Children’s Favourite Childhood Constructs
Identifying Patterns in *Children’s Choices* (2005-2014)

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Adult authors, artists, publishers, educators, parents and scholars variously create, interpret, and re-create notions of childhood. But what about children? How do they participate in the process of creating notions of childhood through narratives? One could argue that an indirect mode of participation is through choice; by choosing their favourite stories, children identify their preferred interpretations of childhood. It is under this lens that we examine the past ten years of the ILA *Children’s Choices in Literature*.

**What is Children’s Choices?**
Children’s Choices is a reading list in which children themselves evaluate books and write reviews of their favourites. It serves three main goals:

1. To give young readers an opportunity to voice their opinions about books written for them;
2. Develop an annual annotated reading list of new books that young readers enjoy;
3. 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 cosponsored by the International Literacy Association and the Children’s Book Council. Each year 12,500 school children from five different regions of the United States read hundreds of newly published children’s trade books donated by North American publishers and choose 100 favourites. 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 United States:

- **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 and use it as a read-aloud unless a student selects it unprompted and asks to have it read to the class. 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 winning titles. Each year’s winning results are available on the International Literacy Association’s website at: http://literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists/childrens-choices-reading-list.

**Methodology**

Our Idaho-based team of four researchers (Steiner and Chase having been actively involved in the project) analysed Children’s Choices from 2005 to 2014. For the purposes of this presentation, we focused on the first age group (Beginning Readers: Grades K-2) reviewing a total of 330 favourite books, selected by 5,000 children every year over the past 10 years.

This paper has been appropriately listed by the conference organizers under Reader Response. Reader response analysis may focus on the reader’s process of engagement (Bleich, 1975; 1978; J. A. Langer, 1990, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1986, 1989), the social setting of the literacy event (Bloome, 1985; Bloome & Katz, 1997; Fish, 1980), the discursive practices of the cultural community (Foucault, 1980; Schein, 1985) or features of the text (Iser, 1978, 1980; Rabinowitz, 1987; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998) (Shine & Roser, 1999: p.198). Our team analysed the readers’ choices by focusing on the features of the actual texts they have chosen. By examining and comparing the books that were identified by children as their favourites, we aimed to identify prevalent patterns or trends that may be associated with children’s choices.

Three of the participating researchers, Chase, Son and Steiner (2014) have recently applied a similar methodology to Children’s Choices booklists to investigate children’s preferences for nonfiction books. We are not aware of other studies that have investigated children’s reading preferences through reading lists or book awards generated by child readers. Some researchers have used questionnaire techniques to measure reading preferences and habits (e.g., Estes, 1971; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Lewis & Teale, 1980). Others have used guided interviews (e.g., Guthrie & Seifert, 1983; Mikulecky, 1982) 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 borrowing records have also been used (Moss & McDonald, 2004). While all of these approaches are valuable, our study brings the added value of being able to look closely
at the specific texts that a large sample of child-readers have been identifying as their favourites over the course of a decade.

To collect and analyse the data, we used an inductive rather than deductive approach. Rather than starting with a hypothesis and testing a theory, we opted for generating new theory emerging from the data. In order for this emerging to happen, we needed to implement the qualitative research strategy of Constant Comparison (Grounded Theory). Keeping an open mind, all four researchers went through the 2005 book-list, individually and collectively looking for indicators of categories in the selected texts. After establishing some initial categories, researchers then collaborated in pairs to go through the rest of the book-lists. When possible we would read the entire text, but if not, we would read the Children’s Choices summary, browse through electronic excerpts and images, compare several book reviews from sources such as the School Library Journal, Booklist, or Publishers Weekly, and use each other as a resource. We named and coded the emerging categories. We then compared codes to find consistencies and differences. Consistencies between codes gradually revealed major trends/categories and eventually the specific prevalent trends/categories became our central focus.

Findings
Some broad observations are that the vast majority of the books children chose were picturebooks and that more than two thirds fell under the genre of Modern Fantasy. In spite of its similarities with Modern Fantasy, Traditional Literature such as fairy tales or myths were only sporadically featured in children’s choices. Fractured fairy tales were more likely to be included, but most of the remaining one third of the books were Realistic Fiction and Information Books.

While our observations regarding children’s preferred genres are meaningful, when one takes a closer look at the texts, searching for more specific, identifiable patterns, even more interesting findings begin to take shape. In specific, using the Constant Comparison strategy described earlier, we were able to identify two major trends in the children’s choices.

1. Humour

The first palpable trend is a consistent favouring of humorous texts. As shown in Figure 1, over a ten-year period, 205 out of the 330 books that made it into the book lists incorporate humorous elements. This is a weighty 62% of all selected books.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Humour #</th>
<th>Humour %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>29 of 56</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>28 of 47</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>26 of 32</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>17 of 23</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>23 of 29</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>15 of 28</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16 of 23</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>20 of 33</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>19 of 33</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>12 of 26</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>205 of 330</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Noticeably, the percentage of selected books with humour per year was approximately between 50% and 80%. While the maximum and minimum (81% in 2007 and 46% in 2014) may prompt one to talk of inconsistency, the rest of the data points to the exact opposite. The mean and median are 64% and 60.5% respectively, and standard deviation shows that on average yearly selections were about 11% over or below the mean. The consistent favouring of humour is visualized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

While these numbers do support the notion that humour plays an important role in children’s reading choices, we have to admit that at this point our data analysis is incomplete. For more solid conclusions to be drawn, we need to compare the percentages presented in Figures 1 & 2 to data regarding the presence of humour in the entire body of texts made available each year to participating children by publishers. This is a daunting task, since over the past 10 years more than 1,500 books have been submitted by publishers to Children’s Choices, Grades K-2. An approach that would make the task more feasible is to randomly select 3 years and compare all the titles that were actually submitted (about 450 titles) to the ones that were finally selected by children, which would add up to approximately 90 titles. In any case, regardless of the results of our upcoming extended data analysis, the fact remains that the majority of Children’s Choices K-2 participants enjoy humorous stories.
This finding is in agreement with several studies that have focused on humour in children’s literature and child readers’ responses to it. Alvin Schwartz (1977) observes that “Children tend to be more playful than adults; as a result, they are inclined to laugh more readily and more frequently” (p. 282). Humour scholar Don Nilsen (1993) asserts that “Humor is a very important aspect of much of children’s and adolescent literature” (p.262). And a child reader interviewed by Matthew Zbaracki (2003) captures the importance children attribute to it: “…all books kind of have some humor, and if you don’t, I’m not saying that you should put like all humor in the book, it’s just if you don’t it’ll be kind of dull, and it won’t…well, it’ll be like the cake without the icing” (p.14).

In her seminal work that was grounded in the area of psychoanalysis, Martha Wolfenstein (1954) describes how children create humour through their physical play or with their play of words to outlet repressed sexual feelings and emotions. She also explains how humour helps children cope with the challenges of daily life: “Joking is a gallant attempt to ward off the oppressive difficulties of life, a bit of humble heroism, which for the moment that it succeeds provides elation, but only for the moment” (p. 11). According to Kuchner (1991) “Through the medium of humor, unacceptable feelings, particularly those associated with sex and aggression, can be expressed, carefully disguised under a socially acceptable cover or façade” (p. 2). Beverly Cleary (1982) acknowledges the idea that humour can relieve anxiety in children as well as make them feel superior to their younger selves, releasing some tension that may have been created earlier in their lives. Recognizing the appeal of comic characters in children’s books, Monson (1978) describes “the laughter that comes from a ‘sudden glory’ at discovering we are better or smarter than others [...] character humor is often directed toward a comic character who is so stupid or absent-minded as to be ludicrous” (p. 5). Numerous researchers also point to the anxiety release brought about by the humorous, carnivalesque targeting of authority figures such as teachers or parents in children’s books (Zbaracki, 2003; Mallan, 1993; Landsberg, 1992; Nilsen, 1982; Monson, 1978; Bateman, 1967; Wolfenstein, 1954).

Studying the development of humour, scholars also point to humour as a social skill. Kuchner (1991) and Keith-Spiegel (1972) recognize that humour evolves in children through social experience, and that it emerges as a form of socializing play; language play, play with ideas, and play with social norms and relationships. Interestingly, scholars also associate a significant developmental stage of humour with the age group studied in this paper. By around the age of seven, children enter a fourth stage called “Multiple Meanings” or the “First Step Toward Adult Humour.” At this point children understand language may have two meanings, which creates incongruous, funny circumstances (McGhee, 1979: p. 76). Further analysis of the K-2 Children’s Choices texts might reveal the increased presence of this kind of humour.

In her work with children and children’s literature, Katherine Kappas (1967) writes, “Incongruity, then, 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). Grounded
in incongruity, research into what children find funny has come up with the following ten elements of humour in children’s literature that are found to be appealing to children: incongruity, exaggeration, human predicaments, surprise, ridicule, slapstick, defiance, the absurd, violence, and verbal humour (Kappas 1967; Klause 1987). The stages of development of humour and the above elements could be handy tools for further analysis of the Children’s Choices texts, perhaps across and in comparison between the three age groups that participate in the project.

The other important trend we have identified, which is books that feature animals, might be related to humour: Kerry Mallan observes that animals as pets and as characters are quite popular in humorous picturebooks for young children. She explains that “The Animals and toys which are childlike, if not completely anthropomorphised, can provide humour for young children. The antics of such characters often put them at odds with the established order” (1993: p.12). For laughter to be evoked, the reader must have some detachment from the object of the laughter; this is why, for instance, children will only laugh with characters who have trouble performing tasks or face obstacles that they, the readers, have already conquered or overcome. Animal characters can provide the necessary sense of detachment.

2. Animals
The prevalence of animals in Children’s Choices booklists for grades K-2 became obvious to our research team early on in the process. As shown in Figure 3, the actual numbers and percentages are impressive.

**Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Animals #</th>
<th>Animals %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>36 of 56</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>30 of 47</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>20 of 32</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>20 of 23</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>16 of 29</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>21 of 28</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16 of 23</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>21 of 33</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>27 of 33</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>17 of 26</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>218 of 330</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, books with animals are included in Children’s Choices K-2 booklists in an even higher percentage than humorous books; 66% compared to 62%. The consistency with which they are included is also a bit higher compared to humour: Mean 69%; Median
65%; Standard Deviation 9. This steady preference for books with animals is visualized in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

![Books with Animals per Year](image)

May Hill Arbuthnot (1964) lists three categories of animal stories: stories that tell of animals that dress and act like people, as *The Wind in the Willows*; stories in which animals talk, but act otherwise naturally, as *Bambi*; and stories in which animals are objectively described, as in Marguerite Henry’s horse stories. The former two categories display anthropomorphism, the first to a greater degree than the second, and the third does not. All three categories can be found in Children’s Choices, plus a fourth category of information books about animals. Animals that dress and act like people is by far the most populated category in Children’s Choices K-2.

Juliet Kellogg Markowsky (1975: p.460-461) poses the question: “What are the reasons that an author of children’s books may dress animals or make them talk?” 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 provides the following possible reasons:

1. **(i)** To enable young readers to identify with the animals;
2. **(ii)** 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;
3. **(iii)** 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; and
4. **(iv)** To achieve humorous effects, as animals who are caricatures of certain types of people are funny to adults and children alike.

In relation to the second reason, Kellogg Markowsky associates animal fantasy with the need for escapism, explaining that “Escapism must be looked at as not only escaping from a reality,
but as escaping to a new form of reality which an imaginative author can provide. Thus escapism need not have negative or limiting connotations” (461). And in relation to the use of animal characters to achieve humorous effects—yet another connection here to the first Children’s Choices trend—she observes that the humour often stems from the animal’s image and what it says. An additional usual source of laughter is incongruity between the animal’s stereotypical traits and its actual personality and behaviour in the story. Toad, in *The Wind in the Willows*, is used as an example, his funniness stemming from the discrepancy between his being a toad, often a symbol of ugliness in literature, and his being a fop and a dandy (461).

Burke and Copenhaver (2004) ask similar questions with Markowsky, namely, “Why do animals with human characteristics populate so many early childhood stories?” and “What purpose do they serve?” Approaching the issue historically, they point to three important factors that have influenced the proliferation of anthropomorphic animal characters in children’s stories:

(i) Citing anthropologist Stewart Guthrie (1993), they argue that as humans evolved, being able to recognize other people where they existed became critical to their survival and success. Visualizing the world as humanlike meant organizing our predictions in a way that increased our potential to recognize what is of most importance to us; thus anthropomorphism became a human instinct, humanizing even the face of the moon.

(ii) Aesop had a profound influence on Western civilization. His animal fables communicate basic and powerful interpretations of life that remain relevant to this day.

(iii) 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 convincingly describe a different main purpose served by anthropomorphic animals: “The intellectual and emotional distance that the animals’ role-playing allows children and their mentoring adults grants space in which to become reflective and critical concerning life problems and life choices” (212). They explain that:

> 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 (Applebee, 1978; Dyson & Genishi, 1994). (213)
They list the following life problems and choices that have been addressed by stories with anthropomorphic animals:

- Morals & Responsibilities
- Power vs. Weakness
- Personal relationships
- The School Experience
- Animal Rights
- Race & Social Class
- Ecology
- Respecting Difference
- Feminist Issues
- War
- Gay Rights
- Gangs
- Drugs

This is perhaps the common function of animals and humour in picturebooks, the two dominant elements in Children’s Choices grades K-2: Both elements seem to enable children to explore and negotiate difficult but important issues through the stories they read and share. Obviously, more work needs to be done to examine the degree to which these issues are explored through humour and animal characters in the actual books chosen by children. Children’s favourite forms and combinations of humour and anthropomorphic animals are also worthy of further study. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, we plan to randomly select 3 years of Children’s Choices and compare all the titles that were actually submitted by publishers to the ones that were finally selected by children. Studying children’s actual responses to the books in relation to the major elements we have identified would further enrich our data and findings. Other trends in Children’s Choices, such as rhyming, repetition, and popular themes are also part of our ongoing data analysis, but these are not nearly as intense in their presence compared to humour and animals. Figure 5 compares Animals, Humour and Rhyming in Children’s Choices K-2.

**Figure 5**
Finally, as we begin to study the remaining two age groups that participate in Children’s Choices (Grades 3-4 and 5-6), comparisons and contrasts between dominant trends in their different booklists are expected to be quite revealing.