Rich *Silverwing* Sequel

Sunwing. Kenneth Oppel. HarperCollins, 1999. 243 pp. $14.95 paper. ISBN 0-00648166-3.

What is a bat's utopia? Why, a place where "the trees never lose their leaves, the stream never freezes. It's forever warm as a summer night, with as many insects as you could ever hope to eat." In *Sunwing*, lured by siren bat voices, Shade and his fellow bats fly through the trapdoor of the Human Building containing this utopia. However, the suspicious Shade wonders: "If it's Paradise, why isn't there a way out?" Besides, the bugs don't taste quite right.

Sunwing is the stunning sequel to *Silverwing*, and is more ambitious in scope. Once again Shade encounters his nemesis, the giant cannibal bat Goth. But Shade manages more than mere survival: he saves the sun and brings the bats, exiled from its rays, back into daylight.

In *Sunwing*, Kenneth Oppel plays with ideas of utopia. The bat utopia turns out to be a place where humans experiment on bats, getting them to carry explosives. This is based on Project X-Ray, a real plan during World War II to use bats to carry explosive devices. (It backfired when the bats escaped and bombed Army buildings!) Shade escapes and travels to the jungle, where he discovers the cannibal bats' plan to extinguish the sun.

The book is fast-paced, compelling and inventive. Shade has grown up a little since *Silverwing*. His ability to use sound has developed: in a gripping fight sequence with Goth, he uses it to make optical illusions. Oppel creates a feeling of real evil, but leavens it with his great sense of humour. His writing is rich with just the right amount of detail. He brings to life a complete world, and you can almost taste the mosquitoes. The change from the northern forest to the jungle — with huge bugs that can kill a young bat — is vividly described. These bats are all individuals; I particularly like the sharp-witted Marina. The relationship between Shade and Chinook is nuanced, as Shade is by turns impressed and annoyed by his sometime rival. Father and son relationships are played out in the bat, rat and owl worlds as fathers and sons are lost and found.

Shade saves the day, but not single-handedly: he forms alliances with the owls and rats, sworn enemies of bats. He moves from the fake utopia that came about with no effort, to a real one founded by courage and negotiation. Oppel thus shows the young reader the value of cooperation without preaching.

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Combating Racism through Friendship

Maybe Tomorrow. Joan Weir. Stoddart Kids, 2000. 209 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7486-1. ***Rebecca***. Carol Matas. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 2000. 152 pp. $5.99 paper. ISBN 0-439-98718-0.

Both *Maybe Tomorrow* by Joan Weir and *Rebecca* by Carol Matas are historical novels depicting British Columbia in the 1880s and Winnipeg in 1912 respectively. These two novels show a surprising similarity in their adolescent female protagonists's struggles to combat prejudice and racism through female friendships that transcend ethnic and racial lines. Unfortunately, both novels ultimately espouse a message of passivity for girls and women.

Both books render their historical setting for a laudable purpose: to show girls' relationships working to overcome racism and prejudice. In *Maybe Tomorrow*, Sesuq and Jane, First Nations and white respectively, attend an experimental integrated school, All Hallows, where they become best friends. Similarly, in *Rebecca*, Jewish Rebecca becomes very close with the Ukrainian girl in whose house she is temporarily living while her family recovers from a financially-devastating fire. Both sets of girls face disapproval for their friendships; indeed, they are forced to stay away from each other at points. Where Matas's girls, Rebecca and Sophie, manage to negotiate for their friendship to be accepted, Weir's Sesuq ends the novel literally on the outside, having been expelled from the integrated school. Jane, on the other hand, ends the novel in her boyfriend's arms, after having graduated from the school. Weir's message seems to be that in the 1880s, girls could not overcome prejudice. Maybe tomorrow they will be able to? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be no, as her novel perpetuates rather than questions stereotypes and racism.

The details Weir weaves into the novel lack credibility. She begins the book with potential violence against women and the hint of prostitution, for no apparent reason except perhaps to highlight Jane's vulnerability. Similarly, Weir kills off the white woman who donates a writing prize to the school on the morning before the prize was to be given, again for no apparent artistic reason. Indeed, the moment becomes completely unbelievable as the husband presents the prize, even though his wife died the previous morning, "just as the sun was rising" (196). Not only do the events ring false, but Weir employs almost every stereotype of First Nations culture — Sesuq is a shy girl who is uncomfortable indoors, knows all about plant life, and is able to teach the white girls outdoor survival skills. The novel begins and ends with Jane, showing Sesuq to be important only as her character develops Jane's, preparing Jane for marriage and homesteading. Beyond exposing the racism that an integrated school like All Hallows might evoke, Weir does not raise any questions about the viability or justice of an integrated school. The press release for the book explains that "prejudice forced the separation of the white and native students." Prejudice may have caused the closing of the school, yet Weir might have engaged with the assimilationist motives of the school, problematizing her own assumptions about integrated schools. Moreover, *Maybe Tomorrow* is a deeply neurotic book: the girls experience worry, fear, anxiety, and/or fright on almost every page with almost no way to overcome these negative emotions.

Rebecca is much more believable and readable, yet Matas, too, seems to rely heavily on somewhat unbelievable events to carry the narrative forward. Rebecca's family has had to move to Winnipeg because their farm burned down. Not only does she move into a temporary foster home because of her family's poverty, but she and Sophie, her temporary foster sister, are then quarantined in hospital with scarlet fever. The plot becomes unbelievable when fire breaks out in

the hospital, and the two girls become heroes for saving babies. Even their heroism does not bring approbation for their relationship, however. Sophie's Ukrainian brothers and Rebecca's Jewish uncles (her own age) constantly fight and prevent the girls from being able to express friendship openly. By the end of the novel, the two girls overcome this obstacle only by a *deus ex machina* of Polish bullies who beat up the Ukrainians. The Jewish kids come to the Ukrainians's defence, and all prejudices are forgiven except, of course, the new, shared one against the Polish boys.

Furthermore, each writer oversimplifies by creating a villain character, embodied in a little girl: Belinda in *Maybe Tomorrow*, and Rachel in *Rebecca*. The little villain is the watchdog in both novels, ensuring that the races/ethnicities do not mix. That the authors embody racism primarily in one character encourages the belief that racism is an anomoly, that the majority of us are relatively free of prejudice. A little more complexity of characterization would suggest that racism is not confined to bad people, such as Rachel and Belinda, but potentially exists in all of us.

That neither Weir nor Matas find ways for their heroines to negotiate for an acceptance of difference conveys a message of passivity. Matas comes closest in showing a way around racism by bringing the Jewish and Ukrainian children together, yet the girls did not create the resolution; it merely happened by chance. Both writers suggest that the best one can do in the face of prejudice is bide one's time — not a particularly empowering message for young adolescents. For all this, however, *Rebecca* is a fascinating and engaging book, well worth reading. I could not recommend *Maybe Tomorrow* so highly.

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Rites of Passage

Charlie Wilcox. Sharon E. McKay. Stoddart Kids, 2000. 221 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6093-8. ***Lost in Spain***. John Wilson. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000. 174 pp. $19.95 cloth, $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-550-6, 1-55041-523-9.

For centuries, boys have gone away to war under the assumption that such a step marked their transformation into adults. In most cultures, battle was a rite of passage: no boy could truly be considered a man without having experienced combat. This process, in turn, has spawned a whole genre of literature. From the earliest oral traditions to twentieth-century novels like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, writers and storytellers have described the trials and tribulations of boys who became men through combat.

Charlie Wilcox and *Lost in Spain* sit firmly in the tradition of coming-of-age literature. McKay's title character is a Newfoundland boy who goes to World War I almost accidentally; hoping to prove his manhood by joining a sealing ship, he instead finds himself in England and, eventually, in the war zone. In *Lost in Spain*,