1994

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Heil, Lillian H. (1994) "Eric Beddows, the Nutt with a Passion for Details," Children's Book and Media Review: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 3. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol15/iss1/3

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Eric Beddows, the Nutt with a Passion for Details

by Lillian H. Heil

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Ken Nutt is a gallery artist; Eric Beddows illustrates picture books for children. They are the same person. Ken Nutt became two people in 1985 after his first illustrations for the popular Zoom the Cat books caused people to arrive at his gallery shows expecting pictures of cats. (A gallery artist doesn’t want to be confined to one subject even if he loves cats.) Ken Nutt’s solution was to create a pen name for his book illustrations; thus Eric Beddows was born. He admits that his book illustrations are for the kid in himself. "I regress into the kinds of things I loved doing as a kid" (Emergency Librarian, May/June, 1993, Vol. 20:5, p. 69).

Nutt has rich memories of those early "kid" years. An only child, he was born in 1951 in Woodstock, Ontario. He never felt lonely because he created fantasy friends and made stories about them. When he discovered books he formed strong opinions about illustrators; he kept lists of what was good and bad. He disliked the impressionists because they were non-graphic, and he didn’t think that worked for illustrations in a book. He appreciates details rather than shimmering impressions. In high school he was surprised to discover that artists were at the top of the social heap. That was part of the milieu if you lived in the East in the sixties. In addition, his skill at creating dance and campaign posters made him a valued asset to his classmates.

Nutt’s family supported his preoccupation with art:

My parents were both working class; my father worked in a factory, my mother in the telephone office. Your job was considered not to be very important, but your hobbies were everything. My dad built model airplanes, raced motorcycles and had a succession of hobbies that each became his focus for about a year. And so art was my "hobby." It was just assumed that if it didn’t work out I’d get a job in a factory and still do my art. There was never any pressure. (Emergency Librarian, May/June, 1993, Vol. 20:5, p. 69)
Nutt studied art at Toronto's York University for a time. In 1972 he got a job in Stratford at a public community gallery, where he did everything from cutting grass to teaching children and running a weekly life-drawing studio. After the gallery job he became a freelance artist; his first children's book illustrations appeared in *Zoom at Sea* by Tim Wynn-Jones in 1983.

The kid in Ken Nutt is what drives him to include small details in his illustrations: "That comes of my being an opinionated little kid. It just drove me nuts when illustrators didn't fill in the background. I liked to have everything worked out, even in the little details. I'd think, "They're not really trying!" (Emergency Librarian, May/June, 1993, vol. 20:5, p. 71). Paul Fleischman's *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*, tested Nutt's ability to tell a whole story in a single picture. He catches the omnipresent quality of sparrows in the facing picture for the poem about their "squabbling, flitting and singing everywhere" (*I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*, p. 37).

As a child, Nutt loved the detailed graphic art style. After leaving York University, he decided his training had not been disciplined enough. So he disciplined himself. For a time he worked only in black and white. He completed a second book of two voice poems by Fleischman (*A Joyful Noise*, which won the Newbery Award in 1988). The book contains wonderful examples of his skill in black and white. One of my favorites is his sinking beetle. Notice the meticulous drawing of the beetle and those marvelous drops of water frozen in midsplash. The pictures accompany a humorous poem about the unsuccessful efforts of two water striders to teach a beetle how to walk on water.

Nutt uses a lot of shading in his drawings. His love of detail pushes him to use lots of middle and darker grays. *The Cave of Snores* shows how skillful he is at rich shading. Much of the story takes place at night. Look at the cover for *Cave of Snores* later in this issue. Then find the book itself and look closely at the back. The pencil marks prove that Nutt did all the shading by hand. That's one reason it takes a year for him to do a book.

Nutt began to incorporate color into his illustrations with *Night Cars* by Teddy Jam and in 1992 for Barbara Esbensen's *Who Shrank My Grandmother's House*? If you take time to locate this last book, don't miss the oil rainbows described in the poem about grease from an old Buick and the prism that breaks a white bird into one cardinal, one bluebird, and five parakeets. They'll convince you that Nutt's (alias Eric Beddows') passion for details will satisfy the kid in you.