Exploring Human Identity in Picture Books About Animals

—Catherine McLaughlin

Arsenault, Elaine. *Doggie in the Window*. Illus. Fanny. Toronto: Groundwood, 2003. N. pag. $16.95 ($14.95 USD) hc. ISBN 0-88899-619-5.

Atwood, Margaret. *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda*. Illus. Dušan Petričić. Toronto: Key Porter Kids, 2004. N. pag. $21.95 hc. ISBN 1-55263-609-7.

Bradford, Karleen and Leslie Elizabeth Watts. *You Can't Rush a Cat*. Victoria: Orca, 2003. N.pag. $8.95 ($7.95 USD) pb. ISBN 1-55143-283-8.

Cumming, Peter. *Out on the Ice in the Middle of the Bay*. Illus. Alice Priestley. 1993 Rev. ed. Toronto: Annick, 2004. N. pag. $8.95 ($7.95 USD) pb. ISBN 1-55037-870-8.

Jennings, Sharon. *Franklin and the New Teacher*. Illus. Céleste Gagnon, et.al. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. N. pag. $4.95 pb. ISBN 1-55337-500-9.

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Maybarduk, Linda. *James the Dancing Dog*. Illus. Gillian Johnson. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. N. pag. $22.99 ($15.95 USD) hc. ISBN 0-88776-619-6.

Schwartz, Roslyn. *The Complete Adventures of the Mole Sisters*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. 167 pp. $24.95 ($19.95 USD) hc. ISBN 1-55037-883-X.

Simmie, Lois. *Mister Got To Go and Arnie*. Illus. Cynthia Nugent. Vancouver: Raincoast, 2001. N. pag. $19.95 ($15.95 USD) hc. ISBN 1-55192-494-3.

Questions of identity always lurk in animal stories: realistic texts seek to illuminate animal behaviours; anthropomorphized tales feature human aspirations and usually endearing foibles, like Pooh's poor spelling or Toad's car lust. All the picture books under review here are, in some way, about animals. All, indeed, broach various notions of identity, from contemplating a career in couture to catness. These Canadian books also speculate, obliquely or openly, on what it means to be Canadian. Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* notes that contemporary English fiction in this country is flexible on the issue

of how or who to be: "the dominant Canadian self-image" is one of flexibility—of declining sweeping notions of who we are as a nation, of embracing local diversity and flux (19). The best of the books are genially—perhaps parodically—self-conscious about issues of identity and open, in good Canadian fashion, to openness on these questions.

I remember as a child being worried and even slightly sickened by the lyrics of "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?"—the "waggley" tail semaphoring the doggie's hopes for adoption distressed me to the point of tears. Though abundantly waggley-tailed and eager-eyed, the protagonist of Elaine Arsenault's *Doggie in the Window*, illustrated by Fanny, replaces pathos with ingenuity. He dreams of being taken home by Mademoiselle Madeleine, the seamstress who keeps shop—"Costumes de Rêve"—next door to Monsieur Albert's pet store. Mademoiselle (a grown up, and, I think, deliberate avatar of the Bemelmans character, complete with beribboned hat and wings of orange hair) comes to work each morning with rolls of bright fabric under her arm, trailing clouds of ribbon and buttons. This creative glory seems to be the attraction for Doggie. Getting adopted by Mademoiselle is a career move, as much as anything: "One day I'll be a seamstress just like her, thought Doggie" (N. pag).[1] Mademoiselle doesn't notice his initial antics—somersaults, lolloping tongue, the waggley tail—but does pay attention after he sneaks into her workshop of nights and sews up disguises—kitten, goldfish, parrot, lizard—to draw her interest. Doggie plays these roles each morning in time for Mademoiselle's sweep past the window, and she finally acknowledges him: "What an odd-looking kitten you've got there; I think your fish needs water wings. . ." Monsieur Albert notices Doggie too—"You are not like other dogs"—and colludes with the animal when the crunch comes. Mademoiselle admits to interest in the unorthodox Doggie but suggests she doesn't need another seamstress: "'But look at all the costumes he has made,' said Monsieur Albert." Mademoiselle takes on Doggie as a designer; he arrives each morning dressed beautifully and identically to Mademoiselle Madeleine. The two resemble each other facially, too—Doggie's ears jut from beneath his hat as Mademoiselle's hair does; their faces are both soft rectangles in three-quarter profile with enigmatic half-smiles and round, bright eyes. Buttons and ribbons bounce in the wake of his passing.

"Even a small dog can have a big dream. And make it come true." This is the moral of the book, but not its fate. *Doggie in the Window* entertains conventional notions about being resourceful and creative in achieving one's dreams (big dreams, too, impossible-seeming ones); however, the comic—indeed slavish—lengths to which Doggie goes to get noticed are refreshingly mercenary. Doggie may

be a character, but he isn't averse to taking on other characters: to figuring out exactly what Mademoiselle wants in order to get what he wants. Readers are spared sober lessons about being true to oneself and treading the lonely but inevitably rewarding path of the visionary.

I think we could read Doggie's quick-changes of costume as genially mocking the clichéd search for Canadian identity: here, such an identity is something that might be stolen, tailored, tried on, cast off, and tried on again. Readers are invited to range in the territory Linda Hutcheon suggests might be peculiarly Canadian: the eccentric, the marginal, the unfixed, the parodic (see Hutcheon 1–23). Indeed, it is Doggie's wit—and the source, perhaps, of his perpetual grin—to nudge the borders of homage and parody in his costumes. Canadian identity is probably just such an off/balancing act, too.

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This is a bright book, both textually and visually: Fanny has a lithe, deft touch for figures and faces and her colours are rich and strong. The cherry warmth of Mademoiselle's coat is picked up variously throughout the text (by Mademoiselle's shop front and awning, as well as bolts of fabric, furniture, and walls inside her studio; by Doggie's after-hours window ledge, his goldfish costume, and Monsieur Albert's slippers; by a parked car near the pet shop) and contrasted with appealing golds, oranges, blues, and greens. The book's urban setting (Paris? Montreal?) and abundance of interior scenes don't dim this sunniness. Even Doggie's nighttime sortie into Mademoiselle's workshop is aglow with hearth-orange. Oblique angles throughout the book defy gravity and set the story and characters askew: Doggie's eccentricities are at home in the colourful, off-kilter world he inhabits.

In contrast to Arsenault's work, identity in the "Franklin TV Storybooks" from Kids Can Press, *Franklin's Nickname* and *Franklin and the New Teacher*, seems as fixed and as candy-hard as the colours used on Franklin and his cronies. Franklin's task, in these books, is to chip off the excess—the wrong-headed fears (xenophobia, in *Franklin and the New Teacher*) or delusions of grandeur (soccer stardom, in *Franklin's Nickname*), typically entertained by Franklin himself—that obstruct his, or anyone else's insertion in the cultural mosaic. These

Franklin texts are carefully inclusive and encouraging of difference (a Canadian ideal?), but this very care perhaps admits of a brittle urge to contain identity, rather than to admit ambiguity and uncertainty as part of a Canadian self. In *Franklin and the New Teacher*, for instance, the young turtle resists Ms. Koala, the supply teacher from Australia who replaces Mr. Owl; Ms. Koala pretends she doesn't know that Franklin is her biggest doubter, and enlists him in the project of bringing the class around, thereby winning him over to boomerang throwing and a hearty outburst of "Fair dinkum!"—to appreciation of rather than dismay at Ms. Koala's difference. I think the text also hints that Ms. Koala is a lesbian: her open-chested vest—Bear wears a similar outfit in *Franklin's Nickname*—and purple triangle of neckerchief, as well as her exuberant slang and boomerang-throwing abilities, seem a caricature of butchness. Lesbian identity is ambiguously addressed in the book by inscribing a stereotype—this is how a lesbian looks and acts—and, at the same time, avoiding open talk about sexual identity. The book's reticence implies that it's a subject best left alone. Such an exploration becomes part of the excess I noted above: something that doesn't fit in, and is better ignored or discarded.

This could be TV's fault. The Franklin books don't seem to have an author any more, not a conspicuous one, anyway, announced on the title page or the cover. TV is their real progenitor. In TV only one thing happens at a time: it is impossible to attend to more. Hence, the singular focus in the texts on Franklin's angst-filled relationships with his peers. Little time to explore Ms. Koala's subjectivity. The calligraphic perfection of the black outlines that incise the characters and the solid colours of these figures also recall television cartoons and transform the characters into actors in front of a vague scenery. This downplaying of the natural world that surrounds the characters is the major drawback of the Franklin texts. The anthropomorphized Franklin cannot seem to delight in the green idyll that surrounds him; he moans about the same old problems every kid has, such as having a new teacher and convincing people that he resembles a professional athlete. This is a shame, for surely the point of sticking your protagonist in a pastoral is to have him respond to this environment, to find magic in it? There is magic in the books, though it is subdued to make way for focus on Franklin's suburban issues. For instance, when you can get a glimpse of it, the adobe mound Franklin's family occupies is a pleasure, a textured dome fissured with tiny cracks and littered, occasionally, with stray stones, suggesting that something wild might, after all, be able to infiltrate the neat problem-solving lab that is Franklin's world.

Where Franklin's parents are insufferably kindly and prone to always doing the right thing and having wise responses to their son's dilemmas ("Maybe you

have a case of new-teacheritis," suggests Franklin's mother in *Franklin and the New Teacher*—with, of course, deadly accuracy), the first thing that Leah's father does in Peter Cumming's *Out on the Ice in the Middle of the Bay* is, thank God, fall asleep in front of the TV, ignoring the cloying narratorial injunction that he and Leah are going to "babysit each other" and allowing his small daughter to wander outside toward an iceberg and encounter polar bears. Out of sheer terror, he later takes a potshot, as a real person would, at the mother bear who strides to intervene in Leah's rendezvous with a young bear. Both adult responses—the dad's and the growling mother bear's—are pooh-poohed somewhat by the narrative in order to foreground the moment of connection that Leah and the smaller bear have out on the ice. For once, the story hints, enmity between human and bear has been stilled, and the suggestion is that conflict of all sorts can be similarly defused. For instance, Alice Priestley's illustrations are heavily iconographic: a Canadian flag, a blue ball with stars, and an inukshuk coexist in the book's first opening, implying that national and northern affiliations are at issue; Leah, whose father is white and her mother Inuit, partakes of a multicultural identity; a border comprised of images culled from Inuit art scrolls underneath most of the action—again, bringing notions of cultural identity to the fore. The book is pretty earnest, but there is enough imbalance in the text—whether on purpose or not—to push it out of the claws of good intentions.

For instance, the mauve frieze of Inuit icons doesn't seem to comment upon the action or contain the danger of the story so much as to throw the book askew (although sometimes the gaps among the clouds in the moonlit sky mimic the shapes in the border, and provide some balance between the top and bottom of the page). Leah's father and the mother bear confront each other in open-mouthed threat. Meanwhile, the border unfurls placidly across the bottom like a strip of wallpaper in a child's room. Perhaps this is precisely the purpose of the frieze: to remind readers that the connection of Leah and the young bear has the strangeness of a child's dream. There is a certainly a surreal quality to the pictures, which are all rendered in soft focus. I find that, rather than gentling the story's danger, this mist of pastel colour reminds me of air charged with ice crystals: a beautiful, deadly glitter. The iceberg nods to Dali, as does a particularly striking opening in which tiny Leah and an even tinier polar bear encroach upon each other across the vast prairie of ice. The vantage point of viewers is atop the church roof beside a raven and some ice that melts over the eaves like Dali's liquid clocks. Again, the raven and the church's cross juxtapose identities—Arctic and western symbolic systems—and the scene is fixed, transfixed even, in such a way as to make the impending meeting of

girl and bear a kind of showdown. Again, however, the inevitable confrontation is a mix of intimacy and aggression, indeed, of mistaken identity. Leah and the young bear take each other for natural playmates; the parents see each other as natural enemies. Both responses are right and wrong. The scene of mutual retreat is a precarious dance, "Back, back, back" towards both homes, something which honours, rather than glosses over, the delicacy of human/wild negotiations.

I can't help but read *The Complete Adventures of the Mole Sisters*, written and illustrated by Roslyn Schwartz, against their canonical male British relative, Mole, of *The Wind in the Willows*. The front cover of Schwartz's text depicts the sisters in a gondola made of a leaf; one sister poles with a green stem past bun-round rocks and yellow furrows while the other reclines with a finger in the water. Shades indeed of Ratty and Mole's adventures "messing about in boats" (7), and the eternal leisure of the Grahame characters: as the mole sisters declare on the first page of the collection, "Sometimes it's important to do nothing. . ." (10).

Doing nothing leads, of course, to activity, as "simply messing" (Grahame 7) draws Mole into the doings of the riverbank community. The mole sisters, however, are not overly community-minded. They have each other not simply as companions, but as mirrors—the mole sisters are radiantly narcissistic. The frontispiece of the book even shows them looking at themselves in the river water, the leaf gondola delicately beached against a stone. They interact pleasantly enough with others: while considering the importance of doing nothing, for instance, they notice the industry of a bee and emulate it for a space, sticking their snouts into flowers and achooing pollen into a starburst that falls on the bees, thereby assisting the insects with their daily work. Such community service is accidental, however, and most flora and fauna the moles encounter are mined for their entertainment value for the sisters. They reassure a self-pitying piece of moss about its loveliness and push it to the top of a hill where it might have an exciting view, but—"BOINGA-BOINGA" (78)—bounce on it on the way up. The moss doesn't seem to mind. The sisters draw themselves into a cave painting: "Everyone's here," they note, of the animals depicted on the cave wall. "But where are we? Just a minute. . . . There we are!" (164–65). They encourage a young nestling

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to fly: "'You never know,' said the mole sisters, 'til you try!' Try what? 'Everything'" (112–13). The mole sisters' advice is really self-talk that the bird, apparently, overhears: the sisters are soon ensconced in the abandoned nest and turn the discarded halves of the bird's blue eggshell into snug swings. Indeed the sisters'—Schwartz's—ingenuity is superb. Where Ratty and Mole live in humanized bunkers with fireplaces and china, the mole sisters (unlike fellow Canadian Franklin) are all about reading and revelling in the immediate environment to a gorgeous degree. I noted the leaf boat and eggshell swings; the sisters also turn a dandelion leaf into a kite, flowers into costumes, and a raindrop into a lens that captures a rainbow. The pleasure of the miniature operates in this book, with its small format (approximately 22 by 14.5 centimetres) comprised of four rectangular panels (roughly eight by six centimetres) per page. Perry Nodelman suggests we expect "charm and delicacy" in small books (44); indeed, each of Schwartz's panels is a discrete work of beauty in itself. Schwartz mixes bright and soft hues, delicately texturing and shading with coloured pencils; pleasing circle shapes are common in the pictures, including a round-cheeked sun, the intricate cockle spiral of a staircase inside a tree, and a fairy ring with chubby mushrooms like the snub noses of the mole sisters themselves. The sisters have the paradoxical appeal of babies and mini-Capuchin monks: they are pear-shaped and bottom heavy, with blunt pink-fingered paws like human infants; also, the sisters are often pictured side by side, touching each other, with the proximity of newborn animals in a den. Their monkish black-cowled heads and short-lived bursts of philosophical enthusiasm—"'Who are we?' 'Good question,' they said" (139)—prevent their appeal from being saccharine. The sisters' exuberant self-esteem—"Anything really can happen on a beautiful moonlit night. Especially to us!" (70–71); The stars are "so pretty . . . just like us" (86)—is anything but delicate: it is indelicate, almost, in its exclusivity. Almost. The mole sisters do wave good-bye to the cliff of "wavy wheat" (100) that gives them a ride; they fan the dandelions to help the latter disperse their seeds (after the sisters fan themselves, of course); they thank the bees for blessing their pollen sneeze. The sisters' sheer joy in their idyll and its denizens is, after all, a crucial way to be community-minded—planet-minded—and it is infectious, indeed.

Hutcheon notes the plethora of strong female writers in Canada and the ways they employ parody to subvert the power of the male and British- or American-authored canon (7); I detect such a move on Schwartz's part in these works. Where Grahame's book establishes and defends the solidarity of a group of British gentlemen, Schwartz's mole sisters, strong female voices, certainly, suggest that a sustainable community might depend on individuals trying out

various roles—much as Doggie does in Arsenault's work—and, above all, remaining alive to local conditions. Hutcheon asserts that Canadian fiction cultivates regional differences: "The particular and the occasional . . . " are cherished over "the uniform, the universal, the centralized" (19). "Who are we?" is, as the sisters note, a good question, not least because it is open; the fey self-consciousness of the sisters—their repeated check-ins on who, how, and where they are—nods to the importance of the particular and the occasional in shaping identity.

Author Atwood plies plosives; Dušan draws. *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda*, by Margaret Atwood, illustrated by Dušan Petričić, is about alliteration, something that always amuses me (although I assay assonance). "When Bob was a baby, he was abandoned in a basket, beside a beauty parlour. His bubbleheaded mum, a brunette, had become a blond in the beauty parlour, and was so blinded by her burnished brilliance that baby Bob was blotted from her brain." Bob is taken up by a trio of dogs—a borzoi, a beagle, and a boxer with nasal congestion: "Bob is making brogress!" the latter barks, of Bob's tutelage in human language at the hands of destitute Dorinda. Dorinda joins the group after getting fed up with her neglectful guardians (and allowing the narrator to thoroughly explore the possibilities of "d" to describe her desperation). When Bob and Dorinda meet, amalgamating their two solitudes, the "b" and "d" interactions bedazzle, the gold and sepia of Bob's world mingle with the lavenders and blues of Dorinda's, and rightful parents are recovered. The families of Bob and Dorinda, plus the dogs, end up in a purple and yellow bungalow, "in blinding bliss, delirious with delicious delight."

I do like alliteration, as I noted above. It attends to the materiality of language, its sound and shape. It calls for performance. It is always goofy, as Margaret Atwood's over-the-top rendering of "happily ever after" attests. Atwood's text is intricate and literate, and includes hard words like "defunct" and "benign" and "gratified." This is refreshing in a genre that suffers from tepid prose. There are good Canadian jokes in the book too. A buffalo, mistaken for a begonia at the botanical gardens, is rescued by the dogs, who bark news of his true identity at him: "The buffalo, being bilingual, understood their barking and became benign." The benefits of bilingualism! The animal ends up in a boxcar bound for Alberta. Petričić's ink cartoons are witty, and the division of colour schemes—gold for Bob, mauve for Dorinda—with gradual integration of the two, is a clever way to support the wordplay. Petričić positions readers slightly below the action by plying an inch-wide strip of ground across the bottom of every opening. The characters are thus elevated, like actors on a stage. The lighting is similarly stagy: the mauve and gold tones are subdued, almost melancholic; the pictures

evoke and gently send up a Dickensian urban dinginess, complete with displaced and hard-working waifs. In the final opening, the scene of bliss in the bungalow—a gently ironic metaphor for Canadian unity, with its carefully proportional distribution of purple and gold—Dorinda acknowledges the audience with a direct gaze into our eyes and a finger pointing in the direction of the cast, thus calling attention, again, to the text's theatricality—and to the performance inherent, perhaps, in all identities. This good-humoured self-reflexivity is perhaps particularly Canadian; it is missing from the Franklin books, which, in their care to be fair, turn identity into a stodgy acceptance of roles, but is alive in Arsenault's and Schwartz's texts, as well as in the skewed iconography of Cumming's work.

Trouble brews, I suggest, when humans are construed as the parents of their pets. This occurs in Linda Maybarduk's *James the Dancing Dog*, the story of a beagle owned by two dancers—"his new mom and dad"—who work with the National Ballet of Canada (the story is based on a real dog). James develops balletic aspirations: *"Dancers are a very special breed,* he thought to himself. *I'm going to be just like them*." The dumpy beagle is loved and humoured but a sleek wolfhound captures James's coveted part, the role of the hunting dog in *Giselle*. The wolfhound, however, gets stage fright, and James, who has been learning the part secretly from the wings, ends up in the spotlight—to great acclaim, of course.

Gillian Armstrong's dancers are appealingly skinny, smiling souls who don't seem to belong to the remote and abnormally accomplished "special breed" that James indicates. The dog's hopes seem almost achievable. The book's illustrations, however, do not save the text from being cloying: James's affiliation with the National Ballet is incidental to his role in a conventional understudy-makes-good story. James's move from the margins to the centre could be construed as a gentle joke about Canadian aspirations to win the world stage, just once—to emerge from the shadow cast by the larger and more powerful U.S.. But maybe that joke is too old: Canadians, noting the dire consequences of grabbing that world spotlight, perhaps congratulate themselves nowadays on remaining in the wings.

Mister Got to Go and Arnie is another instalment of Mister Got to Go's adventures as resident cat in the Sylvia Hotel in Vancouver. The cat is dismayed by the arrival of Arnie, a yappy and idiotic Yorkshire terrier who barks continuously, trips up the hotel guests, falls into the sewer, and even runs off the hotel roof one day. A tree breaks Arnie's fall, but he requires bandages and stitches and relocation—to Paris—which enables Got to Go to take up disdainful possession of the Sylvia once more.

Though the illustrations are richly busy—teeming

beach and street scenes, and views of the hotel's lovely, vine-covered exterior—the stereotypes that operate in the book obscure its local colour. Feline aloofness, canine stupidity, high-heeled Parisian femininity (Madame Latour, who takes Arnie with her to France, wears an elaborate hat that is a mini-version of the Eiffel Tower): these are stock attributes that dull attention to the story's very particular setting. The book's attention to regional detail, admirably Canadian, is obscured by stereotypes.

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I can't help thinking of Anthony Browne's *Changes* when I see a cat's tail—metonymic of its off-page owner—sliding from view beside an empty dish in Karleen Bradford's and Leslie Elizabeth Watts's *You Can't Rush a Cat*. Browne's spare sets include highly detailed, realistic renderings of various animals, including a cat, an alligator, and a gorilla, all transforming surreally out of, and into, other things: the cat, for instance, metamorphoses from a kettle; we see its tail, later, turn into a snake. These startling changes mirror the anxiety of a child waiting for the arrival of a new sibling. The illustrations in *You Can't Rush a Cat* are similarly uncluttered, and attend to domestic interiors—kitchens, living rooms—as does Browne's text. Metamorphosis is also at issue here: this time, on the part of Granddaddy, who, with his perpetually downcast eyes and irritating pursuit of a stray cat, is clearly lonely. Granddaughter Jessica repeatedly cautions her elder that "You can't rush a cat"; you can't rush a grandfather either, apparently, as he ignores her advice throughout the book. Jessica lures the stray with food, appropriate songs—"The Three Little Kittens Who Lost Their Mittens," "The Owl and the Pussycat Went to Sea"—and patience. Though the book suffers from comparison with Browne—the pictures are not so accomplished, nor the theme of transformation so subtly handled—Jessica's scenes of cautious aloofness when drawing in the cat are wise. Jessica emulates the cat in order to make contact with it, much as Doggie makes costumes in order to catch the eye of Mademoiselle the costumer; Jessica is, in postmodern Canadian fashion, attractively alert to her immediate situation, and creates a role, an identity, to meet its demands. In contrast, the grandfather's rather pointed ignorance not only of Jessica's cat savvy but of her equally patient attempts to buoy his spirits is off-putting. Jessica seems the truly lonely character in this text, doing the hard work of looking after a rather selfish adult.

I restate, in conclusion, my perhaps particularly Canadian preference for informed waffling on the subject of identity; a number of the books discussed above revel in self-conscious performance and ambiguity and hesitation. This isn't necessarily a weak position, as Doggie or Dorinda or Leah's dad or Jessica or the mole sisters prove: certainly the latter's enthusiasm for moleness does not exclude trying on various roles and wondering about identity. "All good stuff," as the sisters say.

Notes

[1] Unless a page number is listed parenthetically, quotations are to unpaginated picture books.

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