



Miffy, the Giraffe and Rebecca

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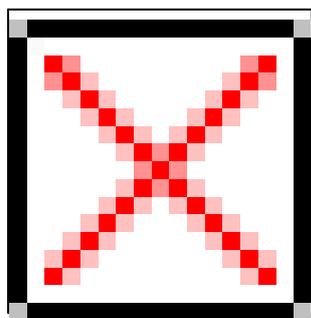
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by **Virginia Lowe**

In the latest of her regular series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** observes her daughter's different responses to animals in her favourite stories.

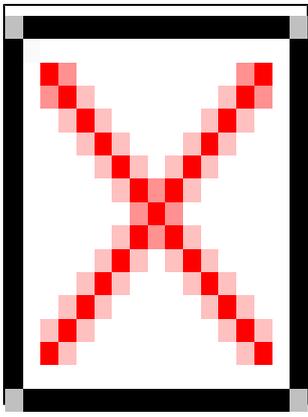
Rebecca had lived with our cat, Pinkle Purr, all her life. This may have been why, in Bruna's **B is for Bear**, the lion was consistently her favourite, from about three to nine months (judged by her happy arm waving and vocalisations on that page). I thought at first it was the yellow colour and spiky outline, assuming that Bruna's highly stylised figures would not be related to their counterparts in life ? but now I am sure I was wrong. If it were the colour or the outline it would be consistent across infants, but her younger brother Nicholas, not living with a cat (Pinkle had died in the interim) showed no interest in the lion picture at all.

Rebecca knew that Pinkle didn't answer when adults addressed him. No doubt anthropomorphism was only an extension of adults pretending that cats could speak. She knew other animals quite well too ? none of them spoke, or wore clothes. But animals often did in books, and she seemed to just accept this ? what happened in books was in the story world, and that clearly had different rules to life. Not only Miffy, but Tom Kitten, Peter Rabbit, Little Bear, Frog and Toad, and various nursery rhyme animals could all speak. Her literary diet was full of articulate animals.

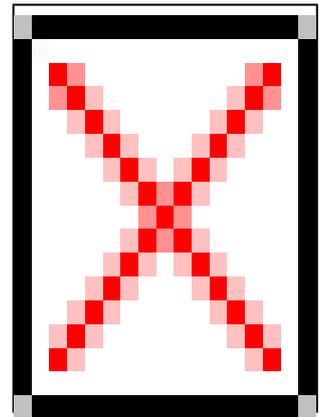


She had known Miffy for a year, when she first heard **Miffy at the Zoo** (3y7m). In this, the zoo animals speak to Miffy, asking her to come and play. Rebecca laughed and said ?Animals can't talk? on each page. At ?The tall giraffes bent down their long necks. ?Hullo little Miffy? they said?, she added, ?And giraffes don't make any noise at all!? I presume that it was the contrast between the clothed little girl-rabbit Miffy and her father, and the unclothed zoo animals, which had foregrounded the dichotomy for her, and also made it funny. She probably expected, as an adult would, that the zoo animals would behave as animals in the zoo, and it was funny when they didn't. This laughter became ritualised at each reading for the next year. She never bothered to remark on the animal characters speaking in any subsequent title however. It was as if once she'd stated it in this book she had established her understanding, and there was no need to point out the obvious anywhere else.

She had first articulated the idea two weeks before (3y6m) in her perennial favourite **The Hare and the Tortoise** (Wildsmith) where she had remarked to the wise owl, ?Owls can't talk? ? but without amusement.



Animals wearing clothing was another matter however. She never bothered to state that animals don't wear clothes, but clearly recognised the importance of clothes in Beatrix Potter's oeuvre. 'Shoes in Mr McGregor's garden' she used as a byname for **The Tale of Peter Rabbit** for some time, beginning at 2y3m. She enjoyed Potter's arcane words for garments. 'I'm putting on my tucker' she said draping herself in a towel (2y9m), adding, as in **Tom Kitten**, 'it does up at the back?.'



The Tale of Tom Kitten was her favourite Potter story. Sometimes playing dress-ups she would announce (for instance at 3y3m), 'I'm wearing elegant uncomfortable clothes' just as Tabitha Twitchett insisted her children did (before unwisely sending them out into the garden to await a visitor). Rebecca would always eschew elegance for comfort in her own choice of clothing, wearing her grandmother's beautiful hand-made dresses only for Christmas or other times when Mamma was actually expected.

Potter often draws attention to her conceit of dressing her characters. In **Tom Kitten** she remarks at the beginning that the kittens had 'dear little fur coats of their own' and Mr Drake Puddleduck speaks urbanely, gentlemanly, once he has donned Tom Kitten's discarded clothes. Her characters often lose clothes or shoes, or tear or dirty them or leave them behind. Clothes matter, to the characters and to the story world, showing it is different to the real world. The one human protagonist in her oeuvre, Lucie, encounters Mrs Tiggy-Winkle 'and The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle is all about the work that went into caring for clothes ' washing, airing, ironing, goffering (some of it still very familiar). Rebecca was 'washing' outside with a basin and a hose when I asked if she were Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. 'No, because I'm not a hedgehog' she replied (4y1m). But she came inside later, covered with mud. When I remarked on her legs she said, 'That's because I'm Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. She was brown all over.'

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of **Create a Kids' Book**, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. See www.createakidsbook.com.au [3] for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-415-39724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Miffy at the Zoo, Dick Bruna, Simon and Schuster, 978-1-47112-082-4, £4.99

The Hare and the Tortoise, Brian Wildsmith, Oxford, 978-0-19272-708-4, £6.99

The Tale of Tom Kitten, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne & Co, 978-0-72326-777-5, £5.99

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