BEWARE OF THE FOX!

Emotion and deception in *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer

From the perspective of an adult reader, *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks certainly is a challenging picturebook. Basically, it is a love triangle between a half-blind dog, a broken-winged magpie and a fox, in which the fox seduces the magpie away from the half-blind dog by deception. The accompanying pictures give the impression of emotional arousal and despair. In order to reconstruct a possible interpretation of this particular text–picture relation from the point of view of a child reader, we analyse the fox as a specific literary character, discuss the notions of deception and seduction (with reference to the child’s emerging mind-reading abilities), ask how empathy with literary characters contributes to the child’s moral theme comprehension, and include emotional aspects of the pictures (especially those triggered by the colours). The comprehensive analysis shows that *Fox* can be read on multiple levels, thus qualifying for the status of a genuine crossover picturebook. On a methodological level, this chapter shows how picturebook theory can benefit from an in-depth analysis of a single picturebook when cognitive aspects related to the picturebook are taken into account.

Introduction

This chapter analyses the challenging content of the picturebook *Fox* (2000), with text by Margaret Wild and illustrations by Ron Brooks. By ‘content’, we refer to both the pictorial and the textual level. Why is this picturebook ‘challenging’? It is challenging, because it presents a story about love and seduction in a very condensed way; at first sight, not a topic expected to be appropriate for an audience of young children. In our analysis, we will focus not only on the content (i.e. the story and the artwork) but also on the three literary characters, Fox, Magpie and Dog, and their narrative characterisation through a network of emotions. We also look at Fox as a trickster and deceiver, embedding this character into narratives of lying and deception (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2011a; Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2014). Analysing emotions and deception, as related to the
three characters, is important for our investigation, since the perspective we take is
 driven by our specific approach to picturebook theory that consists in working out
 the cognitive underpinnings of picturebooks, both from the side of production and
 comprehension (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2013; Kümmerling-Meibauer
 et al., 2014). Moreover, we are interested in how assumed cognitive restrictions for
 children’s understanding of picturebooks can be violated or transgressed, and
 ultimately give an answer to the question how a ‘challenge’ might be constituted
 (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2011b).

Challenging story, challenging artwork

The title of the picturebook, Fox, refers to different entities. First of all, fox denotes
 a type of animal. It can be assumed that children have some rudimentary knowl-
 edge about foxes, be it from the zoo, from other picturebooks, or from their own
 experience. Second, fox denotes the individual literary character Fox. Thus, Fox is
 a fictional representative of the class of foxes. Note that there is a shift from denoting
 a natural class of animals to a proper name; the same holds for Magpie and Dog.
 Third, fox denotes a type of literary character. We know that animal characters have
 a longstanding tradition in the arts (Oberman, 2009). Let us briefly sketch the
 story’s plot, before we come to the artwork.

Fox focuses on the triangular relationship between a one-eyed dog, an injured
 magpie, and a fox. In the beginning, Dog saves Magpie whose wing has been burnt
 in a bush fire. Although Magpie is on the verge of abandoning hope because she
 would never be able to fly again, Dog finally convinces her to stay together so that
 they might support each other. Since Dog runs very fast, Magpie gets the impres-
 sion of flying when clinging to the dog’s back. After a while, their well-rehearsed
 teamwork is challenged by Fox who accepts Dog’s offer to join their companionship.
 Whereas Dog confides in Fox, Magpie is mistrustful of Fox’s actual intentions. She
 realises that Fox secretly observes her friendly conversations with Dog and stares at
 her broken wing. One night Fox tries to persuade Magpie to leave Dog, arguing
 that he can run faster than Dog. Magpie initially refuses this bargain, but also starts
 having doubts about her refusal. On the third occasion, she gives in to Fox’s
 persuasiveness. Overwhelmed by new sensations caused by Fox’s extraordinary
 speed, Magpie does not realise that Fox takes her far away to a remote desert. There
 Fox shakes her off his back, leaves her on her own and tells her that she will now
 know what it is like to be alone. At first Magpie prepares herself to die in the desert,
 but the thought of Dog who might worry about her disappearance prompts her to
 begin the arduous journey home.

Ron Brook’s artwork embeds and reflects this story in a congenial way. We
 observe that he experimented with different artistic techniques in order to convey
 the multiple meanings of the story (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013). He
 combined oil painting, acrylic painting, water colour illustration, and shellac, thus
 creating a sophisticated colour scheme which lights the single pages and contributes
 to the mysterious atmosphere. Moreover, the illustrations are cross-hatched by
scratches and lines that Brooks accomplished by using kitchen tools, wires, and oil sticks (see www.allenandunwin.com/uploads/BookPdf/TeachersNotes/9781864484656.pdf). The disrupted patterns and scrapes underscore the dynamic and spontaneous character of the drawings, which often seem to be incomplete and evoke an impression of sketchiness (Figure 7.1).

All pages are fully coloured, the most prominent colours being red, different shades of brown, and black, followed by dark green, yellow, white and blue. The book cover that shows Fox gazing at the viewer reveals that red is the dominant colour, since the fox’s fur, the charred forest in the background, and the book titles are all coloured in bright red, intermingled with some orange and yellow undertones. Throughout the book, the colour red is connected with three domains: the bush fire in the beginning, the fox, and the burning sun in the desert, thus creating a tight connection between the animal, the fire, and the sun. Hence, red is marked as dangerous, since Fox threatens the harmonious relationship between Dog and Magpie, whereas the fire and the sun are depicted as life-threatening natural phenomena. Since the storyline focuses on a triangular relationship, red can also be associated with love and sexual attractiveness, all the more when Fox and Dog are interpreted as males and Magpie as female. Consequently, red arouses different associations that are closely related to strong, even controversial emotions, such as love and hatred, and to menacing situations, such as the bush fire and the hot sun in the desert.

Furthermore, the light brown fur of Dog and the black and white coat of Magpie contrast with the red fur of Fox. When Dog and Magpie enjoy their happy life together, the colour scheme of the landscape presents brownish and greenish tones, penetrated by the blue of the sky and the water. Whenever Fox emerges, the

FIGURE 7.1 Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (2000).
colour red increasingly impacts the colour scheme, even causing the darkening of the landscape colours.

In addition to the unusual combination of artistic techniques and colour schemes, the typography catches the eye. Ron Brooks has handwritten the whole text in block letters, using a penholder with a thick black pen. He created spiky capitals and shaky letters by writing the text with his left hand. In this manner, Brooks gives the impression that the handcrafted lettering was made by a child or somebody who is not used to or able to write regular letters and to keep to the line. The names of the protagonists are constantly capitalised, sometimes also the word ‘flying’. In addition, Brooks changes the direction and size of the font. Singular text blocks are vertically and horizontally arranged so that readers are enticed to rotate the book through 90 degrees or to twist their heads in order to read the text. This strategy slows down the reading process and thus creates a certain pace that matches with the uneven progress of the story. While most of the text is placed on the illustrations, Brooks also glued separate sheets with text onto the illustrated pages so that layers of papers are scattered on the doublespreads. Sometimes the text passages frame the characters. On other doublespreads the text blocks separate the characters from each other, thus emphasising their unbalanced relationship. For instance, the power of Fox who looks down on Magpie as she looks up to him is communicated by the vertical text block between the two (Figure 7.2) (Plate 26).

The paratexts also contribute to the sophisticated meaning of the story. As already mentioned, the book cover focuses on Fox, whose body stretches around the spine and the back cover, thus embracing the whole book. The front endpapers show a burning and partially charred forest, dominated by the colours red and yellow. The flyleaf and the front matters present the other two protagonists, Dog and Magpie. Dog is running fast, holding Magpie in his mouth. These illustrations are quite misleading, since they make the viewer suspect Dog of having caught Magpie as a prey. The fact that the injured bird is actually rescued by Dog and

---

FIGURE 7.2 (Plate 26) Fox: ‘Dog beams, but Magpie shrinks away.’
brought to a safe cave is something the book does not reveal until its first doublespread (Mallan, 2013). The subsequent doublespread with the imprint on the left-hand page and the dedications on the right-hand page might be interpreted as an anticipation of the story: While Dog continues carrying Magpie in his mouth he is secretly followed by Fox. The rear endpapers show the same forest as in the front endpapers, only that the trees’ foliage is thicker. Accordingly, the colours green, blue and brown dominate in this illustration. Besides the mirroring effect, the endpapers can additionally be interpreted as a sign of hope. Just as the forest has recovered from the severe bush fire, Magpie will hopefully succeed in returning to Dog.

All in all, the layout of the picturebook and the elongated form of the dog’s and the fox’s bodies manifest the energy of movement and the ambivalent relationship between the three animal characters. Their position and postures on the page invoke tension and highlight the complex power relations among them.

Animal characters

Considering the taxonomy of literary characters in picturebooks, like the one proposed by Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) and Nikolajeva (2002), we find a distinction between human and non-human characters. As for the non-human characters, Nikolajeva (2002) offers another distinction between animals, supernatural creatures, objects, such as toys and machines, and abstract entities, such as colours and letters.

So we can ask, what is the special narrative or aesthetic potential of these non-human characters? According to Nikolajeva (2002: 125), ‘children’s novels and especially picturebooks abound in clothed and humanized animals, living toys, supernatural creatures (witches, ghosts), as well as personified objects and machines, such as cars or trains’. While it is plausible that these picturebook characters are somehow related to the human reader, for instance, mirroring the reader’s ecological, social, and emotional situation, it is also feasible to assume that each of these different characters has its own and very specific narrative and aesthetic potential. Each non-human character challenges certain assumptions of the child about what a ‘normal’ world looks like, thus introducing the concept of fictional space, where persons and things are quite different from the real world the child experiences.

The question arises, then, why picturebooks apparently show more non-human characters than children’s novels. Nikolajeva’s (2002: 125) basic tenet is that ‘animals, toys, baby witches, and animated objects are always disguises for a child’. This approach, however, seems inadequate with respect to Fox. None of the characters seem to be a disguise for the child. Instead, the child is introduced into a fictional world where complex feelings reign. This world can be compared to the world of adults; it can also be compared with the child’s own world but this would demand very complex processes of transfer.

With respect to characterisation in picturebooks, Nikolajeva and Scott (2001: 82) argue that:
it is clear that picturebooks allow little room for thorough characterization in the conventional sense. We may generally observe that picturebooks tend to be plot-oriented rather than character-oriented. Further, the plot is often too limited to allow much development, which means that most characters are static rather than dynamic, and flat rather than round.

Again, we think that Magpie, Dog, and Fox are flat characters in a way, yet the emotions they show and the tragic plot in which they are involved give them a more round and dynamic outlook.

What makes Fox so exceptional is the intricate triangular relationship between Dog, Magpie and Fox. Whereas the animals’ proper names are genderless, their behaviours are certainly not: The way Dog and Fox treat Magpie makes them seem male, and Magpie’s need of protection seems to represent the female sex. The ambivalence of their relationship thus switches between friendship and love attachment, additionally stressed by the colour red and the fox’s pervading gaze which is perceived by Magpie only. Magpie’s feeling of uneasiness is ingeniously presented in the illustration that just shows nothing but the fox’s haunted eyes staring at the viewer (Figure 7.3). Fox increasingly takes over space and blocks out Dog and Magpie. Further, while Dog is often on a par with Fox concerning size and posture, Magpie is almost always forced into a corner, until right near the end when she is virtually placed in the middle of the page.

The changing relations are additionally stressed by the position of the characters on the page. In the beginning, Dog and Magpie are close to each other, they even seem to merge into one creature – as depicted in the illustration that shows Dog and Magpie staring into a water pool. In this scene, Magpie clings to the dog’s back.

In the evenings, when the air is creamy with blossom, Dog and Magpie relax at the mouth of the cave, enjoying each other’s company.

Now and again Fox joins in the conversation, but Magpie can feel him watching, always watching her.

And at night his smell seems to fill the cave—a smell of rage and envy and loneliness.

FIGURE 7.3 Fox: ‘Magpie can feel him watching, always watching her.’
and claims that she sees a new creature, whereas Dog explains that this creature is actually themselves reflected in the water. This picture presents a key scene, which is additionally stressed by the text blocks framing the illustrations on the left and right like a mirror.

Looking at the reflection of one’s own face in the water is one of the seminal motifs in art since Antiquity, going back to the prominent myth of Narcissus. Recognising oneself in a mirror is a milestone on the path of self-knowledge that might lead to egocentrism and self-love on the one hand (as in the case of Narcissus), and to the realisation of one’s own individuality and dependence on others on the other hand (as in the case of Dog and Magpie). Hence, Dog and Magpie have a deep affection for each other, which is severely menaced by Fox. He often stands between Dog and Magpie and thus contributes to their separation and gradually developing alienation. Interestingly, the animal species in this picturebook reveal another power relationship on closer consideration. While Dog is depicted as a wild dog or dingo, and Magpie evidently is an Australian magpie, Fox is also an intruder in a literal sense as this species was imported from the United Kingdom to Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to introduce the traditional fox hunt in this British colony. Consequently, the fox became a rival to the dingo as predatory species.

Besides the illustrations, the relations between Dog, Magpie, and Fox become clear in the condensed dialogues, which stress the characters’ emotional conditions and reveal their secret wishes. For instance, Dog is trustful and confident despite Magpie’s warning of Fox’s sly behaviour: ‘He belongs nowhere,’ she says. ‘He loves no one.’ But Dog says, ‘He’s all right. Let him be.’ Dog remains optimistic although he has lost one eye and is dependent on Magpie’s guidance. His attitude towards life culminates in the expression ‘I am blind in one eye, but life is still good’. In comparison, Magpie is determined by conflicting feelings, fluctuating between disappointment and hope. Though Dog attempts to console her by referring to his missing eye, Magpie is not convinced since she believes that this loss cannot be compared to the inability to fly: ‘An eye is nothing!’ says Magpie. ‘How would you feel if you couldn’t run?’

Because of her unbalanced emotional condition, she is an easy prey for Fox, who is the most complex character. In the beginning, his attitude towards Dog and Magpie is dominated by jealousy, but the readers will gradually become aware that Fox is overwhelmed by a feeling of loneliness that finally leads to despair and the determination to destroy the close friendship between Dog and Magpie. In this regard, the notion of ‘flying’ is a leitmotif, a recurring theme that connects the three characters. By repetitious references to flying, this capacity gains in weight in the course of the picturebook story. The ability to fly is not only linked with fulminant speed, but also with a feeling of freedom which almost touches upon erotic sensations.

It is no wonder, then, that Magpie finally succumbs to Fox’s seductive speech whose effect is underscored by the fox’s whispering voice: ‘I can run faster than Dog. Faster than the wind. Leave Dog and come with me’ – and on the second
night: ‘Do you remember what it is like to fly? Truly fly?’ Magpie litany-like answers back: ‘I will never leave Dog. I am his missing eye and he is my wings.’ Nevertheless, Fox succeeds in sowing seeds of doubt in Magpie, as she reproduces his thoughts when riding on the dog’s back again: ‘This is nothing like flying. Nothing!’ Consequently, her final decision culminates in the assertion: ‘I am ready.’ This condensed dialogue that reoccurs on three consecutive nights convincingly shows the gradual change in Magpie’s attitude towards Dog. While she refuses to abandon Dog twice, she yields after Fox’s third seduction, and is now ready to betray Dog.

**Fox as a trickster and deceiver**

Fox, as a type of literary character, has the properties of a trickster. This term notifies a character whose main trait consists in being a cunning deceiver. In cultures around the world, the trickster is a favourite character that appears in diverse media from folktales, primordial and ancient myths, to modern literature, comic strips, picturebooks and films. The character delights in playing tricks on others, either to profit from a specific situation or just for the sport of it. Famous figures are Till Eulenspiegel in Germany, Reynard the Fox in France, Nasreddin Hodja in Turkey, Anansi in the Caribbean, and Coyote and Rabbit in the USA. The mystery of the trickster lies in the way he acts entirely on his own, being bound neither by law nor by a moral code. The trickster might be human or an animal, male or female, acting in a way that makes it difficult to decide whether their behaviour might be classified as good or bad. This ambiguity is additionally emphasised by the fact that the trickster might also perform functions of an essential benefactor (Geider, 2012: 913).

In many European and Non-European cultures, the prototypical representative of the trickster is the fox who has played a dominant role in trickster tales since Antiquity. In these tales, be it the *Talmud*, the *Panchatantra* or the fables of Aesop, the fox is always depicted as a sly and bogus animal, characterised by asocial behaviour and the tendency to tell lies. According to the New Testament, the fox even symbolises malice and trickiness (Luke 13: 32). It is no wonder, then, that the fox mutates into a personification of the devil in medieval legends and bestiaries, thus granting the fox a demonic character (Uther, 1987: 450). Nevertheless, several trickster tales also point to the double function of the fox as deceiver and dupe, when he is outsmarted by his actual victims.

Fox is a deceiving character. He aims at leading Magpie into a false belief, the belief that he is a better partner than Dog because with him ‘flying’ is possible. When Magpie outbursts ‘At last I am flying, really flying!’, she is a victim of self-deception. And Fox, so it seems to turn out, never thought about a relationship to Magpie like the one she had with Dog. Instead, he is malicious in that he teaches a lesson to Magpie and Dog: ‘Now you and Dog will know what it is like to be truly alone.’ Magpie then hears ‘a faraway scream’ and ‘she cannot tell if it is a scream of triumph or despair’.
Understanding deception is by no means an easy task for young children. Lying to others is the prototypical way of deceiving someone (Meibauer, 2014). The ability to lie and to recognise that other people lie is strongly connected with the development of metalinguistic abilities, such as irony, metaphor and joke (Leekam, 1991). While in ironical and metaphorical remarks as well as in jokes the content of the speech acts is not literally true, the speaker nevertheless wants the hearer to understand that they are true. In contrast to irony, metaphor and joke, lying is basically uncooperative. This principle of rational communication postulates that speakers should make conversational contributions that fit the ‘accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange’ (Grice, 1989: 26). Since no rational conversation principally requires lying, lying is closely related to its fundamentally uncooperative character.

A milestone for the child’s acquisition of lying is Theory of Mind (ToM), that is, the ability to comprehend other people’s thoughts, feelings and imaginations. As several experimental studies have proved, children usually acquire this ability when they are around four years of age. Precursors of ToM are the imitation of intended actions (at 18 months), the distinction between one’s own and other people’s feelings and intentions, and the beginning of symbolic play. At two years of age children develop the ability to ascribe feelings and wishes to other people. In this respect, the distinction of first-order belief, that is, the understanding that one might have a false belief about an actual situation (appearance-reality distinction), and second-order belief, that is, the understanding that one might have a false belief about the belief of another person, is crucial. While first-order belief is usually acquired at age three-and-a half to four, second-order belief is acquired somewhat later, approximately at six years of age. A full understanding of different perspectives of a certain belief only begins to mature around 12 years of age and then fully develops in adolescence (Ringrose 2006; Lee, 2013; Lee & Talwar, 2014).

On reading Fox, children can learn about seduction and deception. And they can also learn about another important aspect of deception, namely that it is good to trust others but also to distrust others and be epistemically vigilant, that is, not to believe in false information (Mascaro & Sperber 2009; Sperber et al., 2010).

Dog is certainly a trustworthy character. He is the one who shows Magpie that they could be ‘one’ creature: ‘I will be your missing eye, and you will be my wings.’ Dog is caring and he is even friendly to strangers. Yet he is not taking Magpie’s concerns about Fox seriously. In the end, Dog remains a victim because his trustful and sharing relation to Magpie has been interrupted. Magpie is not vigilant enough. In fact, it is not true that Fox can fly in the literal sense of the word. Ironically, however, it is true that she knows in the end ‘what it is to be truly alone’. This knowledge is so strong that Magpie ‘can feel herself burning into nothingness’, that is, that she is ready to die.

Recent research on the development of distrust has shown that the ability to distrust others has to be acquired. Vanderbilt, Liu and Heyman (2011), in their research on preschoolers’ reasoning about the reliability of deceptive sources,
showed several trials to 90 three- to five-year-olds in which an informant gave advice about the location of a hidden sticker. The informants were either ‘helpers’ who were happy to give correct advice, or ‘trickers’ who were happy to give incorrect advice. The authors found that: (a) ‘three-years-olds tended to accept all advice from helpers and trickers’; (b) ‘four-year-olds were more sceptical but showed no preference for advice from helpers over trickers, even though they differentiated between helpers and trickers on metacognitive measures’; and (c) ‘five-year-olds systematically preferred advice from helpers’. They concluded that ‘selective trust was associated with children’s ability to make mental state inferences’ (Vanderbilt et al., 2011: 1372). These results show that it is not easy for children to be distrustful, even when they are aware of the possibility of deceptive ‘trickers’.

Furthermore, there are moral themes built into the story. Moral lessons that can be learned from Fox are, for instance: (a) that it is better to be content with a certain state, even when it is dissatisfying, than to always strive for a better state (Dog vs Magpie); and (b) that it is better to love and be socially and emotionally bound, than to love no one and be socially isolated and lonesome (Dog/Magpie vs Fox). Research concerning moral theme comprehension conducted by Narvaez et al. (1999) shows that even for seven-year-olds and nine-year-olds it is by no means easy to extract moral lessons from stories. We can speculate that this holds all the more for a younger audience like the one targeted by Fox. (Note that the book is recommended to children from six years onwards.)

Emotion and empathy

In this section, we will relate our descriptive findings to two cognitive-narratological topics that are important for a deeper understanding of Fox. These topics are emotion and empathy, that is, cognitive abilities that are also related to children’s development of a Theory of Mind (ToM). We will ask what kind of knowledge children might have when they read Fox, and what they can learn from reading Fox. Briefly, our point is to make clear that these considerations are in fact relevant for a deeper understanding of the ‘challenging’ nature of Fox.

We know that children have to acquire an emotional lexicon (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). The semantics of words denoting emotions is notoriously difficult, even for adults. In Fox, we find several passages in which feelings and emotions are explicitly addressed:

p. 1   How would you feel if you couldn’t run?
       Magpie drags her body into the shadow of the rocks until she feels herself melting into blackness.

p. 3   Days, perhaps a week later, she wakes with a rush of grief.

p. 6   Magpie feels the wind streaming through her feathers, and she rejoices.

p. 10  Dog beams, but Magpie shrinks away. She can feel Fox staring at her burnt wing.
Now and again Fox joins in the conversation, but Magpie can feel him watching, always watching her. And at night his smell seems to fill the cave—a smell of rage and envy and loneliness.

Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox. ‘He belongs nowhere’, she says. ‘He loves no one.’ But dog says, ‘He’s all right. Let him be.’

She cannot tell if it is a scream of triumph or despair.

She can feel herself burning into nothingness.

As Bretherton et al. (1986: 533) show, 28-month-olds have already a positive and negative emotion vocabulary, for instance good (moral) love, like, have fun or bad (moral), sad, scared, and use these and other emotion labels ‘not only to comment on or explain their own or someone else’s feeling state but also to guide or influence their companions’ behaviour’ (1986: 537). In the preschool years (from 3–5), ‘children’s ability to verbally reflect on emotion-related situations (antecedents, consequences, behavioural correlates) gains in accuracy, clarity and complexity’ (Bretherton et al., 1986: 537).

Yet it appears that:

although preschoolers are proficient at imputing ‘general purpose’ emotions like happiness and sadness to story characters, social cognitive studies show that emotion terms requiring more complex understanding of interpersonal situations, for example, gratitude, guilt, or pride, are not appropriately used until later.

Bretherton et al. (1986: 538)

Thus, it is not clear to which extent a five-year-old can understand, for instance, what a smell of rage and envy and loneliness means. Generally, children may have difficulties in understanding these processes and feelings, but the picturebook Fox is also an invitation to learn about these feelings. Interestingly, the emotions and feelings of the animal characters are tightly connected to the senses. The text emphasises several times the impact of seeing, hearing, smelling and touching on the individual characters’ emotional state.

In order to understand other people’s emotions, children have to acquire ToM (also called ‘mindreading’). Without ToM, children are not able to feel empathy and to identify with others. However, it is still under discussion what empathy actually is and which cognitive and social requirements need to be fulfilled. The general assertion is that empathy is the capacity of an observer to get access to the emotional state of another being or fictional character. The concept of empathy plays a significant role, since it influences the multi-levelled acquisition of emotional competence, which consists of four developmental stages, culminating in the acquisition of ‘empathy for another’s feelings’—often equalised with ToM—and ‘empathy for another’s life condition’, which is acquired at the age of about 11–12 (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler & McShane, 2006: 487). In comparison with ‘empathy for
another’s feeling’, ‘empathy for another’s life conditions’ demands the ability to discern not only feelings and imaginations of individuals, but also of groups, whether it concerns the peer group, or a social, ethnic, or religious group (Frijda, 2007).

In this regard, empathy is often confused with sympathy. It is important, however, to distinguish these emotional conditions because empathy does not imply automatically that the character one empathises with should be classified as likeable. On the contrary, the interesting point is the observation that one is usually even able to empathise with emotional conditions, of people regarded as unfriendly or unappealing. Therefore, we would like to consider what children might learn about empathy when reading Fox.

One crucial issue in cognitive studies dealing with the impact of literary texts on readers’ engagement with literature is the appreciation of other people’s emotions and how this process might support children’s engagement with fictional characters, thus arousing empathy. In this regard, the notion of literary character plays a seminal role: it is very important in modern narratology, not only with respect to literature for adults (Margolin, 2007; Jannidis, 2009; Eder, Jannidis & Schneider, 2010), but also with respect to children’s literature (Nikolajaeva, 2002; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2012; Nikolajeva, 2014). Most interestingly, children may identify with a certain literary character. Identification itself is a complex cognitive notion, yet there appear to be textual clues that support identification; for instance: (i) ‘sympathy with a character who is similar to the reader’; (ii) ‘empathy for a character who is in a particular situation’; and (iii) ‘attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader’ (Jannidis, 2009: 24).

The degree to which a child reader’s identification with a literary character is possible, depends on further conditions, such as: (iv) the ability to take over a certain perspective of the literary character (based on its characterisation); (v) the affective relation to the character that may be induced by a number of factors, some possibly of a rather idiosyncratic nature; and (vi) the evaluation of the respective character, which is in turn dependent on a set of individual attitudes and preferences, as well as on world knowledge (including historical, social and cultural knowledge) (Jannidis, 2009: 24–25). Learning ‘to care about literary characters’, as Vermeule (2010) puts it, is of prime relevance for literature acquisition, and it is obvious that children’s literature plays a seminal role in this process.

By way of summarising our findings, we pick up these issues and relate them to the characters in Fox. In relation to the issue of sympathy, it could be stated that the animal characters are not similar to the reader as they are not human beings. Nevertheless, children are able to sympathise with Dog and Magpie at least, since they acknowledge that these characters are driven by emotions and feelings similar to their own. Whether children might also feel sympathy with Fox is not easy to answer. The unveiling of the reasons for Fox’s behaviour, however, his feelings of loneliness and despair that increase after his encounter with Dog and Magpie, may stimulate children to reflect on Fox’s inner state of mind.

This observation leads to the second issue, ‘empathy for a character who is in a particular situation’. The animal characters arouse empathy because of their
physical handicaps and their distressed emotional states. These are mediated by their bodily position and the dialogues, sometimes even by their facial expression with an emphasis on the eyes. In order to decipher the meanings of these depictions and the short dialogues, children should have knowledge of schemata and abstract signs. In cognitive psychology, this strategy is determined by 'emotional scripts' that refer to certain encoded emotions. Encoded emotions presuppose a general knowledge about the representations of emotions, such as joy, sadness and anger, in facial expression, gesture, posture and language. Moreover, readers must have acquired the ability to recognise visual and textual cues that refer to specific emotions. This is especially the case when characters lack relevant information that contributes to their characterisation and identification, such as proper names, age and gender. The readers of Fox, for example, do not get any information about the characters' individual background, let alone age, family relations and gender. Nevertheless, children are able to empathise with the animal characters, since they realise that these characters show comparable emotions and feelings to their own.

Concerning the third issue, 'attraction to a character who is a role model for the reader', we do not believe that children are attracted by the animal characters as role models in a general sense. However, children might recognise that the emotional turmoil evoked by the triangular relationship between Dog, Magpie and Fox probably mirrors their own sometimes complicated relationships with siblings, friends and peers.

The fourth issue, 'ability to take over a certain perspective of the literary character', is tightly connected to the phenomenon of empathy. In this respect, children are encouraged to develop empathy with the animal characters' feelings. Children can identify with the emotions and thoughts expressed by Dog, Magpie and Fox. While it might be easy to identify with Dog's optimism, trust and tolerance, and with Magpie's need of protection and her longing for freedom expressed in the metaphor of flying, the examination of Fox's feelings challenges the reader in multifarious ways. Fox confronts the child reader with negative emotions, such as jealousy and despair. Despite these adverse effects, children might get an insight into the causes of the Fox's behaviour and even compare it with experiences made in their own life. While Magpie is the primary victim and thus deserves the child reader's empathy, Dog is a victim, too, because he is the one who is left and betrayed. For children, it may be hard to see that Fox is also a character who deserves empathy. He loves no one, as Magpie says, and he teaches Magpie a lesson that he learned himself before: 'Now you and Dog will know what it is like to be truly alone.'

This finding is strongly connected with the fifth issue, 'affective relation to the character that may be induced by a number of factors, some possibly of a rather idiosyncratic nature'. If children accept that animals have emotions similar to those expressed by humans, they may be able to compare the animals' emotions and feelings with their own. This strategy opens up an affective relationship between child readers and the three animal characters. Children may be attuned to the various affective markers in Fox, which appear as strong and appealing images and dialogues.
The emotional lexicon additionally attracts readers and stimulates them to build up an affective connection with the three characters. In the beginning, children will certainly be mostly persuaded by the injured and helpless bird. Then, their affection might turn to Dog who is Magpie's lifesaver and protector. Children may obviously identify with Dog's confidence and tolerance, but may also be affected by Magpie's dream to fly again. In this regard, the final image exerts a strong impact on the viewer, since it contrasts the hostile surroundings with Magpie's determination not to lose hope and to cross the desert in order to reunite with Dog. This open ending, which refuses to show the usual 'happy ending' of picturebooks, provokes the readers' active consideration of the possible outcome of the story.

Concerning the final issue, it should be evident that the evaluation of the three characters is 'dependent on a set of individual attitudes and preferences, as well as on world knowledge' (Jannidis, 2009: 25). It is a well-known fact that children are interested in animals and that animals appear in many books targeted at children. While animals in picturebooks are often anthropomorphised, the animal characters in Fox are depicted in a quite realistic manner, although they can speak and show emotions comparable to those of humans. Hence, Fox addresses both children's attachment to animals and their interest in emotional situations of high degree. What distinguishes Fox from other picturebooks with animal characters, however, is the open ending and the confrontation with ambivalent, even negative feelings that challenge the reader to delve into the presentation of a complex psychological situation.

Conclusions

As our detailed description and interpretation of Fox has shown, this picturebook is indeed challenging on a number of counts. First of all, its artwork challenges common expectations with respect to child-appropriate aesthetics. Second, its content is challenging, since narrating a disastrous love triangle, albeit told with reference to animal characters, seems to be risky for an audience of six-year-olds. Our interpretation showed that the rewards of reading this book, for both children and adults, relate to learning about complex emotions such as jealousy and despair. These emotions appear late in the process of emotional acquisition; therefore gaining knowledge about them is by no means easy. We realised that Wild's text helps children to learn how emotions can be verbally expressed and additionally that Fox contains implicit moral lessons. This is undeniably challenging, because such lessons have to be inferred from all the information given in the pictures and in the text. The most demanding challenge, however, is to feel empathy for the remorseless Fox, since his malignancy is caused by his loneliness and his inability to love someone.

Academic references


**Children's literature**