

Human Nature

Many children's stories have anthropomorphized creatures that are based on human characteristics that the animals do not actually possess. Children eventually realize that the characteristics attributed to these creatures are false. As an adult, it is commonly viewed as juvenile to think of animals as possessing thought or emotion, but animals are more conscious than people frequently assume. These stories that falsely anthropomorphize creatures don't help children to develop an adult understanding of the full potential of animals. I have made an illustrated book, *Human Nature*, based on non-fiction stories or research directed at children ages 6-8 showing instances in which animals are more like people than is usually thought. It includes different anecdotes about animals, in which human characteristics such as physical self-recognition, gratitude, laughter, a sense of humor, and grief are portrayed. Accompanying this text is a drawing exaggerating each animal's human-like quality. This book's goal is to encourage kids to relate to a variety of creatures and think of them as conscious beings. This will cause them to have a sense of wonder about the minds of animals, encouraging a sense of respect.

I have always been interested in the fact that there is more to animal life than we currently understand. We keep learning more about the abilities of animals. For example, we had no idea that ants communicated with pheromones until pheromones were discovered. There probably is other animal communication that we don't know at

all. I am interested in creating a sense of wonder about these possibilities, specifically for children.

I recently realized that I would like to pursue design and illustration for children. My decision to make a children's book was guided by this realization. I am interested in the fact that children's minds are fresh and open to new ideas, since they have not yet been trained to think in certain ways. This gives me the ability to be greatly influential. I experienced this fresh open-mindedness when I brought an unfinished copy of my book to a second grade class. The children in the class were open to the ideas presented in the book. They would say things like, "I never knew that a Border Collie could know that many words." They were very excited and engaged by the ideas that were new to them. The children all seemed to understand the concept of the book. One kid in the class suggested that I focus on Degus on one of the spreads. He said that his sister has pet Degus, and they chirp at each other, and he thought that they might be communicating. His ability to suggest other instances of animals having humanlike behavior demonstrated his clear understanding of the overall concept.

In *Human Nature*, the illustrations that I made are playful but show actual behavior of each animal. The playfulness comes from my exaggeration of the true behavior. For example, in the illustration of the elephant painting, the elephant is painting, as they have done in real life, but it is painting peanuts flying in space with geometric shapes, something that an elephant has never painted before and probably never would. (Masson and McCarthy 205-207) The behavior of this animal is exaggerated by the illustration. (Fig. 1) The animals in the book are all rendered to

appear relatively realistic in that they have true proportions, are their actual color, and have some of their distinctive features. It is more apparent that the anecdotes in my book are true if the animals are rendered in this way, as opposed to if they had been rendered to look like over-simplified caricatures of animals.

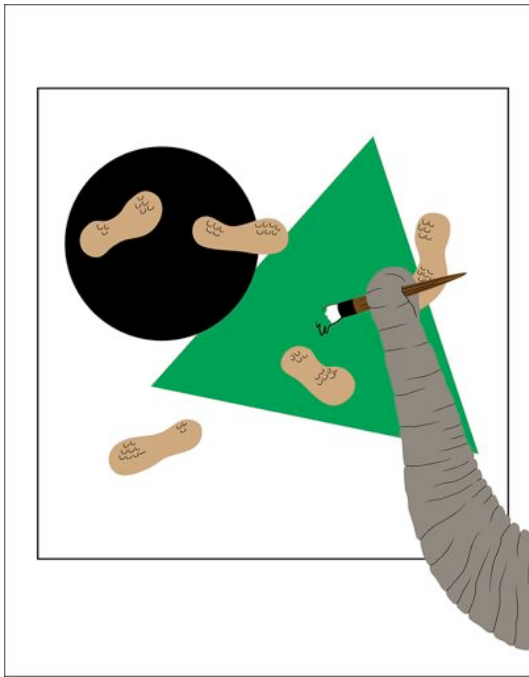


Fig. 1: Illustration of an elephant from *Human Nature*

One illustrator that I have been stylistically inspired by throughout the year is Edel Rodriguez. The backgrounds of his illustrations are minimal, but he is able to vividly evoke the setting through his choice of color and simple shapes. In one of Rodriguez's children's books, *Sergio Makes a Splash*, he demonstrates his ability to evoke strong mental imagery through his use of minimal backgrounds. A mental picture of the arctic is painted with only light blue land and water and a golden sun. The same background elements are carried throughout the book. (Fig. 2) In the foreground

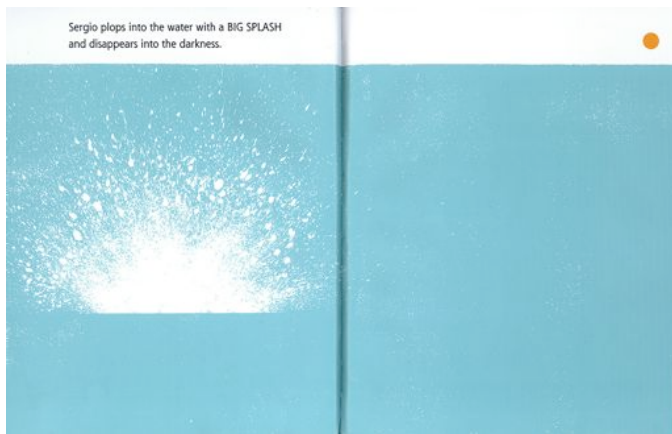


Fig. 2: Spread from *Sergio Makes a Splash* by Edel Rodriguez

of a lot of Rodriguez's work, he frequently uses a few simple solid colored shapes with more detailed lines drawn over them to illustrate the subject that he is focusing on. The lines that he adds on top are only in a few select areas. I had a few printouts of his work hanging in my studio all year. If I found that my illustrations had too much going on, I observed his work and realized that I could simplify my own drawings a great deal. By taking out some of the detail, my illustrations would get a stronger focal point. They became more about the viewer imagining the rest of the scene and less about the scene being created for them. A good example of his influence on my own work is my drawing of the llama in comparison to his painting of Melvin Van Peebles. (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4) The basic shape of the llama is a large solid silhouette. Similarly, Rodriguez used a few large solid shapes to compose the base of his illustration. A few dark lines are used in some places to give dimension to areas in both drawings (The back fur on the llama and Melvin Van Peebles' clothing.) The only area where fine detail is created with an abundance of fine lines in both illustrations is in each of their faces. Also, we both used a limited color palette. Only three colors (including black and white) are used in the

illustration of the llama, and only four colors are used in Rodriguez's illustration. In both, the subject feels still, and the primary focal point is the emotion in their eyes. However, the background of the llama spread is more closely related to Rodriguez's backgrounds in *Sergio Makes a Splash* than to this portrait of his, since they are both made up of a vast solid area of color. In the case of the llama, the extensive amount of solid black is meant to evoke solemnity. In the portrait of Melvin Van Peebles, the background elements are still rather minimal. The camera and light behind Melvin Van Peebles are one solid color. I made use of this approach to background elements in other spreads in *Human Nature*. For instance, in the spread focusing on a crow's ability to use tools (Savage 23-31), I chose to make the motorcycle and the floor of the garage simple silhouettes rather than depicting them with great detail, because I did not want to draw too much attention to them. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 3: Illustration of a llama from *Human Nature*



Fig. 4: Edel Rodriguez's portrait of the film director Melvin Van Peebles from *The New Yorker*

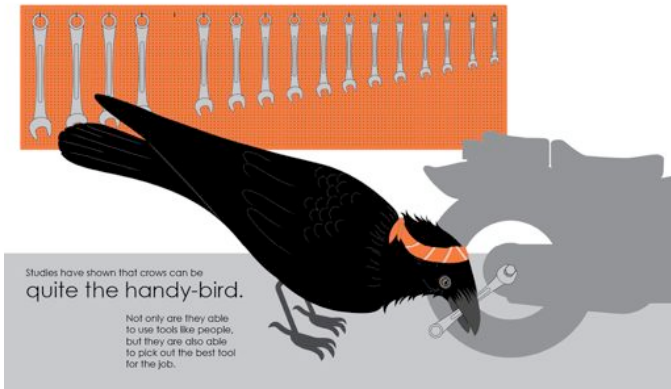


Fig. 5: Spread about crows from *Human Nature*

The children's book *Actual Size* by Steve Jenkins also had an influence on my book. In *Actual Size*, he created detailed paper collages that depict different animals and animal parts at their actual sizes. It is, like my book, a non-fiction children's book that focuses on a different creature on each spread. I came across this book about halfway

through working on my project. Before I discovered it, I was concerned that my book would not connect well from one spread to the next because each spread was about a different creature. It was refreshing to see that it was possible to have a book flow even if this were the case. Jenkins accomplished this simply by maintaining a consistent style and a similar amount of text on each spread. I was also inspired by the way that the information about each creature was organized typographically. The eye-catching information about what animal or animal part is depicted is primary, and the measurements of each animal or animal part is secondary. (Fig. 6) This makes the book accessible to children in a wide range of ages. Younger children would be enticed by the large illustrations and basic information, and older kids could maintain interest in the book because of the more detailed information. They could become interested in memorizing the exact size of their favorite animals or animal parts. I would like my book to transcend ages in this way. The author of my book, Tobias Walker, wrote the text with two levels of information so that it would have this potential. Similar to my illustrations, one level is playful and skims the surface of the information, and the other level delivers more detailed information. The younger children may not understand the extent of the information being conveyed, but they would be drawn in by the playful narrative and illustrations. As they grow older, a deeper understanding of each spread would develop. For example, the text on the spread about Betsy the Border Collie states, "Border Collies are known to be the smartest of all dogs. One Border Collie, Betsy knows over 340 words!" This is the easy to grasp information. It then states, "She can learn and remember words as fast a toddler. That's even more advanced than our closest relatives,

the great apes.” This information is initially more difficult for children to grasp. When arranging the text on each spread, I emphasized the first level of information typographically, as Jenkins did. (Fig. 7) As you can see, “Border Collies are known to be the smartest of all dogs,” and “Over 340 words,” stand out more than the rest of the text.



Fig. 6: Spread depicting a giant anteater tongue from *Actual Size* by Steve Jenkins



Fig. 7: Border Collie spread from *Human Nature*

Jenkins places the text for each illustration in one corner of the spread, and it becomes a caption to the illustration. I sometimes did this when there was already a lot already going on in the illustration, such as in the spread depicting a rat audience and a parrot going across a tightrope. (Fig. 8) However, on some of the spreads I was able to make the text more expressive and further incorporate it into the illustration. I sometimes did this by mimicking a part of the illustration with the text, while also continuing to emphasize the first level of information. For example, on the spread about the llama, the dominant text is, "Even a llama can get upset." This part of the text mimics the shape of the fur on the back of the llama's neck, and creates downward movement in unison with the tear rolling down the its neck. (Fig. 9) The text becomes a part of the illustration. Also, the size changes and line breaks of the text express an intentional rhythm when they are read.

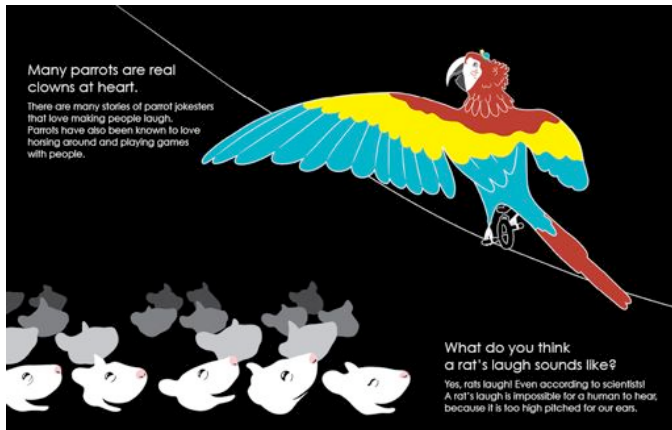


Fig. 8: Rat/Parrot spread from *Human Nature*

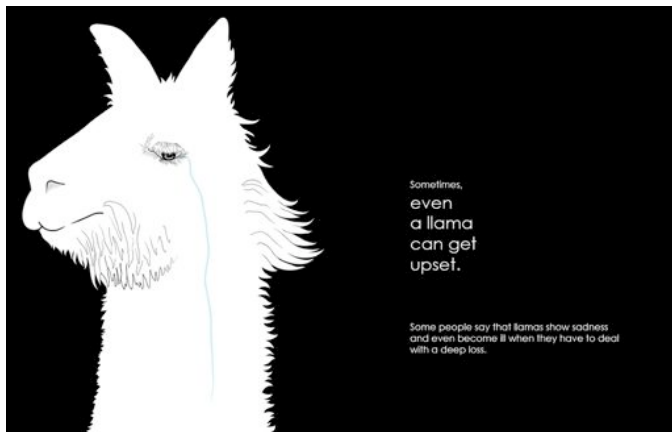


Fig. 9: Llama spread from *Human Nature*

In certain spreads, I put the child in the physical perspective of the animal. This encourages the child to think of himself/herself as the animal, making the relationship between the two of them easier to grasp. For instance, I did a spread about a dolphin's ability to pass the mirror test, which is a test in which researchers mark an animal's body with an odorless dye such that it cannot see the mark unless it looks in the mirror. If an animal reacts in a way that shows that he is aware of the mark being on his own body, the animal is said to have self-awareness. (Querna) The spread depicts the dolphin's reflection, rather than showing it in front of a mirror. (Fig. 10) The largest

text on this spread states, “When you look into a mirror,” which also encourages this pretense. Kids are aware that they can see themselves in the mirror, so they are encouraged to think about how dolphins can do the same thing. Another example of this is the spread about the elephant painting. (Fig. 1) The concept of an elephant painting is new to most children, but they know what it feels like to paint. It is something that requires consciousness. Putting the child in the perspective of the elephant encourages him/her to think of elephants as having a higher level of consciousness than he/she may have previously assumed.

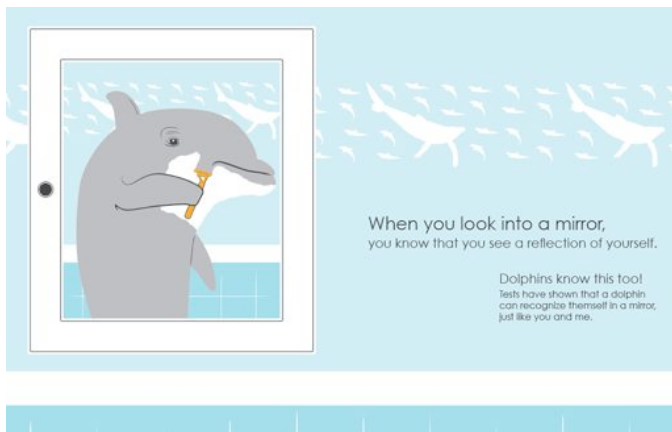


Fig. 10: Dolphin spread from *Human Nature*

In some cases, I based a spread on an animal’s ability that a child would already be familiar with in order to reinforce the idea that the ability is something that we share with animals. For example, river otters appear to be having fun when they slide down banks into water over and over again. (Burde and Feldhamer 174) Most kids are familiar with the idea that animals can have fun from their experience playing with pets. I chose to illustrate a river otter going down a water slide on an inner tube, an activity that many kids have experienced. A child could easily relate with this image. The spread

about honeybees' excellent construction skills is similar to this. Children know that honeybees make honeycomb, but they may not have considered the details of the construction process and how efficient the comb is (Weiss 118-121). I decided to draw a comparison between honeybees and people that construct complicated and efficient structures, construction workers. I also created a blueprint of honeycomb to supplement this metaphor. (Fig. 11) Most children are familiar with blueprints and construction workers, but the construction process seems very complicated and mysterious to a child. The spread encourages the idea that honeybees' construction process is more complex than it may seem.



Fig. 11: Honeybee spread from *Human Nature*

I found myself spending significantly more time drawing the eyes of the animals than any other feature. Rather than focusing on drawing them to look entirely realistic, I worked to maintain an appropriate balance of the humanlike expression and the natural appearance of the animal's eyes. Eyes are incredibly expressive, and a small change of detail can alter the expression completely. In some cases I worked to mold the

physical attributes of a certain expression that human eyes make with the animal's eyes. For example, in one spread I told the story of a humpback whale that was rescued from being tangled in crab lines by divers. Afterwards, it appeared to thank them. (Bekoff, 51-53) To depict this whale, I zoomed in on its face, focusing on one of its "thankful" eyes and its smile. (Fig. 12) Its eye is wrinkling in the way that a human's smiling eye does. However, it maintains whale-like features such as the large pupil that a humpback whale's eye has and the protrusion of their eyes. In some other cases, I focused on creating a mixture between the expression of human eyes and of animal eyes. In the Border Collie illustration, the eyes look more like animal eyes, and they express the thoughtful look that a dog sometimes gives. However, this expression is strikingly similar to that of a person contemplating their next turn in Scrabble, which the dog is playing. (Fig. 7)

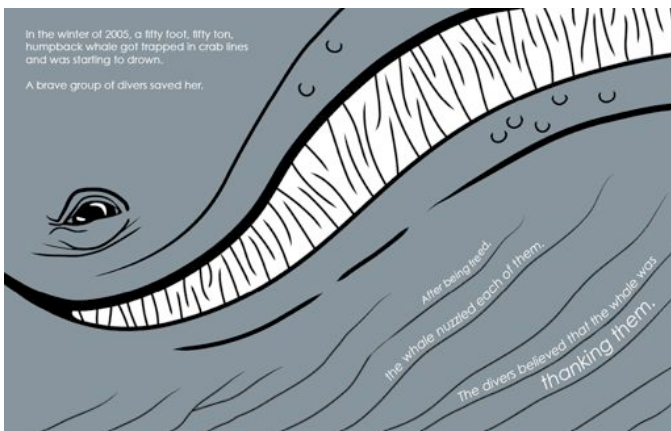


Fig. 12: Whale spread from *Human Nature*

Children possess eager minds. My hope, with this book, is to provide for them a stimulating and enlightening experience, offering them exciting and true instances of behavior that they may never hear of elsewhere. Within our society, adults commonly

feel that the idea of animals possessing thought or emotion is juvenile. However, I feel that the contents of my book will help to prevent a child from developing this mentality. My book shows children, through substantial, non-fiction anecdotes, that animals are more conscious than people typically assume. My goal, with *Human Nature* is to not only entertain children, but to stir within them a lasting wonder about the cognitive and intriguing abilities that animals possess.

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