



Picture Window

Annette Goldsmith, editor



"Beware of Book!": Art Spiegelman's *Open Me...I'm a Dog!*

Tim Wynne-Jones

Tim Wynne-Jones is the author of seventeen children's books, most recently the novel, Stephen Fair (Groundwood, 1998).

Open Me...I'm a Dog! is a little dog, a lap dog, house-trained and, at twenty dollars, complete with leash, a good deal cheaper than your average run-of-the-postman purebred.

Author Art Spiegelman, who won the Pulitzer prize for his stunning *Maus*, and who is a regular cover illustrator for *The New Yorker*, stands the classic kid-meets-dog- kid-loses-dog-kid-gets-dog-back formula on its tail. Here, instead of the kid pleading with his folks to keep the mutt who has followed him home, it is the dog who does the pleading with his young reader/owner. It's not your average sales pitch, either. In *Open Me...I'm a Dog!*, the critter's spiel begins with having to convince the young reader that he is, in fact, a dog and not, as the kid might suspect, merely a book.

His story has to do with a series of curses by which our canine friend was turned from a dog into a German Shepherd--that is to say, a shepherd from Germany--then a bullfrog, and finally the quaint print-based artifact in which we presently find him. This pup may not have papers but I'd like to think he was sired by William Steig's *Caleb and Kate* out of Dayal Kaur Khalsa's *I Want a Dog*.

The book's narrator is very convincing. Apart from his leash, he's got a tail you can wag and endpapers you can't resist stroking. (He's a short-hair and, seemingly, allergen-free.) The conclusion the reader is forced to come to is that you can't judge a book by its bark.

On the other hand, *Open Me...I'm a Dog!* is also, most winningly, a book. Indeed, this is a toybook that epitomizes the important place the subgenre occupies in the early page-turning experience. It is, in a word, irresistible.

The toybook has been around 250 years or so, since John Newbery first realized that a child could be cozened into reading with pretty distractions. Toybooks reached a mechanical zenith in the late nineteenth century in England, a pinnacle contemporary manufacturers have been hard-pressed to better. While there are certainly more mechanically sophisticated examples of the toybook around, I can't think of one that is both captivating and so fundamentally literary in nature. While our doggy protagonist protests that he is "certainly not a book!", he travels from lap to backpack to bedside table in a decidedly book-like manner. There is a wonderful notice on the foot of the child's bed, "Beware of Book!" And the final page of the story shows the enchanted dog sitting on a shelf amidst other less animated book-shaped objects with the following text: "If you let me be your dog I'll tell you my story whenever you like!" What more could you ask from a book? Interestingly, several teenage readers to whom I showed *I'm a Dog!* found it sad. The dog, after all, was imprisoned--a bird in a very small cage, a tanked fish! Younger readers, however, seemed unconcerned on this front. What youngster, heartlessly, does not wish to possess a pet in toto? The column **Picture Window** that this article inaugurates is dedicated to design and illustration, the form of the book, and how it reflects and informs the book's content. In this department, Spiegelman certainly wins Best of Show. In an age of increasingly glamorous and, all too often, outsized picture books, *Open Me...I'm a Dog!* is modesty itself. At 13 x 18 cm (5 x 7"), it is just



the right size for a child's small hands; a consideration Beatrix Potter championed but which is seldom followed in today's marketplace where thousands of titles clamour for attention.

The illustrations are wonderfully simple and crisply drawn throughout. And yet, Spiegelman has cleverly utilized two quite different media in order to set off the dog's story of his enchantment, that is, the story within the story. When the dog is addressing the reader directly, the artist works in more graphic fashion, the washes nicely picked out in ink with strong outline and cross-hatched shadow and texture. Utilizing more or less the same palette, Spiegelman paints the story within the story in opaque blocks of colour, gouache, I suspect, without black outlines. He even uses colour photography. While this might seem jarring the first time through, it is probably less so for the young viewer than it is for those of us with preconceptions of what a picture book should be. The photographs break the fictive dream, reminding us in true Brechtian fashion that we are looking at a book, not lost in a story. But that is entirely appropriate here. The bookness, if I may call it that, is an essential ingredient of the story.

It is hard not to ramble on about this book in high-falutin' metalinguistic terms. This is a book which says itself--proclaims itself. It is a book charmingly claiming to be something else. And that is, of course, just what a book always is. Like *Simon's Book* by Henrik Drescher, this is a book about how a story becomes a book which is, of course, a story in itself. But, ultimately, the wonder of *Open Me...I'm a Dog!* is its beguiling simplicity. The child reader sees only a story about a dog of utter dogness. Crockett Johnson's *Toby*, Garth Williams's *Mr. Dog*, Marjorie Flack's *Angus* and Gene Zion's *Harry the Dirty Dog*, among others, are the neighbourhood mutts Spiegelman's pup probably hung out with. That is, before he became a book.

Bibliographic Information:

Spiegelman, Art. *Open Me...I'm a Dog!* New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

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