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Our Mascot Won't Wear Wellies

Who Needs Paddington? Seeking a Mascot for New York City

By SARAH LYALL JAN. 15, 2015

Here at Weekend Arts, we are always excited about new movies featuring anthropomorphized animals. As we waited for “Paddington” to arrive, some of us got to thinking. If a small, confused, marmalade-loving bear from Peru is an emblem of sorts for London, where is our mascot for New York? Is there an animal — or a character of some kind — who stands for our city? If not, should we make up our own?

First, a word about Paddington. He is not English at all. He is an exotic foreigner. His understanding of London is the understanding of a South American mammal deposited into a bewildering new environment with little more than the coat on his back, the hat on his head and an introductory note of sorts pinned to his collar.

We can relate to that. The immigrant experience is, of course, embedded into the fabric of life in New York. We are all outsiders, one way or another, and we are all at times as befuddled by our native city as Paddington is by his adopted one. We cannot be pigeonholed. It is hard to sum up our experiences, let alone channel them into a single being who represents all of us.

But we will try.

From children's literature, of course, there is Lyle the Crocodile, who is helpful and resourceful and, though he probably doesn't realize it, represents the population of crocodiles who may or may not live in this mysterious city's sewage system. There is Harriet the Spy, who epitomizes the curiosity of New Yorkers and also our tendency to write things down.

Other non-animals include the disaffected Holden Caulfield, whose existential musings about the people in the city and the ducks in Central Park sometimes resonate with us, especially in winter, and the cheerful Eloise, who makes us wish that we, too, lived at the Plaza (before all those changes) and could spend our time roller-skating through the halls, tampering with the mail and ordering room service.

Chester, the musical cricket from "The Cricket in Times Square" who helps rescue a subway newsstand from bankruptcy, shows New Yorkers' entrepreneurial spirit and generosity. Archy, from "Archy and Mehitabel," proves that even our cockroaches are smart.

King Kong reminds us that although assertiveness can sometimes be attractive in romantic relationships, this does not hold true if our date is also threatening to rip apart our favorite building. Spider-Man speaks to New Yorkers' difficulty in reconciling our professional and personal lives. Batman does not come from New York, per se, but he shows how, with the right backdrop, you, too, could look fantastic in a long, swirly cape.

How about a real animal? Pale Male, the mesmerizing hawk? Gus, the Central Park Zoo's neurotic polar bear (now deceased), who, according to his therapist, was "just bored and mildly crazy in the way that a lot of people are in New York City"? (It's too early to tell how bored and/or crazy the zoo's two grizzly newcomers, Betty and Veronica, will turn out to be.) Chuck (or Charlotte), the gender-fluid groundhog who bit Mayor Bill de Blasio last year and then died under mysterious circumstances, providing us with one of our favorite things: a political scandal that may involve homicide? Or some new modern character that has not yet been invented: a locavore Williamsburg gerbil with a thing for sautéed brussels sprouts?

If it were up to me, I would vote for Stuart Little. His creator, E. B. White, was a great New Yorker writer who wrote one of the great essays about the city. Stuart

represents our tolerance, ingenuity, adventurous spirit, good looks and optimism. He leaves the city to find his way in the great wide world, but he knows who he is. Like all of us, Stuart will always be a New Yorker.

Below, several New Yorkers make suggestions for a New York City mascot. Please share yours in the comments.

LYLE THE CROCODILE

“When Paddington Bear arrives in New York City, he will be welcomed with open arms (and a big tail hug) by Lyle the Crocodile. Lyle has the best of taste, as he lives in a Victorian brownstone on East 88th Street with the Primm family. Lyle is a lovable crocodile who has been described in *The New York Times* as nice, sensitive, urbane and “perfectly plausible.” He’s the perfect (although green) N.Y.C. welcoming-committee-of-one for Paddington Bear.”

Chris Loker, *Grolier Club member and curator of the exhibition “One Hundred Books Famous in Children’s Literature” at the club.*

FRITZ THE CAT

“R. Crumb’s Fritz the Cat, from the story where he’s attending N.Y.U., hanging around the Village, getting into trouble. I’ve had it in mind for many years to do a funny-animals comic of my own about city animals, mostly vermin. Rats, pigeons, squirrels, roaches, mice. But then I think about spending that much time in their company, and I retreat. But I still might. There’s something admirable about their pluck, their tenacity. So long as they stay the hell out of my apartment.”

Bob Fingerman, *artist and comic book writer.*

THE GRAY SQUIRREL

“There are so many qualified candidates in Central Park — Balto the heroic sled dog, majestic red-tailed hawks, and a healthy population of raccoons and chipmunks — but after a robust debate in our office, we want to nominate the gray squirrel. It is by far the most popular and photographed creature in the park, and just like New Yorkers, they are hard-working, resourceful and stylish.”

Douglas Blonsky, *president and chief executive of the Central Park Conservancy.*

THE FERRET

“What other animal understands our need for flexibility, is at home in tight places, enjoys a sleep mid-commute, relishes collecting objects and embraces tenacity, yet knows how to party? Ferrets also share our hatred of humidity, below-freezing temperatures, rats and subpar food (they’d rather starve than eat something not to their liking).”

Ariel Jasper, *member of New York Ferrets.*

PATIENCE AND FORTITUDE, THE LIBRARY LIONS

“Patience and Fortitude remind us daily that to survive and thrive in this city, you need a good dosage of both. Paddington is quite an intellectual bear, loving antiques. Our lions guard 52 million treasures, have perused most of them and at times can appear to be rather snobbish about it all. But get to know them, and you will see that they put down their guard and are most welcoming.”

Paul Holdengraber, *director, Live From the New York Public Library.*

MUPPETS

“New York blends energy and intensity. Where else are there people from so many different places, who come together to talk, work and eat each other’s food? Muppets like Bert and Ernie and Oscar are always finding new ways to make mischief, solving problems that only they could invent, and bringing music and wit to every challenge they face. There is no single animal, mascot or statue that conveys New York’s spirit and zest for life. The Muppets don’t stand still, and neither does New York.”

Mitchell L. Moss, *Henry Hart Rice Professor of Urban Policy and Planning, New York University.*

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