

BETWEEN THE LINES, STORIES LIVE

Gilgamesh, the king. Ludmila Zemaan, reteller. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1992. Unpag., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-283-2; **Cathal the giant killer and the dun shaggy filly.** Mary Alice Downie, reteller. Illus. Jillian Hulme Gilliland. Quarry Press, 1991. Unpag., \$12.95, \$7.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55082-008-7, 1-55082-009-5.

While retelling old stories, either from Irish legend or Greek myth, *Cathal the giant killer and the dun shaggy filly* and *Gilgamesh, the king* choose language which reflect the peculiar qualities of those forms of storytelling. On the one hand, *Cathal* is written in Irish dialect, with the lovely, flowing rhythms of that language emphasized by the threesome pattern of the story and by a periodic repetition which recalls the refrain in ballads and songs. On the other hand, the language in *Gilgamesh, the king* is more generic, effaced of speech patterns and images that might draw attention to themselves and away from the story. In the last line of *Cathal*, the voice of an endearing, gregarious storyteller, such as you might meet over a mug of ale in an Irish tavern, appears inadvertently but so convincingly that you close the book thinking "of course." Someone has told us this story. And we wouldn't have it any other way. But in *Gilgamesh, the king*, the language is clean and crisp, reduced to essential images that assume a new elemental importance in a classical style. The story is public, told by no-one or everyone.

In *Cathal*, this lilting refrain three times holds the story still for us: before Cathal in his search for his wife (stolen by "The Giant of the Hunting Hill") stops by the home of the "Great Dog of the Mull," by "The Falcon of the Rock of the Ledge" and by "The Brown Wren of the Stream of Flowing:"

He was travelling till there was blackening on his soles,
and holing in his shoes.
The little nestling, folding, yellow-tipped birds
were taking to rest at the foot of the bushes
and in the tops of trees.
The little nimble squirrels were choosing
sheltering places for each other for the evening.
But though they were, Cathal O' Cruachan was not. (Unpag.)

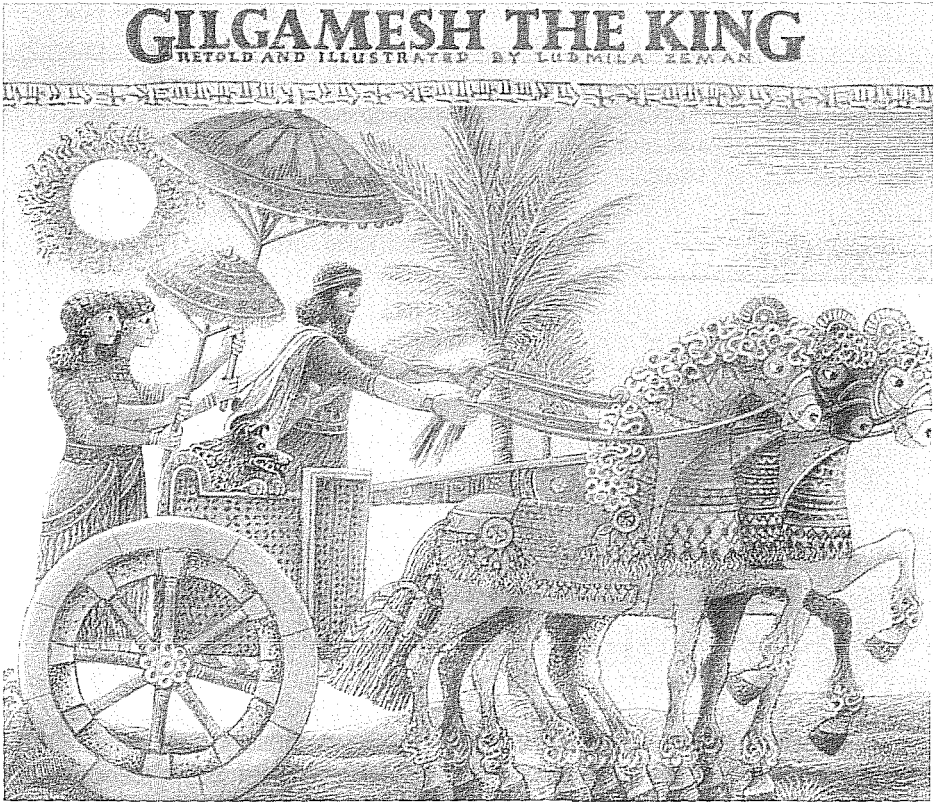
Here the progressive verbs and a use of gerunds create a rhythm and lend a feeling of song to the action.

In *Gilgamesh, the king*, Gilgamesh, "who did not know what it is to be human," had ordered his subjects to sacrifice all that makes life worth living to build a grandiose wall around his beautiful city of Uruk. The people, no longer persuaded that the wall was to protect them against invaders, appeal to the Sun God. In contrast to the language in *Cathal*, note the economy of image and expression here:

The Sun God heard their prayers and ordered the creation of another man as strong as Gilgamesh.

His name was Enkidu. He was made from the clay of the earth. Since Gilgamesh had learned nothing from living with people, Enkidu was sent to live with the animals of the forest. As he got to know the animals, he learned to care for them. But he did not know human kindness for he had never seen another person. (Unpag.)

In *Gilgamesh*, the images are part of the story (such as “clay” and “forest”), and the powerful dichotomies are reinforced by these images. The world of man and his drive to achieve are set against the animal world which lives closer to instinct and, presumably, love.



Both stories are remade using language that radiates with implication and is characterized by a narrative economy (even in the musically verbose *Cathal*) and subtlety not necessarily endemic to those ancient story forms. (cf. Levi-Strauss’ description of myths in their raw state as “ugly”). We feel the magic touch of an artist storyteller, for instance, when we assume that the Giant’s housekeeper—who obviously dislikes her master when she hides *Cathal* and lies to the giant—has revealed his secret weakness to *Cathal*: that if the egg inside the dove inside the sheep inside the sheeppcote is broken, the Giant’s heart, too,

will be broken.

Similarly, the simple line in *Gilgamesh* that Enkidu and Shamshat, the beautiful singer and emissary from Uruk, "explored the ways of love together," will be appreciated by the adult reading this story to the child. A grace in the narrative which extends beyond the language may be attributed to a perfect balance of story elements as they are put together so seamlessly.

While the illustrator of *Cathal*, Jillian Hulme Gilliland, restricts herself to black, green and white, and represents the characters in a frieze silhouette in which they troop across the stage of the book and our imagination, Ludmila Zemaan, (artist/author of *Gilgamesh*) keeps to earth tones (sepias, olives and terra cotta browns) which remind us of the myth's roots in Babylonian myth/legend. One story begins "before now," in a shadowy age earmarked by the traditional green of Irish legend: the other opens up in a patch of warm sunshine of another world and earlier civilization, "long ago."

Although both books are excellent, my daughter preferred the more immediately accessible *Gilgamesh* with its cleanness of narrative, and my son was drawn into the cumulative pattern of action in *Cathal*. My daughter loved the coloured illustrations in *Gilgamesh* for their warmth and immediacy and the dramatic impact of such scenes as Gilgamesh facing Enkidu on the city wall. But my son was drawn to the scary giant, black, threatening and hairy (semi-comic?) shadow of giant that he is in *Cathal*. In fact, personality may determine which book your child will prefer.

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A SCOTTISH FOLKTALE RE-PAINTED

The Nightwood. Robin Muller. Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1991. 32 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-385-25305-2.

Based on one of the oldest of the Scottish folktales, *The Nightwood* tells the tale of Tamlynne (or Tam Lin). There are many versions still in existence of this story, but this one features Elaine, daughter of the Earl of March, who becomes fascinated by the nearby enchanted forest called the Nightwood. Forbidden to attend her father's formal dance, she finds herself drawn to the faery ball.

As is common to all versions, Elaine plucks a single red rose that blooms amongst the decay of the Nightwood. This flower, belonging to the Elfin Queen, summons the young knight Tamlynne. The ageless youth reveals that he has been the captive of the queen for seven years and that soon his soul will be sacrificed so that the faeries can keep their bargain with Hell. Only through the love of a mortal can he be saved. During the fight for his soul, Elaine clasps Tamlynne to her while he metamorphoses into many strange and frightening beasts until, finally, he becomes a red-hot brand. When Elaine, never daunted,