

Chocolate's Brown Study in The Bag
And Other Animals In Literature

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1. Gillian and Verner – Mr and Mrs Bickley of Proverse Publishing, friends, ladies and gentlemen. I am most delighted to be launching my book at Helena May, since my wife's name is Helena, and she is the female lead character of my book, although Chocolate is the eponymous **HERO!** I must begin by expressing my most heartfelt thanks to the organizers of this event [to Proverse Publishing and the Literary Festival] for offering me this **VERY RARE** and **MOST TREASURED** opportunity for me to.....**TALK!** You see, in my workplace HKU, I am such a slow talker that people I am talking to invariably finish my sentences for me. And at home, well, I may start to talk, but I am never allowed to finish my sentence!
2. That's why I **seize** every possible opportunity to talk: I **teach** as an Honorary Professor, I **host** radio programs, I give **seminars**, all on music or drama or opera or translation. I **relish** every chance to deliver **MONOLOGUES**, just like this evening, with **NO INTERRUPTIONS** – except...when you **SNORE!**
3. I am supposed to talk about my new book entitled ***Chocolate's Brown Study in the Bag*** and ***Other Animals in Literature***. [This topic **implies** that my book ranks among the "Animals in Literature" category. Well, that's for my readers, **IF ANY**, to judge]. I will just tell you **HOW** and **WHY** I wrote this book.
4. The **HOW** is simple. Firstly, I put myself in the place of my pet toy poodle **Chocolate**. So he is telling his own story in the **first person**, and I am

merely his scribe. Secondly, the **situation**, or **context**, of **pretext**, what you will. Because Chocolate is small in size, weighing under 4 kilograms, and well-trained to stay quiet and still, once he is zipped up and hidden in a bag, I can carry him with me to any place, including places where dogs are not allowed. I mentioned in my book taking him to Sunday Mass in church, to dinners and banquets in restaurants and even to watch movies. [To update, his latest breakthrough was attending the fundraising concert of the HK Academy for Performing Arts at the City Hall Concert Hall. My son Phoebus was one of the alumni performers. That's a high risk gamble because Chocolate sings whenever he hears Phoebus playing the piano. But this time he kept quiet throughout.] The pretext is that when Chocolate is in a brown study shut up in the bag he would **dream** and **fantasize** and reminisce, about our family and how we interact with him, so the book is made up of his **stream of consciousness** so to speak, or **stream of subconsciousness** to be precise.

5. Then let me talk about WHY I wrote such a book. I quoted Lydia Chan my friend who works in the Monetary Authority and her column in the HKEJ which says, "Dogs by nature know how to fill their relatively short life with happiness. Man has just failed to grasp that feat throughout the centuries and wastes decades in his lifespan unhappily, looking for the recipe for happiness." I chronicled Chocolate's first 33 months of his life of happiness, in order to share with my readers Chocolate's recipe for happiness. You want to know what it is? Well, buy a copy and look for the answer! My **conclusion** in this little book is that **Chocolate brings happiness to my family and to everybody around him, and that is his purpose in this world.**

6. [To support my **conclusion** let me cite an instance not mentioned in my book. The number of pet dogs in the building where I live has multiplied. From an **absolutely reliable source** – my domestic helper – neighbours have seen me playing ball with Chocolate (after his walk) in the lift lobby and envy our obvious happiness so they in turn become dog owners!]

7. Now let me turn to talk about **Animals in Literature**. I am aware of my own limitations and will only talk about **literary works I myself have come across**. And I will start with **my childhood reading**.

8. Since this is the New Year of the Rabbit, let me begin with the **Tale of Peter Rabbit by Harry....sorry, I mean Beatrix Potter**. I always have a soft spot for Beatrix because her parents are Mr Rupert & Mrs Helen Potter. I will just make a couple of observations about Peter Rabbit, which I assume is familiar to you all. Firstly, the author employs **anthropomorphism**, i.e. attributing human characteristics to non-humans: the rabbits talk in human language, wear clothes etc. Secondly, it started as a pictorial story book. Beatrix Potter first told the story in picture letters she wrote with drawings and sent them to cheer up a boy in his sick bed, the 5-year old son of her former governess. The Peter Rabbit characters started a series of merchandize, pioneering Disney or Peanuts in USA, Hello Kitty in Japan and McDull in Hong Kong. My tooth brushes in my bathroom for instance are placed in a Peter Rabbit container. An important point I wish to make, besides that pictorial books lead to merchandizing naturally, is that I was no precocious child who could read original literary classics at the age of six. I was reading illustrated classics, of simplified dialogues, in Chinese translation, and enclosed in balloons above the characters, in the form of comic books. That is a great vehicle for children's initiation to literature. [A few years back I helped promote the Commercial Press **Black Cat** series of English classics in **simplified readers** form and Shakespeare in the form of comic books, by giving a talk to English teachers and I quoted Deng Xiaoping "Never mind Black Cat or White Cat, he who could catch a mouse is a good cat. And the Black Cat series is a good start. Turn to the White Cat, or original unabridged version, when the child grows older."]

9. On the one hand, the country setting of **Peter Rabbit**, beautifully described and illustrated in drawings, goes well with the simple innocent text, painting a **pastoral** or even **idyllic** scene one would cherish with NOSTALGIA of

one's childhood days. Similar works I can enumerate are Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) which started in the Rabbit Hole, there's the hurrying White Rabbit with the pocket watch on chain, and the grinning Cheshire Cat; Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) in which you have the **Mole**, the **Rat**, the **Toad** and the **Badger**; A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), "A book that we all greatly loved and admired and read aloud or alone, over and over and over" ; and of course, *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877) – I can still recall the nostalgic ending line by the *Black Beauty*. "I fancy I am still in the orchard at Bertwick standing with my old friends under the apple trees." The common features are **anthropomorphic** animal characters who actually speak English. Then of course there are those who speak French, like *Master Cat or Puss in Boots* by Charles Perrault, originally "*Le Maitre Chat ou le Chat Botte*" (1697) or in Italian, such as *Pinocchio* by Carlo Colloidi (1883), a musical play version of which I translated into Cantonese for Chung Ying Theatre Company to perform in **1988**; in which there is the Cricket as a sort of the voice of Pinocchio's conscience, and the villains, a fox and a cat.

10. And I can go on with an easily endless list, from Hans Christian Anderson to Brothers Grimm right down to Oscar Wilde with his *Swallow and the Happy Prince*. But let me go back to make that one last point about that **on the one hand** pastoral and idyllic **Peter Rabbit**. **On the other hand**, here is a quotation printed as caption to the picture of Peter Rabbit and his family on a tray that holds my glasses of morning drinks, "Now my dears" said old Mrs Rabbit one morning, "You may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr McGregor's garden: your father has an accident there: he was put in a pie by Mrs McGregor. " Well, clearly there is a **somber** and **sinister note** there!

11. On that **note**, let me go back to more ancient literature. Still on rabbits, let's recall early **fables** in **ancient civilizations**. Aesop the Greek slave told such great stories like *The Tortoise and the Hare* and the *Fox* that first uttered "**Sour grapes**". About the same time, **4-500 years Before Christ**,

we also had the classic **Records of the Warring States** in ancient China, a period in which ministers of each warring state would try to persuade and convince the state ruler with fables. The rabbit fable is well-known. A hunter gave up hunting and sat idly under a tree waiting for another running rabbit to hit its head against the tree and die, after getting such an easy game once. And there's also a famous **fox** fable of a **fox borrowing the terror of a tiger**, similar to the English saying "**to be an ass in the lion's skin**".

12. But **fables** and **children stories** are but **juvenile literature**. Let me go to more heavy weight classics of ancient civilizations that I first read as a child. In Chinese, there is of course the celebrated 16th century classic *Journey to the West*, for which I recommend Arthur Waley's English translation entitled *The Monkey* (1943), retelling an interesting story of the Tang Dynasty Monk **Tripitaka** and his three disciples, **Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy**, travelling to **India** in a quest for the **Buddha's Sutras**, meeting numerous **monsters** on the way. So from cynical and satirical fables, we now come to classics where **anthropomorphic animal characters** include both **the good** like Monkey, and **the bad** and ugly like the monsters, such as **Monster King Ox**, and the **Black Mane Lion** which was the **Bodhisattva Manjusri's** mount but turned into human form and usurped a king's throne for three years before meeting the Monkey, yet no harm's done to the queen at least, because the Lion had been gelded by the Bodhisattva. That's the moral limit. And there's a moral: through rigorous practice of Buddhist or Taoist asceticism, animals could in time attain human form and even ultimately, divinity like Monkey. But there's the danger of turning bad in the process and becoming a monster instead.

13. Then I'll turn to Indian classics. The two famous ancient epics are *Mahabharata* (which I will pass over) and *Ramayana* (Journey of Rama), which appeared between **2 to 5 centuries B.C.** It's the story of **Prince Rama** who gave up the throne for brotherly love (so unlike our local princes who scramble to have twins and triplets just to maximize inheritance

claims), whose wife the **Princess Sita** was abducted by **Ravana the Monster with 10 Heads** on the **Island of Lanka (Sri Lanka)**. The abridged children's version I read concentrated on how the **magic monkey Hanuman** helped Prince Rama to defeat and destroy Ravana and rescued Sita. English translations of *Ramayana* appeared in the 19th Century, and the latest one by Penguins was in 2006, "*Rama the steadfast: an Early Form of the Ramayana*". I'd say it seems no coincidence that both the Chinese and Indian classics have a **magic monkey** as the **hero!**

14. A **passing note** on other ancient civilizations. There are no lack of examples of anthropomorphism. [In **Greek myths**, they anthropomorphize not only animals but also **non-human immortals**, the gods have human characteristics including faults and shortcomings of envy, jealousy, blind anger, spite and lust, etc. That's why Greek gods are so much more lovable because we mortals can empathize with them!] Then there are the semi animals like Centaurs, half human half horse, and Pegasus the horse with wings, on the good side; and on the bad and ugly side we have satyrs and gorgons and hydras and harpies. I remember translating *Monster Man* for Chung Ying (1987), it was a play by **Bernard Goss** the late Artistic Director of Chung Ying, an adaptation of the tale of **Theseus** who slew monsters along his path to become an idol, a parody on all **idols** that while you slay monsters in your way on your path to stardom you are at risk of becoming a monster yourself. And the ultimate monster Theseus faced in the labyrinth on the island of Crete was of course the half bull half human **Minotaur**. And I will skip over **Egypt** and **Assyria** and **Babylon** etc where we've all seen the **lions** with human heads or humans with **birdbrains** – I mean **bird heads**.

15. Right, from **pastoral, idyllic** fairy tales, to **more sinister** myths and legends with **monsters** and **villains**. In my preteen years I was a cubscout [you only qualified to be a boy scout at 12 and before that you could join as a cubscout]. That institution was based on Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894). We were the wolf cubs in the pack under Akela, the

Leader of the pack. Other scout leaders include Baloo the Bear, Kaa the Python and Bagheera the Black Panther. But there is the arch villain: Sheer Khan the Tiger who in the original *Jungle Book* was the sworn enemy of the human hero **Mowgli** the boy raised by the wolves. Then we had other **not so pretty tales** in the first half of the 20th Century like C S Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950) and before that **JRR Tolkien's** classic *The Hobbit* (1937) and later *Lord of the Rings* (1955). On the **positive** side they brought us epic movies with great visual effects, and John Ratcliff commented they had "*The Doctor Doolittle Theme*" (Dr Doolittle is of course another film classic about the vet who knows animal speak and could communicate with them, twice made into films, first with Rex Harrison and then the black version with Eddie Murphy as the Doctor). On the **negative** side these more somber children's classics are criticized for having led to the subculture of "**Furry Fandom**", to which I had referred earlier. That reminds me of my very first translation for Chung Ying Theatre Company. It was a Czech play called *Insect Play* by the **Capek Brothers** Karel & Josef who also wrote the more famous *RUR*. *Insect Play* is a parody of the human world, with a happy couple of crickets dreaming about their new home and babies when they were abruptly killed by an Ichneumon fly (a sort of poisonous wasp), to feed its own baby, who in turn got swallowed by another predatory insect; a dung beetle couple making their pile-of dung; and red ants army fighting yellow ants in a territorial war of ludicrous miniscule scale. I remember at that time I was caught in a heated debate on what children's plays and tales should be. One school of thought was that children would one day grow up and discover all the bad and sad and evil and unjust things in life. We should preserve their childhood innocence and tell them stories of an untainted world of **beauty** and **goodness**. The other school criticized that this was overprotective and raising children like plants in a hot house, that they would be so shocked and disillusioned at their very first encounter with unpleasant things in life (such as pepper spray). Well, which side did I take? I said there were already ugly things in children's stories such as witches, the big bad wolf and fire spitting dragon,

etc. *The Beauty* and *The Beast* always come together!

16. That brings me to North America, to **Jack London**. His **1903** novel *The Call of The Wild* has a dog as its hero, telling how **Buck** the **Scotch Shepherd** crossed with **St Bernard** ventured to the polar land of Alaska, became a sled dog, killed Indians to avenge the killing of his owner and finally followed the call of the wild, joined the pack and became a **wolf**. Then his **1906** novel *The White Fang* has another eponymous hero of a wolf cub called White Fang who was a **dog fight champ**, was tamed and eventually saved the life of the Judge his owner. I won't quote Jack London as my precursor. Because he was criticized by so many, notably US President Teddy Roosevelt, as a "Nature Faker" telling unbelievable stories. I'll be careful not to send my book to Barack Obama. Jack London offered the following self-defence, "I have been guilty of writing two animals – two books about dogs. The writing of these two stories, on my part, was in truth a protest against the humanizing of animals, of which it seemed to me several animal writers have been profoundly guilty. Time and again, and many times in my narratives, I wrote, speaking of my dog-heroes, 'he did not think these things, he merely did them'. To hammer into the average human understanding that these dog heroes were not directed by abstract reasoning but by instinct, sensations and emotions – in line with evolution."

17. With that statement in mind, I ponder upon Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. *Captain Ahab* pursued the white whale Moby Dick as an **intelligent** enemy and in the end one is not sure, of Ahab and Moby Dick, who is the nemesis of whom. This gloomy and bizarre fiction is in sharp contrast to the play *Whale* I translated for Chung Ying in 1993, which is by **David Holman** the environment-loving Australian playwright, about how people try all means available, ice breakers and helicopters included, to save the whale washed up high and dry on an ice floe at the North Pole, with a happy ending. [The helicopter has a Polish name, you know, ending in S-K-Y but not pronounced sky.]

18. Oh, and by association with Jack London, let me recommend *Wolf Totem* (2004) by Jiang Rong the contemporary Chinese novelist. Penguin saw its worth and bought the exclusive rights for translation into English (2008 by Howard Goldblatt) this modern classic about wolf packs and Mongolian nomadic tribesmen in north China during the Cultural Revolution. The bold statement made by the author, through the mouth of an old Mongolian shepherd in the book, is that “**Mongolians** take after the **wolves**, while Han people, the Chinese, are **sheep**”. The great **Genghis Khan** was inspired by, and copied the tactics used by wolf packs in hunting, and thereby made his conquests all the way across Asia to Europe.

19. So now let us inspect quickly the animal classics in literary history all adopting the formula of having both the beauty and the Beast. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1735) (everybody knows Parts 1 and 2 about Lilliput and Brobdingnag). Part 4 is about the **Land of the Houyhnhnms** – the elegant, civilized and gentle soft-spoken (ie anthropomorphic) horses, in contrast to **Yahoos** the savage Neanderthal humans (a name now made famous by the web server). [HG Wells’s *Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) is all about mutant animals or semi humans. No beauty at all.] More recently, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) is a satire on Stalinist dictatorship, symbolized by the **Pig Napoleon**, who coined the Commandment “**all animals are equal**” and later added the rider “but some are more equal than others” to justify his “riding on the head of the animal subjects”. However there is one beauty in this very sordid novel, viz. **Boxer** the **pack horse** whose mottos are “Napoleon is always right” and the more respect-inspiring one “**I will work harder**” which he practiced until he collapsed from sheer exhaustion!

20. The last books I would mention are my translations. One is the Nobel Laureate William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which I translated into Chinese and dramatized for a summer project for Sha Tin school children to perform on stage. A group of school children stranded on a desert island gradually turning into savages, superstitious, nature fearing and

blood thirsty, that's the story. *The Lord of the Flies* is the **head of a pig**. The children hunted it down and stuck its head on a pole as sacrifice to their superstitious fears. This Lord of the Flies gave a long (imagined) monologue telling the psychic boy Simon that it represented the evil beast within the children – the Devil so to speak, or more specifically **Beelzebub** which is called the Lord of the Flies. Simon became the first human victim the children murdered by accident, while the second victim who was murdered in cold blood actually had the nickname **Piggy**.

21. And my latest translated play performed last November at the HKAPA by students of its School of Drama was the French – Romanian playwright Ionesco's absurd drama *The Rhinoceros* (1960). This updated version directed by a guest director from France is set in a modern day big firm with black suited staff all playing with iPads and iPhones, then turning one by one into rhinos. All except Berenger the hero, or rather, the antihero because he's a slovenly slob, who nonetheless persisted to the last to stay human and not follow the crowd and turn into a beast. I won't pretend to understand it, but I specialize in translating what I don't fully understand from not fully comprehensible English into not fully comprehensible Chinese.

22. That's also why I don't mention *Metamorphosis* (1915) by Franz **Kafka**, which was in fact a prescribed text in my syllabus when I read Comparative Literature at HKU, but I skipped it, having enough options of other works. Why? Because there are three kinds of Kafka readers, those who **think** they understand him, those who **pretend** they understand him, and those who **honestly admit** they don't understand him; and I belong to this last category.

23. And a last question: who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? I am. Because she wrote *Flush* (1933) the autobiography of a cocker spaniel belonging to the 19th Century poetess Elizabeth Barret Browning, Robert Browning's wife. *Flush* is a **stream of consciousness novel** passing as non-fiction biography. It tells a much more eventful story, about Flush's jealousy of

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Robert as a suitor, his abduction by dognappers and ransom, and his tour of Italy. I am afraid my little book on Chocolate is nowhere near that class. [Compared to “Flush”, my hand is only “two pairs”.]

24. That completes my guided tour of the hall of fame, or rogues gallery, what you will, of animals in literature. Coming back to my book, it does not attempt that level of sophistication of the works I mention at all. Instead it is just for light reading and for fun, and I hope you will enjoy reading it too. To quote Zheng Banqiao my favourite Chinese painter, calligrapher and poet of the Qing Dynasty, “if my book is not your cup of tea, use it to cover tea cups, jars and bowls.”

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Rupert Chan's book, *Chocolate's Brown Study in the Bag*, Finalist for the 2009 Proverse Prize, was published by Proverse Hong Kong on 9 March 2011. It is available from online retailers (including amazon.com), in Hong Kong bookstores and from its Distributors, the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. [http://www.chineseupress.com/asp/e\\_Book\\_card.asp?BookID=3054&Lang=E](http://www.chineseupress.com/asp/e_Book_card.asp?BookID=3054&Lang=E)  
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**RUPERT CHAN** is a university administrator, award-winning playwright and lyricist, and a well-known versatile translator, writer, radio host, and opera commentator. Many are in his debt for his English sur-titles and sub-titles for Cantonese operas and films. He is Chairman of Directors of the Chung Ying Theatre Company and a Director of the Composers' and Authors' Society of Hong Kong (CASH). He has been an adviser on opera and drama to the Hong Kong Government's Leisure and Cultural Services Department. *Chocolate's Brown Study in the Bag* is Chan's second book in English.

Chan received the Hong Kong Artists' Guild Playwright of the Year Award in 1990. He wrote the lyrics in Mandarin of *Nine Regions Singing As One*, composed by Professor Chan Wing-wah for the 1997 Hong Kong Reunification with China (sung by Warren Mok and Choir), which won the Most Performed Original Local Serious Work Award from the Composers' and Authors' Society of Hong Kong. He received the Home Affairs Bureau Certificate of Commendation for making outstanding achievements in the promotion of arts and culture in 2004.

**"Rupert Chan has a light, humorous touch. Delightful. Witty." —Proverse Prize Judges, 2009.**