

into an artistic whole, it would be both more charming in its fantasy and more convincing in its theories.

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A Poor Year for Beavers

JOSEPH GOLD

Sharptooth: The Year of the Beaver, David Allenby Smith. Peter Martin Associates, Toronto, 1974. 54 pp. \$6.95 cloth.

In spite of charges of evasion, laziness and cowardice, I went ahead with my scheme to have my three children review this book for me. True to the modes of modern youth, their writing was brief, hasty and not deeply thought-out, but it taught me to treat this book more seriously than my own reading of it had inclined me to do.

The eleven-year-old boy wrote that while he thought the book "well-written," it "is probably more understandable to adults." Does this mean that his natural deference leads him to believe that what is incomprehensible is well-written? He goes on to say the book "makes one aware of the beavers [sic] situation with man and nature." Clearly this factually-based narrative speaks to the new ecological sensitivity of children.

The fourteen-year-old girl noticed that the story is not "fictionalized" as indicated by the title, "the beaver," not "a beaver." She says it is "isolated from sentiment and feeling." She says it is not a child's book "for few children would be very, if at all interested in it! The illustrations are very straightforward as is the book itself." Clearly this second opinion confirms the book's appeal to mature tastes and its documentary style, though this bothers her more than it does her younger brother.

The sixteen-year-old liked it more than the others. The idea of the beaver as hero and man as the enemy appealed to her. She found it "a well-related story about survival and love and growing-up." She thought it had a "powerful impact--a very distinct punch."

David Allenby Smith was a documentary film maker and this book shows all the marks of the trade. It is not a novel, not really even a story, though it forms itself around the simplest possible narrative structure of the beaver's life-cycle. As documentary it benefits from the latest information on beaver instinct and goes out of its way to emphasize that

beavers do everything by instinct, and are far from being the clever little fur-bearers we've wondered at for so long. To de-mythologize the beaver and at the same time produce a sense of awe at the genetic mysteries thus revealed is a task both essential for the artist and beyond Mr. Smith. What this challenge amounts to is re-mythologizing, which is the task of all art, and it is possible only for the best of writers. Mr. Smith wants to neutralize his language in order to remain true, Simon-pure, to his subject, but he fails to realize that in language the shape of the construct is the truth and once he puts his data into language he can as easily kill his "facts" as enliven them. His book is not data-in-language-form but itself, a whole thing--made and not a vehicle. The author's failure to understand this guarantees this book's rapid demise.

Let us look at some examples and contrasts. He tells us,

Most of their food is derived from the trees and bushes which they use in the building of their dams and houses. They are thus supplied with food high in protein and the mineral elements that every living organism needs. Sharptooth and Brownie belonged to one of the few species of animals in the world that seldom suffer from serious shortages of food. (p. 19)

This is travelogue journalism, the sort of thing we used to hear spoken over films about Bali and Morocco that bored me to death as a child, when I could not understand how films about such exotic places could be so dead and dull. Or take the didactic, textbook account of genetic evolution in beavers:

Much of what Sharptooth and Brownie had accomplished had come about successfully not because of what they had learned from their parents so much as because of the commands that came to them through their parents of the past. Most of these directives had irresistible power--power that left Sharptooth and Brownie with few but token decisions. They could decide where to build their dam, where to locate their lodge--but they were compelled to build. They could not ignore the commands and decide *not* to build. No more could they decide, when the proper time came, *not* to mate. (p. 33)

This is appropriate to a school textbook, where dull writing is almost mandatory, but surely not evidence of the "vivid narrative" claimed on the dust jacket. The following writing fails to give a single, powerful image or a proper sense of the wonder of how things in nature conspire to harmonize and symbiotize. The language is abstract, pompous lecturing--telling, not showing.

Events in the natural world are so intricately and powerfully related that there needs to be a wide spread in the time it takes for the young to grow in the womb or the egg. Such a spread allows for the variation in the change of seasons and the accompanying variation in the availability of food for the nursing mother or the hatched young. Brownie's kits could

be ready for birth anywhere from ninety to one hundred and twenty days after the mating. If spring came early and Brownie herself fed on the sap-filled new green shoots of aspen or birch, or on the first new growth in the roots and sprouts of water plants, this food, with its concentrated nourishment, could quickly bring the young in her womb to a moment of birth that would coincide with a period of greatest availability of best food. (pp. 37-38)

And so on--no, sadly enough, Mr. Smith is not another Charles G. D. Roberts. Now there was a man who knew beavers and how to write about them! In the *House in the Water* we get some gorgeous description that brings life to our understanding.

In the under-water world of the beaver pond the light from the cloudless autumn sun was tawny gold, now still as crystal, now quivering over the bottom in sudden dancing meshes of fine shadow as some faint puff of air wrinkled the surface.

And when he wants actually to show us the living, colourful world of the animals, not the facts but the Fact of their being, he writes like this:

The beavers, moving hither and thither through this glimmering golden underworld, swam with their powerful hind feet only, which drove them through the water like wedges. Their little fore-feet, with flexible, almost handlike paws, were carried tucked up snugly under their chins, while their huge, broad, flat, hairless tails stuck straight out behind, ready to be used as a powerful screw in case of any sudden need.

If you want to really see and hear the differences, read aloud the passages from both books.

I think D. A. Smith's book is designed, as its subtitle suggests, to capture a market through the renewed interest in the beaver, characterized by National Animal year or Beaverism, or was it Beavermania. This book is not fiction, but it might serve well as Grade 9 biology background. I will say that my children showed knowledgeable interest in the beaver exhibit at the Metro Toronto Zoo because they had read the book. As imaginative experience however, the reading faded almost as soon as their little critical chore was over. The price, by the way, seems quite unjustified for such a thin volume.

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