

listeners and readers will certainly enjoy these imaginary flights. Adults too will share in the lively excursions of the childhood mind at work.

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### A Powerful *Beowulf* from Welwyn Wilton Katz

***Beowulf***. Welwyn Wilton Katz. Illus. Laszlo Gal. Groundwood, 1999. 64 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-365-X.

*Beowulf* is Welwyn Wilton Katz's kind of story: it's history, but then it isn't; it's fantasy, but then it isn't. In *Out of the Dark*, *Come Like Shadows*, *Whalesinger*, and *False Face* Katz also uses crossovers of past and present, history and fiction, natural and supernatural to weave a story in which an adolescent protagonist comes of age.

In retrospect, Katz's turn to the *Beowulf* story shouldn't be too much of a surprise. *Whalesinger* introduced Sir Francis Drake's landfall in California; in *Come Like Shadows* we met the historical Macbeth; *Out of the Dark* used Norse sagas to recreate the Viking landfall in Newfoundland. *Beowulf* is next in the temporal sequence.

Clearly, the aspect of the story that most intrigued Katz was the brief account of Wiglaf, *Beowulf*'s fourteen-year-old nephew who, though the youngest member of the king's mead bench, is the only one to aid *Beowulf* in his fatal battle with the dragon. Wiglaf, the last of the Waegmunding clan, is our focus for the entire story. Katz posits a "genetic kink" whereby Waegmunding clan members have special gifts. *Beowulf* has the strength of 30 men, as in the original. Aelfhere, his uncle, is a bard who can read minds. Wiglaf, Aelfhere's grandson, has visions of true events, whether past or future. These last two gifts are Katz's inventions.

Our way in, then, to *Beowulf*'s fight with the nine sea monsters, and with Grendel and his mother, is via Wiglaf's visions of past events and Aelfhere's bardic interpretation of them for the troubled boy. This procedure for getting the story told deftly enables Katz to overcome both the vast distance in historical time and the arcane style of the original West Saxon alliterative epic. Through Wiglaf's teenage interjections, Katz can provide a personal, human dimension while acknowledging the beauty of the highly stylized original. Here is the skald (bard) Aelfhere telling of *Beowulf*'s selection of companions for his journey to fight Grendel:

... Thirteen he sought, the keenest of warriors and stout wave-walkers to cross the whale-way to Hrothgar's realm two days to the south.

'Grandfather,' Wiglaf said. 'The story would go better with fewer wave-walkers and whale-ways.'



*Illustration from Beowulf*

Aelfhere hid a smile. 'A warrior you will clearly be, Wiglaf. Agreed then. Less poetry, and less criticism both....'

So we get the story in its raw power, its violence of sword and emotion, its gore, and its celebration of bitter-sweet victory. The final battle with the dragon is as much Wiglaf's story as Beowulf's. Wiglaf chooses to aid the old king at risk of almost certain death rather than run off as the other warriors do. As in most of Katz's fiction, the choice for life is heroic, entailing genuine risk — the risk that is the guarantee of life's value. The scene of youth and age conquering the "wurm" is genuinely moving.

The 8.5 x 11" hardcover volume is distinctively supported with 23 full-page, full-colour graphite, coloured pencil, and watercolour illustrations by Laszlo Gal. Purple, grey-green, and of course blood-red predominate, establishing an atmosphere that moves from chilly stoicism, to eerie evil, to determined violence. The coloured pencil gives a tapestry-like texture to the illustrations. Gal's figures carry a medieval quality in their elongated forms and the stylized folds of their clothing that is reminiscent of illuminated bibles and the paintings of Giotto.

The Katz-Gal *Beowulf* should become the standard version for a young audience. It's enthralling to read to older children, and is captivating reading for teens. But it reawakens the power of this venerable old story for all readers.

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