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Animal Tails

Ken Kawata
Masayuki Yabuuchi, illustrator
Kane/Miller Book Publishers (March 2001)
Unknown $13.95 (32pp)
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Beginning with a long flexible tail grasping a fruit on its cover, here's a book where "ends" come first. Originally published in Japan under the title How Animal Tails Work, this vividly illustrated book challenges the reader to identify the whole of the animal from just one part. The right hand page features the south end of a north-facing animal, a brief description of its tail: "This long bushy tail works like a rudder for steering," and the question: "Whose tail is it?" Turn the page to find the rest of the animal and an explanation of how that animal uses its tail. The text describes how animals employ their tails for expressions of emotion, in guiding their movement, and even for deceptive getaways.

In clear, simple language the reader is offered the wide diversity of the world of animal tails. Although the majority of the animals are mammals, a few of the reptile family do slither in. The book features both wild and domestic animals from all corners of the globe. In all, there are ten animal puzzles, one being a marvelous past tense query.

Yabuuchi's illustrations are vibrant and lifelike. Some of the animals appear in their native habitats, while others stand out against a white background. The animal's faces are alive with expression, their bodies filled with motion. The illustrations include not only the featured animal but others it may interact with in nature. The pictures complement the text well, helping to explain the animal's behavior. Why is the Japanese monkey's tail straight up in the air? To let other monkeys know he is "tough and strong." The dolphin uses its tail to propel itself through the water, snapping it to leap into the air. There is no doubt why the bobcat is shying away from the rattlesnake.

While lacking the verse form and alphabetical sequence in Garten's The Alphabet Tale, which is similar in concept, Animal Tails has a richness of illustration and wealth of information. When read to kindergartners it rapidly became a guessing game. The children's eagerness to identify the next animal's tail practically precluded reading the text on the facing page.

MICHELE MUDAR (April 15, 2001)

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