

Elizabeth Cleaver (1939-1985)

William Toye

After absorbing shock and sadness at the death on July 27 of Elizabeth Cleaver, I turned to her books, renewing my pleasure in them and appreciating her accomplishment. Elizabeth's use of the collage technique introduced something quite new into the illustration of Canadian children's books. Creating forms and backgrounds from brilliantly coloured and densely textured monoprints, and childlike figures from linocuts; sometimes using real materials (grass, birchbark, evergreen branches, fur, pearls); and controlling all these elements with an intuitive sense of design — she brought to the texts she illustrated what is most wanted in picture-storybooks for children: a colourful world of visual delight and imaginative suggestion.

In a profile of Elizabeth Cleaver published in the June 1985 issue of *Quill & Quire*, she described our meeting in November 1967. Towards the end of that year she underwent surgery for cancer. In early January she phoned me from the hospital to ask if the book I had mentioned that she might illustrate — which developed into *The wind has wings* (1968) — was still a possibility. I assured her it was. Much later she told me she prayed that if she were spared she would devote her life to making beautiful books for children. This goal remained constant and paramount in the seventeen years that remained to her, and resulted in twelve books — three of which she wrote.

Our collaboration on many of them enabled me to observe admiringly both her character and her creativity as she engaged in the difficult process of bringing a book to life. Her pictures were not achieved easily; but she knew that in time everything — elements, colour, design — would come together and be clearly right. Rejoicing briefly when that point was reached in one picture, she would then press on to the next — summoning amazing reserves of energy and determination that carried her over all discouragements. When the illustrations lay in sequence on her living-room floor, her joy and pride were wonderful to behold. This was her greatest moment. Her work then entered the production process, every detail of which she participated in. Later, when she held the finished book in her hands, she was detached and quiet. It was a gift she had made for children, what she was here to do, and she knew she had done it well.

I was greatly privileged to be associated with Elizabeth — both professionally and as a friend — in this highly creative period of her life. I think now par-

ticularly of the unusually productive last year and a half, when we worked so happily on *The new wind has wings*, her *ABC*, and *The enchanted caribou* (to be published in October). Her wish to be remembered by these and all her other books will surely be fulfilled.

Elizabeth's life was enriched by other things besides her one consuming passion. She overflowed with love for her family and friends, and responded to beauty in everything — in nature, graphic design, clothes, the books she extravagantly collected, and places and works of art she observed on her travels. The vivid memory of this tall, beautiful woman, radiating warmth and enthusiasm — reminding us that her last seventeen years were happy and fulfilling — comforts us in our loss, along with her books, and will never fade.

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William Toye is Editorial Director of Oxford University Press. He collaborated with Elizabeth Cleaver to produce three books, including *How summer came to Canada*, *The mountain goats of Temlaham*, and *The loon's necklace* which won the Frances Howard-Gibbon Award.



Elizabeth Cleaver Picture Credit William Toye