

<sup>2</sup>Compare *A Boy of Tache* (Montreal: Tundra, 1973); *Mary of Mile 18* (Montreal: Tundra 1971) and *The Cottage at Crescent Beach* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>Compare selections in Leonard de Vries' *Little Wide-Awake, an Anthology of Victorian Children's Books and Periodicals* (London: Arthur Barker, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Lang, ed. *The Blue Fairy Book* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965 [1889]) p. 251.

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## Rousseau for Young Readers

JAMES GELLERT

*Anna's Pet*, Margaret Atwood and Joyce Barkhouse. Illus. by Ann Blades. James Lorimer & Company, 1980. 32 pp. \$6.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88862-249-x-bd.

Two external details relevant to the production of *Anna's Pet* might at first glance cause some disquietude to those familiar with books intended for young children. First, as a series book, it is presumably susceptible to the limitations common to books written following a prescriptive formula. Secondly, the sensitive partnership between writer and illustrator, so delicate in a picture book for beginning readers, is complicated by the involvement of a third collaborator in the venture. Happily, in the latest title in the "Kids of Canada Series," *Anna's Pet*, which is co-authored by

Margaret Atwood and Joyce Barkhouse with illustrations by Ann Blades such reservations remain academic.

The writing team of Atwood and Barkhouse is formidable. The latter has written numerous short stories and articles for children, as well as a syndicated newspaper column about children. In addition to Margaret Atwood's international reputation as a poet and novelist, she brings to *Anna's Pet* the simple beauty of her earlier picture book for younger children, *Up in the Tree* (1978). Ann Blades' reputation in Canadian children's literature is no less impressive: she has won the Canadian Library Association Book-Of-The-Year Award in 1972 for *Mary of Mile 18*, and in 1979 she received both the Canada Council Children's Literature Award for Illustration and the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award for the best illustrated children's book of the year for *A Salmon for Simon*.

In keeping with the *raison d'être* of the series, *Anna's Pet* is specifically designed to enable young readers to discover for themselves the lives of other Canadian children and the realities of the world at large. Virtually every aspect of the book, from its physical shape and size through to its elementary, controlled vocabulary and realistic full-colour illustration, successfully contributes to these general aims.

*Anna's Pet* is produced on fine quality paper, with the bold, evenly-spaced text thoughtfully balanced against the nine illustrations (seven of which are full page). Young children will find the size appealing and comfortable to handle (8 7/8" x 6 1/8"), and the laminated boards should provide the required durability. The distribution of the illustrations allows for two facing pages of text, an illustration opposite a single page of text, two facing pages of text and so on through the 32 pages, thus creating a format well devised to allow the beginning reader to develop reading skills without the constant attraction of illustration. The pages are unnumbered, although the four short chapters, each of which focuses on a critical stage in Anna's development, are numbered.

The simple, precise plot is carefully structured to emphasize young Anna's changing attitudes as she searches for a pet. After being discouraged from taking home one of her grandfather's cows, she continues her quest by choosing first a toad, next a worm, then a snake. Under the genial tutelage of her grandparents, Anna disqualifies each as a pet, and finally happily settles on a tadpole. The cumulative pattern contributes to the shape and cohesion of the story, while the freshness of Anna's approach to each creature assures a vitality often lacking in similarly constructed stories. Nothing in the plotting is obscure or extraneous, and few young readers will lose the direction of the story. Nor are they likely to miss the immediacy and relevancy of Anna's experience. Far removed from the distant "once upon

a time" worlds of fairyland and fantasy, Anna's visit to the farm, as the opening lines of the story indicate, is taking place "today." The simple, realistic plot of *Anna's Pet* is complemented by the use of a controlled vocabulary notable for its tautness and precision of language and well within the capabilities of most beginning readers. Not many will fail to sense the wider implications of Anna's discoveries.

The didacticism of *Anna's Pet*, while unmistakable, is not overt, and is skillfully presented through a delicate treatment of the emotional concerns of Anna. The young girl's involvement with the various creatures helps her to formulate a perception of the universe as harmonious and ordered, where the respective roles and needs of all animals are as important as her own desire to possess them as pets. Through her attempted domestication of the toad, the worm, and the snake, Anna embraces a concept of a shared world, and it is significant that after each encounter, she willingly returns the animal to its natural environment. It is notable that Anna's chosen pets are not those which would immediately appeal to adults or even older children. Yet in concert with the Coleridgean "all things both great and small" motif inherent in *Anna's Pet*, the stereotypical uneasiness with toads, worms, and snakes is no match for the simple but all-encompassing feeling Anna has for them. The brief scene when her grandmother releases the snake in the garden is a clear representation of the themes noted above, and it echoes the gentle didacticism which runs throughout the story:

"This is where the snake lives," she said.

"In the daytime, when it's sunny, the snake can come out and lie on the rock. At night, when it's cool, the snake can go down between the rocks. This is the best home for a snake."

"Goodbye, snake," said Anna. "I see that you like your home. It's a better place for you than a pail or a house. You will be happy here."

One reason that *Anna's Pet* does not lapse into the excesses of some morally instructive writing is that Anna's discoveries are for the most part her own. Certainly her grandparents provide the requisite guidance, but their presence is never obtrusive, and Atwood and Barkhouse avoid contrivances like the obvious Socratic questioning common to many didactic books. Indeed, it may be that the constructive and beneficent criticisms of Anna's grandparents are intended to guide parents as much as the primary audience.

Like her grandparents, Anna is an eminently believable character. She displays the syllogistic logic of most youngsters, and it is through her ingenuous approach to her experiences that Atwood and Barkhouse add touches of humour and insight even while shaping a credible personality. When Anna sees her grandfather's cows, she quite naturally desires one as a

pet; the toad is given a bath in her grandparent's tub; the worm is deposited under a bed since "it's cool and dark" there; the snake is destined for Grandma's oven "where it's hot and dry." By the end of the book, Anna has become not only plausible but an engaging character, and the implicit didacticism of the last scene is not likely to cause many young readers to balk. After her grandfather has explained the life-cycle of Anna's new pet, the tadpole, she agrees to return it to the farm's pond when it becomes a frog. Then, with the following snatch of dialogue, the final moral gently descends:

"I like this tadpole very much. I'll take it back to the city and watch it grow. But I wish I could keep it forever."

"I know," said Grandma. "But it's hard to keep anything forever."

Through the strikingly apt symbol of the tadpole, the young reader is left to contemplate the ongoing changes in nature, including, presumably, the metamorphosis of Anna herself. What distinguishes this moralizing from the merely pedantic is that it evolves naturally as an extension of realistic characterization and plotting in the story.

The illustrations of Ann Blades provide a final, cohesive unity to *Anna's Pet*. In her earlier books, especially in *Mary of Mile 18*, *A Boy of Taché*, and *A Salmon for Simon*, Blades' watercolours are primarily earthtones, well suited to the stark settings and solitary beauty of the children's lives featured in them. In *Anna's Pet*, the soft but realistic paintings are done mainly in greens and blues to complement the emphasis on the natural world. A harmonious balance exists between the authors and illustrator, and the paintings wonderfully elaborate on Anna's childish fascination and love for the creatures she encounters, giving her and the book an added vivacity and poignancy.

*Anna's Pet* then, while offering a delightful story about a Canadian child's search for a pet, transcends its setting and plot and succeeds in evoking more universal concerns. The book is thoughtfully written, beautifully illustrated, and handsomely produced, and it certainly warrants inclusion in the library of books for young Canadian children.

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