painful times. With their emphasis on action, the remaining novels all possess a crisp dialogue which contributes to the momentum of the stories, and which at the same time accurately captures the speech patterns of children.

These novels are five successes worthy of a place in any children's library. They are at once entertaining and thought provoking, the kind of stories children often devour at one sitting. Their greatest strength, though, is a realistic portrayal of teenage and childhood sentiments and feelings. In coupling real life with entertaining, well developed plots, they clearly demonstrate that the writing of successful fiction for children and adolescents is a very special kind of craft.

David Atkinson teaches courses in fantasy, mythology, and children's literature at the University of Lethbridge.

Animal Lessons: Correcting the Perspective

ADRIENNE E. KERTZER

Bel Ria: Dog of War. Sheila Burnford. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 204 pp. $10.00.

The animal story's origin in fable still colours our interpretation. We rarely read animal stories just to learn about animals; the wisdom we seek concerns mankind. Even books that seem to move beyond the fable format and its moralistic structure challenge us in this way; *Bel Ria* for example, a new book by Sheila Burnford raises the question always pertinent to the children's animal story -- just what is the lesson here?

Although appropriate for adolescents, *Bel Ria* does not appear to be a traditional children's story. The phrase "In Memoriam 1939-1945" and the epigraph from *Hamlet,* "Let Hercules himself do what he may,/ The cat will mew and dog will have his day" give the time and the subject, the terrifying experience of the Second World War as viewed by a dog, Bel Ria. Deprived of his Gypsy mistress by the strafing of a German plane, Bel Ria suddenly loses all sense of meaning in his life. Desperate to hold onto something that recalls his dead world, he tracks down an English soldier whose wound had been dressed by the gypsy only a few moments prior to the bombing. Such are the chance occurrences that make as much sense as anything else during war. Corporal Sinclair does not want the dog. Fighting for survival, he has enough to worry about without taking on a dog or the tiny monkey that clings to its neck. But he feels respon-

When people need animals to release the affection within them, no wonder they go to war. Burnford may avoid a common flaw of the animal story, turning the animal into a shaggy human; she is not so successful in missing another frequent trap -- sentimentality. Because she has written a book in which the animals are all so much more attractive than the humans, we care far more for Bel Ria than for any of the other characters. When the monkey, Louis, dies because he will not abandon ship, MacLean asks himself why he is more distraught over the death of one monkey than over the many men who also died that day. He decides:

> Louis had been the only alien, the only one out of his element against that background. Loss of life was an accepted gamble that men took when they went to war. But no animal went to war: caught up in man's lethal affairs, they were an irreconcilable aberration.

MacLean's realization, which is clearly the book's theme, is worth examining. Sympathy has led to distortion, a fantasy where we pity the non-human victims more than the human. The moral burden of our wartime behaviour towards animals, although something that we do need to be reminded of, is only part of our responsibility. Not all people choose to be "caught up in man's lethal affairs." Hence there is something disconcerting and self-indulgent in Burnford's description of the Plymouth bombing. At one point, a child, stunned by the war's impact, lashes out at a puppy. Both are victims, but the point of view, the sympathy Burnford has created for the animal side, makes the reader almost indifferent to the woes of the child.

Slighting the human element, reducing the focus to the animal's, brings the story perilously close to the sentimental despite Burnford's overall attempts to avoid it through passages such as her description of our wartime response to animals:

> That a hungry scavenging dog would feed on the overturned contents of a meat safe while ten years away lay the body of the one who planned to cook those contents offended by its very reasonableness.

The touch is sure; the irony evident. But just as in *Little Women* the sentimentality is strengthened by the pretense that the girls are brave and refuse to be sentimental, in *Bel Ria* we are also manipulated unfairly. Initially attracted to the dog as a symbol of all war's innocent victims, we gradually lose interest in the human victims. Contrast the balance that exists in the opening with the rest of the book. In the first few pages, the animal story does not exclude the human. When the caravan moves against the refugee traffic, there is still sympathy for human as well as animal. The cluster of dead rabbits that Sinclair sees is not a replacement but a reminder of the gypsy caravan. Both animal and man are victims, their only difference being that man thinks he understands the horror. The imbalance of the later chapters becomes evident by comparing the skilful portrayal of Bel Ria's tragic inability to express himself with the unconvincing treatment of the same theme in the humans. Bel Ria's isolation is very moving, but the author achieves this at the expense of the human characters, especially MacLean and Mrs. Tremorne who clearly cannot communicate even with their own kind. Try as she might for realism, Burnford is so good at creating the animal

sible for both. If the gypsy caravan had not stopped to help him, its human inhabitants might still be alive. Grudgingly Sinclair accepts his companions.

In the chaos of war Bel Ria and Sinclair are soon parted. There are more bombs, this time on the sea. Unable to keep the dog, Sinclair forces him onto a medical attendant who also resents the intrusion. A third separation takes place, again during a characteristic act of war, the bombing of Plymouth. The miracle is not simply that the dog survives, but that he helps the humans survive.

Bel Ria saves people on both symbolic and realistic levels. First he rescues Sinclair by dancing and thus deceiving the Germans who stop the caravan. Burnford emphasizes the irony of the scene, the temporary forgetting of the war:

> Not far away, guns rumbled a reminder. Three-quarters of the western world lay reeling in the bonds of occupation, the wake of smouldering destruction left by these grey-green uniforms. A few short miles would soon end the agony of France, and then all Europe would be over-run -- yet for this moment, in this one place, there was nothing but a silver tinkling and a lilting tune and an audience who had become children again, spellbound before a dog who danced on a sunlit road to the bidding of the flute.

Soldiers as children? If enemies can lay aside their hatred through a common wonder at a simple dancing dog, why are they fighting? There is no answer, only the further irony of the same caravan being hit shortly thereafter.

Although differences between people drive them apart, the difference between animal and man allows them to support each other. After his rescue ship is destroyed, struggling to stay afloat, Sinclair envies the animal ability to accept death, "to take whatever came without protest." Yet it is the dog and the monkey who save his life by reminding him of the worth of his existence and the need for survival. Animal and man help each other: "Then always, just as his will was slipping away, he would be jerked back to open his eyes and see himself again in those other intent summoning ones."

Bel Ria celebrates this miracle of animal-human communication. Each locked in his own world, nevertheless animal and man do communicate, often when men cannot. Neil MacLean, the sick-berth attendant, trapped because he gave his word to what he assumed was a dying soldier, is a silent repressed man who as the seventh son of a seventh son possesses magical healing power but no love for animals. Isolated, suspected for his supernatural powers, he is a warped man able to heal the dog's wounds, but not able to restore its will to live. Ria remains loyal to the dead gypsy. Finally, unable to speak in any other way, Ria bites MacLean and forces him to acknowledge his ambivalent feelings towards animals. It does not matter that Ria does not know why MacLean can now respond openly to him; what counts is that Ria accomplishes what no human can.

It is very easy to become enchanted with this story. What child or adult will not long to protect such a spirited, brave little dog? Yet however admirable the miracle of animal-human communication, the novelty of seeing war through an animal's eyes, the skill with which Burnford makes us believe in her imaginative world, the implications of Bel Ria's restorative powers are very disturbing.

perspective that she inadvertently trivializes the war and the human suffering it causes. If only her humans were as well drawn as her animals, we could accept the lesson, for *Bel Ria* rightly teaches us that man is not the centre of the universe.

Adrienne E. Kertzer teaches children's and Victorian literature at the University of Calgary.