The Blue Cat

Hello, Kia ora, to you all. It is so lovely to be here – a true privilege. Thank you, Ursula, for asking me to say some words at your book’s launch. Thank you for the opportunity to think aloud about *The Blue Cat,* to help send this exceptional book out into the world where its mystery and horror and beauty will, I am quite sure, transfix and disturb its readers as it did me, *and* offer readers the kind of transformation and solace that is the mark of great art.

I was a latecomer to the art of Ursula Dubosarsky. My first Ursula book was *The Red Shoe,* which came my way for review in 2006. I don’t think it’s overstating to say I became quite obsessed with that book. I had not ever – since childhood - been so ensorcelled by a story, by writing so limpid, yet freighted, so that each re-reading made me marvel at its radiating mystery and complexity, while greatly admiring its chyrstaline surface. Above all, I was entranced by a rare magic: that of a writer who so completely inhabited the elusive and disputed land of children’s literature; who so fluently spoke its locutions and nuances; who did what only the greatest writers for children can do: mine childhood’s richest and most dangerous seams – where the clarity of children’s *seeing* meets the simplicity of their understanding and brings forth misinterpretation of adult behavior and thinking. There springs true literature for the young – the young, that is, between 9 and 90.

Ursula’s writing made me tremendously excited. It made me evangelistic – I wanted everyone to read her. It filled me with a new zeal for my own reading and writing – it made me want to do better! It is a wonderful thing to have a writer so thrill you that there is no question of envy. You simply thank the universe and pay close attention.

So it has been with *Abyssinia*, *The Golden Day*, and the Dubosarsky backlist, which I have gobbled up with great joy and much wonder.

And now, *The Blue Cat*.

*I only know*, begins the epigraphic poem at the start of the book. On the facing page a ‘blue’ cat stares impassively at the reader. *Nobody knows what he thinks,* says the poem. And, *Secret anger, dark and deep.* And, in the final stanza, ‘*there’s nothing,* nothing *we can do…’* You must pay careful attention to all ancillary texts in a Dubosarsky novel – quotes, newspaper headlines, documents, paintings – and this is no less the case in *The Blue Cat.*

*‘There is nothing,* nothing *we can do’* – a statement of fact? A pragmatic acquiescence? A lamentation…? The words toll through the novel – and remind us, as do all Ursula’s novels, that we are so often in childhood bewildered witnesses to events little and large, to the tyranny and mystery of adult behavior and thinking. (*I only know –* that *only* is so plaintive).

*The Blue Cat’*s subject is warand the pity of war, but it is also another installment in what I think of as Ursula’s larger project – her writer’s bone, as Annie Dillard puts it, that pressing matter you chew over, wrestle with again and again. In Ursula’s writing it is the fall from childhood into the bitter-sweetness of adult knowledge. As with the *The Red Shoe* and *The Golden Day* we live in the *Blue Cat’*s story, and with its characters, at a heightened level, experiencing every human exchange, the material and natural world, all sensory feeling, *acutely*, because it is all coming to us through a child’s eye. Colomba, the little dove - released, like Noah’s, to bring us Ellery’s story – sees and feels everything vividly: she describes much by way of comparison – simile and metaphor – as children do when they’re working to understand the world: the navy ships in the harbor are mountains or a herd of tired grey elephants; Ellery’s skin gleams like snow; buildings grow out of the ground like trees. Like all the great writers of childhood Ursula revivifies the world for us, makes us understand it anew, in all its beauty and sadness.

I so love Ursula’s opening chapters – they are peerless examples of story seeding: the novel’s dna is delivered with masterful concision: characters, themes, potent symbology, all contained in prose of extraordinary simplicity. It is hard for me to convey adequately the brilliance of this kind of writing: the best I can say is that, as with poetry, every word is essential and those apparently simple sentences pulse with myriad possibilities; meaning reverberates between the lines. Each re reading brings new insight.

*It was New Year’s Day. Outside the world was dozing, the leaves in the trees were almost still. The waves lapped against the sea wall, and from far away, but not very far, came the sound of a lion roaring and the lonely trumpeting of an elephant.* The sense of portent is almost palpable.

In the next paragraph the novel’s propelling metaphor – time, passing time, running out of time – is offered innocently enough: *I watched my father take the big clock down from the kitchen wall. It was made of dark wood with a creamy face and stiff Roman numerals. It had a loud tick, like someone clapping in time to a silent song*. What a killer sentence that last one is. Your heart stops a little every time you read it.

I’m not going to parse the entire chapter, you’ll be thankful to know, but I wanted to take the trouble over a couple of Ursula’s paragraphs because they so perfectly distil her terrific gifts and the serious intent of her work. They tell us definitively that a great writer for children is simply a great writer.

Ursula’s novels come to us one by one, but there are chimings and interconnections. *Blue Cat* is tonally and stylistically related to *The Red Shoe* and *The Golden Day* (as the titles might suggest). They share a compelling unease, even menace. They are all, incidentally, occasionally very funny. It is impossible not to smile at the litany of classmates ending, *Elizabeth and Elizabeth and Elizabeth*, or Matilda’s spiky exchanges with Floreal, or Hilda’s flat-footed observations and prognostications. But *The Blue Cat* is also speaking to two of Ursula’s earlier books, completing as it does a story only hinted at in *The First Book of Samuel* and *Theodora’s Gift*. That story is grave and devastating, as it must be. The final chapters of *The Blue Cat* are haunting *and* shot through with the beauty of human connection.

‘No poetry after Auschwitz,’ said Adorno. Understandably. But the breadth and humanity of this book is vast. At the beginning Ursula quotes the nativist nonsense of wartime prime minister, Curtin, and reminds us of Australia – and the global community’s – eternal duty of care to the dispossessed. At the close of the book, she reaches back to the grace and consolations of an 18th century poet and a pastoral Germany. Between the two flutters a letter carrying the words, ‘I have a real friend.’

Ursula, congratulations and much admiration…*Blue Cat –* out you go, into the world…