



## *Mirrors and Windows*

*Kathleen Bailey, editor*



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### **FLYING FREE; ICARUS STORIES OLD AND NEW**

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Down through the ages, dreams of flight have been captured in stories. Soaring away from the earth, flyers found freedom and dizzying independence as they escaped their earthly ties. They risked much as they climbed ever higher, towards the sun.

Wilmon Brewer's book, *Ovid's Metamorphoses in European Culture*, is a good introduction to the different versions of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Brewer observes that Greek poet and scholar Callimachus "appears to have noted that Icarus took a childish delight in handling the wings and that Daedalus endeavoured to provide for the boy's safety, as a mother bird tries to protect her young." (p. 179) According to Brewer, frescoes in Pompeii showed the "fall of the boy and the father's search for his body." (p. 179) This tragic tale survives in many forms, interpreted by many different cultures.

The most interesting portion of Brewer's commentary is his comparison of how Horace and Ovid treat the fateful flight. "Horace in his *Odes* alluded several times to the flight of Daedalus and Icarus. He regarded both of them as guilty of reckless daring. Ovid took a more favourable view. He observed that Daedalus flew safely, and in the *Tristia* he contrasted the wise modesty of the father, who kept a middle height, with the unwise ambition of the son, who soared high and fell -- an idea repeated by Seneca both in his *Oedipus*, and in his *Hercules on Mt. Oeta*." (p.180) All these writers focus on the tragic centre of the story.

When we actually read A.D. Melville's translation of Ovid's version of the story (Book VIII, *Metamorphoses*), we find that Daedalus is challenging the known limits of the universe. Rebellious against his imprisonment by King Minos, he resolves to make wings, declaring: "Minos may own all else, he does not own the air." (p. 177) Daedalus wishes to break free of his world, and soar over the sea to return to Athens. He believes that he can escape the confines of his community, and the restrictions placed upon him.

The tale of Icarus in modern times takes many shapes. British author Penelope Farmer presents a powerful retelling in *Daedalus and Icarus*. Her Daedalus makes wings, saying, "Remember, Icarus my son, remember that great King Minos does not rule the sky."(p.[23]). Aching to escape the isle of Crete and return to Athens, Daedalus and Icarus launch themselves out onto the ocean of air, daring to fly freely. Icarus rashly flies closer and closer to the sun, finally paying with his life for his act of hubris. This is an archetypal image for the impetuosity of youth, risking and ultimately losing all. "Higher and higher flew Icarus, towards the strengthening sun. The air grew hotter, the sun more brilliant, dazzling to his eyes. He had forgotten all warnings now, flying nearer as if drawn to it, like a moth towards a lamp."

Farmer's understated account of the death of Icarus is extremely effective. "Straight as a gull he fell towards the sea, but did not swerve in safety like a gull above the glittering waves. He plunged right into the heart of them, and their startled waves closed above his head. All that remained of Icarus were some feathers floating on the sea, while his father flew, weeping, in the sky, alone." This final, poignant picture is unforgettable.

After the striking image of a daredevil adolescent in Farmer's tale, the young child depicted in Jane Yolen's *Wings* just doesn't carry as much weight. There is no thrill of a reckless young man's flight, just the unwitting action of a child who falls to the sea below. *Wings* illustrator Dennis Nolan's realism emphasizes the child's surprise; Chris Connor's treatment of the same scene in *Daedalus and Icarus* features the golden silhouette of a youth spiralling helplessly downwards. Yolen's focus on an



unselfconscious child playing with feathers and wax picks up an authentic thread of the story, but diminishes the tragic core of the tale.

Peggy Appiah takes a very different approach to Icarus as hero in the story "Why Kwaku Ananse Stays on the Ceiling", from the collection *Ananse the Spider: Tales from an Ashanti Village*. Ananse's boasting in front of Lion and all his subjects forces him to prove that he can fly. Ananse wants to show that he is far above the others, both literally and figuratively. As always, Ananse the trickster is an endearing figure as he struts, is caught in his overweening pride, and must deliver on his boasts. There are dark overtones to the story, for Ananse's life will be forfeit if he cannot prove that he can fly.

However, Ananse succeeds. Though Eagle tempts him to fly too close to the sun, he lands safely on a soft palm roof -- no tragedy here. Unlike the previous Icarus tales, in this story Ananse has never really left the community. Even in his shame at having fallen ignominiously back to earth, his neighbours' taunts ringing in his ears, he remains a part of his close-knit network.

The dream of flying free permeates *Wings to Fly*, a new novel by Canadian writer Celia Barker Lottridge. The Icarus motif is not overt, but the theme of escaping from the familiar world and testing oneself as an individual is. For Josie, the central character, the knowledge that there is a woman aviator barnstorming at country fairs is dizzying. Katharine Stinson is a pioneer both as an aviator and a woman defying the gender roles of Alberta society in 1918. Eleven-year-old Josie is fascinated by the idea of a woman having so much freedom. "Imagine that she could do that. Just fly anywhere she wants to go. I'll probably never even get to Edmonton and it's only eighty miles away." Encircled by her family, enclosed by her rural community, Josie sees the overarching prairie sky as a symbol of freedom.

Lottridge successfully develops a feminist theme of women daring to dream and take risks. Angela, a young teacher, wants to be an astronomer. Josie sees the barriers against which Angela and Katharine must struggle. But with a leap of excitement, Josie thinks: "They were determined to get over that wall. Even the sky was not too high for them." (p. 63) Both women defy the conventional expectations of the community to satisfy their ambitions.

Flying is clearly a metaphor for following one's dream and developing as an individual. Lottridge skilfully balances different role models and stories in Josie's world to show her the possibilities: there is not just the encouragement she receives from her family, but also the counterpoint of her mother's story of having to leave teaching when she married. Towards the end of the novel, there is a hint that Katharine Stinson may again encounter barriers to her ambitious career, as the men return from flying in World War I. This thread of the story is left open-ended: the tragic Icarus-style thwarting of ambition is only implied.

Katharine Stinson was a real aviator, as was Bessie Coleman, who in 1921 became the first Black aviator in the world to gain a license. American writer Reeve Lindbergh's poetic interpretation of this story, *Nobody Owns the Sky: the Story of "Brave Bessie" Coleman*, follows the classic Icarus pattern. (Note the echo of Daedalus's words about the freedom of the air.) Bessie Coleman realized her dream by leaving the United States to learn to fly in France. She returned home in triumph, and at the peak of her success, died during an air show. She had overcome both race and gender bias, only to lose her life as a modern-day Icarus outlined against the sun.

Icarus flies through the world of story in many guises, breaking free of the strictures of conventional expectations. Sometimes the figure flying high is doomed to plunge to death in the sea, far from the known world. Sometimes Icarus lands safely in the heart of the community, confined by the jeers of his fellows. Whether our protagonist dons wings to escape imprisonment, realize a dream, or even to challenge racist and sexist attitudes, the myth of flying free testifies to the power of the human spirit.

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