

# Roberts for Children

*Michael Hornyansky*

The chief sin, in writing for children, is archness. I shall examine in this light three books by Charles G.D. Roberts: *Children of the wild*, *The heart of the ancient wood*, and *In the morning of time*. I choose these three because they are sufficient to show how far the sin afflicts him, and how he overcomes it; because they have a focus that should be of enduring interest and profit to children; and because each of them is (more or less) a complete and connected whole. I could make the same case for a great many individual stories in various collections, but it would have to be in a scattered way.

What I mean by archness is the knowing, the waggish, the roguish: the posture of tone that conveys, with cocked eyebrow or rolled eye, that you and I know there is more to a matter than what we speak. Between adults or equals it may be harmless, an invitation to share a tacit joke; though it is always coy, and usually (to my taste) a bit sickening. Between adult and child it is inexcusable, and fatal to honest dealing. The history of the word *condescend* illustrates my point exactly. When Milton's Archangel Raphael condescends to Adam and Eve, he meets them willingly on their own level, cheerfully eating their sublunary food and pulling no rank. When we condescend today, to our inferiors in age or learning or social degree, it is an overt stooping, doffing for the moment our proper worth. Children shy away from this, as they do from all manner of adult pomposity. Perhaps I should add that by "children" I mean people up to the age of twelve or so — before the tribal laws of the teenager muffle their directness and mask their true feelings.

Condescension in books for children occurs when we call them Kiddie Lit, and when we treat or practise them accordingly. Two forms of it are obvious. First we scale down our vocabulary, if not to outright goo-goos and choo-choos, at least to a Dick-and-Jane level of primer chat that the poor dears can be expected to follow. Second, we don the pink glasses of sentimentality, and distort the child's world into a cute, sugary never-never-land. For unforgettable examples, let us turn to that emperor of pablum and corn syrup, Vancouver-born, alas: Walt Disney. When the great Mickey talks, we hear no mousy squeaking but the sexless accents of a child — and surely not even a real child: what brings the eternal note of archness in is that it's a falsetto simulation, by a patronizing adult. The diction is basic honky, of the kind now reserved for detergent commercials. My most haunting example comes not from

cartoons, but from one of those real-life animal films Disney made long ago — in this case the saga of an indomitable homing pigeon: “Let’s call him Pidge,” says the unctuous Voice Over. Let’s call him anything else, for pity’s sake. (By way of contrast, I recall a British documentary of the same period, in which plates emerging from the firing oven tell each other they’ve been through hell.)

The other half of the Disneyfying process is to set about denaturing the landscape. I don’t much object to dressing up Mickey and Donald in short pants or sailor suits — an innocent fantasy, if coy. But that rubber dog Pluto, and the relentless toothy cuteness of Chip and Dale giggling in the hedgerows, are the thin edge of something else: a misleading guide to the real world, where Dobermans bite and rodents may be rabid. *Bambi* makes a braver stab at sketching the terrors of forest life; but the enterprise is flawed at the heart by the ladylike cooing of Jane Doe. Disney’s contrary tendency, to heighten the menace of flames or predators or clutching trees, should not be taken as compensation for all the cuteness: the grotesque is the other face of sentimentality. (The first misstep is to show carnivores as the enemy; in the dry light of truth, as Huxley points out, “deer and wolf are alike admirable.”) When Disney’s alternate team of documentary cameramen focus upon actual wild life, the menace of the wild is pretty thoroughly deleted by the cutter and the commentator. Otters sliding down a snowbank are celebrated as “good-time Charlies,” having endless fun; puma, fox, and coyote become brave little pioneers surviving against an immense backdrop, with few questions raised about what they do for a living.

For all that, Uncle Walt never quite commits the ultimate sin: making the child his target, and inviting other grown-ups to join in the snickers. This needs a master of civilized cattiness — like A.A. Milne, writing a short generation after Roberts. I don’t complain that the Enchanted Forest is overrun by Christopher Robin’s toy animals; after all, suburban England is *hardly red in tooth and claw*. But you’ll recall that they have coyly childish names, from “Winnie-*ther*-Pooh” down through Ee-yore, Kanga + Roo, to Tigger; that they are given to darling mispronunciations, like Heffalump, mastershalum, expotition, missage, haycorns, and blinch; and that they can’t spell worth a damn, not even Rabbit (Scerch, Wolery, Backson, Plez Cnoke if an Rnsr is not reqid — and in case we should miss that one, Milne twists the knife: “These notices had been written by Christopher Robin, who was the only one in the forest who could spell.” The archest cut of all comes near the start, perhaps while Daddy is still feeling his way:

Once upon a time, a very long time ago now, about last Friday, Winnie-the-Pooh lived in a forest all by himself under the name of Sanders.

*(“What does ‘under the name’ mean?” asked Christopher Robin.*

*“It means he had the name over the door in gold letters, and lived under it.”*

*“Winnie-the-Pooh wasn’t quite sure,” said Christopher Robin.*

*"Now I am," said a growly voice.*

*"Then I will go on," said I.)*

*(W.P., 4)*

Italics and brackets are the typographical equivalent of the archly rolling eye. Small wonder that Milne *films* never outgrew the trauma of being thus put on parade. (Or that Milne inspired heartless rejoinders, like "Hush, hush — nobody cares, Christopher Robin has fallen downstairs." To be fair, the boy wasn't the only victim. The honeyed dedicatory poem to his mother in *The house at Pooh Corner* is simply blush-making.)

Surprisingly, the grossest pitfall is the one to give Charles Roberts most trouble. We have almost the sense of a man so skilled in solitary forest walking that he proves gauche in human company. *Children of the wild* is a collection of stories about young animals, mostly such as might be met with in New Brunswick 80 years ago. Risky territory, one might think, inviting coy anthropomorphism. But Roberts has Darwin's eye, and Darwin drives out Disney. What causes difficulties is the frame story: Uncle Andy is telling these short tales, *in situ*, by way of instructing his nephew in natural science. A useful device, on the face of it, to mediate between the object lessons and the pupil, the wild world and our own. But the fact is, it gets in the way. One problem is with diction: properly launched on a narrative, Roberts allows himself the full amplitude of his own style; but at the beginning of each tale, and occasionally along the way, he recalls Andy and the nephew, and becomes momentarily self-conscious. For instance:

"[The two young crows] had inherited from their eccentric parents an altogether surprising amount of originality. Their feathers were beautifully firm and black and glossy, their beaks sharp and polished; and in their full, dark, intelligent eyes there was an impishness that even a crow might regard as especially impish."

"What's *impish*?" demanded the Babe.

"Goodness me! Don't you know what *impish* is?" exclaimed Uncle Andy. He thought a moment, and then, finding it a little difficult to explain, he added with convenient severity: "If you listen, you'll find out, perhaps."

Yet here is Andy a moment later:

"... before their parents had realized at all what precocious youngsters they were, they had climbed out upon the edge of the nest. . . With hoarse expostulations their father tried to persuade them back. But their mother. . . chuckled her approval and flew off to hunt young mice for them. Thus encouraged, they ignored their father's prudent counsels, and hopped out, with elated squawks, upon the branch."

*(C.W., 49-50)*

I blame Roberts not for being grandiloquent — though he is that, as most 19th century story-tellers are for the post-Hemingway reader — but for virtually apologizing, and *thereby reminding us that this is meant to be oral delivery.*

The same passage illustrates other oddities. You will have noticed that the nephew is called the Babe: as he is throughout, with a capital B, except when younger infants intervene and the nephew becomes temporarily the Child. We can hardly scold Roberts for not knowing the later history of “babe” as an endearment; but all the same it becomes obtrusive, like a continual pat on the head, and we wonder why the lad doesn’t deserve a proper name. We have also seen Uncle Andy get a come-uppance, for being unready to define *impish* — as he does at several points in the book, and as he deserves, for he is unreasonably stern about interruptions, jealous of being upstaged, and quite inhuman about fidgeting. The last lesson is happily justified later on, when the boy learns that by keeping heroically still in the woods he can grow invisible to animals, and witness all sorts of wonders instead of hearing about them.

The frame story, in fact, works best when it stops being a device and comes alive in itself, as Chaucer had discovered some time before. Roberts achieves this, rather mechanically, by having the Babe fall asleep on an unmoored raft in a much later chapter, and drift into adventure; he manages it more organically in the “keeping still” chapter already cited; and most subtly and far-reachingly by an unobtrusive comment on Andy near the start. Is it strange that he should begin with the subtlest method and hit upon the most obvious at the last? Only, I think, if we expect him to take more care with narrative tidiness than with telling the truth. Here is the comment from Chapter I:

“And she could never come!” murmured the Babe thoughtfully. “Well, she didn’t,” snorted Uncle Andy, the discourager of sentiment. Fairly reeking with sentiment himself, at heart, he disliked all manifestation of it in himself or others. He liked it left to the imagination. (p.21)

This serves first to humanize the uncle, and to discount the pedestal from which he addresses the Babe. Second, it explains what otherwise would seem lapses in Andy’s outlook, veerings away from Darwin toward Disney: for example, a woodchuck called Young Grumpy and treated accordingly (Chap. III), and a young bear in search of honey guarded by bees, who is treated far more realistically than Winnie-the-Pooh but is nevertheless called Teddy Bear (VI). For the overriding aim in this series of lessons is of course quite the contrary — to teach the Babe, and all children, to see the natural world with unsentimental clarity, as governed by inexorable laws far from our heart’s desire. Thus, the mother of that grumpy woodchuck has already gnawed off her own paw to escape from a steel trap; and Uncle Andy confesses to the accidental murder of a historical woodchuck who, startled by the onrush of a big red automobile, “jumped straight on the front wheel and bit wildly at the tire.” (The modern

reader may be distracted by a period detail: Uncle Andy could see just what happened, because he was sitting beside the chauffeur.) By happy coincidence, we are given a most instructive contrast in the first chapter, “The little furry ones.” These are two young otters, who have learned from their parents the joy of sliding down a moistened clay bank into the stream — just like Disney’s cheerful band of “good-time Charlies,” except that they were on clean snow and this is *mud*. The real difference is that these two have been orphaned, thanks to a hunter from the city with “a good eye, a repeating rifle, and no imagination whatever”; that they are menaced by a fox, a fish-hawk, and a weasel (which comes closest to being the villain in Roberts’ non-moral wilderness); and that one of them very nearly falls victim to a mink, who waits underwater at the foot of that same slide.

*The heart of the ancient wood* is more complicated, both in narrative and in perspective. It is a single unified story, extended in time and carefully plotted, and its focus is human — indeed, at its centre is a young girl, growing up in much the same territory that the Babe was visiting on a summer holiday. Since the child has been thus shifted from observer to protagonist, the difference between the human world and the wild likewise shifts, from a perceived contrast to a conflict directly experienced. And if there is to be any patronizing of the child, the author supplies no Uncle Andy to take the rap.

To a remote cabin in the heart of the New Brunswick wood comes Kirstie Craig, a strong young woman abandoned by her indolent husband (a frail artist from the city) and exiled from the Settlement by the “bitter tongues” of gossip. She brings with her two named steers, a cow, some chickens, and a five-year-old daughter. They are escorted by young Davey Titus (torn between personal loyalty and fear of social disapproval), and received by his father Old Dave, who has repaired the abandoned cabin and clearing as their refuge. Once the party is settled in, the two men depart, and we are left with Kirstie and young Miranda facing a new life far from humankind. The child’s name and other hints point us toward Shakespeare’s *Tempest*; but no sooner has Roberts confirmed the parallel than he transforms it. We realize, within moments of the arrival, that Miranda will be the Prospero of this version. It is her fresh young eye that sees the brave newness of this world, and the fascinating creatures in it — which are quite invisible to the others; her inexperience leads her to confuse Kroof the she-bear with a “nice, great big dog,” but she learns otherwise without damage, having got her hand in by quelling a bumptious rooster. The history of the next months unfolds her astonishing skill and rapport with the wildlings, above all with the bear, and her establishing of a “*pax Mirandae*” over the environing wood. The difficult lesson that remains is to learn that she is human, to resolve the conflicting claims of the wild and her own emerging nature — the latter being poignantly reinforced by the return of young Dave, now a full-grown hunter and trapper.

It is clear from the start that there will be no condescending to the child reader

in this book. The language makes no concessions; even the first words heard from Old Dave the lumberman are almost incomprehensible. But a child who can read at all must surely be ensnared by the skill of the narrative: the undisturbed forest, pursuing its own affairs; the entry of Old Dave, slouching along the trail unaware of all the watchers; the appeal of the haven he rebuilds in the clearing; and the delayed entry of the main characters, Miranda above all. Her ability to see and gradually to master the wild creatures, witnessed by a half fearful, half baffled mother, makes Miranda irresistible — magical and yet credible. Her virtual adoption by Kroof is exciting as well as entrancing. Kroof has lost her only cub to a dreadfall trap set by a man; and when the child's overconfidence leaves her lost in the forest at peril from a marauding "panther," it seems wholly natural that the bear should rescue her and treat her as a surrogate. The bear has a dim hope that her new cub will ease the aching of her swollen teats. This detail does a lot to dispel a sentimental reading; and of course the child doesn't oblige — worn out by her ordeal, she goes to sleep on Kroof's belly instead. (Suppose Marian Engel had been in charge?)

In all this, the only risk of archness is that Roberts might slip into sentimentalizing either the animals or the child. We can trust him with the animals: slight hints of anthropomorphism can be taken as forgivable translations of non-human feelings, *e.g.*, Kroof's blind grief over her dead cub; and otherwise the predators and their quarry move unconsciously through their own dooms. The crux, the entente between bear and child, I've already argued Roberts makes credible. He preserves Miranda from cuteness partly by placing her amid unexaggerated dangers, partly by presenting her as a holy fool, the object of ironies she cannot yet see. Time allows me only one example, the question of Kroof's diet. As long as the bear pursues berries and roots Miranda approves; but when Kroof craves meat and kills a hare, the appalled child gives her hell. The she-bear, perplexed by a habit of tender regard and an uneasy recognition of Miranda's human authority, watches as the hare is buried. After Miranda goes home to the cabin, Kroof returns to dig up the hare and enjoy a guiltless supper. This amiable clash of values, animal and human, foreshadows several others, before the far-off climax in which Miranda, now a young woman caught between forest loyalties and the call of her own kind, must choose in the starkest circumstances between Kroof and Dave, the meat-eating trapper. This passage would seem melodramatic in summary; in reading, it is entirely satisfactory.

*In the morning of time* is a tale of prehistory, with no room for a child. In fact through the first chapter there is no room for humans at all, as Roberts paints with some gusto a broad picture of colossal saurians tearing each other in the primeval slime. Chapter II opens a quarter million years later, with a set-to between an obsolescent dinosaur and a giant black mammal resembling a six-horned mammoth (Roberts calls him *Dinoceras*; we know him as *Uintatherium*, having found his bones in Wyoming); among the spectators we discover a furry anthropoid with an opposed thumb and a sagacious gleam in his eye.

He is too early a starter to show much more than promise, but this he does splendidly in revenging himself on the dinosaur who has casually slaughtered his mate and baby. The chapter ends with him groping dimly after the idea of new sons, as inquiring and resourceful as himself, to start the long work. To find continuous action on the hominid plane, we must leap forward again to Chapter III, and zero in on the people of the Little Hills at their taking-off point, "The Finding of Fire." Here we meet the admirable hero Grôm, whose saga fills the rest of the book. Not the least of his qualities is his readiness to leave politics to his chief, Bawr — whom he serves as fighter, counsellor, strategist, explorer, and inventor. It is Grôm who learns by rapid trial and error how to deploy, and ultimately to transport, the dancing flames offered by volcanic fumaroles. Not long afterwards he invents and refines another weapon, the bow, from a baby's toy accidentally devised by his wife A-ya; she however gets the credit for instituting cooked meat, after another accident. Finally, in searching for a better home, Grôm invents navigation. Palaeontologists may object that the process took far longer than a lifetime; but once we accept Grôm, one thing leads very plausibly to another.

I rehearse this much of the story to show how Roberts has triumphed over his (or my) problems. There is no condescension here, in either language or content. If vestiges of archness crop up in his style, they belong to the type customary with Dickens or Conan Doyle:

"This is a country of very great beasts," Grôm remarked, with the air of one announcing a discovery. As A-ya showed no inclination to dissent from this statement, he presently went on to his conclusion, leaving her to infer his minor premise.

*(M.T., 110)*

And sentimentality can hardly infect this scene: quite the contrary — animals and proto-humans slaughter each other with such ferocity that one suspects Roberts has been restraining an urge to do full justice to this aspect of the Darwinian struggle. Nothing hampers him here. Since the animals are monstrous, predatory, or edible, no child will mourn their passing, however gory; and most of the *human* enemies are alien and brutish — squat, bowlegged, and regrettably yellow-skinned. A bit gratuitous, this, and likely to provoke a grin (or a grimace) in the adult reader: for A-ya's legs are "hairy but long and shapely," the men are "light-skinned and well shaped," and Grôm's son is the original fair-haired boy. But who can cavil at Grôm's basic decency? In early days, the girl A-ya by excess zeal has smothered their portable fire, while her mighty hunter sleeps.

She expected a merciless beating, according to the rough-and-ready customs of her tribe. But Grôm had always been held a little peculiar, especially in his aversion to the beating

of women, so that certain females of the tribe had even been known to question his manhood on that account. (p. 77)

(The use of “women” and “females” is deft, and the irony resonates even today.) And if A-ya reacts by feeling quite sure he is a god — well, after all, she’s a child of her times; and she’ll have her innings later.

But our wise smiles do Roberts less than justice. In Grôm, he has created something far more impressive than Ug the clever cave-man. Above those shaggy brows lies an ample forehead, and beneath them a brooding face whose “calm, reasoning eyes” are apt to be clouded with visions. He finds mystery a magnet, and takes supreme delight in utterly new experience. His feeling for A-ya (“a kind of thrilling tenderness, such as he had never felt toward a woman before” — too soon to call it love, Roberts notes, but it’s a start) is of a piece with his “compunction” in questioning a wounded foreigner (Chap. IX): clear tokens of the emerging humane. A-ya likewise is much more than a savage mate; help meet for this Adam, she saves his life more than once and brings a practical wisdom to share his dreams (she soon surpasses him with bow and arrow; and remarks approvingly that he has “not grown too divine to be ready to run away on fitting occasion”). In these two, nature has cast up the virtual founders of a race that will find its values in a realm above nature.

In short, Darwinism is not enough. The struggle for existence, ruled by mechanism and chance, offers no foundation for purpose and ideals. Some fitter must be sought. If the universe offers no God, we must trust to what divinity we can find. Darwin’s astute front man, T.H. Huxley, had taken this road in *Evolution and ethics* (1894): firmly championing natural selection against the bishops (and showing by the way that “survival of the fittest” held no hope for progressionists), he insisted with equal force that the human world is not part of this wilderness, but a walled garden responsive to the care and purpose of its gardeners. Human truth is not natural truth; and we must learn to hold it against the world — a stance remarkably close to modern existentialism.

Now, younger readers of Roberts might have trouble digesting such an argument, but they cannot miss the hints and signposts he provides. Of Grôm mastering the gods of fire, he comments explicitly: “then still more of the god was there in his own intelligence.” To the Bow-legs, their sub-human enemies, Grôm’s people are “a tribe of tall, fair-skinned demons” — demons being gods inimically viewed. The apparent racism of Roberts’ account falls into clearer perspective. Grôm’s race should not be taken as primal shoulderers of the white man’s burden, but as a giant stride above the beast. In Mawg the renegade there are still signs of “the mere brute from which the race had mounted.” And when Grôm’s folk in their great trek westward are menaced by unevolved apes, what sickens A-ya is not the peril but the “hideous caricature of man” they present.



In case some should find that my argument is rather allusive, let me spell it out briefly. Roberts comes nearest to being arch in *Children of the wild*, where he invents a narrator telling the stories to a child. In *The heart of the ancient wood* he solves most of the difficulty by getting rid of the narrator and by moving the child into the centre of the story. Finally (*In the morning of time*) he avoids all risk of sentimentality by taking a full scale Darwinian romp through prehistory, and starring a proto-human who is far too noble and ingenious to patronize.

Anyone familiar enough with these books may notice that I've got them in the wrong order: *The heart of the ancient wood*, which I have represented as a considerable advance on *Children of the wild*, actually pre-dates it by some thirteen years. Need this fact damage my case? I don't see why. I've been teaching (and learning) long enough to know that wisdom doesn't grow in a smooth logical order.

#### EDITIONS USED

*In the heart of the ancient wood*. Silver, Burdett & Co., New York, 1900. *Children of the wild*. Macmillan, New York, 1913. *In the morning of time*. Frederick A. Stokes Co., New York, 1919.

*Michael Hornyansky, Professor of English at Brock University, is a former Rhodes Scholar; at Oxford, he became the second Canadian to win the Newdigate Prize for Poetry. His book for children of all ages (including his own), The golden phoenix, is a retelling in English of French-Canadian folktales collected by Marius Barbeau; it was chosen book of the year for children by the Canadian Library Association in 1960. His "The Truth of Fables," on writing for children, appears in Only connect (ed. Egoff, Stubbs, Ashley).*