



Recent Books about Relationships between Humans and Animals

— Sumiko Shirai

Crosby, Jeff, and Shelley Ann Jackson. *Little Lions, Bull Baiters & Hunting Hounds: A History of Dog Breeds*. Toronto: Tundra, 2008. 72 pp. \$22.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-88776-815-6. Print.

Fergus, Maureen. *Ortega*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2010. 224 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-474-6. Print.

Jordan, Rosa. *Wild Spirits: A Novel*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2010. 264 pp. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 978-1-55488-729-3. Print.

Loxton, Daniel. *Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2010. 56 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-430-2. Print.

Natalini, Sandro. *What Came First?* Toronto: Tundra, 2009. 32 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-88776-910-8. Print.

Oppel, Kenneth. *Half Brother*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010. 376 pp. \$19.99 hc. ISBN 978-1-55468-812-8. Print.

Tyson, Ian. *La Primera: The Story of Wild Mustangs*. Illus. Adeline Halvorson. Toronto: Tundra, 2009. 32 pp. \$22.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-88776-863-7. Print.

Young, Beryl. *Follow the Elephant*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2010. 246 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55380-098-9. Print.

Since the 1970s, when concern about the inhumane treatment of animals was growing, children's books dealing with animals have tended to focus more on animal protection and animal rights.¹ Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which advocates the pursuit of happiness by both human and non-human animals, has exerted an influence on children's books since its publication in 1975. Yet unlike classics such as

Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, a novel that reflects the sentimental aspects of Victorian-era movements to prevent cruelty to animals, Canadian children's books published more recently do not present their moralistic side as directly. The books I have chosen to review deal with relationships between human and non-human animals, and some of them engage contemporary perspectives on animal rights. These texts

can be divided roughly into three groups: picture books dealing with evolution, books in which non-human animals are symbols of human thought or emotion, and novels with anthropoids playing important roles in human society. The authors of the texts under review regard non-human animals as either symbolic or living, breathing, sentient beings, lending credence to Greg Garrard's thesis that "[t]he study of the relations between animals and humans in the Humanities is split between philosophical consideration of animal rights and cultural analysis of the representation of animals" (136). Although the books I examine in this review are not scholarly, they too manifest a split between simply depicting animals and reflecting on the larger implications of treating them—and, indeed, representing them—as members of inferior species or in anthropomorphic fashion as "little people."

Picture Books Dealing with Evolution

Learning about evolution or the birth and development of living things, including humans, is a good way for young people to start thinking about the relationship between human and non-human animals. A picture book is a useful form, moreover, through which to teach children about evolution. This is largely because the picture book can convey complicated ideas or explanations visually. In the last decade, most picture books about evolution were more like matter-of-fact textbooks. Picture books published more recently reveal

some new trends.

Sandro Natalini's *What Came First?* is a beautifully illustrated book with a playful spirit. It starts with a set of humorous questions: "What came first? The chicken? The egg?" The first half of the book describes the birth of life on earth and provides a brief introduction to various ancient and contemporary creatures. The highlight of this book is the folding pages in the middle. These folding pages have no text, and the illustrations, featuring ancient and modern creatures such as jellyfish, huge squid, dinosaurs, mammoths, and bears, are arranged in roughly chronological order. Apparently, readers are supposed to make sense of these illustrations by reading the words that are crammed into the two pages following the folding pages explaining how creatures evolved from 543 million years ago to the present.

The second half of the book focuses on the mystery of extinction and on Darwin's theory of evolution, which explains the survival of the fittest. The text suggests that the dodo was exterminated by humans, who caught them in large numbers. On the very last page, the personified earth explains: "Our ancestors didn't know about the impact of climate change or pollution or our own actions, but we do. And it is up to us to maintain the environment to ensure many generations to come will be able to live on Earth" (n.pag.).

In spite of the difficult-to-follow arrangement



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of words and pictures, the imaginative illustrations, comical personification, and crisp explanatory texts of *What Came First?* promise to entertain young readers and pique their interest in evolution and the protection of the environment.

Evolution: How We and All Living Things Came to Be by Daniel Loxton, an editor of the scientific magazine for children *Junior Skeptic*, takes a different approach to the subject. This book explains what evolution is and how creatures have changed through the process of evolution with many illustrations, photographs, scientific explanations, and interesting metaphors. Part 1 deals with what evolution is, whereas Part 2 is devoted to the answers to specific questions, such as “How could evolution produce something as complicated as my eyes?” (44) or “How could walking animals turn into flying animals?” (46). Compared to Natalini’s book, some explanations are long and include terms such as “natural selection,” “survival of the fittest,” “DNA,” and so on. Such concepts might pose challenges for young readers, but the expressions are what might be called “child-friendly.” For example, the question “Why do some skeletons look so similar?” (25) is answered using the example of a hot-rod car. The narrator explains that “Hot-rodders . . . start with a basic plan they’ve inherited from a century of car design. . . . Evolutionary change also builds on what was already there” (24). Young readers are expected to understand from this example that the basic construction of a skeleton is the same despite the existence of minor differences. Loxton tries to answer questions about evolution with up-to-date theory. At the end of the book, he says, “here’s the spine-tingling thing: You’re related to every species, every person, every living thing that has ever existed on this planet” (53). *Evolution* should

captivate young readers with the majestic power of evolutionary theory through extensive scientific explanations and illustrations, as well as the author's affirmative attitude toward all creatures in the world.

Jeff Crosby and Shelley Ann Jackson's *Little Lions, Bull Baiters & Hunting Hounds: A History of Dog Breeds* is a companion book on dogs and selective breeding. Breeding strongly reflects a human engagement with animals in a way that is comparable to evolution. The authors of this book claim that there are over four hundred breeds of dogs today (7). The book shows how dogs have been improved through their long history of relationships with humans. For instance, people in the old days valued dogs with good eyesight because they can spot distant prey. The dogs with the best eyesight were bred and nurtured. Then people realized that they could mate certain dogs to bring out the features that they liked: short-legged dogs to hunt in small places, hardy dogs to withstand extreme climates, and so on.

The forty-three breeds introduced in this book are grouped into four categories: hunting, herding, working, and companion breeds. An individual breed is introduced with texts and illustrations that explain characteristics of the dog's figure and disposition. Also provided is the historical and cultural background of breeding. For example, the English bulldog was bred for bullfighting: "The Bulldog's strong wide jaws

clamped onto the bull, while its pushed back nose allowed it to keep breathing" (52). This history of breeding and the use of bulldogs for entertainment in medieval England points to a history of exploitation. Another example reflects the anthropocentric and exploitative character of dog breeding. The greyhound, now best known as a racing dog, runs "almost as fast as a racehorse," but "[t]housands more lose their lives each year because the racing industry breeds a huge quantity of dogs and then selects only the fastest for racing" (13). Although the text explains these facts without being emotional, it encourages young readers to understand both the harms and the benefits of breeding.

Taken together, these picture books display the possibilities and difficulties of introducing children to a theme as sophisticated as evolution. Through its use of personification and likeable illustrations, *What Came First?* should stimulate young readers to have interest in the long history of evolution, even though the book has some problems in its arrangement of text and illustration. In the other two books, the combination of text and illustration is well balanced and should gratify the curiosity of young people. These three books not only show the evolution of creatures but also encourage young readers to view all creatures as being equal and to understand that exploitative human activities have a destructive impact on animals and the environment.

Books with Animals as Symbols of Human Thought or Emotion

The main concern of Rosa Jordan's YA novel *Wild Spirits* seems to be with protecting wild animals. The story is very suspenseful. Wendy, a nineteen-year-old bank teller and animal rehabilitator, and Danny, a thirteen-year-old boy, are involved in a bank robbery. Wendy quits her job as a result of the trauma she experienced during the robbery, and she and her husband move to the countryside. There she starts an animal-protection farm and devotes herself to rehabilitating sick and injured wild animals. She also helps out Danny, a former customer at the bank who shares her love of animals and who is suffering from negligence by his parents. She takes on Danny as an assistant and trains him as a rehabilitator of wild animals. Throughout the story, Wendy shows Danny (and readers) how to save injured or abandoned wild animals and return them to the wild. A few years later, the unsolved bank robbery case unfolds dramatically and Danny plays an important role in saving Wendy.

First, although the three plot threads in this story—wild-animal protection, helping a neglected boy, and the bank robbery—seem unrelated, eventually they come together. Wounded animals are treated by Wendy and Danny, Danny is supported by Wendy, Wendy is saved by Danny, and both Wendy and Danny are emotionally healed through their work with animals while they take care of them. Wendy's trauma

and Danny's wounded heart parallel the abandoned, injured wild animals. In older animal stories such as Marshall Saunders's *Beautiful Joe*, the main concern is people's willingness to help injured animals; *Wild Spirit* shows that people can be healed as a result of contact with animals.

La Primera: The Story of Wild Mustangs is a picture book based on lyrics written and sung by the iconic Canadian folk singer and ranch owner Ian Tyson. The story, told by a mare named La Primera, is about the history of mustangs: how they were brought to the Americas from Spain by Spanish conquerors in the mid-fifteenth century, how they survived the hardship of that journey, and how some of them have returned to the wild in the last five hundred years. La Primera sings "I am a drinker of the wind" and "I love my freedom" (16), adding that her son eventually "became an outlaw" and "his blood was watered some," but "the flame still burns into the new millennium" (27). La Primera tells us not only of the difficult life she had in the Americas but also about the pride she takes in being a mustang.

Some of the accompanying oil paintings of the mustangs portray the historical relationship between people and mustangs. A commemorative photo-like illustration with sixteen horses huddled together, all facing the reader, portrays the anxious look of horses uprooted and brought to South America from Spain. In the illustration accompanying the mention that "Texans

had revolvers when they returned from the war” (20) and that “the buffalo had gone away” (21), a mustang, tied to a pole at a shop, is painted like a shadow behind men. Its existence looks very slight. In contrast, when La Primera is free, she is running lively on the beach against the backdrop of the bright blue ocean.

The song suggests that the mustangs and the cowboys who were kind to them share a love for freedom. It also grieves over the decrease of buffalo and Indians at the turn of the twentieth century. The commentary at the end of the book explains the history of mustangs in detail. It tells us that the wild mustangs were once on the verge of extinction because they were caught excessively and sent to war. Now they are protected by law. It also says, however, that there is a conflict between cattle ranchers, who argue that mustangs are a foreign species that threaten the cattle for pasture land, and supporters, who argue that the mustangs “pre-date modern ranching practices” (32). With this commentary, this lyrical book takes on a political and moralistic tone.

In Beryl Young’s *Follow the Elephant*, an elephant is treated symbolically in a contemporary setting. The title may be a little misleading, because it is not a book about wild elephant hunting, but rather a book about the “philosophy of life”—if I may be allowed a little exaggeration. Thirteen-year-old Ben, who has recently lost his father, visits India with his grandmother who wants to find her long-lost pen pal there. He joins his

Gran reluctantly at first, but during their seventeen-day-long journey he familiarizes himself with Indian cultures and thus regains enthusiasm for life.

The elephant that Ben follows is not a real elephant but “Ganesh,” the popular Indian god who possesses a human body and an elephant head. Ganesh is a god of a popular belief in India and is a symbol of wisdom. James G. Lochtefeld explains in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism* that Hindus also consider Ganesh to be the “‘Lord of Obstacles’ who has the power both to remove and to bestow difficulties” (236). In this book it is also said that Ganesh is a guardian god of children. When Ben gets lost in a cave and feels that Ganesh helps him, he decides to follow this elephant-shaped god.

During their stay in India, Ben and his grandmother observe monkeys living freely in the city, cows and elephants treated sacredly, the dead being cremated on the roadside, and people bathing in the river where the ashes are sprinkled. Ben finds that there are no boundaries separating the animals, the dead, and the living people in India as the carvings on the temple say that “all gods, animals and humans sprang from the source of the Ganges River” (184). Toward the end of the book, the mystery of the long-lost pen pal is resolved. They finally meet the pen pal who is now suffering from slight Alzheimer dementia, but she lives happily with her daughter’s family. Her brother, a doctor who runs “a dying home” (a hospice in Western



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society), tells Ben and Gran that he has a belief that “[p]eace and dignity, that is our goal for the end of life” (204).

Being exposed to the everyday life of India where everything is different from the Western sense of values with which he is familiar, Ben gains a new view of life and death, which helps him to overcome his father’s death. The story is fast-paced and full of interesting encounters with Indian people, culture, and food. At the foundation of the story, however, lies a theme: how to live a good life. The elephant is a symbolic guide that leads two Canadian travellers to a set of ethics that teaches people to seek happiness in the integration with nature, not in its subjugation.

Novels with Anthropoids Playing Important Roles in Human Society

It is an interesting coincidence that Kenneth Oppel’s *Half Brother* and Maureen Fergus’s *Ortega*, both published in 2010, deal with scientific experiments that aim to teach apes human languages. Both ask readers the same question: where lies the boundary between animals and humans?

Half Brother is a story about thirteen-year-old Ben, an only child whose parents are both scientists who are involved in a scientific experiment that involves adopting a baby chimpanzee and teaching him American Sign Language. When his parents bring home a baby chimp as a test subject, Ben does not like him at first. Soon after he names the chimp “Zan” after Tarzan, Ben and Zan develop a strong friendship through sign language. After a while, Zan can express emotions fairly well. It is impressive how Zan tries to share the beautiful song of birds with Ben. When Zan is not sure if Ben is listening, he signs twice as if to

say, “You should appreciate the joyful chirps of birds”: “Listen, said Zan once more, glancing over at me, as if he was worried I’d get distracted—like humans did—but I was still listening, noticing now how different all the bird sounds were, the notes, the tempo, the patterns” (152). The end of the research grant puts the family into a difficult position, however, since they must give up not only the experiment but also Zan, because it is too dangerous and costly to keep him. Since they know they cannot return Zan to the jungle because he has been brought up among humans, they have to think about sending him to an animal testing laboratory or to an animal sanctuary. Ben cannot accept Zan’s impending departure because Zan is no longer just a test subject to him but a younger brother. After much tumult and consideration, the family decides to send Zan to an animal sanctuary.

Ortega is a nice companion text to *Half Brother*. Ortega is the name of a lowland gorilla who has been trained since his birth to acquire spoken English in the laboratory. A scientist implants a voice box in his throat and surgically reshapes his tongue. After ten years of training, he can speak English as fluently as any ordinary ten-year-old. Now the scientists want to study how Ortega acts among human children in a school setting. The story deals with the reactions of Ortega, his newfound peers, ordinary adults, and scientists on the project team.

After getting over their initial shock, children accept

Ortega as one of their classmates. Although he is a big eater and sometimes walks on all fours, they find that he is, for the most part, similar to them. Adults, however, see Ortega as a dangerous animal. The worst case is that of Dr. Whitmore, the head scientist of the “Ortega project” team. He treats Ortega as if he is nothing more than a test subject. What is worse is that he pays no attention to Ortega’s emotions, even when he is not allowed to use a men’s toilet and is deeply humiliated as a result.

With exaggerated characters and events, the story is more like a funny, if cynical, comic. Ortega wants to know who he is, he wants to find his biological mother, and he worries about his future. Are these not the same concerns that young people often worry about? What is worse, Ortega constantly has to resist being treated as a subject of experimentation. As with *Half Brother*, the rumour that the grant may be stopped threatens Ortega’s future. Unlike the very young Zan, however, Ortega becomes frightened at the idea of being sent to the animal experimentation centre and so decides to run away.

Since ancient times, people have argued about whether non-human animals have emotions, rationality, or the ability to feel pain. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer argues that such philosophers as René Descartes believed that animals experience neither pleasure nor pain. They may squeal when cut with a knife, but this does not mean that they

feel pain (200). Descartes adds that “there is nothing to be found in a dog that resembles the things I recognize in a mind” (77). These thoughts suggest that humans could do anything to animals because they do not feel pain. The argument has been repeated constantly over the centuries. Today, more people think animals have emotions and feel pain, and a movement against animal experimentation started in the 1990s. *Half Brother* and *Ortega* strongly reflect the spirit of this movement.

Therefore, it is very ironic that both Zan and Ortega, who are taught human language and can articulate their physical and emotional feelings like humans, are eventually forced to live like animals once again. It seems that they are not allowed to cross the abyss that lies between humans and animals.

Conclusion

As I explained at the beginning of this review, in today’s society where a range of opinions and arguments about animals are exchanged, it is only natural that children’s books about animals be remarkably diverse. Whether they be fiction or non-fiction, the books I reviewed have strong implications in terms of animal ethics and animal welfare as well as human welfare. Contemporary books not only advocate for animal welfare but also protest strongly against speciesism and the exploitation of animals. With their skilful use of suspense, humour, and fantastic illustrations, the messages conveyed in contemporary books are subtle. Not all of them effectively express the message, but they show unlimited possibilities for young people to think about what life is through the relationship between human and non-human animals.

Note

¹ In Canada, children's literature had just started to bloom in the 1970s and there were not many books dealing with animals that deserve special mention. Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman mention four animal books in *The New Republic of Childhood*, including Cameron Langford's *The Winter of the Fisher*, but these follow as an extension of Ernest Thompson Seton's animal biographies. Sheila Burnford's *Mr. Noah and the Second Flood* deals with environmental pollution and Noah's struggle against saving

animals with sarcastic humour. The most important movement with respect to children's literature that engages with animals is the first publication in 1976 of *Owl Magazine*, Canada's first science magazine for children that deals with various topics such as ecology, zoology, and botany. In their contribution to *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, Tara L. Holton and Tim B. Roger chart the changes in the content of *Owl Magazine* over the last thirty years.

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Sumiko Shirai is a professor in the Department of Children's Literature and Culture at Shirayuri College in Tokyo. Her research and teaching focus on Canadian children's literature, girls' stories, animal stories, and multiculturalism. She is the author of *A Critical Biography of Eleanor Farjeon*, co-author of *Contemporary English Children's Fiction*, and co-editor of *Anne of Green Gables: Collection of Essays*, all published in Japanese. She stayed at the University of Winnipeg in 2010 as a researcher and is presently writing a book about Canadian children's literature and society.