

ACROSS CANADA WITH A SCHIZOPHRENIC CAT

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Lucifer and Lucinda, Kenneth Dyba. November House, Vancouver, 1977. 106 pp. \$6.95 hardback.

Kenneth Dyba's *Lucifer and Lucinda* is a thoroughly unusual Canadian children's book — a picaresque cat novel, written in a clipped, quipping style and moving always at a frenetic pace. In its tone and treatment of the subject it certainly bears little resemblance to *The Incredible Journey*, *Watership Down* or other animal quest stories; its kinship would be rather, remotely, with the works of Roald Dahl. Its characters are grotesques and scenic description is scarce, although the book is divided into sections by the towns and cities through which the cat travels. Instead, Dyba emphasizes slangy dialogue, word play and constant action.

Thomas (otherwise known as Lucifer), a handsome orange cat left behind on the West Coast when his young owner, Lucinda, moves to Halifax, stows away and hitch-hikes across Canada to find her. The situation may sound sentimental, but Dyba's treatment of it certainly is not. His style is tough, trendy and colloquial; he relishes language for its own sake and plays with garish verbs and adjectives. This is a novel to be read aloud, to savour its richness of assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia.

'I'm thirsty as a desert in August,' Les bellowed out to Jerry the bartender. Jerry, a rednosed old-buddy of a young man, slung four sudsy mugs onto their table and sat down. Les flashed his gold tooth and introduced old-buddy Jerry to old-buddy cat.

Jerry sneezed into his beer and foam spluttered across the table and smacked Lucifer in the face. The bartender tried sneezily to explain that he was allergic to cats. But Les wasn't really listening; he was too busy waving at some trucker buddies from Wawa. And Lucifer was too busy licking the tickly foam from his dripping whiskers.

Red-nosed Jerry hustled off, his eyes already puffing up into two beery mushrooms.

Although the reason for his journey belies the convention that cats care

more for familiar places than for people, Thomas' (Lucifer's) personality does not come across vividly in this story. It is the description of Thomas' adventures and misadventures, rather than his own nature, that interests us. He flies over the Rockies in a tiny plane piloted by an octogenarian Chinese laundryman, participates unwillingly in the Stampede Parade and later in a wild car chase across northern Ontario, is kidnapped several times, becomes a movie star, and rescues the victims of a crazed vivisectionist — among numerous other adventures. The thematic centre of the book is the transformation of Thomas by the maniacal lady Voodoo into Lucifer, an evil black cat who will help her concoct a potion to return the world to chaos. Under the loving care of such disparate characters as a retired circus clown, a loyal Mack truck named Olga, and a gigantic red-haired stunt lady, Thomas gradually recovers his true identity. The sheer number of events, weird personalities, and changes of scene in the book tends, however, to overwhelm the study of Thomas' character-change. As it isn't convincingly integrated into the episodic structure of the book, it would probably be better omitted.

Like *Sister Roxy*, Dyba's novel for adults (November House, Vancouver, 1973), *Lucifer and Lucinda* is colourful, absorbing and original. Taken individually, many episodes are quite remarkable — notably the scene of the filming of *Cat Woman of the Moon*, which is a bravura piece of literary slapstick. The stylistic quirks and frenzied activity can, however, become wearisome: periodically one wishes Dyba would take a tranquillizer and let his cat have a nap. While the subject of *Lucifer and Lucinda* might seem of interest to younger children, the style and tone of the book would restrict it mostly to readers over ten. The frantic pace, sudden shifts of locale and constant knock-about violence link this novel with movie cartoons, but on the printed page such abrupt shifts and transitions are more confusing than they are on the screen. The reader must have a quick, flexible mind, and pay close attention. Dyba, a youngish Albertan now living in Toronto, has worked a lot in the theatre and is fascinated by Hollywood movies. His theatrical experience has evidently influenced his interest in the oral possibilities of language, and the delight he takes in playing with sounds. This quality, along with his use of cinematic and stream-of-consciousness techniques, provides some interesting connections between *Lucifer and Lucinda* and contemporary adult fiction.

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