Animal Antics in New Brunswick

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The Wild Life I've Led, Stuart Trueman. Illustrated by the author. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 160 pp. $8.95 hardcover.

Canada has a long and honorable tradition of realistic animal literature, perhaps no surprise in a land where the wild inhabitants must still vastly outnumber its tame human interlopers. The standard set by Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Seton-Thompson at the turn of the century has been maintained by the able work of Farley Mowat, so that Stuart Trueman seeks illustrious company with his latest book, *The Wild Life I've Led,* a collection of humorous animal anecdotes.

Inevitably, Mr. Trueman must compete with a writer in his chosen genre from beyond our borders. The rage for the James Herriot books shows no sign of abating in North America, with the movie version held over in cinemas across the country, and the latest title, *Vets Might Fly,* selling well in cloth at $8.95. While Trueman, of course, cannot draw on the kind of detailed knowledge of animal life and health that forms a large, and fascinating, part of veterinarian Herriot's books, he does share with his British rival the essential ingredients for a well-told animal anecdote: a sincere love of animal life in all its forms, and a genuine respect for animals which enables him to regard them on their own terms, not ours. Trueman defines both these qualities as absolute essentials for the dedicated participant in the world of animals: a generous love, a realization that the rationale for animal behaviour lies in a code different from that of people.

> If you love animals and birds, it's easy to forgive them for their occasional small transgressions–for the times they frustrate you, embarrass you, worry you to death and cost you a lot of money.
>
> The point is, they don't mean it at all. I know that raccoons are regarded as the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of the nature world–but they're not really vandals merely because they tear the stuffing out of mattresses and sofas. They aren't vindictive; they're just curious–they want to see what's inside.

Added to his feeling for animals, Trueman has the many-faceted gift of the experienced raconteur–judgement in pacing, timing, the placing of the telling one-liner. As well, he possesses the *sine qua non* for the teller of

humorous animal tales–an eye for the absurd, which always resides in the incongruities resulting when human behaviour and expectations run afoul of an animal world determinedly pursuing its own patterns and interests, always at variance with ours.

Yet, for all its felicities of story telling, sympathetic observation and accurate recording of the lives of the wide range of creatures who are its subjects, *The Wild Life I've Led* (as the rather cheap and misleading pun of the title might suggest) is not Stuart Trueman at his best. That best, I would suggest, lies in earlier books which give us certain satisfactions not to be found in his latest publication. The sustained comic situation, *Cousin Elva* (1955) for instance, or the sense of place so beautifully defined and developed in *The Fascinating World of New Brunswick* (1973), or even the consistency of point of view achieved in *You're Only as Old as You Act* (1968) with the skilful use of the bumbling Leacockian persona are pleasures the reader of *The Wild Life I've Led* will anticipate in vain.

Which is not to say that a collection of anecdotes can provide the satisfactions of sustained comedy, consistent point of view, or vividly realized locale. Yet it must convey at least a sense of meaningful association, which the loosely linked subject matter as it stands fails to do. My feeling is that Trueman has been guilty of a hasty construction, and that it shows in a weakness at the seams. The stories are poorly arranged; even the logic of an observed chronology would have helped. There are several raccoon stories; why do those which deal with the exploits of the grown raccoons precede those which chronicle the early stages in the raising of the same raccoon family? The last story might logically have come first, because it is historical in nature, or at least partly so. In fact a mere catch-all for the many two-paragraph animal sketches which could not be used elsewhere, it begins as an account of how, in well documented times past, people attempted to train moose to do such jobs as pulling sleighs. The first story, a delightful account of how the author misconstrues his vegetable growing neighbor's intense interest in the whereabouts and welfare of his new pair of rabbits, is well told in the Leacock manner. But the persona of the well-meaning misfit never reappears, leaving the reader constantly frustrated.

Other signs of haste are the evidence of the twice-told tale: the story of Mrs. Mickelburgh's patience in winning the confidence of beavers (in "Hitch Up the Moose, James") has already been described more thoroughly, and with Tom Anthes' superb accompanying illustration, in "Some of These Little Pigs Won't Go to Market" *(The Fascinating World of New Brunswick).* There is an error of fact as well. In "The Bird That Sang Off-Key" Trueman quotes a lady who is an expert on budgerigars: "The males are the talkers; they have a touch of brown over their bills." Almost every budgie-owning child in Canada has known that anxious time between the purchase of the immature and neutrally colored budgie and its gradual maturation signalled by the appearance of sex-distinguishing color. This brings either resignation, if a brown cere (the part "over the bill") develops–

a female, non-talking budgie has been purchased—or elation at seeing the brilliant blue cere of the talking male budgie.

There are, too, errors in judgement. Both "How Little Cora Became a Star", the story of a raven from New Brunswick who finds fame in Hollywood, and "The Dolphin Who Came Home", which recounts the experiences of the dolphin trainer at the St. Petersburg Beach Aquatarium in Florida, offend the true animal lover because, for all Trueman's own love of animals, these stories are really about the exploitation of animals, the manipulation of such animal virtues as loyalty, friendliness, intelligence and willingness to please in order to serve man's greed and flatter his ego. In the story of Cora, the whole account of animal trainer Frank Weed's means is debased by his ends, and Mr. Weed's successes with animal television commercials—teaching "a dog to point at a big bag of dog food (by happy chance Frank Weed had put a quail inside)"—is not humorous. It is distasteful to the adult reader, and certainly not likely to increase the younger reader's appreciation of animal—or human—behaviour.

"The Dolphin Who Came Home" is altogether less offensive than "How Little Cora Became a Star", but it too presents problems. There is a good deal of factual information about the nature and habits of dolphins in this section, which is both welcome and valuable. Yet it sits there like a great chunk from *Compton's Encyclopedia;* it is not integrated naturally with the account of Trueman's visit to the Aquatarium. He is more successful in "Do the Birds Really Know?", an account of a visit to a Florida tourist mecca of a different sort. In this anecdote, all sorts of snippets of fascinating bird lore are relayed as Trueman is guided around the bird sanctuary by its dedicated founder and his volunteer assistants. Never does the factual jostle uncomfortably with the anecdotal. I think Trueman himself is more comfortable in the non-profit bird sanctuary than in the glossy show biz atmosphere of the marine animal complex. For all the fascination of the dolphins themselves, the setting is not right. It is slick American pizzazz, and neither Trueman, nor his Canadian reader, is quite up to the mark. How much better if Trueman had been able to visit a Canadian dolphin show such as that provided by the Vancouver Public Aquarium, where all the animal "tricks" are based on behaviors that belong to their activities in the wild. Not nearly as sensational as the "Dolphin Boogaloo" perhaps, but more congenial to the Canadian reader's temperament, which also rejects "flamboyant showman" trainer Tom Hazlitt's "simulated big-league pitcher-batter duel", and the discussion of how the American military monster hopes to exploit dolphin intelligence and skills for military purposes.

But having brought Mr. Trueman to task both for sloppiness due to haste and a less than rigorous selection of material, let me add that there are many good things in this book, ranging from such felicities of phrase as that describing pretzels as "starved doughnuts twisting in anguish" to whole stories such as "The Day the Bull Moose Dropped In", and "It's Easy to Banish Raccoons", a little gem.

"The Day the Bull Moose Dropped In" can best be described as low key; nothing spectacular happens, no revelations of universal significance occur. Simply, as Trueman strolls through the early morning autumn air toward his bus stop, musing on the cares of the working man, he is joined by a full grown moose. Immediately all his energies are diverted to the task of saving the bull moose from the dangers of civilization. Any reader who has suddenly come into close proximity with a full grown bull moose, as I have on a camping trip when I was awakened by one browsing about ten feet away, is impressed by the sheer bravery of the action. But Trueman the hero is swamped by Trueman the eccentric. He builds up a delightfully mad picture of the huge beast lumbering down the centre line of the highway bound for St. John, massive antlers swaying, followed by the author, in business suit, ineffectually trying to cajole the moose into heading back to his river valley, meanwhile flailing his briefcase as a gesture to attract passing motorists and keep them from hitting the precious specimen from the wild. The juxtaposition of suburban amenities and civilized routine with the brute bulk and strength of the strayed animal is delightfully conveyed, and the old Leacock touch is there in the disbelief, amazement and head-shakings of the drivers who do slow down to take in this ill-assorted parade of two.

All Trueman's raccoon stories, as well as "The Day the Bull Moose Dropped In", "That Dangerous Wild Creature, Robin Redbreast", and several others, require no more exotic setting than the Trueman back yard or summer cottage. Although the New Brunswick setting is only lightly sketched in, Trueman knows and loves the province and its people; he obviously savours life as he has found it there, and a good deal of this solid satisfaction is communicated to the reader in the back yard exchanges between the Truemans and their neighbours, and in the delineation of the country routine. These stories on home ground are generally most pleasurable. They are genuine all the way through, never relying on related or vicarious experience, and therefore more effective than some of the "visit" stories gleaned from Florida holidays.

"It's Easy to Banish Raccoons" is the first of several stories which explore, in a variety of ways, just how often one man can be duped and manipulated by an animal. The keynote is established in the opening sentence. "One of the nice things about having a pet is that it reminds a man how superior he is in everyway to God's lower creatures." The reader settles back, anticipating the techniques of the ironist. Nor is he disappointed in the pathetic chronicle of how, in an attempt to rid himself of raccoons, Trueman and his henchman-advisor are in turn relieved successively of food, crockery, a transistor radio, and their self-esteem. In "Whatever Became of Doris Duck?" Trueman again finds himself the victim of an animal, who given an inch, will take a mile. Feeding a duck is not supposed to lead into a way of life, but it does. Trueman has to get up before dawn to feed the duck before its quacks wake his fellow condominium dwellers. If he attends a neighbourhood patio party, unless he remembers to keep his cocktail conversation *sotto voce* (which in itself leads to uncomfortable

glances) the first sound of his voice brings a refrain of quacks from Doris. She has been listening for him, following him along in the ocean shallows or sandy beach. And if Trueman spends days and nights guarding a nesting robin and her fledglings from marauding cats, devoting hours to setting up tin can early warning systems, activities which cause a certain amount of strain in his own domestic arrangements, how is he rewarded? By an all-out attack from the distraught mother, of course, who after one close call is apparently taking no chances with anything nearby which moves. Always, the generous impulse; inevitably, the ungrateful, or free loading, animal. Older children will undoubtedly find all these stories, with their slapstick situations, most amusing.

One of Trueman's best stories depends on a rather more sophisticated brand of humour, however, "The Bird That Sang Off-Key" presents the little conflicts of married life through the unlikely medium of a budgie who is a marvellous talker, the pride of his lady owner-trainer. Unlike Mr. Trueman, the reader does not have to struggle to keep a straight face as the budgie, in a voice virtually indistinguishable from that of his mistress, reels off one peevish, whining, hen-pecking remark after another. While Mrs. Jones attempts to cover with a spirited, monotone rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner", Mr. Jones sits through the whole performance in what must be characteristic silence.

The Wild Life I've Led is not exclusively about the amusing situations people have found themselves in when they have tried to befriend, or outsmart, members of the animal kingdom. For the animal-loving child reader, there is a feast of heart-warming stories which deal with the absolute trust, the unswerving loyalty, the kindly affection which can exist in animals for the people they choose to adopt. Again, these stories are unspectacular; their heroes range from chipmunks to family dogs. Other stories cause the reader to pause in admiration at the examples of courage and intelligence which Trueman cites: animal mothers who defend their young to the death, birds who are waiting for one, always, at the end of a journey of many miles.

And finally, Trueman asks the reader to consider the wider ranging implications of the whole man-animal relationship. In "Tales of Ten Raccoons" he tries to keep a balanced viewpoint himself: "I decided that after this they could go their own way and look after themselves, because I was only making welfare bums out of them." After all, raccoons *are* wild animals, and one is perhaps doing them no favour by providing a reliable and well stocked fast food outlet. Certainly it fosters an indiscriminate trust in all men, and diminishes the wild animal's ability to fend for itself in a cruel world. Elsewhere, Trueman recognizes how universally members of the human race are tempted to "befriend and train anything that walks, flies or swims." And in asserting that all who do succumb insist that their pet is the most intelligent ever to exist, the implication is that man's motives are not quite as selfless as those of the animal whose devotion and obedience he

secures. The heartbreak for pet owners when death comes to a much loved pet is treated with poignancy and sensitivity. Human carelessness and human atrocity with its toll in animal suffering is catalogued with cold and precise detail. No editorial comment is needed; in the context of this book such information is ironic proof that man can still be an animal.

Still, these dark notes are rare in *The Wild Life I've Led.* The book leaves one with the feeling of cheerful well-being that comes of having been genuinely entertained, and the conviction that, generally speaking man, like Trueman, is at his best when in the company of the animals. I am sure that the older juvenile reader, like myself, would welcome hearing about Mr. Trueman's latest escapades with his animal friends.

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Choosing Language Arts Texts

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Colours: Brown is the Back of a Toad; Yellow is a Lemon Tart; Red is the Nose of a Clown, Robert Barton, David Booth, Agnes Buckles. Longman Canada Ltd., 1976.

Colours is an upper elementary language arts program based on literature and designed especially for Canadian schools. The program consists of four parts: the anthology ($4.25–$4.50); the source book ($2.00–$2.50); the skills book ($1.75–$1.95); and the teacher manual ($1.75–$1.95). The idea behind *Colours* is that the different colour levels (corresponding roughly to grades 4, 5, and 6) are arranged in units around a number of themes, the first of which involves the colour for that level. All parts of the program can be used or different parts can be chosen to meet the individual language needs of students.

The anthology contains stories, poems, articles, plays, all pertaining in some manner to the colour of a particular level. Many of the selections in the anthology are excerpts from full-length children's books. The majority of the selections are one to two pages in length, the longest around 8 pages. This enables the reluctant reader to master each selection easily, yet motivates the good reader to seek out the source and read it in its entirety. It is an