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Remembrance of All Things, Great and Small

***Born Naked* by FARLEY MOWAT**

Douglas & McIntyre, 2013 \$19.95

Reviewed by **TED GEIER**

We've lost Farley Mowat and I'm reading a new edition of his 1993 childhood memoir, *Born Naked*, while my wife's grandfather—a North Idahoan Navy man who was always a sensible north country populist, with animals and family in tow—passes away. Our hearts are broken. Few authors demand more personal affection than Farley Mowat, whose strong autobiographical tone, to misquote him properly, “never got in the way of the truth.” Our own personal, deep thinking amongst “the Others” of the remaining northern wildernesses—the critters who call it home—must be included to properly address this sharp little work of his. It's how he would have wanted it—Farley, William, Bunje, whatever he's going by today.

Born Naked is an installment in the excellent Douglas & McIntyre series of Mowat's collected works. The book is printed in Canada with electronic versions available, but the compact, sturdy builds and lovely modern layouts of the print editions are richly satisfying. One likes to hold these books in one's hands and take them along to places. A book review ought not to worry too much about covers, but when a host of government agencies support publication efforts in this day and age, all points must be covered, as all are clearly part of the appropriate commemoration of a national treasure. This cover is familiar and charming thanks to Jessica Sullivan's design palette, and it features a perfect illustration by Brian Tong

that you'll just have to see and consider alongside your own reading to fully appreciate. Look it over more than once. Farley's headed into the twenty-first century, and he'll fit in just fine.

Farley Mowat stands as one of the central voices of environmental, animal, and naturalist literary studies. His 1963 *Never Cry Wolf* continues to spark deep concern for animal life and human-animal interactions and reminds readers of the sense of humour required to properly cope with difficult challenges, environmental or otherwise. *Born Naked* and Mowat's larger body of work put him firmly in the company of canonical North American nature writers and Romantics such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, whose articulations of care for the world humans share with “the Others” have had profound social impact. But Mowat's humour establishes a singular place in the field.

Mowat reminds throughout *Born Naked* of other canonical North American environmental writers, matching at times Muir's rangy reverence for the natural world, Rachel Carson's meticulous, elegiac observations of its proper flourishing, and Whitman's unruliness. At one point, Mowat crafts a Muir-like spiritual awakening during a narrative biological study worthy of—but also more nuanced than—Thoreau's play-by-play of the ants battling like Greek soldiers. Cataloguing his childhood observation of a “battle” between a spider and a hornet, Mowat writes, “The web, which had been shaking wildly, grew still as death overwhelmed the duelists. And I slowly emerged from something akin to a trance having, for the first time in my life, consciously entered into the world of the Others—that world which is so infinitely greater than the circumscribed world of Man.” Mowat knows he's invoking Muir and

is quick to temper any grand, classic aesthetic astonishment at Nature: “My most cherished images of the mountain country were not of the forbidding peaks but of the animals.” These nods to the humble details of the earth, a Mowat hallmark, mean that teaching Mowat in a comparative, environmental literary frame might not range too far afield, but will prove educational even to the grizzled academician of ecocritical rhetoric.

The work’s dominant elements are the defense of the lives of nonhumans and a broad, deep respect for interspecies community. These are presented as parts of the preferred worldview of a well-adjusted human being, a view that perhaps requires the sort of cross-terrain upbringing Mowat experienced as an occasional city-dweller and regular wilderness traipse. The “sissy nature kid”—with an uncanny relationship and communicative prowess with the famous Mutt—also encountered firsthand (though one senses the older Mowat realizes exactly what it all meant where the young Bunje might not have been fully aware) “the fearful inequalities which exist between the haves and the have-nots in the human world.” Narrating his own “well-nourished life,” then, in contrast to “the stark existence being endured by many of [his] contemporaries,” the elder Mowat’s spirit of atonement is perhaps not always amply supported by the excessively magnanimous tone of some bits of this restorative recollection. But it’s all laid out, bare enough, for the reader. He utilizes a standard compositional technique, inserting long entries from his childhood field notebooks and sometimes other purportedly archival texts, like poems he wrote to love interests and others. The result is a convincing, if fanciful and at times didactic, documentation of a brief time in

the young Mowat’s life with Others. The tone is casual, matter-of-fact, irreverent, and direct in usually the best sorts of ways, though too lightly apologist when it comes to his philandering father, Angus. His mother Helen’s suffering is often made too funny at her expense.

Some of the book’s greatest comic successes are the recasting of Angus’s harebrained schemes—particularly the great, plodding land ark he builds for a cross-country trek during the Depression—within the coherent frame of Mowat’s adolescent development as a student and advocate of nonhumans. Mowat suggests an origin of this impulse, naturally, in the acclimations of his childhood, and in those shared across the generational experiences of the twentieth century. The wonder of the spider-hornet duel is an early moment that builds consistently, in the work’s presented chronology, to the touching but predictable closing conversation between young Farley and his friend Brucie (one of the many intriguing characters in the book): “‘We’ve sure seen an eyeful. You think we’ll ever see anything like it again?’ ‘Maybe, yeah. I guess so, if we’re lucky.’ We were not to be that lucky. I doubt if anyone else ever will be either. I think it’s too late.” In contrast to such maudlin bouts of epic nostalgia, Mowat’s wise intimacy with nonhuman politics—often via the elegant anthropomorphisms he has been roundly criticized for in the past—include the most compelling and reflective passages, such as the hilarious episodes when the great reindeer throng stops the train dead in its tracks, or when one imprinted bird of prey under Mowat’s watch covertly snuffs out another (much more annoying) such non-pet. Farley’s well-staged narration of all parties to the crime ensures that, like the

Mowats, we approve of the hit wholeheartedly.

Young Mowat is an “eccentric” journalist, biologist, birder, entomologist, and what have you, who participated in the sorts of beyond-one’s-years activities now over-fetishized as college entry extracurriculars. *Born Naked* does not cover all the “facts” we know about the Farley Mowat who just passed, missing, for example, that he was the grandson of the third premier of Ontario, or that he served well in World War II while heading an historical museum enterprise, sending German military equipment to Canada. Then again, some of that is gleaned from another Mowat autobiography, *My Father’s Son*. So who knows? Woe, then, to the mothers of the world striving to wrangle the Truth and the Facts out of the Farley Mowats. But there’s no mistaking Mowat’s delicate nostalgia and hopeful care for the Others and the whole wide world—especially in the funny parts, which may

help things along a little, whether you like it or not. There’s so much of Mowat published, but this little work, like so many of his—and like the fleeting time spent with any beloved, wise soul—leaves one with the persistent wish for just a little more. And this motivation for frequent returns to cherished memories and lifeworks is an effect few have achieved as enduringly as our dearly departed Farley Mowat.

TED GEIER, ABD in Comparative Literature at UC Davis, is completing his dissertation, “British and oOther nNonhumans of the lLong nNineteenth cCentury: Abject fForms in lLiterature, lLaw, and mMeat.” A member of several environmental research groups and founder of the Interdisciplinary Animal Studies Research Group at Davis, he teaches and publishes on nineteenth-century British literature and culture, Kafka, Calvino, film studies, critical theory, and the history of environmental thought and literature.