



My Own Invention



The Story of *Everybody's Favourites*

Arlene Perly Rae

*Literacy advocate Arlene Perly Rae has spent a lot of time thinking about how to promote reading. Her recent book, **Everybody's Favourites** (Viking, 1997), is a wonderful tool of the trade. Rae wrote to hundreds of famous Canadians, asking them for a brief essay on the influence of childhood reading in their lives. The resulting list of very personal recommendations, along with various lists of other "favourites", makes for an innovative and accessible bibliography. This article describes how the project came about. - Ed.*

The process of writing a book generally begins with an idea tossed around in the mind and not, at first, on the page. For me, the germinating event that inspired *Everybody's Favourites* was a gift. Several years ago, the noted Canadian author (and friend), Timothy Findley, was happy to learn that I was beginning to review children's books for *The Toronto Star*. He sent his congratulations by way of a note and a book. The book, Ernest Thomson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*, was his personal favourite as a young reader and he still read it and valued it enormously. He hoped my own three daughters would read and enjoy its wonderful stories for many years just as he has. He was not disappointed. Findley also expressed the hope that the brightest lights from the current crop of literature for young people would be equally well written, absorbing and stimulating.

We all loved the book--stories about animals in their natural habitat--typical and believable in behaviour but able to communicate among themselves. They were also brimming with adventure and excitement. Seton's twin passions as a committed naturalist and compelling storyteller established him as founder (with Sir Charles G. D. Roberts) of a new and uniquely Canadian genre of writing for children, the realistic animal story. His stories breathe today with the same immediacy, tenderness and impact that they did almost a century ago.

Wild Animals sat on my desk as I wrote and submitted my reviews week after week. It represented a standard of achievement, a quality of writing by which I could measure the many other books that piled up and passed over my desk. It also made me want to find a way to write about the classics, the many and varied stories and picture books that have passed the test of time, are read and reread, loved in many lands and languages and passed down in families from one generation to the next.

A review in a daily newspaper must deal with new books most of all. There are hundreds of contemporary titles emerging from publishers in Canada and around the world every year. Hundreds are presented every autumn and another only slightly smaller crop arrives in the spring. They jostle for attention and acknowledgement in the media, at the bookstores and in the hearts and minds of their audience, the eager but sophisticated and discerning children, parents and teachers who demand good stories and evocative pictures. There is, usually and thankfully, much to recommend among them. So it takes effort and creativity to find ways--and even then, only occasionally--to refer to older titles, those fairy tales and stories two, twenty, or two hundred years old and older.

I wanted to offer some good leads, including a few well-worn and tested paths to the older books for children and reminiscing adults. Advertisers, publishers and booksellers take note: word of mouth



recommendation from their peers is the single strongest influence on what a modern young person reads and wants to read. Short of asking all their pals, it occurred to me that the childhood reading favourites of a subjective--but I hope representative--group of well-known Canadians might fit the bill. It would be fun to discover what books influenced these people and what they had to say about them. We'd find out a little more about them as people through that insight and also discover if books read at an impressionable age really do have a major impact on individuals. But most of all I hoped that kids today would be drawn to read more, including many of those recommended books--Arthur Ransome's adventure stories, the *Emily* books by L.M. Montgomery, Gene Stratton-Porter's *A Girl from the Limberlost* and *Freckles*, and all manner of others because they have been remembered so vividly and so well.

Similarly the long lists of my favourites, of award-winners, jury recommendations and so on are intended as other paths to the varied and numerous delights of the great smorgasbord of literature. As a literacy and reading advocate, I feel sometimes that I am engaged in a sort of matchmaking, that my role is to offer suggestions and guidelines that will lead readers to those works that will inspire, entertain and delight them. Writing and editing *Everybody's Favourites* was, I hope, a helpful step in that direction.

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