

virtually at the moment when Sam, clamouring in the pit, feels the gold coins in his hands.

But while the children and Grandpa discover a buried treasure that makes them indescribably rich, the novel excavates a hollow message best summed up by Grandpa himself after he apologizes to the police for his actions and buys them a new cruiser: "'Amazing how finding a treasure makes everything all right,' Grandpa chuckled."

It is not just legalistic matters that are dismissed so airily, but emotional ones too, for money, in the cynical ending of this novel, buys both material and familial happiness. (It almost seems to buy health, too, as the issue of Alzheimer's never comes up again.) Although Walters no doubt intended a tale about human vulnerability and growth using a romantic, action-filled plot, the ends-justify-the-means conclusion turns *The Money Pit Mystery* into little more than a parable of obsession and greed rewarded.

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### Living with Animals

*It's Raining, It's Pouring.* Andrea Spalding. Illus. Leslie Elizabeth Watts. Orca, 2001. 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-186-6. *The Chicken Cat.* Stephanie Simpson McLellan. Illus. Sean Cassidy. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2000. \$17.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-531-X. *Julian.* Dayal Kaur Khalsa. Tundra, 2000. 24 pp. \$9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-513-0. *My Sister Gracie.* Gillian Johnson. Tundra, 2000. 32 pp. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-514-9. *Leon the Chameleon.* Melanie Watt. Kids Can, 2001. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-867-X. *Edmund and Washable.* Chris Jackson. HarperCollins, 2000. 28 pp. \$16.00 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224558-2.

Our domestic pets often function as comedians in the stories we love to tell about them. If laughter promotes love, what are the effects of fear? In the most famous of folk tales, *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf's skills of deception increase our interest in the animal left wandering in the wild, outside of our domestic control. Fear locks our doors, keeps us awake at night, makes our heart rate increase, and creates something more interesting than mere hatred. In these recent picture books, animal identities serve to teach children about the complexities of our emotions and what happens when we try to understand them. In Andrea Spalding's *It's Raining, It's Pouring*, a rainy day motivates Little Girl to embark on a skyward journey to visit the giant Old Man who is, in a variety of senses, "under the weather." Leslie Watts's illustrations of a house and a bedroom above the clouds are populated by many animals: dog, cat, goldfish, mouse, bat, duck, and bird. The animals don't participate in the action — there are no serious dangers here — but through shifts in scale they assert their presence. The animals in these illustrations give a sense of belonging; the giant himself isn't going to eat any of them. The end of the story is marked by the return of the sun and the onset of a reflective mood of sadness. Parents play an absolutely minimal role.

*The Chicken Cat* narrates a more intricate tale of animal life. An orphan kitten,

Merlin, is adopted by Guinevere, “the oldest hen” in the barn. Allison, a six-toed cat, rejects him. In a pairing that resembles the impossible relationship of pig and spider in *Charlotte’s Web*, Guinevere’s distinct lack of glamour casts her in a comic role. When a child wants to adopt a kitten, Guinevere cannot protect Merlin from the injustice of humans breaking a natural bond between mother and child. Well provided for in his new home, Merlin does not forget Guinevere and her dream of flying. Merlin teaches himself to fly by riding wind currents, which gives him the freedom to reunite with his adoptive mother and teach her also to fly. The image of Merlin flying for the first time pairs him with a swallow, whose abilities can seem more natural. Without any magic beyond his Arthurian namesake, Merlin’s flight doesn’t seem fully satisfying; not enough is at risk in this low-stakes achievement. If the relationship of kitten to chicken makes us question the laws of nature, that questioning ought to include some knowledge of what constitutes the world of cats. The mouse in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* doesn’t find it odd to be talking English to a girl named Alice; what he doesn’t like is any discussion of cats, because the fear mice have for cats is beyond a mere game of language. When flying becomes a metaphor for happiness, the earth becomes a metaphor of failure. Breaking all the laws of nature doesn’t provide *The Chicken Cat* with the transcendence of natural, given identity that it seeks.

Dayal Kaur Khalsa’s *Julian* celebrates the virtues of dogs as pets, since two existing cats are no help in keeping groundhogs from raiding the vegetable garden. Julian arrives on the farm and establishes a place for himself in the order of things that constitute our daily life. When Ricky Rainbow, a cat, is lost, Julian’s tracking ability becomes heroic. Dayal Kaur Khalsa’s illustrations are thrillingly colourful, with playful references to Tom Thompson and other Canadian art icons. At the centre of well-being — the colour green dominates throughout these illustrations — sits Julian himself. However, the life of a dog is not always bliss. Fabio, in *My Sister Gracie*, must deal with the arrival of a sister, Gracie, who is older, sedentary, and beyond slim. Fellow dogs can be cruel: “Hey, Fatso, you’re an / Ugly hound. / Were you the last one at / The pound?” Gracie’s sufferings are nicely represented in a dog’s body out of her control, and it is heartening that the happy ending of brother-sister bonding does not include weight loss. In both stories, dogs learn that the rules of loyalty and affection that bind human communities together are unconditional; once acceptance occurs, a new pet remains a member of the family until death.

Melanie Watt’s illustrations in *Leon the Chameleon* celebrate colour and conclude with a lesson to the reader on the three primary colours red, yellow, and blue. As a red chameleon in a green world, Leon’s individuality makes him a backwards chameleon, always out of sync with a world of six distinct colours. This is a book that forces us to think seriously about colour as both the source of major distinctions but not in itself a determining principle of identity. The essence of a chameleon is its escape from colour. *Leon the Chameleon* represents a triumph of illustration, but any book on real chameleons would be equally fantastic. The dominant colour in *Edmund and Washable’s* tale of jealousy is pink, the colour of real pigs and toy pigs. Edmund can’t keep the toy pig he finds because it belongs to someone else, but this is a story that hides the nature and destiny of Edmund’s place on the farm from children. Pigs are not pets; teddy bears do not make the lives of wild animals any easier. Edmund can feel good about himself because he has earned a moment of affection, but this story will ring false to any child who has been exposed to the

deeper truths of *Charlotte's Web* or the fear that is perhaps inherent in all plots.

A common thread, it seems to me, that runs through these books is their unwillingness to deal with the question of fear: fear of rejection, fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear of death. *Little Red Riding Hood* cannot contain all the different fears that it generates, hence it is a story that keeps being retold in new forms. The popularity and longevity of *Goodnight Moon* perhaps resides in its deep knowledge that while going to bed and saying goodnight, children must evaluate the meaning of their lives and run the risk of encountering unaccountable fears. But when a story fails to deliver a sense of what it means to be alive in our skin or share our daily lives with animals who are equally mortal, the success of picture books can still reside in the power of their illustrations. The sleeping pets that form the final image of *Julian* have an emotional resonance that can only be deepened with the knowledge that Dayal Kaur Khalsa died in 1989.

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### Mr. Capra's Cats

*Tom and Francine: A Love Story.* Sylvia Fraser. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Key Porter, 1998. 30 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-944-4.

While it may fall short of an exhaustive scholarly definition, I feel safe in claiming that if a children's book reassures, delights, and instructs its young readers, it has done well. If the adult readers of that same book can appreciate the considerable wit of its creators and can come away charmed by its characters and illustration, then it is fine work indeed. One small and one large thumb up, therefore, for *Tom and Francine: A Love Story*, written by Sylvia Fraser and illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes.

The plot is Capra-esque: hayseed boy cat meets snooty girl cat, is spurned by same, vanquishes vicious pit-bull, and wins girl cat's delicate fuzzy paw and employment by the end. It could easily have been quite irritating, but Fraser combines some delightful doggerel (catterel?) with a fine sense of the limits this structure imposes. Much of the pleasure here for the adult reader comes from seeing how Fraser's ear and Fernandes's eye playfully collude to keep each other out of trouble.

Tom and Francine (thankfully) inhabit a place where cats and dogs do not act in the mundane fashion to which we are accustomed, but according to a considerably more reassuring picture of community and humanity. Along with this reassurance, readers are challenged not to put their faith in outward appearances. Tom chases and helps capture a dog with the aid of a "hundred police dogs" who chase and capture not a cat (their more natural enemy) but pit-bull terrier "Spike Hooligan, scourge of the nation." Neither Tom's species nor his outward appearance is in any way allowed to diminish his accomplishments. Canine, feline, and human alike see Tom for what he is, and he is rewarded. Character is destiny, and good triumphs over evil.

Two things prevent this unobjectionable but fairly commonplace collection of