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Photo by Peter C. McCusker

Frances Tyrrell and her mother, Avril, have written and illustrated a Christmas book, *Woodland Nutcracker*. The children's book, loosely based on the *Nutcracker Suite* ballet, is about a family of bears and will be launched at Bookers Bookstore on Saturday.

Woodland Nutcracker

The magical world of bears

By Carol Baldwin
ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

The National Ballet of Canada introduced a new country, Russian *Nutcracker* a few years ago. Now Oakville artist Frances Tyrrell and her mother Avril have introduced a new country, Canadian *Nutcracker* in their recently released children's book *Woodland Nutcracker*.

This book, Frances's eighth, uses some of the same characters from her seventh book, but it is not a sequel.

"I thought the bears were there to do another book," she says of the two main characters in *Woodland Nutcracker* who married at the end of her previous book. "They're not specifically tied in, but in my mind these are the same bears. It is the same cottage. It is the same landscape...and some of the woodland friends have stayed the same, the squirrels in particular."

The *Woodland Nutcracker* story, written by Avril, follows the original *Nutcracker Suite* ballet to a point, veering off as Tyrrell's Clara leaves her parents' Christmas party and flies in a hot air balloon, with her animated nutcracker doll, to Ursa Major (the constellation in the northern skies that contains the Big Dipper, also known as the Great Bear).

"Do you take the standard *Nutcracker* and just insert bears, or do you do a story? I thought we should do a real story," says Avril, explaining that she began her tale by thinking of the original *Nutcracker* story, with bears. However, the King of Mice and his battling band of bullies in the original tale soon turned into hungry country mice ready to do battle over food in a northern Ontario cottage.

"They've come for food. They're hungry. And the little bear, Clara, stops the battle. She says, 'Truce. No one fights on Christmas Eve...' I thought it more appropriate to have a truce," Avril explains.

Clara then helps the mice fill their sacks with food, and the mice go away happy. Consequently, her nutcracker

doll turns into a cinnamon black bear prince and as a reward for bringing about the truce, he whisks Clara off not to the Sugar Plum Fairy but to the Great Bear, Ursa Major.

"And she (Ursa) summons all the bears of the world to come out and honour Clara, the peacemaker," Avril continues. "And instead of a ballet, it's a circus of the stars - Le Cirque des Étoiles."

Then, says Avril, once the North Pole was settled upon as the setting for the rest of the story, "everything fell into place." And all the bears of the world, some facing extinction, became part of the story - black bears, South American spectacled bears, giant pandas, grizzly bears, and even koalas.

"It's a fantasy story with an edge of reality that will make a child think," explains Avril.

Frances, who often talks to school children about her books, says she is quick to admit her fear of real bears to the kids. However, the bears in her books are friendly, and those in *Woodland Nutcracker* do any number of activities from dancing and gymnastics to high wire walking and even hockey playing.

"*Woodland Nutcracker* is a jammed packed story. It's very difficult to get it all into a 32-page book. It's like an overstuffed Christmas stocking," says Avril. "You have to take time to look at it."

And by looking at it, she means examining her daughter's colourful illustrations, which are each bordered with even more illustrations that are crammed with details of the story.

Like the original *Nutcracker*, once Clara leaves the living room of her home, the story becomes a play within a play. So, the borders around Frances's main illustrations include an audience, an orchestra pit and even a balcony for the blue jays. But they also include such things as dancing puppets, toy soldiers, Christmas cake, clocks striking midnight.

The text is on the left-hand page, the illustrations on the right. But even the text page has small illustrations at

the bottom.

The right-handed page features each species of bear as it performs its special circus act for Clara, the Nutcracker Prince, and Ursa Major, who are all sitting on ice thrones on the opposite page. Once the act is complete, the following page shows that particular bear or bears enjoying the next performance with the spectators.

It doesn't take long before the left-handed page is not only crowded with text but also with performing-bears-turned-spectators. And the attendant serving refreshments to this crowd of bears is none other than Ursa Minor or "Little Bear."

As with any theatrical production, there is a program for theatregoers, or in this case readers, which is included with the book. This *Woodland Theatre* program lists the cast members - mother, father, Clara, Peter and guests played by black bears; puppets played by striped skunks; Sarita Thapa played by lesser panda; and so on. It even sports advertisements and lists sponsors - fine dining at The Den, transport provided by Beaver Canoe, shoes by Petit-Paws...

Frances has dedicated *Woodland Nutcracker* to the chocolate fairies who left chocolate kisses in her mail box and other strange places around the house during the two years she spent working on the book.

The original paintings for the colourful, intricately detailed illustrations in this children's Christmas book are on display in Toronto at Mabel's Fables on Bloor Street West, just east of Royal York Road.

Those originals include 16 sets of paintings which consist of one large painting (as seen on the right-hand side of each page in the book) and a smaller picture hanging above (as seen in the border around the main picture), as well as 28, or 14 sets of two, rondels (as seen below the text in the book).

Woodland Nutcracker is priced at \$18.95 and will be launched in Oakville on Saturday (Nov. 13th) from 1 to 3 p.m. at Bookers Bookstore, 172 Lakeshore Rd. E.



Photo by Peter C. McCusker

BOLD LANDSCAPES: An exhibition of Rod Charlesworth's new paintings at the McLaren-Barnes Gallery opened on Saturday. The Kelowna, B. C. artist is seen here with his *Over The White Pass* painting. Charlesworth's earliest paintings were influenced by the surrealists. Later, he discovered the works of impressionist artists, which have taken him to his current artistic interests, including experimenting with colour and the physical qualities of paint. Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven have also had a profound influence on his work. His Oakville exhibition will continue in the gallery at 133 Reynolds St. until Nov. 20th.