



Public
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Airborn

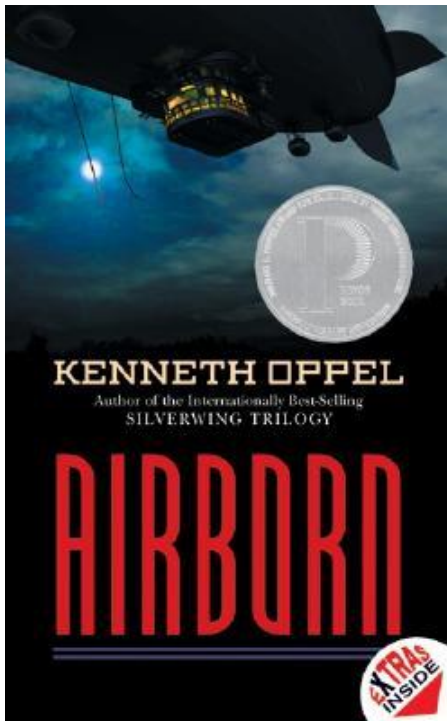
by Kenneth Oppel

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Summary



Matt Cruse works as cabin boy in the Aurora: a luxury passenger ship in an alternative Victorian time where airships roll across the skies. Six months ago, Matt rescued a dying man from a drifting air balloon who claimed to have seen something of great beauty. But it isn't until six months later when he meets the man's granddaughter, Kate de Vries, that he is reminded of this incident. After showing him her father's logbook, Matt is dubious but intent on finding what he actually saw.

Plunging into action, the Aurora is attacked by pirates and the legend himself: Kikram Szpirglas. After looting the ship and shooting a crew member, the renowned pirates leave in their own ship to face a storm. The ships come into contact, ripping the Aurora's Hydirum gas bags and sending it into an inevitable crash.... onto an unexplored island.

The mystery heightens with the finding of a suspicious 'cloud cat' matching the descriptions found in Kate's grandfather's log book. "

Source: http://www.allreaders.com/topics/Info_34340.asp



About the Author

I was born in Port Alberni, a mill town on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, but spent the bulk of my childhood in Victoria, B.C., and on the opposite coast, in Halifax, Nova Scotia.... At around twelve, I decided I wanted to be a writer (this came after deciding I wanted to be a scientist, and then an architect). I started out writing sci-fi epics (my Star Wars phase) then went on to swords and sorcery tales (my Dungeons and Dragons phase) and then, during the summer holiday when I was fourteen, started on a humorous story about a boy addicted to video games (written, of course, during my video game phase). It turned out to be quite a long story, really a short novel, and I rewrote it the next summer. We had a family friend who knew Roald Dahl - one of my favourite authors - and this friend offered to show Dahl my story.



I was paralysed with excitement. I never heard back from Roald Dahl directly, but he read my story, and liked it enough to pass on to his own literary agent. I got a letter from them, saying they wanted to take me on, and try to sell my story. And they did. ***Colin's Fantastic Video Adventure*** was published in 1985, in Britain and Canada and the U.S, and later in France. It was easily the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me -- and it gave me the confidence to think I could make writing my career. I did my BA at the University of Toronto (a double major in cinema studies and English) and wrote my second children's novel ***The Live-Forever Machine*** in my final year, for a creative writing course. I married the year after graduation and spent the next three years in Oxford, where my wife was doing doctoral studies in Shakespeare. Since then we've lived in Newfoundland, Dublin -- and Toronto, where we now live with our three children. My books include the ***Silverwing*** trilogy, which has sold over a million copies around the world, ***Airborn***, winner of the 2004 Governor General's Award for children's literature and the Michael L. Printz Honor Book award from the American Library Association. My latest book is ***Starclimber***, the third in my Airborn series.

To learn more about me, where I get my ideas, visit my website!

Source: <http://www.kennethoppel.ca/biography.htm>



Book Review

Publishers Weekly

In crisp, precise prose that gracefully conveys a wealth of detail, Oppel (*The Silverwing Saga*) imagines an alternate past where zeppelins crowd the skies over the Atlanticus and the Pacificus, and luxury liners travel the air rather than the sea (references to films by the Lumière “triplets” and various fashions suggest a very early 20th-century setting). Young Matt Cruse works aboard the elegant passenger airship Aurora, where his late father also worked. In an exciting opening sequence, Matt rescues an injured old man flying solo in a stranded hot air balloon; the man later dies, but not before telling Matt of “beautiful creatures” that he saw sailing through the air. Matt’s curiosity about the man’s dying words is piqued a year later when the fellow’s granddaughter Kate arrives on board, bearing his journal. As other plot lines develop, pirates attack the Aurora, which crash-lands on an island that closely resembles a drawing in the old man’s journal. There are minor, pleasing shades of the film Titanic throughout—the rich but overprotected girl, the poor but daring and lovable cabin boy, and the vessel itself, which is a sprawling and multifaceted character in its own right—but Oppel places the emphasis squarely on adventure rather than romance, keeping the pace brisk and the characters dynamic. The author’s inviting new world will stoke readers’ imaginations—and may leave them hoping for a sequel (those curious for a preview can log onto www.airborn.ca).

Source: http://www.kennethoppel.ca/books/airborn_reviews.htm



Discussion Questions

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. When does ***Airborn*** take place: in the past, present, future, or a fabrication of one of these times? What clues help you decide? Why do you think the author sets the story in this time period?
2. ***Airborn*** mentions three kinds of flying machines: airships, balloons, and ornithopters. How do these vehicles stay aloft? Read about the history of dirigibles, zeppelins, and hot-air balloons. Who was Leonardo da Vinci and what does he have to do with ornithopters?
3. What is hydrium? Is it real? Where is it found in the story and what functions does it serve, both for good and evil? What are goldbeater's skin and Aruba gas? Are they real and what are their uses?
4. On numerous occasions, Matt is the first crew member to spot various threats to the aircraft and to the voyage itself. List these instances and explain why Matt is so capable and observant. How is Matt mature for his age?
5. Matt often describes the Aurora in anthropomorphic terms, and he also compares himself to various animals. Find examples of both descriptive devices in the novel. What do they reveal about the way Matt thinks? How do they help you better visualize what is happening?
6. On several occasions in ***Airborn***, Matt disobeys the orders of his captain. Think about these choices and the motivations behind them. Is Matt a hero? Do you trust his judgment? Would you recommend him for the Airship Academy?
7. Matt's peers on the airship are Kate, Baz, and Bruce. Discuss the relationships among these four young people and the valuable lessons they learn from one another.
8. In what ways does Matt's father's death determine Matt's future and affect his choices? How does Matt resolve his internal struggle over the loss of his father?

9. Compare and contrast how the following characters speak and communicate: Captain Walken, Mr. Rideau, Chef Vlad, Miss Simpkins, Kate de Vries, Vikram Szpirglas, Mr. Crumlin, and Rhino Hand. How does each character's style of communication reflect his or her personality?

10. Compare the maturation and changes of the crippled cloud cat to the ways that Matt grows in the story. How might either character be considered the novel's hero?

11. Kate is a strong character who often surprises Matt with her knowledge, fortitude, courage, and spunk. Together they make a winning team—although not without some frictions. Discuss this blossoming friendship, its potential pitfalls, and its possible future direction.

12. Author Kenneth Oppel is intrigued with flight, both in this series and in other books he has written. In what ways does flying impact the plot of the story and the development of the characters? What constraints and advantages do being airborne place on people and events?

Source: <http://files.harpercollins.com/PDF/ReadingGuides/0060531827.pdf>



Author Interview

BWI: When you are writing a book, what does your typical day look like?

KO: I drop my kids off at school, then go back home to my study, where I start work about 9:30. Once I'm past the research and outline stage, and am actually writing the book, I try to write 1000 words a day. I try to do this before checking my email or doing any other tasks, so I stay focused. Sometimes, it takes me half an hour; other times seven hours; and sometimes (and this is rare, fortunately) nothing comes at all.

BWI: Which authors have had the biggest impact on you professionally and personally?

KO: Roald Dahl, both professionally and personally because I loved his work as a kid, and emulated his style when I wrote my first book, and he very kindly helped me get it published by recommending it to his own literary agent. Other authors whose works have influenced me include Brian Doyle (stylistically) and L.M. Montgomery, whose *Emily of New Moon* books I found so personally inspiring when I was a kid who wanted to become a writer.

BWI: What do you like best about being a writer?

KO: The part when I don't have to write: the daydreaming stage when I imagine a whole world where my new story will take place.

BWI: Since you've written for all ages, do you develop ideas that suggest themselves as aimed a particular age range, or do you decide a target age range first, then develop ideas?

KO: I start with the idea; and the idea will inevitably determine both the format, and target age range of the story. Often it's as simple as the age of the protagonist; other times it has more to do with the subject matter or complexity of the theme.

BWI: We've really enjoyed *Airborn* and *Skybreaker*. We think one of the things the books have in common is the feeling the reader has of actually being on the air vessel. We got a good feel for the "Saga," but even more realistic feel for the

Hyperion. We loved the secret passageways. What we're saying is that we admire that ability you have of fully imagining the vessel involved. How do you imagine these vessels, as well as the **Aurora**, in such detail?

KO: With the **Aurora**, I started with the Hindenburg, and fused it with the interior of the Titanic! I drew myself a big blueprint of the ship, because I thought it really important that its geography be clear to the reader at all times—and that's why I urged my publishers to include a map in the book. The **Aurora** is the main setting, and also almost a character in itself. With **Skybreaker**, I did the same with the Sagarmatha and the Hyperion. I drew myself blueprints so I knew every inch of the ship, and could get around easily. It was one of the really fun parts of writing these two novels.

BWI: We also admired the portrayal of our hero's gold lust and how it all played out in **Skybreaker**. It was handled with such a light touch. Did you intend for that theme to be understated to the action?

KO: I feel that any theme should never rear its head too overtly. When I write a book, I'm concerned with the story and characters; I never start out with themes in mind. They become apparent as I write and rewrite the book, and often it takes me a while to discern them. At that point, I might develop and hone them more deliberately, but I never want them to capsize the action!

BWI: We loved the end of the book! It was great to have the ornithopters work. We loved the dead man who'd been missing, the gold bars, the fact they were pedaled. It was all wonderful, including the landing. We liked Matt Cruse's sky suit. Do you think it is difficult to write endings of books? The **Skybreaker** ending was cinematic!

KO: Endings can be killers. I always want to finish with a cinematic bang, which is challenging in itself, but even harder is bringing the characters to a good endpoint. With **Skybreaker**, I wrote two endings, and had trouble deciding whether they get the gold, or the blueprints—or anything at all! You also want to provide some kind of emotional resolution without being too pat. Personally, I like open endings where there are some loose ends, and the delicious sense that the world of the story continues long after you turn the last page and close the book.

BWI: For that matter, the beginning of the book worked very well too. We liked the sequel every bit as much as the first book and that is rare. Do you plan to write another sequel?

KO: I have every intention of writing another book about Matt Cruse and Kate de Vries, but right now I'm taking a break and writing a prequel to my novel **Silverwing**. It takes place 65 million years ago and tells the story of the very first bats.

BWI: What types of scientific and/or historical research did you have to do to create *Airborn* and *Skybreaker*?

KO: I read quite a bit about the real airships of the 20's and 30's, particularly the Graf Zeppelin and the Hindenburg, which were the models for the Aurora. I wanted to know all the basics about lighter-than-air flight, down to the amount of water carried in the ballast tanks, the maximum angle of ascent, and the names of all the controls in the bridge. Since the book is set in an imaginary past, circa 1910, I also researched the clothing and decor and social mores of the time. My goal is to immerse the reader in a believable world, even if some of it is pure invention.

BWI: What books did you enjoy reading as a child, and what do you like to read now?

KO: As a child: *The Great Brain books*, *The Mad Scientist Club books*, anything by Roald Dahl, *Emily of New Moon* by L.M. Montgomery, G.B. Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comics, Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*.

Now: Roald Dahl (to my own kids), Ian McEwan, Peter Carey, M.T. Anderson, Philip Reeve, Michael Chabon.

BWI: What was it like to win the Printz award?

KO: It was fabulous to win a Printz Honor Book award. As a Canadian, I didn't even know I was eligible! It was the first time a book of mine had received such acclaim in the United States, so I was very grateful to have the chance to become better known there.

Source: <http://bwibooks.com/articles/kenneth-oppel.php>



Further Reading

If you liked **AIRBORN** by Kenneth Oppel you might like to read the following books, too!

DOCTOR ILLUMINATUS by Martin Booth

ATTACK OF THE INTERGALACTIC SOUL HUNTERS by Timothy Carter

THE DIRT EATERS by Dennis Foon

THE LOTTERY by Beth Goobie

RASH by Pete Hautman

MERCURY MAN by Tom Henighan

ARK ANGEL by Anthony Horowitz

INVITATION TO THE GAME by Monica Hughes

BURNDIVE by Karin Lowachee

BLACKWATER by D.J. MacHale

THE REALITY BUG by D.J. MacHale

ZOO: A NOVEL by Graham Marks

THE LIONESSE & HER KNIGHT by Gerald Morris

SKYBREAKER by Kenneth Oppel

STARCLIMBER by Kenneth Oppel

RAVEN QUEST by Sharon Stewart

RED SEA by Diane Tullson