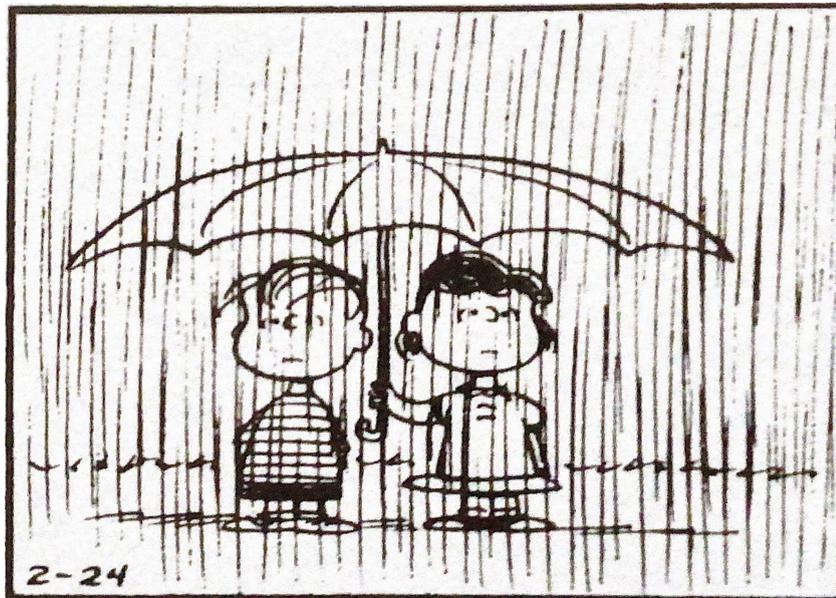


Communicating Negative Emotions in Children's Visual Media: How Picture Books and Comics Teach Children how to Categorize and Express their Feelings

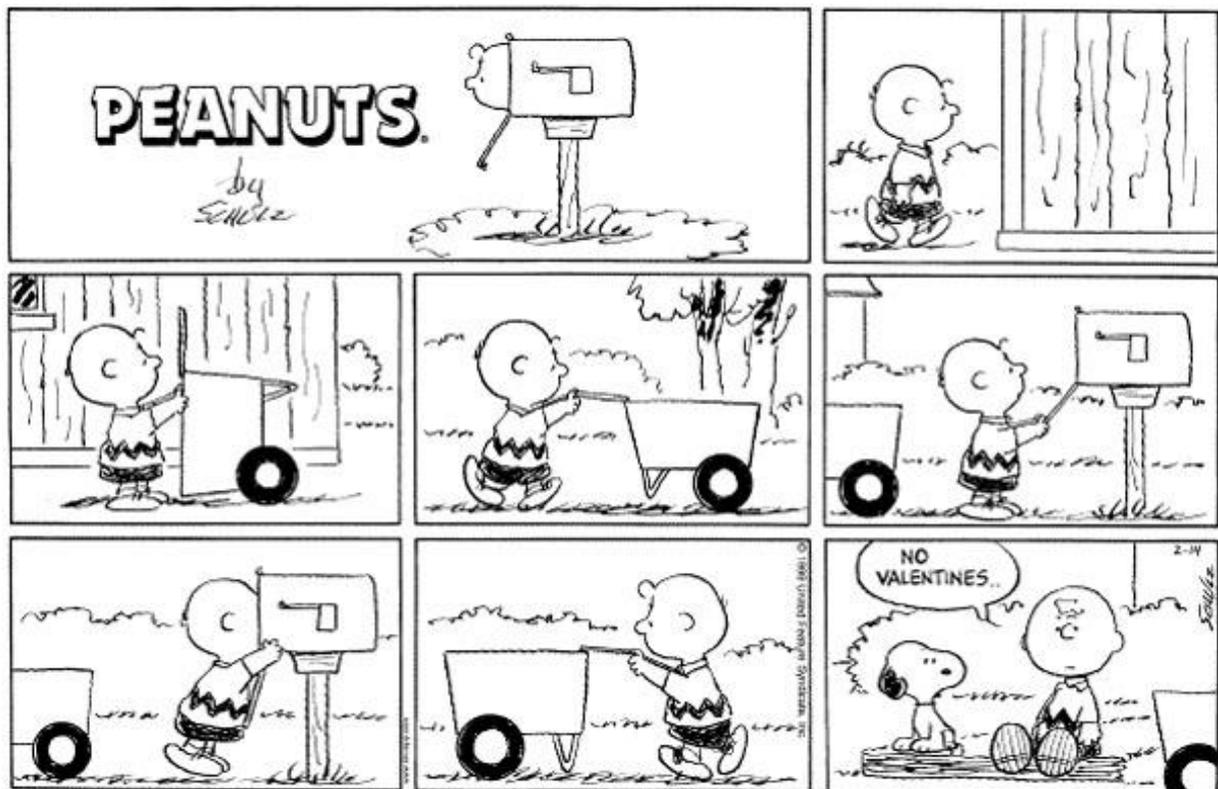


“Visual literacy is the ability to construct meaning from visual images. Children encounter visual images in their daily lives and must constantly use and interpret these images as well as analyze and think critically about the significance of what they are seeing (Giorgis, et al. 146).”

Throughout their journey to adulthood, children experience a variety of feelings, starting off with the basics: feeling content and discontent. But as they grow older, these feelings grow, change and become multifaceted, as is the case with everything in life. How can a child begin to grasp the entirety and ubiquity of human emotion? **How can a child learn to cope with their first negative emotions?**

“One potential way of fostering empathy in young children is through picturebooks. Like all fiction, picture books represent fictional characters' emotions as well as their interpretation of each other's emotions. However, unlike novels, picturebooks evoke our emotional engagement through images as well as words and, moreover, through amplification of words by images (Nikolajeva 249).”





“[I]mages carry the primary task of emotional engagement. Many picturebooks use wordless double-spreads to convey **strong emotions for which words would be insufficient and inadequate**. [...] [T]his is a recurrent device in picturebooks dealing with **extreme emotional states, such as fear and grief** (Nikolajeva 249).”

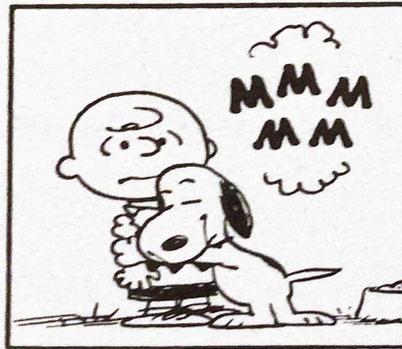
Often, **picture books are the starting point for a child’s journey into literary media**. Children are not only able to see pictures that convey emotions, but they also establish the ability to connect these pictures and emotions to the accompanying text that is either read to them, or that they read themselves. When there is no accompanying text, children can fill this space with their own thoughts and thereby relate to the emotions displayed in the book.



“Young children have limited life experience of emotions, whereas picturebooks offer vicarious emotional experience that children can partake of. Fiction, as cognitive criticism claims, creates situations in which emotions are simulated. Reading picturebooks prepares children for dealing with empathy and mind-reading in real life. Vast empirical research confirms that even very young children understand and respond to emotional dimension in picturebooks (Nikolajeva 250).”

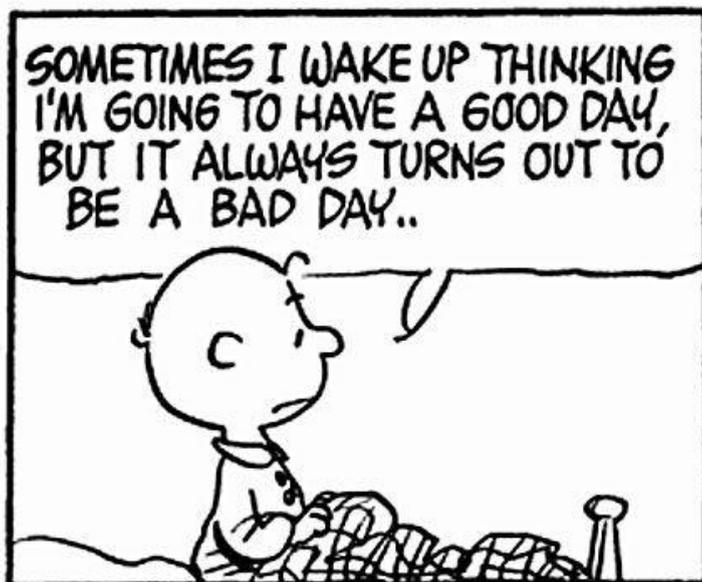
Multitudes of Life

“Thus a child feels joy seeing images of a smiling face, a bright sunlit landscape, or a **cute animal**, and they experience fear seeing a **scary monster** (Nikolajeva 250).”



Case in point.

When communicating negative emotions through pictures and text, children familiarize themselves with these emotions and, in a best case scenario, learn how to deal with them. Pictures books try to bring an understanding of life to its readers. And sometimes, a child simply needs to understand that they are not alone with their thoughts or feelings. Sometimes, life can be rough! Sometimes, nothing works out how you want it to. Sometimes, your actions have different consequences than intended. Posing the question: **What do you do when you start to feel bad?**



Often, the message is simple:
It's okay to have a bad day!
Learn to pick yourself up again!
S* happens!**

Sometimes, it's harder:
Life contains multitudes!
Not everything is black and white!

Visual Metaphors

While the written word is translated between different language editions of picture books and comics, the space it is afforded and the place it is allocated are the same, because

“The ability of verbal signs to be transformed into graphic signs through the use of balloons is international, and works even in cultures with different figural traditions like Japan, China and Thailand (Bongco 72).”

Moreover the pictures themselves are generally completely unchanged, as the meaning of several elements of visual narration are universal, e.g. lines, colours and perspective. However, other visual cues are not as universal, gestures and facial expressions are of note, but Western picture books and comics have somewhat standardised their depiction and augmented them with **visual metaphors**,

for example squiggly lines showing anger



or fear being depicted by sweat on and around the character, greenish skin and many more.

Body Language

These visual metaphors help understand the depicted emotions that would otherwise be harder to decipher, as the young readers have less experience in doing so and the drawing style is often very reduced, lacking finer expressions. Often facial expressions and gestures are paired with visual metaphors, both for comedic effect and easier understanding, as

“The artist must supply sufficient cues in each panel so as to activate the remembrance necessary for comprehension, without providing too much so as to take the pleasure out of recognition and participative reading (Bongco 63).”



Even though picture books on average tend to be of a higher educational value than comic books, which more often than not only seek to entertain, the latter enable children to recognize emotions and emphasize with people other than their own as well. Anger is one of the emotions in the highest need of regulation. At their best, comic books depict anger in a way accessible to young readers, but refrain from oversimplifying the situation that created said anger, making it possible for children to retrace how this negative emotion developed and to be able to understand different sides.

In many cases, emotions assume a secondary role in the storytelling, only for there to be an **explosion of emotions** later on, as in this example of fear, anger and guilt all in very close proximity.

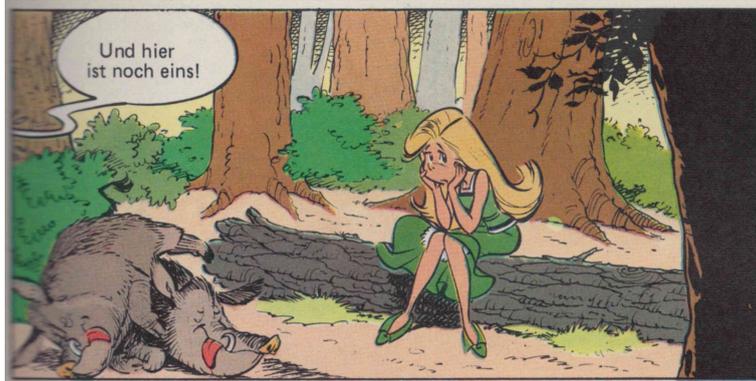


Moral Development

While some comics and picture books tend to arrange their characters into the simple categories of 'good' and 'evil', others allow for their characters to show both positive and negative emotions and actions, as in the following example of the normally positively depicted chief of the village, Vitalstatistix, who gains a rather evil look, when he squints his eyes in hate.

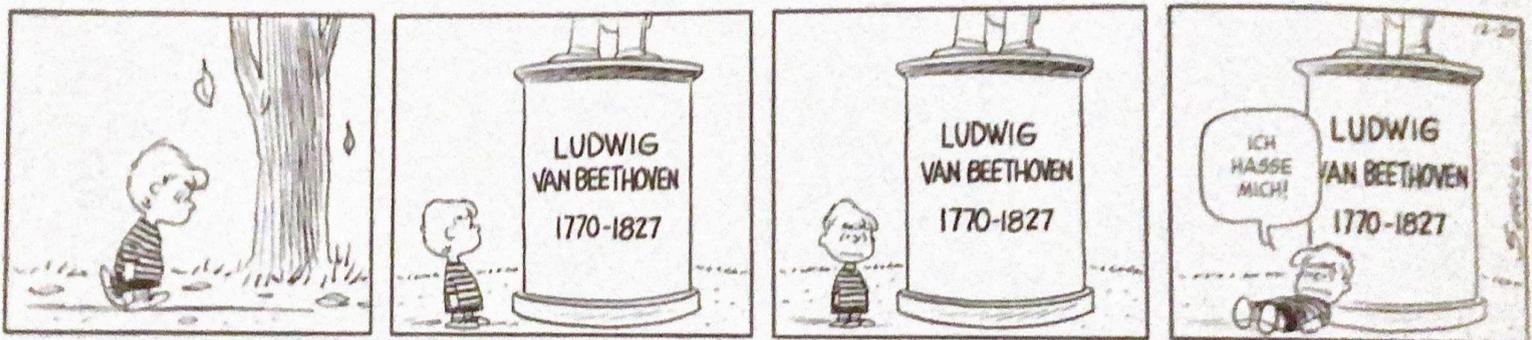


While a simple good-evil dichotomy clearly has some advantages in teaching the concept of morals, this approach of more nuance and the good in evil in every person is to be preferred for pedagogical purposes.



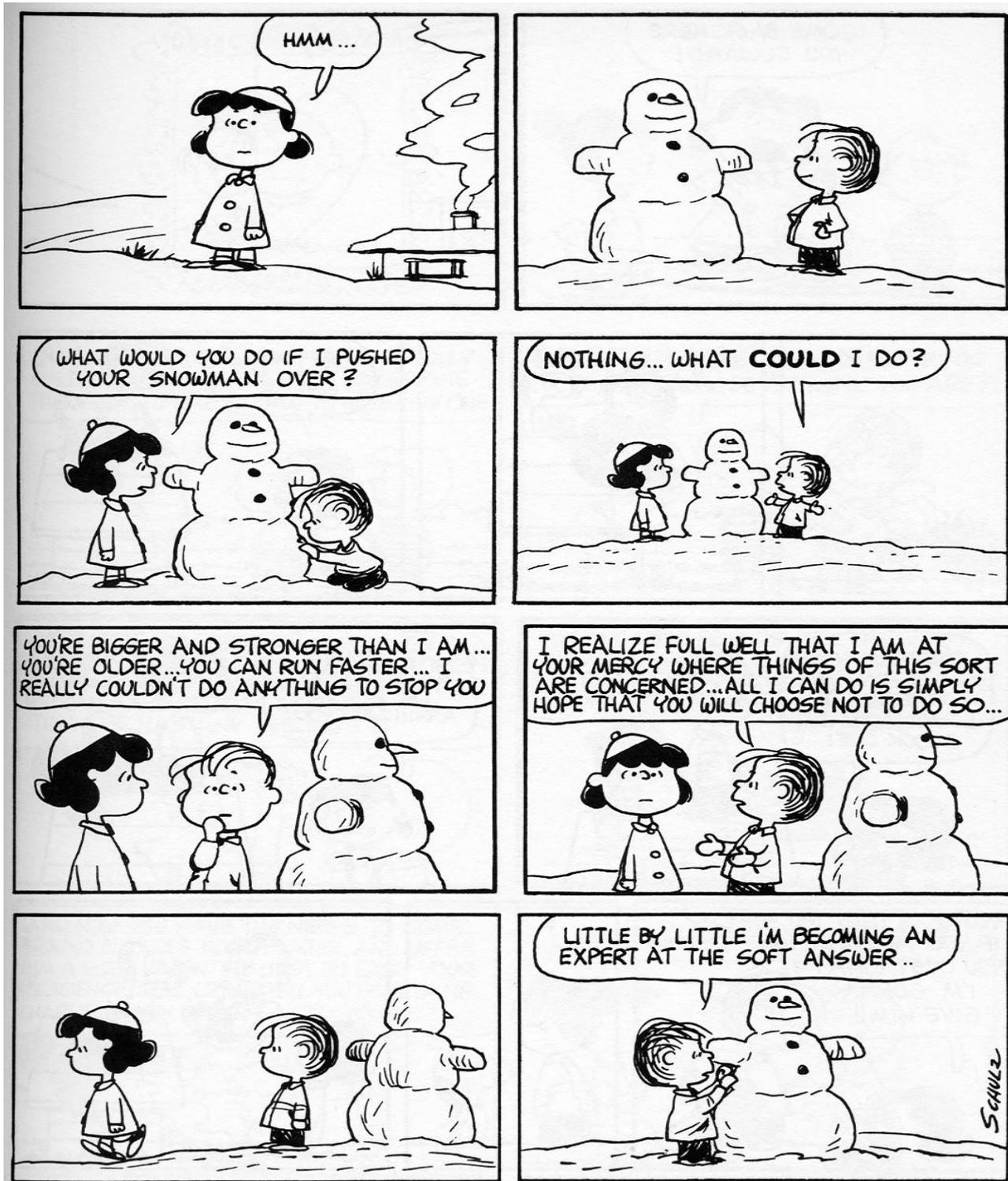
While the very feminine depiction of the girl in the next panel paired with her only existing in the story as a potential love interest is objectionable, the depiction of boredom helps readers to recognize that emotion.

A critical consideration overall when evaluating comics and picture books is whether their **inherent biases** outweigh the **pedagogical benefits** achieved through reading and thus learning.



While not every picture book or comic's (primary) aim is to teach, **many lessons still can be found within each story**. Some of these lessons may appeal to children, many of them may just be amusing. Some of them may be intended to stick with young readers and are meant to be understood as the moral of the story, some of them may function as a cautionary tale. Some of them may even be beneficial to adult readers, many of them may not. Maybe, just maybe, the lessons we learn along the journey of growing up are simply a by-product of other's stories and experiences.

Conflict Resolution



Visual Media can not only communicate the ubiquitous nature of negative emotions that will arise throughout the journey of childhood, but it can also teach healthy approaches to dealing with these negative emotions. From being bullied to bullying others, **surely there's a picture book for you** somewhere! Maybe it even contains a solution to your problem! Or a thought perhaps?

What is all of this about?



This does not mean that all approaches are equally valid...

Sometimes it's not about understanding others or fixing problems. Sometimes it's about the absurdity of life (or something along those lines)! Children's visual media is not necessarily a collection of self-help books; **It's about showing emotions, talking about emotions, explaining emotions, teaching emotions and everything in between.**

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