

Profile: Franklin: Ideal Children's Literary Idol or Flavourless Turtle of Privilege?

• Leanne Wild •



Photo credit: The Water Street Studio

Brenda Clark

Résumé: Ce court article analyse le succès de la série Franklin la Tortue. L'auteur examine la dimension didactique et culturelle de la production ainsi que les caractéristiques essentielles du personnage. Une étude des illustrations de Brenda Clark étaye son analyse.

Summary: This profile examines Franklin the turtle's rise to fame. Leanne questions the socializing and didactic value of the Franklin books, as well as the uniqueness and substance of Franklin himself. An interview with illustrator Brenda Clark forms part of the analysis, and the significance of the illustrations, character, story and pedagogy of the Franklin phenomenon are discussed.

He's a small green guy with a shell, and he's made his way into the spotlight of the Canadian — and now North American — children's literary scene. On a Saturday in mid-April, children gather in a Mississauga Chapters store to meet Franklin the turtle and hear one of his stories read. Franklin's visits — to bookstores, libraries, schools and even restaurants — have become so frequent that Kids Can Press has designated a staff member to co-ordinate the booking of the turtle's official costume.

Franklin's stats are impressive: 16 million books sold worldwide, an animated TV series with The Family Channel and CBS (beginning fall 1998), a myriad of toys, figurines and stickers. Activity books and CD-ROMs geared towards developing math and reading skills, and inspired artistic partnerships such as that with the Touring Players Theatre of Canada, whose Franklin shows, performed largely for schools, have joined the Players' Robert Munsch-based plays as their best-selling shows. And there are only more such diversions to come. At illustrator Brenda Clark's Port Perry home, a continual flow of potential Franklin image-bearers makes its way into her studio (on the day of this interview, the hopefuls range from plush toys to a "Franklin bank"), awaiting her discerning judgement in their bid to win approval as "real" Franklins. Children, parents, educators and marketers of children's books and entertainment seem overwhelmingly in support of the growth of Franklin's fame and success.

If success is measured in terms of marketability and partnerships, the Franklin venture has been successful. But how does this amphibious creation of author Paulette Bourgeois, Kids Can Press and Brenda Clark rate according to the measures of intelligent discourse, social impact and creative uniqueness? Working from a recognition of the substantial potential impact of children's literature as a socializing agent, the widespread reception and influence of the Franklin stories is reason enough to investigate these deeper aspects and perform some analytic probing. Thus we follow the critical narrative into a less nurturing climate, and evaluate the internal story: the less-than-dynamic character of Franklin and his questionable uniqueness.

Franklin is an unassuming, slightly neurotic little turtle who deals with situations no more traumatic than losing soccer games and having his first sleepover. There is not much in plot or character which makes him stand out as extraordinary. In fact, among his young fans, he blends quite comfortably into a circle of (all male) idols which includes Barney the dinosaur and Arthur the aardvark. Just like on TV, the books are set in a cosy family atmosphere and grounded in an established community, and plots revolve around a mildly problematic situation which is solved in a fairly predictable way by the end of the story. Neither plot, character nor setting appear to encourage imaginative and non-linear thinking or challenge the status quo.

Franklin is also a "turtle of privilege": he lives in a materially sufficient home and community with both parents and is physically, mentally and socially more than capable. His "problems" are usually based on a fear of some sort, and even when he has difficulty with a task or skill, it is usually caused by fear or lack of discipline. He has trouble learning to ride his bicycle because he doesn't want to have to practice, and gets stage fright because he has the privilege of the lead role in the school play. These are, perhaps, situations encountered by countless pre-schoolers and primaries, but — in the world of children's literature — they are nothing new. Arthur, Barney, Little Critter and many other characters have also addressed these types of issues. Franklin may be many good things, but he does not seem to be at all revolutionary, or even very original. So why all the excitement? Perhaps this an example of a cultural tendency to celebrate art with some general appeal but rather lacking in depth

and intelligence; more likely this is merely the reality of the mainstream market of literature for children.

The factors contributing to Franklin's success with children, parents, educators and marketing specialists are not difficult to delineate. The illustrations are skilful and appealing, the stories are easily digested and deal with issues and situations encountered daily by the target audience and their adult counterparts, e.g. fear of the dark, tidiness, acquiring new skills, first day of school. Asked why they and their children like the Franklin books, most parents at a Mississauga Chapters Franklin event referred to the kid-relevant storylines: "the books work through issues and situations at their [children's] level of growth, but have happy endings"; "he [child] gets a sense of his own world." Reviewers tend to respond similarly, praising plots involving situations such as fear of the dark, getting lost, first day of school, tardiness and messiness, as relevant to the life and times of many '90s pre-schoolers. "Stories about Franklin the turtle ... are appreciated and loved on each side of the generation gap. Kids recognize Franklin's successes and failures and grown-ups generally approve of the stories' gentle resolutions" (Beaty 34).



Franklin visits a Mississauga, Ontario, bookstore.

Not everyone responds to Franklin with open arms, however. Some reviewers find the issue-based plots contrived: "the moral bits are irritating, especially the attempt at non-sexist revisionism involving a girl named 'Sir Lady Beaver'" (Beaty 34). A children's bookstore staff member had some harsh but insightful criticism for the little green guy. She described the Franklin stories as "washed-out" and "generic," and accused Franklin's creators of "sameness," suggesting that Franklin, Barney, Arthur and others in their realm are "interchangeable." Franklin "teaches good manners and good behaviour, but doesn't teach [children] to be original individuals." She characterises Franklin stories as lacking in creative imagining, originality, intelligent humour and critical thought, and wonders if the socializing effect of such books is to render children "uncritical." The general praise of Franklin's relevance to young children's daily encounters didn't impress this critic. She was more interested in whether or not the books displayed clever wit, a super sense of fun and wacky characters,

and whether or not they could be seen to encourage individual, critical thought.

A three-year-old at the Mississauga Chapters event gave the best response to adult claims of child-relevancy. In response to a parent's unprompted question, "Who do you like better, Franklin or Barney?", the child looked at his father thoughtfully, tilted his head to one side and finally announced, "horse!" He followed this by an impressive demonstration of whinnying and galloping. The "point taken" is not that children don't care about Franklin; nor is it that Franklin stories are removed from the experience of many North American children. It is merely a reality check; a reminder that spontaneity, imagination and originality are instinctive childhood characteristics, and that literature which encourages and demonstrates constructive channelling of those characteristics is worthy of attention. Sarah Ellis voiced this reality in an article in *Quill & Quire*: "by supporting children in their imaginative natures, we are being deeply subversive because we are fostering change in a way that is likely to be extremely effective" (38).

In such an incredibly censored realm as literature marketed for children, perhaps "subversion" of this sort must be recognized in small ways. Brenda Clark's illustrations are a case in point. Her attention to detail — oft-noted and praised — is not limited to (although it certainly includes) varied types of flowers in a field, or a messy room overflowing with carefully articulated objects. She brings important points to focus through her detail in character interactions and her choices in object detail, demonstrating both artistic skill and insight. Although Franklin and his parents have become quite personified, each of Franklin's friends represents their species in a surprisingly realistic fashion. Beaver *looks* like an authentic beaver; she is also not given any stereotypically ascribed characteristics (long eyelashes, hair ribbons) to validate her girl-ness. Clark also has a tendency to portray the animals eating species-appropriate food: at lunchtime at school, Beaver has a twig and Raccoon is eating an apple. At home, flies, beetles and leaves turn up in Franklin's cookies, pancakes and meals. She commented on this in a recent interview:

I try and do that as much as possible.... They're still animals! You throw in those bug things just for humour more than anything. You sort of bring [readers] back to realizing [the characters] are not people, even though they're acting like people.

In *Franklin and the Tooth Fairy*, the tooth fairy appears as a fox, then a bear and then a raccoon, when she appears to each of those animals:

in the illustrations, everybody is dreaming about, or talking about, the tooth fairy and Franklin's friends each have an image of their own tooth fairy. I thought it was important, because we as humans believe that tooth fairies, Santas, etc. look like ourselves, whatever our heritage may be. So why not? She's talking about Franklin being different because he doesn't have teeth when everybody does, so they can also have different tooth fairies.

Clark affirmed the suggestion that her inclusion of bugs, animal-specific tooth fairies and dads in the kitchen is very much intentional, based on an awareness of the deeper issues these reflect.



Illustration by Brenda Clark, from
Franklin and the Tooth Fairy

I'm aware of all that ... I began my career by illustrating educational books. They have a set of rules you wouldn't believe — standards to go by. For example, if you're showing a group of children, there should be a balanced mix of boys and girls from many different racial backgrounds, and perhaps one or two with obvious disabilities. It's all percentaged out. Also, mothers should not always be seen wearing aprons and fathers can't always be fixing things. Every page is planned out very carefully. That's where I came from when I began the Franklin series.

In fact, considering the amount of censorship placed on children's books, it is not quite surprising that many illustrators stick to the safe spaces of comfortable representation. Franklin now has to pass the tests for Scholastic in the US, which has meant another round of censorship. One main result: no witches allowed at Franklin's Halloween party.

Franklin's international distribution has exacerbated the censorship filters. "At Kids Can Press, the rights and licences department is careful to research the international customs and traditions for the countries that purchase Franklin," including details as seemingly insignificant as the wiener roast in *Franklin Has A Sleepover*. In the UK, wieners are bizarre and sausages are the norm, so Clark had to come up with an artistic compromise: "a chubby short wiener, so it looked like it could be a sausage.... You want to make [the readers] feel that this is their Franklin, that he lives in their countryside, otherwise, they won't feel as drawn to him or the situation."

In terms of character interaction, Clark creates a clear sense of relationship between characters, especially parents. In *Franklin's New Friend*, Moose's parents share a loving glance in the background as they move into their new home. Franklin's parents often share similar glances. While Franklin opens a gift in *Franklin and the Tooth Fairy*, his parents smile at each other as his father passes to Franklin's mother the tea he has just poured for her. Franklin and his parents wash dishes together, and when Franklin makes a mess, his parents help him clean it up. Clark expressed her conviction about illustrating families interacting positively:

"I don't think there's anything wrong with showing a well-adjusted family. There are happy kids, that have good parents, and there's nothing wrong with portraying that. I think it's good to portray a family with healthy attitudes. There are plenty of dysfunctional examples of parents and children in literature and on TV. We show our families as animals, they aren't shown as any nationality or race or anything like that—they could be any nationality and from just about anywhere in the world. They're just dealing with everyday issues, and dealing with them gently."

The Franklin texts are, in fact, quite moralistic. They are not often subtle in their didactic purposes, and although this is sometimes grating to reviewers, child readers and their parents don't seem to protest. Contrived or intentional though it may be, the Franklin stories do contain some applicable pedagogy. Obviously, child readers can learn approaches to dealing with fears. But the didactic qualities of Franklin and Friends go beyond that. Parents observe parenting techniques which are discerning, assertive, gentle, consistent and child-focused; teachers and other educators observe similar interactive approaches to problem-solving in the classroom. Trusting the child with ownership of the problem, and acting as facilitators and guides is the main undercurrent in the responses of Bourgeois' adult characters to the dilemmas of their younger counterparts. This approach not only gives the stories a quiet sense of humour, but also makes them more child-centred and provides helpful parenting strategies. In *Franklin and the Tooth Fairy*, his parents don't stop him or tell him he's being silly when toothless Franklin puts a note and a tiny white rock under his shell in an attempt to trick the tooth fairy into giving him a present. Instead, he finds a note in the morning which reads: "Dear Franklin, Sorry. Turtles don't have teeth. Good try. Your friend, The Tooth Fairy.", and a book at the breakfast table from his parents, "to celebrate [his] growing up."

My concern with this moralistic approach is merely with its historic tradition. Books for children have been known to wield their power as a socializing factor in many ways. Stories of children who reached heaven or hell based on their conformity to behaviour deemed proper are no longer considered to be very relevant, or even appropriate, for current Canadian culture. Neither are most of the values and lessons learned in *Leave It To Beaver*. Current academic thinking scoffs at history's moralistic stories featuring child protagonists who learn that good girls don't get muddy and that children should be seen, not heard. However, this is the model from which Franklin's creators espouse various strategies of applying child psychology. Is Franklin the '90s answer to the Cleaver family? I'm not sure that we are qualified to judge our sensitive '90s morals and values as "better," or any more worthy of moralistic discourse than Puritan values many years ago. The end may be worthwhile, but it may not justify the means, especially if that means is borrowed from an historically notorious model.

However, the experience of one Franklin-positive family is almost enough to convince me that the end does justify the means in this case: a mother explained to me that she and her husband like to read Franklin books with their three-year-old son Zach, because, even though the issues raised may not be huge, they can be extrapolated to the family's situation. She found *Franklin and*

the Tooth Fairy excellent, because, "our child is different, being bi-racial," and the premise of difference in that story was enough for them to discuss with Zach the reality of his own individuality, in an entirely non-threatening manner, because Franklin had been through it too.

Recognizing the obvious element of "sameness" and lack of radical originality inherent in the happenings of Franklin and his children's entertainment co-horts, I also wonder if these characters, their struggles and journeys are readily embraced as "new" or "original" simply because children are born and growing and changing every moment, and people are continually discovering the unoriginal newness of parenting. Again, perhaps the tendency of the process of childhood and parenthood to be incessantly new and unprecedented to each individual, despite eons of practice in the process as a human race is what allows characters such as Franklin to be so joyfully embraced.

The appealing nature of Franklin's character, the child-centredness of his world and his widely applicable (and transferable, as realized in the math and reading skills-centred CD-ROMs) positive didactic value are certainly deserving of recognition. Clark's achievement of "subversion" through detail in her illustrations (as discussed earlier) is also worthy of praise. From this point, it is easy to desire to applaud Bourgeois, Clark and Kids Can in their success and close with a smile. However, some reservations remain salient in my mind. The stories continue to stand as a socializing agent reinforcing many undesirable (to my mind) standards: a main character who is male and the majority of whose friends are male; storylines and setting which mirror the triteness of TV sitcoms; a pedagogical backbone; a type of pseudo-realism which permits neither actual realism nor imaginative exploration; a lack of an awareness of the outrageous, the ridiculous and the spontaneous; a disappointing unwillingness to venture beyond the well-travelled tracks of children's "daily issues." All this in mind, the Franklin craze is neither cause for ecstatic celebration, nor is it cause for extreme alarm. In a very real world of censorship and production, Franklin is quietly endearing himself to kids and their grown-ups.

Works Cited

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