



BROWSE



## If you are to be an owl

T. Fleischmann

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

## If you are to be an owl

*T. Fleischmann (bio)*

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My mother raised me by herself while taking night classes to be a librarian, so I spent much of my childhood in the free space of the library. Our town was small, and the children's section took up only one corner,

with soft chairs, low shelves displaying the books face-first, and a flat green carpet. Among the simple lessons were the books of Arnold Lobel, known for *Mouse Soup*, the *Frog and Toad* series, and my favorite, *Owl at Home*. The books were clouded with sadness and separation, his illustrations muted grays, greens, and browns, the weather often windy and inclement. His characters lived in that unspecified nostalgia of so much children's literature, with buggies and candles and tandem bicycles.

Lobel's books are part of the I Can Read series, designed for young children just discovering the escapism of literature and art. He writes starter chapter books (Level 2 of 4) for children who are confident with their skills and who can engage with more complex ideas, but who still need some support in reaching a narrative's conclusion. The chapters are quick and easy, often involving a complete rehashing of the plot in their eight or ten pages, or a simple pattern that could be followed several times. My mother started reading me these books when I was two. By five or six, I was able to walk through the stories on my own.

The boy I love collects owls. He is as gorgeous as a bright light and although he claims otherwise, he doesn't love me back.

The *Frog and Toad* series told the story of two close friends, the impulsive and lazy Toad and the stodgy, neat Frog. The two go on picnics and sit in front of the fireplace and bake cookies for one another. While Frog buys Toad a **[End Page 77]** pretty hat and helps him plant a flower garden, Toad worries that Frog will leave him, at one point having a nightmare in which he spins about in a ruffled shirt and feathered cap crying, "Come back, Frog, I will be lonely!" But in the end, the two are always companions, sleeping under the stars or sitting by the water, arms around one another. They are, as *Days with Frog and Toad* describes it, "alone together."

For Frog and Toad, fussiness and worrying are only a mask for love—their arguments and frustrations always foreshadow embrace. It's not surprising that within this context Toad so often drives himself into fits of doubt concerning Frog (Frog, who is lean next to Toad's pudginess,

confident and bright when Toad is confused and groggy, who even gets prime billing in the story of their relationship). In the first chapter of *Frog and Toad Together*, Toad makes a list of his day's activities: "Wake up; Eat Breakfast; Get Dressed; Go to Frog's House; Take Walk with Frog; Eat lunch; Take nap; Play Games with Frog; Eat Supper; Go to Sleep." He lives his life on the basic assumption that Frog is waiting for him, that because he wants to nap and play games, Frog will want to do the same with him. But even after a whole book of Frog telling Toad how much he cares, or of them falling asleep on each other's shoulders, or testing their bravery together, the series still ends with Toad on a note of insecurity, and Frog on reassurance. "I am so glad that you came over," says Toad. "I always do," says Frog. They are eponymously together, but a part of Toad knows that he is not meant to be the second in any pair. Because of this, and despite how happy they are, in almost every story Toad becomes certain that Frog will eventually leave him.

I sit with him, his boyfriend, and some friends in his living room.

"It's a game," he says. "See how many owls you can find in the house."

There is an owl on a towel, and a plaster owl, and a ceramic owl, and an owl that helps you hold hot dishes...

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T. FLEISCHMANN

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