

The Cat's-Eye Short Guide

The Cat's-Eye by Jim Murphy

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Overview

Murphy's short stories tend to have forthright plots and easily identifiable good and bad characters, but "The Cat's-Eye," from the collection *Night Terrors*, is an exception.

Heroes and villains are hard to distinguish, and its moralistic theme raises ethical issues that are difficult to resolve. The result is a layered story with a traditional plot structure that overlays a foundation of complex characters and challenging ideas. The blend of plot, characters, and theme works well, making "The Cat's-Eye" a particularly satisfying read. That the ethical issues it raises remain troubling after the story is finished seems right for a horror story; such stories are usually intended to shake up an audience at least a little, reminding readers that some aspects of life remain truly mysterious, even in a scientifically enlightened age.

About the Author

Jim Murphy was born in Newark, New Jersey, on September 25, 1947, to James K. Murphy and Helen (nee Grosso) Murphy.

His father was a certified public accountant and his mother was an artist who worked as a bookkeeper. Murphy was not particularly interested in reading as a youngster, although he remembers enjoying horror stories, but he was athletically precocious and adventurous. As a teenager, he held a number of physically demanding jobs, and he remembers construction work as his favorite job. He was also a nationally ranked high school sprinter who participated on two national champion relay teams. He became interested in literature in high school only after he discovered that there were books adults did not want him to read; this motivated him to find and read those books.

He attended Rutgers University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970.

He attended graduate school briefly at Radcliffe College in 1970, and he married business executive Elaine A. Kelso on December 12, 1970. He landed a job as a secretary in the juvenile department of Seabury Press (now Clarion Books), where he eventually became managing editor. It was while working for Seabury Press that he realized that his childhood adventures and the various jobs he held as a teenager provided him with experiences that he could write about for young readers. In 1977, he left Seabury Press to become a freelance writer and editor, and the following year his book *Weird and Wacky Inventions* appeared. When the book received very good reviews, Murphy's literary career was off and running. In recent years, Murphy has been especially noted for his books on historical subjects, but he has also attracted attention for his young adult fiction, such as "The Cat's-Eye."



Setting

There are two principal settings in "The Cat's-Eye," each interlocking with the other. Most of the action takes place within Mrs. Hayword's old, large house. It is a fairly standard horror story house with many large rooms and many cubbyholes and dark places—especially mysterious closets. One of the closets seem right out of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (please see separate entry), in which children walk deep into a closet full of coats and emerge into a land covered with snow. In "The Cat's-Eye," the closet is more ominous and complex than that in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; as Jessica and Kirsten traverse it, the floor changes in texture, and the clothing becomes progressively more old-fashioned, through World War I, past the Civil War, and into eighteenth-century America. The second setting, a woodland, emerges out of the back of the closet; it is a woodland, the floor of the closet. Jessica and Kirsten discover that while they walked into the past, forces from the eighteenth century have reached forward into the future, capturing them both.



Social Sensitivity

"The Cat's-Eye" has at least three social concerns that are important to American society. One is that of the elderly victimized by the young. Kirsten regards Mrs. Hayward as an easy victim, and she is eager to plunder her house. Even more disturbing is Jessica's going along with Kirsten's stealing. She even rationalizes her own complicity in the thieving: "A good sport wouldn't badger Kirsten about taking a dumb marble." This rationalizing raises a second, even more troubling concern: The willingness of good people to go along with doing evil. In the case of Jessica, the desire to belong to a group, a common young adult impulse, motivates her to do what Kirsten wants her to do. Yet the plot offers moments when Jessica can stand up for herself and defy Kirsten's evil: When Kirsten wants to search the house; when Kirsten wants to rifle through drawers; when Kirsten wants to break into a closet; and any time during their walk through the closet. At each opportunity, Jessica chooses not to upset Kirsten because she wants Kirsten to be her friend. While understandable, Jessica's motivations are not good ones, and she allows someone else to do her thinking for her.

In his biographies and histories, Murphy emphasizes the importance of individuality. Individual people matter, and one way they make themselves good citizens is by taking personal responsibility for their actions. When they shirk responsibility for their behavior, they become little more than pack animals such as wolves. For instance, in *Across America on an Emigrant Train*, about Robert Louis Stevenson's railroad journey across America, Stevenson notes with disgust fellow passengers surrounding a few Native Americans and teasing them by making stupid faces and dancing. When the passengers give themselves over to a group impulse, they degrade themselves and become little more than animals. In "The Cat'sEye," Jessica degrades herself in a fundamental way that is highlighted by Mrs. Hayward's comments at the end of the story. Jessica has given herself over to Kirsten, a strong personality whom Mrs. Hayward likens to Adolf Hitler, a leader who led a nation into mass murder and other horrific crimes. By denying her own individuality, by giving herself over to her desire to belong to a group, Jessica has debased herself by committing crimes that she would not have committed had she defied the group impulse and instead chosen to be responsible for her own choices.

Of the social issues treated in "The Cat'sEye," the issue of the individual versus the group is the most important, and in this conflict Jessica has failed to meet the challenge.

Another social concern is that of witches and witchcraft. Fiction portraying witches, especially portraying witches in a good light, has been long criticized as subversive of the moral teachings parents wish to impart to their young. For many hundreds of years, witches have been portrayed as evil in Western culture, but in recent times writers have made a distinction between good witches and bad ones. Perhaps the most famous example is L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, in which there are wicked witches from the east and west and good ones from the north and south in the land of Oz. The objections to any witches being good stems from witchlike practices of summoning spirits, using pagan symbols, and worshiping idols, all of which represent a defiance of



God, for whom such practices are anathema. In the case of "The Cat'sEye," Mrs. Hayward is a complex witch and not necessarily a good one. She and her coven choose people they think will do great evil and then transform them, putting their best characteristics into the form of cats and trapping their evil in marbles— cat's-eyes.

Who gives them this authority? Are they a counterpart of Kirsten's selfishness and cruelty? By transforming Kirsten, they take away from her whatever chance for redemption may have been in her future.

Many teenagers behave stupidly, even criminally, yet eventually manage to take control of their lives and become good people. Why not Kirsten? Under Kirsten's evil influence, Jessica at least had choices; she could have defied Kirsten and retained her self-respect.

However, Kirsten has no such choice. A group to which she does not belong makes her choices for her. There is no easy resolution to the moral confusion that underlies "The Cat's-Eye," and perhaps the issue cannot be resolved by debate. Even so, that it raises the issue of the common good versus individual rights is one of the strengths of the work.



Literary Qualities

"The Cat's-Eye" is structured on the journey motif, a common one in fiction. A journey may take a long time and be very complex with many sidesteps, as in the case of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, or it can be brief and direct, as is the case of "The Cat's-Eye."

The journey structure usually requires that events be related in chronological order; tension is created by leaving the conclusion of the journey open-ended. One way to do this is to place the travelers in peril, suggesting that they may die before reaching their goal. Another way, as in "The Cat's Eye," is to make the ending of the journey doubtful. In "The Cat's-Eye," it is unclear how long the journey will take and where it will end.

Murphy uses the journey structure to transport his characters and his audience gradually into a fantasy world. The principal characters—Jessica and Kirsten—are first sketched. Then they are put in motion, allowing their actions to suggest what kind of people they are. The journey is complicated by the personality of its leader, Kirsten, whose motives are poor. Jessica's anxiety about her social standing with Kirsten's group becomes ironic because her real worry should be for her own safety; Kirsten shows that she cares little about Jessica's welfare.

In "The Cat's-Eye," the resolution of the journey is a return to its starting point, but with the characters transformed. For Kirsten, the transformation is literal—she becomes a cat and a marble. This is part of what makes the ending a puzzler because we have only Mrs. Hayward's word that the cat is good and that the marble is evil. Mrs. Hayward has proven herself to be treacherous—the closet is, after all, a trap she and her coven have set to catch youngsters.

Whether Jessica has truly undergone a transformation of her own—in which she would learn to act more responsibly—is also problematical. The resolution mostly offers food for thought and transcends Mrs. Hayward's simplistic rationale for her own actions.

Murphy successfully uses the journey structure and the horror genre to create a tale that disturbs not so much with frightening events as with difficult ethical questions.



Themes and Characters

Just how much right do people have to take control of the fates of others, and when they do, who determines whether they are acting for the common good or against society's best interests? Murphy raises this issue in his morality tale of two girls, one a follower, the other a leader. Jessica Elizabeth Wyman has been hired to watch Mrs. Hayward's house and cats while Mrs. Hayward is out. She takes the opportunity to have Kirsten Richards visit, in the hope that Kirsten will like her enough to be her friend: "There was something about her [Kirsten's] personality, its power really, that made Jessica feel important." In this aspect of the relationship between the two girls, the story relies heavily on irony—that is, the audience is expected to know more about what is going on than the characters do. Although Jessica likes Kirsten's powerful personality, Kirsten's actions will likely set off alarms in the story's audience. This suggests that Jessica may have a somewhat warped view of what is right and wrong because when Kirsten plainly does wrong, as when she steals the marble, Jessica makes up excuses. "Oh, Kirsten could be a little bossy, but that was okay with Jessica."

Although Jessica may be surprised by Mrs. Hayward's remarks after Kirsten has been transformed, the truth of her words has been evident for most of the story: "She [Kirsten] never was your friend and never would have been. People like her only use other people." On the other hand, this lopsided relationship begs the question of Jessica's eagerness to be used.

If "her [Kirsten's] heart was as black as the night," as Mrs. Hayward says, then what is Jessica's heart when she sets aside her notions of right and wrong to do what Kirsten wants to do? Jessica's thought that "Kirsten was capable of doing bad things, had, in fact, led others to do them, too" does not relieve her of her own responsibility for what she has done. Even so, Jessica is smart enough to recognize that Mrs. Hayward's solution to the problem of Kirsten is not necessarily a good one or even rational: Eliminate evil before it has a chance to do evil, Jessica thought. That was like finding people guilty and sentencing them before they actually committed a crime. It didn't seem fair.

Thus, the ending of "The Cat's-Eye" is not necessarily a true resolution of its issues. Mrs. Hayward seems to be acting as arbitrarily as Kirsten had. Who is Mrs. Hayward that she should choose who gets to grow up and who does not?

This uneasy ending helps to make "The Cat's-Eye" a good story. Murphy could have ended it differently, giving it a neatly wrapped ending in which Kirsten's future evil is plainly shown, and with her transformation having the ring of justice to it.

Yet he chooses to engage his audience's minds, instead. Just how much right do Mrs. Hayward and her coven have to take control of the fates of others? Are they different from Kirsten, or are they, too, powerful personalities who use their influence to make other people's choices for them? It would seem that not just Kirsten's choices have been taken away, but Jessica's, as well. The choice to follow or to break away had been



hers to make until the witches took over; she might have learned to be an independent person, capable of making her own moral choices. At the story's end, Jessica has a chance to take control of her own life and exert her own moral authority, but Mrs. Hayward seems confident that Jessica will follow her lead, perhaps as she followed that of Kirsten.



Topics for Discussion

1. Kirsten is the figure who takes action in "The Cat's-Eye." Without her there would be no story, yet she is a villainess who is penalized for her self-absorption. On the other hand, Jessica is fairly passive; her contribution to the story is primarily to offer faint resistance to Kirsten and to otherwise go along with what Kirsten chooses to do. Does this mean that inaction, staying within boundaries is good, whereas defiant action is bad?
2. The point-of-view character in a story is not always the main character, although he or she often is. For instance, in most of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about his fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, the point-of-view character is Doctor Watson, but Holmes is plainly the main character. In "The Cat's-Eye," is the point-of-view character Jessica the main character, or is Kirsten the main character? How can you tell?
3. Is what the witches are doing to people like Kirsten evil? Does Kirsten deserve a chance to mend her ways before she becomes a grownup?
4. In what ways does Jessica represent the good in people? If she has good qualities, why does she condone Kirsten's misbehavior?
5. Is the desire of a teenager to be a secure member of a peer group strong enough to overcome the teenager's knowledge of what is good, so that she willingly participates in criminal acts such as stealing from an old lady?
6. Does Mrs. Hayward's explanation that Kirsten was an evil leader justify what she does to Kirsten?
7. When did you figure out what the cats were? How did this affect your pleasure in reading the story?
8. What point does Murphy make by uniting a bad but strong girl with a good but weak one?
9. In what ways must Jessica mature so that she does not surrender herself to someone else's personality, as she does to that of Kirsten?
10. How well developed are the personalities of Jessica and Kirsten? Do they seem more like real people or more like stereotypes?
11. How much blame for what happens belongs to Jessica rather than Kirsten?
12. What does Jessica like about Kirsten? Are these truly likable characteristics? What does Jessica's liking of them tell us about Jessica herself?
13. How likely is Jessica to take Mrs. Hayward's cue and start her own collection of cat's-eyes?



14. Mrs. Hayward says, "There are a lot of us around In schools, in government, in the police department, everywhere." If her method for dealing with evil people is a good one, and there are others like her doing similar work, why have they failed to eliminate evil people and make the world wonderful?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The idea of identifying evil people when they are young and then doing something about them is an old one. What are some of the ways proposed in the last thirty years that people have suggested for discovering evil youngsters? Are there any characteristics in common among the suggested ways? Why has American society consistently rejected these proposals, even when they seem to have a scientific basis? What are the ethical matters raised by proposals to not only identify evil or criminality in young people, but to then prevent the youngsters from harming society?
2. Why do young people like Jessica yearn to be popular? Why do others not care about being popular? What do psychologists say about the subject?
3. What makes some people leaders and others followers? Are there people who are neither? Can a person be both a leader and a follower? What makes leaders dangerous? What is their social value? What do psychologists suggest as answers to these questions?
4. The presence of witches in fiction for young readers can be worrisome for some people. What is the history of witches in young adult literature? What objections have people raised to books that have witches in them? Are the objections valid? What has happened to the books?
5. When watching a house for someone as Jessica is supposed to, what are the ethical rules about what the watcher may touch or look at? What are the ethical rules about whether someone else may be invited in the way Kirsten is invited? What are the ethical rules for how those living in the house—for instance, the cats—should be treated?
6. Write a manual for house sitting, with the dos and don'ts laid out logically, with explanations for each. Note what the sitter's responsibilities are.
7. Why were woodlands important to ideas about witchcraft in eighteenth-century America? Does "The Cat's-Eye" capture the essentials for the setting?
8. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a girl discovers a large old closet full of clothing and makes her way through it to another world. Compare her experience with that of Kirsten and Jessica.

Do they share similar expectations? Are the results as interesting? Which is the more complex journey?



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Related Titles

Murphy's fiction tends to reflect what he likes to read and what he remembers liking to read as a youngster, which, in the case of his short stories, means horror fiction. In his collection *Night Terrors*, the stories vary from straightforward ones such as "Just Say Yes," about a girl's having to choose whether or not to become a vampire, to ones that rival "The Cat's-Eye" in complexity. For instance, "Something Always Happens" stresses creepy settings and characters more than "The Cat's-Eye" does, but it offers a morality tale about choosing one's friends carefully, as well as remembering that looks can be very deceptive. Like "The Cat's-Eye," it has a seemingly harmless, decrepit old lady, and the main character stereotypes her, shutting off the critical part of his mind when he should be looking beneath the surface and asking himself many questions. "Footprints in the Snow" is about a journey, as "The Cat's-Eye" is, but the journey is over many years and through many communities, mostly small towns. Of Murphy's short stories, "Footprints in the Snow" is most plainly in the American tradition of the horror tale, echoing Edgar Allan Poe and more strongly echoing H. P. Lovecraft's eeriest work. The story involves a transformation every bit as ethically troubling as that in "The Cat's-Eye."



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