

The Cats of Seroster Short Guide

The Cats of Seroster by Robert Westall

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Overview

The Cats of Seroster is a novel of high adventure set in a fantasy world where felines and humans join forces to battle chaos and oppression. Cam, a wandering scholar, and Amon, the main feline protagonist, face death, robbers, and wild animals, and lead an exciting siege of a medieval city. In true fairy tale fashion, the young hero is given a magic gift, a knife that fights on its own, but he fears the terrible power of the weapon which forces him to kill against his will, and tries to escape from a role that seems to be forced upon him by fate. Amon, the cat, is unhappy about the leadership role and responsibility that is given to him as protector of a mob of fugitive cats.

Eventually, both submit and accept the mission that fate or magic seems to have reserved for them. The action of the story is suspenseful and exciting, but the emotional struggles of the hero give it added meaning. Cam, who is strongly against violence, has to come to terms with the violent results of his task which demands of him that he become the Seroster, a brave but inhuman defender of the torn city.

Although the story is not developed against a specific mythological background, the elements of myth that Westfall introduces add an interesting dimension to the novel. There is, foremost, the Egyptian mythology that surrounds a tribe of super cats, the Miw.

The ordinary cats are also targets of numerous folk beliefs such as the one about the Matagots, black felines that lead men to buried golden treasure.

Drawing upon fairy tales and myths, Westfall has constructed a world reminiscent of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where men and animals are all locked into a monumental struggle of good against evil, but where good sometimes has the deceptive appearance of evil, and evil is not always distinguishable from the beneficial forces.

About the Author

Robert Westall was born on October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, England. He graduated from the University of Durham with a bachelor's degree in 1953. From 1953 to 1955, he served in the Royal British Army Signal Corps, then continued his studies at the University of London where he received a doctor of fine arts degree in 1957. In 1960 he joined the faculty of the art department at Sir John Deane's College in Norwich, England, where he spent his career.

From 1957 on, almost annually, he published a novel for young readers.

Many of the plots stem from his own childhood experiences during World War II, such as in *The Machine Gunners* which deals with children changed by war. His interest and love for cats appears in several of his books, including the realistic novel about the wartime experiences of a black cat in *Blitzcat*.

Many of his novels also stress the way ordinary people react and help each other in times of crisis. His novels earned Westfall a number of awards, including runner up for the Carnegie Medal for *The Devil on the Road*, and the English Carnegie Medal and the Boston Globe Horn Book award for *The Machine Gunners* and *The Scarecrows*. Westall died April 15, 1993, in Cheshire, England, of respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia.



Setting

The novel takes place in a medieval French town and countryside during the sixteenth century. As the author points out in a note, the French town of Les Baux, perched high on a steep cliff, was the inspiration for the setting, "a place where it was impossible to tell where the ruins ended and the rocks began . . . a place full of cats . . . immutable, disinterested . . . embodying Les Baux's past spirit of independence and malevolence."

In the castle of the town, the duke has just been assassinated, and the only witnesses to the crime are his twelve-year-old son, and the royal cat Sekhmet, member of the Mivw, a super race of golden cats with great powers. Sekhmet helps the boy escape to a ruined mausoleum, meeting place of cats, to hide him from his enemies. But first, she has temporarily taken away his human mind so that he thinks and feels like a kitten.

Meanwhile, in another part of the countryside, a young Englishman named Cam has stopped at an inn for a meal. He is a jack-of-all-trades who makes a living as a fixer of things, solving problems ranging from plugged sewers to obtaining profitable goods. At the tavern, he meets a mysterious blacksmith who asks him to deliver a letter to the Seroster at a nearby city, and offers a magic knife as a reward. Frightened but also tempted, the boy reluctantly accepts the letter and goes on a journey that will lead him through impassable swamps, hostile deserts, and to the very heart of the rebel city.

Social Sensitivity

Violence is an aspect of this novel that may be of concern to some readers or parents. The battles for the besieged city are full of swordplay, killing, and even the Miw respond to the news of the duke's assassination with the cry of "kill, kill." But the violent action is a natural and necessary part of the story and is not overly graphic or described for its own sake. In fact, Cam, the hero, is strongly opposed to all killing, and he has difficulty doing so even in defense of his own life. His struggle against becoming the Seroster has much to do with his horror of inflicting injury and death. The cats are hunters who simply and without remorse dispatch their prey, but the truly human characters try to overcome the animal instincts of violence and cruelty.



Literary Qualities

Westfall uses both stylistic devices and symbols to create the atmosphere of his part magical, part medieval world. The cats have their own language and vocabulary such as "unfu" for insane, and "minnen" for child.

Since their communication is through telepathy, they have evolved a terse, almost telegraphic language. In the human world, we are reminded of the time and place by terms like "catapult" and "battering ram" and other terminology from medieval warfare, but the characters talk in modern language.

Westfall uses direct dialogue very effectively to give the reader a feeling of being right there. "There is something coming up the road . . . a house on wheels. Can't you hear it creaking?"

Since the novel is a fantasy, unusual events and items are often taken at face value. Thus the magical knife is really a knife that performs magic, and not just a figure of speech. But it also serves as a reminder of Cam's inability to get away from his fate. Every time he leaves the knife behind, it returns to his hand. The only way the curse can be lifted is to pass the burden on to another who voluntarily accepts it.

The time and place of the story are also allegorical. The swamp, the desert, and the city carved from rock become obstacles themselves in the hero's attempt to get away and free himself.

The only freedom is found in "the dusty road leading to a blue river," and that is actually the landscape that the dying cats see. Death breaks the bonds imposed by fate. The period in which the novel is set makes it easy for the reader to accept both allegory and magic, since medieval literature and folklore accept the supernatural without questions.

The Cats of Seroster has many of the qualities of good literature. The characters are interesting and believable; there is exciting and fast-paced action that keeps the reader in suspense, a complex theme about the role of fate in man's life, and a lively style that makes the reader participate in the events of the story, making this novel entertaining as well as thought provoking.



Themes and Characters

The characters in *The Cats of Seroster* can be divided into two groups—humans and cats. The cats, too, fall into two categories, ordinary felines known as Brethren and Sisters, and the golden Miw, an ancient feline race descended from the sacred cats of Egypt. Generally speaking, the cats represent all that is noble and natural, whereas most of the humans are greedy, foolish or corrupt.

Cam of Cambridge is the main human character, a young man who loves his independence, a drifter who is skilled with his hands and has a clever mind. His strongest character traits are a desire to be his own person and an abhorrence of violence. In his travels he has learned to be a keen judge of human nature, and he uses this knowledge to survive, but in spite of his shrewdness, he is tempted by the power the knife promises. Basically a kind person who is willing to help others, he shies away from close emotional ties to humans or animals. His basic conflict arises from his determination not to be dominated by the magic of the Seroster and his equally strong fascination with his power. Therefore, in spite of his struggle, he is drawn into the events of the city and discovers to his dismay that he is fated to become the Seroster, a legendary knight that is both protector and ruthless defender. Soon the violent but heroic nature of the Seroster and the ordinary, kind and human personality of Cam are in inner conflict, the one threatening to obliterate the other.

While Cam is the main human character, some of the supporting figures stand out in minor parts. There is the young duke, a frightened boy who wants desperately to prove that he is a man. While he is spoiled, peevish, and sometimes power hungry, he is the true ruler of the city. Among Cam's supporters are also the brave innkeeper, George, who represents the decent people of the city, and the military captain, Geoffrey. Both are rather flat characters, mostly designed to move the action along and to show additional aspects of Cam.

On the enemy side, there is Little Paul, the chief villain and rebel leader.

He is devious, cruel, small-minded, greedy, and a convinced cat hater who tries to wipe out the entire feline population. His captain and chief defender of the city is Sir Henri, a knight of the old school who glories in battle and tries to uphold all the knightly virtues.

Like an aging Don Quixote, he considers himself the defender of a noble profession and cannot understand why no one else follows his ideals. He has joined the rebels because he enjoys fighting, which is his sole purpose in life. Unlike Little Paul, he likes cats, especially a black and white female named Castlemew.

Foremost among the feline characters is Amon, a young Miw with golden fur, the embodiment of courage and devotion. Amon is sent out early in the story to take a message about the duke's murder to the wild horses. The Miw are outraged at the killing, not because they liked the old duke, but because they believe in law and order, and because a victory for the rebels also means a victory for the enemies of cats.



During his journey, Amon rescues cats that have fled from a nearby town, and is accepted as their leader. Amon is the most developed among the cat characters—he is young, inexperienced, still unsure of his leadership, looked up to by the ordinary cats, and frightened of the responsibility such leadership brings. In many ways, his character parallels that of Cam with whom he forms a close bond. There are a number of other Miw, all with Egyptian names, who play minor parts, especially Sekhmet, the royal cat who rescues the little duke. Among the ordinary cats, two characters stand out. They are black and white brothers named Tornear and Ripfur. Unlike the noble and refined Amon, those two are rogues with an earthy sense of humor and an irreverent view of life. They provide much of the somewhat coarse humor of the story.

The other truly important cat character is a black and white female named Castlemew. She is the cat of Sir Henry, whom she loves with a passion. Even when Castlemew is asked by fellow cats to leave her master, she stays faithful and defies the curse of her own kind. Eventually, she sacrifices her life for him, still worrying in death about her abandoned knight.

With the "good" and "bad" characters squarely lined up in the struggle, one major theme of the novel deals with a confrontation of good and evil.

However, this is not a simple struggle because the difference between the two is not always apparent. The magic knife and the Seroster are both violent and beneficial. In fact, when Cam becomes the Seroster, he loses much of his humanity and turns into a clever but pitiless fighter and leader. This leader serves the "good" cause, but he also uncaringly sacrifices his people if the war demands it. Cam, realizing that he is losing his human qualities, desperately struggles against being completely taken over by the Seroster's spirit.

In contrast to the humans who are torn between good and evil, the cats, especially the Miw, have a clear sense of right and wrong, although it does not always follow the human definition. Serving the wisdom of the Mother, Bubastis, the cat goddess of ancient Egypt, and of Ra, the sun god, they follow their vision, even if it means sacrificing their own lives. Their faithfulness beyond death is shown when Amon is killed but voluntarily returns to Cam instead of going to his reward in an Egyptian "cat paradise."

The theme of fate is brought out through visions of the bright blue river in a golden desert, and of the boat which takes the dead to Ra. The cats are given this vision at the end of their lives, and Cam shares it when Amon is severely wounded but decides to remain with his friend. This understanding of an eternal cycle helps Cam accept his role as Seroster, and when, at the end, he leaves with Amon, he tells him: "All roads lead to Bubastis."

The idea that all beings, human or animal, are prisoners of fate is underscored by the magic knife and sword.



Both are not really gifts but shackles which force their bearer to do things against his will. The knife follows Cam wherever he goes, no matter how much he tries to rid himself of it. Even when, at the end, Cam once more tries to leave his fate as Seroster behind and start a new life, his former companions who are left behind wonder whether he will be able to free himself from the magic. " 'We will wait', said George."



Topics for Discussion

1. We all have had dreams of fairy tale luck—of wishes that come magically true and objects with special powers. Yet when Cam is offered a magic knife, he desperately tries to get away from it and is afraid. Is he just superstitious or are there other reasons for his fear? What does he mean when he says that magic is a curse?

2. What qualities make Cam a suitable heir to the Seroster? Why is he singled out when he seems to hate his role so much? Are those qualities perhaps also the ones that would make a very good Seroster?

3. The Miw are a superior race of cats and see themselves as above ordinary felines. They have special powers.

Did they pay a price for this noble role, and have they lost qualities the ordinary cats possess? What are those qualities? Is there a parallel to the price Cam has to pay for his newly found powers?

4. If Cam is so strongly opposed to violence, why does he enjoy being Seroster?

5. The only characters who have no selfish goals in the struggle for the besieged city are Cam and Sir Henri.

Yet they are on opposite sides. Is one therefore good and the other evil? Are good and evil in people clearly defined? And what about the cats? They kill without much remorse yet they are supposed to support the good cause.

Do they? And what is the good cause?

6. When Cam leaves at the end, George and the rest expect him to return because of the magic. Do you think he will be able to free himself, or will he be forced to be Seroster forever?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Cats of Seroster is a story of talking and reasoning cats. How does the author make us believe in these magical beasts? To what extent are they feline, and to what extent human?

Their human traits are contrasted with those of the people around them. Westall uses irony in his contrast. What does this tell us about his attitude toward people and society?

2. Magic plays an important role in this novel, just as it does in traditional fairy tales, but the magic in this story is more of a curse. Why is Cam afraid of magic, and why does he dislike being called a wizard? Is magic good or bad?

3. The novel is called The Cats of Seroster, not "The Journey of Cam." Why?

Are the cats more important than the humans? Whom does the author prefer and why?

4. Sir Henri is a man who has no friends and does not fit into his time.

He resembles a character named Don Quixote by Cervantes about a man who thinks he is a knight. What does he believe? This is a story set in the Middle Ages, a time of knights, and yet the rest of the town thinks Sir Henri is strange in his ideas about knighthood.

Why? How do his ideas differ from reality? What role does his cat play in his life? Why does Cam say after Sir Henri dies, "You have won your battle, Lady Castlemew"? Why does he call her lady since she is not a human but a cat?

5. Westall draws from Egyptian mythology, especially concerning cats and death. What beliefs did the ancient Egyptians hold about the soul? Why did they venerate cats?

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Malachi, McCormick. *Cat Tales*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989. This is a collection of folklore tales about cats, illustrating old beliefs and superstitions about cats worldwide.

Richard, Patrick. *All Color Book of Egyptian Mythology*. London: Octopus, 1972. A concise but complete discussion of Egyptian mythology and the individual deities.

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This is a discussion of Westall's writings.

Related Titles

Cats and magic are two topics that obviously interest Robert Westall, since they appear again and again in several of his books. In *The Devil on the Road*, a young man gets involved with a young girl who turns out to be the spirit of a seventeenth century witch. Not only does he fall in love with her, he becomes quite attached to her familiar spirit, a little cat named Newsy. The ghost of a young girl also plays an important part in *The Promise*, where the young hero promises his girl friend never to leave her. When the girl is killed in an accident, her ghost returns to demand that he fulfill his promise by following her into the grave. A more realistic cat is the heroine of *Blitzcat*, the story of a feline survivor of a German bombing attack during world War II. Traveling through war torn Britain, the little feline brings luck to anyone she encounters until she is finally reunited with her owner.



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