Farley Mowat: Writer for Young People

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With such angry books as *People of the Deer* (1952), *The Desperate People* (1959), and *A Whale for the Killing* (1972) among his works, Farley Mowat is scarcely the kind of author one would normally associate with children's books. Yet, faced perhaps with doubts about effecting any changes in attitudes of society through these very books, he has written several stories for young people and has spoken out with his usual forthrightness on the importance of such literature:

> The hardest books in the world to write are books for young people. They are also by far the most rewarding. Books written by adults, for adults, rarely have any prolonged effect upon their readers, no matter how good they may be. A good book for youngsters can influence the whole future life of the young reader. This is, of course, almost an axiom. Yet it is all too often ignored by writers in this country, and elsewhere. I happen to believe that it is an absolute duty for good writers to devote a significant part of their time and talent to writing for young people. It is also the hardest kind of work, for it demands qualities of honesty that are not essential in an adult book. But it is of absolutely vital importance if basic changes for the good are ever to be initiated in any human culture. God knows, *our* culture desperately needs changing for the better.
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> Of course writing for youngsters is not *all* hard work. In truth it can be, and damned well ought to be, good fun too. There ought to be a large ingredient of fun in everything we do. Alas, it is a quality that seems to be of declining value. For me, the writing of young people's books has been fun--and some of the best and most enduring fun I have ever known. It has also brought me, and I hope, my young readers, the feeling that life is very much worth living.[1]

There is probably more to this advocacy of juvenile books than the quotation indicates at first reading. From early youth Mowat had been interested in creative writing. At first he had addressed himself to the high ambition of serious poetry. Later he took a course in creative writing at university and early in his career published short stories (to be published soon in revised versions in *The Snow Walker*). Moreover, as the critics of many of his adult books (all non-fiction) delight to proclaim, he liked to stretch the truth in them if he did not actually write fiction. In his children's books, Mowat could, then, indulge his imagination without fear of attack and perhaps also find some fulfillment for his desire to write the fiction that seems to have been his early ambition, but that he never quite realized, either because he found the adult novel as then defined unsuited to his way of conceptualizing or to his social

purpose. Beyond these conjectures, however, Mowat's children's books (and all are boy's books) demonstrate his desire, on the one hand, to indoctrinate boys with his social concepts and values and, on the other, to retain the pleasant memories of his childhood.

For the most part Mowat skilfully disguises his didactic intent. He hides it under narrative motifs and themes that have to do with wish-fulfillment, with the search for affection and security, with animals as a way of satisfying a child's wish to love and be loved, and with success achieved through brave and noble deeds or through skill and resourcefulness. These motifs and themes are not only those of much adult fiction, but also (especially those relating to deeds) of much of Mowat's non-fiction, despite what would seem radical differences between his juvenile and his adult books. Carver would list *People of the Deer, The Grey Seas Under* (1959), *The Serpent's Coil* (1961), and *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) as children's literature, [2] and Sheila Egoff puts it that *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* (1957), "written for adults [has been] adopted by children" and that *Owls in the Family* (1961), "written for children [has been] adopted by adults." [3]

Carver's and Egoff's observations introduce a question that pertains to all children's literature. In the first place almost all children's books are purchased by middle-class adults who, in general, use as their criteria of judgment what they as children found best or what they now believe is "best" for boys and girls. Consequently, authors of juveniles usually write in terms of the *status quo*, for the sake of the adults, if not of the children. In some ways the practice has advantages since the values of childhood are precious. Within recent times, however, children's literature in Canada, as elsewhere, has been criticised for its alleged sexist, racist, and reactionary attitudes. For example, as one of probably many counter actions against such allegedly biased writing, Anne Millyard of Toronto has even begun a publishing venture called Books for Kids, which will handle only stories by children for children, with the first book, *Wordsandwich,* published in 1975.

Like his motifs and themes, Mowat's subjects are the old time-tested children's story standbys of pets and family life, Eskimos, Indians, and pirates, but in his books they take on new life. Mutt and his "owlish" playmates, Wol and Weeps, defy classification with animals and birds. Mowat's Eskimos may be friendly, but they are far from the fat-cheeked and jolly creatures of the general run of children's books about them, and his Indians live as Indians, not as noble savages, or as blood-thirsty warriors, or as sentimentalized vanishing Americans. Vanishing they may be, but Mowat is indignant rather than sentimental about their plight. Mowat's "pirates" are boys, and their booty, far from the usual, is a treasure-trove of bootleg whiskey!

The settings of Mowat's stories have a freshness about them. His northland is far more realistic than Ballantyne's, E. R. Young's, and Oxley's, and there is also a convincing verisimilitude about the maritime world of *The Black Joke* (1962). As for the animal stories, Mowat relives his childhood in them and has simply to recreate, not invent, their settings. The fact that Mowat wrote from experience may limit his scope somewhat, but it makes his books more vivid and more interesting. He is no arm-chair naturalist or yacht-club seaman. He lived in the Canadian North and sailed the eastern seaboard and the coasts of

Newfoundland, and he succeeds in imparting his knowledge of and feeling for these regions in his stories.

If Mowat is impressive for his handling of his settings, subjects, and themes, he is no less so for his skill as a story-teller and for the liveliness of his humour. He creates suspense by hinting at future events or by withholding information and by dramatizing or describing exciting episodes in which disaster is only a hair's breadth away. As is standard, also, in fiction of event, the characters are types with just enough individuality to set them apart from each other, but not so much as to preclude the reader's identification with them, or to hinder the flow of the narrative. Mowat is little concerned with analyzing personality. His interest centres on the physical world and the life of action. This interest unquestionably attracts young readers, but it also seems to have contributed much to the popularity of his books for adults.

The first paragraph of Mowat's comment on children's literature quoted above echoes the moralistic aims of nineteenth-century authors of children's books, but his high seriousness about this purpose barely surpasses the high seriousness of his determination to have "fun." To teach and to delight have long been the aims of literature, but with such early writers of children's books as Traill, Ballantyne, Young, and Saunders, "fun" scarcely ever reached the level of humour, and then only as the cute or farcical. With Mowat "fun," especially in his animal stories, means hijinks, eccentric characters, and a flavouring of satire.

Mowat's first juvenile book, *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), is obviously a by-product of *People of the Deer*. Both are set in the Keewatin District, the barren lands west of Hudson Bay. Both aim not only at creating sympathy for the aborigines of the north, but also at a greater understanding of the north itself and the way of life appropriate to it. It could be argued that *Lost in the Barrens* represents Mowat's response to the failure of officialdom to take prompt and appropriate action following his *exposé* in *People of the Deer* of their inadequacies. An indignant book aimed at immediate remedies, it had received indignant replies in its turn. *Lost in the Barrens*, by the very nature of its genre, is a more moderate book than *People of the Deer,* and though it takes its stand on the same issues, it puts its trust in a future when its young readers, having become adults, will help bring about a changed attitude toward our native peoples. Jamie, a white city boy, and Awasin, a young Indian, survive a winter on the barrens only because the "inventiveness" of the former complements the "experience" of the latter. The combination of the strength of each enables them to cope with injury, illness, storms, and bone-freezing frosts, though they do benefit, too, from the good offices of coincidence or "the spirits of the north," whereby they discover a hidden valley replete with trees and wintering caribou, not to mention the two huskies that seek refuge with them or Peetyuk's igloo that they happen to find just in time to thwart death in a raging blizzard. And, through it all, Jamie learns what Awasin has always known, but what "white men don't as a rule." "If you fight against the spirits of the north you will always lose," Mowat admonishes. "Obey their laws and they'll look after You."[4] Mowat's Indians are not redskin varmints like many in Ballantyne's stories who ungraciously, with white man's firearms, make life difficult for those who bear the white man's burden, nor do they resemble Young's, who

are innocents waiting for the word of the Lord. In Ballantyne's day Indians and Whites might well have been at each other's throats; for many, then, law and order meant guns and bloodshed. In Young's day the Bible had replaced the gun as a solution to the Indian "problem," for it would lead the Indian, though apparently not his white brethren, in the path of righteousness. Mowat's Indians in *Lost in the Barrens* are simply human beings with values and customs of their own, living their everyday lives, fishing, hunting, feasting, or, when called on, lending a hand to their white friends..

Mowat embeds his rough-hewn anthropology and history with some nature lore-- though one wonders about the delicious fish duck the boys ate--in a story of high adventure or misadventure in which two boys in search of a viking tomb lose touch with their hunting companions and have to winter on the barrens. The boys move from crisis to crisis, after the traditional fashion of boy's stories, and finally all ends happily, thanks to Peetyuk, a half-white Eskimo. The most distinguished section of the book by far, however, revolves around the boys' lives in Hidden Valley. Mowat, like Defoe, could make the most of a situation in which man and nature meet, not as rivals but as partners. Although storms blow violently in Hidden Valley, it is always cosy in the cabin, thanks to human ingenuity and to nature's bounty in supplying food and fuel and, as evidence of even greater largess, a caribou fawn so that the boys have an opportunity to satisfy their "wish to love and to be loved," the motif of so many pet animal stories. The wolves kill the fawn to Jamie's angry regret, but not to Awasin's, for, as he informs Jamie, "wolves have to eat." [5]

Mowat, again like Defoe, also made the most of a deep psychological realism by describing minutely all the boys' activities in building their wilderness home, getting in their supplies, making their clothes, building their fires, and cooking their meals. Hidden Valley resembles Ballantyne's Silver Lake in *Silver Lake, or Lost in the Snow* (1867), but in Ballantyne's northern Eden the children (a brother and a sister) live almost idyllically, playing house as it were-- such was the influence of home, sweet home, in an age of great migration-- and enjoy their winter sports of sliding and tobogganing. (They even delight in washing in the clear water of the lake-- after they reach it on their snow-shoes in sub-zero weather.) Indeed, they live as happily as the British lads who, in Young's *Winter Adventures of Three Boys in the Great Lone Land,* turn the north into vacationland.

Mowat's boys never live so luxuriously as Ballantyne's and Young's. Their activities resemble the initiation rites of an adolescent Indian as they pass through the hardships of their winter's isolation on the barrens. Ballantyne's and Young's books were addressed to the nineteenth-century British; Mowat's, to the twentieth-century Canadians. On the surface the central theme of the book may appear to be that of survival, but Mowat celebrates no such negative concept, not the merits of mere dogged persistency, for beneath the surface lies evidence that he has dedicated his story to positive values through which one asserts a joy in the vitality of living.

Mowat has unified the different elements in his story with a

variation of the epic quest for home as a central motif. Mrs. Traill had introduced this kind of quest into Canadian children's literature with *Canadian Crusoes* (1852), but in her book the children are truly lost—she had drawn on a local and contemporary event—and are only saved through their faith in divine guidance. Ballantyne in *Silver Lake, or Lost in the Snow* follows Mrs. Traill in suggesting that prayer and faith in divine guidance are instrumental in saving the children. Jamie and Awasin in *Lost in the Barrens,* however, triumph largely through faith in themselves and an ability to adjust to their environment-- though the supernatural ("the spirits of the north") comes to their aid, not because of the efficacy of prayer, but of common sense.

British writers have long included lost children among their *dramatis personae*, but they have invariably been lost heirs; Canadian writers have had simply to make do with lost children. Oliver Twist may have been lost in a social wilderness, but blood carries him through, and breeding triumphs. In *Lost in the Barrens,* breeding does not count, even if race does; the boys succeed largely because of "good sense," "hard work," and self-reliance, as Horatio Alger's boys did in the world of office and factory. Though not interested in the same kind of "success", Mowat's adolescents are cut from the same cloth as Alger's, and their achievement demonstrates two typically North American faiths —that self-reliance counts above all and that luck comes to those who earn it.

Ten years after *Lost in the Barrens*, Mowat turned to the north again in another book for boys, *The Curse of the Viking Grave* (1966). Like the former, it also stems from a preceding adult's book, in this case a history, *Westviking* (1965). *Lost in the Barrens* won a Governor-General's Award among other honours and, according to Egoff, became "one of the few Canadian children's books that have achieved an international reputation."[6] No such acclaim awaited *The Curse of the Viking Grave*. Even Mowat called it "a lousy book, a really bad piece of work,"[7] and despite D. H. Lawrence's dictum, "Never trust the author," Mowat can be trusted here.

All the ingredients of *The Curse of The Viking Grave*--sizzling caribou chops over cheery campfires, dangerous rivers. ancient treasures, Indian and Eskimo hunters--ought to have produced another exciting tale. But the book proves the conjurer's old adage, "never twice," for Mowat seems to have lost his magic in it. Perhaps he was exhausted after the big book *Westviking*, or perhaps *Lost in the Barrens* had expended his imaginative capital as regards the north.

The Curse of the Viking Grave again uses quest and chase to create suspense and achieve unity. The heroics of Jamie, Awasin, Peetyuk, and this time Marie, Awasin's sister, derive from a trek to a mysterious viking tomb to secure treasures buried there and at the same time to avoid the RCMP officers who are out to get their man, Jamie--to send him back to school in the south. Not even the RCMP can stir up much excitement, however, for Mowat has too palpable a design upon the reader. Again there is a plea for understanding of the natives who, as the fellowship of the travellers proves, are worthy people by any standard worth holding by white civilization. In this book, however,

Mowat has a new cause to take up. He is convinced that the vikings once settled in northern Canada. He accepts the Kensington Stone (and the Beardmore relics) as genuine and as almost certain proof of the viking presence there, as the long recitations of viking legends in the book demonstrate. Even if justified as history, they clog the narrative, for Mowat drags them in as support of a theory and not as part of the plot. The story involving the police trails off completely early in the book, and the story of the treasure hunt loses itself in a thicket of anthropological and geographical details. Furthermore, no account could carry the weight of the description of an almost interminable journey through country that is endlessly the same, particularly since, from the very beginning, the treasure seems hardly worth the trouble, even if it is to be sold to help the native cause, and since the awful curse of the Eskimo medicine man seems little more than a joke to the young people.

Mowat's attempt to write a thriller about the north fails because the story proper is mainly a travelogue and hence lacks any dramatic tension. "Where do the characters go next?" is a bare substitute for "what do they do next?" or "what happens next?" as a narrative device. Moreover the characters do not have the personalities to supply the interest that the plot lacks. They are theme-ridden, Jamie obviously acting as spokesman for the author when, early in the book, he cries out against white man's indifference and injustice towards the Cree Indians: "Jamie clenched his hands, wadded the letter into a ball and flung it onto the ice. There was bitter defiance in his voice. '*My* people? They aren't mine! They'd let the whole lot of you die without lifting a hand to help. Don't call them *my* people, Alphonse!' "[8] The romance between Peetyuk and Marie is out of place, cute, and heavily propagandistic. Fiction with four protagonists, no villains, and two adolescent lovers sets up obstacles that *The Curse of the Viking Grave* never overcomes.

Mowat's only other adventure story, *The Black Joke* (1962), is a tale of the sea, but, unlike the books set in the north, it centres on the struggles of man with man, not man in nature. If it lacks the psychological insight that the experience of the two boys in their winter camp reveals, it does not have to carry any of the kind of message that *The Curse of the Viking Grave* collapses under. Mowat again makes heroes of the unsophisticated--this time of the Newfoundland fishermen with their skills as seamen and their inherent loyalty and honesty. In *The Black Joke,* however, the qualities he admires are implicit in the story, so that it contains little upstage moralizing.

If the northern books gave the teen-ager a chance to "play" Indian, *The Black Joke,* the story of a boat, lets him identify with three modern boy "pirates" who rescue her from the rum-runners and restore her to her rightful owner, the father of one of these good "pirates." The story focuses on a plot leading to a typical "virtue triumphant" conclusion thanks to the shrewdness and derring-do of the three boys (this time a white, his white-Indian cousin, and a French boy) who prove too much for a whole crew of rum-runners.

The northern books, though stories of event, do not depend on the conflict between hero and villain for their interest. Mowat prefers a positive and general approach to the virtues of the northern people over

one in which he would set out the weaknesses of the white man in his treatment of the aborigines by selecting some individual trader or trapper as a villain. Not that the white men were not worthy of the role, but Mowat avoided isolating one for such a part; he feared he would run the risk of defeating his purpose of revealing the general callousness or indifference of the white man outside the world of the natives, if he based his attack on the specific evils of an individual within it. He wishes most of all to disclose the attitudes, customs, and values of a good society, the members of which he thinks have long been treated as inferior citizens. Only once he toys with the idea of a villain—strangely, an Indian—who falls from grace apparently because he made improper proposals to Marie, destined by love (and theme) for Peetyuk, a white-Eskimo.

In *The Black Joke*, white villains take centre stage. Mowat has no need here to concentrate on enlightening the reader about a different way of life in a primitive society. Twice he alludes to the running sore of social injustice by which a government declares as contraband cheap food that could have been a godsend to the impoverished outports of Newfoundland during the Depression era, but otherwise he comes at the problem indirectly by devising a story and by creating characters who in themselves demonstrate the evils of modern materialism--Barnes, a business man (the standard whipping boy for such purposes in fiction). who secretly arranges to seize Jonathan Spence's *Black Joke*, a French judge who puts money above the law and Jonathan's rights, and Smith, a blow-hard American rum-runner, who indirectly controls all three. Mowat squares accounts somewhat with two good Frenchmen (Basques and poor fishermen), but the business man, the lawyers, and the American have no similar counterbalances, although Bill Smith's brave deeds (and his admiration of the three boys for their boldness) "redeem" the American in the end. There are no subtleties here. Mowat makes no attempt to analyze his views; he assumes their validity. The good guys and the bad, all type, static characters like those of most juvenile fiction, are clearly distinguishable, and the issues--unsophisticated integrity and honesty versus sophisticated chicanery and avarice--are no less obvious, despite the fact that the boys set fire to the *Black Joke*. They act for justice, for true law and order and, in doing so, enable the honest poor of Newfoundland to defeat the less morally pure privileged and wealthy who would subjugate them to economic serfdom. Even in his children's books Mowat did not hesitate to deride establishment values.

As Canadian children's books go, *The Black Joke* belongs in the "rough and tough" school. Yet the boys do have a chance to have some fun on the island of Miquelon. They fish and hunt and, moreover, learn that, as Awasin had also admonished, "It is not good to kill more than one needs." In such comments, however, Mowat leaves "need" undefined, perhaps because hunters belong with his red-blooded men of action, or because he still has a yen for hunting himself, associated as it is with his youthful years in Saskatchewan. For all that, his children's books disclose his intense interest in the natural world, not as romantic love of the pretty or as awe of grandeur, but as a sincere appreciation of

the whole dynamic process it manifests. In the books about the north he tries to inculcate something of the feeling that vast land with its rivers, lakes, caribous, and Eskimos invoked in him. *The Black Joke* reveals a similar fascination with the sea and the fishermen who meet its challenge knowingly, yet unflinchingly, in their daily lives, and the story ends, after all its turbulence, with a tribute to their world:

> The wind was fresh from the southeast. Under the combined power of her sails and her diesel engine, *Black Joke* was soon logging a full twelve knots. It was still daylight when she began to close with the shores of Newfoundland. The massive sea-cliffs rose up close ahead, and the roar of bursting seas echoed back from the great rocks. Snoring through the water, the black-hulled ship bore down through the shadows of the evening.
>
> *Black Joke* was home at last.

This is the traditionally happy ending of children's stories. Simon Barnes's black joke has failed, turned back on him as it has been by the clever and brave boys. Yet it is more than a formula ending or a variant of the epic conclusion in which the long absent traveller finally returns home. It hints at Mowat's sympathy with the way of life of what he calls the "natural" man--the "simple life" as it is termed in the so-called agrarian myth. If the books about Indians and Eskimos speak for the pleasure of escape into the natural world, *The Black Joke*, the other side of the coin, implies the pleasure of escape from corrupted urban life.

Mowat has written four books about animals. Of these the publisher has classified "For Young Readers" only *Owls in the Family*. Yet since it is a sequel to *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be,* the latter also, as Egoff notes, belongs in the same category. *Never Cry Wolf* and *A Whale for the Killing*, despite being animal stories, however, are books for adult readers, for their subject concerns the adult world and the cause of conservation of natural wildlife.

Within the genre of the animal story, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* belongs to the very popular class in which pets are the protagonists. Among the celebrated of the kind is *Beautiful Joe* (1894), Marshall Saunder's earnest and emotional plea for prevention of cruelty to animals, but other books about pets have had their day. Ballantyne's *The Dog Crusoe* (n.d.) is a boy-and-dog story that extols Crusoe largely as a faithful servant. E. R. Young's *Hector, My Dog* (1905) is the autobiography of a dog that seems fully converted to the Christian belief. At least, Hector concludes his story with a long rumination about death and his hopes of reaching heaven so that he can continue to love his master. Finally, in Callaghan's *Luke Baldwin's Vow* (1948), Dan, an old dog, is central in a pattern of moral symbols.

Mowat's book stands apart from these and from Roberts's and Seton's stories with their attempts to examine animal psyche and character. It could be argued easily that Mowat satirizes all of these in his book, for it treats light-heartedly and even irreverently everything that they took so seriously, that Mutt, the animal hero or anti-hero (the very name suggests anti-elitism, (embodies Mowat's own sense of fun in

a world of make-believe, or that Mutt and Wol reflect something of the revolt against the *status quo* of the time as the dogs of the earlier books reflected the attitudes of their day and age.

Whatever the matrix of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be,* on the surface it is an animal-cum-family children's story that has proved very popular. Although it has won no awards, it has gone through many editions and, like several other of Mowat's books, has become a favourite in Russia. Written in the first person about the author's childhood, it allows both the child and the adult reader to identify with the story teller's "I," as wish-fulfillment for the one in a world of mischievious but affectionate pets, and as a detour into the past for the other, for there is a common denominator in the autobiography of childhood lacking in that of maturity. Actually the book is broken-backed, for the protagonist, Mutt, fades from the middle of the story for some eighty pages. Because the book is episodic and anecdotal, the break does little harm, however, especially since the story never slackens pace from its remarkable *in medias res* beginning, whether Mutt, Father, or the owls are in the spotlight.

Lost in the Barrens, with its crises, issues, and serious purpose had no place for humour, nor had *The Curse of the Viking Grave* or *The Black Joke*, except for a practical joke or two, played against a shy lover in the former and, of course, against the villains in the latter. It is quite otherwise in *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be,* with its alleged recreation of events and people from the writer's happy, boisterous boyhood. Much of the humour is tongue-in-cheek, and, indeed, the whole story is a tall tale, for Mowat describes a dog who uses a diving board to go swimming, who climbs trees, fences, ladders, and mountains, and who challenges the very science of biology with his chattering teeth. This principle of exaggeration leads most frequently to slap-stick scenes, which Mowat occasionally garnishes with fine dialect dialogue, as when Mr. Couzinsky describes his experience with the acrobatic Mutt. "I stand there painted," he explains, "and nowhere looking when it comes up between the legs. Dat dug! Oh my, dat dug! I yomp, what else?"[9]

The verbal, descriptive, and situational humour of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* is never subtle. Unfortunately the verbal humour is sometimes forced or obnoxiously prurient, and the descriptive and situational is hackneyed (at least in the tired old "dog and skunk confrontation") or coarse (as when Mutt falls foul of a cormorant in its nest). Humour of character often combines with humour of situation in *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* in the battle of the sexes (as it does much less successfully in *The Black Joke*) during the mild skirmishes between Father and Mother Mowat, but especially in Father Mowat's misadventures afield and afloat. Although they are not the bland and sentimentalized parents of many children's stories, they are traditional, however, in that their ancestors have had long and distinguished careers in life-with-father comedies--a naive wife (who thinks Mutt chases cows because beef is a "dreadful price"), a blustering husband (who loves boats but moves to the dust-bowl prairies), and a precocious child (who acts as innocent commentator, observor, and prankster). All of these make for the fun Mowat has--hilarious is a favourite work word with the critics--but it is Mutt, not the father in the familiar roles of green-horn nimrod or sailor or foolish eccentric, nor the owls, who gives the story distinction.

For one thing Mutt is no ordinary dog. "His hind legs moved at a slower speed than did his front ones. This was theoretically explicable on the grounds that his hind legs were much longer than his forelegs--but an understanding of this explanation could not dispel the unsettling impression that Mutt's forward section was slowly and relentlessly pulling away from the tardy after-end."[10] For another thing there are Mutt's ingenious methods of dealing with trouble: by lying on his back and waving his legs when he fights, or, like Roberts's Red Fox, by running away along the fence-tops. But most noteworthy are Mutt's achievements (as a Prince Albert retriever) when he frightens the ducks from the blind or herds them ashore for his sportsmen masters in scenes that illustrate Mowat's ability to recreate situations with remarkable vividness.

Essentially, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* is a modern beast fable. Although neither typically allegorical nor heavily moralistic, it fits the genre, for it employs an animal to satirize man. Aside from the family comedy, there are inklings of a deeper satiric intent, also, in Mowat's grumbling about Ontario's lack of culture and Paul Sazalski's shrewd business practices: here Mowat, the social critic, surfaces too obviously. But it is Mutt who focuses the irony of the story. If, as Mowat says, Mutt is not human, he has, mingled with the canine, many of the characteristics of the human. Like a small boy he dislikes to wash (and so furtively swallows the soap), eats cherries and spits out their pits (against all rules of etiquette), and chews gum and swallows it (much to Mother's disapproval). As a naive actor he unconsciously makes a mockery of hunting, that holy of holies activity of the outdoors man. He dislikes rising in the cold dawn, he plays a practical joke on the hunters to the benefit of the hunted when he bounces from the duck blind before the firing starts (and it is he who saves the wounded ducks and geese from a slow death), and he even retrieves a mounted grouse from a hardware store, whereby his master saves face in a boastful and silly bet. Finally Mutt enables the son (and the reader) to learn of the father's pretentiousness and false pride and, along with Wol and Weeps, is the vehicle for an irony that pokes good-natured fun at the adult world. Although Mutt's innocence may be Tom Sawyerlike, Mutt does make a case for astute, individualistic behaviour as against mere eccentricity. For all his extraordinary ways as animal, Mutt makes more sense than the master of the house. Again, when, at the end of the book, a truck kills Mutt, it brings an animal story to a sad conclusion, but it also seems to imply much about this technological age.

Four years after *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be,* Mowat published his second animal story in which Mutt, Wol, and Weeps appear, but this time the owls are the stars of the piece. *Owls in the Family* is, however, more than sequel, for not only are the characters identical, but so also are many of the scenes, probably the result of the pleasures of memory rather than a flagging imagination. The owls are good copy, besides, and are never cute and cuddly, and play some very good scenes--Wol contributes a dead skunk to a dinner party, frightens a visiting minister, disrupts a French class, and plays squeeze-tail with poor Mutt. Many of the bizarre events have as common denominator not only the farcical but also the satiric overtones of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be.* The trick of breaking up the Eaton's parade with a rattlesnake hidden in a box is

more than trick. It is a joke played on a tinselly society, for until the box is opened, the "special pet in reserve" wins great praise from a successful business man as "smart merchandising." Actually Mowat speaks out directly once about his conviction that man is an inferior animal, Wol killing only out of need and man out of greed and his aggressiveness, he says, though he must have had war, not hunting, in mind in making the comment. But even iconoclast Mowat has not gone unscathed among modern socio-literary critics. Apparently he has been rocking only one side of the boat with his criticism of middle-class attitudes, for his *Owls in the Family* has recently been singled out for attack for its allegedly stereotyped, bourgeois attitude toward a black boy.[11]

Despite Mutt's highly anthropomorphic traits, Mowat readily secures a willing suspension of disbelief because of the vigour of his narrative and humour, and because the whole story is a wonderful spoof that discloses some inner truths about man and his little ways. *Owls in the Family* maintains the same realistic-fanciful (if not fantastical) perspective, as *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* but since owls, unlike dogs, are neither familiar pets nor common literary subjects, the remarkable antics and habits of Wol, the brashly confident, and Weeps, the timid (whose role it is to win sympathy for the animal world), add something to the book as realism, but they do not and cannot reveal (few readers having the knowledge needed as a standard of reference) the outlandish imagination that enabled Mowat to make Mutt so attractive and original.

If natural history goes awry in Wol's deliberately calling crows, acting as a mother prairie chicken, or failing to remember "whether he had finished his dinner or not," it certainly does not go astray in the western setting. Here, as in the descriptions of hunting in *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be,* Mowat's feeling for nature comes through clearly. The search for the owl's nest, to give one example, bears witness to the fact.

Some of Mowat's success depends on the choice of suitable themes, but much more depends on his talent in dramatizing them, on his lively descriptions of settings and situations, and on the verve of his narrative and humour. In short, on his prowess as a story teller. Beyond the wit, the farce, and the melodrama, the excitement and the fun, however, Mowat shows a seriousness of purpose: on the one hand he is in sympathy with the down-trodden and abused, and, on the other, he is out of sympathy with white society. Moreover, if his human characters sometimes support stereotyped concepts about certain aspects of human behaviour, his animals never do. They echo the anti-establishment attitude of some of his books for adults. One may disagree with Mowat's views, but it is they that contribute much of the intensity that makes his children's books far superior to the general run in our literature.

NOTES

[1]Farley Mowat, "A Message from the Patron," *Canadian Library Journal* (September-October, 1973), p. 391.

[2]Jos. E. Carver, "Farley Mowat, an author for all ages," *British Columbia Library Bulletin* (April, 1969), p. 11.

[3]Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 120.

[4]Farley Mowat, *Lost in the Barrens* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 152.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 128.

[6]Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood,* p. 198.

[7]Farley Mowat, "MacLean's Interviews Farley Mowat" (March, 1968), p. 64.

[8]Farley Mowat, *The Curse of the Viking Grave* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 26.

[9]Farley Mowat, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), p. 103.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 18.

[11]Vicki Wright, "The Rape of Children's Minds," *Interim Report,* No. 2 (Ad Hoc Committee Respecting the Status of Women in the North York System, 1975), p. 27.

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