

It's Raining Cats and Dogs in Children's Books

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Animals appearing in children's books are nothing new. From *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*, to *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Olivia the Pig*, animals are a recurrent presence in popular picture books. There are also many memorable animal figures in novels popular with teens, such as *Souder*, Old Dan and Little Ann in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and *Black Beauty*. For this issue we decided to focus on perhaps the most ubiquitous animals of all in children's literature: dogs and cats in picture books.

Whenever we reviewed books for an issue, we couldn't help but notice all the stories containing dogs and cats—dogs and cats as main characters, dogs and cats as secondary characters, dogs and cats as comforting background, and even dogs and cats as catalysts (or neutralizers) for conflicts or problems. We are also pet owners and lovers, as you can see from the pictures of us with our pets we've included with this issue, so we were personally drawn to these books and their canine and feline characters. Instead of reading and setting the books aside, we finally decided to make them the center of their own thematic issue.

So why the popularity of dogs and cats in children's books? It could be about the nearly universal love of children for these animals, or the sheer prevalence of them in American households. For many children, having a dog or cat of their own is a rite of passage, providing their first experience bonding with something or someone other than a parent or sibling. A child seeing a dog or cat in a book might immediately lead to recognition, as the child sees something familiar in a text, something that looks like his or her own life or home. Then the child might go on to identify with a human character in the book who, like him or herself, has and loves a dog or cat. This human character's actions and thoughts become a gateway into a vicarious narrative world, opening the child's mind and emotions to new people, places, and ideas. And the beginning of it all was a dog or cat drawn into a story.

But what about the books in which the dog or cat is the main character, speaks, thinks, or is otherwise anthropomorphized? While giving dogs and cats human characteristics can be seen by some as encouraging an unrealistic view of the real needs, behaviors, and emotions of canines and felines, the trope has a long history in children's fiction in fairy tales, folk tales, and fables. When an animal becomes a personlike character, the opportunities for instruction through books may be enhanced, as the child is drawn to the animal character relatively quickly. Or misunderstandings of animals and their behavior might result. Or identification with events of a text might be quickened because of the attractiveness of the animal persona to a child. There are varied opinions on the value and effect of anthropomorphism in children's

fiction; regardless, it is undoubtedly popular among authors and young readers as the books reviewed here demonstrate.

The books in this issue explore the human-animal connection in all of the above ways, and more. They contain cats meandering through European cities, service dogs assisting their brave owners, dogs as imaginary and/or much-needed friends, dogs who have great adventures, dogs who are lifetime companions, and cats who are lost until finding a home. They depict cats and dogs as friends, companions, helpmates, travelers, and adventurers. Who could ask more from a main character?

We hope you enjoy this issue and are inspired to read some of these wonderful books. We also hope you are inspired to take your dog for a walk or cuddle with your cat in front of the fire.

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