Modern Bestiaries: Escaping the Dragons That Haunt

MEGUIDO ZOLA AND MARSHA BARRY

A Day in the Woods, Val Clery, illustrated with photographs by Noel Keenan. Greey de Pencier, 1978. 32 pp. $6.95. ISBN 0-919872-41-7.

The First Zoo Book Kit (containing 4 copies of *Brum, the Siberian Tiger, Lobo, the Timber Wolf, Snowflake, the Polar Bear, Tequila, the African Elephant*, 1 Teacher's Manual, 1 Zoo Map), Judy Ross, illustrated with photographs. D.C. Heath, 1978. $24.95 the kit, or $1.35 each book. ISBN 0-669-00820-6; -00821-4; -00822-2; -00823-0.

The Second Zoo Book Kit (containing 4 copies of *Dassen, the Penguin, Falstaff, the Hippopotamus, Khan, the Camel, Mias, the Orangutan*, 1 Teacher's Manual, 1 Zoo Map), Judy Ross, illustrated with photographs. D.C. Heath, 1979. $24.95 the kit, or $1.35 each book. ISBN 0-669-00845-1; -00846-X; -00847-8; -00848-6.

The young are ever fascinated with animals – from those first well-loved (and well-worn) denizens of the nursery, to the more exotic species found only in faraway places, to those fictitious beasties that people the imagination mostly of poets and other children. Elders and betters, standing by ever ready to teach a lesson or point a moral, will fuel the fires of this infatuation by taking children on trips into the wilderness and on visits to the farm, the zoo, and the natural history museums; as well, some parents keep pets at home, and some teachers even raise animals in the classroom. But vital as all this rich first-hand experience may be, it does not go quite far enough: ultimately, for a host of compelling reasons, children need to have ready access to books – lots and lots of books, and all kinds of books.

The problem about animal books is that there are so many bad ones – surely disproportionately more bad books on that one seemingly easy, inexhaustible, universally sure-to-please topic than on any other.[1] The bad books are those that have fallen prey to the dragons that haunt the species – inaccuracy, vulgarity, sentimentality. The effects such books wreak on children are terrible, being numbered by at least one critic "among the most corrupting influences" children can encounter. On the other hand, obviously, there are also plenty of good animal books for children. The

good ones – the good animal biographies, in particular, for that is what concerns us here – are rooted in a reality which is communicated to the reader in such a way as to spark thought, stretch the imagination, and stir the sensibilities, so that, in the imagery of Blake, they extend the vision which not only is with the eye but, more importantly, through the eye. The impact of such books has been tellingly evoked by one of our writers for children, Robert Thomas Allen. Reminding us first that children today see so few real animals yet see

> so many cartoons of animals talking and falling in love and playing pranks, so many T.V. shows of chimpanzees cuddling up to the show's host, that they're beginning to think animals are just quaint little people who would really like to join our Home and School Club

Allen recalls of his own childhood:

> We read stories of Lobo and Vixen, White Fang, Wab the Grizzly, and just about crawled right into the drawings of glassy northern lakes and tangled moonlit forests. When we got a new animal book from the library we read it sitting outside the library on the curb. We spent hours curled over the kitchen table copying pictures of otter, weasel, mink and muskrat out of books by Ernest Thompson Seton, Thornton W. Burgess and Charles G.D. Roberts – carefully lettering under each picture the title.[2]

Today's children, especially older and better readers, can still share in our continuing tradition of good animal biography: there are the books of Roderick Haig-Brown, Farley Mowat, Fred Bodsworth, and Cameron Langford, for example. And for younger readers, the less able, or the more reluctant, there is a variant of the animal biography, in which Canadians also excel, if our distinguished magazines for children, *Owl* and *Chickadee*, are anything to go by. This is the photo-journalism genre into which the books presently under review fall.

The first of these, *A Day in the Woods*, is a large, lavish picture-book created and photographed by Noel Keenan, with a simple, short accompanying text by journalist Val Clery. Keenan, a well-known naturalist and photographer, spent two summers first accumulating and then whittling down a collection of some two thousand colour slides of the Ontario woodland and of son Rory's investigations of its exciting, teeming life – much of which normally goes on very much out of sight of the casual observer. The result is a sumptuous, unusual photographic record of a child's woodland explorations condensed into the story of one eventful day. The highlight of that day is Rory's finding Fluffy, a young raccoon he had once briefly rescued from dogs and then returned to its natural environment. Together, boy and raccoon explore and swim until sunset, when the boy returns late for supper.

The power of the book lies in the photographs: these are technically flawless and artistically superb in their unerring sense of story. By turn dramatic, by turn quietly contemplative or lyrical, breath-taking close-ups, unusual viewpoints, and telling sequences draw the reader into a thrilling journey of discovery of the forest's birds, insects, and animals as these go about their everyday affairs in their natural habitat. But this is not just an album of photographs; it is a true picture story-book with a text that, slight though it be, is quite integral to it. The text is in the form of interior monologue – Rory's thoughts spoken out loud during his wanderings and encounters with the inhabitants of the forest. This running commentary unobtrusively links each photograph with the next, giving the collection cohesion and the impetus of a powerful story packed with events of high drama. And because the commentary is so easy and informal, it has all the immediacy of intimate conversation between narrator and audience while, at the same time, it manages to get across some key facts and concepts in an entirely natural way. (These are subsequently fleshed out in an appendix of more elaborate scientific data.) *A Day in the Woods* is indeed a fine picture book, a distinguished nature study and photographic essay memorable for the way it so delicately melds the science of teaching with the art of entertaining, an animal biography in the best of our traditions.

Differing from *A Day in the Woods*, as a scientific text-book might be expected to differ from a lyric poem, are the *Zoo Book Kits*, compiled by journalist and writer Judy Ross, with the expert help of photographers, a teacher, and a naturalist, and produced by the publishers in conjunction with the Metro Toronto Zoo. Each of the eight booklets is part text-book and part biography: each consists, in the main, of a formal exposition about a species represented in the zoo, but each also personalizes part of the material by focusing it on a named individual inhabitant of the zoo. The books follow a uniform format of organization and presentation of material. In each case the animal's native habitat is first sketched in; this is followed by a description of the animal's physical characteristics, with a special emphasis on its more interesting or peculiar features. There follows a longer, more discursive section in which the animal's environment, habits, and behaviours are described in some detail, followed by a section on the animal's family life – including mating, pregnancy, and care and protection of the young. Further on, the reader learns of the ancestry of the animal, how it lived long ago and how today, its place in the balance of nature, and its chances of survival. The concluding section consists of an animal newspaper (The Pachyderm Press, The Hippo Herald, The Tiger Times, etc.), an entertaining grab-bag of trivia, anecdotes and puzzles. Throughout the series there is some emphasis on identifying differences between animals in the wild and in captivity; and each book contains a special focus on the animal's life in the zoo.

The lively text of these brief 16-page booklets is concise, clear, and richly

informative while remaining always interesting and frequently amusing. The text is complemented throughout by photographs, both black and white and colour, as well as a sprinkling of drawings and diagrams. A bonus is the centrefold, a stunning close-up of the named young animal that is the special focus of the book. One of the chief strengths of the books is their simple, attractive format and the clarity and cohesiveness of their design: this greatly facilitates ready access to the wealth of content, and should make the books useful and popular in classroom, library and zoo, with or without help from the accompanying teacher's manual. The *Zoo Book Kits* are, in the best sense of the term, a scholarly series of nature study texts that succeed in communicating their subject matters with verve and style: we need more of them. Along with *A Day in the Woods*, the *Zoo Books* are among the finest publications for children of the last decade.

NOTES

[1]Margery Fisher, *Intent Upon Reading: A Critical Appraisal of Modern Fiction for Children* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), p. 51.

[2]Robert Thomas Allen, "We Liked Animals Better Than People", *Maclean's*, December 5, 1959, p. 28.

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Monsters in the Bush

GWYNETH EVANS

Sasquatch Adventure, Sheila Rolfe. Hancock House, Saanichton, B.C. 1974. 128 pp. $2.95 paper.

The monster is a pervasive figure in the mythology of many cultures, and the hairy humanoid monster seems particularly fascinating to the post-Darwinian and post-Freudian era. We respond to this image of "the missing