



Reading Notes

Come Down, Cat!

Sonya Hartnett

Notes by Jean Yates

SYNOPSIS:

The day is ending, night is falling and Nicholas's cat just won't come down from high on the roof where she sits, licking her paws, as Nicholas becomes more and more worried. He calls to her and coaxes her but she hop-skip-jumps away and answers him with a haughty 'Marl!'.

Concerned that his cat will be left all alone with the scary night things, Nicholas fetches a ladder so high that he can see into nests when he reaches the top. But the cat - that cheeky, naughty cat! – dodges his grasp and just won't come down to the safe, warm house. She doesn't seem to care about the bats or ghosts or creepy-crawlies that Nicholas is afraid of. Eventually, reluctantly, he climbs back down and goes to bed, marvelling at her bravery as he falls asleep.

But there is one thing his cat *does* fear – rain! As drops begin to fall, the cat realises she isn't so brave after all, and high on the roof she has nowhere to hide. When Nicholas wakes to the sound of rain, he thinks of her there, and races to her rescue, not worrying about the slippery ladder or the strange night things. When he reaches the top, the cat, so happy to see him, jumps into his arms.

As Nicholas dries off his cat in the kitchen and takes her back to his bed, he thinks of how brave she is to have stayed out all alone. And the cat, curled up at his feet, thinks of how brave he was to rescue her.

This is not just a story about a boy and his cat: it's a tale of fear and courage, and what we are capable of doing for those who we love the most.

WRITING STYLE

Come Down, Cat! has the trademark lyricism of Sonya's previous work, and yet achieves a simplicity and sweetness that its target readership will delight in. Evocative, cinematic imagery is still present, but it takes a back seat to the pithy characterisation that brings Nicholas and the cat to life. The brilliantly timed, mischievous 'marls' of the cat convey a sense of its cunning, its cheekiness and its feline wiles. And through his heartfelt pleadings and acts of bravery and tenderness, Nicholas's sense of compassion

and devotion are skilfully conveyed. It is remarkable that even in a book for the very young, Sonya's love affair with language and talents as an author are as present as ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sonya Hartnett is the internationally acclaimed author of several novels, including *Thursday's Child*, winner of the 2002 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and *Forest*, winner of the 2002 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year: Older Readers. In 2003, her adult novel, *Of a Boy*, won *The Age* Book of the Year and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award.

In 2000 and again in 2003, Sonya Hartnett was named one of *The Sydney Morning Herald* Young Novelists of the Year. Her work has been published internationally with editions available in the UK, US, Canada, Germany, Italy, Norway and Denmark.

In 2004, *The Silver Donkey* was published to great critical acclaim. It won the 2005 Brisbane *Courier Mail* award for young readers and was CBC Book of the Year (Young readers) in 2005.

Surrender was published in 2005. It was shortlisted for *The Age* Book of the Year Award and the Aurealis Award - Fantasy Division in 2005. In 2008 Sonya was the recipient of **The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award**. The prize is awarded to authors, illustrators, narrators and/or promoters of reading whose work reflects the spirit of Astrid Lindgren. It was the first time this award had gone to an Australian.

Sonya's adult novel *Butterfly* was published to great acclaim in 2009, and was shortlisted for the 2010 Miles Franklin Award. Her latest, beautiful book of junior fiction, *The Midnight Zoo*, was published in 2010 and has been shortlisted for the CBC Book of the Year Older Readers category.

Her previous picture book, *The Boy and the Toy*, won the 2010 Aurealis Award for Children's Fiction (told primarily through pictures). She lives in Melbourne and has a dog named Shilo and a cat named Marcus.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

How excited I was to see this incredible duo paired again to create another magical world for child readers to explore. The nuance and lyricism of Sonya's text marries so beautifully with Lucia's European sensibilities and rich, textured style.

The result is one of the most touching and endearing books I've had the pleasure to work on. The themes of bravery, independence, fear, courage, fortitude and love are woven into a story that will have the child reader gasping and cheering by turns. The universality of the narrative means that children of many backgrounds and ages will be able to relate to this book, which, at its heart, is about the wonder of compassion.

STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

THEMES:

- Friendship
- Fear
- Conquering your fear
- Helping others

PRE-READING

- What characteristics do cats have?
- List 5 words that describe a cat's behaviour and attitude towards people.
- What sorts of things do cats like to do?
- In what ways are they different from other pets such as dogs?
- Is it easy to train a cat?
- Is there anything cats are afraid of?
- Looking at the title of the book, if you were to ask a cat to 'Come Down!' do you think it would obey? Give reasons for your answer.
- Where do you think the cat in this picture is?
- Why might its owner want it to come down?
- What expression does this cat have on her face? Do you think she will come down when asked?

GUIDED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Why does Nicholas want his cat to come down off the roof?
- Why might he be getting worried about the cat?
- In what ways does he sound similar to your parents?
- Why do our parents often call us inside or away from where we are and what we are doing?
- How does the cat react to being called to come down?
- Nicholas thinks that the cat is afraid to come down. Do you think this is the case?
- Do you think the cat is worried about it being nearly night time?

- In spite of his concerns that the roof is a long way up, Nicholas grabs a ladder and climbs it to rescue his pet. What does this reveal about Nicholas? What does it tell you about his relationship with his cat?
- Do you think the cat needs or wants to be rescued?
- Why does Nicholas tell the cat that '*Ghosts and monsters and creepy crawlies come out at night.*' Do you believe this? Why do children often think that the night time is full of scary monsters?
- Why does Nicholas see all the strange creatures when he goes to bed that night?
- Do you think that the cat sees these same strange creatures?

- Whose fears are these really?
- Have a close look at the creatures Nicholas imagines. Can you identify each of these animals or creatures? Are they the same ones that you think are lurking in the dark?
- What is the cat actually afraid of?
- How do the ghosts and other creatures react to the rain?
- How does Nicholas react to the rain?
- When Nicholas hears the cat in the night, '*He didn't stop to worry about the night things, He jumped up and ran outside.*' What does this tell us about Nicholas?
- Why does Nicholas think that the cat must be very brave?
- Why does the cat think that Nicholas must be very brave?

Fear:

- What sort of things is Nicholas afraid of?
- What sorts of things are you afraid of?
- Why are children often scared of the dark?
- Are these things as scary during the day time?
- What then is our real fear?
- Is the cat afraid of the same things as Nicholas?
- How do you think the cat would react even if it did see these sorts of creatures – mice, owls and bats?
- What scares the cat?
- Why are cats so afraid of water?
- The book suggests that we are all afraid of different things, but that everyone has fears to conquer.
- How can you help someone to overcome a fear?
- Should you ever make fun of someone's fears?

Conquering your fear:

- What helps Nicholas to overcome his own fear of the night to rescue his cat?

Friendship:

- What does it take to be a true friend or companion?
- In what ways is Nicholas shown to be a good friend to the cat?

Illustrations:

- How much of the story is told through the text and how much through the illustrations?
- How do the illustrations help to establish the setting and mood of the story?
- Consider the use of light and shade in the illustrations. What is the mood of the lighter pages and what is the mood of the darker pages?
- Consider the amount of detail in every illustration. How does the detail help to add to the story?

- How does the illustrator manage to include emotion in her illustrations?
- Choose your favourite illustration and explain to the class what it is that you like about that page. How did you react to that page as a reader?

Overall Message:

- What do you think is the most important message in this book? What does it teach us about our fears and about the sort of friends we should be?

ACTIVITIES:

- Have all students write their biggest fear on a piece of paper. Place all of the pieces of paper inside a box anonymously. Share with the class the fears that have been listed and ask the students to write a possible cure for each fear.