

# Owls in the Family



**Farley Mowat**

## **Chapter 1**

One May morning, my friend Bruce and I went for a hike on the prairie.

Spring was late that year in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Snowdrifts still clung along the steep banks of the river, in the shelter of the cottonwood trees. The river was icy with thaw water and, as we crossed over the Railroad Bridge, we could feel a cold breath rising from it. But we felt another breath, a gentle one, blowing across the distant wheat fields and smelling like warm sun shining on soft mud. It was the spring wind, and the smell of it made us walk faster. We were in a hurry to get out of the city and into the real prairie, where you can climb a fence post and see for about a million miles—that's how flat the prairie is.

The great thing about Saskatoon was the way it ended sharp all around its edge. There were no outskirts to Saskatoon. When you stepped off the end of the Railroad Bridge you stepped right onto the prairie and there you were—free as the gophers.

Gophers were the commonest thing on the prairie. The little mounds of yellow dirt around their burrows were so thick, sometimes, it looked as if the fields had yellow measles.

But this day Bruce and I weren't interested in gophers. We were looking for an owl's nest. We had decided that we wanted some pet owls, and if you

want pet owls you have to find a nest and get the young ones out of it.

We headed for the nearest of the clumps of cottonwood trees that dot the prairies, and which are called "bluffs" out in Saskatchewan. The ground was spongy under our sneakers, and it squooshed when we hit a wet place. A big jack rabbit bounced up right under my feet, and scared me so much I jumped almost as high as he did. And as we came nearer the bluff, two crows came zooming out of it and swooped down on us, cawing their heads off.

Bluffs are funny places in the spring. The cottonwood trees shed a kind of white fluffy stuff that looks like snow. Sometimes it's so thick it comes right over the top of your sneakers and you get a queer feeling that you really are walking through snow, even though the sun on your back is making you sweat right through your shirt.

We walked through this bluff, scuffing our feet in the cottonwood snow and stirring it up in clouds. We kept looking up; and after a while, sure enough, we saw a big mess of twigs high up in a poplar.

"All right," Bruce said to the two crows which were swooping and hollering at us. "If you want me to snatch your eggs—I will!"

With that he handed me his haversack and began to shinny up the tree.

It was an easy climb, because cottonwood poplars always have lots of branches. When he got to the nest and looked into it I yelled up at him: "Any eggs?" Bruce grinned but he wouldn't answer. I could see him doing something with his free hand—the one he wasn't holding on with—and I knew there

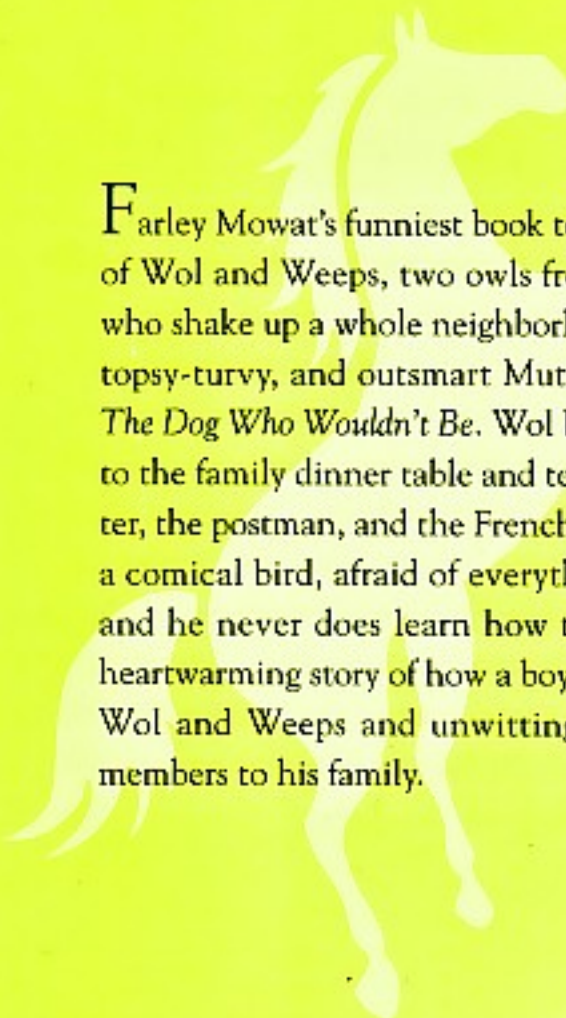




were eggs there all right. I watched, and sure enough he was popping them into his mouth so he could carry them down out of the tree.

We always carried eggs down out of trees that way. The only thing was, crows' eggs are pretty big, and if you have to stuff three or four of them into your mouth it nearly chokes you.

Bruce started to climb down. When he got about ten feet from the ground he stepped on a rotten branch. Poplar branches are always rotten near the ground, and you have to watch out for them. I guess Bruce forgot. Anyway, the branch broke and he slid the rest of the way and lit on his seat with a good hard bump.



Farley Mowat's funniest book tells the adventures of Wol and Weeps, two owls from Saskatchewan who shake up a whole neighborhood, turn a house topsy-turvy, and outsmart Mutt, the dog hero of *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*. Wol brings dead skunks to the family dinner table and terrorizes the minister, the postman, and the French teacher. Weeps is a comical bird, afraid of everything except Mutt, and he never does learn how to fly. Here is the heartwarming story of how a boy named Billy finds Wol and Weeps and unwittingly adds two new members to his family.

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