ANIMAL STORIES

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Seven Bears. Selections from *Thirteen Bears,* by Sir Charles G. D. Roberts. Illus. by Ken MacDougall. Scholastic - TAB Publications Ltd., 1977. 128 pp. $1.15.

Selected Stories of Ernest Thompson Seton. Edited and with an introduction by Patricia Morley. University of Ottawa Press, 1977. 168 pp. $6.00.

These two books contain similar materials but are designed for different audiences. *Seven Bears* is suitable for Grades 6 to 9, while the anthology of Seton's stories, with its scholarly introduction and its selected bibliography, is aimed at senior high school and university students. Nonetheless, Patricia Morley's edition is by no means unsuitable for younger readers, since the type is large and clear, the binding sturdy, and the illustrations Seton's own. Nor should *Seven Bears* be passed over by high school and university curriculum committees looking for an inexpensive alternative to the New Canadian Library's *The Last Barrier and Other Stories.*

Both these books have attractive covers. The quality of the paper in *Seven Bears* is not as good as that for the Seton stories, and the black and white illustrations are disappointing. Generations of young readers have grown up with imaginations full of the powerful images of Charles Livingston Bull and Paul Bransom, and it is difficult, I suppose, to provide new illustrations which are as strong and attractive in their own way as those of Roberts' earlier illustrators. Seton's illustrations are another matter. He called himself an "artist-naturalist", and no text of his would be complete without his drawings and sketches. These include not only the pictures of crucial moments in the actions of his stories – the conventional kind of illustration – but sketches for margins, divisions in the text, titles, and initial capital letters. The sketches are the record of a naturalist's observations, like the various rams' horns that run down the edge of p. 146, or more fanciful creations, like "Redruff's calendar" on p. 96. He gives musical notations for the language of crows, and he gives us a stylized drawing – a great swirl with sun, man, beast, and bird at its centre – that is his version of yang-yin (see figure 1). These sketches and drawings can be as absorbing an object or study as the text itself.

Seven Bears is a selection from *Thirteen Bears,* itself a selection from animal stories that Roberts published between 1909 and 1922. Ethel Hume Bennett chose and edited the stories for the 1947 anthology, and seven of those stories are reprinted here, arranged in a different order. It is good to have these stories in print again, for they read well, and will repay further study.

To begin with, there is much here that must appeal to the adolescent imagination, even to that imagination which, as Earle Birney said in "Canada: Case History", "Doesn't like books (except about bears). . . ." Here is that exception. Who could resist a story about a woodsman's treacherous journey along a mountain ledge, and about a moment both feared and expected: "He reached the turn, craned his head around it, and came face to face with an immense black bear"? Or about a girl trapped in an isolated cabin by a bear: "Under his weight, the door came crashing down . . . ."? In a story like this, one has to keep going, just to see how it will turn out.

For the senior student, who is aware of patterns and ideas in the stories, this collection provides a good introduction to Roberts' treatment of the animal story. The central idea – and the key word in most of Roberts' writing about animals – is "kinship". The concept is not a sentimental one. Instead, it must be understood in the context of ideas that Roberts held in common with Darwin, Huxley, and Meredith: that all creatures share the physical basis of life; that both men and animals are involved in a struggle for survival; that animals survive primarily through instinct, and man primarily through education. Some of these stories explore the idea of "kinship" by paralleling the experiences of man and bear. Sometimes man and bear are "pardners" when confronted with a common danger, as in "the Gauntlet of Fire" or "With His Back to the Wall"; sometimes man and bear work at cross purposes, as when the woodsman violates the traffic patterns of the mountain ledge in "The Ledge on Bald Face". More typically, the "Kinship" is ironic, as in "Mothers of the North"; both the polar bear mother and walrus mother act correctly to protect, and provide for, their young, but, in the struggle for survival, one must win and one must lose. The effect of these stories often depends upon such parallels, where tragedy and comedy, sentiment and horror, mingle ironically.

The wolf has had his due as a creature of legend, and it is perhaps time now, with novels like Marian Engel's *Bear,* that the bear took his place in our imaginations as well. In one of the thirteen stories not reprinted in this edition Roberts describes the bear as "an individualist" who "loves to depart from his rules and confound the naturalists. When you think you've got him, he turns out to be an old black stump, and laughs in his shaggy sleeve from some other hidden post of observation" *(Thirteen Bears,* p. 101*)*. The laughing bear, strong and intelligent and tricky: there is an Emily Carr painting of a totem that captures the type, and we would do well to admit him to a Canadian bestiary.

Selected Stories of Ernest Thompson Seton contains eight stories, five of which are taken from Seton's earliest and best known book, *Wild Animals I Have Known.* The selection is disappointing, not because these stories are not good, but because they are available elsewhere, and in a less expensive format. *Wild Animals I Have Known* is available in the New Canadian Library for $3.50 though this edition has few of Seton's illustrations. There are also two American editions of *Wild Animals I Have Known;* I have seen neither of them, but both are cheaper, according to *Books in Print.* The story of "Krag, the Koote-

nay Ram" is also available in Signet/New American Library's edition of *Lives of the Hunted,* with many of the original illustrations, for $1.25. Given the availability of these stories, Morley might have taken the opportunity afforded by a series like this one (the University of Ottawa Press's Canadian Short Story Library) to publish less familiar stories that are worth renewed consideration, like "The Winnipeg Wolf" and "The Wild Geese of Wyndygoul", welcome parts of this collection. The bibliography is useful, and Morley's introduction is admirable, giving in a concise form much essential information and many of the central ideas that a student needs in approaching Seton's work.

It is interesting to read these stories along with Roberts'. Similar as they are in many ways (one thinks of their common debt to the Victorians, and their common understanding of "kinship"), the differences are worth exploring . At first glance, Seton's stories seem less artful and more episodic than Roberts'. This effect is the result of the narrative voice that Seton uses. Whereas Roberts tells his stories in *Seven Bears* in the third person, and uses an omniscient point of view that seems impersonal, Seton often uses the first person, and "I" of the narrator is limited to what he observes. Hence, one is aware of the voice of a naturalist, seeing, recording, deducing, and guessing, and the stories are as much a record of the naturalist's discoveries as they are an account of the creature itself. "Silverspot, the Story of a Crow" begins with the question, "How many of us have ever got to know a wild animal? ", and the question indicates the structure of many of these stories, a structure based on the process of "getting to know".

Anyone who has pets soon realizes that animals are individuals, with distinct personalities. Roberts is not unaware of this fact, but one often has a sense that he is dealing with a representative of the species. Seton, however, is concerned with the individual. "The trouble," he writes at the beginning of "Silverspot", "usually is to know one creature from his fellow." His animal stories are "personal histories", histories of creatures who are "stronger or wiser" than others of their kind, great leaders or famous characters. It is, perhaps, not too far-fetched to suggest a parallel with the Carlylean view of history as the biographies of heroes, for Seton's natural history is certainly made up of stories of outstanding animals.

Seton's view of nature is nowhere better summed up than in his little drawing for the title page of *Wild Animals I Have Known,* and one wishes that Morley had included it in her edition. As she points out in her *Journal of Canadian Fiction* article on ' Seton's Animals", it is a Canadian version of the Peaceable Kingdom, with the artist-naturalist himself at the centre, bringing all the creatures together in his notebook or sketch pad. In a country where nature will always be wild and often hostile, our view of the whole scheme must rely upon such a record. Hence, one remains grateful for the work of Seton and Roberts, and for the continued interest in republishing their stories.

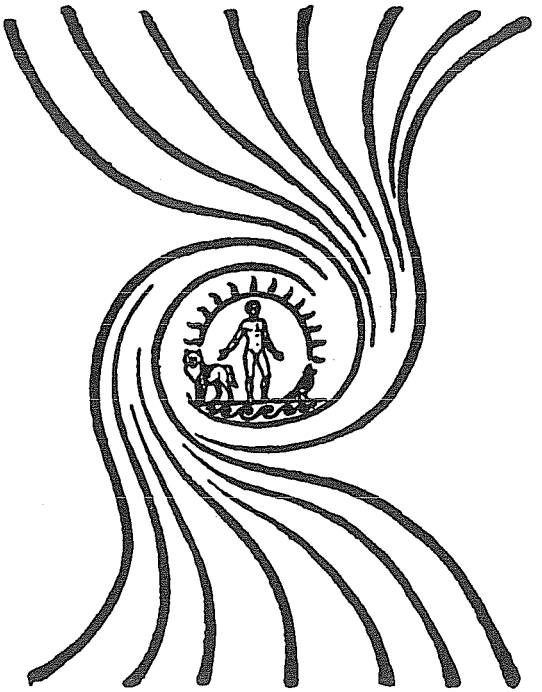

Figure 1

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