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THE SEARCH FOR A SHARED HOME

Out of the Dark. Welwyn Wilton Katz. Groundwood, 1995. 185 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-241-6.

In *Out of the Dark*, Welwyn Wilton Katz successfully continues to explore the main concerns of her fiction for young adults: the search for emotional wholeness of teens with problems, the pervasive influence of history and myth on the present, and the interpenetration of fantasy and reality as the way by which the “real-world” present and historical-mythic past interact. Through this interpenetration she also wrestles, again, with the question of who rightfully belongs to a place.

Thirteen-year-old Ben Elliott and his nine-year-old brother Keith have moved to Ship Cove, Newfoundland, with their author father Lorne, who had grown up there. Their mother, Frances, has been killed in a parking lot shooting in Florida, and Lorne has taken the boys “home.” The problem is that Ship Cove is not home to Ben, and he resents the move as an imposition. The one thing that saves the situation for him is that across the bay from their house is L’Anse aux Meadows, the restored site of one of the Viking landfalls. Lorne and Frances had met one summer while working on her father’s archeological dig at the site, and Ben has inherited his mother’s love of things Viking. He knows *The Vinland Sagas* thoroughly, and since being little has “played Viking” by imagining himself to be Tor, a young shipbuilder who accompanies Karsefnie and Gudrid to settle Vinland.

In *Whalesinger* (1990), Katz develops the historical/tourist site marking Sir Francis Drake’s harbour at Point Reyes, California, by having the past episode penetrate into the present story. Similarly, in *Out of the Dark* Katz details the restored Viking settlement and Ben’s imaginary recreation of its inhabitants in order to have the Viking clash with native people (Skraelings) increasingly mirror, and eventually come to shape, Ben’s encounter with kids of Ship Cove. The question Katz explores is whether the outside can plant a “home” in inhospitable territory. For Ben the territory is not only Newfoundland, but also the uncharted emotional ground he finds himself on after his mother is murdered. The title, *Out of the Dark*, comes from the story Frances tells Ben about the aftermath of the Norse Apocalypse, Ragnarok, where when everything is dead, “only then, out of the dark, will life begin again.” The climax of the story occurs when Ben/Tor has to make a choice of whether to throw the Viking axe away or to bury it in the head of Ross Colbourne/Skraeling. In the actual saga it is the native chief who throws the iron axe into the lake, in a gesture of rejection of all

things European. The Vikings finally abandon Vinland, knowing they cannot win the land, and that they could never share it with the Skraelings. By adapting the saga to have Ben/Tor holding the axe, Katz enables the abandoning of it to be a gesture of acceptance, goodwill, and trust rather than rejection. It also allows the Skraelings/Ship Cove kids the opportunity to express the same. It enables the ground — the “home” — to be shared:

Tor had gone away from here, but he, Ben, would stay. And this time, he would make Vinland work.

The search for a shared ground between Native and European was also central to Katz's *False Face* (1987) in which a mixed-race boy, Tom, and a white girl, Laney, tentatively enter a new, unstereotyped human territory while dealing with the havoc caused by Iroquois medicine masks of power which are irresponsibly possessed by Laney's mother. Upon the book's nomination for Trillium and Governor General's awards, Katz was charged with cultural appropriation by members of the Iroquois nation. Eight years later, by having Ben know he would “make Vinland work,” Katz responds to those who accused her of treading where she has no business. The land is a shared home, and we must make it work. Katz's fiction is an impressive contribution to that task.

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THE ATLANTIC'S FUTURE

Out of Darkness. Ishmael Baksh. Jespersen, 1995. 144 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-921692-71-4.

Out of Darkness is a dystopian novel for young adults. The chaos and despair from which the characters eventually escape in this future society stem from the present social crisis in Newfoundland. Current world and Atlantic problems such as lack of employment, lack of morals, and economic stagnation have culminated in a society where young people face such realities as fierce competition for scholarships in a world where education is the only hope; social and racial intimidation by gangs; alcoholism; violence in the home; ecological disaster; date rape; poverty; and paranoia. All our fears have come true.

This is not, however, a cyberpunk or violent novel. It is a political and social commentary. The future is non-democratic. Governed by The Party, Newfoundlanders have no freedom of thought or of movement beyond designated living areas for workers, play areas such as Rec-zones, and the dreaded Out-zones where “the unemployed were collected along with the descendants of the Second Resettlement and the thousands who had returned jobless from other provinces” (9). The threat of the violent anarchy in the Out-zones is as close as we get to Gibson's *Bladerunner*. The hero lives in worker's housing in St. John's.