

An Australian Tale

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How the Kookaburra got his Laugh, Aviva Layton. Illustrated by Robert Smith. McClelland & Stewart, 1976. 27 pp. \$4.95 hardcover.

In writing *How the Kookaburra got his Laugh*, Aviva Layton seems to have modeled the style of her book after the traditional "pourquoi" tale. This type of story can be found often among native legends (i.e., how man first got fire, how the loons got their necklaces) and it finds humorous form in the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling. The reader of the book may be familiar with the song,

Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree
Merry, merry king of the bushes he;
Laugh kookaburra, laugh kookaburra
Gay your life will be,

for it expresses the mood of nonsense that is created as the story offers its amazing explanation of how the kookaburra got his call.

At the beginning of the book, Kookaburra was living in a land far from Australia where all the animals dwelt together peacefully. In this land Owl was the wisest and most respected animal. Naturally, Kookaburra was envious of the attention given to Owl, for he felt that he himself had no special gift of which to be proud. He thought that if he could imitate Owl he would gain respect for being very wise, but when Kookaburra tried being solemn and wise the other animals didn't take him seriously. So Kookaburra decided to leave this land and fly away in search of a new country where the animals would respect him. He flew a great distance until he came to Australia, a land described by Ms. Layton as overgrown with wattle and eucalyptus trees and inhabited by such birds and animals as emus, mopokes, kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, possums and platypi. Here too, in Australia, Kookaburra tried to be solemn and wise. He gave notice of his arrival to the other animals by posting a message which read "ATENSHUM! THE GREAT WISE ONE HAS KUM FROM FAR AWAY AND WILL TALK WISELY AT THE WATTLE PATCH TOMOROW AT SUNSET". The animals arrived, surprisingly enough, since these animals did not live together peacefully as creatures did in the other land. Kookaburra began to speak, but all the noise he could make was a type of laughing call, "Hoo Hoo Hoo Hoo, Ha Ha Ha Ha." Poor Kookaburra—the animals again did not take him seriously because of his laugh. Luckily, one animal among those in attendance, saw the real value in Kookaburra's laugh, pointed out to the others how great Kookaburra really was because he brought them the most important message of all, that of laughter. The book ends with Kookaburra being lauded as a hero, but more significantly, with Kookaburra's discovery of his special gift, his laugh.

The book is written for children of five to eight years. The themes of jealousy, envy and self-discovery are already relevant at this age. For those who have close contact with young children, an easy parallel can be drawn between Kookaburra as he imitates Owl's behavior and a young child who jealously imitates the actions of a peer to gain attention. All the struggles which Kookaburra goes through to discover himself are applicable to a young child.

The text of the story is in large print, appropriate for books used when reading to young children. The plot of the story is simple, unhampered by extraneous information. The illustrations are large and fill the pages with pleasant colours.

It should be added, however, that the clarity of the story is hampered by several items. First, although the book is written to be read to young children, the sentence structure and vocabulary often better suits the comprehension level of a much older child. One page of the book illustrates the sign which Kookaburra posts as containing several misspelled words. This serves to humour the adult or older child, but the younger child, for whom the book was intended, would completely miss the joke. Furthermore, such Australian terms as wattle bush, emu, mopoke, and eucalyptus require that the teacher-reader do some quick research into the native trees and animals of Australia before reading the book. I suspect that the text is appropriate for young Australian, but is it possible that the Canadian child would first require a couple of lessons on Australia. Secondly, the illustrations, although attractively drawn and appealing to look at, do not always extend or support the text as clearly as possible. A few pages occur where the text does not directly relate to the illustration. Furthermore, illustrations of native Australian animals, uncommon to the North American child, are not as clear as necessary for the introduction of unfamiliar material. For example, some of the animals are shown in part rather than in whole. Some children of pre-school age to whom I showed the book identified the illustration of a kangaroo's head as a rabbit. Another factor concerning the illustrations was the appearance of animals not mentioned in the text of the story. A large lizard, a camel, a gorilla and a porcupine were among those appearing in the illustrations, yet not in the text.

Generally, a story about "How the Beaver got his Tail" may be more immediately appropriate for the Canadian child, but skilful handling of this book (i.e., introduction to Australian animals through photographs or a trip to the zoo as a preface, and instruction in Australian songs in which native animals are mentioned) can make its use an enjoyable experience which the young child will want to repeat.

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