

“When a voice was heard”: Charlotte, Ivan, and Other Talking Animals in Captivity

Drawing on recent scholarship in anthropomorphism and animality studies, this paper will argue that talking animals give voice to human fears of loneliness and loss, possibly triggered by the anxieties we feel about holding animals in captivity. In *Cheek by Jowl: Animals in Children’s Literature*, Ursula K. Le Guin includes a section on “Animals Speaking: Big and Little Languages,” where she explains that storytelling signification requires “a big language,” one with “grammar, syntax, verb tenses and modes” (54). Typically, in realistic animal stories, “the creatures do not talk or think in the ‘big language.’ The author presents the animal’s perceptions and feelings within its own frame of reference, avoiding interpretation in human terms as much as possible” (57). Yet the focalizing animal characters do think and speak in human Big Language in some of the most popular and critically acclaimed children’s books representing animals in real-world settings—a farm in E. B. White’s 1952 classic *Charlotte’s Web*, a cabin with a dog chained in the yard in Kathi Appelt’s 2009 Newbery Honor book *The Underneath*, a circus mall in Katherine Applegate’s 2013 Newbery winner *The One and Only Ivan*. In all three texts, animals seem instinctively able to communicate across species in the same language human children must be taught. In all three texts, animal Others desire the human values of friendship, love, home, and protection. Animal fantasy in domesticated settings such as barns, pens, cages, and chains encourages empathy through the activism of animals who use their words to save each other from human abuse because “At some deep level, we’re all of us connected” (Appelt 97).