

# Cat, Herself Short Guide

## Cat, Herself by Mollie Hunter

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## Overview

Hunter has gained a reputation as one of the most important contemporary Scottish writers of young adult fiction. *Cat, Herself*, as is the case with many of Hunter's other books, provides readers with insight into Scottish culture and traditions. In particular, it treats a group of homeless "travellers" who are persecuted for the way they live. An adventure-accomplishment romance, the book is essentially a journey novel which culminates in a love story. The novel also explores a variety of social issues, including spouse abuse, discrimination, gender roles, and society's responsibility to the homeless.

The novel is well-written, is full of interesting characters, and has an exciting plot. The protagonist, Cat McPhie, is a strong female character who is determined to be an individual, refusing to be deflected from her desire to perform "male" tasks. The story traces Cat's development as she comes to appreciate her special talents and gifts and learns to understand her own unique culture. Like many young adults, Cat must choose what kind of life she will live and whether or not she will adopt the beliefs and attitudes of her parents.

*Cat, Herself* was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, a School Library Journal Best Book for Young Adults, and a Child Study Association of America Best Book.

## About the Author

Maureen Mollie Hunter McIlwraith was born on June 30, 1922, in Longniddry, East Lothian, Scotland.

Her father, William George McVeigh, a mechanic, was Irish and her mother, Helen Eliza Smeaton Waitt, Scottish.

As a child, Hunter heard many of the stories of Scottish history and folklore which she later used in her writing.

When Hunter was nine years old, her father died, an event which formed the basis for her autobiographical, *A Sound of Chariots*. Both her father and mother had encouraged her to read and, when she was forced to leave school and go to work while still a teenager, she continued to educate herself.

In 1940, Hunter married Thomas McIlwraith and, after World War II, they settled down in the Scottish Highlands where their sons, Quentin and Brian, were born. At that point, Hunter began to actively pursue her lifelong interest in writing, creating her first children's book at the insistence of her sons. Since then, Hunter has published twenty-six books for children and young adults, becoming probably the most important contemporary Scottish writer for that audience. In addition to writing fiction, Hunter has also scripted two one-act plays, presented lectures around the world, and even acted in a film, *Colloden*.

Hunter's books include literary folktales, such as *A Stranger Came Ashore*, *A Furl of Fairy Wind*, and *Mermaid Summer*; historical novels, such as *A Pistol in Greenyards*, *The Stronghold*, and *You Never Knew Her as I Did!*; and contemporary realistic fiction, such as *A Sound of Chariots*, *Hold on to Love*, and *Cat, Herself*. Hunter has won a number of major awards for her writing, including the Carnegie Medal for *The Stronghold*; the Boston Globe Horn Book Honor for *A Stranger Came Ashore*; New York Times Outstanding Books of the Year for *A Sound of Chariots*, *The Haunted Mountain*, and *A Stranger Came Ashore*; and the Children's Literature Association Phoenix Award for *A Sound of Chariots*.

## Setting

As in Hunter's other books, setting plays an important role in *Cat, Herself*. The novel takes place in a variety of locations across the Scottish countryside since the travellers never stay long in one place, moving through towns, farms, and across mountains.

It begins when the travellers are forced out of their winter camp because Cat is falsely accused of poaching. They journey through Perthshire, where they try to sell their wares, passing the shores of Loch Ness, stopping in a glen where Cat's mother dances away her grief.

Eventually, they arrive in the "enchanted land," Loch Loyal. As her grandmother explains, no matter how long a person is on the road, there is "always something that calls you back to some place that feels special to you—maybe because it's the place where it all started. And you can't be at peace till you see it again. That's 'home' for a traveller." For Cat and Nan, Loch Loyal is that place.

While the travellers seem old-fashioned to many people they meet, the novel is actually set in the early 1970s. It is a time when it is increasingly difficult for the travellers to find open places where they can camp. They are also the victims of continued persecution from "settled people," although new laws are being established to help ensure that they have places to stay.



## Social Sensitivity

In writing a story about a group of people who are essentially homeless and who reject many of society's values and laws, Hunter explores a number of social issues. She clearly sympathizes with the travellers, usually presenting their antagonists as narrow-minded, irrational bigots. While Sergeant McKendrick, Constable Miller, and the "yobbos," Yellowhead and Hairychest, seem like stereotypical villains, the travellers are more developed and demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses. For example, Daddler Drummond abuses his wife, a major issue facing Cat when she contemplates marrying his son.

The travellers do have little compunction about breaking laws, particularly those relating to poaching, since they believe that no human can really own the land. Hunter allows Cat to question her father's activities, but allows him to explain his own point of view. In general, the book presents the travellers as realistic people with strong family ties, suggesting that Cat and her people are sensitive and often misunderstood.

Cat, Herself also tries to show why some people may choose a lifestyle different from the norm.

## Literary Qualities

At times, *Cat, Herself* has the feeling of a realistic folk tale—the characters travel through the rural countryside, encountering seemingly enchanted lands, helped and hindered by heroic and villainous characters. Indeed, the novel includes two folk tales which are related by Cat's grandmother. The first is a love story about a couple who come together even in death; the second is a trickster tale about a man plagued by work fairies. Both tales are relevant to the kind of life Cat lives and foreshadow the decisions she must eventually make. Like many folk heroines, Cat also discovers that she has a special gift, one which she ultimately comes to appreciate. In the end, after a number of trials, Cat chooses to marry in a simple folk ceremony.

The novel is carefully constructed, divided into three sections, each representing a stage in Cat's life. Part I, "The Enchanted Land," describes Cat's movement into womanhood as she discovers her "gift," as well as her heritage. A brief section, "Interlude," bridges the action which takes place in Part I and Part II, "Kissing Time," in which Cat decides the course her life will take and finally marries Charlie Drummond.

The novel is told from the perspective of Cat, who, like the reader, is just beginning to understand the way of life of the travellers. Hunter heightens the suspense in the story by providing hints of later events through snatches of the future that Cat is able to see. The novel is further shaped by various births and deaths which Cat observes and other recurring events, such as the travellers' return to various places, suggesting the cyclical nature of their lives.

There are also parallel scenes, such as when Ilsa dances in the glen and Cat bathes in the river and when Daddler Drummond beats his wife and Charlie nearly hits Cat, which suggest the connection between the younger travellers.



## Themes and Characters

The novel centers on a group of itinerant Scots referred to as "travellers," "tinkers," or "The Mist People."

The travellers are quick to distinguish themselves from "gypsies" and are a clannish group. For the most part, they spend their days roaming across Scotland, except when they camp for the winter so their children can receive the required hundred days of schooling. The travellers make their living in various ways, selling baskets, poaching fish and small animals, searching for pearls, and begging for food and clothing.

Over the years, the travellers have developed a number of traditions and beliefs which shape their thinking.

They see little value in formal education, believe their children should learn by "doing," burn other travellers' tents or trailers when they die, and do not participate in legal or formal wedding ceremonies. They also have fairly rigid notions about gender roles—a girl who participates in "manly" activities like hunting is labelled a "split mechanic" and supposedly will not find a husband. While the travellers do not have homes, they all cherish certain special places which they return to so they can find peace.

The travellers find themselves the object of a fair amount of persecution, partly because they believe that no one can own the land and that they are entitled to any game they can catch. They are often forced to move on by local authorities, such as Sergeant McKendrick and Constable Miller. Their children are sometimes mistreated in school and, towards the end of the novel, firebombs destroy their campsite, killing Alec's mother, Isobel's baby, and Cat's dog, Shuffler.

There are, however, a few nontravellers who are sympathetic toward the group, such as Mr. Brownlee who lets them stay on his farm for the winter, and Dr. Ballantyne, who tries to help them "get a square deal from people who don't sympathize with their way of life."

The novel's protagonist, Catriona "Cat" McPhie, is the daughter of travellers and, in general, loves their way of life. She does, however, rebel against their attitudes towards women, desiring to learn how to go pearling and trapping like her father, "Poacher" Jim McPhie. Cat is strongwilled, determined that no man will ever abuse her. She decides she will be "herself," regardless of what others say, and that nothing will ever stop her. Like her mother, Lisa McPhie, Cat can also see into the future and knows that she will eventually return to the enchanted land with Charlie Drummond. The novel takes Cat from age eleven to sixteen when she marries Charlie, determining to live as a traveller when she becomes an adult.

Like Cat, Charlie Drummond also matures as the novel progresses.

Early in the book, he expresses hatred for his father, vowing that he will someday kill him because he beats his mother. Charlie is also scornful of Cat's desire to go pearling,





warning that she will grow up to become a "split mechanic." He does, however, defend Cat from the teasing of Morven Reid, who is from an Irish traveling family. Charlie also follows the traveller tradition of "marking" Cat as his future wife without consulting her. Eventually, however, he submerges his own anger toward his father and comes to appreciate Cat's individuality, finding a pony and cart for her instead of the car he desires.

For the travellers, family members are extremely important and Cat learns about her heritage from them.

Her father teaches her how to hunt and fish. Cat learns about her special gift and about dealing with grief from her mother, who dances alone in a grassy clearing to forget that she apparently cannot have more children.

Cat's mother also teaches her about caring for others, making her beg clothes for a poor family of "settled" folk. Later, Cat reciprocates her mother's help by delivering her long awaited little brother, James, when he is born.

Cat's grandmother, Old Nan McPhie, also has an important part in her development. Old Nan tells her stories of the past and folk tales, such as those about Deidre and Naois and the man who tricks the work fairies.

Like Cat, Old Nan does whatever she pleases, as when she performs a song normally sung only by drunk traveller men in front of a group of tourists. It is Nan who tells Cat of the "enchanted land" that she comes to love.

Since Cat is related to almost all of the travellers, the whole group serves as her family. Thus, Cat mourns when her cousin Rhona's baby is killed in the fire and when Alec MacDonald loses his mother. The travellers, however, are not perfect. Cat dislikes Moura Reid, who chases after every man around including Charlie, and she is angered by Charlie's abusive father, Daddler. Cat also feels close to the animals that accompany the travellers, particularly the McPhie's gray pony, Pibroch, and Shuffler, her dog, who dies in the fire.

A number of important themes are developed through Cat's travels across Scotland. Most obviously, the novel addresses the prejudice and persecution that arises from the differences between the travellers and the people they encounter. Hunter effectively shows the travellers' point of view about the world, helping the reader understand their attitudes about man-made laws and their love of tradition.

At the same time, *Cat, Herself* is a novel about growing up, exploring a young girl's changing attitudes toward her family, her talents, and society in general. While most of the travellers feel bound by traditions which dictate many of their actions, Cat challenges her role in society, becoming a "split mechanic," learning her father's ways of making a living. Cat also forces Charlie Drummond to officially ask for her hand in marriage, rather than merely allowing him to "mark her down" as his bride.



Even then, she takes her time accepting his proposal, making sure that Charlie will not treat her like his abusive father treats his mother.

As is the case with Hunter's other novels, *Cat, Herself* also suggests that there is value in tradition and folk beliefs. Cat is entranced by the folk tales and the stories about the past her grandmother tells. In the end, Cat does embrace some of the travellers' traditions. She comes to love travelling with a horse and cart instead of in a car, and she and Charlie opt for the informal marriage ceremony of their people instead of a legal one in the registrar's office. Cat also embraces "the gift" of seeing into the future, which she has inherited from her grandmother. Despite the fact that the travellers are homeless, the novel reiterates the importance of family and of special places where one can feel safe, such as in "the enchanted land."

Finally, the novel is concerned with the importance of being an individual, arguing that being allowed to choose how to live is more important than one's particular lifestyle. This idea is present in the novel's original title, *I'll Go My Own Way*, as well as in the present title which suggests that Cat will be herself and no one else.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Cat's mother, Ilsa, tells her to trust the gift. Discuss how Cat learns to trust both in her gift and in other people.
2. Why is Cat reluctant to agree to marry Charlie Drummond? Are her concerns well-founded? Why are Cat and Charlie attracted to each other?
3. In chapter six, Cat vows that, regardless of what others say, "I'll go my own way." Discuss the extent to which Cat keeps this vow. What does the novel suggest about the importance of independence for Cat, as well as for the travellers?
4. In the first section of the novel, Cat's grandmother, Old Nan, relates a number of stories or folk tales. Why does Hunter include these stories in the novel? What does the book suggest about the value of such tales?
5. Despite the fact that the travellers do not have homes, they believe in special places that bring them peace. Discuss what makes "the enchanted place" so special to Old Nan and Cat.
6. Ilsa enjoys dancing by herself and Cat secretly relishes bathing in rivers. How are these activities similar and why do they appeal to Ilsa and Cat?
7. The travellers are often engaged in activities that might be considered unlawful—for example, they poach salmon and rabbits. What are their reasons for participating in such activities? How valid are these reasons?
8. How do the travellers take advantage of those they meet? On what occasions do the travellers help nontravellers?
9. A few reviewers have suggested that characters such as Sergeant McKendrick and the yobbos, "Yellowhead" and "Hairychest," are stereotypes. Is this criticism valid? Are all nontravellers portrayed negatively in this novel? Discuss those characters who help the travellers or who are sympathetic toward them.
10. Discuss the role of women in the travellers' society. Why is Cat worried about being identified as a "split mechanic?" Why does Cat's family eventually decide that she should learn to perform tasks usually reserved for men?
11. The original British title of this novel was *I'll Go My Own Way*. Discuss which title is most effective, as well as suggesting other possible titles.
12. Why do Cat and Charlie choose to continue the life of the travellers after they have married, instead of settling down in one place? How do the conditions of the travellers' lives change during the course of the novel?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. A number of young adult novels feature female protagonists who have unusual "gifts" and who battle their own cultures in order to pursue activities usually identified with males.

Compare and contrast Cat with characters such as Harry Crewe of Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* (1982) and Sara Louise Bradshaw of Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980).

To what extent do these works share similar concerns about gender roles?

2. The travellers frequently encounter prejudice—they are chased off by police, they are taunted and persecuted by those they meet, and their camp is burned. Write an essay exploring the sources of this persecution. To what extent do the travellers bring antagonism on themselves?

3. Based on a close reading of the novel, write a feature article for a magazine describing the society and culture of the travellers. You might also compare the travellers to other "homeless" peoples.

4. Some reviewers have compared Cat McPhie to Bridie McShane of Hunter's *A Sound of Chariots* and *Hold on to Love*. Read one of the books about Bridie and then compare her and Cat. You might consider both her personality and philosophy of life.

5. One of the novel's major topics is the cyclical nature of life. For example, the travellers return to many of the same places over the years, traveller children grow up to become like their parents, and key incidents involve both birth and death. Write an essay showing how Hunter uses cycles to structure the novel.



## For Further Reference

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books 39 (April 1986): 149. A positive review, praising the novel's characters, dialogue, and narrative flow. The reviewer suggests that *Cat, Herself* has two themes, prejudice against itinerant people and coming of age.

Hickman, Janet. "Profile: The Person Behind the Book—Mollie Hunter."

Language Arts 56 (1979): 302-306. A good, general overview of Hunter's early work, suggesting the extent to which she researches her writing.

Hunter, Mollie. *Talent Is Not Enough: Mollie Hunter on Writing for Children*. New York: Harper, 1976.

In this collection of essays, Hunter discusses both her life and craft.

Lewis, Marjorie. Review. *School Library Journal* 32,9 (1986): 104. The reviewer suggests that the novel's characters are lifeless stereotypes, although it has "flashes of beauty, passion, and wisdom."

Twichell, Ethel. Review. *Horn Book* 62 (1986): 455. A generally positive review praising Hunter's competent writing and her characterization of *Catriona McPhie*.

Walker, Christine. Review. *School Librarian* 34,1 (1986): 73. This reviewer feels that the novel is finely crafted, but questions its intended audience and whether *Bridie* is too refined for her circumstances.



## Related Titles

Many of Mollie Hunter's novels are concerned with Scottish culture, history, or folklore. While *Cat, Herself* is not a fantasy, it does resemble some of Hunter's works in this genre, like *A Stranger Came Ashore*, which treat isolated, close-knit groups who are steeped in tradition and folklore. Several of Hunter's novels, such as *The Third Eye*, also deal with characters who have the ability to see into the future.

*Cat, Herself*, however, is even more closely connected to Hunter's realistic novels of life in twentieth-century Scotland. It has been noted that *Cat McPhie* is similar to *Bridie McShane*, the heroine of Hunter's two most autobiographical books, *A Sound of Chariots* and *Hold on to Love*. Both *Cat* and *Bridie* are strong-willed young women who have close ties to their fathers. They both possess special talents which set them apart from their peers and are outsiders who do not fit into society. *Cat, Herself*, like a number of Hunter's novels, reflects her own childhood, arguing for the value of oral tales and featuring older characters who, like *Old Nan*, share folk traditions with someone younger and then die before the novel is over.

*Cat McPhie* is also similar to the heroines of a number of adventure-accomplishment romances for young adults. Like *Harry Crewe* of Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*, *Sara Louise Bradshaw* of Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*, and *Dacey Tiller* of Cynthia Voigt's *Dacey's Song* (1982), *Cat* struggles with accepting a stereotypical female role in society and is a strong-willed individual who will not let herself be beaten back by the events she experiences.



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