



The Blue Cat

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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On the first page, a poem which, the author reveals on the Web, 'crept into my mind' on a long overnight flight home to Sydney from Berlin when, she says, 'I was in a bad mood':

i only know / the cat is blue / he sits alone / his needs are few

And, a couple of verses later,

he breathes and stares / and then he blinks / and nobody / knows what he thinks

The blue cat slips in and out of the pages, leaving a scent of feline mystery perhaps, shaping the plot only insofar as his disappearance prompts the young protagonists to search for him all over Sydney. They don't find him; though maybe they saw him. Columba's neighbour, Miss Hazel, declares, 'If that cat could speak, imagine the stories he would tell'. We're none the wiser about those stories when we reach the novel's end. If the cat is elusive, then much the same might be said of the whole book, though it could hardly be more rooted in threatening reality.

Columba is growing up in Sydney in 1942: Air Raid Warning Sirens followed by the All Clear, soldiers everywhere, the fall of Singapore, warships at anchor in the harbour, Darwin bombed by the Japanese with loss of life and property. Columba is very aware of the war, overhearing fragments of her parents' talk or listening in confusion to the rallying calls of her headmaster during school assemblies. Black and white illustrations punctuate the text, often photographs of what Columba might have seen around her city, along with images of King George VI, Hitler and his entourage in front of the Eiffel Tower, or Government Documents concerning National Security and Alien Residents.

Columba's friend Hilda (who knows everything and is good at almost everything) decides patriotic prayers are not getting anyone anywhere, so she makes some rock cakes, cuts a slit in the lid of a Golden Syrup tin for coins, and goes out to raise cash for War Bonds. Columba's response to the anxieties raging inside her mind is given immediacy by the arrival of a small boy in her class - a Jewish refugee newly arrived in Australia with his father. No-one knows what has happened to his mother (except Hilda - 'Hitler's killed her?'). Ellery doesn't speak English - he doesn't speak at all - but Columba somehow makes silent friends with him, even writing him a reassuring letter as if it's come from his mother, over in 'You-rope?'. And she dreams, waking and sleeping. Dreams which start to weave a past for Ellery and

his family. Images linger in her mind. An old man with a stick, culled from an illustration in Ellery's favourite German edition of **Treasure Island**, revisits her mind as an old man hobbling over a bridge with a woman who may be Ellery's mother along with her husband and Ellery himself. An illustration from an old Latin text shows a different kind of refugee as Aeneas carries Anchises from ruined Troy. Flames, soldiers, the tick, tick, tick of a clock or maybe a watch, the blue cat.

If such images work for readers as they do for Columba, they will do so by releasing the shifting meanings of poetry: sometimes inconsequential, sometimes charged with menace. The novel seems about to end in the sadness of parting as Ellery and his father have disappeared, maybe taken to an internment camp; but then, on the last couple of pages, another poem, printed in the original German of 1834 alongside a translation, hints that there might one day be another meeting. Maybe.

So certainties remain elusive to the end. One reader might well find the book frustrating, bewildering, even not worth finishing. A different reader might be intrigued by the otherness of the times and place. Beyond that readers might glimpse a young child's confused experience of war; a collage perhaps, conjuring up an atmosphere of an uncertain time rather than a linear series of events.

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