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 **Trouble in the Farm Yard: Labor Relations and Politics in
Doreen Cronin's Duck Books**

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

**Trouble in the Farm Yard:
Labor Relations and Politics in Doreen Cronin's Duck
Books**

Kimberly Jack (bio)

In *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* (2000), *Giggle, Giggle, Quack* (2002), and *Duck for President* (2004), author Doreen Cronin and illustrator Betsy Lewin rewrite the farmyard as a site of labor activism and political action. The first two works, *Click, Clack, Moo* and *Giggle, Giggle, Quack*, recast farm animals as agricultural workers utilizing their collective voice to gain benefits from the farm's management. *Duck for President* uses characters established in the earlier books in an ever-expanding depiction of the American political arena. Although Betsy Lewin's illustrations avoid total anthropomorphization of the farm animals, Cronin's text situates the animals as laborers who manipulate various implements of writing to communicate and negotiate with the farm's human management in the form of Farmer Brown and his brother Bob.

Diverse groups and individuals have seized upon this dynamic in their efforts to design educational programs. They cite Cronin's books as resources for educating children about labor relations and socialism, economics and blackmail, literacy and disenfranchisement, as well as other topics. But such attempts raise questions about the degree to which the books can be used as primers. To what extent do they effectively introduce concepts of literacy, labor dynamics, and the electoral process? Are the goals and practices of the animals in the books positive models of behavior to offer to children? Or should the books be read as satire, serving to convince citizens, at the earliest age, that politicians and union activists seek only selfish luxury? How do we determine the dividing line between parody and satire in the three works? And furthermore, how does our conception of the books' audience influence our readings and uses of them? To what extent does adult readers' privileged knowledge of American culture and history encourage an intertextual reading of the books, thereby influencing the "lessons" gleaned from the texts by parents and educators? **[End Page 409]**

The Duck Books

A brief summary of the Duck books' production attests to the books'

appeal and provides some insight into why the books have been perceived as both politically radical and politically conservative. *Click, Clack, Moo* was written by Doreen Cronin in memory of her late father, a member of the policemen's union. Betsy Lewin was called in to illustrate once the text had been accepted for publication (Castellitto). Daniel Pinkwater read the book on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, and it later received the Caldecott Honor. Cronin and Lewin, both New York residents, met after the book became popular and chose to collaborate on *Giggle, Giggle, Quack* (2002), *Duck for President* (2004), and their recent alphabet book, *Click, Clack, Quackity-Quack* (2005).¹

In *Click, Clack, Moo*'s relatively simple plot, Farmer Brown's cows find an old typewriter in the barn and use it to communicate a request for electric blankets. When Farmer Brown refuses, the cows withhold milk and persuade the hens to join them on strike. With the aid of a "neutral party," Duck, Farmer Brown eventually agrees to trade the electric blankets for the typewriter. The cows accept the blankets and turn over the typewriter, but Duck absconds with the machine and uses it to demand a diving board for the pond.

In *Giggle, Giggle, Quack* Farmer Brown goes on vacation, leaving his brother, Bob, in charge. Farmer Brown writes up detailed instructions on running the farm, but Duck substitutes his own notes. Bob has pizza delivered for the animals, bathes the pigs in Farmer Brown's bubble bath, and is popping popcorn for "movie night" when Farmer Brown calls home, ending the deception.

Duck for President depicts Duck's successive campaigns for farm manager, governor, and president. In each instance he envisions the election as a way to avoid work. The books detail various stops on the campaign trail, each incumbent's demand for a recount, and Duck's realization that farm managers, governors, and presidents have to do more work than was required back on the farm. Duck eventually leaves the country in the vice-president's hands and returns to the farm to write his autobiography...

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Kimberly Jack, a graduate student at Loyola University, Chicago, will soon complete her dissertation, which examines costume rhetoric in the Middle English poems attributed to the Pearl-Poet. She teaches courses in writing and literature at Loyola and performs weekly storytelling sessions for children at a local book store.

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