Janet Stevens: The Artist Who Talks to Animals

Lillian H. Heil

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Janet Stevens: The Artist Who Talks to Animals

by Lillian H. Heil
Professor Emeritus
Brigham Young University

The reader of From Pictures to Words: A Book About Making a Book by Janet Stevens finds that animals “talk” to her. They demand to be in her stories with pleas like “We want something exciting to do. We need places to go, people to meet. We’re like actors without a stage, burgers without buns, aliens without spaceships!” To Stevens, animals are people, and she uses their animal characteristics to intensify universal human qualities.

Stevens was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1953. Her father’s naval career later took her family to Virginia, Rhode Island, Florida and Hawaii. After earning a degree in fine arts from the University of Colorado in 1975, Stevens was encouraged by artist Tomie dePaola to try illustrating children’s books. Her first illustrations were for an anthology of holiday poems, Calooh! Callay! Holiday Poems for Young Readers, edited by Myra Cohen Livingston, published in 1978.

Since Stevens carries on an ongoing conversation with animals, it will come as no surprise that her version of The Emperor’s New Clothes stars a rather plump pig as the emperor. Through animal characters, she intensifies human qualities we all recognize. She recognizes that animals can be in situations readers may question when humans are involved. For example, it is acceptable to have a pig “emperor” appear in the nude. No reader is distracted by the nudity of a pig; no adults have to wonder if the picture should be shown to children; and no children need wonder if it’s all right to look at pictures of a nude pig. They can all focus on the vanity and pride of the emperor.

But Stevens does more than illustrate and tell exciting stories. Animals can be sneaky and tricky, as in Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock, retold by Eric Kimmel and illustrated by Janet Stevens. However, no one need worry about whether or not Anansi the Spider is a bad example for children. It doesn’t matter whether or not Anansi suffers consequences for his sneaky behavior. Readers can simply enjoy a funny story, while recognizing that Stevens’ animals are really people. Sometimes Stevens makes her animals look like stuffed toys, as the lion does in Anansi, but the posture and expressions are human. (Don’t miss the first appearance of the little bush deer in the story; she is not mentioned in the text until half way through the story.) All through this tale, the furrowed brows, positions of front paws, smiles, animals sitting in chairs, and even the spider waving his legs in the air as he talks tell us they are really people in animal shapes.

Picture 1: ©Janet Stevens 1995, Tops and Bottoms, courtesy of Harcourt Brace

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1997
In *Tops and Bottoms*, Stevens introduces the story with an inventive layout that relates to the title. The tops of all the vegetables are on the top of the two-page spread, and the roots are on the bottom. (see picture 1) The book has to be read by turning the binding to the top (instead of on the left-hand side). All the way through the book Stevens has used this kind of visual joke whenever it fits. For example, one picture shows Bear’s house on the top, viewed through the hole that is the hares’ home on the bottom. In this same illustration, a six-pack plastic top is used as a ladder. It seems to indicate further the poverty of the hare family.

The animals in *Tops and Bottoms* look more realistic, but not in their expressions or positions. In this picture, notice that Bear’s sprawl across a chair would be an impossible position to sleep in. (see picture 2)

The fact that Bear has to have Hare yell in his ear to wake him makes this human-looking bear seem sleepier and lazier than if he were stretched out on a bed. The next picture in the book shows Bear with one eye open staring at all the useless tops of carrots, radishes and beets. His facial expression reveals his displeasure, while his posture indicates he’s only half awake. (see picture 3)

In addition, the visual theme of separating tops and bottoms continues on this two-page spread with the carrots, beets, and radishes. Later when Bear demands bottoms, the illustration shows broccoli, lettuce and celery on the top and a most disgruntled and more wakeful bear on the bottom, staring at a useless pile of roots.

Be sure to look for the inventive layout, pictures that show an integral part of the story, wonderful details, and humorous but affectionate views of human nature—all in Stevens’ illustrations of animal characters.