A Pack of Fables

PETER MITHAM relates the true story of how a young Vancouver book collector, SAMUEL JANG, became enchanted by the moral tales of an ancient Greek fabulist.

ONE OF THE chief criteria for the success of a children's book is its ability to inspire, to stir the child's imagination, as renowned Canadian illustrator Frank Newfeld has often remarked. An illustration should work as much magic in its own right as the words it accompanies.

These thoughts come back as Victoria book collector Samuel Jang talks about his fascination with the fables of Aesop (620–564 BCE), the fabulist of ancient Greece whose tales of animals offer insights regarding human character and moral guidance. Growing up in Vancouver in the late 1980s, Jang was fascinated with all manner of reading materials. His parents would read him the tales of Mother Goose, and he quickly memorized the text, which gave him time to absorb the illustrations too.

By the time he entered school, he had received his first collection of Aesop's fables, another collection of stories in which animals provided rich fodder for the imagination.

"I found it really fascinating how these animals would assume human characteristics," he says. "I wanted to explore that further and get a sense of what are they really trying to get at here? These animals would portray human behaviour but still remain animals."

His fascination with the illustrations, and the texts they accompanied, blossomed into a fascination with the various interpretations of the fables that existed. He soon found the illustrations played a large role in the telling of the fables, and the fables themselves could assume different forms despite a common root.

While other kids took to collecting pogs, the colourful image-bearing discs that were all the rage in the early 1990s, Jang visited bookstores, looking for editions of Aesop's fables: MacLeod's Books, Lawrence Books, Kestrel Books—all the second-hand shops of Vancouver and beyond. Kidsbooks and other new bookstores weren't out of bounds. He didn't discriminate between new and used books; his focus was finding what was out there.

"It became a weekly habit for me, almost," he says. "Anything that said 'Aesop's Fables' would catch my attention. I was very indiscriminate." He laughs as he recalls stripping the shelves of Powell's Books in Portland when he was in Grade 4 for whatever he didn't have. "There were rows and rows of Aesop's fables on the bookshelves," he says. "I just remember picking all the books off the shelves that I saw that I didn't have and kinda calling it a day."

The main constraint was his parents' goodwill, because in Grade 4 he wasn't yet of independent means to feed his habit. But so long as he didn't break the bank, he forged ahead, building the base of a collection that allowed him to start making decisions about what was important and what was less so.

"I matured and realized that not all of Aesop's fables were made the same, and that some of them would be just nice books after 50 years whereas some of them would be books that I really, really treasured." By the time he reached high school, he was scouting editions like Samuel Croxall's *Fables of Aesop* (1722) and saving what money he had to buy specific editions.

A COLLECTION EVOLVES

One of the first editions he saw after his initial taste of Aesop was *Jack Kent's Fables of Aesop* (1972). Kent was a commercial artist, and the illustrations were done with comic-strip stylings. Jang was attracted immediately. "A hilarious

book," he says. "And I didn't get it till, probably, when I was in high school, about 12 years later when it showed up at Lawrence Books."

But as he grew older, editions of the fables such as Samuel Croxall's garnered his attention. With each step he found himself honing his search, seeking what was distinctive about a copy rather than the mere accumulation of variations on a theme. Children's books gave way (with his childhood) to signed editions and copies with a story attached.

"I was looking for books that were limited, rare, not readily available," he says. "I devoted a lot of the money I earned to finding books that were just beautifully kept books that were signed or had some very compelling story behind them."

Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables choisies* (1668), the first versification of the fables, found "a welcome home" in his collection. John Gay, who brought his own artistic flair to the retelling of the fables in 18th-century England, also attracted him. "Those two were the ones who gained the most prominence during the 1700s and 1800s."

While he has yet to secure a copy of Sir Roger L'Estrange's *Fables of Aesop* (1692)—available copies sell in the range of $10,000—he now focuses on collecting editions illustrated by artists like Arthur Rackham, Harry Rauch and Steven Gooding. The fascination for Jang—as with the Kent edition—is that the illustrators had careers that inform the style and perspective they brought to their interpretation of Aesop's work.

"Arthur Rackham published a lot of different books," he says. "[But] one of the things that unifies all of that is his illustrations. The way he could bring the animal to life in the illustrations. And when you see an Arthur Rackham illustration, it's hard to describe but you can tell it's an Arthur Rackham illustration right away."

An image from Edward Detmold, *The Fables of Aesop* (1909).

FROM TRUTH-TELLING TO ENTERTAINMENT

The variations on the fables and the manner of interpreting them continue to fascinate Jang as he becomes older—he's now 27—and comes to understand how the fables functioned as literature and in society. On the one hand, the stories spoke truth while never claiming to be true, giving them an authority that true stories would never have; the first-century philosopher Apollonius of Tyana remarked on this achievement, noting: "By announcing a story which everyone knows not to be true, [he] told the truth by the very fact that he did not claim to be relating real events." Or as Jang observes: "I felt the fables were trying to tell us something about human behaviours, but do so in a way that would make us laugh or not feel defensive about the behaviours we normally exhibit as human beings."

On the other hand, the fact the fables were never written down by Aesop himself but instead passed along by others meant that the fables have been interpreted—and reinterpreted—by each generation. "There's a lot of room for interpretation," Jang says.

This is clear from the earliest English-language printing by William Caxton, *Fables of Aesop* (1484), and continued through government-mandated editions such as the Sir Roger L'Estrange collection. Such editions were cautious, having to respect the government of the day or command favour by honouring patrons in their introductions. "They still had to make sure those fables were palatable to the powers that were, that were financing this book," says Jang.

Gradually, however, the collections became valued more for their entertainment value than what they had to say about the human condition. The fables were broken up into smaller chunks, presented in verse or with illustrations or as

single-fable books that were meant to teach a single lesson. The emergence of children's literature in the late 1700s and early 1800s gave way to the entertaining and visually rich editions of the early 20th century, spurred by technological innovation as well as economy.

"In the '20s and the '30s there were books that were for children but also for adults, because adults would read it and then they would give it to their children. People had to save money, and that's reflected in the type of book that was published," Jang explains.

The emerging visual culture spearheaded by the cartoons of Disney and Warner Brothers facilitated the fables' transition from education to entertainment, the didactic purpose of the fables serving as the inspiration for the films but ultimately subservient to their entertainment value (see, for example, Fred "Tex" Avery's animated short *Tortoise Beats Hare* [1941] at http://bit.ly/mBHfvE).

Graeme Kent, *Aesop's Fables* (1991), illustrated by Tessa Hamilton.

While many of the early editions of Aesop's fables had very pure representations of the animals, without human additions or accoutrements, this changed as their entertainment purpose grew.

"There are a lot of people out there that also like to be entertained," Jang said. "They buy the fables not because they want to learn something but because they want to be entertained. And seeing these animals dressed up in clothing—a fox, for example, in a top hat . . . there's entertainment value in that."

SHIFTING INTERPRETATIONS

But other changes took place too. Popular understandings of the fables' morals have occasionally shifted.

The fox in the fable of the fox and the grapes, for instance, is now often understood to express smug disdain for what he could not have. But in the William Caxton telling, the fox was praised for not desiring things he couldn't have.

"But now, of course, we've shifted to a culture that is more consumption-driven, and the moral has shifted to sour grapes—the fox wants something he cannot have, so he's going to disdain what he cannot have," Jang says. "The shifting of the moral shifts with the perception of behaviour. Before, it was more acceptable to be not so desiring of material things. And now it's considered a human value that if we work hard for what we want, we can have what we want."

Another example is the fable of the farmer and the viper, in which a farmer sees a viper freezing in the snow, takes pity on it and brings it into his home, where it warms up and bites him. Jang says the fable was traditionally told to caution people against caring for those who would ultimately harm them. Recent interpretations have typically cast the viper as an ingrate, encouraging people to do good to those who treat them well.

"The blame lies more on the viper, as opposed to the farmer. The farmer was just trying to help out his fellow creature on this earth," Jang explains "It's a big shift in the societal values that changes how we interpret these fables, I think."

He looks forward to seeing how the telling of the fables will evolve over the course of his life and how future editions will present them. "The fables are living because they're continually being amended in the way that we interpret the fables, even though the story remains the same," he says. "The understanding of these fables continues to adapt to the times in which we live. And I find that really, really, really interesting."

TIMELESS MORAL LESSONS

But ultimately, it all comes down to the books. Jang is, after all, collecting the physical

'Physical remnants of literary history'

An extract from the essay Samuel Jang wrote to accompany his prizewinning submission to the National Book Collecting Contest, co-sponsored by the Alcuin Society, the Bibliographical Society of Canada and the W.A. Deacon Literary Foundation. The full text of Jang's essay, and the essays of all other prizewinners, are at www.bsc-sbc.ca.

ALTHOUGH I AM a more knowledgeable collector today than I was at the age of eight, I still retain many of the same characteristics. I love Aesop's Fables just as much, if not more, because they are great stories that continue to stimulate my imagination and make me more aware of myself. I still ask book dealers the question, "Do you have any Aesop's Fables books?" and upon getting the answer "No," will still rummage through the shelves in case the dealer "missed anything." And I am still known in Vancouver as the "young Aesop's Fables collector," though few still know my name even after 18 years.

As for my motivation to carry on collecting, I see my role as that of a preservationist. I refuse to collect e-books and none of my books are ever for sale. In an age wherein digital technology is transforming our lives through social media, the Internet and e-readers, the digitization of the book world has rendered books an evanescence of electron flows, limitless and searchable in seconds. Yet an e-book can never capture the physical embodiment of a book, its smell, look, feel and flaws—its beauty.

The beauty of one book alone sparked my inner drive to become a book collector for life; an e-book, on the other hand, would simply be a compilation of two-dimensional pixelated data.

Finally, my collection has value beyond its monetary worth; to me, it represents 18 years of personal growth as a collector, and the evolution of my long-held assumptions about what makes a "good book." I do not fear having to memorize my books anytime soon and join the underground movement in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. On the contrary, I am hopeful that when e-books display in holographic 3-D, my collection will serve as a reminder of the physical remnants of literary history; and that others, like me, will want to cherish those relics, hold them in their hands, as much as I wanted to hold my very first Aesop's Fables book, by Ash and Higton.

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objects rather than the meanings, though the books have become vessels of meaning for him. "Aesop's fables have had a lot of impact on my life," he says. "Every time I read the fables, touch the books, I admire the books for their physical beauty, their illustrations, but also the message they're trying to impart."

One of his favourite fables is of the dog that sees its reflection in the water and drops what it has in an attempt to claim what its reflection has. "It shows us that one of the virtues of being human, that we always want more and more and more, can also work against us if we take it to extremes," Jang says.

It's a fable that comes back to him often as he pursues his own work as a fund manager. "I think when you take a look today on Wall Street or at corporate culture, sometimes people just get too greedy, too motivated by money, and they end up doing things that cause them to go to jail," he says. "You bet the farm, you can lose the farm."

The timelessness of the fables, made present by constant reinterpretation in new editions, renews Jang as a person and as a collector. "A lot of the fables have morals that have stood the test of time," he says. "They go to the higher purpose of human nature."

~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.