Rodney McRae

Aesop's Fables

Australia (1990)

TAGS: Aesop Aesop's Fables Fable Jupiter Mercury Venus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Aesop's Fables
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1990
First Edition Details	Rodney McRae, *Aesop's Fables*. Sydney, Margaret Hamilton, 1990, 96 pp.
ISBN	0947241078
Awards	1990 – IBBY Honours List – McRae was given a High Commendation by the Munich Youth Council, West Germany for his Aesop's Fables; 2011 – Artist in Residence Program at Taronga Park Zoo, Sydney (February – April).
Genre	Adaptations, Didactic fiction, Fables, Illustrated works
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Rodney McRae , b. 1958
(Author, Illustrator)

Rodney McRae was born in New Zealand in 1958. He studied design, sociology and contemporary architectural history in New Zealand. He has worked as an animator, illustrator, and graphic designer for Television New Zealand and as a freelance children's book author and illustrator. In 1984 he moved to Australia. Since 1985 McRae's sculptures, paintings and photography have featured in many group exhibitions. McRae's illustrations draw upon a wide range of cultural motifs and art forms as reflected in his visual interpretations in *Aesop's Fables*.

Bio prepared by Margaret Bromley, University of New England, mbromle5@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

McRae's illustrations interpret Aesop's fables through a range of international art forms and visual references. He is inspired by folk art and design, as well as some of the earliest known European artworks, such as the Lascaux cave paintings, Australian Indigenous, Mayan and Aztec art, Indian art, and contemporary Japanese woodblocks which enhance the reader's interpretations of the fables. McRae also uses collage from torn paper, scraperboard, charcoal and watercolours.

McRae's interpretations include Aesop's stock characters of gods, humans and talking animals. Human foibles such as those of vanity, pride, hypocrisy, selfishness and foolishness are easily recognisable in the animal characters.

Aesop's *Fables* (c. 550 B.C.), the most well known of all fables, with their animal characters depicting human traits, have for centuries been considered an ideal introduction to reading for children. Aesop's comic wit and his pithy plotlines ensured that the reception of the moral lesson was more palatable through humans disguised as animals. There have been countless illustrators of Aesop's fables, interpreting his tales according to their own socio-historical contexts, well as from a personal vision of the artistic potential of the dramatic tableau of animal interactions set in a pastoral setting.

McRae's selection of sixty-three fables includes many of the more well-known fables such as *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *The Hare and the Tortoise* and *The Fox and the Crow*. The stock characters of satire, the (cowardly) Lion, the (predatory) Wolf and the (cunning) Fox appear frequently in the fables.

Jupiter, the all-powerful sky god, plays a role in Aesop's fables as he makes irrevocable decisions that govern human and animal lives; for example the origins of body shape, as in the fable of *Jupiter and the Tortoise*, where Jupiter decrees that the Tortoise should be encumbered by carrying his house upon his back for the rest of his life. However, the Tortoise is the winner in *The Hare and the Tortoise*. McRae's illustration is inspired by the traditional codes of Aboriginal art, depicting an Australian long-necked tortoise and an eager hare through cross-hatching and dot painting.

Fables have an intergenerational appeal which is acknowledged through McRae's nuanced illustrations. The political meaning of *The*

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Frogs Asking for a King from Jupiter is quite transparent to a more sophisticated reader as they recognise the moral "We get the leaders we deserve".

Mercury and Venus are supportive of humans in need of help, but they expect honesty and integrity in return. In *Mercury and the Woodman* Mercury helps a grieving woodman who has lost his axe in a deep river. Mercury tests the woodman's honesty by retrieving first a golden axe, then a silver axe, and finally, the woodman's axe, which he rightfully claims. Upon hearing this story, another woodman let his axe fall in the river and claims the golden axe that Mercury retrieves. "But Mercury was so disgusted at his dishonesty that he not only declined to give him the golden axe, but also refused to recover for him the one that he had let fall into the river". McRae's illustration of this fable is inspired by Russian folk art. Mercury's traditional long gown is embellished with embroidered motifs and lush furs whilst the Woodman wears a simple grey tunic, their costumes reinforcing social hierarchy.

In the fable of *Venus and the Cat* Venus graciously changes a besotted cat into a young woman so that she can marry her owner, a handsome young man. However, she fails Venus's test of integrity. When Venus lets a mouse run loose in the house, the woman reverts to her previous cat habits and chases the mouse. "The goddess was so disgusted that she changed her back into a cat".

McRae's interpretation of *Venus and the Cat* is based on classical Athenian vase designs, which used a black pen on red clay. The young man is depicted anxiously repelling the predatory young woman, whilst Venus, the goddess of love and his guardian in this scenario, stands by, ready to take action.

Analysis

McRae's illustrations respond to the timeless genre of the fables attributed to Aesop as well as their international standing as one of the earliest forms of literature that children appropriated from their elders. The multicultural styles and motifs in his illustrations allude to the fables or fable motifs from other literary cultures; for example the Indian Panchantra storybooks and Buddhist Jatakas. Readers can notice a similarity to the fables of La Fontaine, whose first book of fables, published in 1668, was derived from Aesop's fables.

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This Australian publication of Aesop's fables is the result of close collaboration between publisher Margaret Hamilton of Margaret Hamilton Books and illustrator Rodney McRae. Margaret Hamilton Books, an imprint of Scholastic Australia from 1996 to 2001, was a small publishing company dedicated to the production of high-quality children's books, specialising in picture books promoting Australian authors and original illustrators. Whilst both publisher and illustrator worked on the text, the fables in this book were chosen as vehicles for McRae's varied interpretations of the fables. The last page of the book includes notes on the techniques used and the artistic style or culture that inspired the illustrations.

The collection evolved over a long period and, given the financial constraints of printing such a book, both illustrator and publisher had to be selective as to what they included. However, from the publisher's point of view, the book sold so well that it was re-released in a paperback edition (Margaret Hamilton, 15/02/17, email).

At the time of publication, 1990, McRae's *Aesop's Fables* exemplified the new movement in Australian children's book publishing by a small publisher, which promoted the art of children's book illustration as an interactive reading experience through the visual and the verbal texts. The compressed form of the fable is an accessible genre for younger readers, many of whom on their first reading or hearing the fable would not appreciate its origins in classical antiquity. McRae's illustrations alert the reader to the universal appeal of Aesop's fables whilst the verbal nuances resonate a code of language that seems timeless.

There is a humanist concern running through this selection of Aesop's fables that demonstrate the rewards of the generosity of spirit towards mankind and the wisdom of thoughtful actions. Humans are supposed to be rational beings but some do think and behave like animals. McRae's selection of fables omits fables that demonstrate the natural order of preying animals, e.g. *The Wolf and the Lamb*, in which a wolf tyrannises an innocent lamb as a pretext for making a meal out of her. There is little violence in the short narratives selected and illustrated by McRae. Physical harm comes to those who deserve it, such as in the well known *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, where the wolf disguises himself as a sheep in order to take advantage of them, but his deception results in himself being slaughtered for dinner.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aesop Aesop's Fables Fable Jupiter Mercury Venus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Humanism Morality Nature
Further Reading	Lesnik-Oberstein, Karin, "Children's Literature and the Environment", in Richard Kerridge, Neil Sammells, eds., *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, London: Zed Books, 1998.

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