

The BiblioFiles: Kenneth Oppel

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DR. DANA: The All Ages Show, the Cotsen Children's Library and WPRB present The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr Dana. My guest today is Kenneth Oppel, author of the award-winning Silverwing series and several other books for children and young adults. Today we'll be talking to him about his most recent series, which features the books Airborn and Skybreaker.

Set in a world parallel to our own, the books follow the adventures of Matt Cruse, a young sky sailor aboard the airship Aurora, and Kate de Vries, an amateur zoologist with a penchant for pursuing extremely dangerous new species of animals. From relentless sky pirates to ghost ships sailing at 20,000 feet above the Earth, to the airless realms of outer space, to say this series is action-packed is a supreme understatement. The books are incredibly fast-paced, and, while fictitious, contain just the right amount of believability to make them enticingly real. The characters are dynamic and witty, and at times the dialogue seems to crackle off the page. The interesting settings, cool machines, and wry humor make these books absolutely addictive and utterly satisfactory.

Airborn won the 2004 Governor General's Award and the Michael L. Printz Honor Award in 2005. Skybreaker was the 2005 London Times Children's Book of the Year, and a New York Times Best Seller in 2006.

Mr. Oppel joins us from Toronto, Canada. Mr. Ken Oppel, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

KENNETH OPPEL: Thank you.

DR. DANA: I recommend Airborn, the first book in your series, often. And I find myself going into a lot of detail in the very beginning, explaining the setting. And the best I can do is to say that the story takes place in a Victorian-esque world parallel to our own, where airplanes have been replaced by massive airships, and helicopters have been replaced by something called ornithopters. Can you tell us about how you develop the settings for these books and why you wanted to set your story in a parallel world.

KENNETH OPPEL: The setting for the book, really, for me, was very firmly Edwardian, around 1912 was the date I had in my mind, just before the first World War. Why I chose this era, I'm not totally sure. I liked the look of it, I liked the technology, liked the cars, liked the modes of transportation. I liked the clothing. I thought of it as the Titanic era. Of course, in my world, all the Titanics are flying, they're aloft as giant airships.

So it's a bit of a cheat in terms of a strict chronology, because the technology that exists in my world was really in our world, sort of 1920s, 1930s, around the time of the real airships, the Graf

Zeppelin, and the Hindenburg. But there's a lot of inconsistencies in my world. I shouldn't say inconsistencies, it's a very wide-ranging alternate history. So it involves technology from the turn of the last century to all the way up to the space era in America in the third book, Starclimber. But in terms of how people behave, and the social conventions and the look of the world, it's Edwardian, 1912.

DR. DANA: And were you just attracted to that period of time for this particular book, or is that something that you've always been interested in?

KENNETH OPPEL: Well, the inspiration for the books originated with my fascination with the real airships, which is circa 1920s and into the '30s. But I think once I started imagining this floating world of these great ships, it was pretty hard to avoid the associations with the great ocean liners, like the Titanic. And yes, that was a world and a look that has fascinated me for a while, because it recalls so many great examples of adventure fiction, you know, H. Rider Haggard, and Jules Verne, and Robert Louis Stevenson. So I had all these classic images swirling around in my mind when I was writing the books.

DR. DANA: Have you actually ever been up in an airship? Have you ever flown in a blimp?

KENNETH OPPEL: I've never flown in a blimp. I'd love to. Blimps and airships are different, a blimp is just a balloon, basically. It's a zeppelin-shaped balloon, but if you take all the lifting gas out, you can fold it up and put it away in a box. But an airship has a rigid frame, so even if you took all the gas out, it would still look like this huge Hindenburg-style ship. You can fly in little ones in Germany. The Zeppelin company is still making airships out of Friedrichshafen, which is where they made the Graf Zeppelin and the Hindenburg. But you have to go all the way to Germany, and I have not done that. Maybe one day, I'd certainly like to go up. They're quite small, the ones they're building now, they really only hold about 20 or so people for little tourist jaunts.

DR. DANA: There are some bits of actual history in your books. For example, Matt refers to the eruption of Vesuvius at Pompeii, and another character in the second book, Skybreaker-- his name is Hal Slater-- he mentions that he summited Mount Everest. How do you decide which parts of history to use in your books?

KENNETH OPPEL: I want to keep my readers on their toes. So even though the worlds really are very similar, I throw in all sorts of little deviations just to keep reminding the reader that this isn't our world, it's an alternate world. It's an alternate history and an alternate technology, even an alternate physics. Because there's elements in my books that simply don't exist on Earth, namely Hydrium, a lighter-than-air gas that enables my huge airships to become airborne.

My strategy when writing fantasies, including with the Silverwing books, before the Airborn books, was to build a foundation of trust and plausibility around the world. So there's a large amount of factual information in Airborn, about the general physics of the lighter-than-air travel, and the geography of the ships itself. But then I start adding things and deviating. So I think if you can make your reader believe in the foundation, the big nuts and bolts of the world, then they will also believe you when you take them on flights of fancy.

DR. DANA: Especially with biology.

KENNETH OPPEL: Yes.

DR. DANA: I really love the mixture of real and fantasy biology, because it makes it all the more plausible.

KENNETH OPPEL: Well my model for a lot of the Airborn zoology that I create for the books, is, well, it's based on-- a lot of it's based on marine life that really does exist in the oceans, much of it very, very, very far down. And I sort of adapt it for a life in the air and flip it up into the skies. But when I was writing, certainly Airborn and Skybreaker and Starclimber, I was trying to model the discoveries after more of the true scientific discoveries made in the Victorian era by people like Charles Darwin. I kept thinking of him going the Galapagos, and discovering and recording things that had not been hitherto discovered and how exciting that would be.

So I always tried, with my own creatures, to make them vaguely plausible. Or at least talk about them in a very serious way, so I wasn't just brushing them off as mystical, magical creatures that exist in another dimension. No, they're supposed to be living, breathing creatures and you could draw pictures of them, and take notes. Which is what Kate de Vries, the character, loves doing in the books.

DR. DANA: And they're also incredibly dangerous.

KENNETH OPPEL: Yes, they're all dangerous, just like all like all good wild animals. It's funny, the tradition of animal fantasy, I think, really had its genesis in England, where most of the animals in England now are very cute and cuddly. They're tiny. There's not really a lot of big, wild game in England anymore. It's all hedgehogs, and badgers and stoats.

DR. DANA: But watch out for man-eating squirrels.

KENNETH OPPEL: But in the North American tradition, we still have mountain lions, and bears, and things that will hunt you and eat you if you're unfortunate enough. So that's my own particular take on the animal fantasy tradition.

DR. DANA: Matt Cruse and Kate de Vries are very detailed characters. So detailed, and so complex, and so vibrant that they seem very, very real to me. Can you talk about how you developed the characters Matt and Kate? Can we start with Matt Cruse?

KENNETH OPPEL: When I decided I wanted to set a storyboard, this big floating world, I wondered, who's going to be my narrator, who's going to tell the story of these great flying machines. And quite early on, it became clear that it should be a cabin boy. A young person who has the run of the ship, knows the ship intimately, and really thinks of the ship as his home. I love the idea of a character who lives in the air. And Matt, not only does he live in the air, he was truly born in the air.

Initially, I saw him as a very capable, competent kid who really loved flying. He just felt much more comfortable in the air than on the ground. And that was really my starting point with him. Increasingly, as I wrote and then rewrote the story, I became aware of the interesting aspects of his character that I hadn't known at first. Like about his parents, there's a relationship with his parents, and why does he like spending so much time in the air, and why does he not like returning to Earth. What was that? Was his father alive or dead. And that was a question I didn't answer really until the second draft of the book. And that becomes one of the key facets of his character in the first book, anyway, the death of his father.

So Matt is totally unlike me, he's a very together, sunny-natured, well meaning, quite a generous-natured person. I mean, I shouldn't say he's totally unlike me. That makes me sound like Scrooge or something. But I wish I could say, oh, Matt is based completely on me, but I don't know where he came from, but that was just how he presented himself to me in the story. He's certainly a very stalwart type.

DR. DANA: The thing I like about Matt is that he's Steady Eddie until he suspects that someone is flirting with Kate. And then he loses his rationality completely.

KENNETH OPPEL: He is jealous. He is very jealous.

DR. DANA: Volcanic jealousy that can blind him at certain moments. And actually, at times he will lose his temper or get frustrated, and he panics and things, but he always manages to think through it. But not in a way that's unbelievable or superhuman. I do really like his character.

KENNETH OPPEL: Well, thank you.

DR. DANA: I like Kate very, very much. In fact, she's probably one of my all-time favorite female characters. Can you talk a little bit about Kate de Vries?

KENNETH OPPEL: Oh, Kate is easily my favorite character of my own fictional creations. She really did seem to leap off the page for me. Initially she started out being very, very inspired by my wife. So that was easy, it was easy to steal that stuff. And I think what's interesting about her in the books is that she's incredibly strong-willed and ambitious, but also maddening, too. She can be incredibly stubborn to the point of ruthless. And if you go through the three books I think she really achieves the zenith of her perfection as a character in Starclimber. She does so many things that are just completely audacious. But to me, that's what makes an interesting character.

You don't have to like the character all the time, that gets a bit bland and boring. But you just have to be fascinated by them. And I think she's such a big character, and has so many interests, and ambitions, and desires. Even when she's in conflict with people, and the other protagonist of the story, and you always want to watch her. And I always liked writing her, and I could imagine putting her in a room, and I know she'd do something interesting and surprising, that might make me laugh or make me shake my head, or make me stamp my foot. So she's very much one of those slightly larger-than-life characters that you don't want to look away from.

DR. DANA: I'd actually like to ask you about the dialogue in your books. When I read *Airborn*, the first book, a really strange thing happened to me. I could hear the voices of Matt and Kate in my head. Usually when I'm reading a book, I know I'm reading dialogue, but when I was reading your dialogue, it was like I was overhearing a conversation. Can you tell us how you write dialogue for your characters?

KENNETH OPPEL: That's funny you should say that, because I mean, that's what you want to hear as a writer, that your dialogue seems very believable. I'm surprised to hear you say it, because it does have a sort of turn of the century inflection to it for sure. The funny thing about was even though these are not contemporary characters, they are not using contemporary slang and idiom, I felt much more comfortable writing their dialogue than I ever had before. I just felt I don't know whether it's just a good match with my sensibility, but I felt, here were people who were good talkers. They liked talking, they liked using words, and they were good at it. And they liked the ricochet of words, and they liked the repartee and the sparring, and the fun of words. And that, as a writer, for me, anyway, was a huge pleasure to write. And I'm glad that you found that spontaneous and you could hear them, because certainly I could hear them in my mind absolutely. I know exactly how they deliver the lines, and how they would look and their body language as they said them. They were fun to write.

DR. DANA: I know that *Airborn* is in pre-production as far as a film. Do you have any say on the script?

KENNETH OPPEL: Ah, the film, the film. Well, the film is on temporary-- well, temporary-- permanent hold as far as I know. The rights were acquired several-- well, even before the book was published-- by Universal Pictures for a production company called the Sommers Company, which was headed by Stephen Sommers who did *The Mummy* movies. And they developed it for two years. They had a two-year window to develop the picture and have a script written and get it into production. I was not at all a part of that process until the very, very end when they finally let me read the script, which I thought was in no way like the book. I was deeply, deeply mortified.

DR. DANA: We don't have to include this part of the interview if you don't want.

KENNETH OPPEL: Yeah, put it in if you want. It's interesting

DR. DANA: We can skip this one.

KENNETH OPPEL: This is a common story for the writer's work being adapted. So the rights have come back to me, so there's no planning of the film at this point. They'd make good movies, but I'm surprised they changed so much of it in their script. Unrecognizable.

DR. DANA: Do they have Matt saying things like "I'm Canadian, eh"?

KENNETH OPPEL: Of course not, everything's American, and they switched to San Francisco. The characters are all much older, and there's mystical urns, and cultish priests chasing after the gods of the four winds. It's basically like *The Mummy* meets *Pirates of the Caribbean*. I hated it.

DR. DANA: Oh my god.

KENNETH OPPEL: I know, it's crazy.

DR. DANA: We're going to take a short break, and be right back.

If you're just tuning in, my guest is Kenneth Oppel, author of the award-winning Airborn and Skybreaker books. The third book in the series, Starclimber is due out this month.

I know that you're a Roald Dahl fan. Is there any chance that the seed for air travel was planted by the fire balloons in Danny, the Champion of the World?

KENNETH OPPEL: Oh, gosh. Well, it's a good question because that, really, far and away was my favorite of his books. I love that book, I still read it.

DR. DANA: Such a little-known book.

KENNETH OPPEL: Yeah, not one of his most popular, by any means, but my favorite. And his kindest book, too, his warmest book. There's real warmth and affection in that book that you don't often get in some of his books which are really quite acerbic. And mean, and fun, but have that sort of edge to them. Well I certainly remember that, the fire balloons-- Danny's father did so many fantastic things with them. I'm not sure, I certainly have no conscious memory of that being an inspiration for the Airborn books, but who knows. Your subconscious is always surprising you.

DR. DANA: Would you mind telling us about your connection to Roald Dahl? I know it goes beyond you just being a reader of his books.

KENNETH OPPEL: We had a friend of the family who knew Roald Dahl from his childhood days in England, and this friend of ours knew I was an aspiring writer. And I'd just written-- in the summer holidays when I was 14 and 15-- my first book. And he offered to show it to Roald Dahl on a visit to England. And Roald Dahl was very kind, and read my manuscript, and liked it enough to pass it on to his agent in London. And they contacted me and said, we really like your book, and we'd like to try and sell it for you. And they did, they sold it to Puffin Books in England, and Dutton in the US.

And that was how I got my start, because Roald Dahl was generous enough to read yet another piece of writing, probably, by an aspiring author. And he passed it on and put in a good word for me. So he was my big lucky break. And it was very nice for me. I mean, it was incredibly exciting, and hugely helpful, but I read all about how he started his career, and he got a similar kind of break from C.S. Forester in his early days, when he wrote a war story but his RAF days. And showed it to Forrester, thinking he was just giving him notes for one of his stories, and Forester was bowled over by it, and said, you're a gifted writer and I'm recommending this to be published immediately. So he passed that along to me.

DR. DANA: We've all read books that were page turners. We couldn't put them down. But I have to say that the final sequence of Skybreaker actually made my heart speed up. How do you create so much excitement and tension in your action sequences?

KENNETH OPPEL: I don't know, I mean--

DR. DANA: Coffee, lots of coffee.

KENNETH OPPEL: No, I don't need to drink coffee, I'm permanently stimulated all the time. I don't know, I think I have quite a visual imagination. I grew up watching TV and reading comics and playing video games in the '70s and '80s, so there's a huge visual influence on my writing, I think.

I just always, I feel at the end, I just really want to put on a good show. The ironic thing is that the ideas behind the climaxes are all very-- you're always trying to sort of, ooh, now, what would be the most difficult thing to have to go through. And, oh now what if that happened? And so there's a certain amount of one-upmanship going on in your imagination.

But the ironic thing is to write action scenes, is I find it's deadly dull. Because there's so much choreography and attention to the physical details of the sequence. Where everyone is in the room, what's blowing up, who's falling. What happened to Dan, over there, where is he now. And it gets very tedious. It's much more exciting for me-- and probably, I suspect, most writers-- to write a really amazing dialogue exchange, where someone's switched the balance of power between two people, or revealed something, there's something of a psychological nature.

But the running and the jumping, even though, for the reader, it can be really intensely exciting, for the writer, it's like, oh, my gosh, I've got to build the sets, and I've got to rig the lights, and get the special effects people on. It's a lot of work. And sometimes it's like being on a movie set. It's very slow.

DR. DANA: You majored in English literature and cinema at the University of Toronto. And your books strike me as extremely visual, even cinematic. I'm wondering if you would read a passage from Skybreaker that is an example of the cinematic touch.

KENNETH OPPEL: This is from Skybreaker and this is Matt and Kate, and his team has just boarded the Hyperion, which is this ghost ship that's been floating, drifting around the world at 20,000 feet. They've boarded it over Antarctica, and they've gotten on to the ship, and they're exploring the ship. And this is Matt.

"I had expected many things, but not the sight that greeted us. It was like the inside of a shipwreck, frozen at the ocean's floor. All the tanks and pipelines overhead had burst and their various liquids-- water, fuel and lubricants-- had congealed mid-flow. Great oily stalactites spiked from overhead, releasing phantasmagoric rainbows as our torch beams struck them. Walls and girders and wires bore coatings of frost in purples and oranges and blood reds that resembled strange coral and sea anemones. The Aruba fuel had turned brilliant green as it froze and shaped

itself into bizarre spirals and arches and buttresses as though an army of pixie artisans had been hard at work.”

DR. DANA: I love these books. I loved when they got inside the ghost ship. Because I didn't know what to expect, and it was a mess. And I love the fact that it was an absolute mess.

KENNETH OPPEL: Everyone loves a ghost ship. They're such compelling stories. I read up on a few famous ones. I lived in Halifax for four years as a kid, and there's a lot of nautical Maritime stories about shipwrecks and haunted lighthouses and ghost ships and things like that. And I remember really liking that stuff.

DR. DANA: The most recent book in your series, *Starclimber*, is due out at the end of February. What can you tell us about it?

KENNETH OPPEL: *Starclimber* is about the very, very first human journey into outer space. It involves a means of transportation that no one will ever guess. It's totally unexpected. I'm not going to tell you here. It's a very novel form of travel. And I think it fits very well in the world of *Airborn*, which is a quasi-Edwardian technology, but, of course, with a slightly futuristic tinge to it. But if you can imagine how the Edwardians, the Victorians, would have imagined getting to outer space, then you'll be closer to getting an idea of how Matt and Kate get beyond the sky than if you imagine Apollo rockets and all that stuff, which I think is really boring.

DR. DANA: Also, fans of your book will be happy to know that Chef Vlad makes an appearance. I hope I'm not spoiling anything.

KENNETH OPPEL: How could I not have Chef Vlad in the new book?

DR. DANA: The final question of our interview is what question would you, the author, like to ask us, your readers?

KENNETH OPPEL: Well, the big question is, what is it that really gets you reading? I mean, what is it that really wants you to turn that page, and find out more? It's a naive question, like all these questions. It implies one personality, and one set of literary desires. I think that's certainly the question that most writers would like to know of their readers. Like when you see a book that's just doing so phenomenally well, like *Harry Potter*, and the *Twilight* books. And you want to say, what is it that keeps you coming back for more?

DR. DANA: Mr. Kenneth Opper, thank you for coming on to The BiblioFiles.

KENNETH OPPEL: You're very welcome, it was a pleasure.

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