

## Reviews / Comptes rendus

---

### Fresh Shades of the Red Maple Leaf

*The First Red Maple Leaf*. Ludmila Zeman. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1997. 24 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-372-3.

Ludmila Zeman has made a significant contribution to the mythology surrounding one of the classic icons of our Canadian culture. As a recent immigrant to Canada, Zeman tells us that the maple leaf came to symbolize powerful feelings for her. It moved her to produce an engaging and beautiful children's book.

Zeman creates a *pourquoi* tale charged with energy, terror and beauty. The story reaches back to the time of a mythical period when the fierce Iceheart rules the land. In Iceheart we are introduced to a ferocious demon. Iceheart almost lunges off the pages like a frozen tornado, fangs, teeth, claws dripping in icicles. In this arctic landscape a parade of Canadian icons are woven into the struggle of a small boy, "a child of the people" (obviously a Native Canadian) who frees a Canada Goose from the clutches of Iceheart and retreats south to a forest where Iceheart strips the forest of its protective leaves. Thus begins the journey that eventually brings summer to Canada and red maple leaves to the barren trees. "Never fear, for all time winter and summer will take turns and the leaves will always come again." Throughout this picture book Zeman laces the evocative icy and boreal landscapes with familiar symbols; dogsleds, Canada Geese, Native Canadians, moose, black bears, burnt-out forests, ravens and, of course, the ubiquitous maple leaf.

Ludmila Zeman has been recognized for her outstanding illustration, receiving the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Illustration for *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh*. She does not disappoint here. The left hand page contains the text framed in delicate garlands of maple leaves, icy snowflakes, snowbound branches or birds and flowers, while the right hand page presents the story visually through a complex rendering of single scenes or as many as nine individual frames. There is a compelling interplay between the multiple images on these pages. Her artwork is splendid, evoking engravings of a bygone era. The delicate colouring of pale yellows, blues, mustards and icy whites of the early pages merges into more vibrant colours of autumn, in keeping with the story. Iceheart is a visual triumph as he emerges from, and disappears into the landscape in ingenious ways.

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.

---

*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.