The Moon of the Mountain Lions. Jean Craighead George. Illus. Ron Parker. HarperCollins, 1991. 48 pp., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-06-022429-0. **Bear Stories**. Hubert Evans. Illus. Kim LaFave. Harbour Publishing, 1991. Unpag., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88971-153-4. **The Hippos at the Seashore**. Lindsay Grater. Lester Publishing, 1993. Unpag., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-25-6. **Precious and Oliver**. Patti Farmer. Illus. Laurie Stein. Greey de Pencier/Books from OWL, 1992. 32 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920775-83-7. **The Parade To Paradise**. Charles Van Sandwyk. SummerWild, 1992. 48 pp., $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-969280-78-5. **Gamal the Camel and the Elephant's Tusk**. Kira Van Deusen. Illus. Anne DeGrace. Polestar, 1992. Unpag., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-919591-90-6. **Crico**. Blanche Béland. Centax Books, 1991. 24 pp., $4.95 (English) $5.95 (French), paper. ISBN 1-895292-04-02. **King of Cats**. Arthur Johnson. Illus. Vlasta van Kampen. Stoddart, 1992. Unpag., $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2589-X. **Tom Foolery**. Curtis Parkinson. Illus. Cathy Bobak. Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1993. Unpag., $17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-02-770025-9. **Naughty Scamper Meets the Bush Monster**. Penny Wooding. Breakwater, 1992. 32 pp., $8.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55081-015-4. **Puccini and the Prowlers**. Adele Wiseman. Illus. Kim LaFave. Harbour Publishing, 1992. 32 pp., $14.95 cloth. 0-88971-154-2. **The Snow Cat**. Dayal Kaur Khalsa. Tundra Books, 1992. Unpag., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-293-X. **Setting Wonder Free** . Maryke Barnes. Illus. Jirina Marton. Annick Press, 1993. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-241-6.

In "A Note to the Reader" at the beginning of *Wild Animals I Have Known*, Ernest Thompson Seton wrote:

> "The real personality of the individual, and his view of life are my theme, rather than the ways of the race in general...."

The focus on the personality of the individual, not on the behaviours of the species, became the hook through which Seton's realistic animal stories were to appeal to the human imagination as well as to the naturalist. Nonetheless, readers have often criticized Seton and his fellow Canadian Charles G.D. Roberts for what they considered unscientific and "unrealistic" portrayals of animal characters, pointing out that the authors wrongly assumed their animal characters were motivated by such human emotions as jealousy or vengeance. These problems largely arose through Seton's and Roberts's desire to create a sense of individual personality in their woodland dramatis personae.

Nearly a century has passed since the initial publication of *Wild Animals I Have Known* and Roberts's *Red Fox*, offering an interesting perspective from which to consider a number of recent Canadian children's books in which animals play central roles. The thirteen books reviewed here show a great diversity in how animal characters are presented, ranging from a story more objectively realistic than anything Seton or Roberts ever told, to one in which the illustrator — not the author — depicts the otherwise entirely human characters

as mice. Ultimately, it appears that the exploration of relationships between humankind and the "lower" species commands more attention at the end of this century than does the issue of "realism."

Continuing the Great Tradition: Realistic Animal Tales

First, and most obvious, are two books that very much participate in the tradition set down by Seton and Roberts. These are Jean Craighead George's *The Moon of the Mountain Lions* and Hubert Evans's *Bear Stories*. Certainly *The Moon of the Mountain Lions* best fits the realistic animal story expectations — perhaps even better than any work by the genre's creators. In spite of its title, Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* included few truly wild animals. Rather, the book is filled with stories about feral horses, domesticated dogs, and birds and rabbits living within the perimeters of human habitation. And human beings play a constant role in Seton's and Roberts's realistic animal stories, suggesting that humanity's relationship to these creatures has always been of special importance.

Not so for George's *The Moon of the Mountain Lions*. There are no human characters in this story of a young cougar that lives in the remote Hoh River valley near Mount Olympus in Washington state. As he stalks a lame elk, the young male witnesses the death of a female lion, killed while protecting her two offspring from a black bear. The protagonist then becomes the protector of the orphans — one male and one female — and the story closes with the protagonist and the orphaned lioness starting the rituals of courtship. For George, the behaviour of the species within the ecosystem commands centre stage. Unlike Seton and Roberts, she eschews the depiction of individual personality and its attendant humanizing tendencies. This is not a "human" story, but a story about animals from which humans might learn. The lions, bear, elk, dipper, and junco that inhabit this book are neither humanized by speech or psychology, nor do they depend on human characters to create interest in the account. They exist in a nearly timeless world of wilderness in which humankind has no relevance. Like Seton and Roberts before her, George is a naturalist as well as an author, and in many respects, she has improved and refined the genre created by those turn-of-the-century Canadians. Ironically, the much-talented George was born in and continues to live in the United States. The book is, however, illustrated by British Columbia artist Ron Parker. His colour illustrations — somewhat in the style popularized by Robert Bateman — concentrate so intensely on verisimilitude and detail that a magical or heightened realism is produced, reminiscent of the work of Alex Colville or Andrew Wyeth. Perhaps it arises from the conventions by which graphic art is presented and viewed, but the illustrations convey a greater sense of being constructed by human agency than does George's prose. The illustrations are not entirely successful at freeing themselves of those humanizing tendencies also evident in Seton's and Roberts' stories, but they make fine companions to this exploration of the complexity and intricacy of a natural universe from which humankind is excluded.

Hubert Evans's *Bear Stories* is quite a different book, but still one very much in the tradition of Seton and Roberts. The book comprises six humorous anecdotes about bear behaviour, told from the perspective of someone entirely familiar with the bush. One story records a cub's antics on its first fishing expedition, another of the voracious appetites of two orphaned cubs, and a third of a "ferocious" bear who sought refuge up the same tree that the frightened hunter had been trying to reach. The facts about the bear species — how bears learn to fish, what they eat, when they seek a winter den, etc. — are accurate, but the tone of these stories depicting realistic animal behaviour is humorous. When Seton attempted to add narrative interest to what would otherwise have been mere collections of data about animal behaviour, he sought to capture the "real personality of the individual." Evans does much the same by always focusing on the comedic aspects of personality. In this way, *Bear Stories* differs substantially from *The Moon of the Mountain Lions*, where the narrative tone and the selection of plot events exhibits a strong desire to be distanced and objective. Kim LaFave's black-and-white illustrations — intaglios of some variety, probably wood or linoleum cuts — enhance the light-hearted and comical tone of Evans's text.

All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go: Human Characters in Animal Bodies

If an accurate, scientific depiction of animal behaviour is one objective in the portrayal of animal characters, Lindsay Grater's *The Hippos at the Seashore* surely represents an alternative objective. Here, a family of hippopotami, dressed in hats, flowered shirts, and shorts, holiday at the seashore. These creatures could just as easily have been brontosauruses, elephants, or any other large animal. The only connection between the events of the story and the fact that these characters are hippos is their size, as the family must spend a rainy holiday cramped in a tiny seaside cottage. Beyond this thin link, neither the behaviour of the species nor the "personality of the individual" is an issue. There is no reason, of course, that authors must make animal characters behave according to their biological type. Even so, Piglet's fondness for Haycorns and Ratty's pleasures of the riverbank add an imaginative pleasure to the conception of those humanized animal characters that is lacking in *The Hippos at the Seashore*. Grater seems only concerned with portraying Granny Hippo's experience and good sense in dealing with what is beyond our control, a skill yet to be learned by Rollo and Rosie Hippo and their parents. The book is a thinly disguised effort to encourage the young reader to make the best of a bad situation by looking at life's sunny side — not a profound philosophy, but no doubt a healthy one. The sugar-coating designed to make this bit of healthy didacticism more palatable, it seems, is in the playful absurdity of hippopotami dressed and acting like humans.

Grater's words, although competent in moving the story forward, ignite few imaginative sparks. The final pages of the story, however, bring a pleasant but anticipated surprise when we see the blanket that Granny Hippo has been knitting all week. Two full pages of the text reproduce that quilt-like blanket, which captures

imaginatively numerous icons of the family's holiday. Throughout, the illustrations have a fun and colourful effect. They are bright, the busy patterns of fabric often clashing in an appealing way, suggesting that Grater not only has a strong sense of visual design, but that she has worked extensively with textiles. One hippo, unfortunately, looks like every other hippo; you can only tell Granny by her granny glasses, Father by his Hawaiian shirt, and Mother by her sun hat.

A book even less concerned with the realistic depiction of animal behaviour is Patti Farmer's *Precious and Oliver*. If the hippos' naturally large size makes for a tenuous link between animal realism and Grater's plot, no such gossamer thread ties Oliver's dilemma to characteristics of his species. Oliver is a mouse, yet Farmer's story concerns his realization that sensible eating and physical activity are the only remedies to an increasing middle-aged waistline. The plot, then, involves health issues relevant to an aging generation of over-fed human couch potatoes, not mice. In fact, Farmer's dedication of the book "To Harold 'Oliver' Allin, a loving father" makes the human prototype for Oliver's character unambiguous. Actually, the written text does not say that Oliver and his wife, Precious, are anything other than humans, but the illustrations portray them as mice. Why is this? Why are they not at least portrayed as pigs or groundhogs, choices that would seem more appropriate? Without question, the mid-life concern with slower metabolisms is an odd theme in a children's picture book, especially as the "problem" remains focused on Oliver alone, never expanding to encourage healthy diet and regular exercise in everyone's daily routine. Is the implication here that if a story about adult issues is told in simple language and is illustrated with pictures of little mice, it will be a children's book? Laurie Stein's illustrations of mice employ an unusual combination of fabric animal models photographed against a background of watercolours. While one hopes the technique will never replace the simple pen-and-ink drawings of Ernest H. Shepard, younger readers will probably enjoy the 3-D effect Stein produces. Nevertheless, while text and illustrations are not without their moments, this particular use of animal characters raises some troubling thoughts about how children's literature is conceived.

The Parade To Paradise, by Charles Van Sandwyk, also creates animal characters that share nothing in common with their biological counterparts. The characters, all birds, initially express their various dissatisfactions with life, and then go off in search of Paradise. Not far into their journey, however, they discover — or rather, it is pointed out to them by the Toucan in a nauseating Sunday-school tone — that Paradise is not a place to which one must travel, but is the happiness to be found through kindness, love, and compassion. This false resolution to the story is intrusive because the book does not show a single instance of love or compassion among the characters. Like Moses's tablet, this moral injunction is imposed from on high, and like Thomas, I doubt it will have the socially elevating effect on young readers that Van Sandwyk anticipates. This is preaching, not storytelling. The effect of such heavy-handed moralizing

is made worse by the doggerel verse in which the entire story is told.

The Parade To Paradise is a transparent vehicle for exhibiting Van Sandwyk's often interesting illustrations of exotic birds, frequently sporting such *fin de siècle* fashion accoutrements as vests, walking sticks, monocles, and top hats. Beatrix Potter's fine watercolours immediately spring to mind. According to advertisements in the backpages, limited edition prints can be purchased. Van Sandwyk's illustrations are indeed whimsically attractive and imaginative, although I think most of their appeal would be with adults, not children.

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The Political Animal Story

If these five books reveal at least two opposing positions in the depiction of animal characters, *Gamal the Camel and the Elephant's Tusk* introduces yet another possibility. Author Kira Van Deusen uses Gamal, a singing camel with international rock star celebrity, and an African elephant, who once rescued Gamal from the cruelty of greedy humans, to politicize children about problems in the real world of animals. The explicitly stated objective is to encourage children to speak out against the injustices done to animals who cannot speak for themselves, especially the elephant, who is still being poached for his valuable ivory tusks. Thus, humanized animals with anything but realistic behaviours are created to alter the political will so that the species can be saved from very real destruction. These paradoxical circumstances, however, are more interesting than is the book. Insight and imagination are rarely the companions of black-and-white didacticism, and they play no significant part in this particular instance of message-peddling. Indeed, saving the elephant is a noble cause, but *Gamal the Camel and the Elephant's Tusk* falls far short of what a picturebook could be. I'm reminded of James Janeway's *A Token for Children*. The didactic intent is every bit as strong here as it was in that seventeenth-century Puritan's work, and who would suggest that Janeway's values were any worse than Van Deusen's? His technique was faulty, but at least it was honest, as it lacked the subversive sugar-coated narrative and innocent illustrations of Anne Degrace that thinly disguise Van Deusen's political objectives. Elephants are indeed worth saving, but so are the imaginations of children.

Bringing Nature to the Nursery: A Tale for the Very Young

Blanche Beland's *Crico* offers another alternative to realism and animal characters. Targeted at an extremely young audience, *Crico* seems ultimately motivated by a desire to teach very young readers/listeners something about the natural world. In this respect, it shares common ground with George's *The Moon of the Mountain Lions*. Beland, however, is no naturalist, or at least, that is not apparent from the text. Crico is a caterpillar, anxious because his meadow friends seem to have forgotten his birthday, but his anxieties are soon resolved. Given a silk umbrella as a belated gift, Crico curls up inside it for a sleep from

which he will emerge a beautiful butterfly. End of story. Thus, while Beland shares George's objective of revealing the fundamental workings of nature to the reader, she makes use of totally humanized animal characters to do so. *Crico* includes simple four-colour illustrations that evidently have primary appeal for very young children, at least to judge by how often illustrations in a similar style are seen ornamenting nursery walls and furnishings.

Animals in the Parlour: Pets as Protagonists

Thus far, all the books considered — regardless of whether they portray animal characters realistically or in humanized forms—involve what Revenue Canada might call an "at arm's length" relationship between the author and his or her characters. That is, however the animal character might be portrayed, the author does not share any particular relationship with the character, beyond the normal fictional bonds between a creator and the thing s/he creates. On the other hand, in *King of Cats*, *Tom Foolery*, *Naughty Scamper Meets the Bush Monster*, and *Puccini and the Prowlers*, we encounter a group of stories not only about animals, but about pets, presumably the author's. Even so, there is still great diversity in how those animal characters are treated.

Arthur Johnson's *King of Cats* is my favourite of the four. "Who is the King of Cats?", the young female narrator asks her purring feline companion. After entering the African veldt through a picture hung on her bedroom wall, she asks a series of large cats — a cheetah, a lion, a jaguar, a black panther, and a siberian and a sabre-toothed tiger — the same question. Each answers that his own particular field of prowess — speed, loudest roar, courage, beauty, size, age — make him the *King of Cats*. The ending is fairly predictable, with the narrator ultimately recognizing that her own pet tabby is the real *King of Cats* because she loves it. But the book creates a number of imaginative moments that are certainly to its credit. I already mentioned access into the imagined world through the picture frame, much like Carroll's rabbit hole or Lewis's wardrobe. When the narrator encounters each big cat and is told that its particular skill makes it king, the narrator asks why that power should justify kingship. This questioning in the text encourages the reader to ask these same questions, thus helping him/her work toward a critical intelligence that probes at the assumptions we make every day. And while the feline characters converse fluently in English, their responses to the narrator's question introduce the young reader to some fundamental differences between the various species of big cats.

Van Kampen's nicely executed colour illustrations suit Johnson's finely nuanced prose. They portray the cats in somewhat realistic detail — less so than Parker's illustrations in *The Moon of the Mountain Lions*, but sufficient to create an image of each cat that reflects our stereotypic thinking about that species, just as each animal is stereotyped about what makes him king. But that realistic detail is made more friendly and inviting by the expressions Van Kampen paints on each cat's face. Her illustrations complement the verbal story very well.

Curtis Parkinson's *Tom Foolery* involves a pet cat who temporarily abandons the comfort and security of home for adventure. At the story's end, Tom is happily reunited with the humans who care for him, and the adventure turns out to be great fun. Tom's behaviour throughout is cat-like, although the numerous mental processes ascribed to him would send shivers down the spine of those critics of Seton and Roberts who thought the motivations of their animal characters were something short of realistic. Generally, realism in animal stories arises out of a desire to educate the reader about the habits of less familiar species or about the intricate relationships of the natural world. There is no such intent in *Tom Foolery*. Instead, this story will be familiar to any pet-lover who has ever imagined how the family cat or dog spent the day, what he got into when he was "lost" for a few hours, and so forth. I cannot say that either Parkinson's rendition of what happened to his own cat — Tom Foolery, according to the notes at the beginning of the book — or Bobak's illustrations add imaginatively to the genre.

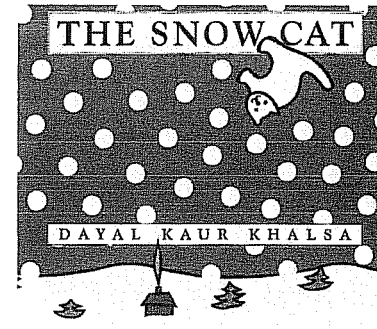
Another story generated out of the "my pet did the darndest thing" school is Penny Wooding's *Naughty Scamper Meets the Bush Monster*. Scamper, the name of the story's protagonist as well as the name of the author's Appaloosa gelding, is repeatedly sent galloping home by the apparition of a frightful monster in the bushes. Each time Scamper bolts for home, he sends everyone around him tumbling head over heels. The bush monster, it turns out, is nothing more than a plastic green garbage bag caught on some roadside bushes. The book is clearly valuable in that it encourages children to look for logical explanations for what frightens them, although when one recalls Maurice Sendak's imaginative exploration of what frightens Ida in *Outside Over There*, *Naughty Scamper* pales rapidly. Wooding never approaches Sendak's brilliant apprehension of the psychological complexity of children, a mediocrity perhaps best illustrated by some of the names Wooding creates — Naughty Scamper, Doggy Dozo, and Phyllis Farmer. The colour illustrations have a somewhat charming simplicity, but the fact that they are executed on a black background seems inappropriate for the intended audience. I'm constantly reminded of velvet paintings and all their trappings.

Adele Wiseman's *Puccini and the Prowlers* is a better told "pets do the darndest things" story. Puccini, bane of peaceful suburban quiet, barks constantly at what he takes to be prowlers — the neighbour's cat, the milkman, the postman, even the moon. But when a real prowler offers Puccini a little snack and a rub behind the ears, Puccini sits quietly as the prowler steals the family laundry. Puccini is first and foremost a pet; he is also a dog, of course, just as Tom is a cat and Scamper is a horse, but that is only secondary. The element of relationship between human and animal in these stories overwhelms any interest in the protagonists' behaviours as individuals of a particular species. These authors — Johnson, Parkinson, Wooding, and Wiseman — have little interest in the naturalist's variety of realism that George desires. The only reality they seek to evoke is situated in the bond established between pet and owner.

As one might expect from the pen of a Governor General medal winner, the prose of *Puccini and the Prowlers* is controlled and attractive. It reminds one of the power of good prose, and makes the doggerel of *The Parade To Paradise* even less acceptable. Kim LaFave's illustrations are, like Wiseman's prose, quietly effective without drawing attention to themselves. They capture Wiseman's tone nicely in this story of that rascally pup, Puccini. The remarkable difference between LaFave's illustrations here and those in *Bear Stories* attests to the breadth of the illustrator's skill.

Postmodernism: Animal Stories Without Animals

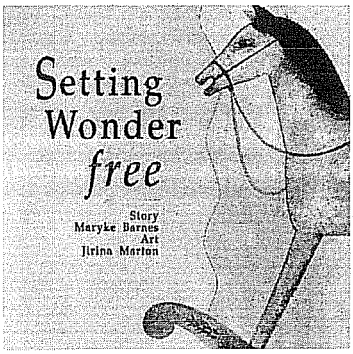
The eleven books introduced up to this point have portrayed animal characters in diverse ways. A few authors have presented their characters with a naturalist's eye to realism, while others have flaunted a seeming unconcern for biological accuracy. In the four books just examined, the focus has been on the characters primarily as pets. Still another variety of "animal story" is encountered in the final two books. Dayal Kaur Khalsa's *The Snow Cat* and Maryke Barnes's *Setting Wonder Free* are not truly stories about animals at all; rather, both concern characters who only take on animal forms.



The Snow Cat is about a mythical creature made of snow that God sends in answer to the prayers of lonely Elsie, who lives in an isolated cabin far away from any companionship. The creature is marginally feline in its appetite — it eats fish and mice, but only when those foods are shaped out of snow — and in its domestic habit — it curls cosily at Elsie's feet in front of the fire. But its transformative powers are mythical and spiritual, not biological. Not only is it made purely of snow, but when a comfy night spent by the fire causes the Snow Cat to melt, he is transformed into a pond, again in the outline of a cat.

Through her prose and her wonderful art, Khalsa creates a story of simplicity, but one that reverberates with meaning, much like a folktale or myth. In the same way the primary tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm have generated controversy about their suitability for children, *The Snow Cat* will rankle some readers. Khalsa's conception of God is a fundamentalist one, and while her creation of a God who answers prayers (I'm reminded of Huck Finn's giving up on prayers because repeated requests for a fish hook went unanswered), who gives verbal orders from on high, and who punishes those who defy his instructions will make good sense to some readers, it will be unsettling to others. The imaginative freedom, however, that surely lies at the core of what is valuable about literature is greatly enhanced by such a mythologically rich medium, and the power of Khalsa's imaginative flight will be felt by all who read *The Snow Cat.*

The final book, Maryke Barnes's *Setting Wonder Free*, is another "animal story" that is not actually about animals. It concerns a wooden rocking horse, outgrown by the young narrator and her brother, and now relegated to the basement. What holds the fabric of this narrative together is not a horse or even a piece of wood shaped like a horse, but the relationship between the narrator and her outgrown toy, which represents her past. While the title might suggest a saccharine fantasy, the book presents a delightfully down-to-earth exploration of growing up and growing away from the things we once loved intimately. This might seem an odd subject in a child's book, as did Oliver's concern with his increasing waistline. Yet children, like adults, have pasts, and much of how they develop in future depends on how they come to grips with their pasts. Like Fern in *Charlotte's Web*, the narrator of *Setting Wonder Free* is growing up, but while White only chronicles Fern's growth and views her going off with Henry Fussy as normal development, Barnes provides readers — who are themselves growing up — with continuity between the many changing bonds and emotions in their lives. Undoubtedly, the most delightful quality of this story is the narrative voice of that young girl, a voice richly complemented by the simple and soft water-colour illustrations.



Setting Wonder Free serves as the crystallization of a pattern emerging from many of the books collected here. The developing interest is in the relationship between the human and the animal worlds, not in the realistic behaviour of animal characters. When Seton and Roberts sought to capture "the real personality of the individual," they were, in fact, recognizing that the appeal of the animal story lies in perceiving the characters' behaviours from a human context. We see ourselves revealed through the personalities of those animal characters. These thirteen books — with the notable exception of George's *The Moon of the Mountain Lions* — suggest that more recent Canadian authors have chosen to develop the connections between human readers and animal characters, rather than to move in the objectifying direction of George. One suspects that even George's story, from which humans are conspicuously absent, arises from the human recognition that this earth is shared with others. Most authors, however, choose to focus directly on those connections that make animals interesting to us, whether they are cats made of snow, horses made of wood, mice dressed up like middle-aged men, or family pets doing the "darndest things."

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