

*Book Reviews*

literature, and whom she describes as having been “in cahoots” with her younger self. Moore remains “in cahoots” with her child and youth characters throughout the novel, never resorting to heavy-handed didacticism or downplaying the validity of their responses to troubling experiences. While it might be tempting as adults to see Tyrone’s graffiti merely as an act of vandalism and rebellion, for example, Moore also appreciates the beauty of ephemeral art and the emotional depth and complexity of teenage forms of creative expression. In his depiction of his mother as the Snow Queen, Tyrone expresses the pain he feels when his mother chooses to overlook the abuse her son suffers at the hands of his stepfather. Moore allows Flannery to express the truths she comes to understand in her own experiences of trauma and disappointment, one of which is the realization that “adults could be evil.” At times, the adult world can also be woefully blind to the capabilities and rights of young people. Some of Flannery’s most significant moments of self-assertion and maturity occur when she understands her experiences in the context of social justice and adult culture’s tendency to overlook young people’s rights as human beings. If there is a message, it is perhaps directed at adults, showing us that to be effective and authentic allies to young people, we might best adopt the style of Miranda’s boyfriends.

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George Murray. *Wow Wow and Haw Haw*. Illus. Michael Pittman. St. John’s: Breakwater Books, 2014. ISBN 978-1-55081-462-0

*Wow Wow and Haw Haw* is acclaimed poet George Murray’s first children’s book, and it is an enchanting first. His eloquent, evocative

writing style combines with Michael Pittman's beautiful paintings to create a book that is both eye-catching and pleasing to the ear when read aloud (as many children's books frequently are). At its core, the story is a fable and a work of Newfoundland children's literature, but one cannot reduce it to either of these descriptors. By breaking with the norms for both categories, it sets itself apart from other works in these genres, and, consequently, it shines.

Murray's writing is poignant and Pittman's paintings, although they use an understated rather than flamboyant palette, are captivating, and the two complement each other excellently. The story is an adaptation of the Celtic legend "How the Fox Lost His Fleas," and it is a relatively simple story: a young fox named Wow Wow (after the sound he makes), who is quite proud of his red, white, and black fur (2), finds that he has fleas, and he does not know how to rid himself of the parasites. A crow watches his attempts to get the fleas out of his fur, and, because of her call ("Haw Haw"), he believes that she is laughing at him (9). Eventually, he realizes that she is trying to help him, and, with her aid, he discovers how to get the fleas out of his coat. The complementarity of word and image makes this straightforward story quite touching. For instance, when the little fox discovers his fleas, Murray writes, "One day Wow Wow woke-up feeling very, very itchy. He began to scratch," and then goes on to detail how Wow Wow scratches at the fleas with his paws and mouth, as well as by rolling in the dirt of his den (5). Pittman's accompanying illustration (6) depicts Wow Wow's rolling silhouette in his dark den, paws in the air, fleas flying off of him, his suffering clear from his posture and the darkness. Later in the story, Murray describes Wow Wow's changed attitude towards Haw Haw: "Wow Wow, said a croaky voice from the bushes. Wow Wow's ears perked up, his head jerked around, and his tail went stiff. He saw a little black face looking out from the ferns" (16). The accompanying illustration (15) portrays the fox's surprise and increased attentiveness: his head and tail are low out of shame and frustration, fleas still jump from his fur, and his wide eyes consider the black bird across from him. Pittman's paintings convey Wow Wow's feelings

effectively, supporting the emotive quality of Murray's writing, and this complementarity is consistent throughout the book, so that together the text and the illustrations form an artful work of children's literature that is full of feeling and beauty.

Like all fables, *Wow Wow and Haw Haw* instructs its audience, but its lessons are not reducible to a pithy "moral of the story" statement, breaking with expectations for how fables end. Through Wow Wow's interactions with Haw Haw, the story demonstrates the importance of paying close attention to the world around you, for things are not always how they appear, and first impressions may well be wrong. In effect, there is a language barrier between the fox and the crow, which causes Wow Wow to mistake Haw Haw's addresses to him for laughter at his expense. Their names (and the book's title) highlight the importance of speech to their story. The turning point in the story is when Haw Haw tries to speak Wow Wow's language (16), for it is then that the latter begins to reconsider the situation, watching and listening to the crow from a new perspective. The tale shows that those individuals who are different from ourselves may have much to teach us, if only we are willing to listen to their voices and to cross the boundaries that separate us from one another. These are significant lessons for children to learn, and the book communicates them vividly, but without a patronizing or even obviously didactic tone. It makes its point gently, but nonetheless powerfully.

Newfoundland children's literature often focuses on local animals, and *Wow Wow and Haw Haw* is no exception; however, foxes and crows live in many places besides Newfoundland and Labrador, making the book relatable beyond provincial borders. I have admittedly limited experience with local children's literature, but I have scanned through some publications that I have encountered in the shops in downtown St. John's, and I have noticed an emphasis on the province's animals, both wild and domestic, creatures that would be familiar to anyone living here, and several of which are provincial symbols. For example, Margaret O'Brien's *Star's Island* (2010) features a Newfoundland pony (Star) and a seagull (Cordell), Nancy Keating and Laurel

Keating's *Find Scruncheon and Touton: All Around Newfoundland* (2011) centres on a Newfoundland dog (Scruncheon) and a Labrador retriever (Touton), and Gina Noordhof's *A Puffin Playing by the Sea* (2014), a charming reworking of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," showcases several of the province's animals, as well as other aspects of our heritage.

While I am not trying to deny the strengths of these works or their place in our children's literature corpus, Murray's book proves that Newfoundland authors writing for children need not bind themselves so tightly to the local in order to make the work exciting for children (or for the adults who buy these books and read them to their children). *Wow Wow and Haw Haw* does connect to the province, not only through its animal protagonists, but also by taking inspiration from Celtic legend (and so from our heritage), and through Pittman's illustrations, which are reminiscent of Newfoundland landscapes. However, the location remains unspecified, leaving the reader free to imagine that the tale occurs in any "small wood, half way between a farmer's field and a city block" (2) that foxes and crows inhabit. The story could occur quite near the reader, whether he or she is in Newfoundland, Ontario, or the United Kingdom, giving the book the potential to effectively speak to a child audience far beyond the local one.

An emotionally and visually engaging children's book, *Wow Wow and Haw Haw* breaks with expectations for fables and for Newfoundland children's literature, opening these categories to greater possibilities for what they can encompass. Overall, it is a lovely book and quite deserving of a place on children's bookshelves.

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