Childrens' Picturebooks and World Politics

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When you think about world politics, from where do you draw your knowledge and understanding? Instinctively, we probably don't think the answer would be children's picture books. Yet as Peter Hunt argues, 'most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority of those in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development' (Hunt 2006: 1). In a recent article in *Review of International Studies*, we make an argument for greater engagement with picturebooks as a vitally important, yet largely neglected, site in which world politics is (re)produced, negotiated, and contested.

Such books have incredible reach, entering the homes of thousands, even millions of readers, many of whom are young and still learning about the world. Their authors and illustrators attract considerable critical acclaim, winning prizes and recognition for their work. And – most important for our purposes – they *tell stories about the world*: how it works, who has power, whether it can change, and so forth. In this sense, picturebooks engage directly with the issues and events of world politics, covering themes such as gender and identity, conflict, environmental protectionism, friendship and inter-cultural communication. And, yet, curiously, such books remain almost entirely absent in the work done in fields such as International Relations despite the growing attention to 'everyday' or 'vernacular' sites of knowledge, to the importance of visuals and narratives in world politics, and to the popular culture consumed by older audiences (Grayson *et al* 2009).

To try to demonstrate the importance of these texts, our article focuses on one of the most successful and most loved picturebooks of all: Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's (1999), *The Gruffalo*. First published in 1999, the book has now sold over 1.49m copies in the UK alone, enjoying translation into over eighty different languages. It also, we argue, demonstrates so vividly and succinctly how susceptible the world is to multiple understandings and interpretations.

For anyone unfamiliar with the book, *The Gruffalo* recounts the journey of one character – mouse – through a deep dark wood via a series of encounters with four predatory others: a snake, an owl, a fox, and ultimately the Gruffalo: 'a monstrous creature with 'terrible tusks, and terrible claws, And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws'. Despite its size, the mouse manages to draw on powers of deception and trickery to escape each encounter unscathed, adapting adroitly to the manifestation of the (hitherto imaginary) Gruffalo at the book's turning point, and sending its would-be attackers fleeing in fear.

One plausible reading of this picturebook that will be instantly familiar to International Relations students and teachers is that it offers a characteristically pessimistic depiction of the world that we tend to associate with political realism. Mouse, the Gruffalo, snake and the others, here, are all self-interested, survival-seeking entities encountering each-other in an anarchical 'state of nature' unbound by any shared laws or moral principles.

At the same time, however, the book is open to multiple alternative possible readings. One alternative would be to read the book as offering important insight into the constitutive and causal power of ideas. Mouse's ability to escape their opening encounters involves fabrication of a dangerous, threatening other: the Gruffalo. And, as the story unfolds, mouse demonstrates their capacity to discursively convince the Gruffalo of their own superiority, such that it flees from mouse 'as quick as the wind'. Yet the book also, we argue, serves as a provocation to a more fundamental

critique of the politics of security (knowledge) through centring its narrative and visuals around the journey of mouse. This – decolonial – reading is one that deeply unsettles fundamental assumptions about the Gruffalo's world and its inhabitants. It does so by 'unthinking' or decentring mouse and their story as the book's taken-for-granted perspective and agent, and by paying attention to the side-lining of other characters and their experiences.

What is particularly important, though, is that the messy and ambiguous nature of our reading of *The Gruffalo* is reflective of the messy and contested nature of world politics more generally. That the book can tell us multiple, and very different, stories about how the world works tells us something important about the world's similar openness to multiple, simultaneous readings.

Overall, many of us have become increasingly attuned to seeking knowledge about world politics from multiple sources be they theoretical scholarship, media accounts, political speeches, policy documents, or indeed popular culture. And disciplines such as International Relations and Political Science have become far better at exploring the work done by different texts and artefacts in depicting – or, better, in constructing – the world in particular ways. Such constructions are never neutral, of course. Knowledge of the world always comes from somewhere and serves certain interests. Given that children's picture books – like all texts – are so adept to multiple readings, are engaged with by millions of readers, and have audiences that are often impressionable and creative in their ways of thinking the world, they are surely worthy of ever greater study by students of world politics. These books are not just for kids; and our failure to treat them seriously is symptomatic of broader failings of disciplines such as IR to seriously engage with children and world politics (Brocklehurst 2015).

References

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