

Vermin beings: Anthropomorphism and dehumanization in children's literature

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Abstract

In this article, I will discuss depictions of vermin in order to investigate what these portrayals signify in stories for children. Vermin are here defined as animals or insects that are considered harmful or a nuisance. I will examine what the use of the motif signifies in books for children and will specifically study stories where vermin are used to describe an experience of otherness, discrimination, or dehumanization. I am specifically interested in stories where the boundaries between animal and human are blurred or critically investigated. I have therefore chosen to discuss a small selection of children's stories with animal or humanoid protagonists depicted or described as vermin. Considering that dehumanizing imagery and metaphors have historically been used to evoke the moral emotion of antipathy or discrimination in different cultural contexts, I have chosen to discuss texts from different eras. Besides a contemporary picturebook, which functions as the starting point for my discussion, two stories from post-World War II years and two novels from the 1960s are examined. In my analysis, I am interested in investigating whether literature for children reflects, or possibly questions, dehumanizing imagery concerning animals, and how this is done in the texts. As a theoretical standing point for the analysis, I will apply children's literature research and posthuman theories that investigate size and power and, more specifically, dehumanizing metaphors and images. The article aims to discuss how insects, mice and rats in these children's stories are used as expressions for otherness, but also how they are used to question ideas concerning dehumanizing rhetoric. While doing so, these small characters point at a muddling of categories, of different systems and hierarchies of bodies, big and small, organic and mechanic, human and nonhuman.

Keywords: *dehumanization, vermin, animal characters, miniature, human-animal studies, posthumanism, illustration*



Shaun Tan's picturebook *Cicada* (2018) is a story about a cicada who works as a data entry clerk in an office. The protagonist, who is bright green and has large, black, compound eyes, and a wide, inexpressive face, is being systematically discriminated. His wage is so low that he can't afford an apartment, and since he is not human, he is denied promotion and is not allowed to use any of the resources available, or even use the office restrooms.²⁴

The Cicada's small body provides a strong contrast to the human surroundings, which are drawn in shades of gray, in repetitive, angular shapes. Despite the Cicada's marginalized position, the story is told entirely from his perspective, the images focusing on him, placing the humans in the periphery. They are often depicted with their backs turned, walking away, or cropped out of the illustrations. A sense of alienation is not only expressed through the illustrations, but also through Cicada's short, halting sentences:

Cicada works in tall building.

Data entry clerk. Seventeen year.

No sick day. No mistake.

Tok tok tok!

Tan's story offers multiple interpretations. It can be read as a description of mistreatment of migrant workers, of racism and discrimination, or as a narrative about colonial experiences, where the insect body stands for otherness.²⁵

Tan's picturebook also demonstrates how insects and small animals have since ancient times had a central place in fables and literature for children. They have been used as symbols and metaphors, as cautious examples, warning signs, or moral lessons. In this article I will discuss depictions of vermin, here defined as animals or insects that are considered harmful or a nuisance, and that should be controlled or exterminated. I will examine what the use of the motif signifies in books for children and will specifically study stories where vermin are used to describe an experience of otherness, discrimination, or oppression. My focus lies on the ideological and moral implications expressed through the use of tiny characters, but also in the kind of artistic and narrative potential the motif proposes. And while my material consists of stories of anthropomorphic animal or humanoid characters, I am particularly interested in stories where the boundaries between animal and human are blurred and critically investigated. I have therefore chosen to discuss a selection of children's stories with animal or humanoid protagonists that are depicted or described as vermin. In a wider cultural context, metaphorical use of vermin as part of dehumanizing rhetoric has historically been used to evoke ridicule, antagonism, and discrimination.²⁶ Applying Nick Haslam and Michelle Stratemeyer's

²⁴ I refer to the protagonist as a "he" because of the costume the character is wearing, which is similar to the male characters' costumes in the story. However, it should be noted that the character's gender is not indicated in the story.

²⁵ As previous research has shown, insects and other arthropods have often been used as a trope of colonialism and are a recurrent motif in literature that explore colonial experiences. See, for example, Christopher Hollingsworth, *Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature*, (University of Iowa Press: Iowa, 2001), and Evan Maina Mwangi, *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

²⁶ Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An integrative review" in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(3), 2006, 252-264. Goff et al. "Not yet human: Implicit knowledge, historical dehumanization, and contemporary consequences" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, No. 2, 2008, 292-306.

definition, dehumanization is here understood as “the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human,” a process that involves both individuals and groups.²⁷



Picture 1. © Shaun Tan, *Cicada*.

²⁷ Nick Haslam and Michelle Stratemeyer, “Recent Research on Dehumanization” in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2016, 11: 25–29, 25.

In order to investigate how characters that are described as vermin in children's literature can be understood, and how the motif has been used during different time eras, I have chosen a selection of stories that in different ways use the motif of vermin in a thought-provoking or politically encaging way. Besides Shaun Tan's already presented contemporary picturebook *Cicada*, I have chosen illustrated novels from the post-World War II years and from the 1960s: Bengt Anderberg's *Niklas och Figuren* (Niklas and the Figure, 1950), Mary Norton's *Borrowers* (1953), George Selden's *The Cricket in Times Square* (1960), and Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child* (1967).

As my first example, *Cicada*, demonstrates, these stories present animals in such a way that the reader is invited to interpret them as metaphors for humans, or as representatives for specific groups of individuals. I am interested in investigating whether literature for children reflects, or possibly questions, dehumanizing imagery concerning human-animal relations and how this is done in the texts. In order to discuss the motif of the vermin, but also human-animal relations, I have deliberately chosen books where the protagonists are not necessarily animals, but, instead, inanimate or humanoid characters treated as animals. What I find interesting in this context is how the notion of vermin, something (or someone) who is seen not only as a nuisance but also as undesirable and despised, is applied in these stories.

As a theoretical standing point for my analysis, I will apply posthuman theories that discuss anthropomorphism and dehumanizing rhetoric and images. Studying the way animal protagonists are anthropomorphized and, in turn, how tiny humanoid protagonists are depicted or treated as animals, points at a complex human-animal relationship that has moral implications. Furthermore, different hierarchies and a discourse of species is activated in these stories. I will therefore discuss how speciesism, the practice to favor certain animals over other, is applied in this context.²⁸

The diminutive size of most vermin is essential in this discussion as well. The popularity of different kinds of small protagonists in children's literature – insects, mice or even rats – can be explained by a message that is often expressed: even the small and powerless can prevail and survive despite overwhelming difficulties. But the motif also raises several questions. As Lynne Vallone states, both animal fables and traditional fairy tales establish size conventions and subvert them, since the tiny characters are often described as weak but cunning, and the gigantic as brutish and violent.²⁹ This kind of dynamics is also evoked by Perry Nodelman who points at the use of small size as an expression of decisiveness and determination in children's literature: "when these small beings prevail over insurmountable odds, as they always do, they represent a potent version of the wish-fulfillment fantasy: the very small can triumph over the dangerously large, the very powerless over the exceedingly powerful".³⁰ Questions about size, power and agency in children's literature are also connected to adult-child power relations and how these are reflected in animal stories. By discussing the liminality of the vermin beings, which are often placed in the periphery of the human world, it

²⁸ Cary Wolfe, *Animal rites: American culture, the discourse of species, and posthumanist theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003), p. 7. For a discussion about speciesism in children's literature specifically, see Kelly Hübben, *A genre of animal hanky panky? Animal representations, anthropomorphism and interspecies relations in The little golden books* (Stockholm 2017), chapter 1.

²⁹ Lynne Vallone, *Keywords for children's literature*, second edition, (New York: New York University Press 2021), 172.

³⁰ Perry Nodelman, *The pleasures of children's literature* (New York 1995), 199.

is my objective to examine the ways in which size and power in human–animal and adult–child relations are manifested in these stories.

In the Aftermath of World War II

There are multiple examples of miniature worlds and tiny protagonists in children’s literature during the post-World War II years, a tendency that has been seen as a way to articulate a general sense of insecurity and vulnerability.³¹ A classic example of liminal, humanoid characters is Mary Norton’s novel *Borrowers* (1952), illustrated by Diane Stanley. The miniscule characters depicted in the novel series live hidden from the human world and “borrow” things to survive. Their existence is based entirely on their reliance on humans, a dependency which previous research has seen as a trope to describe the authority that grownups have on children, “echoing the situation of children in the company of adults”, as Jerry Griswold states.³² But Norton’s portrayal of the Borrower’s symbiotic life style has also been described as complicated, “grotesque” and parasitical.³³ *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* describes the story as “a parable about parasitical dependence of the rentier class (Borrowers) on those who are the means of production (the “human beans” upstairs)”.³⁴ As Madelyn Travis suggests, Borrowers have no valued role in the society; they are politically and economically powerless and literally invisible to the world.³⁵ Besides applying class perspective on the novel series, it has also been seen as a portrayal of homelessness and as a parable of persecution of different minorities during World War II.³⁶ I would therefore like to take a closer look at the way the Borrowers are depicted in the novel and discuss how and why associations with parasites is expressed in the story.

The Borrowers home could be considered a miniature world inside a human world. Their home is decorated with small items, scraps and toys from the human house, and therefore becomes a reflection of it in miniature. Here, Susan Stewart’s definition of the miniature as a nostalgic description of childhood in her influential work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993) offers an interesting counterpoint for the discussion.³⁷ Stewart sees the miniature as “a metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject,” which suggests that small miniature worlds function as separate, nostalgic and sheltered spaces.³⁸ Stewart writes: “The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulateable, version of

³¹ Elina Druker, “Berättelser om flykt. Miniatyren som samhällskritik.” In *Mångkulturell barnoch ungdomslitteratur. Analyser* (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur 2017), 205-208.

³² Jerome Griswold, *Feeling like a kid: childhood and children’s literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006), 62.

³³ Caroline C. Hunt, “Dwarf, Small World, Shrinking Child: Three Versions of Miniature” i *Children’s Literature*, 1995:23, 115-136, 126.

³⁴ Humphrey Carpenter & Mari Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1999), 76.

³⁵ Travis 2007, 188.

³⁶ Deborah Cogan Thacker & Jean Webb, *Introducing Children’s Literature: from Romanticism to Post Modernism*, 2002, 131. Hunt, 115-136, Madelyn Travis, “Mixed messages: The problem of class in Mary Norton’s Borrowers series” In *Children’s literature in education*. 2007(38):3, 187-194.

³⁷ Susan Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, second edition (Durham: Duke Univ. Press 1993), xvii.

³⁸ Stewart, xvii, 69.

experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination”.³⁹ This kind of idyllic sentiment of the miniature as a precious, “timeless and uncontaminated” place, is a core image in the novel, as the family strives to survive and to create a secure home.⁴⁰ At the same time, their existence is constantly threatened – in fact, we are told that they are the last family of the Borrowers species left in the building and that all other Borrowers have “emigrated” (that is, they have died or disappeared). The family is therefore closely connected to humans, both through their parasitical lifestyle, but also through their mirroring of the human world.

Not only the characters’ lifestyle but also their behavior and bodies are repeatedly described with verbs connected to vermin. The main protagonist, Arietty, and her father go often to look for things to “borrow” in the human house. During one of the scavenging trips, she watches her father running across the floor and is suddenly struck by how small he seemed: “Arietty saw him scurry across the sunlit floor. Swiftly he ran – as a mouse runs or a blown dry leaf” (56). The description of size and scale is suddenly slightly detached and expresses an idea of marginalization. The same detached perspective is articulated in the illustration, where the character’s miniscule size is accentuated.⁴¹ The tiny characters (in this scene not larger than the printed letters on the page) are placed at the margins of the illustration. In other illustrations the characters are depicted hiding among grass, leaves, and even trash, or trying to disappear among human artefacts, like vases and porcelain figures.⁴²

A double perspective, where the human world collides with the world of the Borrowers, is already established on the endpapers of the novel, depicting the turning point in the story, where a human boy finds the family’s nest-like home under the floorboards. Stanley’s illustration shows how the tiny family and their home are abruptly exposed by the boy, left defenseless and in a state of shock. The image describes the staggering difference in size between the (gigantic) human boy and the family and demonstrates the vulnerability of their situation. This remarkable key image is also connected to the ending of the story, where the family is discovered by the housekeeper Mrs. Driver:

And then she shrieked, loud and long. She saw movement: a running, a scrambling, a fluttering! She heard a squeaking, a jabbering, and a gasping. Little people, they looked like, with hands and feet ... and mouths opening. That’s what they looked like ... but they couldn’t be that of course! Running here, there, and everywhere. [...] ”A nest! A nest!” she shouted. ”Alive and squeaking!” (127)

The association with a rat’s nest established on the endpaper is repeated here, and is further emphasized by a sudden blurring between human-animal categories. While the Borrowers are never defined as human in the novel, in this scene they are also deprived of their language. They are portrayed with words connected to non-human sounds, “a squeaking, a jabbering”; their movement, uncontrolled and frantic, is associated with animals. Their mouths are open, but no intelligible words are expressed. The scene is, of course, described through the

³⁹ Stewart, 69.

⁴⁰ Stewart, 66.

⁴¹ For a more detailed analysis of the illustrations, see Druker, 205-208.

⁴² See for example illustration of the characters running through a large hall p. 56-47 or hiding among artefacts on a mantle piece p. 36-37.

housekeeper's perspective, when she sees what she believes is a nest of rats, but the episode also points at the family's lack of voice in the human world and their position of otherness.⁴³

The tiny protagonists and their nomadic lifestyle depicted in Norton's novel series articulates a sense of defenselessness and vulnerability that can be seen in relation to a general sense of insecurity in the post-war years.⁴⁴ In fact, Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb have seen the constant threat of extermination in the story as a parable of Jewish persecution during the World War II.⁴⁵ This explanation is supported by the final chapters, where a rat-catcher is hired to exterminate the nest, "to smoke them out" (145). The housekeeper explains the rat-catcher's method: "He puffs this stuff in and they come running out. At least that's how it works with rats. But first, he says, you have to block up all the exits..." (146). Although the Borrowers manage to escape the house through an opening created by the human boy, the family is forced to leave their home. The smell of gas is described in detail in the final pages of the novel, making everyone in the building nauseous for days.

Dehumanizing Imagery

As Mary Norton's novel demonstrates, the choice of small anthropomorphic characters – in this case, humanoid characters *thought to be* animals, more specifically, rats – can be understood within a "discourse of otherness" where the Other is understood and described not only as different, but also as inferior.⁴⁶ What we see here is a muddling of boundaries between the human and the animal. In fact, the hybridity of the humanoid characters in Norton's novel confuses strict species boundaries. Describing the characters as parasites can therefore be understood in relation to dehumanizing rhetoric and imagery in general, where humans are described as insects or animals – a rhetoric that has been used in different acts of ethnic, national or religious discrimination across time.⁴⁷ Persecution and extermination of European Jews during the World War II is one of the most blatant examples of this. As Haslam has shown, it is one example of many points in history where metaphors such as insects, parasites, vermin or garbage have been used about minority groups or ethnicities to evoke moral emotion of disgust. This kind of imagery has been used to promote a "them-versus-us" attitude between groups of people.⁴⁸

Another novel published in the years after World War II that uses anthropomorphism with moral implications is Swedish Bengt Anderberg's novel *Niklas och Figuren* (Niklas and the Figure, 1950), with illustrations by his wife Astrid Anderberg. While Norton's novel can be considered a children's literature classic, Anderberg's story, which has somewhat of a cult status in Sweden, has not received international attention. The story depicts a young boy Niklas and his friend, a fantastic creature named Figure. Figure is a small humanoid character who

⁴³ Travis, 188.

⁴⁴ Druker, 205-208.

⁴⁵ Thacker & Webb, 131. Druker, 208.

⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin 2003/1979), Introduction.

⁴⁷ David Livingstone Smith, *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others* (New York: St. Martin's 2011).

⁴⁸ Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An integrative review." In *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(3), 2006, 253.

has a tail and lives in a tree. But despite human behavior and mannerism, he has trouble reading, writing and understanding numbers or abstract concepts.

In a short but significant scene in the beginning of the novel, Anderberg sends a strong message of tolerance that is then conveyed throughout the story. Here, the protagonist meets a retired policeman who enjoys gardening, and whose goal is to create perfect order in his garden. The policeman has put up prohibition signs that forbid playing football, picking flowers, or walking on the grass. But he also forbids most animals and insects (who, of course, cannot read) to enter the garden. The placards forbid animals to aimlessly cross the garden paths, to visit certain plants, flower beds or earth mounds and, most importantly, to interfere with other species. Instead, the different species are separated from each other. Spiders are especially detested: "Spiders not allowed! and "Spiders are unwanted here!" (25), the signs state.⁴⁹ When detected, the spiders are immediately taken into custody and put in small cages in "a prison" in the tool shed. We are told that the spiders "were devastated and had many times intended to move from the garden altogether. But they had so many childhood memories there that they stayed anyway and tried to hide whenever they saw the police" (25-26).⁵⁰

Anderberg, who was a famous author and poet, wrote several socially critical novels for adults. He was also an outspoken pacifist⁵¹, and the scene in *Niklas och Figuren* can be seen not only as a protest against violence and discrimination, but also as a direct comment to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. The policeman's signs resemble anti-Semitic signs like "Juden sind hier unerwünscht" (Jews are unwanted Here) or "Juden verboten" (Jews forbidden), which were used to gradually limit Jewish citizen's freedom of movement in society during the 1930s and onwards. Similar kinds of antisemitic signs were on a couple of occasions used even in Sweden, which caused a public outrage and led to new legislation against incitement against ethnic groups in 1948.⁵² Although antisemitic symbols were rare in Sweden, dehumanized expressions were used in Swedish right-wing publications and public debates.⁵³ Anderberg's story raises critical questions about norms and societal expectations on individuals, especially those placed on children, but the scene in the policeman's garden can also be understood as a blatant anti-military and anti-discriminatory commentary, an allegory in miniature.

How, then, should we understand the use of animal fables, associated with different animal and insect species, in relation to Anderberg's novel? And how is the seemingly absurd hierarchy between these insect species constructed? The humorous and, at the same time, uncanny portrait of the retired policeman's garden is clearly based on associations with dehumanizing terminology and oppression tactics of the time. But the description of the garden, divided into controlled sections for different species, could also be seen as a minuscule apartheid system. How, then, is the hierarchy between species constructed? It is noteworthy

⁴⁹ My translation: "Ej för spindlar!", "Spindlar äga ej tillträde!", Anderberg, *Niklas och Figuren*, 25.

⁵⁰ My translation: "De stackars spindlarna var alldeles förtvivlade och hade många gånger tänkt flytta från trädgården helt och hållet. Men då hade så mycket barndomsminnen där att de stannade kvar ändå och försökte gömma sig när de fick syn på polisen." Anderberg, 25-26.

⁵¹ Per Arne Tjäder. "Bengt Anderberg", *Litteraturbanken*. 2021.10.22.

⁵² Antisemitic signs were used by Einar Åberg's bookstore in Stockholm in 1941. The law against incitement against ethnic groups from 1948 in Sweden was initially called "Lex Åberg".

⁵³ Mikael Byström, *En broder, gäst och parasit: uppfattningar och föreställningar om utläningar, flyktingar och flyktingpolitik i svensk offentlig debatt 1942-1947*. Diss. (Stockholm: Stockholm University 2006), 183, 190.

that while the policeman considers the spiders to be vermin, he tolerates ants in his garden. According to him, they are resilient, can walk long distances in lines, and do so quickly and properly: "they knew what they were doing" (26), he states happily.⁵⁴ Unlike spiders, who roam around the garden "aimlessly", the ants stand for order and discipline, efficiency, and resilience. The image of the ant who stands for virtues of hard work and collaboration is already used during antiquity, in stories and fables about social animals.⁵⁵ As Nina Goga notes, ants are often described as a self-organizing machine.⁵⁶ The practice that favors certain species over other based on species membership is common in fables, and in children's literature in general. In her doctoral thesis about the ethical dimensions of anthropomorphism in picturebooks, Kelly Hübber proposes that this kind of anthropomorphized animals can provide the reader with new insights, not only regarding the very nature of the human-animal relationship, but regarding "the moral implications that follow from depicting species in terms of difference and hierarchy."⁵⁷

Furthermore, the image of the organized and disciplined ant has also been used to express opposite ideas, as an expression of blind compliance to a certain norm, behavior or culture. Consequently, descriptions of ants as disciplined and well-trained soldiers have been used to express pacifist ideas in various post-war eras.⁵⁸ Anderberg's novel can be understood within this tradition, as can be Swedish Gustav Sandgren's *Det stora myrkriget. En saga för barn och vuxna* (The great ant war. A fairytale for children and adults, 1948). Both stories are aimed at children (and possibly adults) and can be seen as critical commentaries to violence and wars.

As previous research has shown, dehumanization has been closely connected to discrimination, violence and genocide during different historical eras.⁵⁹ An analysis of anthropomorphism offers a way to investigate and understand the complex messages depicted in these children's stories. In his use of the insect metaphor, Anderberg implements the fable tradition, but his choice of insect species is also connected to the discriminatory, dehumanizing imagery of the 1930s and 1940s, which he uses in the opposite manner – to criticize narrowmindedness, racism and oppression. According to Haslam, dehumanizing functions as a precondition of violence, preparing people for the idea of oppressing another group and to justify violence when doing so.⁶⁰ I propose that what Anderberg does in his novel is to reclaim this kind of dehumanizing imagery by using it, instead, as a humorous, anti-discriminatory method.

⁵⁴ My translation: "Det enda djur som denne verkligen hade fått ordning och reda på, som han sade, var myrorna. [...] De visste var de gjorde". Anderberg, 26.

⁵⁵ Even bees have since ancient times used to represent social order, as in Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714) or Waldemar Bonsel's *Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer* (1912).

⁵⁶ Nina Goga writes that ants' capability for labor and organization is emphasized in different kind of literary genres, and even used in entomological literature. When ants are described, their well-functioning and intricate social organization is often commented on initially, a quality that has become an established "introductory topos" in depictions of ants. Goga, *Gå til mauren: om maur og danning i barnelitteraturen* (Kristiansand: Portal 2013), 60.

⁵⁷ Hübber, chapter 3, see also p. 223-224.

⁵⁸ Goga, 70-71.

⁵⁹ Goff, 292-306.

⁶⁰ Haslam, 255.

Muddled Anthropomorphism

Russell Hoban's novel *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) is a thought-provoking and dark story about two discarded toy mice. The father and child, attached to each other through their hands, are broken and thrown in the rubbish, and so they set out on a journey to find a new home. They come to a dump, inhabited by different insects, rats, shrew, and frogs. It is a harsh society, run by Manny Rat, who "smelled of darkness, of stale and moldy things and garbage" (27-28). Placed in the periphery of the human world, the small characters are described as helpless and powerless. The fact that the story mostly takes place in a junkyard is significant as well. The characters live on trash and rotten food, but they also kill and eat each other. In fact, the rats treat the other animals (and other rats) as a commodity. Dubious or morally questionable characters in stories for children are often recognized by transgressive eating habits.⁶¹ This includes food items that are considered non-foods in the Western culture, such as trash or contaminated foods.

The junkyard with insects, rats and broken toys is a hostile environment, outside human society and yet tightly connected to it, since it is created by humans and built by discarded material and food from the human world. Although most of the characters in the junkyard would be considered vermin, this society has a clear hierarchy between species and a regime based on violence. Everyone is aware of the system that favors certain animals over others. This "balance of nature" is explained to the mouse child by a hawk who attempts to eat him: "It's like a beautiful pyramid, with a lot of juicy mice and chipmunks down at the bottom and a hawk up on the top. Naturally the hawk eats up the mice and the chipmunks. That's how it is. I eat and you get eaten" (134). The awareness of this species hierarchy is, again, constant throughout the story. At the same time, this young mouse is also a child; therefore, his status is lower than all other characters in the story. As Hübben points out, both speciesism and ageism often intersect in children's literature; for example, when children are compared with (young) animals, or when animals are presented as stand-ins for children.⁶²

The latter is especially interesting in Hoban's novel; since the mouse and his child are discarded toys, their animal/toy position poses a challenge to the nature-culture divide described in the novel. As Stewart points out, the toy world presents a projection of the world of everyday life, but it also raises questions about the relation between materiality and meaning: "We are thrilled and frightened by the mechanical toy because it presents the possibility of a self-invoking fiction, a fiction which exists independent of human signifying process."⁶³ Although mechanical, these fictional animals are alive and become "self-winding"; their battered animal/toy bodies represent both the cultural and the natural. In her *Animal land: the creatures of children's fiction* (1974), Margaret Joan Blount emphasizes the fragility of these toy mice, comparing their slowly disintegrating and eroding tin bodies with human aging.⁶⁴ For the other animals in the novel, the Mouse and his son are considered either entertainment or workforce, but they are also seen as raw material that can be taken apart. They are considered to be outside the "balance of nature." "They're almost animal-like!", a mole announces when

⁶¹ Hübben, 178.

⁶² Hübben, 10.

⁶³ Stewart, 57.

⁶⁴ Margaret Joan Blount, *Animal land: the creatures of children's fiction* (London: Hutchinson 1974), 186, 189.

watching the two mice perform in a theatre play (80), while the hawk who tries to eat the mice is appalled by their existence and their "taste of rusty tin" (135).

Here, the use of anthropomorphism becomes complex and confusing. Human attributes are not clearly projected onto these fictional animals, and yet, their animal status is questionable. As Hübben proposes, anthropomorphism "is not a straightforward projection of human properties onto fictional animals. It is complex, confuses boundaries, and can't be resolved by solely relying on dichotomies."⁶⁵ Thus, the discarded tin mice are occupying a liminal position in multiple ways, as anthropomorphized artefacts and as animal figures.

In a similar way, small characters are used to portray an otherness in the middle of a lively city in George Selden's *The Cricket in Times Square* (1960), with illustrations by Garth Williams. It is a story about a mouse, a cricket, and a cat who live in a drainpipe at the Times Square subway station, a story that has not gained much scholarly interest. When the cricket is introduced for the first time, he is literally dug up and saved from under "a pile of waste papers and soot" at the subway station (8). What is revealed is "a little insect, about an inch long and covered with dirt. It had six legs, two long antennae on its head, and what seemed to be a pair of wings folded on its back [...]. Gradually the dirt that had collected on the insect fell away. His true color was still black, but now it had a bright, glossy sheen" (8-10). It is noteworthy that while the child protagonist, who finds the cricket, deeply cares for his pet, the insect isn't considered valuable by others until its extraordinary musical talent is discovered. The cricket becomes famous and starts earning money by performing at the subway station; thus, he becomes visible for others and profitable for its human owners.

In both Selden's and Hoban's novels, the choice of small anthropomorphic protagonists is significant and symbolically charged. They are usually invisible to humans and raise questions of our ability to see unwanted individuals or disagreeable parts of urban society, or our lack of interest in doing so. In a similar way to Tan's insect character, the small and alien body of the cricket stands out as the recognizable Other, and invites a revised perception that can serve as a way to transform or critically describe everyday places. But even here, experience of size is always connected to scale, and while the animal protagonists are the main characters in this novel, they are still described in relation to the human body.⁶⁶ This is especially striking in Garth Williams' illustrations in *The Cricket in Times Square*, which constantly vary in focus. When human beings are included in the illustrations, focus oscillates from the small protagonists to the human bodies – thus making the animal bodies even smaller. As Vallone states, exceptionally big or small bodies make visible "differences and divisions that exist between people, including those of race, religion, and culture. Visual and verbal representations of size difference encourage the child reader to picture and explore the nature and resolution of prejudice against the 'other.'"⁶⁷ The illustrations constantly shift from the human world's size and proportions to a perspective that accommodates the animal's size.⁶⁸ When illustrating only animal characters and their surroundings, this is, instead, done with

⁶⁵ Hübben, 223.

⁶⁶ Stewart points out that the human body functions as the base for "conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and the disproportionate on the other" and thus, the basis for what is understood as "big" or "small. Stewart, xii.

⁶⁷ Vallone, 173.

⁶⁸ Similar technique is used by Garth Williams even in other animal stories, for example in his illustrations to Miriam Norton's *The Kitten Who Thought He Was a Mouse*, 1951.

close-ups, often in confined spaces – inside a drain pipe, a shoebox, or even a matchbox.⁶⁹ As I have already mentioned, similar fluctuations in focus between the micro and macro perspectives takes place in Diana Stanley’s illustrations in *Borrowers*. A division between human and animal, the miniscule and the gigantic, is constructed both verbally and visually, and through the interaction between words and images.

Size, Movement, and Mobility

Size, language, and also bodily movement are significant in all of these stories. In Tan’s *Cicada*, the illustrations often show the protagonist standing still or sitting by a desk, the ill-fitting suit (with four sleeves) hiding his actual body shape. Similarly, the organized and controlled movements of ants (walking in straight lines) in Anderberg’s novel are depicted as something one can have control over. It isn’t until in the end of Tan’s *Cicada* that bodily movement is depicted as free, joyful and unrestricted. In other examples discussed in this article, the characters are continuously moving, shifting places or fleeing, thus creating a sense of movement and rootlessness. Again, this kind of constant mobility is used to emphasize a pattern of movement associated with insects or small animals. The humanoid characters in *Borrowers* are “running,” scrambling” and “fluttering;” they “scurry across” floors and move lightly as “a blown dry leaf.” In *The Cricket in Times Square*, the characters “dart out across the floor;” they “scuffle,” “jump,” “leap,” “whisk” and “creep”. Even the characters in *The Mouse and his Child* are constantly mobile, but their movement is described as more bothersome and restricted, as the Mouse and his son tread through mud and snow tenaciously, trudging through rubbish and filth, in crowded tunnels and dark alleyways.

In all of these cases, a lack of order and direction is part of the small character’s otherness in relation to the human world.

There is also a significant difference in describing a singular insect or a group of animals or insects. The scene in *Borrowers* where the family is discovered is a telling example of this. They are depicted by the housekeeper as a group of creatures that move frantically and uncontrollably as a collective, “a nest.” Discussing depictions of rats in art, cultural history, and literature – from *The Pied piper* to Beatrixe Potter’s *Two Bad Mice* –, Jonathan Burt discusses how groups or clusters of insects or animals have historically been associated with overcrowding, unsanitariness, and lack of control.⁷⁰ Similarly, in her study about how representations of animals have expressed changing social conditions, Linda Kalof has shown how freely roaming animals, like masterless stray dogs, have often been seen as a threat, as “visible sources of disorder, out of control and unsanitary.”⁷¹ Both these examples also demonstrate the complexity of associations and attitudes towards animals and how they have changed through different times and in various social and cultural contexts.

When discussing anthropomorphic animals in children’s literature, I would like to propose that this kind of wider contemporary cultural practice, including cultural history, art, popular culture, and rhetoric images, should be considered. There is a substantial continuity between these different contexts and between different types of texts and images, including

⁶⁹ Compare, for example an image of a busy street, p. 31, and the animal friends in a drain pipe, p. 121.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Burt, *Rat* (London: Reaktion 2006), 10, 19.

⁷¹ Linda Kalof, *Looking at animals in human history* (London: Reaktion Books 2007), 88.

children's literature. In *Picturing The Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (2001), Steve Baker discusses animal imagery in popular culture and emphasizes that "[a]ny understanding of the animal, and of what the animal means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation."⁷² This kind of wider context of cultural history and this complexity concerning animal representations is expressed in my material, where the animal story itself offers resistance to universal and historically fixed associations and symbolism.

The Non-Human Body

Several of the anthropomorphic protagonists portrayed in the studied children's books are powerless in relation to the human world. They are not distinctly categorized as either children or grown-ups, human or animal, and could thus be seen as representations of the child's otherness from the adult. They are, however, given an unexpected possibility to describe the human society critically, from a non-human perspective, and to convey this altered point of view to the reader.

Tan's *Cicada* expresses a Kafkaesque tension between the human and the animal, a tension that is ultimately expressed through the insect body. Like the other white-collar workers in the office, Cicada is dressed in a grey suit, a black tie and black dress shoes. However, although dressed as everyone else, he sticks out. His clothes seem too big and he reminds slightly of a child; in fact, he is portrayed both as childlike and animalistic. As a child playing dress up, he is wearing human clothes to mimic his surroundings. Mimicry – imitating and acquiring the knowledge, abilities or attributes of the colonizer can, according to Homi Bhabha, function as a resistance strategy and offer a "double vision" which questions ruling constructions.⁷³ Although dressed in a human costume and working harder and more effectively than his human colleagues, Cicada still stands out as the recognizable Other. In this way, he both reveals and shatters the discursive system that constructs him as a subordinate: "the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence," Bhabha states.⁷⁴ By accentuating the character's large, black eyes and inexpressive face, Tan destabilizes the dynamics of who is observing and who is being observed.

In the final episode of *Cicada*, the main character slowly climbs to the roof top and molts from his previous body. In this stunning scene of rebirth, the Cicada now emerges as a red insect with two pairs of membranous wings, leaving his human clothes and his exoskeleton behind. He leaves the human world and joins a swarming mass of cicadas. An ontological rupture between animal and human, natural and cultural, is suddenly evident.

The tension between different cultures, or culture and nature, is also emphasized through the fragmentary language. As Maria Lassén-Seger has shown, Shaun Tan often investigates language barriers, silence, or broken communication in his books.⁷⁵ In *Cicada*, the

⁷² Steve Baker, *Picturing the beast: animals, identity and representation*. [New ed.]. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2001), 4.

⁷³ Homi Bhabha sees mimicry as "double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority", Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge 1994), 126.

⁷⁴ Bhabha, 127.

⁷⁵ Maria Lassén-Seger, 2017, 252.

poetic, fragmentary text, formed in sections of four short lines, is placed in the middle of a white surface on the left side of the double spread. On every double spread the block of four lines are finished with the sentence: “Tok Tok Tok!” It isn’t until we reach the end of the book, that this line is separated from the text as the lonely protagonist is finally united with others:

*Cicada all fly back to forest.
 Sometimes think about human.
 Can’t stop laughing.*

Placed on a page of its own, the rhythmic sound “Tok Tok Tok!” is included for the last time, now explained as laughter, an explanation that suddenly changes the way the story and the character can be understood.



Picture 2. © Shaun Tan, *Cicada*.

Cicada not only abandons his human clothes, but also human movement (walking on two legs), and is instead depicted flying high above the rooftops. The character is, for the first time, described not as an individual, but as part of a group. Suddenly, the mentioning of the 17 years of employment at the beginning of the story gets an explanation. Periodical cicadas spend most of their lives as underground nymphs, and emerge after 13 or 17 years, swarming in large numbers.⁷⁶ The final illustration, with the soaring, red cicadas, moving together in the sky, depicts a hopeful, joyous image. Finally, a nature scenery takes over, creating a harsh contrast to the grey, geometric pattern used on the initial endpaper. This ordered design, which is

⁷⁶ Kathy S. Williams & Chris Simon, “The Ecology, Behavior, and Evolution of Periodical Cicadas”. *Annual Review of Entomology*. 1995. Vol. 40:269-295.

repeated in different ways throughout the book, as office cubicles, stairs and corridors, is here replaced with a wild, vibrant and colorful image of nature.

Apart from the rudimentary narrative possibilities these anthropomorphic protagonists offer, it is, nevertheless, evident that the motif of vermin, and diminutive characters in children's literature generally, often have moral or ideological implications. "Visual and verbal representations of size difference encourage the child reader to picture and explore the nature and resolution of prejudice against the "other," Valone writes.⁷⁷ While some of the stories discussed in this article have happy endings, as Nodelman suggests, the worlds depicted, and the underlying messages conveyed, are certainly not always hopeful and optimistic. Instead, the small protagonists, living in periphery of the human world, can be read as critical depictions of otherness that tell alternative narratives and offer open endings.

When reading these children's stories with liminal anthropomorphic characters, I have found that the small protagonists – living in small spaces under floorboards, inside walls or drainpipes – are connected to ideas about the "domesticated" and secure miniature worlds, but also work in the opposite way. While nostalgic notions might be present, these anthropomorphic characters are not shielded; nor do the stories offer the reader a peaceful retreat. Instead, they are connected to their contemporary reality and take stance, engage and criticize. Through their liminal positions, the fictional animals, insects and humanoids, defy and redefine their roles and purposes in the stories. In opposite to the motionless and protected miniature, they are placed *outside*, at the periphery of the human world. They are made invisible and stripped of value; and, at the same time, they are given a voice, and used to convey something important to the readers.

Whether published during the post-war periods or at the beginning of the 21st century, the stories discussed in this article convey a critical voice through anthropomorphic bodies that suggest a changed vision and a revised perception. They can be seen as variations of the animal fable, commenting on the social, economic, and political changes and developments of their time. Cicada's very form, which on a surface level mimics a human office worker, or the tiny tin mouse who dreams of freedom and autonomy, challenge the nature-culture divide. Their bodies become a meeting place for both the natural and the cultural, two contexts that can't be separated without losing significant information. They provide a perspective that is not necessarily human-centered, where "we" is set apart from "them." Instead, these tiny insects and animals lead to a muddling of categories, systems and hierarchies of bodies, big and small, organic and mechanic, nonhuman and those struggling to free themselves from anthropomorphic notions. These narratives for children use dehumanizing images and rhetoric, historically connected to discrimination and racism, but do so in order to reclaim these metaphors. Instead, images of and associations with insects, mice, rats or arthropods – animals that in many cultures are seen as a nuisance or evoke negative emotions – are used to convey something important. The dehumanizing rhetoric images, which today are still applied in different acts of political, ethnic, or national oppression, are used here to tell new stories about hope, justice, and tolerance.

⁷⁷ Vallone, 173.

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