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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

Possums in Suburbia: portrayal in selected children's illustrated storybooks.

Sandra Stewart

Australian native fauna are protagonists in many children's illustrated storybooks. *Playing Possum* (Sarah), *Possum in the House* (Jensen) and *Possum Goes to School* (Carter) will be analysed to consider the depiction of possums and their encounters with humans. Children's illustrated storybooks will be referred to by the more familiar term, picturebooks, a book identified as one where written and visual text are reliant on each other (Anstey and Bull 3). The picturebooks will be analysed using Ecocriticism "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 7). This analysis considers how possums are portrayed in the books through the covert use of anthropomorphism that occurs as a result of anthropocentrism. Marlan describes anthropocentrism as a viewpoint that places human-animals as being more important than non-human animals (860). The portrayal of the relationships between humans and non-human animals as well as the artificial 'territories' defined by humans are aspects of anthropocentrism to be demonstrated in this analysis.

Picturebooks are unique art works, as meaning is communicated by both the written or verbal text and visual text through the medium of illustrations (Nikolajeva and Scott 1, Nodelman and Reimer 274). The relationship between words and pictures is dynamic. Both text types may require literal and interpretative comprehension skills for meaning to be acquired from their interactions (Mallan 67, Nikolajeva and Scott 1). This acquisition of meaning is complex and varied interpretations can be developed over multiple readings of texts (Sipe 101, Nodelman and Reimer 276). Nodelman states "a picture book contains at least three stories: the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures and the one that results from the combination of the two" (153).

Picturebooks provide for children a vicarious experience with wildlife; the reader does not encounter the fauna directly but learns from an indirect encounter (More, 19). This vicarious experience may include altered factual information and anthropomorphism as the need for entertainment takes priority. For some children picturebooks may be their only opportunity to encounter wildlife in the early years

(more 20). The information gained may leave a lasting impression (More, 21) and influence what children perceive and learn about relationships between humans and animals. This can include native fauna and the place of native fauna in the worldview of the culture they inhabit. Ecocriticism provides a way to analyse anthropocentric messages portrayed in picturebooks.

Ecocriticism can be defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” (Glotfelty 6) the relationships between “the human and the non-human” (Marland 846) by considering how nature is reflected and perceived in literary texts.” (Sarver 9). Here, ecocriticism is used to analyse the relationships between the protagonist possums and human animals and how the environment and environmental symbols are presented in an anthropocentric way.

The experiences brought to a text by the reader cannot be ignored, I acknowledge my learning and experience gained as a wildlife rehabilitator of injured and orphaned native fauna, including possums and as a Kindergarten to Year 6 teacher. These life experiences influence my knowledge about the natural behaviour of possums and a practical understanding about books that are appreciated by younger children.

Common Brushtail possums, *Trichosurus vulpecula* and Common Ringtail Possums, *Pseudocheirus peregrinus* have been able to integrate well into suburban environments within their habitat range (Hill, Carbery and Deane 101, Kerle 45, 103). This cohabitation is at times valued by residents because they are native fauna and their appearance and behaviour is appealing. Yet when humans consider that possums have invaded their homes or gardens they are declared a pest (Kerle 104, Milton 100). Possums are only valued as long as they stay “where they belong, in the bush.” (Milton 100).

The species of possum illustrated in *Possum in the House* and *Possum Goes to School* is generic and cannot be identified as a particular species. The configuration of the fore and hind paws most resemble a Brushtail but the tail is not thick enough for a Common Brushtail nor furless enough for a Common Ringtail possum. In

Playing Possum the bushiness of the tail and the pink nose and inner ears indicates that the visual text may represent the south eastern form of the Common Brushtail possum (Kerle 41).

Playing Possum, a 2011 self-published book, is written by Susie Sarah and illustrated by Richard Herbert. It textually relies upon rhyme and repetition and has no narrative. It is in portrait mode with written text on the left hand page framed with bush motifs and an adjoining full page visual text. The author utilises alternate double pages to portray human thoughts about possums and in human centric terms how the author perceives a possum may view humans.

The other books form a series of two *Possum in the House*, written by Kiersten Jensen and illustrated by Tony Oliver, was published in 1986 and it has three editions including a North American version, the sequel *Possum Goes to School*, written by Melanie Carter and illustrated by Nicola Oram was first published in 1992 and adopts the style of the original book (Carter, 31). It has four published editions including 2012; its latest reprint was in 2014. This shows sustained purchases over time but is not indicative about the messages given to readers about possums. The written texts in all books give voice to the human opinions that possums are pests that are scary, annoying, destructive and active at the wrong time of the day. The visual texts contradict this by showing round appealing faces, wide brown eyes with long lashes, soft fur and brushy tails. Despite this attractive appearance the picturebooks demonstrate through the written and visual text that possums are acceptable as long as they are 'out there', in their world, and not within the artificial territory created by humans.

Playing Possum has identical title and cover pages. The illustration depicts a boy and a possum. The possum features a central pink nose and inner-ears, prominent round eyes, long whiskers and eyelashes. This possum image initially captures the readers' attention but the boy is visually dominant because of size, foreground placement and use of colour as yellow hair, a blue shirt and eyes are in direct

contrast to the grey of the possum that blends with the tree trunk. Irony is present in the title as humans may be 'playing possum' or livening up events, or the natural behaviour of possums is being anthropomorphised and considered from an anthropocentric perspective to be play.

The content of the written and visual text support each. The illustrations throughout the book are semi-realistic and at times very two-dimensional in nature with the possum faces prominent. The written text describes how the humans feel about the possums. They actively encourage the possums onto the verandah of the home in the early evening by leaving food in the form of sliced apple in a bowl. The humans react positively to the possums as a form of entertainment:

While snuggled up in cosy beds
We watch them having fun, (Sarah 1).

This is before the humans go to sleep. The corresponding illustration has three appealing possum faces looking directly at the reader. Two pages later the possums have become the invaders as the night darkens and they "stomp on the roof" and make sounds of "scratching, screeching, sliding claws" (Sarah 5). The human narrators believe that possum fighting is about the food that has been put out (Sarah 7). This is a factual distortion as it is more likely to be a fight over dominance than over food (Kerle 95). The visual image shows boxing gloves to match the written description:

Possums in boxing gloves

Fight for their supper snack. (Sarah 9)

It places the humans and their beliefs as most important. This book tries to counteract the anthropocentric view given on the human centred pages by attempting to portray the viewpoint of the mother possum towards human children albeit in a very 'human manner. The text of the possum mother's voice uses irony by describing humans in a way that humans will describe possums:

It's children, baby possums and they really are such pests. (Sarah 3, 7, 9)

The possums have not encouraged the children to play under the tree but the human children believe that it is their right to play 'out there'. The illustrations support the written text and are framed by an outline of a hollow to attempt to show what the possum would see, an anthropocentric and anthropomorphised representations as being nocturnal possum eyes are designed to detect low light levels, at night (Kerle 23). This also occurs in the other picturebooks, the possum is represented as invading human territory.

The cover of *Possum in the House* shows this on the cover where a possum has knocked over a variety of kitchen foods. This image and the book's title can lead to an interpretation that this is not a desirable circumstance. Further upsets to the human territory within the house as represented is provided by the visual story. The cover of *Possum Goes to School* shows a wide-eyed possum in a school bag that is hanging on a hook. This may be interpreted that the possum was taken to school by a human child or has found its own way into the bag. These picturebooks are in landscape format with illustrations across double-page spreads. The visual text displays the story and the written text presents the reactions of the humans to the possum. They utilise the possibility of both textual and visual predictions for early readers as the protagonist possum moves through different rooms.

The theme of invader of human-animal territory continues throughout both books with alternate pages opening with the written text "There's a possum in the ... and he's hiding in the..." (Carter, Jensen). In *Possum in the House* the reactions of the human animals to the possum presence is one of fear: "Help, help!" screamed Mum" and annoyance "Oh drat!" yelled Dad.". *Possum Goes to School* follows a similar pattern with the human- animals expressing annoyance and the fear of potential disruption: " "Oh, no!" cried the teacher.", whilst the children scream encouragement: " "yes, yes!". This portrayal of invader and destructor continues visually throughout the books as the possum moves from room to room and is displayed visually including the possum knocking household or school items over, ripping books and scratching or marking items.

Factual distortion occurs as the books ignore that a possum is nocturnal and has poor daytime sight (Kerle 23). The illustrations depict a wide-eyed possum that is looking directly at stationary and moving objects with rounded pupils, this dilation occurs for better night vision (Kerle). A possum in the day is non-active, if caught away from its hollow it finds a place to hide and sleep. If disturbed by humans they may react with loud vocalisations using a threat call with an open mouth and adopt a defensive position (Kerle 95) rather than with the “screech, screech” (.....) presented in the written text. This lack of fact is also reinforced through the anthropomorphisation of the possum’s dexterity and facial expressions.

Anthropomorphism occurs in these books as human characteristics are given to the protagonist possums. The illustrative text shows the possum with anthropomorphic expressions of amusement or surprise on its face that can be interpreted as a mischievous enjoyment of the ‘adventure’. Anthropomorphism is also illustrated in the dexterity of forepaw use. Although possums do use their forepaws to hold items they are not capable of executing some of the deliberate feats with human objects that are illustrated in the books including: holding a spice jar (Oliver 2), squeezing a tube of toothpaste whilst holding another tube in its tail (Oliver 21-22), holding a book open and reading it (Oram title page), and holding a cupcake in both paws, ready to eat (Oram 13). Although the possum is inside the dwelling, the ‘out-there’ is also represented in all the picturebooks.

Playing Possum acknowledges the spaces outside buildings, ‘out there’ in the visual text by depicting both fauna and flora beyond the parameters of the human dwelling. The cover, title page and borders surrounding the text pages give homage to flora by incorporating branches, leaves and eucalypt ‘gumnuts’ and blossoms and include a wide-eyed possum on alternate corners. The world ‘out-there’ outside the home is shown in every illustration.

Possum in the House (Jensen) has a limited view of 'out there' that can only be seen from inside the kitchen and includes trees that can be seen through an opaque, shut kitchen window (Jensen, 4). *Possum Goes to School* (Carter), moves the story from inside to outside as the book comes to a close. The possum is seen running into a sports room (Carter, 24) next to a human constructed garden-bed that contains native and non-native flora. The flora in the playground includes tended grass, non-native trees and small recent growth eucalypt trees. The trees are placed in areas away from buildings and lower limbs are not evident. The playground is controlled and ordered, human animals have designed it to suit their needs. The control that is shown by humans over the boundary they have created is also demonstrated when the 'out-there' is brought inside or represented by human-animals.

Attempts to control the 'out-there' when represented inside human territory are shown with flowers, both native and non-native potted, cut in vases, displayed dried or visually in paintings. These books also portray that the users of the buildings have an interest in the out there through the display of nature books. The science room portrays a place where nature is cared about as long as it is only represented or controlled whilst inside. This is symbolised by artefacts including dried flora, feathers and seashells in a jar, two live goldfish are confined to a small bowl and under the control of humans for food and habitat. A "SAVE THE WHALE" poster ironically highlights environmental awareness for an animal and a habitat far removed from the school, yet in the school yard there is no evidence of hollows or human-made possum boxes to support the possums who inhabit playground.

The conclusions of these books all place the possums in a space that is represented as being satisfactory to the human characters. *Playing Possum* has a dream scene where children are not being kept awake by possums but can reach into hollows to touch the possums "they love so very much". *Possum in the House* concludes with the dry possum curled up looking like a cat in a child's bed next to a teddy bear, despite on the previous pages having successfully both dived into and managed to climb out of the family's toilet bowl. Nevertheless the visually appealing image of a

sleeping possum supports the sympathetic words from the parents and the decision to leave the possum there because he is tired and they feel sorry for them. *Possum goes to School* ends with the possum finding its way up a tree, yawning in an anthropomorphised way and falling asleep on an open fork in a tree, although the teachers were still concerned and the children excited (Carter, 31).

The picturebooks *Playing Possum*, *Possum in the House* and *Possum Goes to School* provide an entertaining reading experience. When analysed from an ecocritical perspective it is evident that facts are sacrificed to provide entertainment. The relationship depicted between the humans and the possums are anthropocentric and the humans are happy when the possums are 'out-there'.

This is demonstrated by the negative reaction of humans when possums are encountered within their artificially imposed boundaries. Yet this viewpoint is changed when the 'invader' is sleeping and is considered to be no longer a threat. The 'out there' that is so vital for possum survival is barely included unless it is for human use.

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