

## First Opinion: Becoming Real: Imagining Love in Lou Berger and David Catrow's *Dream Dog*

Berger, Lou. *Dream Dog*. Illus. David Catrow.  
New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2014.

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Much like Margery Williams and William Nicholson's 1922 classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Lou Berger and David Catrow's *Dream Dog* explores how forming a bond with an imaginary friend—and then letting that bond go—can teach children to form healthy, loving relationships. Berger's text, peppered with humor, and Catrow's colorfully-detailed, idiosyncratic illustrations provide much light-hearted fodder while also probing this common psychological phenomenon.

From the story's beginning, children will sympathize with protagonist Harry's plight: Harry wants a dog. No, no, more than wants. He really *wants* a dog. But his father's job working in a pepper factory has made his nose "twitchy and sensitive" and unable to suffer having a dog in the house. Fortunately, Harry lives in a world where the lines between imagination and reality are blurred. Not placated by the lizard his father brings home (which Harry promptly gives away), Harry puts on his X-35 Infra-Rocket Imagination Helmet and imagines a dog into life. Harry's imaginary companion, Waffle—who, with his blue cotton candy fur and whimsical shape "looked like all the dogs that Harry had ever dreamed"—has much to teach his creator about sustaining a loving relationship.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Harry "didn't *love*" his lizard and even almost lets it get crushed, he forms an instant, tenderly-rendered connection with Waffle. Harry

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<sup>1</sup>This book is unpaginated. All quotes are from this edition.

makes his father roll down the window during car rides so Waffle can “stick his head out and smell everything.” During bath time he uses his father’s favorite hairbrush to groom Waffle because the dog “likes the feel of it . . . on his fleas.” In turn, Waffle snuggles close to Harry in bed, protecting him from “shadows and creakings.” But more than a meditation on imaginary companions, *Dream Dog* is also a reflection on the role that pets can play during children’s formative years. Waffle teaches his owner how to care for an animal so that, when he gets the chance, Harry will be ready for the responsibility of owning a pet.

Harry’s chance comes sooner than he expects when his father is fired from the pepper factory. After (conveniently) finding a new job almost immediately at the ping pong ball factory, he finally has the opportunity to bring home “a real live dog” to his son. But while Harry schemes to get his new dog, christened Bumper, to affirm Waffle’s existence, Catrow’s illustrations make it clear that Waffle is not adjusting well to this change in circumstance. Until this point, Waffle’s emotions have been in sync with his creator’s, but now he takes on a sorrow all his own. He watches woefully as Harry meets Bumper, who has “real hot breath” and “thick golden fur,” and cowers shamefully with his nose pressed into a corner. Once Harry is convinced that Bumper, too, has acknowledged Waffle’s presence, he gleefully leads the dogs to the park, where Waffle “leaped up into the sky to chase a passing cloud” and “was gone.” Without skipping a beat, Harry decides he “was happy that Waffle was happy” and races Bumper home.

Waffle’s sudden exit—so soon after Catrow illustrates his despair at having been replaced by Bumper—may be hard for some readers to accept. Harry never acknowledges that Waffle is imaginary. To the contrary, when Mathilda Gold, the new owner of Harry’s discarded lizard, tells him that Waffle can’t be real because no one can see him, Harry counters that he can hardly see her chameleon either. Harry is even convinced that Bumper, after donning the X-35 Infra-Rocket Imagination Helmet, can also see Waffle. Up until the moment he watches the big blue pup float away, Harry treats Waffle as a real dog and a real friend, bringing to mind the words of wisdom that the Skin Horse imparts upon the Velveteen Rabbit: “Real isn’t how you are made. . . . It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real” (Williams 5).

So it is hard to understand how Harry simply watches Waffle sail out of his life for good without so much as a tear. The book’s sudden ending brings into question just how much Harry *did* love Waffle (or was he “just to play with” after all?). Though readers will recognize the necessity of Waffle’s departure, they might wonder how it is possible to let even an imaginary dog go so easily and with so little emotion. After all, it is not Harry, but Waffle, who will win a very real place in the hearts of readers.

## Works Cited

- Berger, Lou. *Dream Dog*. Illus. David Catrow. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2014. Print.  
Williams, Margery. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. New York: Doubleday Books, 2014. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Ali Standish** is a graduate student in children's literature at Hollins University, where she won the 2014 Shirley Henn Award for critical writing. She recently moved to Cambridge, England, after working for four years as a teacher and school administrator in Washington, D.C.