

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Oh help! Oh no! The international politics of *The Gruffalo*: Children's picturebooks and world politics

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## Abstract

The article explores the complicity of children's picturebooks in the construction and critique of world politics. Focusing on *The Gruffalo*, it argues that this spectacularly successful book: (1) stories the international as a pessimistic, anarchical world populated by self-interested, survival-seekers; (2) disrupts this reading and its assumptions through evocation of the social production of threat; and, (3) provides a more fundamental decolonial critique of the international through parochial privileging of its protagonist's journey through a 'deep dark wood'. In doing this, we argue, the book vividly demonstrates the world's susceptibility to multiple incompatible readings, while rendering visible the assumptions, framing, and occlusions of competing understandings of the international. As such, it theorises both world politics and knowledge thereof as contingent and unstable. In making this argument, three contributions are made. First, empirically, we expand research on popular culture and world politics through investigating a surprisingly neglected example of the former. Second, theoretically, we demonstrate the work such texts perform in (re)creating and (de)stabilising (knowledge of) global politics. Third, we offer a composite methodological framework for future research into the context, content, and framing of complex texts like *The Gruffalo*.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature; Global Politics; International Relations Theory; Popular Culture; *The Gruffalo*

## Introduction

This article explores the importance of a neglected, and ostensibly insignificant, site of world politics: *The Gruffalo*<sup>1</sup> – a spectacularly successful children's picturebook with tens of millions of sales across dozens of languages. Taking up Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott's call to 'view the signifying ... practices of popular culture as "texts" that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place',<sup>2</sup> we argue that *The Gruffalo*'s significance is in its vivid visual and narrative demonstration of the world's susceptibility to plausible, yet seemingly incompatible, readings. Complicit in, and critical of, conventional understandings of the international, the book reproduces the world's familiar storying as a site of insecurity and fear<sup>3</sup> while *simultaneously* interrogating that storying, its assumptions, and occlusions.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, it merits careful attention as

<sup>1</sup>Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, *The Gruffalo* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Children's Books, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture-world politics', *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63 (p. 158).

<sup>3</sup>On the 'common sense' nature of pessimistic – and characteristically realist – understandings of world politics, see Roger D. Spegele, 'Three forms of political realism', *Political Studies*, 35:2 (1987), pp. 189–210 (pp. 190–4).

<sup>4</sup>Kyle Grayson, 'Capturing the multiplicities of resilience through popular geopolitics: Aesthetics and homo resilio in *Breaking Bad*', *Political Geography*, 57:1 (2017), pp. 24–33 (p. 24).

a ‘theoretically informed diagnosis’<sup>5</sup> of the ontological and epistemological manoeuvres central to hegemonic understandings of world politics. Reflecting on this, moreover, highlights the capacity of childrens’ picturebooks to ‘reveal the approaches, interpretations and assumptions that underpin understandings of politics and what we believe to be political’,<sup>6</sup> while pulling attention to the contingent and unstable nature of world politics and popular culture.

To develop this claim, we proceed through an analysis of *The Gruffalo* as a polysemous text that may be read ‘in multiple different ways.’<sup>7</sup> Specifically, we show, first, that the book offers a persuasive theorisation of the characteristically realist state of nature as a pessimistic, anarchical world populated by self-interested, survival-seekers. Second, that it simultaneously disrupts this reading through creative engagement with the social production of threats. And third, that the parochial privileging of its protagonist’s journey through the wood within the text’s visual and narrative construction also offers occasion for a more fundamental, decolonial, counter-reading of global politics.<sup>8</sup> Our aim here is not to impose order on what we see as complex, partial, and contestable understandings of world politics. Rather, to acknowledge, as Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes remind us: ‘that the world is messy and cannot easily or unproblematically be parsed for analysis – that we lose as much as, if not more than, we gain through employing rigid categorizations, abstractions and generalizations.’<sup>9</sup> *The Gruffalo* helps in this precisely because it ‘presents a compelling argument’<sup>10</sup> about the indeterminacy of world politics through exposing the limitations of materialist ontologies and their inevitabilities. And, because its organisation around the journey of one ‘aesthetic character’<sup>11</sup> – mouse – offers an elegant, yet sophisticated, illumination of the partiality of knowledge about global political life.<sup>12</sup>

In making this argument, the article offers three contributions to knowledge. First, it extends contemporary research on popular culture and world politics through original engagement with a spectacularly successful, yet almost entirely neglected, artefact – *The Gruffalo* – and genre – the children’s picturebook. Despite the proliferation of compelling work on the importance of film, videogames, comics and the like, picturebooks aimed at young readers remain conspicuous by their absence in IR,<sup>13</sup> a corollary, in part, of a broader neglect of children within theorisations of global politics.<sup>14</sup> Taking picturebooks seriously, therefore, contributes to recent efforts to open IR to historically excluded texts, authors, and fields,<sup>15</sup> providing opportunity for new connection with disciplines such as children’s literature studies.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Matt Davies and Amanda Chisholm, ‘Neoliberalism, violence, and the body: Dollhouse and the critique of the neoliberal subject’, *International Political Sociology*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 274–90 (p. 274).

<sup>6</sup>Kyle Grayson, ‘How to read *Paddington Bear*: Liberalism and the foreign subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 378–93 (p. 380).

<sup>7</sup>Marcus Schulzke, ‘Interpreting and reinterpreting the political significance of popular media: The importance of seeing from a range of perspectives’, *Political Studies*, 65:4 (2017), pp. 930–46 (p. 931).

<sup>8</sup>See Davies and Chisholm, ‘Dollhouse’, p. 277.

<sup>9</sup>Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, ‘The evolution of international security studies and the everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse’, *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 513–30 (p. 526).

<sup>10</sup>Matt Davies, ‘“You can’t charge innocent people for saving their lives!” Work in *Buff the Vampire Slayer*’, *International Political Sociology*, 4:2 (2010), pp. 178–95 (p. 192).

<sup>11</sup>See, among others, Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009); Michael J. Shapiro, ‘Managing urban security: City walls and urban *metis*’, *Security Dialogue*, 40:4–5 (2009), pp. 443–61.

<sup>12</sup>See also Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR’, pp. 156–7.

<sup>13</sup>For an exception, see Kathryn Starnes, *Fairy Tales and International Relations: A Folklorist Reading of IR Textbooks* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>14</sup>Helen Brocklehurst, ‘The state of play: Securities of childhood – insecurities of children’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 29–46.

<sup>15</sup>Sarah Naumes, ‘Is all “I” IR?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 4:3 (2015), pp. 820–32 (pp. 826–31).

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Hannah Field, *Playing with the Book: Victorian Movable Picture Books and the Child Reader* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

Second, our article offers the first effort to engage with picturebooks such as *The Gruffalo* as important examples of ‘vernacular theorisation’<sup>17</sup> that simultaneously and creatively (re)produce and (de)stabilise (knowledge of) global politics in undetermined ways.<sup>18</sup> Vernacular theorisation, here, is understood as the ‘ability to relate complex issues to the everyday, and to scrutinise and interrogate significant social processes in a critical fashion’,<sup>19</sup> opening up ‘new ways of seeing’ the world and its understanding.<sup>20</sup> Our claim is not, to be clear, that picturebooks serve as allegories or metaphors for world politics.<sup>21</sup> Nor is it that *The Gruffalo*, specifically, possesses or advances ‘a’ pre-existing theory of world politics. Rather, that theorising is something that takes place through *The Gruffalo*’s visual and linguistic content and form,<sup>22</sup> and its invocation and interrogation of seemingly axiomatic understandings of world politics.<sup>23</sup> This approach to theory – as an everyday practice rather than noun<sup>24</sup> – means we make no claim on the book’s reception or causal impact on readers, many of whom may lack explicit awareness of international relations/International Relations.<sup>25</sup>

The article’s third contribution is to offer a composite methodological framework for future interrogation of the context, content, and framing of picturebooks such as *The Gruffalo* in order to facilitate subsequent work in this vein. This framework draws on a range of relevant scholarship within and beyond the pop culture and world politics literature to guide academic engagement with issues of authorship, reception, narrative, plot, visual illustration, and framing. Our claim to originality, here, therefore, is one of ‘conceptual combination’ that involves novel juxtaposition of methodological tools and insights from existing work on related, but distinct, sources of popular culture.<sup>26</sup>

The article begins by situating our analysis within two growing literatures: on children and world politics, and on popular culture and world politics. The former, we argue, offers an important but neglected challenge to ontological, epistemological, and methodological orthodoxies within International Relations. The latter offers vital theoretical resources for exploring the value of children’s picturebooks as sources for exposing the foundations, assumptions, exclusions, and tensions of familiar renderings of world politics. Particularly useful here is Michael J. Shapiro’s notion of the ‘aesthetic subject’ with its emphasis on the actions of fictional characters as an inroad to theorising political realities and their structuration.<sup>27</sup> The article then develops our four-part methodological

<sup>17</sup> Grayson, ‘Paddington’, p. 379.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Milliken, ‘The study of discourse in IR: A critique of research and methods’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–54 (pp. 229–30).

<sup>19</sup> Chris Rogers, ‘V for Vendetta as vernacular critique: The exceptional state of liberal political economy’, *New Political Economy*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 107–21 (p. 108).

<sup>20</sup> Parker, in Rogers, ‘Vendetta’, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Grayson, ‘Breaking Bad’, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Nick Randall, ‘“Imagining the polity”: Cinema and television fictions as vernacular theories of British politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64:2 (2011), pp. 263–80 (p. 264).

<sup>23</sup> See Davies, ‘Buffy’; Naums, ‘Is all “I” IR?’, pp. 824–6.

<sup>24</sup> Marysia Zalewski, ‘“All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up”: Theory, theorists, theorising’, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 340–53.

<sup>25</sup> On the appropriateness of studying popular culture without engaging with audiences, see Jutta Weldes, ‘Going cultural: *Star Trek*, state action, and popular culture’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28:1 (1999), pp. 117–34 (pp. 122–3). See also Richard K. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, ‘Conclusion: Reading dissidence/writing the discipline: Crisis and the question of sovereignty in international studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), pp. 367–416 (pp. 384–5); Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley, ‘So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?’, in Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (eds), *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations, 2015), pp. 11–33.

<sup>26</sup> Ginamarie M. Scott, Devin C. Lonergan, and Michael D. Mumford, ‘Conceptual combination: Alternative knowledge structures, alternative heuristics’, *Creativity Research Journal*, 17:1 (2005), pp. 79–98 (p. 80).

<sup>27</sup> For example, Shapiro ‘Urban security’.

framework that involves: (1) situating texts in their historical and sociopolitical contexts;<sup>28</sup> (2) rich description of narrative construction and emplotment;<sup>29</sup> (3) visual analysis of a book's graphic presentation;<sup>30</sup> and, (4) analysis of the vernacular theoretical work done by the text, which in this case involves reading the *Gruffalo* plurally as invocation and negotiation of the anarchy problematic that structures dominant constructions of the international, *and* as a provocation towards a more radical decolonial critique of the (re)production of global politics (knowledge). In the article's conclusion, finally, we explore opportunities for further research on popular culture, world politics, and children's fiction.

### Children, culture, and world politics

We begin by situating our discussion in two recent and vibrant literatures: on children and IR, and on popular culture and world politics. This helps to locate the article's contribution, and demonstrates the potential importance of relatively neglected texts such as *The Gruffalo*. The section begins by arguing that while much IR literature denies children meaningful agency in world politics, important recent work has begun to emerge on the capacity of children and their books to problematise and disturb common-sense understandings of the world.<sup>31</sup> A second section then migrates this claim to a wider literature on popular culture's theoretical capacity to produce and rupture knowledge of the world through its question-raising sensibilities.

#### Children and IR

Despite their importance within global politics, children are still largely absent in the field of IR:<sup>32</sup> 'It is as yet still rare to find them positioned in IR's stories about itself and its subject matters as complex and consequential actors in and of the social worlds they occupy.'<sup>33</sup> Where children do appear, their roles are often limited to subjects lacking in agency such as child soldiers,<sup>34</sup> victims of humanitarian catastrophe,<sup>35</sup> or individuals vulnerable to violent media or military recruitment.<sup>36</sup> Recent work, however, has begun to challenge this neglect, from scholarship on the agency of children – for instance as witnesses of atrocities,<sup>37</sup> to reflection on the capacity of young people to revitalise political debate including via activism.<sup>38</sup> Although much remains to be done, such work highlights the importance of children's actions and agency in global politics, demonstrating that young people have important capacity for storying, questioning, and critiquing the world, including via complex and critical readings of sociopolitical life. Crucially, this work suggests that young children

<sup>28</sup>See Lene Hansen, 'Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 581–608.

<sup>29</sup>David Shim, 'Sketching geopolitics: Comics and the case of the Cheonan sinking', *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 398–417.

<sup>30</sup>Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, London, UK: Sage, 2012).

<sup>31</sup>Starnes, *Fairy Tales*.

<sup>32</sup>Alison Watson, 'Children and International Relations: A new site of knowledge?', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 237–50 (p. 239).

<sup>33</sup>J. Marshall Beier, 'Introduction: Making sense of childhood in International Relations', in J. M. Beier (ed.), *Discovering Childhood in International Relations* (London, UK: Springer, 2020), pp. 1–19.

<sup>34</sup>Brocklehurst, 'State of play'. Although, as Brocklehurst points out, 'Child soldiers are seen as a political anomaly because they are holding military power' (p. 34).

<sup>35</sup>Emma Hutchison, 'A global politics of pity? Disaster imagery and the emotional construction of solidarity after the 2004 Asian tsunami', *International Political Sociology*, 8:1 (2014), pp. 1–19.

<sup>36</sup>Victoria M. Basham, 'Raising an army: The geopolitics of militarizing the lives of working-class boys in an age of austerity', *International Political Sociology*, 10:3 (2016), pp. 258–74.

<sup>37</sup>Claudia Aradau and Andrew Hill, 'The politics of drawing: Children, evidence, and the Darfur conflict', *International Political Sociology*, 7:4 (2013), pp. 368–87 (p. 373).

<sup>38</sup>Arita Holmberg and Aida Alvinus, 'Children's protest in relation to the climate emergency: A qualitative study on a new form of resistance promoting political and social change', *Childhood*, 27:1 (2020), pp. 78–92.

(in particular) often embody curiosity through the asking of questions and telling of stories that may actively problematise taken-for-granted hierarchies and issues.<sup>39</sup>

There is much that IR scholarship could learn here from the field of children's literature studies, childhood studies, and the sociology of childhood. Hannah Field, for example, exploring Victorian picturebooks, compellingly demonstrates the agency of children (as conventional readers but also as playful disruptors who might chew or colour books) while considering the content of such books both representationally and in material form.<sup>40</sup> Our suggestion here – evidenced through our reading of *The Gruffalo* – is that children's picturebooks contribute to this appetite for questioning and problematisation, such that these books can be approached methodologically as vernacular theorisations of world politics: as accessible yet sophisticated texts that unpack and disrupt existing frameworks of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> In this vein, Starnes uses fairy tales as both method and methodology to expose the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning sixty IR textbooks.<sup>42</sup> Relatedly, J. Jack Halberstam, drawing on *SpongeBob SquarePants*, argues that children's popular culture is especially susceptible to non-hegemonic or subversive readings, in part because children are less imprinted by socialised expectations and more likely to engage in fantasy and play.<sup>43</sup>

As fields beyond IR demonstrate, in short, there is therefore real value to engaging with such texts, their contexts and potentialities, and thereby moving beyond 'misguided and sentimental notion[s] of childhood innocence ... or naive investment in the idea of truth issuing from the mouths of babes.'<sup>44</sup>

### *Popular culture and world politics*

A second crucial recent development in IR has been a growing acknowledgement that popular culture matters in myriad ways for world politics.<sup>45</sup> Weldes and Rowley identify five (non-exhaustive) relationships between the two phenomena: 'state uses of popular culture' (e.g., state generated propaganda such as pro-war posters and films); 'the global political economy and/of popular culture' (e.g., the circulation, distribution, licencing, and consumption of the *Harry Potter* franchise); 'global flows are cultural and political' (e.g., the way in which food morphs, flows, and is absorbed and/or rejected in different contexts); 'representations, texts and intertexts' (e.g., how different cultural and racial groups are represented in films and videogames), and 'the politics of cultural consumption and cultural practices' (e.g., how audiences understand meaning within popular culture).<sup>46</sup> As Weldes had earlier argued, it is unrealistic for a researcher to cover all of these themes – in part 'for reasons of space' – but also due to variation in research questions, methodological frameworks, and metatheoretical assumptions.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the most pronounced thread within this literature is a pedagogical one centred on the value of popular culture for aiding understanding of emerging trends in world politics and theorisations thereof.<sup>48</sup> Marco Fey, Annika E. Poppe, and Carsten Rauch, for example, employ a detailed

<sup>39</sup>Susan Engel, *The Stories Children Tell: Making Sense of the Narratives of Childhood* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1995).

<sup>40</sup>Field, 'Playing'.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup>Starnes, *Fairy Tales*.

<sup>43</sup>J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), pp. xviii–xix, xxiii.

<sup>44</sup>Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

<sup>45</sup>See, for example, Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, 'Pop goes IR?'; Weldes and Rowley, 'So, how'; Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon (eds), *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>46</sup>Weldes and Rowley, 'So, how'.

<sup>47</sup>Weldes, 'Going cultural', p. 122.

<sup>48</sup>William Clapton and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Lessons from Westeros: Gender and power in *Game of Thrones*', *Politics*, 37:1 (2017), pp. 5–18; Nicolas De Zamaróczy, 'Are we what we play? Global politics in historical strategy games', *International Studies Perspectives*, 18:2 (2017), pp. 155–74.



reading of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09) to demonstrate depictions of nuclear weapons within this long-running television series.<sup>49</sup> As they show, *Battlestar Galactica's* portrayal of rational actors routinely employing nuclear weapons not only problematises the 'nuclear taboo'. It also aids theoretical understanding by demonstrating evolving trends in 'real' world politics such as the taboo's weakening through powerful states' talk of 'smart weapons' and 'collateral damage'.

Related work concentrates less on the pedagogical potential of such texts, and more on the importance of popular culture artefacts as provocations to theoretical insight, including through disturbance of established conceptual frameworks.<sup>50</sup> Cynthia Weber's landmark textbook, for instance, reads a number of films to challenge assumptions (or 'myths') inherent to key IR texts.<sup>51</sup> Rowley and Weldes read *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* to problematise assumptions beneath the 'myth of the evolution of (international) security studies',<sup>52</sup> and Matt Davies reads the former series as offering 'a particular and explicit argument about work, about the importance of the quality of work, and about the place work plays in the processes of human development and self-realization'.<sup>53</sup> This use of popular culture to draw attention to omissions and exclusions within IR theory<sup>54</sup> is evident, too, in Davies and Amanda Chisholm's exploration of *Dollhouse's* interrogation of the sexual violence underpinning neoliberal subjectivity,<sup>55</sup> and in Julia Welland's use of novels to track war's joyful experiences.<sup>56</sup> Popular culture, in work such as this, brings into focus that which is obscured<sup>57</sup> in dominant understandings, directing attention to hitherto neglected or occluded phenomena, practices, experiences, and the like.

This use of popular culture to rupture established ways of thinking connects to 'the aesthetic turn' in world politics with its emphasis on the inseparability of methods and knowledge.<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, for instance, draws extensively on popular culture to argue that 'fictional characters' within films and novels are as valuable for exploring the boundaries and contexts of world politics as the 'real' actors with whom IR researchers typically engage.<sup>59</sup> Drawing on Rancière, Shapiro introduces the notion of the 'aesthetic subject' to focus attention on how the permitted and proscribed movements within artistic genres,<sup>60</sup> can 'disrupt the taken-for-granted, invisible, and common-sense premises that inscribe the boundaries around the assumed limits to perceptual or political possibilities'.<sup>61</sup> By centring how characters traverse a text's narrative and visual arc,<sup>62</sup> engaging with the aesthetic subject means eschewing reflection on the internal desires and motivations of actors. As Shapiro argues, this is precisely because fictional characters' 'movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than *what they tell us about the world to which they belong*',<sup>63</sup> not least where their 'movements and actions (both purposive and

<sup>49</sup> Marco Fey, Annika E. Poppe, and Carsten Rauch, 'The nuclear taboo, *Battlestar Galactica*, and the real world: Illustrations from a science-fiction universe', *Security Dialogue*, 47:4 (2016), pp. 348–65.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*; Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013); Grayson, 'Breaking Bad', pp. 26–7.

<sup>51</sup> Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Rowley and Weldes, 'Buffyverse', p. 514.

<sup>53</sup> Davies, 'Buffy', p. 179.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

<sup>55</sup> Davies and Chisholm, 'Dollhouse'.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Welland, 'Joy and war: Reading pleasure in wartime experiences', *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 438–55.

<sup>57</sup> Davies and Chisholm, 'Dollhouse', pp. 286–7.

<sup>58</sup> Roland Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33; Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Shapiro, 'Cinematic'; Shapiro, 'Studies'.

<sup>60</sup> Shapiro, 'Cinematic'; Shapiro, 'Studies'.

<sup>61</sup> Delacey Tedesco and Matt Davies, 'Cities as aesthetic subjects', *Globalizations* (2022), p. 4, available at: {DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2022.2117505](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2117505)}.

<sup>62</sup> Shapiro, 'Cinematic', p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Shapiro, 'Studies', p. 11, emphasis added.

non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains.<sup>64</sup> By moving away from the ‘motivational forces of individuals’,<sup>65</sup> such readings help render visible power-relations and sociocultural dynamics inherent to everyday, and multiple, experiences of spaces of residence, labour, worship, transit, care, leisure, and beyond.<sup>66</sup> They do so, in part, by facilitating analysis of the rules that enable and constrain the actions of specific, but diverse, characters or subjects.

Work such as the above demonstrates the constitutive and critical importance of popular culture for international politics. Not only does it document the world-making potential of cultural genres and their capacity to (re)produce the world in specific ways. It also offers resources for engaging popular culture’s potential to expose, excavate, and problematise the foundations of established ways of seeing, feeling, and knowing global politics and its interfaces.<sup>67</sup> As this literature makes clear, there are real advantages to using popular culture to such ends. Films, videogames, or – in our case, picturebooks – can be arresting, can access hard to reach groups, and can provoke understanding and action through individual and collective experiences: cognitive and affective.<sup>68</sup> For readers already familiar with specific artefacts, popular culture can also be illustrative and informative.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, there are important caveats to guard against an uncritical dash to popular culture for theorising and critiquing world politics and knowledge thereof.

First, in using popular culture it is important to respect the long-standing contribution of PCWP scholars.<sup>70</sup> The very point of the above work is that popular culture merits serious scholarship, rather than relegation to the entertainingly illustrative.<sup>71</sup> Second, using popular culture to ‘simplify’ theory risks patronising readers as incapable of, or uninterested in, high-level understanding. Third, and relatedly, engaging with popular culture requires expertise and disciplinary training that researchers and readers may lack. Scholars of film, literature, videogames, and theatre, for instance, all engage with artefacts within ‘expert disciplines’, and proper reflection is needed on the methodological incorporation, adaptation, and innovation required for the treatment of such texts in IR.<sup>72</sup> Finally, working through popular culture is also time-consuming. While extracts are often used, commonly discussed artefacts – for instance, *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones* – often run to hundreds of hours of material. Engagement therewith for the purposes of illustration or simplification may therefore be more laborious than reading original theoretical material!

In our analysis of children’s picturebooks as a site for theorising and problematising global politics, we guard against these concerns in several ways. First, we develop insight from established scholarship on diverse cultural genres to set out a new composite methodological framework for future readings of children’s picturebooks by IR researchers and students. Second, we situate our reading not as an adjunct or replacement for theory but precisely as an endeavour designed to locate and unsettle dominant understandings of global political dynamics by bringing forth frequently occluded assumptions.<sup>73</sup> Third, we embrace the complexity of picturebooks as a polysemous and

<sup>64</sup> Shapiro, ‘Studies’, p. xiv.

<sup>65</sup> Shapiro, ‘Cinematic’, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Grayson, ‘Capturing’.

<sup>67</sup> Tedesco and Davies, ‘Cities’, p. 14. In more pedagogically-inspired incarnations, such work also purports to address theory’s perceived tendency towards the ‘dull’ or ‘impenetrable’, portraying popular culture as contrastingly ‘engaging’ or ‘accessible’. Popular culture, here, is often portrayed as being emmeshed in students’ everyday lives generating a familiarity that contrasts with the remote or detached nature of theory. For a brief review, see Rhys Crilly, ‘Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics’, *International Studies Review*, 23:1 (2021), pp. 164–80.

<sup>68</sup> Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2016); Stefan Engert and Alexander Spencer, ‘International relations at the movies: Teaching and learning about international politics through film’, *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs*, 17:1 (2009), pp. 83–103 (pp. 85–6).

<sup>69</sup> Marie V. Gibert, ‘Using elements of popular culture to teach Africa’s international relations’, *Politics*, 36:4 (2016), pp. 495–507.

<sup>70</sup> Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR’, p. 156.

<sup>71</sup> For another example, see Betty Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, ‘Pop goes IR’, pp. 158–60.

<sup>73</sup> Davies, ‘*Buffy*’, pp. 179–80.

unstable source of knowledge of world politics. Given the lack of prior engagement with such texts by IR scholars we hope here also to create openings for dialogue with adjacent fields which may be productive in future critical readings of other genres and artefacts.

### **The Gruffalo and world politics**

In the remainder of the article, we now combine and build on insights from related scholarship to offer a new methodological framework for investigating picturebooks, using *The Gruffalo* as a worked example.<sup>74</sup> The framework is one, we hope, with utility for subsequent research on artefacts such as this, and proceeds via four steps, the relative importance of which will vary according to one's research question(s), text, and contexts. First, we *situate* *The Gruffalo* contextually, highlighting its prominence and reach as a vernacular theorisation of world politics. Through this, it is possible to reflect on the text's social status,<sup>75</sup> to take note of its authority and importance, and to engage with statements of authorial intent. A second step provides a rich *description* of the text's narrative, tracing the plot's construction across five stages:<sup>76</sup> exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement. This leads to a *visual discourse analysis* of the book, pulling attention to issues including illustrative style, graphic presentation, framing, and placement. These two sections enable us – as Lene Hansen puts it – to consider how children's picturebooks serve 'as objects that speak *about* the world'.<sup>77</sup> The final – and most expansive – step then explores how *The Gruffalo* itself offers a multiple, and ultimately critical, theorisation of the international. Here, we demonstrate how the book confronts readers with the world's susceptibility to radically different readings, through showing how it: (1) posits the international as an anarchical environment of security-seeking behaviour by unconstrained self-interested actors; (2) develops an argument about the contingent nature of global political outcomes by emphasising the constitutive and causal power of ideas; and, (3) serves as a provocation to a more fundamental, decolonial, critique of the politics of security (knowledge) through its narrative and visual structuring around the journey of one aesthetic character: mouse.

### **Situating *The Gruffalo***

First published in 1999 in the UK by Macmillan Children's Books, *The Gruffalo* has been a phenomenal commercial and critical success. Winner of the prestigious Nestle Smarties Prize, a 2009 poll of BBC Radio 2 listeners identified the book as the best bedtime story for children.<sup>78</sup> Sales of *The Gruffalo* sediment its cultural importance, with 1.49 million copies of the original volume having been sold in the UK alone in the twenty years since publication.<sup>79</sup> The book's global reach is indicated by its translation into over eighty languages;<sup>80</sup> its commercial success evident in the range of subsidiary merchandising from activity books to crockery and clothing.<sup>81</sup> *The Gruffalo* (and its popular sequel, *The Gruffalo's Child*) has been adapted into animated films, while theatre productions, adventure walks, theme park rides, and concerts all contribute to the book's public prominence in the UK and beyond.

<sup>74</sup> Especially Weldes, 'Going cultural'; Clapton and Shepherd, 'Lessons'; Hansen, 'Reading', and Shim, 'Sketching'.

<sup>75</sup> Hansen, 'Reading', p. 586.

<sup>76</sup> Shim, 'Sketching'.

<sup>77</sup> Hansen, 'Reading', p. 586.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Barnes, 'Monster success: *The Gruffalo* is best bedtime story', *The Independent Online*, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/monster-success-the-gruffalo-is-best-bedtime-story-1816565.html> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Natasha Onwuezezi, 'Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler reflect on 20 years of *The Gruffalo*', *The Bookseller*, available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/insight/julia-donaldson-axel-scheffler-979736> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Onwuezezi, 'Julia'.

<sup>81</sup> Magic Light Pictures, 'The Gruffalo Shop', available at: <https://gruffaloshop.com/collections/the-gruffalo> accessed 30 March 2021.



Engagements such as these both point to and reproduce *The Gruffalo's* importance as a contemporary cultural artefact. The book's popularity is facilitated, in part, by its aesthetics as an illustrated novel offering a visual, simplified story of its world and its characters.<sup>82</sup> With the book's intertextual origins commonly narrated through (unproblematised) reference to a 'traditional Chinese tale' featuring a young girl and a tiger,<sup>83</sup> Donaldson locates its success in the sublime: that stimulating, even exciting, sensation of terror experienced on encounter with the prospect of danger.<sup>84</sup> In her words: 'All children like feeling scared and having that fear relieved. They feel empowered through that.'<sup>85</sup> This connects to her dissatisfaction with the moralism of much children's literature,<sup>86</sup> describing the book, in one interview, as a product of wanting 'to do something that was *a bit more realistic* about how life really is.'<sup>87</sup> Donaldson and the illustrator Axel Scheffler have a lengthy history of collaboration, and both enjoy significant public profiles with the former's portrait hanging in London's National Portrait Gallery. The pair have also engaged directly in ongoing political conversations, from Donaldson's suggestion that the 2019 *The Smeds and The Smoos* could 'very much be seen as a Remain book',<sup>88</sup> to their collaboration on a series of cartoons explaining the COVID-19 crisis, including one of the Gruffalo and his child 'stay[ing] in the Gruffalo cave.'<sup>89</sup>

Although media such as picturebooks, graphic novels, and comics often suffer condescension,<sup>90</sup> we can already see *The Gruffalo's* importance for the production, negotiation, and contestation of meaning about the world. On the one hand, the book's continuing success demonstrates the 'ongoing capital' of children as consumers of popular culture,<sup>91</sup> and therefore their importance for the stories told of global politics. Moreover, in introducing its readers to new places, ideas, and dynamics, the book offers important insight into the construction and circulation of common sense, and the creation, perpetuation, and transformation of sociopolitical worlds.<sup>92</sup> 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.'<sup>93</sup> By communicating reality's complexity in a simplified, yet focused, manner, *The Gruffalo* therefore has rich potential for spotlighting the

<sup>82</sup> Shim, 'Sketching', p. 400.

<sup>83</sup> Macmillan, 'The Gruffalo: The Story So Far', available at: <https://www.gruffalo.com/world-of/the-story> accessed 30 March 2021; Nii Ayikwei Parkes, 'The Gruffalo', The Book Trust, available at: <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/pre-2012/the-gruffalo/> accessed 30 March 2021; Paromita Chakrabarti, 'Julia Donaldson, the creator of *The Gruffalo*, who writes of sprightly creatures and spreads a lot of joy', *The Indian Express*, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye-a-life-of-adventure-and-delight-5041271/> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations: Ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31:4 (2005), pp. 621–43 (p. 627). As one of the reviewers suggested this opens up rich potential for future research on the ways in which fear and pleasure are mobilised here and the implications that this has for understanding related developments in world politics.

<sup>85</sup> In Rob Sharp, 'Gruffalo, the monster we all love', *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/nov/26/books.booksnews> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Susanna Rustin, 'A life in children's books: Julia Donaldson', *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/dec/19/julia-donaldson-gruffalo-interview-review> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Julia Eccleshare, 'Q & A with Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler', *Publishers Weekly*, emphasis added, available at: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/47027-q-a-with-julia-donaldson-and-axel-scheffler.html> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Amy Burns, 'The Gruffalo author Julia Donaldson on *The Smeds and The Smoos*: It could "very much be seen as a Remain book"', *Independent* (10 May 2019), available at: <https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/the-gruffalo-author-julia-donaldson-smeds-smoos-remain-book-289919> accessed 18 November 2022.

<sup>89</sup> "Gruffalo stayed in the cave": Axel Scheffler and Julia Donaldson's coronavirus cartoons', *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2020/apr/04/gruffalo-axel-scheffler-and-julia-donaldsons-coronavirus-cartoons> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Hansen, 'Reading', p. 587.

<sup>91</sup> Brocklehurst, 'State of play', p. 38.

<sup>92</sup> Weldes, 'Going cultural', p. 119; Priya Dixit, 'Relating to difference: Aliens and alienness in *Doctor Who* and international relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 13:3 (2012), pp. 289–306 (p. 290); Shim, 'Sketching', p. 402.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Hunt (ed.), *Understanding Children's Literature* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

assumptions and exclusions underpinning constructions of political reality,<sup>94</sup> and, in the process, for enabling a questioning of the world within and outwith its pages. To borrow from a recent article on Dr Seuss, *The Gruffalo* ‘provides a critical access point to the tremendous potential of literature to reveal significant commentary on our complex world.’<sup>95</sup> To demonstrate, the following sections now turn to the Gruffalo’s linguistic and visual storytelling of the world.

### Storying *The Gruffalo*

An illustrated rhyming story of only seven hundred words,<sup>96</sup> *The Gruffalo* centres on a mouse’s journey – a ‘stroll’ – through a ‘deep dark wood’. Structurally,<sup>97</sup> the book begins with a two-part exposition: a two-page illustration of the ‘deep, dark wood’ in which the story is set, preceded by an invitation for readers to, ‘Walk further into the deep dark wood, and discover what happens when the quick-thinking mouse comes face to face with an owl, a snake, and a hungry Gruffalo ...’. This dramatic opening efficiently introduces the book’s primary characters, their attributes, relations, and environment,<sup>98</sup> while establishing a mind/body dualism between its reasoning protagonist and the book’s more corporeal titular character.

The first half of the book provides the plot’s rising action in which the mouse sequentially encounters three of the wood’s carnivorous inhabitants: a fox, an owl, and a snake. Their intention to eat the protagonist is inferred from suggestions that mouse accompany them home for lunch, tea, and a feast, respectively. The mouse successfully rebuffs each invitation – evading the threat posed by the three creatures – by describing, or, rather, inventing, a prior commitment to dine with ‘a gruffalo’. Each predator’s ignorance of this seemingly fabricated creature is met with feigned surprise:

‘A gruffalo? What’s a gruffalo?’  
‘A gruffalo! Why, didn’t you know?’

Answering their own question, mouse then describes three characteristics of a gruffalo to each interlocutor, gradually building – for readers – a composite picture of this creature. So, fox – and readers – are introduced to a gruffalo’s armoury – his tusks, claws, teeth, and jaws. Conversations with owl and snake are then dominated by the creature’s monstrosity, which includes knobbly knees, a poisonous wart, and purple prickles all over his back. Inset images graphically evidence this horror: his orange eyes are drawn menacingly narrowed; his black tongue dribbles revoltingly; his purple prickles are pointed; and his tusks and claws are both sizeable and sharp. Such depictions, accompanied by pointed references to a gruffalo’s ‘favourite foods’ of roasted fox, owl ice cream, and scrambled snake, are sufficient to deter mouse’s antagonists. And, as fox, owl, and snake flee, readers of the book share in mouse’s subterfuge as its protagonist gleefully monologues on their clever fabrication:

‘Silly old Fox! Doesn’t he know,  
There’s no such thing as a gruffalo’

It is at the end of the third encounter (with snake) towards the book’s halfway point, that mouse finds their triumphalism interrupted: ‘There’s no such thing as a gruffal –’. Turning the page, readers encounter the book’s climax as mouse stumbles upon a creature matching the description of previous pages. As mouse revisits those characteristics – ‘But who is this creature with terrible claws, And terrible teeth ...’ – it realises:

<sup>94</sup>Shim, ‘Sketching’, p. 404.

<sup>95</sup>Nick J. Sciullo, ‘Unexpected insights into terrorism and national security law through children’s literature: Reading *The Butter Battle Book* as monstrosity’, *British Journal of American Legal Studies*, 3 (2014), pp. 507–27 (p. 509).

<sup>96</sup>Sharp, ‘Gruffalo’.

<sup>97</sup>See Shim, ‘Sketching’.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 405.

‘Oh help! Oh no!  
It’s a gruffalo!’

The threat posed by this monstrous creature is swiftly confirmed as *the* Gruffalo – from here on a proper noun – corrects mouse’s earlier (fabricated) culinary claims:

‘*My favourite food!*’, the Gruffalo said.  
‘*You’ll taste good on a slice of bread!*’

Mouse’s response to this threat, however, is swift and characterised by the self-composure of their earlier encounters. Feigning umbrage at the Gruffalo’s chosen predicate – ‘Good?’ said the mouse. ‘Don’t call me good!’ – mouse self-describes as ‘the scariest creature in this wood’, inviting the Gruffalo to witness this claim. A laughing Gruffalo agrees, following the mouse back down the woodland path.

The plot’s falling action then mirrors the opening pages as Gruffalo and mouse meet the three earlier inhabitants in reverse. Spotted by – and spotting – the Gruffalo, snake, owl, and fox quickly retreat from the monster of whom they were so recently ignorant. Readers of the book, of course, recognise it is fear of the Gruffalo that causes the predators to flee:

‘It’s Snake,’ said the mouse. ‘Why, Snake, hello’  
Snake took one look at the Gruffalo.  
‘*Oh crumbs!*’ he said, ‘*Goodbye, little mouse,*  
And off he slid to his logpile house.

The Gruffalo, though – stood behind mouse – interprets each retreat as confirmation of the latter’s earlier bold claim. Seeing the Gruffalo’s anxiety mounting with each encounter, mouse finally turns to the eponymous character, reversing the Gruffalo’s earlier threat:

‘Well, Gruffalo,’ said the mouse. ‘You see?  
*Everyone* is afraid of me!  
But now my tummy’s beginning to rumble.  
My favourite food is – Gruffalo crumble!’

The threat is too much for the Gruffalo who turns and flees ‘quick as the wind’, leaving the mouse alone to enjoy a nut amidst the trees of the deep, dark wood in the plot’s dénouement.

### Visualising *The Gruffalo*

As a children’s picturebook, *The Gruffalo*’s storying of the world takes place through visual presentation as much as narrative content, with Julia Donaldson’s written text interacting with Axel Scheffler’s illustrations. The ‘deep dark wood’ of the story’s setting is never explicitly situated, but the environment imagined by its UK-based creators would be a familiar one to readers there, populated by common native flora (white pine trees, birch trees, bullrushes) and fauna (kingfishers, damselflies, red squirrels, green woodpeckers). The naturalness of this bucolic backdrop of trees, grasses, flowers, and streams pictorially accentuates the Gruffalo’s monstrosity as a source of disruption to the wood’s orderliness. As, indeed, does the dramatic visualisation of mouse’s dislocatory experience on meeting the Gruffalo; the rodent’s smiling self-confidence replaced, temporarily, with a wide-mouthed shock that sees a literal sweeping of mouse off their feet.

The book’s illustrations are – to contemporary readers – unmistakably Scheffler’s:<sup>99</sup> its principal and supporting characters benefiting from characteristically anthropomorphic facial expressions conveying their shifting emotional states, so neatly encapsulated when the three initial predators

<sup>99</sup>See Eccleshare, ‘Q and A’

transition from slyness through confusion to fear. A comicality helps soften the threat of mouse's adversaries for young readers, too: from the wide-eyed simplicity of fox, owl, and snake, to the Gruffalo's pear-shaped portliness, although early sketches included more fearsome renderings of this monster.<sup>100</sup> The book's images are drawn from a third-person perspective offering distance to the reader, and the story is told in the past tense by an unnamed narrator through whom readers access the characters' thoughts and (mis)understandings. The inter-character dialogue is politely formal, even quaint – 'It's frightfully nice of you, Owl' – and stereotypically British with references to 'tea', 'crumble', and the mouse's 'tummy'.

The book's overall presentation is relatively uncomplicated, employing a single font size and style augmented only by the italicised dialogue of speaking characters. The guttering between images is minimal, and no pictures speak independently of the written text beyond the opening double-page spread, which illustrates the wood as a still and unmanaged space marked by seemingly recent footprints. The book's text and images are typically separated into demarcated spaces, although two key moments in the story see the written text placed atop a full double-page image. First, where mouse meets the Gruffalo at the book's plot twist, and second, at the book's conclusion in which mouse – having vanquished their enemies – enjoys a nut in newfound security. The book's textual form is in rhyme, an unpopular mode with publishers at the time of publication.<sup>101</sup> And, as indicated above, the book progresses through a pattern of repeated phrasings including at the conclusion of each encounter: 'A Gruffalo! Why, didn't you know?'

Taking the above sections together, we can see that the Gruffalo proceeds via a series of successive encounters between its protagonist – mouse – and a cast of other characters that take place against a familiar visual backdrop (at least to the point of the Gruffalo's intrusion). In storying the world through extrapolation from a hypothetical state-of-nature the book makes use of a stylistic device instantly familiar to students and scholars of IR and (liberal) political theory. As indeed, does its structuring around a series of (visually arresting) dyadic encounters between two characters.<sup>102</sup> These interactions, importantly, are dictated by the mobility of the book's primary character. It is mouse's journey through the wood that organises the book's narrative and visual construction, their presence on every page combining with the plot's emphasis on their movement. Although we return to this centring below, it matters, because, as Grayson notes, 'How aesthetic subjects navigate their fictional terrains and the forms of encounter they experience are an important source of geopolitical knowledge in their own right that need not be reduced to allegorical symmetries between real and imagined geopolitical worlds.'<sup>103</sup>

### Theorising (through) *The Gruffalo*

In this section we now develop our reading of *The Gruffalo* as a polysemous theorisation of global politics. We begin by showing the book's storying of the international as a pessimistic, anarchical world populated by self-interested, survival-seekers. From here, we reflect on its destabilisation of this reading through depiction of the social production of threats, and thereby the ideational and relational nature of power. We finish by showing how the book also advances a more fundamental, decolonial, critique of the politics of security (knowledge) that problematises the epistemological and normative privileging of its protagonist's movement and experiences. Taken together, these readings vividly illustrate that neither world politics nor popular culture are 'static structural givens':<sup>104</sup> the book reflects, pulls attention to, and critically interrogates, the ontological

<sup>100</sup> Axel Scheffler, 'Axel Scheffler opens his sketchbooks – in pictures', *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2017/sep/07/axel-scheffler-opens-his-sketchbooks-gruffalo-in-pictures> accessed 30 March 2021.

<sup>101</sup> See Eccleshare, 'Q and A'.

<sup>102</sup> Paul Poast, 'Dyads are dead, long live dyads! The limits of dyadic designs in international relations research', *International Studies Quarterly*, 60:2 (2016), pp. 369–74.

<sup>103</sup> Grayson, 'Breaking Bad', p. 31.

<sup>104</sup> Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, 'Pop goes IR', pp. 156–7.

and epistemological confidence of dominant understandings of the international.<sup>105</sup> The text's amenability to these hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings,<sup>106</sup> is a product, we argue, of its narrative and visual construction explored above, and of the openness to curiosity and rapture characteristic of children's literature discussed at the article's outset.

*The Gruffalo's* portrayal of mouse's encounter with four predatory carnivores may be read, simply, as a readily identifiable allegory of a characteristically realist anarchical world in which life is nasty, brutish, and short. In place of an imaginary state of nature we have here a literal one: a 'deep, dark wood' populated by fallen trees and heterogeneous fauna. The only (implicit) evidence of human existence is a path running through the wood and a logpile inhabited by snake, and – as in the constructed states of nature of European political theorists and their IR interlocuters – the wood appears to lack any framework of law or government.<sup>107</sup>

In such a straightforward allegorical reading of the book, we encounter a world in which the relations between social actors are unmediated by any genuine (political) authority. No character is obliged, in this story, to submit to the will of another: 'None is entitled to command; none is required to obey.'<sup>108</sup> And, although non-compliance with the solicitations of materially powerful actors – such as when mouse rejects the dinner invitations of fox, owl, and snake – is not subsequently substantiated via coercive power, the threat thereof remains a possibility.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, the story's emplotment through a series of simplified, dyadic encounters is illustrative of what Daniel Deudney identifies as the 'overwhelming consensus' of state-of-nature theorists, namely, 'that anarchical situations combined with actors who are in a situation of intense violence interdependence are intrinsically perilous for security'.<sup>110</sup>

Developing this first reading, the primary characters populating *The Gruffalo's* pages also bear considerable resemblance to the anthropomorphised states of realist (and other 'mainstream') theorisations of global politics:<sup>111</sup> a series of pre-given, unitary actors whose interactions are surface-level rather than constitutive.<sup>112</sup> From the book's opening pages, the attention of readers is concentrated, moreover, on the great powers of the 'deep, dark wood': fox, owl, snake, the Gruffalo, and (perhaps) mouse.<sup>113</sup> Although a supporting cast of actors is identifiable in Scheffler's visualisation (insects, small mammals, amphibians), their presence troubles neither the attention of our primary characters nor the book's written text. Those characters not negligible to the unfolding narrative,<sup>114</sup> though, possess autonomy and formal equality in the absence of an overarching hegemon.<sup>115</sup> They are characterised, too, as functionally equivalent<sup>116</sup> in the sense that their interests – if not their ability to satisfy those interests – are effectively identical: centred on survival through eating and avoiding being eaten.

<sup>105</sup>Our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for pushing us here.

<sup>106</sup>See Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 1991), pp. 117–27 (pp. 123–7).

<sup>107</sup>Jahn Beate, 'IR and the state of nature: The cultural origins of a ruling ideology', *Review of International Studies*, 25:3 (1999), pp. 411–34 (p. 424).

<sup>108</sup>Kenneth Waltz, 'Political structure', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 70–97 (p. 81).

<sup>109</sup>David A. Lake, 'Escape from the state of nature: Authority and hierarchy in world politics', *International Security*, 32:1 (2007), pp. 47–79 (pp. 50–3).

<sup>110</sup>Daniel Deudney, 'Anarchy and violence interdependence', in Ken Booth (ed.) *Realism and World Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), pp. 17–34 (p. 20).

<sup>111</sup>Alexander Wendt, 'The state as person in international theory', *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2004), pp. 289–316.

<sup>112</sup>Pinar Bilgin, 'Beyond the "billiard ball" model of the international?', *European Political Science*, 15:1 (2016), pp. 117–19 (p. 117).

<sup>113</sup>See Matthias Maass, 'Small states: Survival and proliferation', *International Politics*, 51:6 (2014), pp. 709–28.

<sup>114</sup>Maass, 'Small'.

<sup>115</sup>R. B. J. Walker, 'Realism, change, and international political theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 31:1 (1987), pp. 65–86 (p. 73).

<sup>116</sup>Waltz, 'Political', p. 91.



This emphasis on survival-seeking, self-interested behaviour is, of course, fundamental to dominant understandings of global politics.<sup>117</sup> As Darel Paul (critically) argues: ‘Both neorealism and neoliberalism are grounded in the assumption that the core interest of all states is self-preservation, and it is this desire to survive which acts as the fundamental animating principle of the state.’<sup>118</sup> Although *The Gruffalo* comprises a cast of heterogeneous capabilities and appetites (juxtaposing the nut-eating mouse to their carnivorous others), those ‘greater or lesser capabilities’<sup>119</sup> are put only to the service of survival through successful predation or escape thereof. *The Gruffalo*’s state of nature, here, visually captures Thomas Hobbes’s state of scarcity, hunger and covetousness; its cast little more than ‘machines moved by the desire for self-preservation,’<sup>120</sup> and condemned to perpetual insecurity:

It is manifest that during the time that men live without a common power to keep them in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.<sup>121</sup>

As a realist reading of the book might anticipate, the pursuit – and satisfaction – of survival in our anarchical deep dark wood is achieved through individual capabilities. No recourse is made to the morality of predation, either by predator or prey: the book’s ‘dangerous ontology’<sup>122</sup> generates a world of self-help, indeed self-reliance.<sup>123</sup> Those capabilities are material – teeth, beaks, claws, jaws, and so forth – but also (as discussed further below) ideational, as with mouse’s inventive engagement with their would-be attackers.<sup>124</sup> Mouse’s ability to triumph over those foes thus seems to confirm the classical realist assumption of approximate natural equality, even if the difference in faculties between the characters appears more pronounced than assumed in Hobbes’s hypothetical construct:

Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.<sup>125</sup>

*The Gruffalo*’s susceptibility to a realist reading of International Relations, however, does not conclude with its portrayal of global politics’ setting and cast. Indeed, by looking at the resolution to its various dyadic encounters, the book also offers insight into potential strategies for escape from the security dilemma generated by its ontology (Table 1).

Two characteristics immediately emerge from these encounters. First, is the diversity of strategies available to survival-seekers. Second, is the successful avoidance of conflict that follows each. Indeed, contra the ‘eat or be eaten’ mantra of realisms’ offensive incarnations, the book’s characters

<sup>117</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); Matthew Rendall, ‘Defensive realism and the Concert of Europe’, *Review of International Studies*, 32:3 (2006), pp. 523–40 (p. 524).

<sup>118</sup>Darel Paul, ‘Sovereignty, survival and the Westphalian blind alley in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 217–31 (p. 220).

<sup>119</sup>Waltz, ‘Political’, p. 92.

<sup>120</sup>Howard Williams, Moorhead Wright, and Tony Evans (eds), *A Reader in International Relations and Political Theory* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 91.

<sup>121</sup>Thomas Hobbes in *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>122</sup>Louiza Odysseos, ‘Dangerous ontologies: The ethos of survival and ethical theorizing in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 28:2 (2002), pp. 403–18.

<sup>123</sup>See Richard J. Harknett and Hassan B. Yalcin, ‘The struggle for autonomy: A realist structural theory of International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, 14:4 (2012), pp. 499–521.

<sup>124</sup>Michael C. Williams, ‘Why ideas matter in international relations: Hans Morgenthau, classical realism, and the moral construction of power politics’, *International Organization*, 58:4 (2004), pp. 633–65 (p. 638).

<sup>125</sup>Thomas Hobbes in Williams, Wright, and Evans (eds), *A Reader*, p. 91.

**Table 1.** Escaping the dark, dark wood's security dilemma.

Threatened	Threat	Strategy
Mouse	Fox, owl, snake	External balancing via alliance with the Gruffalo
Mouse	Gruffalo	Internal balancing through increasing capability
Mouse	Fox, owl, snake	Bandwagoning with the Gruffalo (unbeknownst to the Gruffalo)
Fox, owl, snake	Gruffalo (unbeknownst to the Gruffalo)	Hiding
Gruffalo	Mouse	Hiding

typically act cautiously: eschewing risk of death through avoiding conflict with ostensibly superior foes.

In the opening three encounters, we see mouse externally balancing the threat posed by fox, owl and snake through allying with the (fabricated) Gruffalo. This new coalition with a materially powerful Gruffalo forces each provocateur into speedy retreat. Mouse's encounter with the Gruffalo, in contrast, sees a successful attempt at internal balancing via the former's demonstration of their (ostensibly superior) capabilities; capabilities seemingly subsequently evidenced on the shared return through the wood. This journey then witnesses mouse's bandwagoning with the more powerful Gruffalo, unbeknownst to the latter. And, in the final encounters, we see the book's four predators – fox, owl, snake, and the Gruffalo – hide from threat through retreat.<sup>126</sup>

There are, of course, limitations to this reading of *The Gruffalo* as a tale of survival under anarchy. One might, for instance, argue that the relationship between the creatures is hierarchical: that the wood homes something of a food chain rather than a mosaic of roughly equal inhabitants. One might also suggest that predators and prey are not 'functionally equivalent', and the relationship between hunter and hunted is hardly a war of all against all.<sup>127</sup> And yet, the threats encountered by mouse are uniform in their immediate interests (consuming mouse), and the visual unfolding of the book around sequential encounters structurally confined to different pages – means its characters have no wider relationship – conflictual or cooperative; hierarchical or otherwise – to one another. Mouse, moreover, although less materially capable (all three foes explicitly reference mouse's diminutive size), is as concerned with survival as their predators, and as reliant on their own capabilities. Hence, mouse's employment of similar tactics such as deception in their efforts to deter those threats.<sup>128</sup> In this sense, our abstracting from every attribute of the characters except their capabilities is commensurate with realism's theorisation of the international,<sup>129</sup> hence our first reading of this text as a recognisable account of survival-seeking behaviour in a self-help world.

### Openings and alternatives

Mouse's successful vanquishing of their foes, then, provides visual and narrative insight into the security dilemma and escape thereof under conditions of international anarchy. In so doing, the book theorises the insecurity – and possibility/absence of conflict – in global politics in a manner familiar to dominant readings thereof through a series of accessible and aesthetically engaging visual and narrative gestures. Taking inspiration from Grayson's reading of *A Bear Called*

<sup>126</sup>Paul Schroeder, 'Historical reality vs. neo-realist theory', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 108–48 (p. 117).

<sup>127</sup>Readers might also question our engagement with diverse thinkers across political realism. This is justified, we feel, to illustrate the book's thematic engagement with IR theory, rather than to approach the book as a celebration of any specific incarnation of political realism, which we recognise as a diverse and vibrant tradition.

<sup>128</sup>Indeed, mouse's successful vanquishing of the four foes seems far from realism's stereotypical pessimism appearing to offer readers hope via an 'underdog' hero. See Joshua Foa Dienstag, 'Pessimistic realism and realistic pessimism', in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 159–76.

<sup>129</sup>Murielle Cozette, 'Realistic realism? American political realism, Clausewitz and Raymond Aron on the problem of means and ends in international politics', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27:3 (2004), pp. 428–53 (pp. 436–8).

*Paddington*,<sup>130</sup> and William Clapton and Laura J. Shepherd's engagement with *Game of Thrones*,<sup>131</sup> we now argue that restricting our understanding of the Gruffalo to this first reading would miss its importance as a critical intervention that also negotiates and destabilises dominant understandings of global politics through engagement with their ontological and epistemological construction and exclusions. To do this, we now offer two alternative readings of *The Gruffalo*, drawing insight from alternative understandings of world politics, to demonstrate that the book's significance is (also) in its sustained narrative and visual engagement with the constructed nature of danger, and with issues of positionality and power in the storytelling of the world.<sup>132</sup>

Reading *The Gruffalo* as a theorisation of danger's constructed nature pulls our attention to the processes through which threats are produced, rather than encountered, and to the book's representation of ideational power. As we have seen, mouse's ability to escape their opening encounters involves fabrication of a dangerous, threatening other: the Gruffalo. Drawing on Devetak's reading of Vanita Seth,<sup>133</sup> mouse's depiction of this creature – with its poisonous wart, terrible tusks and all – is fearsome *because* the constructed creature is characteristically monstrous: combining physiological confusion caused by intermingling human and animal body parts, moral ambiguity in its apparent disregard for ethical or social norms, and geographical displacement such that none of the wood's inhabitants have ever encountered a Gruffalo. The Gruffalo's monstrous otherness therefore signifies danger and depravity for the wood's more familiar inhabitants with its appetite for scrambled snake, owl ice cream, roasted fox, and mouse-on-bread; its incremental unmasking through the narrative and inset illustrations adding to the anticipation of danger for readers.

The salacious detail with which its body parts are described and illustrated confirms the Gruffalo's grotesque abnormality. Neither familiar nor unfamiliar,<sup>134</sup> the creature's impossibility<sup>135</sup> is radically disruptive for life in the wood. Most immediately, the Gruffalo's spectre disturbs the physical security of the wood's residents, forcing them into flight from this threat. Mouse's invention of the ravening Gruffalo, moreover, also disturbs the ontological security of the wood's inhabitants; rupturing their sense of the world – and their place therein – as a familiar, predictable, and stable environment.<sup>136</sup> The presence of the Gruffalo dramatically and fundamentally alters this sense of individual and social continuity, for fox, owl, and snake initially, but subsequently for mouse, too, following the monster's materialisation. The foreboding or dread<sup>137</sup> constructed by this imagined, then encountered, threat is evident from the creatures' words, and through their illustrated expressions and behaviour, as anxious predators are sent scuttling away at the thought, then sight, of this hitherto-unimagined power.

Mouse's construction of the Gruffalo, then, offers a succinct and insightful theorisation of the discursive production of security threats. First, the Gruffalo's monstrosity confirms the exceptionality of insecurity: no ordinary problem is he for our wood's inhabitants to resolve. Second, the 'urgency of emergency'<sup>138</sup> his presence provokes is confirmed by mouse's temporal and spatial positioning of the Gruffalo's imminent appearance, 'Here, by these rocks', 'Here, by this stream', and 'Here, by this lake.' And, third, as argued below, the imagination and encountering of the Gruffalo

<sup>130</sup> Grayson, 'Paddington'.

<sup>131</sup> Clapton and Shepherd, 'Lessons'.

<sup>132</sup> These alternatives do not, of course, exhaust the range of critical possibilities engendered by the text: the gendering of all characters male except (the ungendered) mouse, for instance, offers scope for feminist reflection. *The Gruffalo's* complex and fluid ontological status, moreover, presents opportunity for poststructural interpretations.

<sup>133</sup> Devetak, 'Gothic', pp. 632–3.

<sup>134</sup> Devetak, 'Gothic', p. 632.

<sup>135</sup> Amit S. Rai, 'Of monsters: Biopower, terrorism and excess in genealogies of monstrosity', *Cultural Studies*, 18:4 (2004), pp. 538–70 (p. 542).

<sup>136</sup> Stuart Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity: The securitization of Britain's Muslims', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:2 (2012), pp. 219–35 (pp. 220–3).

<sup>137</sup> Croft, 'Constructing', p. 220.

<sup>138</sup> Mark B. Salter, 'When securitization fails: The hard case of counter-terrorism programs', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), pp. 116–31 (p. 116).

*alike* convinces the wood's inhabitants that the danger he poses is indeed existential. If the successful securitisation of threats (monstrous or otherwise) requires audience acceptance,<sup>139</sup> there is little question of that having been secured, here, by mouse.

This theorisation of security as something that is produced, not given, also establishes a wider challenge to conventional understandings of life under conditions of anarchy by demonstrating the limits of materialist ontologies of global politics. The book does this, in the first instance, by illustrating the linguistic and visual production of danger. Not only is mouse able to balance against their initial foes by convincing fox, owl, and snake of their alliance with a greater power. Mouse is also later able to convince the Gruffalo of their own superiority, seeing the book's titular superpower turn and flee, 'as quick as the wind'. The outcome of these encounters, crucially, is neither pre-determined, nor materially given. In each instance, it is assumptions about the other's interests and intentions that guide the characters' decision-making.<sup>140</sup> Fox, owl, and snake *choose* to flee from mouse and again from an apparent Gruffalo/mouse alliance because they trust mouse's dialogue as much as they distrust the Gruffalo's intentions. Gruffalo, likewise, is sufficiently secure to journey with mouse through the wood until taking flight at the story's conclusion. In each instance, then, it is the relational *encounter*, and the inferences made about the other's reliability, capabilities, and intentions, that generates its outcome. As rendered most obvious in the mouse/Gruffalo interaction – but applicable to all seven meetings – 'social threats are constructed, not natural'.<sup>141</sup>

The constructed nature of threat is why revelation of the Gruffalo's 'real' ontological existence has no additional bearing on the predators and their behaviour. The threat posed by the Gruffalo is as powerful whether imagined or manifest. In this sense, the book offers a wider critique of material superiority as the foundation for (state) power within global politics. Each dyadic encounter culminates, counter-intuitively, in success for the materially inferior participant, with mouse able to compel fox, owl, snake and, ultimately, the Gruffalo to their will. Mouse does so by shaping the interests of their foes in order to determine the latter's behaviour, rather than coercing action through any preponderance of capabilities. Power in the deep, dark wood of *The Gruffalo*, as such, works not as a resource, but through relationships rooted in, and made fungible through, the ideational: through expectations, perceptions, emotions, and discourse.

*The Gruffalo*, then, both illustrates and negotiates a traditional understanding of world politics centred on escaping the security dilemma engendered by the anarchical environment of the deep dark wood. The book, put otherwise, is both complicit in, and critical of, conventional understandings of the international as a site of insecurity and fear.<sup>142</sup> In this final part of our discussion, however, we argue that it goes further still because it also contains a more radical, oppositional, reading that is critical of the broadly realist and constructivist interpretations considered above. This – decolonial – reading is one that deeply unsettles fundamental assumptions about the Gruffalo's world and its inhabitants.<sup>143</sup> It does so by 'unthinking'<sup>144</sup> or decentering mouse and their story as the book's taken-for-granted perspective and agent,<sup>145</sup> and by paying attention to the side-lining of other characters and their experiences.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>139</sup>Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

<sup>140</sup>Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425 (p. 404).

<sup>141</sup>Wendt, 'Anarchy', p. 405.

<sup>142</sup>See Grayson, 'Paddington', pp. 390–1; Clapton and Shepherd, 'Lessons', p. 14.

<sup>143</sup>There are, of course, multiple strategies for decolonising power/knowledge relationships, and the following is far from exhaustive of these. Our thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pushing us here.

<sup>144</sup>Siphamandla Zondi, 'Decolonising international relations and its theory: A critical conceptual meditation', *Politikon*, 45:1 (2018), pp. 16–31 (pp. 18–20).

<sup>145</sup>Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment in security studies', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 329–52; Lucy Taylor, 'Decolonizing international relations: Perspectives from Latin America', *International Studies Review*, 14:3 (2012), pp. 386–400 (p. 390).

<sup>146</sup>Zondi, 'Decolonising', p. 19.

This third reading of the *Gruffalo* begins by recognising the book's narrative and visual emplotment through the journey of one mobile character – one 'aesthetic subject'<sup>147</sup> – mouse. Told in the third person throughout, it is mouse's *movement* through the wood – and, therefore, through the habitats or homes of its various inhabitants – that sets in motion the encounters driving the narrative. Mouse's proximity to the territorial residences of fox, owl, and snake is graphically illustrated through visualisation of the logpile house, treetop house, and underground house. In contrast to their antagonists, mouse is seemingly unbound to any fixed abode, licentiously and smilingly 'strolling' through the wood.<sup>148</sup> As noted above, as the only character present on each of the book's pages, readers are effectively tethered to mouse: nothing happens in the story that does not concern, and is not put in motion by, mouse's journey.

The different freedoms of movement afforded mouse and the wood's 'native' inhabitants reproduces a long-standing anthropological binary in which 'non-native observers are regarded as quintessentially mobile – movers, seers, knowers – [while] 'natives' are understood as immobile through their belonging to a place.'<sup>149</sup> In this sense, the book's focus on mouse's travels vividly demonstrates the situatedness of (security) knowledge highlighted, in particular, by postcolonial scholarship.<sup>150</sup> By centring this third reading upon mouse's journey, we are confronted with the specificity of the book's security dilemma which, far from universal, is, in fact, the dilemma of its principal subject: mouse. The threats that arise as the plot unfolds are threats (initially) *to* mouse. And the resolution of those threats is driven by the actions *of* mouse. Thus, although the book might be read as a conventional stylisation of the politics of security under anarchy (realist and/or constructivist), it may also be taken as a sustained argument about the parochial nature of such stylisations and their particularity to the experiences and actions of privileged characters. Following Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey,<sup>151</sup> the book's rootedness in mouse's journey through the wood therefore means it, 'derives its core categories and assumptions ... from [mouse's] particular understanding'<sup>152</sup> of that journey. Despite the third person narration, it adopts a consciously taken-for-granted perspective in its analysis of key events<sup>153</sup> in which agency is rooted in the body of the story's diminutive protagonist.

This narrative emphasis on mouse as the driver of events has twofold importance. First, it works through an empirical partiality such that the actions and interests of the wood's other characters are revealed only through interaction with mouse.<sup>154</sup> The story of *The Gruffalo* is not told from the perspective of fox, owl, snake or, indeed, from that of the *Gruffalo*. Those characters and their experiences are made relevant only on encounter with mouse. The story of *The Gruffalo* is therefore a fundamentally provincial one that flattens the wood's diverse histories, geographies, and relations into a singular story of insecurity even if their wording by an unnamed narrator gestures at impartiality.<sup>155</sup> Recognising this offers fertile ground for what Edward Said terms a 'contrapuntal reading' of the wood/international relations as state of nature focused on recuperating marginalised stories while exploring their intermeshing and theorising their production within this particular power-knowledge nexus.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>147</sup> Shapiro, 'Cinematic'; Shapiro 'Studies'.

<sup>148</sup> Mouse is, however, depicted as having a home in the sequel, *The Gruffalo's Child*.

<sup>149</sup> See the discussion of Appadurai's work in Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess, 'Time and the others', in Sanjay Seth (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 70–83 (p. 72).

<sup>150</sup> Pinar Bilgin, *The International in Security, Security in the International* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), pp. 110–13.

<sup>151</sup> Barkawi and Laffey, 'Postcolonial'.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>154</sup> See John M. Hobson, 'The other side of the Westphalian frontier', in Seth (ed.), *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations*, pp. 32–48.

<sup>155</sup> See Meera Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace', *Security Dialogue*, 44:3 (2013), pp. 259–78 (pp. 261–2); Tarak Barkawi, 'Decolonising war', *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2 (2016), pp. 199–214.

<sup>156</sup> Geeta Chowdhry, 'Edward Said and contrapuntal reading: Implications for critical interventions in international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 36:1 (2007), pp. 101–16 (p. 105).



This problematisation of the empirical partiality underpinning (knowledge of) world politics connects to a second – ethical – partiality,<sup>157</sup> whereby the book both encourages readers to identify with mouse and – in foregrounding the smugness of its protagonist – asks whether mouse is indeed the powerless creature suggested by the story. As we have seen, the book's plot unfolds via mouse's insouciant movement through the habitats of other residents, detailing their ability to render their counterparts insecure, including by wielding the threat of the Gruffalo to their own purposes. This emphasis on one subject's movement through the woods, in other words, demonstrates how taken-for-granted narratives may generate taken-for-granted politics:<sup>158</sup> how readers might be encouraged to 'root for' specific characters and their particular, embodied, journeys such as in this illustrated, simplified, story.

Once mouse's movements and *metis*<sup>159</sup> are centred thus, *The Gruffalo*'s value as a decolonial critique of security-seeking behaviour and narratives becomes clearer. Most obviously, the story both relies on and invites readers to question a series of familiar binaries demanding deconstruction.<sup>160</sup> Where mouse is mobile and agential; fox, owl, and snake are unmoving and responsive. Mouse is storied as individual and unique; their counterparts have no individual importance beyond an equivalence as threats to mouse. Mouse is sophisticated, intelligent, and resourceful; their others are unsophisticated, simple, and primitive. And, mouse, as we have seen, represents reason and cognition with their problem-solving abilities, deviousness, and inner monologue; the other creatures, in contrast, are animalistic, instinctive.

*The Gruffalo*, however, not only demonstrates the situatedness of (mouse's) knowledge (of the wood) and of threats to their security. It also highlights how a privileged character is able to 'world' shared environments<sup>161</sup> through constituting their interlocutors' understandings of danger, insecurity, and otherness. The point here is not, only, that the wood's other characters might story the environment, its norms, and dilemmas differently. But, in addition, that their *ability* to story their own insecurities has already been shaped or constituted by their encounters with mouse and their constructions. The influence of mouse's travels in shaping others' understanding of the wood therefore provokes a reversing of the gaze to ask: how would *The Gruffalo* be storied from the perspective of snake, or owl, or fox, or the Gruffalo? What security politics would emerge with mouse portrayed as the threat, not the threatened? What unrepresented agency resides with the book's other characters? And, fundamentally, under what conditions might similar value be attributed to the book's non-murine lives?

Our focus, in this article, has been on theorising *The Gruffalo* as a plural and vernacular site of knowledge about (international) (in)security. Although the interpretation with which we began may appear commonsensical given the book's framing and political realism's continuing dominance as an interpretive frame,<sup>162</sup> *The Gruffalo* also, we argued, works through negotiated and oppositional readings of world politics to offer critical intervention into dominant narratives thereof and their meta-theoretical construction.<sup>163</sup> This polysemy, as we have seen, not only exposes the 'messy' and contested nature of world politics but is a direct product of the narrative and visual content and form of children's picturebooks: a remarkably neglected site of knowledge within IR and beyond. Taking it seriously forces confrontation with the contestability of any reading of world politics, or indeed popular culture. As Clapton and Shepherd argue, 'The representations of the international that popular culture provides can either challenge or support conventional understandings or interpretations. Often, many popular cultural texts do both.'<sup>164</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Barkawi and Laffey, 'Postcolonial'.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Shapiro, 'Urban security', p. 445.

<sup>160</sup> Sabaratnam, 'Avatars', p. 261.

<sup>161</sup> Bilgin, 'The international', pp. 106–13.

<sup>162</sup> See Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', pp. 123–7.

<sup>163</sup> See also Debbie Lisle, 'How do we find out what's going on in the world?', in Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss (eds), *Global Politics: A New Introduction* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 154–75 (pp. 167–73).

<sup>164</sup> Clapton and Shepherd, 'Lessons', p. 15.

## Conclusion

In his discussion of *A Bear Called Paddington*, Kyle Grayson argues that children's literature is 'important and political' because of its: 'potential to provide narrative foundations about who one is, and how the world operates'.<sup>165</sup> In this article we have pursued this insight by arguing that *The Gruffalo* – a spectacularly successful and much-loved example of the children's picturebook genre – offers a complex and polysemous theorisation of international politics that: constitutes the international as a pessimistic, anarchical world populated by self-interested, survival-seekers; destabilises this construction through dramatisation of the securitisation of threats; and, enables confrontation with processes of epistemological and normative privileging in the world's storytelling. In doing so, moreover, the book actively demonstrates the world's 'messiness' and susceptibility to competing interpretations.<sup>166</sup>

This analysis, we argued, offered empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions to existing debate, by: (1) engaging with a neglected text and genre; (2) demonstrating the importance of such texts in (re)creating, negotiating, and (de)stabilising (knowledge of) global politics; and, (3) providing a framework for future scholarship via a novel methodological framework. Given the lack of existing literature on children's picturebooks and IR, we finish by mapping a non-exhaustive list of future research agendas to build on the above.

First, and most obviously, our methodological framework could sustain readings of other children's picturebooks and their construction of world politics. Such readings could offer comparative insight into portrayals of the international within these books and their subjects. They could explore intertextual links between such books and other texts, for instance in relation to national myths and lore, or political allegory. And, of course, issues of translation and context matter here too. Are picturebooks altered for perceived (in)compatibility with different cultural values? Do books fall in and out of favour as values change? Does the 'success' of a book in particular markets demonstrate linkage to specific values?

Second, children's picturebooks are an important site in which global politics is made manifest intersubjectively through relations between readers and audiences in everyday spaces from bedrooms to libraries and classrooms. There are thus rich opportunities for audience research here, for instance to explore how adults make sense of such books in their reading, and around how or whether such books provoke political conversation. Affective questions will be particularly important, given the capacity of such texts and their encounters to provoke emotions such as pleasure and fear, to generate connections between readers and listeners, and to stimulate new ways of understanding or being in the world.<sup>167</sup> How, then, do picturebooks differ here from other artefacts or subcultures and their impacts on individuals, communities, and beyond.<sup>168</sup>

Third, building on this, children's picturebooks also offer potentially important insight into the politics of resistance and/or social values. Future research could look at picturebooks as a corpus of resistance practices and/or sites that affirm dominant narratives. Do picturebooks change their messages over time? How do they engage with issues such as racism? Environmental destruction? LGBTQIA+ rights? Relatedly, future research could actively reflect on the cultural authority of children's authors to explore their status as 'public intellectuals or expert voices' in the public sphere able to comment through their work and beyond it.<sup>169</sup>

Finally, there are rich possibilities for further decolonial work in this area. Among other things, this might include: critical reading of children's picturebooks published in the Global South; analysis of picturebooks published in languages other than English; engagement with depictions

<sup>165</sup> Grayson, 'Paddington', p. 380.

<sup>166</sup> Weldes and Rowley, 'Buffyverse', p. 526.

<sup>167</sup> Our thanks to one anonymous reviewer for drawing this to our attention.

<sup>168</sup> For an excellent treatment, see Dunn, *Global Punk*.

<sup>169</sup> Hansen, 'Reading', p. 583.

of colonialism, imperialism, and eurocentrism in picturebooks; and, readings of children's picturebooks through non-Western theories of politics and IR.<sup>170</sup>

Overall, our article has actively set out to demonstrate that children's picturebooks are far from trivial, disposable curios. They are important sites of world politics offering important insights into world politics. They help us to think more sharply about methods, offer a useful vehicle for theorising the international, and demonstrate an important locus of coalescence between world politics and the everyday. Children's picturebooks are not 'just for kids,' and there is rich potential for future research in this nascent field.

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<sup>170</sup>Pinar Bilgin, 'Thinking past "Western" IR?', *Third World Quarterly*, 29:1 (2008), pp. 5–23; Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds), *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009).