



## The Max and Ellie Series Becky Citra

### Ellie's New Home

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5 X 7 1/2, 112 PAGES, AGES 8-11

### The Freezing Moon

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### Danger at the Landings

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## The Author

Becky Citra is a primary school teacher and writer. Her home is a ranch in the small community of Bridge Lake, British Columbia. Eight horses live on the ranch as well as a springer spaniel named Robin and a cat named Cookie. She also shares the property with frequent visitors including bears, moose and coyotes. When Becky is not teaching or working on her ranch, she loves to read and write stories for children.

## The Books

In addition to the Ellie and Max books, Becky is the author of two other children's novels, *My Homework is in the Mail* and *School Campout*. Her fourth Young Reader with Orca is called *Dog Days* and tells the funny and touching story of a boy's relationship with his surly, reclusive grandfather.

## The Ellie and Max Books

In *Ellie's New Home*, Ellie, Max and Papa come to Upper Canada from England in 1835. Papa leaves Ellie and Max with strangers while he goes off to find and clear a patch of land.

*The Freezing Moon* takes place later the same year. Ellie and Max and Papa are settled in their small shanty, but Papa goes off hunting in the dead of winter and doesn't come back. Ellie must take Max to seek help from the Indians at the other end of the lake.

In *Danger at The Landings* Max is eight years old. He longs for adventure, but is thwarted at every turn until his father bundles him off to stay with his uncle, the miller in the nearby village. There adventure finds him when he least expects it.

Becky's fourth book in the series, *Runaway*, is another story about Max.

Her idea for the series came from Catherine Parr Traill's *The Canadian Settler's Guide*. Traill tells that sometimes children were loaned out to work for other people and left on farms, often even before the family reached their final destination. She warns parents who do this to be sure to note where and with whom they left their children along the poorly charted route as sometimes families were never reunited. Becky immediately visualized Max and Ellie left with strangers and wondering if their father would return for them.

### Resources

*A Pioneer Story* by Barbara Greenwood (Kids Can) includes hands on activities such as making butter in a jar, making apple rings and drying them on strings in the classroom or in a dehydrator, dipping candles, growing potato plants and making a pioneer water carrier.

*The Gristmill* by Bobbie Kalman (Crabtree) has great photographs and diagrams.

### Ellie's New Home

#### The Story

In 1835, Ellie, Max and their father set sail from England to a new life in Upper Canada. Once there, Father leaves the children with another family while he travels alone to find land and build a cabin.

Homesick and unused to pioneer life, Ellie makes an enemy of Mary, who dislikes Ellie's fine clothes and London manners. But as the days go by, Ellie's troubles are replaced by a growing fear. Where is Father? Why hasn't he come back for them?

#### The Ideas

- What do you think it was like in the place where you live in 1835? Who lived there then? What were their lives like? Get your teacher or parents to help you find information about your city or town almost two centuries

ago. Make a chart listing what has changed. Write a story or paint a picture or both telling or showing what life was like so many years ago.

- What would happen if you could travel back through time a hundred and seventy years? What would the people then think of you? What might you think of them? What would you have to learn to do differently? What could you teach them?
- Imagine that Mary keeps a journal. What might she write the day that Ellie and Max and their father arrive? What might she write the next day?
- On page 26, the farmyard is described with lots of colour. The yellow dog, the red chickens, the blue bowl of the sky, the green grass and brown logs and dirt. On a big sheet of paper, paint this scene, filling up the whole sheet. Or choose another vivid scene in the book and paint it or use another art form to represent it. Make sure that you read the scene carefully, so that every detail mentioned is in your painting. See if others who have read the book can identify the scene from the painting.
- Mrs. Robertson talks in similes. On page 31 she says “It’s as easy as apple pie to get yourself lost.” On page 32 she says, “The girl’s as white as a sheet.” Can you find any other similes in the story? Make a list. Then choose one to illustrate. You could paint an apple pie lost in the woods, for example. Or a girl who is white, white, white, head to toe, clothes, hair and all.
- Did you ever want a pet like Ellie wants a kitten? What kind of animal did you want? How did you go about trying to get it and what obstacles got in your way? If you did get it, what did you name it and what was it like the first time you and the pet met?
- Mary keeps doing mean things to Ellie. Why do you think she does that? Think about a time when another child was mean to you or when you saw a child be mean to someone else. Write a scene about it as if it were a story. Draw a picture to go with it if you like. See if you can show how both children are feeling in the scene. What could you write in your story that might change things between those two children?

- Have you ever had to do something that you were afraid to do? Or can you imagine yourself having to do something frightening to help someone, like Ellie and Mary do when they fetch the doctor? Write a story about it.

## The Freezing Moon

### The Story

The year is still 1835. Ellie has learned many of the skills she needs to survive as a pioneer, but she is plagued by fears. The true test of her courage comes in the dead of winter when Papa fails to return from a day's hunting. The only help available is in the Indian village at the far end of the lake. Ellie must take her five-year-old brother, Max, walk the length of the lake and face whatever wild animals may be prowling the woods. Then she must turn to the people whom she has found mysterious and frightening until now, the Indians.

### The Ideas

- Ellie has some mixed-up ideas about Indians or aboriginal people as we say today. What do you think that they might think about her? Imagine that a nine-year-old girl lives in the Indian village. What might she say to others about Ellie if she were to meet her? What stories might she tell? Might she have mixed-up ideas too?
- Make up a story that would explain why Napoleon doesn't speak. Perform it for your class. Later, you will learn why Napoleon is unhappy. Compare your story with Becky Citra's explanation.
- In the second last chapter, Ellie hears the Indians talking in a language that she cannot understand. What might they be saying to one another about her and Max and their troubles?
- On pages 73 and 76 the houses where the Indians live are described, but no sketch accompanies them. Read the descriptions carefully. Then draw or paint the scene. Look for other scenes in the book that are not illustrated and draw a picture to go with them. Always make sure that it matches

every detail in the story, then use your imagination to fill it out. You might even want to do some research to find out more about what should be in your picture.

- Make a found poem by copying words or phrases from the story on bits of paper and arranging them on a sheet of colored paper. When you are happy with your poem, glue down the bits and draw a border around the edges of the larger sheet that fits with your poem. Your poem should fit with the story.
- In the last chapter of the story, Papa tells the story of his adventure. Do a readers theatre of that chapter with someone in Papa's role, Ellie's and Max's. At the same time three people could pantomime what Papa is describing. One would be Papa, another George and a third the lynx.
- Make a survival kit for getting lost in the woods. Your teacher might want to show you a video called *Lost in the Woods* by two Victoria teachers. Becky Citra's class made a survival kit and put in things like bandaids, an orange plastic garbage bag with a hole cut for your head, a granola bar and a whistle. What would you take? What if you could only take three items? What would they be?

## **Danger at The Landings**

### **The Story**

Max is seven now. Old enough for adventures and responsibility, he believes, but no adult will let him do more than pick rocks out of the field and sweep floors. When his father slaughters Max's beloved pig, Hambone, Max resolves to run away to live with the lumberjacks. Instead his father takes him to stay with his stern uncle, the miller at The Landings. There Max meets Red, a wild, exciting boy who includes Max in a scheme that could be the death of them both. It turns out, though, that the real adventure comes later on, hand in hand with responsibility, and Max is left with a story that he can report to his father with pride.

**The Ideas**

- Max has some beliefs about porcupines. Do research to find out if he is right or wrong. Papa says that porcupines don't shoot their quills. Is he right? What do porcupines like to eat? What other interesting facts can you find out about them?
- Create a small model of a water wheel and research the differences between how water was used for power in the 1830s and how it is used today. Are there any similarities?
- If you can get some whole wheat, try various methods for grinding it into flour. What are the differences between whole wheat flour and white flour?
- Max knew that Papa was going to kill Hambone, but he is still terribly upset when it happens. Have a debate in your class about what Papa did. Was it right or wrong? Should he have told Max when he was going to kill the pig? Should Max have been there? Or should Papa have let Hambone live?
- Do you think that Max should build the ice boat with Red? What do you think is going to happen? Write about it or draw or paint a picture. Then read on to find out what happens in the story.
- Max loves to imagine himself having adventures and wishes that he could be free to have real ones. Do you long for adventure? Write a story or paint a picture that shows you in the midst of a great adventure. Ask your classmates to predict how it turns out.
- Ellie is hardly in this story at all, but many readers will know her from *Ellie's New Home* and *The Freezing Moon*. What do you think might be happening in her life while Max and Papa are away? Write a story or a drama about it. Then perform it for your class.

## A Letter From the Author

Dear Readers,

I live on a ranch in a tiny community called Bridge Lake. Just like Ellie and Max, my house is right beside a lake. In the summer we swim and paddle our canoe to a little island called Spooky Island. All kinds of wildlife visit us on our ranch: bears, coyotes, foxes, rabbits, marmots, pine martins and weasels. Beavers and muskrats swim back and forth in front of our house. Once we had a skunk! We hear wolves howling quite often but they are very shy and we only catch glimpses of them. Wild animals are not the only animals who live here. We have six horses called Magic, Montana, Tippy, Richard, Skipper and Sadie, and a dog called Robin and a cat called Cookie.

An important job in the summer is looking after our vegetable garden. We grow peas, carrots, lettuce, turnips, beans, potatoes, beets, onions and squash. We store vegetables in our cold room so we can eat them all winter long, but my daughter Meghan says the best part of a garden is sitting right down in the middle on a sunny summer day and nibbling. We had to build a tall wooden fence right around the whole garden because the deer and the marmots think its fun to nibble our vegetables too!

Berry picking is a fun summer job. We know where all the best places in the meadows and fields are for wild strawberries, raspberries, Saskatoons, rose hips and blueberries. Sometimes the bears beat us and there is nothing left! Do you remember in *The Freezing Moon* when Ellie met a bear in the blueberry patch? If we are lucky, we pick enough berries to make jelly for the winter.

The snow gets deep in the winter and the lake freezes. When it is very cold the horses huddle together and icicles hang from their chins and bellies. My husband has a big beaver fur hat that he wears when he goes outside to feed the horses their grain. On those days we burn lots of logs in our wood stove. On warmer days, we cross country ski and skate on the lake. The ice is very thick but sometimes animals make holes in it. Once an otter poked his head up right in the middle of our skating rink!

A long time ago pioneers lived on our ranch. There are three tumbledown log cabins in our meadow which are almost a hundred years old! It's fun to explore in them. We are always finding interesting things that the pioneers left behind – bottles with funny writing, pieces of horse harness and even an old-fashioned boot!

It's exciting to think about pioneers and to imagine what it was like to live on our ranch a hundred years ago! Some things are still the same but so much has changed. Wouldn't the pioneers be surprised to peek in the window and see me working on my computer and warming my cup of cocoa in the microwave!

My original idea for the Ellie and Max series came from *The Canadian Settler's Guide* where she talks about how sometimes children were loaned out to work for other people and left on farms, often even before the family reached their final destination. She warns parents who do this to be sure to note where and with whom they left their children along the poorly charted route as sometimes families were never reunited. I immediately could visualize Max and Ellie left with strangers and wondering if their father would return for them.

A lot of my research has been reading accounts written by “real” pioneers in the 1800's. I am particularly interested in the books written by the sisters Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie. *The Canadian Settler's Guide* by Traill would be a great source for a teacher. *Roughing it in the Bush*, by Susanna Moodie, and *The Backwoods of Canada* by Traill are also great teachers' sources. Ellie and her family live in the area that the Traills settled, which was in Upper Canada north of Lake Ontario.

I hope you have lots of fun reading about Ellie and Max.

From,  
Becky Citra