu, L. (1984). Children's attitudes toward reading and reading interests. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 58*(3), 906-962. https://doi.org/10.246/pms.1984.58.3.960

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1990). Assessing print exposure and orthographic processing skill in children: A quick measure of reading experience. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*, 733-740. http://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-0663.82.4.733

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1991). Tracking the unique effects of print exposure in children: Associations with vocabulary, general knowledge, and spelling. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 3*, 264-274. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.83.2.264

Estes, T. H. (1971). A scale to measure attitudes toward reading. *Journal of Reading, 15*, 135-138.

Getzels, J. W. (1966). The problem of interests: A reconsideration. *Supplementary Educational Monographs, 96*, 97-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/10862967709547215

Grant, E. B., & White, M. L. (1925). A study of children's choices of reading materials. *Teachers College Record, 24(*8), 671-678. http://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0067813

Greaney, V. (1980). Factors related to amount and time of leisure-time reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 15*, 337-357.

Guthrie, J. T., & Greaney, V. (1991). Literacy acts. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.) *Handbook of reading research (Vol. 2*, pp. 68-96). New York: Longman.

Guthrie, J. T., & Seifert, M. (1983). Profiles of reading activity in a community. *Journal of Reading, 26*, 498-508.

Jaques, Z. (2015). *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. New York: Routledge.

International Literacy Association. (2017). *Children's Choices Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/reading-lists/childrens-choices-fact-sheet

Kappas, K. (1967). A developmental analysis of children's responses to humor. *The Library Quarterly, 1*, 67-77. https://doi.org/10.1086/619503

Kimmins, E. J. (1986). *The reading interests of emotionally disturbed boys ages 11 to 15*. Unpublished master's thesis, Kean College of New Jersey, NJ. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 268 516)

Kincade, K. M., Kleine, P. F., & Vaughn, J. (1993). Methodological issues in the assessment of children's reading interests. *Journal of Instructional Psychology 20*(3), 224-36. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759390100200109

Langer, J. A. (1990). The process of understanding and learning: Reading for literary and informative purposes. *Research in the Teaching of English, 24*, 229-257.

Langer, J. A. (1992). Rethinking literature instruction. In J. A. Langer (Ed.), *Literature instruction: A focus on student response* (pp. 35-53). Urbana, IL: National Council on the Teaching of English.

Lauritzen, C. (1974). Children's reading interests classified by age level. *The Reading Teacher*, *27*(7), 694-700.

Lewis, R. & Teale, W. H. (1980). Another look at secondary school students' attitudes toward reading. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 12*, 187-201. https://doi.org/10.1080%2F10862968009547370

Mallan, K. (1993). *Laugh lines*. Australia: Ambassador Press.

Markowsky, J. K. (1975). Why anthropomorphism in children's literature? *Elementary English*, *52*(4), 460-462.

McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor, Its Origin and Development*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

Moss, G., & McDonald, J. W. (2004). *End of award report: Mixed methods in the study of pattern and variation in children's reading habits*. Retrieved from http://www.regard.ac.uk

Nikolajeva, M. (2010). *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. New York: Routledge.

Nikolajeva, M. (2016). Recent trends in children's literature research: Return to the body. *International Research in Children's Literature, 9*(2), 132-145. https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2016.0198

Seegers, J. C. (1936). A study of children's reading. *Elementary English, 13*(7), 251-254.

Smith, R.C. (1962). Children's reading choices and basic reader content. *Elementary English*, *39*(3),202-209.

Spangler, K. L. (1983). Reading interests versus reading preferences: Using the research. T*he Reading Teacher, 36*(9), 876-78.

Stanovich, K. E., & Cunningham, A. E. (1992). Studying the consequences of literacy within a literate society: The cognitive correlates of print exposure. *Memory & Cognition, 20*, 51-68.

Stanovich, K. E., & West, R. F. (1989). Exposure to print and orthographic processing. *Reading Research Quarterly, 24*, 402-433. https://doi.org/10.2307/747605

Sturm, B. (2003). The information and reading preferences of North Carolina children. *School Library Media Research, 6*, 2-20.

Taylor, B. M., Frye, B. J., & Maruyama, G. M. (1990). Time spent reading and reading growth. *American Educational Research Journal, 27*, 351-362.  https://doi.org/10.3102%2F00028312027002351

Vermeule, B. (2010). *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vostrovsky, C. (1899). A study of children's reading tastes. *Pedagogical Seminary, 6*(4), 523-35.

Zimet, H.G., & Camp, B.W. (1974). Favorite books of first-graders from city and suburb. *The Elementary School Journal*, *75*(3), 191-196.

**CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CITED**

Arnold, T. (2006). *Hi! Fly Guy*. New York: Cartwheel.

Christelow, E. (2006). *Letters from a desperate dog.* New York: Clarion.

Dunbar, J. (2006). *Where's my sock*? Illustrated by Sanja Rescek. Frome, UK: Chicken House.

Grahame, K. (1908). *The wind in the willows*. Illustrated by E. H. Shepard. London: Methuen.

Murray, M. D. (2006). *Hippo goes bananas*. Illustrated by Kevin O'Malley. Seattle: Two Lions.

Page, G. (2006). *How to be a good dog*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Shannon, D. (2006). *Good boy, Fergus!* New York: The Blue Sky Press.

Urbigkit, C. (2006). *Puppies, puppies everywhere!* Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.