

# Elizabeth Cleaver Memorial Lecture

Irene Aubrey

**Abstract:** *Dans cet éloge d'Elizabeth Cleaver, nous retraçons les différents moments de la vie et de la carrière d'une de nos plus importantes illustratrices. Après un aperçu biographique depuis la naissance à Montréal en 1939, Irène Aubrey fournit une analyse plus précise de l'oeuvre de Cleaver et de son association à William Toye, à partir de 1967. Elle porte une attention particulière à la technique du découpage et du collage qu'Elizabeth Cleaver affectionnait. Elizabeth Cleaver est morte du cancer en juillet 1985.*

[Editor's note: Elizabeth Cleaver was scheduled to participate in the conference of the Children's Literature Association held in Ottawa in the spring of 1987. Instead, members of the Association heard a version of the following essay, delivered as the Elizabeth Cleaver Memorial Lecture; cancer had claimed the life of this distinguished Canadian artist on July 27, 1985.]

Once embarked on a career as an illustrator, Elizabeth Cleaver never wavered in her determination to make beautiful picture books and this commitment was a guiding force in her life.

Her full name was Elizabeth Mrazik Cleaver. She was born on November 19th, 1939, in Montreal, of Hungarian-Canadian parents, Rosalia and Frank Mrazik, who had immigrated to Canada in the 1930s. Elizabeth was the youngest of four children. A sister and brother still reside in Montreal and another brother lives in Budapest. Her parents died in the early 1980s.

Elizabeth received her elementary education at Aberdeen School in Montreal and part of her secondary education in Sarospatak in Hungary, where the family had returned after the war years, in the expectation of again taking up permanent residence. The family came back to Canada, however, in the late 1950s.

Even though she began as young as three years old to cut and tear paper, an activity which over the years would serve well in helping her to develop her collage technique, Elizabeth didn't come to the full realization of where her true talent lay until she began her university studies.

On returning from Hungary Elizabeth had resumed her studies in science

(all the children had pursued science studies and Elizabeth was particularly interested in mathematics). While attending Sir George Williams University,<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth made the discovery that her real interests were in the area of art and design. She prepared her first collage — the picture which eventually became pages 28 and 29 in her book *How summer came to Canada*, depicting the scene of Winter who keeps the Far North in its icy grip. Elizabeth now became interested in learning more about the principles of art and design and took further instruction at the School of Art and Design of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Ecole des Beaux Arts. She also took the time to acquire practical secretarial skills.

By the middle of the 1960s, Elizabeth was married to Edward Cleaver and living in Toronto. She hoped to find a career in this city as an illustrator of children's books. To help support herself, she worked as a secretary for an advertising firm. She had completed twenty collage pictures for a children's story called *The dragon story* written by Ted Wood. She tried unsuccessfully to get it published and it remains unpublished: all the publishers felt that it would be too expensive to reproduce her collages in full colours. Nevertheless she entered one of the collages in the New York Society of Illustrators Annual National Exhibition in 1968 and was given a Citation for Merit.

To use Elizabeth's own words, she was trying to find her way in art. "As a child, I always enjoyed cutting paper and playing with cut-out books. In a way, I went back to that time and made my images from simple cut-out shapes, guided by spontaneous intuition."<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth had met Judith St. John who was the Head of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collections at the Toronto Public Library. At a reception to celebrate Young Canada Book Week in 1967, Miss St. John introduced Elizabeth to William Toye, editorial director at Oxford University Press in Toronto. Thus began a professional relationship which would produce a series of fine books, beginning with the one on poetry called *The wind has wings: poems from Canada*. In several cases, their books would earn awards for both of them. Elizabeth always thought of Miss St. John as the fairy godmother of *The wind has wings*. For a while, however, it was thought that the project wouldn't materialize as Elizabeth underwent surgery for cancer at the end of 1967. But when Mr. Toye assured Elizabeth that he still wanted her to illustrate the manuscript, she felt encouraged by this welcome piece of news and she recovered sufficiently to begin work on the book in March, 1968.

I met Elizabeth for the first time in 1969 when, one day, she came to the Westmount Public Library where I worked, and in a friendly, casual way, introduced herself to me. I had just been looking at her two books, *How summer came to Canada* and *The mountain goats of Temlaham*. I was delighted to meet her, of course, and, over a period of sixteen years in

which we remained good friends, Elizabeth's greetings were always warm and spontaneous.

Elizabeth's list of accomplishments is impressive: she illustrated two books of Canadian poetry (*The wind has wings: poems from Canada* and *The new wind has wings: poems from Canada*), a collection of folk tales of French Canada (*The witch of the North*), a collection of Canadian folk and fairy tales (*Canadian wonder tales*, originally published in two volumes in 1918 and 1922), four North American Indian tales (*How summer came to Canada*, *The mountain goats of Temlaham*, *The loon's necklace* and *The fire stealer*) and four different editions of a book for adults, published on the Melville Press which Elizabeth established to publish books in a limited edition, such as her *Love and kisses heart book*; she wrote and illustrated a ballet story (*Petrouchka*), an alphabet book (*ABC*), an Inuit tale (*The enchanted caribou*) and a legend of Hungary (*The miraculous hind: a Hungarian legend*).

But Elizabeth had other interests and worked also as a freelance artist and as a lecturer: for example, she did lovely pictures for a story called "The coming of the corn" which appeared in an eighth-grade reader<sup>3</sup> and contributed an illustration for the section on poems and rhymes for the 1973 edition of *Childcraft how and why library*.<sup>4</sup> She illustrated one of Gilles Vigneault's poems, "Quand vous mourrez de nos amours", which appeared in an issue of *Perspectives*.<sup>5</sup> The stage held a special fascination for Elizabeth. She designed, for the 1970-1971 season of the Centaur Theatre in Montreal, a set of posters, and assisted in the design of a Christmas shadow show for children, based on Inuit folk tales.

Elizabeth made two other posters: one for the Canadian Library Association to celebrate Young Canada Book Week in 1969 and another for the Canadian Section of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) to celebrate the International Year of the Child in 1979. Also for IBBY, she made one of the cats (a big, fat white cat) featured in their leporello *Cats of the world*.

In 1972, Elizabeth travelled to Baker Lake in the Northwest Territories to work on a project with the children attending Kamantuak School. This project involved the adaptation of Inuit legends to shadow puppetry through printmaking techniques. She prepared a book-length manuscript on the project but it has never been published. Thirteen years later, however, Elizabeth would be able to create shadow puppets to illustrate an Inuit tale published under the title *The enchanted caribou* and she would include instructions on how to make shadow puppets.

When Elizabeth returned to Montreal from Baker Lake, she received several letters from the children. One boy wrote: "I like the way you illustrate. You add your picture to the story. You use your brain very well."<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth was elected to membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1974.

Before her Hungarian legend *The miraculous hind* came out in book form, Elizabeth had written the text and made the pictures for a filmstrip with the same name, produced by the National Film Board of Canada in 1971. Between 1977 and 1978, Elizabeth collaborated on a television series called *Boucaniers d'eau douce* for the Ontario Educational Communications Authority. The series included thirteen legends with the purpose of teaching French to English-speaking students. Her collages were the same as those she made for her books, except that she animated portions of the figures. And in 1982, the Westmount Public Library asked Elizabeth to make two very large (42" x 74") linoleum prints of Petrouchka and the Ballerina from her book *Petrouchka*. The prints hang in the Children's Department.

Elizabeth received many invitations from all parts of Canada to speak about her books. Although she was grateful for the opportunity to meet the public and to talk about her work, she nevertheless would say that she didn't particularly enjoy preparing talks as she found it more worthwhile to do artwork.

In 1980, she completed her thesis for a Master of Fine Arts from Concordia University. It is called "Words and images: investigation into the literal and symbolic in illustration of a text". Her thesis gave her the means by which to "understand, articulate and communicate" her creative process.

The National Library of Canada acquired, in 1985, shortly before her death, the original illustrations and related manuscript material for eleven of Elizabeth's books.<sup>7</sup> The pictures for her other two books *The wind has wings: poems from Canada* and *The miraculous hind: a Hungarian legend* are in, respectively, the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collections of the Toronto Public Library, and the Rare Book Room, McLennan Library of McGill University, Montreal.

Elizabeth Cleaver was a tall, attractive brunette who could choose inexpensive clothes and wear them with flair. She was a soft-spoken, caring person who had many friends, and who kept close ties with her family whom she loved dearly. There was, at times, an air of fragility about Elizabeth. She was divorced and on her own since the middle 1970s. She always knew that she would make it, but she didn't always know how. She was fortunate in having the support of her family.

She loved libraries and museums — and she loved to read. She was interested in learning. She even attempted to learn French. One summer, she took a course in which the participants came from Canada and the United States. She said that, although she didn't learn to speak French,

she did make a lot of friends.

Elizabeth did thorough research in preparation for a book. (By the way, since looking at her manuscript material at the National Library of Canada, I discovered that some of her notes are in shorthand, a throwback to her days as a secretary, and others are in Hungarian). Her interests were varied: for instance, she studied Jung, music, ballet, lithography and attended many seminars, directly or indirectly connected with her work (one of the seminars that she especially appreciated was called "Story and myth," held at Niagara University in the 1970s).

Elizabeth wanted to excel and she brought a total commitment to her work. She would often express her feelings of happiness and contentment when she had completed the work on her pictures.

Elizabeth was a creative person who deeply believed in the power of books. Her own books were featured in several exhibitions in Canada and elsewhere. She thought that children and adults should have the opportunity to see artistically beautiful books.

In an article called "Idea to image: The journey of a picture book"<sup>8</sup>, Elizabeth Cleaver said "As a picture book artist I find it exciting to go over my work and discover how imagery unfolds within it. When I began searching for themes to work with, I found that I was attracted to the legends of the North American Indian, to the folklore of French Canada, where I grew up . . . , to legends of Hungary, the country of my family's origins and to puppetry and dance". Several of Elizabeth's books fit into the context of cross-culturalism in children's literature.

When Elizabeth first met William Toye, in the late 1960s, she expressed the desire to illustrate Indian legends of Canada. She was keenly interested in these legends and also wanted to make them available to children in colourful picture books. Elizabeth Cleaver and William Toye worked together on four books of North American Indian legends, for which he wrote the text (*How summer came to Canada*, *The mountain goats of Temlaham*, *The loon's necklace*, and *The fire stealer*). They also collaborated on other books, published by Oxford University Press: *The wind has wings: poems from Canada*, *The new wind has wings: poems from Canada*, *ABC*, and *The enchanted caribou* which was published after Elizabeth's death.

Elizabeth and William Toye worked closely together when they prepared a book for publication. It was known that Elizabeth appreciated his sound and helpful advice. But, as in all relationships, their collaboration could be difficult at times, especially during those last few days when they were working hard to meet the publication deadline and pressure was building up. If Elizabeth needed an extra bit of urging, Mr. Toye seemed able to provide it!

When reading through parts of their correspondence held in the National Library, we can see that Mr. Toye was thoughtful and diplomatic in his

approach. On one occasion, when he returned a piece of artwork to Elizabeth, he wrote that he was doing it "so that you can *play* with it."<sup>9</sup> The term "play" was in reference to the way that Elizabeth described her method of assembling her collages. Certainly Elizabeth and William Toye had one of the most successful author/illustrator/editor relationships.

Collage was Elizabeth's "favourite way of creating images since it was concerned with imaginative invention".<sup>10</sup> Collage is a picture achieved by arranging and pasting various kinds of materials, such as paper, on a surface.

Elizabeth particularly enjoyed juggling her pieces of cut and torn paper until they formed a composition that suited and pleased her. This became a form of visual play for her. Before she could begin, however, to put the different elements of her picture together there were other steps that she had to undertake: she would read the text several times until she had formed an idea of what pictures she would like to do; research her material; prepare pencil drawings which she would transfer to linoleum blocks; make monoprints (textured paper) and try endless combinations; and, finally, make the collage composition. It could take Elizabeth as long as a year to work on the illustrations for a book. In one case though, for *Petrouchka*, it took four to five years as she kept putting it aside to do other things. When completed, the illustrations could combine a variety of materials; cut and torn paper and other materials such as lace in *The miraculous hind*, birch bark in *The fire stealer* and a key in *ABC*. William Toye said of Elizabeth that she possessed an intuitive sense of design. In her delightful, amusing alphabet book *ABC*, for instance, the cut-outs for her words, chosen for their universal appeal, are artistically arranged.

Elizabeth illustrated two books in black and white. One is *Canadian wonder tales*, a new edition of two collections by Cyrus MacMillan of North American Indian legends and European-Canadian fairy tales, originally published as *Canadian fairy tales* in 1922. Judy Taylor of the Bodley Head in London had written to Elizabeth and asked her if she would agree to illustrate *Canadian wonder tales*. Doing the pictures in black and white, at this stage of her career (1973, 1974) represented a challenge to Elizabeth and, to make them, she used simple print making methods like monoprints, cardboard and cut paper, linoleum prints, collagraph and mixed media.

The other book done in black and white is *The enchanted caribou*. Elizabeth had been in touch with Jean Karl of Atheneum in New York, who decided, among the several projects which Elizabeth submitted to her, to publish *The enchanted caribou*. Oxford University Press agreed to publish the book for the Canadian market. *The enchanted caribou* is an Inuit tale of transformation. When the girl he loves is tricked and transformed into a white caribou, a young hunter uses magic to bring her back to him. To

illustrate the story, Elizabeth created shadow puppets, a medium which lent itself very well to its magical theme. The book is striking and appealing in its simplicity and has the look of folk art. Elizabeth had found a perfect vehicle for her love of puppetry.

Most of Elizabeth's work was in colour — colour and texture were the dominant features of her artwork. Reviews of her books often contained the words "brilliantly coloured illustrations", or words to that effect. One reviewer spoke of her stories as "peacock-bright stories."<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth found working in colour "very difficult" because it was "a great struggle for her to achieve a colour relationship that was harmonious."<sup>12</sup>

In her first book *The wind has wings: poems from Canada*, a collection of poems compiled by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson, Elizabeth prepared coloured collages which alternated with black-and-white linoleum or potato prints. Trees dominate her compositions in this book, and, in fact, throughout her artwork in general, the image of the tree is featured. (It is interesting to note that one of the things that Elizabeth wanted to do before her death was climb and sit in her favourite tree in Westmount Park).

*The wind has wings* was a landmark in Canadian children's literature. One felt that it should be given official recognition and when the Canadian Library Association established, in 1971, the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Award for the best illustrations in a Canadian book for children, Elizabeth was its first recipient. A second edition was published in 1984 with the title *The new wind has wings: poems from Canada*.

Elizabeth's two first books of North American Indian legends, *How summer came to Canada*, a Micmac legend, and *The mountain goats of Temlaham* (a Tsimshian legend), were done in the same year (1969); *The loon's necklace*, another Tsimshian legend, was done in 1977 and *The fire stealer*, an Ojibwa legend, was done in 1979. Elizabeth felt a great affinity with the North American Indian legend and her excellently-coloured collages, except for *The loon's necklace*, where the brilliance of the pictures is more subdued, capture the emotional intensity of the tales. Elizabeth's use of colour to illustrate the legends has sometimes been described as unauthentic. But she had her own perception of these tales and she portrayed their legendary quality in an expressive and insightful way. Her illustrations sometimes had other elements besides cut-paper, such as pine needles, cedar branches, birch bark and twigs. *The witch of the North: folk tales from French Canada*, adapted by Mary Alice Downie, was published in 1975. Elizabeth was eager to illustrate this book and she had been asked to make one picture for each of the nine legends. All the pictures, except one, are in colour. In the execution of her pictures, Elizabeth felt somewhat

hampered by the fact that she could only make one picture for each story, rather than several pictures for each story as was her usual approach in her picture books. If one has seen the original illustrations for *The witch of the North*, one can understand Elizabeth's frustration with the colour reproductions in the book.

When Elizabeth was approached by The National Film Board of Canada to do a story and pictures, within the framework of a series that would introduce children to the various Canadian ethnic groups, she chose *The miraculous hind: a Hungarian legend* which is a legendary account of the founding of the Hungarian nation and knew that it would have universal appeal. She chose this legend since her ancestry was Hungarian. Her retelling of the story of two brothers, whose quest to capture a hind leads them to a new land and an new way of life, was based on the poem written by Janos Arany in 1863 and translated by E.D. Butler in 1881. When Elizabeth did the book version, she had to add some new illustrations and experienced some difficulty in creating harmony between the facing pages. Her main figures are created by linoleum cuts and the detail of their costume is rich. After the publication of *The miraculous hind*, Elizabeth received a letter from a librarian and naturalist in New Zealand who wanted to know why the hind had been depicted with horns. Elizabeth's explanation was that the hind was a divine being and that, in mythology, there are many references to hinds with antlers.

In 1976, Elizabeth met Jean Karl of Atheneum Publishers and asked her if Atheneum would consider publishing a picture book of Petrouchka. Jean Karl agreed, and the book was published in 1980, with Macmillan of Canada agreeing to publish it for the Canadian market. With *Petrouchka*, Elizabeth had found a story that brought together two themes that she dearly loved: puppetry and ballet. She worked hard on the colour relationships that would best convey the moods and feelings of the story; for instance, the different shades of blue and purple which are used to depict the evening scenes, or the gloom and loneliness of Petrouchka in his cell contrast effectively with the brilliant reds and greens of the Moor's cell. All the characters, as well as the set pieces, are made from linoleum prints which are collaged together.

Elizabeth said "I played with cut-out characters of Petrouchka, the Moor and the Ballerina, moving their legs, arms and bodies trying to find the right gestures. . . .When we observe the pictures they remind us of paper cut-out characters that can be animated as in a puppet performance or animated film."<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth Cleaver was an artist of picture books of international acclaim.



Her pictures and books have been shown in exhibitions around the world. She left an outstanding legacy and for generations to come, children and adults will continue to read and enjoy her books. She used to say "I'm just doing what I feel is right; I'm doing what I love to do".

Her style was right for her; what she chose to illustrate was right for her.

## NOTES

- 1 Now Sir George Williams campus of Concordia University
- 2 "Words and images: investigation into the literal and symbolic in illustration of a text". Unpublished M.A. thesis, Montréal: Concordia, 1980.
- 3 Toronto: Houghton Mifflin, 1981
- 4 Toronto: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, vol. I, 1973.
- 5 Montréal: La Presse, 22 Dec. 1973.
- 6 Correspondence (Baker Lake Project), Elizabeth Cleaver Collection, illustrations and related material, National Library of Canada.
- 7 *How summer came to Canada; The mountain goats of Temlaham, Canadian wonder tales; Love and kisses heart book; The witch of the north: folk tales of French Canada; The loon's necklace; The fire stealer; Petrouchka; ABC; The new wind has wings: poems from Canada; and The enchanted caribou.* (Elizabeth Cleaver Collection, illustrations and related material, National Library of Canada).
- 8 *The lion and the unicorn*, Vol 7/8 (1983-84), p. 156.
- 9 Correspondence (ABC), Elizabeth Cleaver Collection, illustrations and related material, National Library of Canada.
- 10 Thesis, p. 187
- 11 Times-Canada (Victoria, B.C.), March 18, 1983.
- 12 Thesis, p. 178.
- 13 Thesis, pp. 293, 295.

**Irene E. Aubrey** is Chief of the Children's Literature Service, National Library of Canada, Ottawa.