

# *From Delight to Wisdom: The Works of Teddy Jam*

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• Judith Saltman •

*Résumé:* Dans cet hommage à Teddy Jam, auteur dont la carrière fut brève, Judith Saltman nous montre la richesse et la diversité de l'apport de son oeuvre à la littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse du Canada anglais.

*Summary:* In this tribute to Teddy Jam's works, Judith Saltman reminds us of how rich and varied Jam's contribution to Canadian children's literature has been, in spite of his short career.

We are reminded how small the world of Canadian children's literature really is when one of its major figures dies. Upon the deaths of Elizabeth Cleaver and Dayal Kaur Khalsa, those involved with children's books in Canada mourned the loss of their creative talents and of the books they might have created.

A similar wave of emotion has touched us at the death of Matt Cohen (known in the children's book field by his pseudonym of Teddy Jam). When Cohen died at age 56 in December 1999, his reputation as a Governor General's Award-winning novelist and short story writer for adults had been established for several decades. His writing for children was just building to a critical mass of crafted and elegant picture books and young realistic fiction. With nine children's books published by Groundwood Books, and another in the works, Teddy Jam was emerging as one of Canada's most gifted storytellers and stylists for young children.

Jam's themes and subjects are deeply rooted in the bonds of family, in the mutual nurturing between child and parent. His settings and subjects often are laminated into the power of rural landscape, Canada's past, and regional tradition. His writing ranges from profound delight in the shining newness of babies and the creative force of preschoolers' imaginations to serious, even sombre themes, always leavened with warmth and humour.

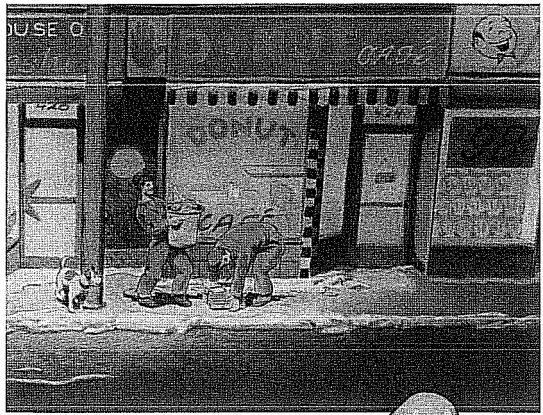


Illustration from  
*Night Cars*

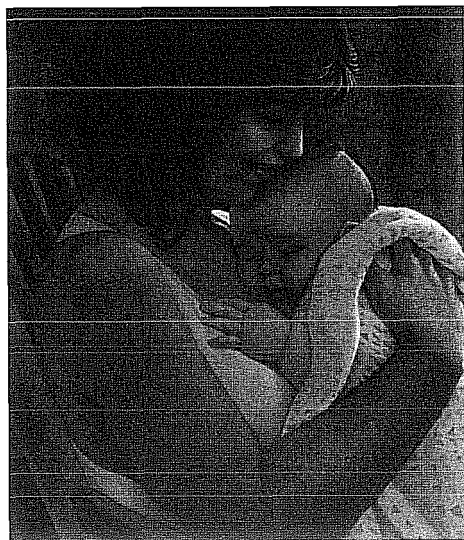


His sensuous style is poetic, comic, and dramatic at turns.

Jam's handsome language and strong stories inspired some of Canada's best illustrators; Eric Beddows, Harvey Chan, Joanne Fitzgerald, Karen Reczuch, Ian Wallace, and Ange Zhang have worked in different styles and with diverse interpretations of his narratives. Two of them (Eric Beddows and Joanne Fitzgerald ) received awards for their illustrations for Jam's stories.

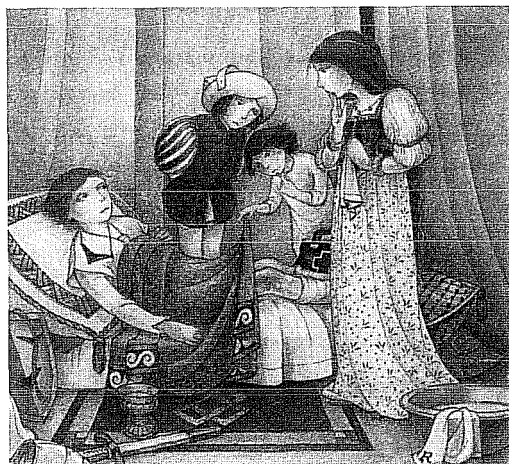
No one writes better about babies than Teddy Jam. In *Night Cars*, his first book for children published in 1988, he created a Canadian classic in the genre of domestic lullaby stories, focusing with simplicity and warmth on the minutiae of babies' and toddlers' experiences and interactions with family members. The lovely fragments of free verse poetry compose a father's all-night lullaby to his toddler fighting sleep. In Eric Beddows's paintings of the city-street nightlife seen through a window, the falling snow, downtown imagery and architectural detail, and city signs in French as well as English remind us this magical, night world is Canadian.

In *This New Baby*, Jam reprises the emotional celebration of the first book. Here, Jam takes a new mother's voice as she cares for her baby and keeps watch through the night. In lyrical similes, the mother compares the ineffable beauty and wonder of the new infant to the moon, falling apples, swimming fish, summer dark, and drifting hawk. The text is musical and cadenced as a lullaby, and is more consciously poetic in diction and figurative language than the earlier *Night Cars*. The splendid watercolour and coloured pencil illustrations by Karen Reczuch set the timeless night in a



*Illustration from  
This New Baby*

rural farmhouse, the summer sky and fields suggesting nocturnal mystery and peace. Ending in morning sun and family love, the minimal text and expansive illustrations are deeply moving. The sharp realism in the figures and portraiture make this a very specific, realized family; the delicate beauty of the country imagery gives a dreamlike atmosphere, frozen in the eternal moment.



*Illustration from  
Dr. Kiss Says Yes*

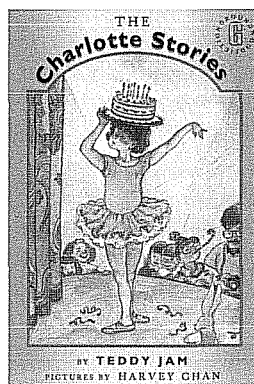
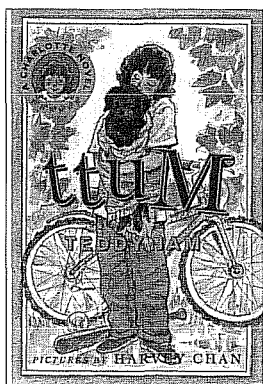
Illustration from  
*Jacob's Best Sisters*



Jam's lovely, lyrical poems of babies brightening into life develop naturally into his two picture books on the rich, imaginative world of preschoolers. In *Doctor Kiss Says Yes* and *Jacob's Best Sisters*, the preschool protagonists are heroic and problem-solving, autonomous agents in their fantasy lives of make-believe and play. In the former title, the parents are part of the child's play in a theatrical, stage-management sense. In the latter, Jacob is alone and deeply engaged in his private world. Both stories celebrate the dramas of the inner world of the very young, existing in tandem with their socially and emotionally nurtured life shared with the gently supportive adult world.

One child saves lives as a courageous, chivalric physician — a brave and noble doctor to storybook knights. The girl's secret identity as Doctor Kiss brings forth her healing gift. Jacob is also a nurturer; he nurtures a gang of difficult, upstart female pioneer dolls. The gender reversals and comic moments in both books are strong and gentle. The children act as agents of mercy and invention. Both stories are illustrated by Joanne Fitzgerald in her signature style of winsome, dreamy gentleness, so appropriate to the sweet, whimsical tone of the texts.

Jam's focus on the preschooler's realm of inner imaginative play continues and grows in his two companion first chapter books written for a primary and intermediate grade audience — *The Charlotte Stories* and *ttuM*, possibly intended as the beginning of a series. It is exceedingly difficult to create convincing realistic fiction in the short form of first chapter books. This family and child subgenre speaks to the younger elementary grades age group, as in American author Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* series. Few Canadian



writers have successfully carried off the delicate balance of short chapters, warmth, situational humour, and the dramas of school, siblings, pets, and friendships that mark this form. Teddy Jam changed that with his splendid and charming first novel, *ttuM* (Mutt spelled backwards), and his earlier picture book of three linked narratives starring the same blithe heroine, *The Charlotte Stories*. In both books, imagination and fantasy are broadened to include inventive social and linguistic play, as befits the elementary school-child's world. Charlotte and her best friend move beyond the warm support of the nurturing family to the realm of school and neighbourhood loyalties, rivalries, embarrassments, and discoveries. The mysterious and ambiguous behaviours of adults are observed and often hilariously misunderstood. In *ttuM*, the format is older and the episodic chapter dramas have a deeper resonance. Charlotte is a wonderful protagonist, spunky, hyper-imaginative, and loving. Her summer dramas involve adopting a stray dog who only understands backwards speech, and enjoying lake-side adventures with her calming friend Mimi, affectionately squabbling parents, and mysterious neighbour. The humour and suspense are perfectly balanced between farcical mix-up and gripping mystery. Jam's prose is witty, smooth, and great for reading aloud. Harvey Chan's robust sketches give a playful individuation to characters and setting.

Finally, and perhaps most lastingly, Teddy Jam has completed a cluster of titles that reprise themes found in his adult *Salem* trilogy set in rural Ontario. These three children's picture books look back to an earlier time in Canadian history; they are shaped as memoir-like reflections on the child's relationship to the Canadian land, its regions, peoples, and traditions. Jam has written a bittersweet, elegiac story of the Maritime love of the sea and the painful loss of the cod fishing in *The Fishing Summer*. Like so many other Canadian picture books that reflect regionalism and community, the text is

also multigenerational, presented as a memoir of an earlier era before harsh economics and ecological disaster resulted in the displacement of family, tradition, community, and history. In strong, rhythmic prose, the narrator recounts a first-person memoir of his eighth summer when he went codfishing with his three larger-than-life uncles, learned how to bait nets and jig for cod, almost drowned, and celebrated a rite of passage into maturity and the family's fishing tradition. The power of memory, both personal and generational, is strong, painful, and healing here. Memory and the act of storytelling are all that is left of a vanished life. "After hundreds of years of everyone's grandfather and grandfather's grandfather going out to sea, no one in the village fishes any more. The fish are gone." Ange Zhang's paintings in acrylic are expressionistic in the large, stylized, sculpted figures of the uncles. They add an aura of fable to the story and convey the young boy's perceptions of his heroic family. The vigorous brush strokes in a palette of purples, blues, and greens leave a sense of the ever-changing light, wind, and dominant expanse of sea and sky.

Jam turns to rural eastern Ontario in an even earlier era, and to the harsh, beautiful farming land with its life of struggle and poverty in *The Stoneboat*. Set in the early twenties, it also evokes the harsh realities and heroism of the rural life and the unpredictable neighbourliness of French and English-Canadian farming communities. The story is told in first-person narrative, through the eyes of a small boy who, while fishing for catfish during the spring thaw, witnesses his gruff neighbour, Mr. Richard, lose his footing and be swept away by the raging waters. Although the boy rescues Mr. Richard, he receives no thanks from the man for his heroism until he

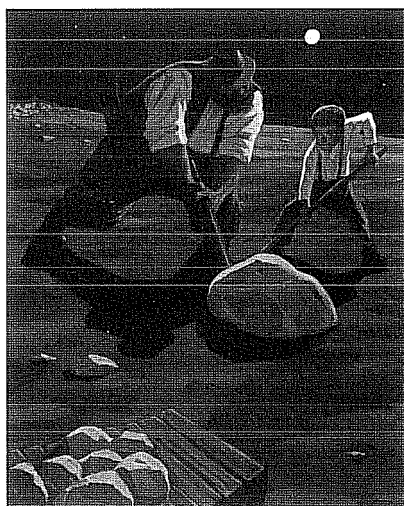


Illustration from  
*The Stoneboat*

joins him one night to silently and stoically clear his land of giant stones. This act changes his father's relationship with the man and, as an adult visiting his family home, he is happy to discover that the two older men often go fishing together on summer evenings.

Some of Ange Zhang's daytime outdoor scenes of water and sky are reminiscent of the bold lines and thick colour of the Group of Seven. The night scenes use sombre earthy tones to effectively depict the moon-washed shadowy landscape, the unforgiving terrain, and the stoic, bitter, and courageous lifestyle of Canadian farm folk in the early part of the century.

On another Ontario farm from around the same era, another reminiscence. Jam's *The Year of Fire* is a long, meaty picture-storybook, almost a short chapter book, full of vigour, fear, and danger. In Northern Ontario, at maple syrup time, the grandfather sits with his granddaughter in front of the boiling syrup pan and, in the oral storytelling spirit of the family raconteur, narrates a story from his youth when a yearlong fire ravaged an entire county. The quality of adult and child life after the First World War, and the precise details of social history are conveyed in text and illustrations. The great success here is not just the drama of nature overwhelming the people, but the depiction of the power of storytelling to release the still-living boy within the old man's memories. Jam's language is beautiful — clear, clean, but subtly poetic and full of vital, telling details: "Sometimes his stories turned into each other, like a long braided rope connecting him to when he was a boy." The profound legacy of family and cultural continuity, that our children will pass on the traditions, values, and stories given with love by their elders, is a moving subtext to this story. The grandparent's storytelling is the conduit to family history and the legends of the Canadian land.

Pen-and-ink and coloured pencil illustrations by Ian Wallace follow the theme of the fire's ferocious destruction and the natural renewal of the environment. Dramatic double-paged spreads provide a feeling for the epic quality of this regional legend, when ten thousand trees die and buried fire burns under the snow. The beauty of farm, field, forest, hills, and valleys is captured in expansive aerial perspectives.

Observing the trajectory of Teddy Jam's writing as it has evolved through developmental stages and themes, the words of Robert Frost come to mind. Poetry, says Frost, is a process, a voyage that begins in delight and ends in wisdom (499). Those words could speak to Teddy Jam's work, which has voyaged from the joy and delight of new life to the hard-won wisdom of generational heritage and the traditions of the land. Canadian children's literature has lost a rich and loving talent, but Teddy Jam's stories will continue to live in the imagination of future generations.

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