I Can Read All by Myself, I Can Read Without your Help: Analysis of Contemporary Early Reader Books

Savannah Duursema

Senior Honors Program Thesis, Eastern Connecticut State University, Fall 2025
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Allison Speicher

Introduction:

Learning to read is a crucial experience in childhood development and education because early literacy provides the basis for all future learning. Reading skills unlock the door to participating in our modern society, and the key to this freedom comes from a genre of books dedicated to our young literates: early readers. An early reader can be defined from Kathleen Horning's description as a text with simple vocabulary, uncomplicated and predictable plot, short sentences with large typeface, and pictures on every page to provide context clues (121). They're typically written for early elementary school-aged children. These texts may seem simplistic, but they hold immense power over the moldable mind of a new reader. Since early readers are intended for independent reading, they have the opportunity to send children messages about the world without a guardian's filter. What do early readers have to say to children when no adult is intercepting the message? Literature scholars have yet to focus on this question.

The field of education has investigated the utilitarian teaching properties of early readers but simultaneously has failed to acknowledge their status as literary works with strong ideological import. As stated in one of the only scholarly texts that treats early readers as literary works, "very little academic ink has been devoted to the Early Reader, perhaps because these books are seen as transitional or as utilitarian, or perhaps because as mass marketed and cheaply produced works of paraliterature, these books, often filled with silliness and scatological humor, assault adult notions of taste and literary merit" (Wannamaker & Miskec 1). They're viewed as only practical learning tools and are often cheaply made, since they're distributed so widely across a range of stores, including supermarkets and department stores. Their sole purpose is thought to be teaching children to read so they can advance to chapter books and beyond—that is, to "real" literature. Even among children's literature experts and tastemakers, the form is often dismissed. Two well-established book awards, the Newbery and Caldecott, are given each year to the children's book with the best story and pictures, respectively. The American Library Association website states that a book is considered for these awards if it's intended for children and is an original (not translated or re-published) book, criteria the majority of early readers meet. Despite this fact, no early readers have won either award, only honors. In light of this neglect, an award specifically designed for early readers, called the Geisel award, was created. It only dates back to 2006, though and remains little-known when compared to the previously mentioned awards, both of which have been around for almost a century and become household names (ALA n.p.). Another issue emerges here as well; the award winners, no matter the award, are chosen by adults who are not the primary audience of the texts.

The power dynamic between adults and children must be explored in any analysis of early readers, since adults write and buy the stories they think kids should be consuming (Nodelman 4-5). For a children's book to even reach a child, it must go through the hands of authors, illustrators, editors, and publishers. Then parents, teachers, or librarians finally give the book to the child. These texts are constantly being tainted by others, which translate to influences on the child. Cultural messages from the adult world also live in the formulaic nature of these texts, so of course children will pick up on and adopt these perspectives. Studies show that they're exposed to and aware of the issues in society, especially when present in the books they read. To offer one example of this awareness of broader social issues, research shows children can have racial biases as early as age 3 (Winkler 1). As seen in the analyses to come, there are much more complex themes playing out in early readers than a surface-level reading would suggest, all of which a child would be able to pick up on.

In this paper, I provide insight into these themes and ideologies, offering a deep reading of a sample of high-quality early readers published between 2019 and 2024, as well as the other stories in their series. These titles came partially from a list of summer reading recommendations from *The Horn Book* (a leading children's literature publication) as well as the Theodor Seuss Geisel book award winners and honors from 2020 through 2024. Since these books have been deemed the best early readers by the ALA, other authors in the future may draw inspiration from them for their own beginner books, therefore, looking at these texts gives a glimpse into a whole category of comparable stories published thereafter. I found each recommended book on WorldCat.org, a site that indexes the book collections from public and school libraries across the world, and noted how many copies were available to gain a sense of how accessible each book was to children. This way I would gain a more accurate account of the content beginning readers are presented with. I also chose stories from within the last five or six years for this reason. Ideally I would have liked to create a list of the most popular early readers among children, but there is no simple way to gather this data because each copy of a children's book is highly likely to be read by multiple readers. From this collection of titles, I identified the texts that, first, most accurately fit the description of an early reader, and second, had a large number of copies compared to other books on the list for the same year.

In the analyses to follow, I articulate three main assumptions that I have found integrated in early readers and explain the impact of their presence. These are ideas infiltrated in the texts, likely without a clear intention, because our culture has certain unconscious expectations of children. Not only are they present in the books, but many other interdisciplinary studies have identified similar societal assumptions towards children. These assumptions often reflect the insights from the fields of developmental psychology, education, as well as political science, filtered through and reduced down by popular culture. The three assumptions towards the early child-reader I focus on, are as follows: 1. Friendship and social skills must be taught and reinforced, 2. Children relate to, and therefore learn best from, animal characters over human versions, 3. Children do not want to (learn to) read! I have also extensively found and explored the assumption that young children lack time awareness and have a distaste for realism, but will not directly discuss that here.

All these assumptions are clearly present throughout the texts and allow for some societal reflection on how we view children. Of course, some early reader texts defy these assumptions, crafting stories beyond the typical, but as highly regarded and popular texts, these selection of books provide a thorough grounding in the conventions of the form.

Assumption 1: Friendship and social skills must be taught.

We live in a world where social interactions matter greatly, from infancy onward, so it's not a surprise to see that early readers often touch on friendship. Making friends is a major focus for children in early elementary school, especially since so many children are around similar-ability and age peers for the first time ("Milestones" n.p., "Child Development" n.p.). If kids already have social desires naturally and plenty of settings in their lives to practice their skills, including the very schools in which they encounter early readers, why then are we trying to teach them about friendship in the texts they read too? While some interest in friendship is unsurprising, the overwhelming emphasis placed on it's, as is the presentation of friendship as though it's a completely unfamiliar experience. Are more heavy-handed social models really needed to help them make friends?

Perhaps one reason for this emphasis is the longstanding belief in the field of developmental psychology that children are egocentric. Children are widely thought to be more egocentric across various settings from 2 to 7 years old, in a stage that Jean Piaget called the pre-operational phase, because they're still learning how to think about someone else's perspective (Kalyan-Masih 38). Researchers have found that specific sections of the brain are dedicated to helping us overcome our egocentric perspectives, and will improve in ability as children mature ("Outgrowing Emotional Egocentricity" n.p.), not necessarily with exposure to more examples.

The examined early reader books model that as a society, we think that children constantly need peer relationships represented for them by adults so they can figure out how to be a good friend. Of the twelve books I looked at, nine of them had explicit messages about friendship and eleven focused generally on social skills. For example, in the book *I Did it!* by Michael Emberley, the main character is only able to figure out how to ride a bike with the help and encouragement of the other characters. Prior, the main character did not know to ask for help, until their friends offered assistance. *Fox and Chick: The Quiet Boat Ride* by Sergio Ruzzier is centered on two friends, Fox and Chick. The two go on adventures together learning about patience in the process. *Worm and Caterpillar Are Friends* by Kaz Windness explores the friendship of two creatures that turn out to be very different from each other. They navigate Caterpillar changing form and Worm learning to support their friend even though they look different. In all three examples, the characters learn how to be a good friend by problem solving together. Working with others can create conflicts because there are more demands to work with, so problem solving in a group setting is a good skill to learn. The underlying belief though, is that children can't figure out how to solve problems on their own when they come up and therefore need examples of the social skill, modeled via simplified one-on-one relationships.

The fact that so many of the stories had a main character duo provides further evidence of the assumption. Many times, both characters were even listed in the title such as *Fox and Chick: The Quiet Boat Ride* or *Worm and Caterpillar are Friends.* There were three other examples of character pairs in the titles of my selected texts, and many more in the stories. All the examples of the title containing character names were also part of series, so they will be following the same characters who continually reinforce the same social skills while the character relationships deepen. It's important to keep in mind that adults are almost always going to be the ones buying the books for children, and the cover is often what makes someone pick up a book. The fact that so many of the stories clearly show social interactions from the front cover, makes more obvious how much friendship is prioritized in our view of children.

Beyond the title page, an unavoidable observation is just how many of these early readers are written in the form of graphic novels. By telling the story only through dialogue, the idea of social interaction is made all the more apparent. Ten of the twelve books had clear features of graphic novels such as speech bubbles, panels, and symbols to represent emotions. All three of the books I have been discussing follow this form, as seen in Appendix A. *Fox and Chick* is told only through speech bubbles between the two characters and has lots of panels. *I Did It!* is also told only through the speech of the main character and shows progression of events through the pictures. *Worm and Caterpillar are Friends* even starts off with the two characters explaining to the reader how to read the speech bubbles and what a panel is. With an additional emphasis on the images too in telling each tale, social cues and expressions can be depicted. Multiple reviews of *Worm and Caterpillar* on both Goodreads and Amazon mention children being drawn in to the story because of the character's facial expressions, especially Caterpillar's face when Worm suggests they eat dirt (McAlister n.p.). Children were noticing the feelings of the characters and

how they interacted with each other. Daniel Hade and Laura Anne Hudock explained that we now live in a multi-literate world where picture analysis is a necessary skill and therefore graphic novels have become significant in learning reading (96-97). Putting the focus on the images over words is certainly counterintuitive in a book intended to teach reading, but it does push the reader to focus on character interactions beyond speech. The choice could overshadow the initial goal of learning to read words though. The choice of using graphic novel elements promotes social themes arguably over the skill of reading, which is supposed to be the purpose of the book.

Friendship is often considered an equal relationship, especially in childhood but despite being friends, the characters in the early readers are never actually of equal knowledge or ability, which is striking. In a society that adheres to what Marah Gubar calls the difference model of age, adult/child is a completely unbalanced power dynamic (451), so it's easy to see their peer relationships as equal in comparison. Although no relationship is ever exactly equal or one in which both people agree on every topic, peer relations get much closer to equality, which is one reason the relationship is thought of as so powerful for elementary-school age children. The examined stories represent some degree of power imbalance between friends quite often, more closely mirroring the relationship of adult and child than a more egalitarian friendship bond. In *Fox and Chick,* Fox is portrayed as very patient with Chick and constantly teaching lessons. When they go on a boat ride, when Chick gets a present, and when they go see the sunset, Fox continues to reassure Chick and answer all the questions that Chick has. As shown in Appendix A, figure 1, Chick asks, "Can I be the captain?" (6) as if Fox can choose to give permission to Chick or not, which signifies that they're not at the same level of authority. Worm and Caterpillar have a similar relationship, depicted in Appendix A, figure 2. Caterpillar spends the story teaching Worm about their differences in what they look like and eat, showing a stronger understanding than their friend. In *I Did It!* all the other creatures are able to complete the activities but not the main character. The raccoon can build block towers, the puffin and elephant-like robot can climb a rope, and another robot can catch a baseball, but the main creature can't do any of the activities. When they all work together though, the creature is able to figure out how to ride a bike (Appendix A, figure 3). The constant power imbalance is in keeping with didactic tendencies from earlier reading experiences of an adult reading aloud and teaching a child. One character is constantly teaching another using their authority. All these examples also have friendships amongst multiple different animal species, which only further divides the power. Of course a fox would tell a chick what to do; it's the predator talking to the prey! Why do we feel it's necessary to keep showing the child unequal relationships which don't accurately model healthy friendships?

U.S. publishers and authors have chosen to focus early reader stories around understanding group dynamics and relationships. This is a very important lesson overall; the issue, however is that majority of texts follow the same themes so that children receive one main message, amongst the many topics they could benefit from. It also assumes one way of being social, but the social world is changing rapidly with technology. The representations of friendship are also skewed in a way to continue to represent the importance of listening to authority figures and promote a message adults want children to know at the risk of modeling unhealthy peer friendship. Friendship is supposed to be a much more equal relationship than the early readers show. Understanding the social world is a lesson learned just from living in society, so incorporating it into their readings so aggressively as well, feels unnecessary, especially if we're using animals to represent friendship, as in the texts discussed in this section. How is a non-human creature the best way to teach a child messages most relevant to humans?

Assumption 2: Children relate to, and therefore learn best from, animal characters over human versions.

Animals as the main characters for children's books are nothing new. Talking animals or objects living a human life provide the premise for many children's shows and books. Anthropomorphism, which is giving non-human objects or animals the characteristics of a human, is well-known as a common element to children's literature, dating back to Aesop's Fables (Fraustino 145). In her award-winning article, Lisa Fraustino explains that, over time, it has become an accepted but problematic way to teach children moral lessons. Kids have been found to enjoy this type of story as well so it seems logical that authors would use the tool, but it brings up the question of why this is the case *so* often (Panaou et al. 178-179, 181, 186). The reliance on anthropomorphism presented itself very obviously as I perused my archive: the texts examined are saturated with animals or references to them. Ten of the twelve books I analyzed used anthropomorphized animals as the main characters and the other two referenced animals frequently. Every single text contained animals! Much like friendship, the association between children and animals is strong in our society and used excessively in early readers. Why use animals almost exclusively to model the lessons instead of a human child?

Anthropomorphism is woven into so many of these texts, to the point that the feature has become almost a requirement of the early reader form. Juliet Kellogg Markowsky mentions, crediting May Hill Arbuthnot, that there are three separate categories of anthropomorphism. There could be animals that dress and act like people, animals that talk but otherwise are typical to their species, and those that act naturally (460). The majority of my texts fit best in the first category and a handful fit into the second, but none are completely non-fiction stories that represent non-talking animals in their natural habitat. In the book *A New Car For Pickle* by Sylvie Kantorovitz, Pickle the dog spends the story looking for a better car after his car stops working. The majority of the characters are animals dressed in clothes and speaking English (reference Appendix A, figure 4). Pickle looks like a stylized dog, and he has a talking bird friend that goes everywhere with him. The entire world created in the book is a human one, and the characters only maintain their animal identity based on outward appearance. Pickle drives a car, lives in a house and wears clothes, to name a few of his human qualities. Many other characters are also seen shopping and wearing clothes. This book is interesting in that it does include some animals that are portrayed in their natural form, best fitting Arbuthnot's third description. There is a dog being walked, and a cow in a field that has few signs of anthropomorphism, but all other background characters are humans in every way that matters. Similar conclusions can be drawn about *Fox at Night* by Corey Tabor. This story portrays a fox who is scared of monsters in the dark (reference Appendix A, figure 5). Fox sleeps in a tent, has binoculars, and uses a blanket. Even more child-like is Fox's fear of the dark because real foxes are nocturnal. The other characters, Bat, Raccoon, and Skunk, all also perform human activities such as flying a kite and playing the drums. Finally, in *What About Worms!?* by Ryan Higgens and Mo Willems, the story starts off with a frame narrative of Elephant and Piggie preparing to read the story, which is a very human ability (figure 6a). Then Tiger, who is afraid of worms, and loves flowers, apples, and books, is introduced (figure 6b). These are all things that a natural tiger would not necessarily be interested in. The worms that are introduced later on fit slightly in the second category, though. They talk amongst themselves and read but otherwise are portrayed as worms (figure 6c). The texts are full of many types of anthropomorphism towards animals, which all work to erase the character's animal qualities.

The use of animals as characters does take the direct comparison off the child when the character does something wrong but consequently makes connections to the lessons of the text more difficult for the child to apply. There are many justifications provided for anthropomorphism, all of which do not have the intended effect. Madhu Sharama explains a few possibilities. Animals are easier to make humorous, as it's less problematic to make fun of their actions than a child (219). When Pickle's car breaks down because he ran out of gas and doesn't realize, it's okay to laugh. After all, the main character is a pickle dog, which is a very unserious character in itself. We are still encouraging the child to directly compare themselves to this creature, though, by writing a book in which we encourage children to inhabit his perspective as the main character. Pickle gets help from the mechanic, as we encourage children to reach out to adults with more knowledge. Another reason behind anthropomorphism is that if an animal is hurt in some way while a lesson is taught, the reader is likely to be less concerned than if it was a child hurt (Sharama 218). This act has the unintended effect, though, of not teaching the lesson as effectively because the reader doesn't learn the full consequences of their actions due to this level of removal. Sharama further suggests that because children tend to think egocentrically, they expect an animal to act and speak just like them (216). They're afraid of the dark, so of course Fox would be too. The issue with this perspective is that adults are the ones anthropomorphizing, not the children! Children just read all these characters because that's what's handed to them.

These non-human characters can also be a way for authors to simplify diversity, but that means avoiding directly portraying human differences that children will encounter anyway. The lesson becomes more confusing because Tiger and the worms are supposed to teach children to accept one another as though human differences are equivalent to the differences between species. Animals can be popular characters because they're not easily gendered and do not have a specific race or nationality. This could make them more initially relatable to children from various backgrounds. Why does it make sense, though, to assume that a child is better capable of understanding an animal that is an entirely different species than they are than they would be of empathizing with a child that looks very similar to them with only a few small differences? The idea of a young reader being able to make all these connections between the anthropomorphized characters and themselves is a quite complex concept in itself.

Some might say that using animals allows the child to be more connected to the natural world, but they're not realistic depictions; after all, real foxes eat chicks. As Lisa Fraustino explains, using anthropomorphism to teach about animals is controversial due to fears of what it misteaches children about the natural world (145-146). For example, tigers are not naturally afraid of worms, and would likely just step on them without realizing, so *What About Worms!?* gives some misinformation about animals.

So, if the goal is to socialize children, why then use animals that complicate the human lessons? In Western culture, an animal is viewed as lesser than a human and something that does not need to be treated with the same respect as humans, as we believe we have the ultimate superiority in the natural world. These ideas have circulated for centuries by philosophers, religion, and evolutionary theories alike (Chapman & Huffman 2,4). Why then, do we want to compare our children to animals? Part of this comparison is rooted in the fact that adults (often subconsciously) view children as lesser than them, similarly to how we feel about humans and animals (Sharama 219). This belief is rooted in part in the debunked theory of recapitulation proposed by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, that the human embryo goes through all the past evolutionary stages of humanity in the womb (M.E. Barnes n.p.). Thomas Fallace adds that

children, specifically white children, were thought to go through all the evolutionary stages to become human during childhood, to ideally evolve beyond their parents (74, 85). As young children they prefer repetition, are driven by the basic need to survive, can't talk, and crawl on four limbs just like many animals, but as they age, they act more like fully evolved humans and break these habits. Although we do not follow recapitulation ideas anymore, there are clearly still remnants of it in our culture and it's a reason behind comparing children to animals. We see children as undeveloped adults who can be compared to animals, and therefore saturate their texts with anthropomorphism. Animals are unsocialized creatures without education so it's odd that we have decided that children should learn from them about our social world.

Whether it's used to connect children with the natural world, match their stage of development, or provide accepted humor, anthropomorphism is not a very effective strategy in teaching children lessons. Nicole Larsen conducted a study having adults read a picture book to preschoolers (3). The findings were that children learned and demonstrated prosocial behaviors much better when the character was human, which Rebekah Richert et al. also found in their similar study on preschoolers' ability to learn real-world lessons from fantasy (60). When a child reads an early reader, it seems intuitive that this finding would only intensify since there's not an adult around to reinforce the lesson the child is supposed to be grasping. If all the characters were human, that message could be clearer. Even if a child is clever enough to figure out that the animal character is supposed to represent them, why should the learning process be overly complicated?

Anthropomorphism is an extremely popular technique used in early readers, but clearly not effective or ethical in many early readers. It can degrade our youth, while simultaneously expecting them to make connections that are complex. For the first group of texts they're reading on their own, this strategy may need to be re-thought when one focuses on what the child learns from the text aside from reading skills. They're learning that they should see themselves as equal in value to animals instead of humans, since the animal characters are supposed to be stand-ins for children. Some fiction stories with anthropomorphized animals can be effective, but we seem to have concluded fantasy worlds are the only appropriate setting for a child to be engaged in.

Assumption 3: Children don't want to (learn to) read!

Children don't want to read. The statement seems counterintuitive as an assumption that presents itself while analyzing the books themselves, but justifying literacy for our youngest generation has been a long-standing habit throughout history, from *The New England Primer* to present. The primer focused on teaching children how to read, in order for them to be able to read the Bible and learn about Christianity (Smith n.p.), not necessarily for the joy of reading itself. Subsequent collections of texts incorporated teaching manners and social expectations as children learned reading: reading was conceptualized as largely utilitarian. For example, *Major's Alphabet*, likely published in the 1870's, portrays a child performing some action for each letter. Ann milks the cow while Benjamin bows, which are expected behaviors for children (1). Readers may be learning the alphabet a little in the process, but social norms play a large part as well. We want kids to read so they can learn other things, not so much for the sole act of reading. Even as we think of books as allowing access to knowledge, we also see reading as a threat.

This concept presents itself even now in our contemporary children's books. The idea of a child not wanting to read is evident in just how hard the books try to make sure a child won't want to put the book down in the middle of the story. Of course authors strive to make their texts engaging but there's an extra initiative when it comes to early readers. *Chick and Brain: Smell*

My Foot! by Cece Bell makes clear from its title how the book attempts to keep a child's attention (Appendix A, figure 10). The story is a silly graphic novel about using manners but is filled with scatological humor. The choice of form means there are always plenty of pictures in relation to words and action pushes plot just as much as dialogue to engage a reader. The words are minimized to reduce the textual reading necessary. Because it's so humorous in its content, the reader stays invested in this way too. *El Toro and Friends: Training Day* by Raúl the Third is also a graphic novel style, about a bull procrastinating training for his wrestling match and his rooster trainer trying to encourage him (Appendix A, figure 11). Since almost every page includes a character in an active pose, whether running, jumping, or rolling, the reader can easily stay focused on the story and excited to find out what comes next. They use color, excessive action scenes, and lots of pictures to coax a child into reading. Joanna Robertson claims the eye-catching elements are present because the stories are competing with the fast-paced digital world children are used to (92). The thought is if the story isn't overly eye-catching, then the child won't read the text. Is all that effort really necessary for a child to read though?

Many early readers rely on the graphic novel format, which has been tainted as a way to trick a child into reading when they otherwise don't want to. The choice of form both creates the impression of a text intended for an older audience and denies the book's literary status. For one, using a graphic novel style gives the impression it's a higher grade-level book, and thus a higher status book. Children don't want to be caught reading something so rudimentary as an early reader, especially if friends have already moved ahead in reading abilities. Graphic novels are usually associated with older kids, so this form can make a child feel they're reading a more advanced book. *Beak and Ally: Unlikely Friends* by Norman Feuti, about an alligator and bird becoming friends, uses chapters and graphic novel elements despite the simple text (Appendix A, figure 12). Using simple chapters allows the young reader to feel like they're reading a chapter book instead of still early readers.

On the other hand, graphic novels have received a reputation as not *real* reading, so a child who doesn't like reading may still be convinced to read a graphic novel. As Sean Connors explains, they're seen as a good tool for students who struggle with reading or simply don't like to read. The problem with thinking of graphic novels as a step towards reading is we inadvertently degrade these stories by assuming they're not ideal for the strongest readers (n.p.). Graphic novels are seen as an alternative book if necessary for a student who refuses or is struggling with the skill, despite the fact that the visual analysis a student does while consuming a graphic novel is actually an important modern-day skill. Most children don't necessarily have an innate hatred for reading, but we already put measures into place in their books under the belief that they will.

Using graphic novels isn't the only textual strategy implemented under the assumption that a child doesn't want to read early readers. Even the characters in the story work to convince the assumed reluctant reader of a book's value. A character reading directly shows new readers how they should feel about literacy and sets them up for the future (Papazian 72, 80; Arizpe & Smith 3). The characters model reading for the new reader because the child is thought to be incapable of otherwise seeing books positively. The rooster trainer, Kooky Dooky, in *Training Day*, reads through a to-do list. Reading is portrayed for the child as an easy activity that aids in daily life in this example because he reads with ease. Kooky Dooky reads the list without hesitation and while simultaneously talking. In *Beak and Ally: Unlikely Friends* Ally reads through an invitation for Beak's nest-warming party. Just as Kooky Dooky did, she reads easily and even comments afterwards, saying she doesn't really want to go. Ally reads the letter,

interprets it, and makes her own opinion, as a good reader would do. There is a picture of the letter too, so the child is sharing the experience of reading with Ally. The fact that both of these texts chose to not only represent reading but also through means other than a book, is significant. The choice emphasizes the utilitarian purposes of reading for children, instead of for the joy reading could bring them. We are telling them they should learn to read to function in society, but not necessarily because it's pleasurable.

The early readers use content outside of the actual story to motivate the reader as well, often which takes away from the supposed independence of an early reader. For example, the stories are often leveled from publishers to encourage progression. Leveling is a built-in motivation and reward tactic because children are encouraged to continue forward beyond the lower leveled books. Instead of wanting to read a book simply to enjoy it, the child is only trying to read so they can get past the initial learning-how-to-read stage. *Fox at Night* is rated as level F, and *Nothing Fits a Dinosaur* as well as *Worm and Caterpillar are Friends* are considered Ready-To-Read level 1. Level F or level 1 are arbitrary in comparison to each other, and therefore don't have value. This is yet another marketing strategy, which encourages parents to buy the next level of books from that publisher. There is no direct relation to Lexile, and categorizing involves a varying combination of elements for each publisher ("Reading Levels" n.p.). We're just assuming a child cannot find motivation in the act of reading itself and therefore need to incorporate behaviorist practices such as operant conditioning to reinforce the act of reading. The overjustification effect occurs when rewards are given for intrinsically motivated activities; the result is reduced personal desire to do the task and usually less success at the behavior. Some extrinsic motivators can be helpful, but the goal should be to push students to find intrinsic motivation for literacy (Hunter 2). Leveling creates a feedback loop, as it ensures that a child will not be only reading for pleasure anymore, and therefore confirms our thoughts that children don't like reading or learning to read. Most texts include a section for the guardians as well, which only further reinforces the need for children to be tricked into reading. The books in the *I Can Read* line from the publisher HarperCollins all begin with a note to parents stating, "Your child's love of reading starts here!" implying they will not have a desire to read on their own, and these books will be the motivation for them to get there. Even the name of the line is trying to encourage a belief in a child as if desire to read is not possible on their own. The idea of an early reader is that the text should be able to be consumed completely independently by the young literate, but it's rare that a text is fully inclusive to their audience. Both *Smell my Foot!* and *Training Day* have author descriptions on the back covers that tout the author's award winning books and provide credibility only important to adults. Children often love learning new things, but we act as if they do not unless heavily prompted by adults.

Why do the early readers use so many different strategies to get a child to read? The variety of techniques that unnaturally push the child into reading stem from the opposing cultural views of learning for young children. As a society, we think learning leads to maturation, which can be positive or negative, so we want kids to learn to read but also discourage it in other subtle ways. We have held on to the Romantic view of childhood from the nineteenth century, even though times have changed significantly since then. This belief, which was not accurate even at the time, sees children as innocent creatures to be protected while childhood is a nostalgic time to be savored (Blakemore n.p.). From a Romantic lens, reading is a way to lose innocence since knowledge leads to awareness about adversity and the child is reaching closer to adulthood. We simultaneously expect young society members to learn in order to be active citizens in

adulthood. In our contemporary society fear of knowledge through books manifests itself in book-banning practices. Children do love to learn, though, and grasp insight about their world.

We're thinking about learning how to read in the wrong way. By hierarchizing texts to devalue visual literacy, addressing the adult buyer instead of the child, and using the characters to teach positive literacy views because negativity is assumed, we forget the true purpose of these texts and ignore the lived experience of the child-readers. In our multi-literate world, words are only a part of interpreting our media. Images and body language play just as large a role. *Training Day* is a great example of the phenomenon because it's a bilingual and multi-literate text. The story is told using both English and Spanish, and the pictures tell additional details. When a child read this book, they're gaining reading skills in three languages at once, English, Spanish, and images, which inadvertently teaches social skills, as mentioned in the first assumption. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development has done many international studies of children, including studies on literacy. Most recently they concluded that using digital technology and accurately identifying fact from fiction are also part of reading literacy (n.p.). Reading is complex and requires analyzing content in many forms, whether online, on paper, through pictures, or through words. Robertson even explains how we live in a multimodal world today and children's texts should be reflective of the world (94). Reading is not just about words and hasn't been for quite some time now. Instead, reading is about analyzing subtle patterns to gain meaning.

We don't know how to feel about children learning to read, so we send the newly literate opposing messages about how to feel. We put measures in place to ensure they'll want to keep reading both as part of and outside of the story while making the child question their initial positive views on books. Early readers are supposed to support the reading process and get the student excited to read but often this is taken to extreme measures. Creating texts already under the assumption the new reader will not want to engage with the story will only push the idea on the child that they shouldn't enjoy reading, creating a feedback loop which reinforces the assumption and makes it seem accurate.

How do we make the early reader about the early readers that gave the books their name?

It's no mystery that the beliefs of the author and publishers, which come from broader society, will be integrated into the stories they write and publish. Tony Scott explains that all writing has ideologies behind it because it's impossible to separate the culture and experiences of a writer from their writing (48). This means that even in the simplest children's books, cultural influences will always seep into the story whether intended or not. If the beliefs are present in children's books, there's no doubt that they'll encounter the same expectations, potentially even stronger in their daily lives. When adults shape child media partially assuming the child won't want to read, or relate to animals, or need more focus on social skills, the child learns to believe it to be true as well. Why focus on all the deficits of a child instead of their strengths? It's not that all the beliefs are inherently negative, and many hold truth behind them, but the excess of very few assumptions focused on the child's lack of skills and then used across the texts they read create the problem.

So what would an ideal early reader look like? Of course assumptions are natural parts of all texts, but we need to consider the impact of choices on the child more deeply prior to publishing as well as diversify the contents of these books. For one, anthropomorphism as a tool to encompass diversity does not work. Instead authors should strive to use human characters that represent a variety of experiences. Another challenge is that the texts cannot accommodate every

child individually as they need to be mass marketed to be profitable. There can be more variety in the themes, though, to appeal to a greater audience of children. For example, there could be stories addressing specific or more generalized adversities of this age group such as losing a pet, a family member falling ill, cyberbullying and safety, or learning differences among peers. These texts are available, but not prominent enough amongst the vast array of similar themed texts. To limit the ideology that kids shouldn't like reading and prepare them for the world of today, we must continue to embrace literary techniques that teach to our digital age and stop teaching reading as though it's a mountain to climb as quickly as possible.

Through this deep analysis of early readers, I aim to give the early reader more recognition for the impact it makes as well as its influence on the young mind. I also hope to provide some reflection for the creators and buyers alike to think about what the book is telling a child on a deeper level especially when the child is presented with a multitude of books following similar assumptions. Future research should focus on the actual impacts of these themes as this analysis was restricted to early readers a child would in theory have the most access to. The Kids' Book Choice Awards, archived in 2022, would be a great way to gather data if continued and expanded to include early readers. Although with limitations, my research exposes potential flaws in the current formation of early readers to encourage a scholarly conversation on early reader content and make some of these changes going forward for the good of the young literates.

Works Consulted:

American Library Association. "Awards & Grants: Book and Media Awards." *Association for Library Service to Children*, American Library Association, www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia. Accessed 9 Nov. 2024.

Arizpe, Evelyn, and Vivienne Smith. *Children as Readers in Children's Literature: The Power of Texts and the Importance of Reading*. 1st ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

Barnes, M. Elizabeth. "Ernst Haeckel's Biogenetic Law (1866)." *Embryo Project Encyclopedia*, Arizona State University, 3 May 2014, embryo.asu.edu/pages/ernst-haeckels-biogenetic-law-1866.

Bell, Cece. *Chick and Brain: Smell My Foot!* Candlewick Press, 2021.

Blakemore, Erin. "Wordsworth and the Invention of Childhood." *JSTOR Daily*, JSTOR, 28 Sept. 2015, daily.jstor.org/wordsworth-and-the-invention-of-childhood/.

Cepeda, Joe. *The Best Worst Camp Out Ever.* Holiday House, 2024.

Chapman, Colin A., and Michael A. Huffman. "Why do we want to think humans are different?" *Animal Sentience*, vol. 3, no. 23, 1 Jan. 2018, https://doi.org/10.51291/2377-7478.1358.

"Child Development: 6 to 12 Years (School Age)." *Children's Hospital of Orange County*, 7 Mar. 2025, choc.org/ages-stages/6-to-12-years/.

Connors, Sean. "'The Best of Both Worlds': Rethinking the Literary Merit of Graphic Novels." *Virginia Tech Scholarly Communication University Libraries*, Digital Library and Archives of the Virginia Tech University Libraries, 2010, scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v37n3/connors.html.

Emberley, Michael. *I Did It!* Holiday House, 2022.

Fallace, Thomas. "The Savage Origins of Child-Centered Pedagogy, 1871-1913." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2015, pp. 73–103. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24546722. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

Fenske, Jonathan. *Nothing Fits a Dinosaur.* Simon Spotlight, 2021.

Feuti, Norman. *Beak & Ally #1: Unlikely Friends*. HarperAlley, 2021.

Fraustino, Lisa Rowe. “The Rights and Wrongs of Anthropomorphism Is Picture Books.” *Ethics and Children’s Literature*, edited by Claudia Mills, 1st ed., Ashgate Publishing, 2014, pp. 145–162, Accessed 10 Oct. 2025.

Gubar, Marah. “Risky business: Talking about children in children’s literature criticism.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4, Dec. 2013, pp. 450–457, https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2013.0048.

Hade, Daniel, and Laura Anne Hudock. “Redefining the early reader in an era of multiliteracies: Visual language of Mo Willems’ Elephant and piggie series.” *The Early Reader in Children’s Literature and Culture*, edited by Jennifer Miskec and Annette Wannamaker, 2016, pp. 88–99, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679631-14.

Higgins, Ryan T., and Mo Willems. *What about Worms!?* Hyperion Books for Children, 2020.

Horning, Kathleen T. “Easy Readers and Transitional Books.” *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children’s Books*, 1st ed., HarperCollins, 1997, pp. 121–148.

Hunter, Phyllis S. “Raising Students Who Want to Read.” *Scholastic Professional Paper*, Scholastic, 2005, https://teacher.scholastic.com/products/independent_reading/scholastic_reading_counts/pdfs/2084_SRC-Hunter_brochure.pdf

Kantorovitz, Sylvie. *A New Car for Pickle*. Holiday House, 2024.

LaRochelle, David, and Mike Wohnoutka. *See the Cat: Three Stories about a Dog.* Candlewick Press, 2020.

Larsen, Nicole E., et al. “Do storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviors in young children?” *Developmental Science*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2 Aug. 2017, https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12590.

“Major’s Alphabet (A-B, U-W).” *Digitalcollections.Lib.Washington.Edu*, digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/childrens/id/607/rec/1. Accessed 6 May 2025.

Markowsky, Juliet Kellogg. “Why Anthropomorphism in Children’s Literature?” *Elementary English*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1975, pp. 460–66. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41592646. Accessed 7 Sept. 2024.

McAlister, Tiffany. “Review of Worm and Caterpillar Are Friends: Ready-to-Read Graphics Level 1.” Amazon, 18 Sept. 2025, https://www.amazon.com/Worm-Caterpillar-Friends-Ready-Read/dp/1665920009.

“Milestones by 5 Years.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 18 Apr. 2025, www.cdc.gov/act-early/milestones/5-years.html.

Nodelman, Perry. “Six Texts: Different Texts Same Genre.” *The Hidden Adult*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008, pp. 1–8.

“Outgrowing Emotional Egocentricity.” *Max-Planck-Gesellschaft*, 26 May 2014, www.mpg.de/8229113/children-emotional-egocentricity.

Panaou, Petros, et al. "Beginning Readers’ Interest in Animal Books: An Analysis of Data Collected from the Children’s Choices Project." *Journal of Literary Education* 1 (2018): 175-192.

Papazian, Gretchen. “Reading reading in the early reader: Mindset, emotion, and power.” *The Early Reader in Children’s Literature and Culture*, edited by Jennifer Miskec and Annette Wannamaker, 2016, pp. 71–87, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679631-13.

Raúl the Third. *El Toro & Friends: Training Day.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2021.

“Reading Levels.” *Bartholomew County Public Library*, 2024, mybcpl.org/reading-levels.

"Reading Literacy | OECD." *Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development*, 2025, www.oecd.org/en/topics/reading-literacy.html.

Richert, Rebekah A., et al. "Learning from fantasy and real characters in preschool and kindergarten." *Journal of Cognition and Development*, vol. 10, no. 1–2, 30 Apr. 2009, pp. 41–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/15248370902966594.

Robertson, Joanna M. "Chapter 7: Influence of the Digital Age on Children's Literature and Its Use in the Classroom." *Steps to Success: Crossing the Bridge Between Literacy Research and Practice*, Open SUNY, 2016, pp. 90–107, https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/265. Accessed 5 May 2025.

Ruzzier, Sergio. *Fox and Chick: The Quiet Boat Ride and Other Stories.* Chronicle Books, 2019.

Tabor, Corey R. *Fox at Night.* Balzer + Bray, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2021.

Scott, Tony. "Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015, pp. 48-50.

Serafini, Frank. "Images of reading and the reader." *The Reading Teache*r, vol. 57, no. 7, 2004, pp. 610–17. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20205407. Accessed 7 Sept. 2024.

Sharama, Madhu. "Animals as humans: Psychological reasons of using animal characters in children's books." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 215–220.

Smith, Samuel James. "The New England Primer." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 26 Apr. 2025, www.britannica.com/topic/alphabet-writing.

Tabor, Corey R. *Fox at Night.* Balzer + Bray, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2021.

Wannamaker, Annette, and Jennifer M. Miskec. "Introduction: Early, easy, first, beginner, chapter." *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture*, 2016, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679631-6.

Windness, Kaz. *Worm and Caterpillar Are Friends.* Simon Spotlight, 2023.

Winkler, Erin N. "Children are not colorblind: How young children learn race." *PACE: Practical Approaches for Continuing Education* 3.3 (2009): 1-8.

Appendix A:

1. (Fox and Chick: The Quiet Boat Ride)

This image depicts two anthropomorphized characters, named Fox and Chick (their names correspond to the animal they're supposed to be) going on a boat ride together. They both stand on two legs. Chick asks Fox multiple questions, such as if he can be captain, what a captain does, and if there are sea monsters. Fox explains that captains are supposed to be quiet. Fox rows the rowboat while chick chats away. The setting is simplistic, with just the water and some mountains in the background, which are orange and green. The water is a greenish color, and the scene uses a watercolor palate. The page is designed in a graphic novel style with 7 panels across the two pages and only dialogue.

2. (Worm and Caterpillar and Friends)

This image depicts two friends, Worm and Caterpillar, who are anthropomorphized versions of the animals they're named after. Worm believes the two are the same, while Caterpillar tries to explain otherwise. Worm is pink and purple striped while Caterpillar is orange and green striped with tiny green legs. Both creatures are in an upright position, with most of their bodies off the ground, as if they're standing up. The setting is simplistic using a watercolor palate with brown dirt beneath them and a flower looming over the top of them in the first panel. The page is designed in a graphic novel style with three panels and only dialogue.

3. (I Did It!)

This image depicts five creatures trying to help their friend ride a bike. Few of the creatures are clear in what kind of being they're supposed to be, but there appears to be a raccoon, robots, alligator, and puffin. They're all anthropomorphic and wear clothes. The main creature is much larger than the friends and sits on a yellow bike with a green and pink helmet, and striped onesie.

They encourage their friend to keep trying as they all repeat various versions of “I can do it!” The background is completely white, and the story is told only through dialogue.

4. (A New Car for Pickle)

This image depicts a graphic novel style book with 4 panels on each page (8 total) in a hand drawn style. All the scenes use simple depictions for objects, such as a triangle and square to make a house. The main character is an anthropomorphized dog named Pickle, that looks like a pickle (he is green with dark green ears), talks and walks on two legs. His anthropomorphized bird friend wakes him up from his windowsill. Pickle wakes up, looks outside, and decides to get strawberry and cream from a local farm while getting dressed. He dresses in a yellow dotted shirt, blue cap, and green pants.

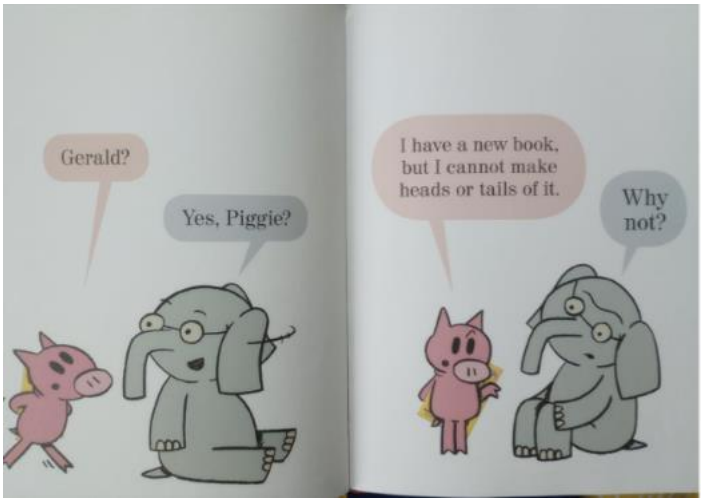
5. (Fox at Night)

This image depicts an anthropomorphized fox (named Fox) who is discussing a fear of monsters in the night and then looks outside his yellow tent for monsters with binoculars. Fox walks on two legs. Fox has a pink blanket with white dots wrapped around them and gray binoculars around their neck. There is a thought bubble above Foxes head on the first page with three black

monsters with various amounts of eyes) The setting on the second page is a blue starry sky and shadowed tree blobs in the background.

6. (What About Worms!?)

6a.

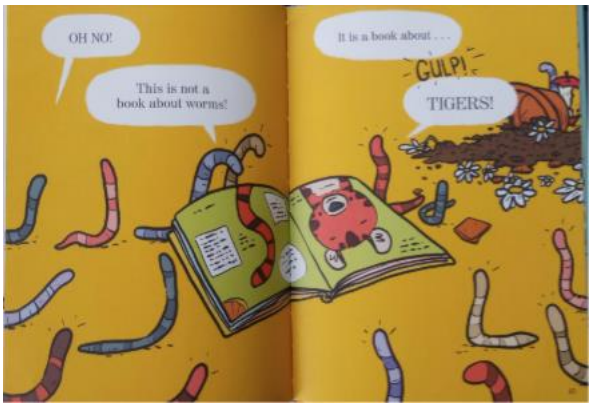


Piggie (a pink pig) shares a new yellow book with Gerald (a gray elephant) which is the book that the reader then goes on to read with these characters. They are anthropomorphic and sketch design characters who walk/sit on two legs, with white space in the background.

6b.

A tiger shares his fear of worms because they're slimy, wiggle, and hard to tell where their head is. The tiger is anthropomorphized with an orange body, brown stripes, and cream belly, ears, and paws. The character walks on two feet with a long tail. While listing their fears of worms, Tiger is shaking and sweating. There is no background beside the tiger.

6c.



This image shows worms crowded around a book about tigers talking about their fear of tigers. In the background is a tipped over flowerpot with dirt and flowers coming out and an apple core. The page is yellow with red, blue, and tan striped worms. They are upright with half their bodies in the air looking at the book. Besides their colorfulness and speech, they look like typical worms.

7. (Chick and Brain: Smell my Foot!)

There are six panels here of a fictional depiction of a yellow chick with a large orange beak and a human-like creature with string arms and legs attached to more realistic feet and hands. They have cream colored skin with a long nose, white underwear with red hearts, and hair that looks like a brain. This character leans out of the panels to try to get Chick to smell the foot while chick waves their feather arms to say no. Chick then leans out of the panel to get away from the foot and turns away.

8. (El Toro and Friends: Training Day)

This is a very colorful scene. The fictional orange and red rooster trainer wears a yellow jacket and whistle, using its feathers as arms. They read from a long piece of paper before rolling it up and poking the bull (who is in bed) with their feet. The fictional bull is purple with a nose ring and pink mouth, and orange horns. They wear a pink night cap with yellow stars on it and lay in bed under a purple blanket with yellow stars. They look annoyed as the rooster tries to get them out of bed and point out they have bare feet.

9. (Beak and Ally: Unlikely Friends)

There are five panels of a fictional green alligator on two legs that receives a letter. She reads the letter about a nest warming party with a picture of a nest on it after taking it out of her white mailbox that says “Ally.” In one hand is the letter and in the other, the envelope. The alligator has a series of panels contemplating what to do with various thinking expressions. She stands with a marshy area behind, a gray rock and two pink flowers growing next to where she stands.