

to reject at the same time some of the “magic” that a fable such as Bodger’s can weave for young readers.

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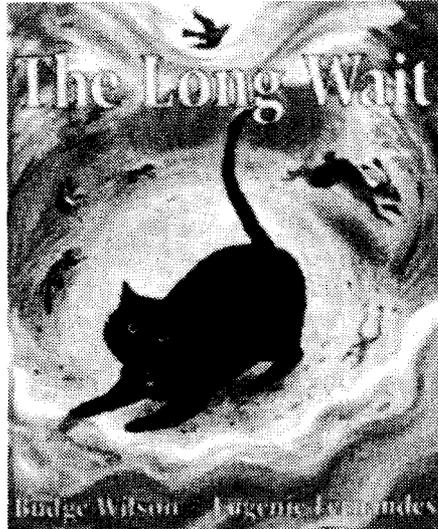
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### **The Return of the Prodigal Cat in Budge Wilson’s *The Long Wait***

*The Long Wait*. Budge Wilson. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Stoddart Kids. 1997. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3021-4.

*The Long Wait*, Budge Wilson’s delightful tragicomic cat tale of love lost and regained, tells the true story of Deirdre, an endearing feline antiheroine with a big tummy, a split left ear, a leathery black nose, and a mind of her own. Returning home to Ontario with Mr. Wilson (the author’s husband) from the annual family summer holiday in Nova Scotia, Deirdre throws caution to the wind (expending at least *one* of her nine lives) and escapes from the proverbial bag — in this case, her much-hated cat carrier. Dodging the lethal wheels of the TransCanada highway, she eludes her frantic master and seeks refuge in the New Brunswick wilderness. After frenzied efforts to entice Deirdre back to the car, Mr. Wilson is forced to rejoin his wife and daughters empty-handed. This apparent catastrophe in fact precipitates Deirdre’s miraculous transformation from cossetted house-cat into sleek miniature panther.

An adept storyteller in the best oral tradition, Wilson immediately takes her readers into her confidence. Using strong clear prose with touches of poetry, wordplay, rhetoric, subtle verbal cadences, and a distinctly Canadian context, Wilson spins Deirdre’s disappearance into an intimate story of suspense, pathos, and humour, which begs to be read aloud. Eugenie Fernandes’ wonderful swirling illustrations in vibrant pastel colours are a feast for the eye and the perfect marriage with Wilson’s engaging text. When we first encounter Deirdre and her people, Fernandes’s drawings mirror Wilson’s words exactly. After the pussycat’s escape, there is a subtle shift in this relationship: gradually what we see and hear are wonderfully at odds. As the Wilsons broaden their long-distance search (assisted by many kind denizens of a small Maritime community) and frosty fall weather closes in, the despairing family struggles to remain hopeful; meanwhile, Deirdre is tasting the wild life and loving it. Fernandes undercuts the Wilsons’s woeful imaginings with joyful scenes of a feral Deirdre frolicking with chipmunks,



pouncing on minnows, and communing with skunks. The climactic juxtaposition of the writer's question — "How far can an old cat walk before the snow comes?" — with the artist's rendering of Deirdre resplendent in her new-found glory, is visual irony at its comic best.

In *The Long Wait*, both Wilson's two- and four-footed characters are well drawn, and delicately fleshed out with Fernandes' lovingly-rendered illustrations. The author paints cosy scenes of domestic harmony at the Wilsons', with Marie and Kathryn and their parents always at the ready with warm laps, tummy-rubs and food. An unabashed cat lover, Wilson captures the essence of the feline species at its most endearing; Deirdre is the apple of her doting family's eye. For anyone who has braved long-distance travel with a basketted cat, this tale rings uncannily true.

Based on fact, *The Long Wait* has a happy ending to rival the best fairy tale. When the vagabond puss and her family are finally reunited, both Deirdre and the soft-hearted Mr. Wilson share the identical expression of utter contentment. As drawn by Fernandes, we can almost hear them purr.

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