

The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat

Classroom activities

The following are ideas for classroom tie-ins for use with the book *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat* (by Lynne Berry, illustrated by Luke LaMarca). The activities are listed in no particular order, though I have indicated activities that will tend to be most appropriate for younger students (pre-K and K) vs. older students (grades 1, 2, and 3). Please feel free to pick and choose among any and all of the activities, to suit your particular students, your teaching style, and your curriculum needs. Have fun!

Picture hunt

For OLDER and YOUNGER students

Luke LaMarca's illustrations are great fun and have a level of sophistication that helps extend the appeal of the *Contrary Cat* even to age groups that tend to be outgrowing picture books. Ask students if they can spot the following:

- Cat, in various hiding spots
- Photos on the walls of Witch's house that change expression from one illustration to the next
- A monster that eats a fish
- Two eyes that peer out from a hole in a tree
- Bat taking a nap
- Sprite playing the banjo
- Various characters that fly or fall out of the pages of the book on different pages: Ghost, Bat, Rat, Witch, Gnome
- Lots of fun pictures of Rat!
 - Rat taunting Cat
 - Rat greeting guests
 - Rat "stalking" and stealing Troll's piece of pie
 - Rat peering over the punch bowl
 - Rat reading a newspaper
 - Rat dancing
 - Hats falling down over the eyes of Rat and a gnome
 - Rat waving guests goodbye
 - Rat floating in a teacup...then holding his nose before doing a cannonball into the dishwater
 - Rat helping Witch sweep the party mess under the rug
 - Rat helping Witch stir her brew
 - Rat holding his belly and laughing

What does an author do? What does an illustrator do?

The picture hunt above can be a great jumping-off point for talking about how words and pictures work together to tell a story—and therefore the roles of author and illustrator.

For YOUNGER students

Discuss the following with students:

- What story do the words tell? What happens in the story that we hear about in the words?

- Do the pictures tell a story that we don't hear about in the words? Here, you might focus on Rat's pictorial subplot, based on the picture hunt for Rat, above.
- How do you think the illustrator decides what pictures to draw? Here, you might point out that the author and illustrator of a book rarely work together closely. Most often, the author writes the story (words only on a plain sheet of paper), the story goes to a publisher, and the publisher sends the story to an illustrator. The illustrator reads the story and uses his or her imagination to decide what to draw, with little if any input from the author. Ask students:
 - If you were the illustrator, what picture details might you have added to the story?
 - What other activities might you have added for Rat?
 - Have students draw a new picture of something Rat might have done during the story.

For OLDER students

Take a more in-depth look at the writing and illustrating process—and engage students in thinking about these processes—with questions such as:

- Who do you think has the more difficult job, the author or the illustrator? Why?
- Who do you think has the more fun job, the author or the illustrator? Why?
- Do you think the words and pictures of the *Contrary Cat* story suit each other? Why or why not?
- If you were an author, how would you feel about sending your story off to a publisher, knowing that you wouldn't get to decide what the illustrations would look like?
- Do you think it's a good idea or a bad idea for the illustrator to draw pictures for a story without any input from the author? Why? (Additional prompts: Do you like what the pictures add to the *Contrary Cat* story? Do you think the author would have thought of the extra pictures details that the illustrator thought of?)
- If you had been the illustrator of the *Contrary Cat* book, would you have done anything differently? If so, what? If not, why not?

Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness, or phonological sensitivity, refers to the ability to recognize that words are made up of smaller sounds, as well as the ability to manipulate these sounds. Sound recognition and manipulation are two of the skills that help children decipher written language, as they learn to recognize the relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols. Rhyming books can help develop phonemic awareness.

For YOUNGER and OLDER students:

When reading the book aloud, ask students to join in on the rhyming lines. I always invite students to join in on:

- Cat's "purr" and "grr"
- Witch's "Drat that cat!"
- The line: "And that was the end of that."

For OLDER students:

Ask readers to identify the rhyme pairs and sets in *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat*. Ask students to choose two rhyming words as a starting point to write their own poem or story.

Sight words

For YOUNGER students and struggling readers:

Many reviewers have mentioned that *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat*, though a picture book, also has great potential as an early-reader. For example, from the Orion Township Public Library, Lake Orion, MI, Children's Department Blog (06/02/2007): "Our 'Wow!' book of the week is a great example of how picture books can help beginning readers learn skills. *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat* by Lynne Berry, illustrated by Luke LaMarca, has just what new readers need: repetition of easy phrases, lots of short words, fun pictures, and most of all, a story that will draw them in... Teach your child to love reading as well as work on sight words with captivating books like this one about the Contrary Cat!"

When reading the *Contrary Cat* book to a small group, have students follow along, identifying sight words.

Story writing

For YOUNGER and OLDER students (younger students might work on picture stories or develop a group story led by a teacher; older students write independently):

- Ask students to choose a favorite character from the book, and write more about that character (for example: likes and dislikes, favorite foods or other favorites, a day in the life of). The cast of characters (in order of appearance) is:
 - Witch
 - Cat
 - Rat
 - Ghost
 - Bat
 - Troll
 - Sprite
 - The Spooks
 - The Gnomes
 - Cat-as-Toad
- *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat* is a "pattern story," with a repeated pattern of lines that advance the story by changing out a few key words or phrases. Some of the earliest stories that children learn, often in the form of songs, are pattern stories, for example, *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* and *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*. Many of Eric Carle's books are pattern stories. Using *Contrary Cat* and others as examples, ask your students to write their own pattern story.
- *The Curious Demise of a Contrary Cat* takes place "on a pale gray night with a bright full moon." What else might take place on such a night? Ask your students to write a story that starts with the words, "On a pale gray night with a bright full moon..."

Vocabulary

For YOUNGER and OLDER students:

- Help students develop their ability to use contextual clues to learn new words. For example, when I read to groups of students, they almost always ask, “Who’s Sprite?” when I read, “But Cat was busy, spooking Sprite.” Encourage students to use picture clues to identify Sprite. Which character do you see getting spooked (startled, frightened) by Cat in these pictures?

For OLDER students:

- Add the following words to vocabulary and/or spelling lists:
 - Bash
 - Stalk
 - Putrid
 - Jig
 - Fife
 - Cloak
 - Snooze
- Ask students to choose three of the words from your list, and write a sentence or story that uses those words.
- Ask groups of students to write and perform a short skit using new vocabulary words from your list.