

Zeman has created a Canadian story for young children. Her work reminds me of the importance of affirming our icons and promoting our shared cultural identity in a way that Canadians of all ethnic origins, from all regions can relate to. We shy away from promoting Canadian images for fear of offending some segment of society or appearing to be patriotic. In doing so we deprive our young and our newest citizens of satisfying their hunger for identifying with Canada and things Canadian. Zeman concludes her book writing "Whatever the season, the red maple leaf shelters my new country. For me, it represents the sense of safety I felt when I first came here with my family."

In reading the book aloud to a class of twenty-five immigrant children, I observed that they listened in rapt attention, were filled with questions and drew connections with maple leaf symbols elsewhere. Eyes wide with the image of Iceheart, one youngster interrupted "Is this true?" This book is a valuable contribution to the storehouse of Canadiana for young people.

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*Jerry Diakiw is a former Superintendent of Education with the York Region Board of Education, and is currently teaching at York University. He is the author of numerous articles on multiculturalism and children's literature.*

### A Distinctive and Successful Canadian Fantasy

***Silverwing***. Kenneth Oppel. HarperCollins, 1997. 128 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-648144-2.

Known chiefly as a writer of realistic fiction, I may seem an inappropriate person to review Kenneth Oppel's fantasy, *Silverwing*. Yet it is not what you write but what you read that determines your validity as a reviewer. Since childhood, I have always loved losing myself in credibly incredible otherworlds and this love only increased as I grew and explored Narnia, Earthsea, Middle Earth and Watership Down to name only a few. I have also, for years, envied those fantasists who have managed, like Richard Adams and, more recently, Philip Pullman, to write books exciting enough to captivate imaginative children and challenging enough to enchant choosy, more sophisticated, adults. I believe that Kenneth Oppel, in this clearly opening book about Shade and his quest, has achieved this feat. Although his prose initially strikes one as less polished than that of Adams, it is a recognizably Canadian voice with its own verve and grace. Certainly my sister and I found the story both enthralling and satisfying. We ended it eager to go on to the next volume as soon as it becomes available.

Perhaps this is the place to caution the author against embarking on a lengthy series about his characters. Often fantasists seem so entranced by their created worlds that they go on and on manufacturing adventures to enable themselves and their fans to continue living there. Oppel's bats are small mammals however, capable of a limited number of actions. They should fly freely, skimming to the end of their quest, leaving the reader satisfied but not satiated, eager to see where next the author's gift will transport them. I personally got heartily sick of Duncton Wood long before its author did.

Shade is a small bat belonging in the Silverwing colony. He has been raised to accept and obey the fixed and predictable life of his sort of bat. First and foremost, he has been told, he will surely die if he looks at, even glimpses the sun, and so he must take care to be home before the first hint of sunrise. But Shade has inherited from his missing father a stubborn curiosity and a longing to question, to prove, to try out for himself taboos for which no convincing reason is given. In a moment of reckless youthful daring, he challenges another bat to risk with him one peek at the sun in spite of the dire warnings that have been passed down to both of them. What results from this dare is the story Opper tells. It is a marvellous quest with all the things such a quest requires, an elderly wise mentor and guide, a courageous companion, a secret to be uncovered, a task to complete, enormous dangers to be faced, evil which is spine-chilling, fearsomely powerful, subtle and so attractive, now and then, even the hero is in real danger of going over to the enemy. There is also, of course, a beloved world and an endangered "family" desperately in need of rescue. Joseph Campbell would approve.

Shade and his companion Marina are brave, but not unbelievably so. They misunderstand each other and get sidetracked from their mission. They are befriended when it seems hope is lost, and enabled to fly on. They are ourselves at our best and our worst, our strongest and our weakest, without ever ceasing to be bats. Opper has rats, pigeons and owls among his characters. Yet he has had the inspiration to make his most villainous being also a bat. A lesser writer would have made the bad guys all owls or vultures, missing the chance to disquiet the reader with the ugliness to be found inside every species. Marina and Shade also, while searching for a clear, unsullied promise of Good are constantly faced by the complex mixture of tarnished good and weak evil. Nothing is simple or easy. A young friend of mine recently told me, when speaking of the Power Rangers' violence, "They don't kill anybody, Jean. They just blow up bad guys and destroy evil. So they're fine." Shade and Marina are not allowed to be so simplistic and two-dimensional. And they are wounded by their journey, not unscathed like comic book super heroes.

This author has clearly and wisely profited by reading the work of E.B. White, Richard Adams and Russell Hoban. Yet his bats are never as cosy as rabbits or pigs or as earthbound as the mouse and his child. Bats, after all, soar aloft and their dreams and visions are necessarily higher.

In an afterword, the author reveals that bats do not see colour. He is clearly pleased with having managed to write a colour-free book. I am glad the note is appended because he does it so well that I suspect most readers will never notice the lack of rainbow adjectives. I was impressed. Anyone who thinks this would be easy to do should try jotting down a few descriptive paragraphs devoid of colour adjectives about the natural world. Despite the lack of colour, Opper has made his bats fly through an intensely vivid landscape rich in detail and interest. It is also obvious that a great deal of research was done before this story was written. I got the feeling the author might really be a bat who has mastered the word processor.

I was sorry, at first, that Shade and his fellows used such modern slang expressions as "Okay" and that they were able to count the mosquitoes they devoured even up to six hundred. But such petty problems no longer troubled me once Shade was waiting for that sun to rise. And, after all, he is a young bat and a runt. He needs slang just like all other young runty males.

Feminists will be pleased, as I was, to find that the wisest old bat is female and that Marina is every bit as believable and interesting as Shade. Opal makes his creatures not only alive but beings capable of learning from their mistakes, growing wiser, changed by what they go through together. Far too often, in a book so full of breakneck chases and last-minute escapes, depth of character is sadly lacking. Opper takes time to let his bats ponder, comfort and encourage each other, listen to others, question themselves and remain acutely aware of the world in which they disport themselves, as well as struggle to survive.

This is an author to follow further. It has been said that we, in Canada, have trouble writing great fantasy because our history is too short; we have not had time to develop our legendary past and our folk culture and so must always write derivatively. How can we possibly manage without a Standing Stone to our names? When Susan Cooper herself managed successfully to bring a boggart from Scotland to Toronto, he was too homesick to stay. Welwyn Wilton Katz, Michael Bedard, Janet Lunn, Margaret Buffie and others have worked valiantly to overcome this difficulty in their different ways. Yet, even though we may not have been here long, our bats surely flit back into prehistory. How clever of Kenneth Opper to have thought of this and gone questing with them. They also have many of the advantages Tolkien discovered when he came up with his hobbits. Shade and Marina belong to a tribe of small, vulnerable, furry, strangely gifted, underestimated and, at least in Kenneth Opper's sure hands, endearing and worthy beings. They deserve a quest to match that Bilbo Baggins so reluctantly set out on long ago.

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*Jean Little, author of 22 published children's books, lives in a 138-year-old stone farm house near Elora, Ontario, with her sister Pat, her five-year-old great niece, her great nephew who is not yet one, six dogs and three cats. Jean writes with a talking computer and travels with her black Lab Seeing Eye dog Ritz. She has three honorary degrees and is a Member of the Order of Canada. Her most recent books are a picture book, *Gruntle Piggle Takes Off*, and a young adult novel, *The Belonging Place*.*

### Friendship and Difference

*The Dragon's Egg*. Alison Baird. Illus. Frances Tyrrell. Scholastic, 1994. 140 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24181-8. *A Friend Like Zilla*. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story Press, 1995. 133 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-71-6. *The Onlyhouse*. Teresa Toten. Red Deer College Press, 1995. 128 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-137-3.

Although one novel is a fantasy and the other two realistic works, and there are striking differences in style and approach, all three of these first novels concern pre-adolescent girls, between nine and eleven, who enter a new environment and experience problems with friendship. That one friend is a Chinese dragon while the other two are, respectively, a tough girl and a developmentally delayed seventeen-year-old, makes relatively little difference to the problems at the centre of the stories: those of choosing wisely, accepting the unusual, standing up for oneself and not giving in to bullying, and dealing with parents who are concerned but who may not understand.

The issue of difference and acceptance is at the centre of all of these novels. Each girl has an unusual name which causes difficulties: Chinese Ai Lien in *The*