



12. A is for ... awareness. Fostering interspecies awareness through nonfiction ABC picturebooks

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Abstract The overall objective of this chapter is to explore *whether a selected corpus of ABC picturebooks may foster interspecies awareness between humans and other animals*. I will discuss how knowledge is organized and communicated both verbally and visually in a corpus of three ABCs about animals typical of Australia. Based on the analysis, I will examine how the reader is offered routes of communication in the selected ABCs and whether these routes are in tune with ideas of interspecies ethics.

Keywords ABC picturebooks, Australian animals, interspecies ethics, routes of communication

INTRODUCTION

As the title indicates, an overall objective of this chapter is to explore *whether a selected corpus of ABC picturebooks may foster interspecies awareness between humans and other animals*. While many ABC picturebooks (henceforth ABC/ABCs) contain word-letter-illustration spreads with no coherent correspondence between the spreads and an overarching idea guiding the choice of words, some ABCs target specific topics, like flowers (Barker, 2002), railways (Townend, 2014), birthdays (Stein, 2011), rooms (Roskifte, 2004), and animals (like the ones selected for this chapter).

In this chapter, my aim is threefold. First, I will present a few ideas about what makes an ABC nonfictional. Second, and based on previous research on

children's nonfiction, I will discuss how knowledge is organized and communicated both verbally and visually in a specific corpus of three ABCs in which each letter is an acroponic word for an animal typical of Australia. The corpus consists of Jennifer Cossins's *A–Z of Australian animals* (2018), Frané Lessac's *A is for Australian animals* (2017), and Warren Brim and Anna Eglitis's *Creatures of the rainforest* (2005). Finally, against the background of theoretical perspectives on interspecies ethics, I will examine how the reader is offered routes of communication in the selected ABCs and whether these routes are in tune with interspecies awareness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – ABCS, NONFICTION, AND INTERSPECIES ETHICS

The immediate answer to the question *What makes ABCs nonfictional?* would perhaps be that they impart alphabetic knowledge about the visual appearance of the letter, the alphabetical order, and the sound/letter connection. However, referring to Perry Nodelman (2001), who explores the many strategies for meaning-making the readers of alphabet books must face or possess, one may question if ABCs really do have the potential to impart alphabetic knowledge. The aim of this chapter is not to follow up on this discussion, but, instead, to carry out an approach based on the idea that some abecedaries teach about the world through images and the interplay between words and images (Litaudon, 2018, p. 170; Skyggebjerg, 2018, p. 63).

According to Anna Karlskov Skyggebjerg (2018), who has studied ABCs as an intersectional field between aesthetic (poetry and visuality) and teaching material, ABCs, in addition to teaching letters, mediate appropriate world views by introducing specific knowledge about nature, culture, and religion (p. 63). Leaning on Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's concept of the aesthetic, Skyggebjerg underscores the importance of the ABCs' aesthetic expression, both verbal and visual, in the learning process. She claims that through sensory appeal ABCs prepare readers for wondering and reflection, which in turn may lead to new knowledge and understanding (Skyggebjerg, 2018, p. 66).

Hence, to determine the nonfictionality of artistic ABCs, one should take a closer look at the nouns, objects, images, and concepts evoked by the letters. When ABCs present illustrations of real-world objects, places, plants, art works, and animals and connect them with their associated names, one may assume that they impart some sort of knowledge about the world. ABCs connecting letters and animals clearly single out a specific field of knowledge, and some such books will link to other genres,

for instance encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Animal ABCs are not only about animal facts, but also offer a way to become aware of the puzzling connection between a verbal and a visual language (or sign system), which introduces readers to a way of communicating or sharing the world with others. A timely question to address may be how and what these animal ABCs teach about the animals' nature and the possible interspecies relations between humans and other animals.

While several scholars have studied general characteristics of children's ABCs (Nodelman, 2001; Thomas, 2005; Litaudon, 2018; Skyggebjerg, 2018), only a few have directed their research towards animal representations. Skyggebjerg (2018), whose study covers a variety of ABCs, notes that many books combine reflections on the relationship between humans and animals with an emphasis on the companionship between children and animals (p. 60). In contrast to the linguistically guided letter and form focus in much previous research, Jennifer Ford (2019) considers the ways animals are represented in ABCs. Her study is enriched and motivated by Giorgio Agamben's idea of the anthropological machine and Jacques Derrida's intriguing observations that by giving names to animals, humans tend to unsee their animality. Ford (2019) claims that "[c]oncepts of early literacy are prioritized in such a way that early concepts and images of animals can be paradoxically hidden, obscured, lost or displaced, depoliticized" (p. 222). Her study reveals that most animals represented in ABCs are typically the so-called exotic and charismatic or cute ones, which are often also at high risk of extinction without that being called to attention (p. 226). She consequently calls for studies challenging the culturally coded cuteness ideology in ABCs.

My study is motivated by this appeal, but while the ABCs studied by Ford only seem to have in common that they are ABCs in which animals are named and depicted in relation to some or most letters, the ABCs I have selected are all focused on Australian animals, which in many cases represent a particular fauna that has proved to be especially sensitive to the ways humans behave and treat the environment. Recently this has become evident in connection with the Australian bushfire crisis in 2019–2020. A telling example could be the Australian Environment Minister Sussan Ley's announcement in January 2020 that Australia's koala population had taken an extraordinary hit during the bushfires and could be listed as endangered.

In contrast to Ford's analytical focus, I will not limit my analysis to the study of whether ABCs support or maintain a hierarchical order of humans and animals or an ethical binary between the two. I am interested in whether the sensory verbal and visual animal representations in my material may prepare readers for wondering and reflection and foster interspecies ethics and awareness. In line with posthumanist thinking in general, interspecies awareness deals with how to

provide a basis for a life in common or an awareness of belonging across humans and other animal species. My understanding of what it takes to obtain interspecies awareness or how to promote it is based on Cynthia Willett's *Interspecies ethics* (2014), which draws insight from intellectual and social movements in the context of transspecies ideals of communitarianism and cosmopolitan peace. Within interspecies theory the main question is how to restore ethical practices that sustain cohabitation and biosocial interconnectedness. According to Willett (2014), these practices have been nearly lost with modernization, and modern humans have forgotten how to live with other animals (p. 5). To restore them we need to challenge human exceptionalism, that is, behaviours that separate rather than attune, and immerse with other species in a biosocial web (p. 6).

Attunement is a keyword for Willett (2014), and she highlights the affect attunement imbedded in the rhythmic, tonal, or gestural patterns or dynamic of genuine 'call and response' communication (p. 13). It is important to stress that this attunement through call and response should also be manifest when engaging with species far removed from ourselves in their sensibilities and biocultures and which may initially strike us as not only strange or insignificant, but also as without any charisma or cuteness (p. 13).

Building on Willett's ideas of interspecies ethics, I will narrow down my focus and study how nonfiction ABCs focusing on Australian animals may prepare readers for affect attunement. Willett (2014) may give us some clues when she notes that a poetic discourse, which is nonmirroring, highlights the "resonance of meanings communicated across distinct sensory modes, such as between a vocal sound and a physical gesture or a color and a sound" (p. 14). According to Willett (2014), "affects flow back and forth" and affect attunement establishes "routes of communication" (p. 89) and "opens pathways across coevolved or parallel creatures (...)" (p. 99). In the following, I will turn to the selected ABCs and look for routes of communication through poetic sounds, colours, and gestures.

A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE ANALYTICAL FOCUS

The analytical framework (Fig. 12.1) is based on an analysis tool presented and motivated in previous studies (Goga, 2019; Goga, 2020) that builds on theoretical considerations of ways of analysing children's nonfiction put forth by researchers in the field of children's nonfiction (Mallett, 2004; Goga, 2008; Larkin-Lieffers, 2010; Skyggebjerg, 2011; 2012; Mallan & Cross, 2014; Sanders, 2018; von Merveldt, 2018). An overall concern in the research literature is to acknowledge that knowledge

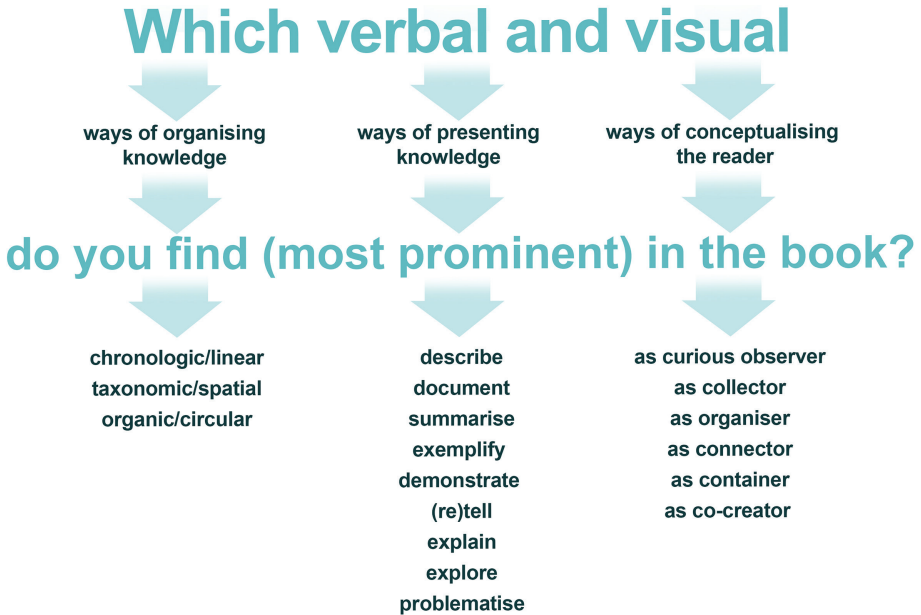


Figure 12.1 A possible analytical tool for examining nonfiction children’s and YA books (Goga, 2019).

dissemination may be both verbal and visual. The scholarly works point out three general approaches to children’s nonfiction, that is, to study how knowledge is organized, by which ‘speech genres’ knowledge is presented, and how the books address and position the reader.

Most children’s nonfiction will probably combine many of the ways listed. Nevertheless, closer examination of a single work will almost certainly reveal that some ways will dominate over others. The choices made by authors, illustrators, designers, and publishers are usually related to the topic of the books and to the primary readers addressed by the book. The analysis tool should primarily be used to map out dominating tendencies in each object of analysis and, possibly, to compare the findings with tendencies in other comparable objects of analysis.

The analysis of the selected material will be structured as follows: I will first motivate the choice of material and map out the specific characteristics of each of the books. Second, I will present an overview of which animals the various books have in common and then concentrate my analyses on a few doublespreads of each book, which will enable me to compare the ways two specific animals (the echidna and the platypus) are represented to the readers.

THREE AUSTRALIAN ABCS ABOUT AUSTRALIAN ANIMALS

While animal representations in many ABCs tend to be occasional and/or stereotyped (like lion for L or elephant for E), the animals selected in the material of this study all represent Australian animals and seem to serve purposes other than or in addition to that of learning about letters and the alphabet. Hence, the alphabet works more like a cataloguing principle for an encyclopaedic introduction to the fauna of a determinate geographical area. Following up on this, and in line with Patricia Crain (2000), who claims that the words and images attributed to ABC's letters in any particular time and place suggest how a culture "make[s] sense of itself" (p. 18), one could question whether such books are potentially nation forming conveying a specifically Australian nature identity.

In total the three books, *A-Z of Australian animals*, *A is for Australian animals*, and *Creatures of the rainforest*, present 66 different Australian animals. While the *A-Z of Australian animals* and *Creatures of the rainforest* have limited their animals to only one for each letter, the *A is for Australian animals* has decided for some letters to include two (the letters B, E, F, M, P, R, S, T, and W) or three (the letter K) animals. Some animals are included in two of the books,¹ and a few animals are presented in all three books, namely the dingo, the echidna, and the platypus. I have selected the echidna and the platypus as samples for the closing inquiry of my analysis. This is not only because they are depicted in all three books, but also, referring to Cossins's introduction to the reader, because the echidna and the platypus "[p]robably [are] the most unusual of our native animals" (2018).

About the books

A-Z of Australian animals, by Tasmanian artist Jennifer Cossins, was published in 2018. In 2017 Cossins's *A-Z of endangered animals* was a CBCA Honour Book-winner. The design and layout of *A-Z of Australian animals* are the same as those of the *A-Z of endangered animals*, and each doublespread has the same layout. The letter in focus is at the top of the left-hand page followed by the "is for" leading the reader towards the top text of the right-hand page, where the name of the animal in focus is revealed. Although conventional in ABCs, the formula 'A is for ...' attracts some sort of attention or tends to tune in the reader's attention to sounds.

1 *A-Z of Australian animals* and *A is for Australian animals* share bilby, frillnecked-lizard, koala, numbat, quokka, sugar glider, Tasmanian devil, wombat, and zebra finch. *A is for Australian animals* and *Creatures of the rainforest* share flying fox, goanna, kookaburra, Ulysses butterfly, wallaby, and yabby. *A-Z of Australian animals* and *Creatures of the rainforest* share cassowary and jabiru.

The way the formula is positioned on the doublespread supports this tuning in with the dots prolonging the suspense and sharpening the ears.

The name of the animal is supported by a realistic but still conventionalized portrait of the example of the species. The animal is usually depicted sideways or slightly turned towards the reader as a way of establishing a sort of contact or line of communication. Another typical feature regarding the illustration is that the habitat or environmental conditions of the animal in question are only barely depicted.

Except for the animal's name on the right-hand page, all verbal text is to be found on the left-hand page. The text for each animal is always presented in the same way, containing information about the size and scientific name at the top and a carefully selected 'interesting fact' at the bottom. The overall layout gives the impression that the imparting of knowledge will be easy to follow. The verbal text is organized in a rather standard spatial or scientific way, by first presenting or listing facts and *information* about distribution (where it can be found), food habits, and physical skills. The final paragraph often focuses on the living conditions, including the conservation status, and *explains* the actual situation and the reasons for it. In this part the text is more organic and open to the readers' engagement. The 'interesting fact' part is a sort of curiosity, or remarkable or marvellous information which, according to Joe Sutliff Sanders (2018, pp. 199–222), may invite the reader to a critical engagement with the book.

A is for Australian animals, by American Frané Lessac, was published in 2017. The book was shortlisted to the Wilderness Society Environment Book Award in 2018 and to the West Australian Young Readers' Book Award in 2019. It received the Outstanding Science Trade Books award in 2019. The layout of the doublespreads is very different from that in *A–Z of Australian animals*. Most striking is perhaps the differences in how the verbal text is distributed on the pages, in the use of full bleed illustrations, and in the depiction of animals' environmental conditions (see Fig. 12.2). In addition, the reader is presented with several specimens of the species. While Jennifer Cossins's illustrations were realistic but conventionalized, Lessac's illustrations are vaguer paintings, with a great deal of attention paid to the surroundings, the sea, water, and the sky, leaving the reader with an idyllic or often harmonious impression of the animal's life. The placing of verbal information, of animals engaging with their environment, and details of plant life repeatedly leads the reader's gaze back and around. Hence, the illustration organizes the knowledge about the animals' life in both an organic way and a linear way (be it a coastline, a riverbank, or the horizon as a parallel to the line of reading). One may say that the illustration invites readers to *explore* the land of the animals.



Figure 12.2 A is for Australian animals (2017), by Frané Lessac, Walker Books Australia.

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The verbal text, presented seemingly randomly on the page, brings bits and pieces of classic scientific knowledge or facts to the reader: special behaviours, physical skills, and nutrition. The texts mostly state, document, or summarize the information. While the *A–Z of Australian animals* presented some information as ‘interesting facts’, the *A is for Australian animals* seems to present all facts at the same level or as equally important. The verbal text of *A is for Australian animals* seems to have little potential to evoke affect attunement. The information is presented in the same syntactical way: “The platypus is ... A platypus can find food ... Platypuses use webbed feet to swim” (Lessac, 2017). Few characteristic words (like adjectives or adverbs) are used to affect the reader or to provide space for an interspecies encounter. The possible encounter or an imparting of knowledge based on affect attunement may take place in the reader’s exploration of the illustration of the life-supporting environmental conditions of the animal. For example, for the platypus, the blue water and the warm yellow sky, and the green belt of trees and bushes may encourage the readers, or ‘travellers’ through the book, to get in touch with ‘the residents’.

The final example, the *Creatures of the rainforest*, by the Djabugay artist Warren Brim and the Australian artist Anna Eglitis, was published in 2005. The book was shortlisted by the Children’s Book Council of Australia for the 2006 Children’s Book of the Year Award and, also in 2006, shortlisted for the Eve Pownall Award. The animals selected to be listed in alphabetical order are all found in Djabugay country, but many of them are also found in other parts of Australia.

The artists are explicit about the aim of the book, that is, “to help people to see how everyone can share their culture, their dreams and their spirituality” (Brim & Eglitis, 2005), and every doublespread exemplifies this sharing, working together, and dialogic attitude to culture – and nature. This is demonstrated most strikingly through the two stylistically different visual representations of the animal, or creature, presented on the doublespread and through the naming of the animal in both the English (which decides the letter) and the Djabugay languages (see Fig. 12.3). I would describe this way of imparting knowledge about the animals as organic. I will argue that the various visual representations signal that even though the animals exist and have some specific characteristic features like size, colour, and form, they may also be explored, perceived, or experienced in other culturally influenced ways comprising dreams, personal sensations, or some sort of social identity. Although the illustrations on the left-hand page are always the ones that are most realistic, they are also artistically done and hence open to aesthetic interpretations.

The verbal texts present facts about distribution, reproduction, and physical appearance. A closer look at the words chosen to present these facts reveals that

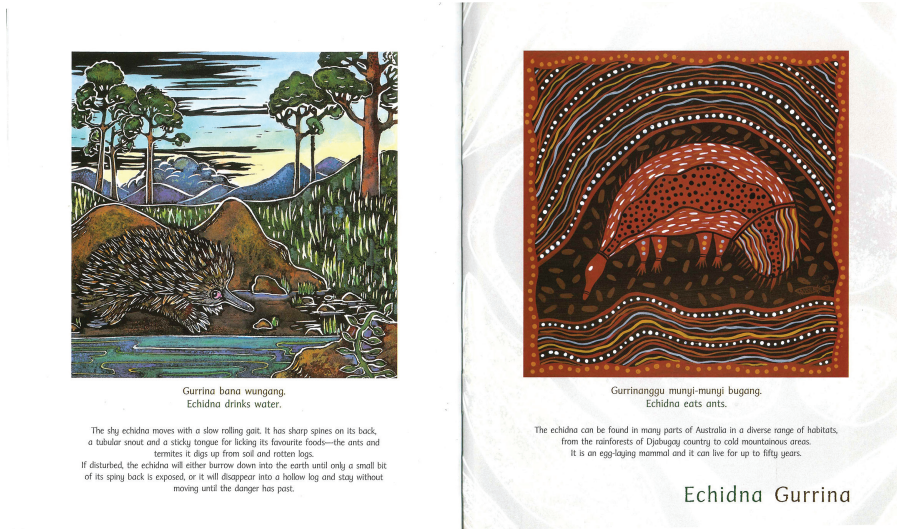


Figure 12.3 *Creatures of the rainforest* (2005), by Warren Brim and Anna Eglitis, Magabala Books.

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several poetic strategies have been integrated into the text. One such strategy is the use of alliteration, often in relation to adjectives that emphasize the animals' visual appearance: "The shy echidna moves with a slow rolling gait. It has sharp spines on its back. A tubular snout and a sticky tongue for licking its favourite foods" (Brim & Eglitis, 2005). Consequently, the verbal text not only presents straight and loosely or spatially connected scientific facts, it also describes and explores the object of study through sensuous language, which also gives the impression of a more organic way of organizing the knowledge about the animals.

Routes of communication

To decide about how the readers are addressed and positioned to engage with the books, I will look more closely at the wrapping. I will first turn to the back of the books, a paratextual place where the primary reader is often addressed and encouraged to read critically (Sanders, 2018, pp. 107–132). In the light of Willett's notion of 'affect attunement', I will examine the reader application (two of three books address a 'you'), the verbal emphasis on positive, enthralling, and enthusiastic words, and, finally, the choice and position of the illustrative elements.

Both *Creatures of the rainforest* and *A-Z of Australian animals* explicitly address a ‘you’. *Creatures of the rainforest* addresses the reader through questions: “Have you heard about the red-eyed green tree frog (...)” and urges the reader to “[u]ncover the secrets of a Queensland rainforest...”. In the third book, *A is for Australian animals*, there is no explicit you, but we find the same sort of indirect addressing through an encouraging or urging call to “[d]iscover the answers to these questions and more in this **factastic** tour of Australian animals”. The same encouraging imperative is found in the first sentence on the back of *A-Z of Australian animals*, reading: “Come on an illustrated expedition through Australia’s unique animal kingdom”. In addition, these reader appeals share the idea of reading as a sort of journey, a tour, or an expedition where something “factastic”, amazing, or secret will be revealed or encountered. Hence, one may claim that the reader is positioned as a collector – or an explorer. While the reader as collector has a touch of a ‘human first’ attitude, where animals or nature are trophies of a conqueror, the reader as explorer may be open to respectful and playful encounters with other species and consequently support or open a pathway to interspecies awareness.

The animals chosen to illustrate on the back cover what the reader may encounter on their journey through the book seem to support or call for a ‘respectful explorer attitude’ more than a ‘trophy hunter attitude’. The gazes of both the numbat (Cossins, 2018) and the red-eyed green tree frog (Brim & Eglitis, 2005) on the back are partly directed towards the reader, as are those of the little pygmy possum and the frog on the front. All welcome the reader into the book and into their world. The animals and landscapes depicted on the back and front covers of *A is for Australian animals* seem more untouched by, unaware of, or unaffected by the reader – and hence perhaps busy living their own lives. In contrast, this busyness may call for the reader’s attention and make them aware of the many and various environments that the tour they embark on will offer.

The echidna and the platypus

Two of the ABCs mention that the echidna is a monotreme (Cossins, 2018; Lessac, 2017), and one mentions that it is “an egg-laying mammal” (Brim & Eglitis, 2005). Only Cossins explains to the reader what monotreme means. All three books seem especially interested in drawing the readers’ attention to how the animal acquires its food. While Cossins focuses on the length of the tongue, how it works, and which food (ants and termites) it catches, the other texts seem

more occupied with catching the readers' attention by emphasizing that ants and termites are the echidna's "food of choice" (Lessac, 2017) or "its favourite foods" (Brim & Eglitis, 2005). The focus on food, and on a favourite food, may be a way of establishing contact or attuning with the reader since they are also dependent on food and perhaps also have their own food of choice. Even though termites and ants may surprise the reader, the text does not judge the echidna for its food habits. Another way of relating to the readers' own conditions of life found in two of the books (Cossins, 2018; Lessac, 2017) is to tell them that a baby echidna is called a 'puggle', which seems to be understood as something cute and in need of being taken care of.

A striking feature in common for the three ABCs is the emphasis on the echidna as a shy creature, either by directly using the word 'shy', or indirectly by describing the animal's reaction to danger, or in both ways. These descriptions, and particularly the one found in *Creatures of the rainforest*, may be interpreted as a way of connecting with the animal. The text reads, "If disturbed, the echidna will either burrow down into the earth until only a small bit of its spiny back is exposed, or it will disappear into a hollow log and stay without moving until the danger has past" (Brim & Eglitis, 2005). The impression of a vulnerable animal that will retreat rather than fight if disturbed is supported by the left-hand page illustration of an anxious looking echidna almost slipping towards the water (see Fig. 12.3). Although the surrounding environment is depicted in a sort of dusk of dark green, blue, and brown colours, the overall impression is of a peaceful sanctuary. The reddish coloured dreaming story-based depiction of the echidna on the right-hand page focuses on the animal while eating. Together with the shy gaze in the left-hand page illustration, the bending and humble posing in the right-hand page illustration calls for the reader's attention and may be perceived as a call to meet the echidna with a willing attitude, that is, a willingness to learn and care about an unusual species.

I have suggested that the various visual representations in *Creatures in the rainforest* signal that the depicted animals may be explored, perceived, or experienced in various culturally influenced ways, comprising dreams, personal sensations, or some sort of social identity. In addition, I have mentioned that the choice of words used to present facts about the animal reveals several poetic strategies. Consequently, the verbal text not only presents scientific facts, it also describes and explores the object of study through a sensuous language which also invites readers to engage and interconnect with the animal in focus. Referring to Skyggebjerg's (2018) emphasis on the importance of the aesthetic expression of ABCs,

both verbal and visual, in the learning process (p. 66), the illustrations may have a strong sensory appeal to the reader. The strong and pleasant colour combinations may affect and fascinate the reader and support a more animal friendly attitude and awareness.

Like the echidna, the platypus is presented as an unusual, shy monotreme, or egg-laying mammal. In contrast to the echidna, its shyness is less stressed in the doublespreads. Instead the focus is on the way the platypus acquires food: it is a carnivore and uses “its sensitive bill to pick up electric pulses of movement in the water” (Lessac, 2017) and its spurs (the male platypus), which release poison “and can inflict a nasty wound on enemies” (Brim & Eglitis, 2005). Although all three texts depict the platypus while diving for food, none of the illustrations give information about the animal’s hunting habits. Hence, one may suggest that they visually protect the readers from these less charming facts to prevent them from disapproving of the animals. In line with Willett’s ideas about an interconnected communication, one may claim that the use of colours and soft and harmonious shapes and landscapes is a specific example of one of the various communicative technologies used to establish affect attunement with the potential of developing interspecies awareness. This is also the case when engaging with species who may initially strike us as not only strange or insignificant, but also as cruel, which is something the carnivore platypus’s use of poison may give the impression of.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this final paragraph I will sum up and try to answer whether these nonfiction ABC picturebooks guide readers towards attunement with other species and foster interspecies awareness. None of the ABCs teach interspecies awareness explicitly, but to varying degrees they impart species knowledge in ways that invite readers to connect and engage in affective ways. The verbal texts are organized in rather standard scientific ways, by listing facts and information about size, species, distribution, and physical skills. The visual texts are realistic and aesthetically expressive to varying degrees, and the reader is positioned as an explorer and co-creator or co-thinker. This position, when supported by a poetic and aesthetically sensitive knowledge transmission, opens pathways to interspecies awareness and may prepare the reader for respectful encounters through which ethical practices that sustain cohabitation and biosocial interconnectedness may be restored.

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