**A Polar Bear in a Snow Storm: Robert Bateman and Me**

One night during a terrible blizzard I drove up Guelph Line north of Burlington. I shook with cold and the fear that I was lost. I’d spent a long day teaching Art at Lord Elgin High School and was also worried about tomorrow’s lessons. Then I thought of the words of Robert Bateman.

Bateman, the internationally famous Canadian wildlife artist, spent the last years of his teaching career at the same school. He retired just a few years before I started instructing there, but most staff still remembered him. Some even speculated about my ability as a newbie to ‘step into his shoes’.

“Nobody can match him,” they said.

A local gallery carried his artwork so I studied his technique. It wasn’t just the photographic detail that made his work compelling, but Bateman’s mastery of the elements of art. He used dramatic contrasts of colour and lines to draw in the viewer. He knew which devices would strengthen the composition and added elements of surprise or mystery. In his later work, be began to add dangerous warnings about the fate of the environment and wild creatures.

I couldn’t afford his original artwork – even then, worth thousands. He had the handsome looks of Robert Redford. I became a Bateman groupie. I collected his books, bought a small print and attended his public speaking appearances. When he sold his country home and studio in north Halton to another artist, I visited it. I came to appreciate that his incredible ability to accurately render nature is only part of his importance.

Bateman is an outstanding advocate for Canadian wildlife. His limited edition prints raise financial aid for environmental causes. The Robert Bateman Foundation supports humanity’s relationship to the natural world, and he continues to speak about the importance of understanding, enjoying and preserving wild nature.

At one lecture I attended, he shared the personal story behind a portrait of a startling close up of a polar bear. In his painting, the bear’s face leers menacingly out of a snowstorm. He told the story of how the image came when he was driving in white out conditions up the Guelph Line one night after school. He imagined the terror he would have felt if a polar bear came at him through the headlights.

That story came back to me as I drove home along the same lonely stretch of the Guelph Line. Snow was swirling around the car and the road was hidden. I panicked and visualized a polar bear leaping through my front window. Somehow, I made it home safely, and planned my art lesson.

The next morning, I faced my Grade 10 art students, who were full of early morning lethargy and resentment that it wasn’t a snow day.

“Today, we’re going to create a scene from a Canadian winter.” I said, distributing large pieces of cartridge paper. “What can we imagine?”

One cocky teenager immediately stood up and waved his empty white sheet in front of the class. “I’m done! I’ve already created a polar bear in a snowstorm!”

It wasn’t the lesson I’d hoped for, but I took it.

My art students won’t brag that their teacher became world famous, but all Canadians have benefitted from that other art teacher – Robert Bateman - who mastered incredible portraits of wildlife and warned us of the need to preserve the wild for future generations.