



Looking Glass Lore

Jeffrey Canton, editor

When I was ten years old, my Auntie Anne and Uncle Mike gave me a copy of Farley Mowat's *Owls in the Family* for my birthday. I still have it. *Owls in the Family* was the very first Canadian children's book that I read with the awareness of its being a Canadian book. Heck -- it couldn't get much more Canadian, set as it was in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan! Although I had only as much knowledge about the province as can be gleaned from elementary school geography books, I did know Saskatchewan meant the Prairies and that the Prairies were the heart of the Canadian West. Not only did *Owls in the Family* open up for me the door to the treasures of Canadian children's books, but it also started me on a series of adventures with Farley Mowat that have continued over the twenty-eight years since I first read about Billy, his friends Murray and Bruce, his dog Mutt and, of course, the "owls in the family", Wol and Weeps.

I devoured books when I was ten and I had no sooner finished *Owls in the Family* than I discovered that much weightier volume, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. *Owls*, in fact, developed out of an episode briefly mentioned in *Dog*. Farley Mowat has been a friend to me throughout my reading life. I was thrilled as a pre-teen reader to explore the wastes of the Arctic with Jamie Macnair and his friend Awasin, in *Lost in the Barrens* and its sequel, *The Curse of the Viking Grave*. During high school, I ate up Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*, *A Whale for the Killing*, *Sibir* and *Tundra*. As an adult reader, I have been intensely moved by Mowat's exploration of his life under fire during the Second World War in *And No Birds Sang*, as well as his reminiscences of his childhood in *Born Naked*.

Why is *Owls in the Family* such a special book? First, there's the story itself. On the surface, it's pretty simple -- a real boy's adventure story. Billy, a Prairie boy with a thing for unusual pets, adopts a pair of stray owls. But looking a little deeper, you discover that it's also an exploration of a child's fascination with the natural world -- you begin to listen to Billy's description of the Prairies and the habits of the owls and you begin to see the depth of Billy's connection with that world. A little deeper? *Owls in the Family* is also a book about perception. You feel the intimacy of the first-person narration -- you're sitting somewhere with Billy and he's describing this adventure to you and you alone. It's a book about looking at the world and the richness and variety that that world has to offer us. In turning that world upside down, *Wol and Weeps* bring us closer to understanding it. Mowat paints a picture of the natural world as it really is -- no whitewashing here -- and that in itself makes it special. *Owls* is a wonderfully humane book to give to sensitive young readers who are hungry to explore the world and their place in it.

Mowat also uses language beautifully. As lovers of children's literature, it's our responsibility to introduce young readers to imaginatively written prose. He sneaks sensuous little details into a sentence: the smell of the wind is like "warm sun shining on mud"; the gopher holes in the Prairie landscape are "yellow measles"; and the racket of "about a thousand mallards" taking flight makes "a sound like a freight train going over a bridge." Mowat writes with the same passion and seriousness that fill the pages of a book like *People of the Deer*. He never patronizes his younger readers, but addresses them as directly as he would an adult audience.

And I love Mowat's sense of humour. There's a wonderful sense of exaggeration throughout *Owls* that children and adults will delight in. Billy describes the Prairies as so flat you can see a million miles from a fence post. He tells us that he and Bruce breed so many white lab rats that they are able to supply all the kids in Saskatoon. Billy enumerates his pets -- gophers, rats, garter snakes, pigeons and rabbits -- and finishes with "...then there was Mutt, my dog - but he wasn't a pet; he was family." Mowat keeps us laughing throughout this slim volume: at Wol climbing trees or tormenting Mutt; at the whimpering Weeps hunting for Mutt; and at the turmoil that Billy and his friends cause entering the Eaton's pet parade. But what's wonderful about the laughter in *Owls* is that it's a shared laughter -- we're laughing with Billy and Mutt, Wol and Weeps and, of course, with Farley Mowat too.

Published by McClelland and Stewart in 1961, *Owls* has become a treasure of Canadian children's literature. Sheila Egoff in the second edition of *The Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian*



Children's Literature in English (Oxford, 1975) writes, "...Mowat is a natural writer for children. He writes from his own experience, both childhood and adult. With his direct, simple, and lively style he can reveal aspects of life that are necessary in good children's literature if it is to have any enduring value. Qualities such as cruelty, irony, satire -- gentled of course -- give life and depth to children's literature and they are present in all Mowat's animal stories...[*Owls in the Family*] is an autobiography, recalling and conveying with humour, sometimes farcical and sometimes wry, a sympathetic but unsentimental feeling for animals and the values the author holds important: generosity, justice and compassion. And it always rings true, for the boy who recounts the tale is honest and sensitive, and as colloquial as only a boy can be...This is possibly our most deservedly popular Canadian children's book."

In The New Republic of Childhood (Oxford, 1990) we find that *Owls* "joins *Sajo and Her Beaver People* (as well as *Anne of Green Gables*) as a Canadian classic".

I don't just remember *Owls in the Family* with the pleasure of a childhood memory. I've read it many times since I was ten years old. When I worked for Toronto Public Library, I often used it for book talks and especially enjoyed introducing it to new readers because *Owls in the Family* is a book that I don't want us to forget. It's a book that has as much value to young readers today in 1997 as it did to that ten-year-old boy who got it for his birthday in 1969.

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