Whale Myths in Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract *For many, the whale is as much a mythical as a real animal, as our ideas about this largest marine mammal are shaped equally by mythological-religious as well as literary tradition and by zoological facts. The article aims to show how the literary traditions of the whale myth are taken up and continued in current children's and young adult literature.*

Keywords *whales; literary myth; children's and young adult literature; anthropomorphism*

Preliminary remarks on the origin of this article

The idea to explore "Whale myths in children's and young adult literature" is closely linked to the *One University – One Book* project and the university-wide reading of *The Whale Rider* (1987) by Witi Ihimaera in the summer semester of 2023 at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.[1] While other colleagues and students were enthusiastic about the numerous possibilities for virtual and fictional trips to New Zealand, I was fascinated by the literary representation of whales. So my spontaneous idea was to search for whales in children's and young adult literature and offer a seminar on the topic of "the myth of whales in children's and young adult literature."[2]

1 I have deliberately chosen not to discuss the novel *The Whale Rider* here. This article focuses exclusively on children's and young adult literature; and although Witi Ihimaera's novel has elements of a coming-of-age story and certainly appeals to young adult readers, it is not a (specific) young adult book. Furthermore, this article focuses on myths handed down in contemporary children's and young adult literature; *The Whale Rider* follows another mythological tradition with the myths of the Māori, which invites comparison but would go beyond the scope of this article. For a contextualisation of Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* in contemporary literary and media representations of the whale, see Michaela Castellanos' contribution in this volume.

2 At this point, I would like to express my gratitude to the seminar participants who supported me in my research on whales in contemporary children's and young adult literature, which ultimately provided me with the text corpus of five literary whales for this article. It should also be mentioned here that we naturally came across numerous non-fiction books on whales and the sea and oceans in general during our research, but these books would be the subject

This allowed me to build on an essay I had written together with Melanie Wigbers on animal characters in the work of children's and young adult author Nina Weger, in which we also examined the young adult novel *Als mein Bruder ein Wal wurde* (*When My Brother Became a Whale*, 2019). However, anyone who thinks the title refers to a wondrous or fantastical adventure story with human-animal heroes in whale form will be disappointed. In fact, *Als mein Bruder ein Wal wurde* depicts in a mostly realistic and at times surrealistic way how the protagonist Bela copes with the distressing situation of his brother Julius being in a coma for quite some time. To cope, Bela repeatedly imagines his brother as a whale swimming alone in the ocean. In this young adult novel, the whale appears 'only' as a metaphor.[3] Like the child protagonists in the novel (*Als mein Bruder ein Wal wurde*, 169–175), we discussed at length whether this is a fitting metaphor (Wigbers and Wild in print) and, in this context, asked ourselves what literary and cultural topoi are associated with whales.

The whale is at the center of significant, partly ancient, partly modern cultural images, starting with the biblical story of Jonah in the belly of the whale (which many children should be familiar with from Carlo Collodi's adaptation *Pinocchio*; 1881), through Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) – which has also been adapted many times for children's literature – and the film *Free Willy* (1993), to numerous YouTube videos in which whale songs are offered for relaxation. The human view of the largest living mammal is always characterised by a feeling of awe; the whale appears as a powerful animal endangered (by humans) that radiates both threat and security.[4] Measured against this 'cultural idea' of 'whale', Bela's metaphor gains coherence by referring equally to the life-threatening reality and to Julius' desire for a pain-free and secure existence. Whether other examples of children's literature follow this cultural idea of the whale will be shown below.

Key aspects of analysis and interpretation and an attempt at systematisation

But first, I will briefly outline the fundamental aspects of the analysis and interpretation of whale representations in children's and young adult literature.

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of another article, as would the astonishingly large number of picture books featuring more or less humanised whales.

3 The same applies to the classic *Insel der blauen Delphine* (1962; original *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* 1960) by Scott O'Dell, an early example of children's literature depicting the whale, if one counts dolphins as whales. Here, too, the dolphins are little more than a symbol of the protagonist's close connection to nature or a metaphor for her development.

4 On the whale as a "literarisches Artefakt" ([literary artifact] with merely a symbolic function in literary history, see Hoiß 2023, 29–30.

As with any literary representation of animals, the question of the degree of anthropomorphism arises in the case of the literary whale.[5] This can tend towards zero. An example from classic children's and young adult literature is the cinematic heroine Lassie, who is an extremely intelligent and people-oriented dog, but always remains a dog. Or it can be so high that one can speak of an animal in human form. This tends to happen in classic fables, although there is always a clear orientation toward topical attributions to the animal, which may also be based on zoological facts. It occurs in an extreme form in many picture books and, of course, in comics, when Donald Duck appears as a human in duck form.

In children's and young adult literature, which from a modern perspective is primarily intended to entertain, the question of the degree of instruction for the young reader always arises. Depending on the degree of anthropomorphism, the aim of the instruction may be zoological and/or animal ethical, but also of a general human nature (Schmideler 2016). It should be noted here that all the texts examined have in common that they provide factual information about whales; this can be done explicitly in the form of educational inserts or implicitly in a poetic or aesthetic manner.

Closely linked to the question of the degree of anthropomorphisation and instruction is the representation of the relationship between humans and animals. In the whale depictions, the portrayal of this relationship is often linked to the different perspectives of the whale living in the water and the humans living on the shore, and the different worldviews that come with them. The whale depictions discussed here share the common feature that the whale is characterised as a marine mammal that cannot live without water – but also cannot live without air. Similarly, some of the whale depictions presented here play with contrasting shifts in perspective between humans living on land and whales living in water, which is also impressively reflected in some of the illustrations (see, for example, the cover of Patrick Ness's *And the Ocean Was Our Sky* 2018/2020).

In an attempt to systematise the five whale depictions, which range from picture books to all-age novels, I was able to identify two groups: The starting point of the narrative is either a real (or at least realistically drawn) whale or a – or rather *the one* – mythical whale.

5 For variations of anthropomorphisation in the depiction of animals in children's and young adult literature and possible classifications, see Schmideler 2016, 3–4 and Bonacker 2016, 73–74.

Real or realistically drawn whales in children's and young adult literature

The group of 'real' whales in my text corpus can be subdivided into

- the type of realistically drawn, non-anthropomorphised whale (Katherine Scholes: *Sams Wal* 1985/1990) and
- the type of real but anthropomorphised whale (Corinna Ruhl: *Der weiße Wal vom Rhein* 2020 and Martin Baltscheit: *Der einsamste Wal der Welt* 2018).

While Scholes' depiction of a whale stranded on the shore and fighting for its life is based on a realistic scenario that unfortunately occurs time and again, the starting point for Ruhl's short story and Baltscheit's picture book is the actual fate of a whale.

Sams Wal, published in 1985 under the title *The Boy and the Whale* and translated into German in 1990, is set in Australia; after 30 years of tradition, including as a successful school reading book, the children's book by the Tasmanian author has now achieved classic status (Hildebrand 2017/2022). It is a short, children's hero tale about the adventures of a boy named Sam who, with the help of various characters and despite threats from his enemies, helps a stranded whale back into the sea. After discovering the whale on the beach, Sam quickly realises that the whale's only chance of survival is to get back into the water, so he begins to wet it. Through this initially hesitant contact, an evocatively described relationship develops between Sam and the whale, although the whale is not humanised; feelings such as fear or anger are attributed to the whale, but this attribution is made by Sam, who interprets the whale's movements accordingly. Furthermore, the whale's eye, through which the young rescuer's activities are observed, is used as a leitmotif; there is no description of the whale's feelings during these observations. This culminates in the touching farewell scene: "Der Wal hob seinen großen Kopf aus den Wellen und sah Sam mit einem ruhigen, warmen Blick aus seinem dunkel glänzenden Auge an. Die Spitze der Schwanzflosse strich leicht an Sams Arm entlang." ([The whale lifted its large head out of the waves and looked at Sam with a calm, warm gaze from its dark, shining eye. The tip of its tail fin brushed lightly against Sam's arm.] *Sams Wal*, 59) The possible interpretation of the whale's gesture as a farewell remains open to the reader.

While *Sams Wal* is consistently told from a human perspective, Ruhl uses the stylistic device of perspective shifts in *Der weiße Wal vom Rhein* from 2020 to tell the story from both a human and an animal point of view. The short story is based on the true story of a beluga whale that swam in the Rhine for four weeks in 1966 and became an icon of early environmental movements. The author sticks strictly to the facts, which can be read in an online article in *Der Spiegel* (Michaelis 2016), for example – were it not for the passages that 'report' on the friendship between the seagull

Hannes and the whale, who 'in reality' was called Eugie (pronounced 'Judschie') and not Moby at all. The story thus oscillates between three poles:

(1) the detailed recounting of a historical event (the story also tells of human ruthlessness, especially on the part of the zoo director, and capitalist greed, but also of human compassion for the suffering creature and the dawning of ecological awareness, as well as the history of the Rhine and its industrial pollution),
(2) the imparting of factual knowledge about whales and, finally,
(3) the careful humanisation of the whale (and the seagull), adapted to the needs of child readers, with the themes of friendship and family in the foreground.

Baltscheit also deals with a supposedly deeply human theme in his picture book *Der einsamste Wal der Welt* (2018) – and he too portrays a real whale. The Wikipedia article introduces the "52-hertz whale," named after the frequency at which it sings, which is much higher than the usual frequency of whale songs; in reporting on it, it has been characterised as "the loneliest whale in the world" (ibid.). The picture book initially presents the story from the perspective of the soldier who first heard "52 Hertz" with his hydrophone, and later, or so it seems, from the perspective of the whale. The picture book follows an artful narrative structure, drawing the reader deeper and deeper into the soldier's thoughts. Until about the middle of the book, the soldier, who can be seen in the picture in his radio cabin, reports from a human researcher's perspective, characterised by both distance and empathy, about his ideas of what the whale's life might have been like: "Manchmal stelle ich mir vor, wie dieser Wal geboren wurde" ([Sometimes I imagine how this whale was born] Baltscheit 2018). The change of perspective in the middle of the book is symbolically marked by the fact that the soldier is now seen lying in bed; the rather matter-of-fact account of the whale's imagined fate turns into a fantastical tale of a wondrous encounter between humans and animals: "Manchmal wache ich in der Nacht auf, weil eine Flosse an mein Fenster klopft. Dann schaue ich hinaus und die Himmelsmakrelen flüstern: 'Geh und finde den Wal. Denn du bist sein Freund. Finde den Wal und er wird nicht mehr einsam sein.'" ([Sometimes I wake up in the night because a fin is tapping on my window. Then I look out and the skylarks whisper: 'Go and find the whale. For you are his friend. Find the whale and he will no longer be lonely.'] ibid.) And indeed, the soldier finds the whale. Of course, the episode of the encounter with the whale is presented as a dream of the soldier, which is ultimately told from the whale's perspective, albeit only conveyed through the depiction of his words and thoughts in speech bubbles. The whale recognises the soldier – whom he unfortunately cannot understand – as the "einsamsten Blasenfisch der Welt" ([the loneliest bubble fish in the world] ibid.) and comforts him by saying that he will find someone.

Scholes', Ruhl's and Baltscheit's whale stories are (primarily) aimed at child readers and therefore also deal with typical themes of children's literature such as fam-

ily, friendship, loyalty to others, abandonment and being abandoned, as well as saying goodbye and letting go. In the spirit of educating children, *Sams Wals* and *Der weiße Wal vom Rhein* also address ecological issues such as threats to animal habitats, species protection, and environmental pollution. They are therefore also appeals. The whale is presented more or less as a vulnerable creature that needs the help of others. The moment of grandeur and also the moment of danger emanating from the whale, which otherwise contributes to the myth of the whale, is largely ignored, yet again in keeping with the conventions of children's books. In the fictional story of *Sams Wal*, which is not based on a real event, the whale is rescued by a human being. In the highly anthropomorphic story of *Der weiße Wal vom Rhein* however, the helper figure is also an animal that has been humanised; humans appear more as a threat. In the picture book about the "loneliest whale in the world", in which anthropomorphism, according to my reading, only occurs within the fiction of the soldier's dream, rescue by humans and other animals is only hinted at – perhaps it is not even necessary. "[…] darum ist eine Geschichte, die wir über andere Tiere erzählen, immer auch eine Geschichte von uns selbst" reads the opening sentence of the picture book ([that is why a story we tell about other animals is always also a story about ourselves] Baltscheit 2018). Before that, the question is raised as to whether the whale "52 Hertz" is really lonely – or whether this is instead a deeply human view of the animal. Or, to put it another way, whether myths always arise when literature tells stories about (real) animals.

The mythical whale

This is what happened in the creation of what is probably the world's best-known literary depiction of a whale, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* from 1851. For Moby Dick also had a real-life model: a male sperm whale that attracted attention around 1810 near the island of Mocha off the Chilean coast due to its unusually aggressive behavior and is credited with sinking the "Essex" portrayed in *Moby Dick*.

In 2018, Chilean author Luis Sepúlveda set himself the task of telling the story of "Mocha Dick," as he was originally named, from the whale's perspective. The story weaves in whale myths of the Lafkenche, an Indigenous people who lived off the coast of present-day Chile. Embedded in a realistic framework narrative that recounts the death of a stranded whale, the inner narrative – despite numerous zoological facts – is characterised by a strong degree of anthropomorphism of the whale (Hoiß 2023, 35, esp. note 18); it is marked by the depiction of the whale's emotional world, which also reflects on its own actions.[6] *Der weiße Wal erzählt seine Geschichte*

6 The shift in perspective from the human narrator Ishmael to the animal narrator, who is only referred to as "Mocha Dick" by humans, is the starting point for Christian Hoiß's interpreta-

(2020; original *Historia de una ballena blanca* 2018) thrives on a clichéd opposition between an animal world described as peaceful and non-violent and a human world described as warlike and violent. The white whale is not aggressive; it is *made* aggressive by humans. The sea also appears as a peaceful place; it is humans who bring evil to the sea. As an appeal for the protection of nature and whales in particular, the story is certainly not a counter-story to Melville's classic, but rather focuses on one of the many interpretations of the multi-layered novel.

Patrick Ness also presented a free adaptation of *Moby Dick* in 2018 with *Und der Ozean war unser Himmel* (2020; original *And the Ocean Was Our Sky* 2018), which is certainly not only aimed at younger readers. Ness turns the story on its head: here, it is the whales that hunt humans. Like Melville's Ahab in his quest for Moby Dick, Ness's whale captain Alexandra is obsessed with the search for the white monster Toby Wick. The numerous allusions to Melville's novel are obvious. A prime example is the first sentence, "Nennt mich Bathseba" [Call me Bathsheba]; with the second sentence, "So heiße ich nicht" [That's not my name], Ness reveals his lower literary quality than his role model. The novel follows an unusual form of anthropomorphism which, unlike Selpúveda's, is not limited to the inner world of the narrating whale. Instead, Ness creates his own technologised whale world geared toward warfare, complete with whale fleets, which remains strangely vague, however. At its core, the novel is an allegory of the causes and consequences of human warmongering, drawing on motifs from Melville's classic. And even if zoological facts are played with here and there, the choice of a whale as protagonist and narrator is nothing more than an intertextual game.

Sepúlveda and Ness both tell more than 'just' the story of a whale. They use the myth of Moby Dick as a call for sustainable behavior, as an appeal against war and for peace as well as universal understanding.

Outlook

The aim of this article was to provide an organising and classifying overview of representations of whales in contemporary children's literature and to offer an initial interpretation with a focus on anthropomorphism and the instruction of child readers. This initial interpretation raises further research questions that would certainly be worth pursuing:

(1) What does a detailed comparison of the texts with their literary models offer? What can we learn about the texts by conducting a detailed investigation of in-

tion of the children's book as an "ökokritische Antwort auf Melvilles Klassiker" ([ecocritical response to Melville's classic] Hoiß 2023, 39).

tertextual references to Moby Dick, but also to myths from the Bible, antiquity, and Indigenous peoples?

(2) What does the respective (tense) relationship between anthropomorphisation and the presentation of facts mean for children's and young adult literature? What effect does it have on child and young adult readers?

(3) From a genuinely didactic perspective, the question ultimately arises as to whether and to what extent the facts about whales presented in fiction can withstand scrutiny by whale researchers. How useful, then, can these books be in interdisciplinary approaches that brings together literature and biology education?

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