

It's Like This, Cat Short Guide

It's Like This, Cat by Emily Neville

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Overview

It's Like This, Cat recounts a year in the life of Dave Mitchell as he completes junior high school and enters high school in New York. The story focuses on relationships among family members and among peers, on loss, and on the development of compassion for others— especially those without strong family bonds or friendships. When his family offers support and friendship to Kate, a recluse, and to Tom, a young adult without direction, Dave remarks, "My family is starting to collect people the way Kate collects homeless cats."

Through his interaction with others, Dave develops the strength of character and emotional maturity to accept and survive life's inevitable tragedies.

About the Author

Emily Cheney Neville was born on December 28, 1919, in Manchester, Connecticut. She attended the Oxford School from 1931 to 1936 and received her bachelor of arts degree from Bryn Mawr College in 1940. More than three decades later she returned to school and received a law degree from Albany Law School in 1976. She has worked as a copywriter, a journalist, a novelist, and a lawyer.

When her own children were young, Neville began writing picture books for them. Although none of these stories were published, an editor suggested that Neville write stories for older children.

Her first book, *It's Like This, Cat*, grew out of a one-page short story, "Cat and I," that she wrote for a Sunday newspaper supplement. *It's Like This, Cat* was awarded the Newbery Medal in 1964. Neville says that her stories begin as a scene or conversation in her head, which she develops by working both backward and forward in time. She claims that the definite structure does not emerge until the work has undergone at least three, and sometimes as many as six, rewrites.

Setting

It's Like This, Cat takes place in a slightly run-down section of New York City during the late 1950s or early 1960s. Neville captures the bustle of this urban setting as Dave criss-crosses the city to engage in a variety of activities.

Some of these scenes have become dated in the twenty-five years since the book was published—for example, Dave visits Fulton Street Fish Market, a spot that has since been gentrified and incorporated into South Street Seaport, a waterfront tourist attraction—but Neville's descriptions bring a New York of the past to life with vivid clarity.

Social Sensitivity

It's Like This, Cat treats subjects such as the importance of compassion and the acceptance of loss without excessive sentiment or emotion. Neville chooses to explore these issues in a straightforward manner through an examination of the characters and the difficult decisions they must make: Dave decides to neuter Cat out of concern for his pet's welfare, and Kate kills the young kitten rather than let it suffer. As Carolyn Kingston points out in *The Tragic Mode in Children's Literature*, these events demonstrate that spiritual toughness can balance tragedy. Some readers may be uncomfortable with the scene in which Kate kills the kitten, but because Neville does not dwell too long on the incident, most readers will not find it offensive.

One potentially disturbing element is Neville's portrayal of Tom's father, who abandons him while Tom is in college and does not leave a forwarding address.

But Neville balances this bleak situation with reassuring examples of the Mitchells' concern for Tom.



Literary Qualities

It's Like This, Cat is realistic fiction for young people. Although the contemporary teen-age slang and consumer prices it cites have changed since its publication in 1963, the book still offers readers insights about themselves and the world around them. The story captures the flavor of life in a large city and is written in a humorous, direct style with vocabulary appropriate to its fourteen-year-old storyteller. Dave describes the buildings, playgrounds, and people in his New York neighborhood, the city's public transportation system, and the sights and smells of the ethnic neighborhoods he visits. *It's Like This, Cat* was a pioneer in the field of young adult literature for its realistic urban setting, and Neville makes effective use of this setting as both a backdrop for and projection of her characters' internal struggles and dreams. Neville shows that her characters learn to draw sustenance from their immediate environment, focusing their aspirations on the challenges and opportunities it offers. A park or playground can provide a taste of nature's wide-open green spaces—and, by extension, the Mitchells' efforts to reach out to others can provide a much-needed substitute for missing family bonds.

The novel stresses familiar themes of adolescence in its portrayal of an innocent awakening. Dave becomes comfortable with girls and begins to see parents as people with strengths and weaknesses of their own. Neville structures her straightforward narrative around a chain of experiences—many of them involving cats—that help Dave develop into a more compassionate and less vulnerable human being. The entire narrative is written in the present tense, lending a sense of immediacy to the events.



Themes and Characters

Neville immediately captures the reader's interest and establishes conflict with her first sentence, in which Dave Mitchell states that he wants a cat for a pet because his father likes dogs.

Kate, a neighborhood eccentric who takes care of strays, gives Dave one of her brood, whom he names Cat. Dave's relationship with Cat provides a framework for the book and a catalyst for Dave's maturation. In one chapter Dave attempts to sneak Cat on the family's vacation trip, and when Cat escapes during a traffic jam, Dave jumps out of the car in pursuit, thus forfeiting his vacation. In another chapter Dave and a friend bring Cat to Coney Island, where they meet a group of girls who use Cat as an excuse to approach the boys.

This encounter contributes to Dave's growing awareness of male-female relationships, and he meets one of the girls again, first accidentally and then intentionally.

Dave's growing compassion for others and his acceptance of loss constitute the novel's major themes. At first he admires his pet for its independence: "Anything a cat does, he does only when he wants to. I like that." Later in the novel, Dave comes to realize that such fierce independence can be dangerous. He reluctantly accepts the responsibility of having Cat neutered after Cat returns from one of his adventures with a deep claw gouge running from his shoulder to his leg. Dave understands that he must act in his pet's best interest.

Dave's friendship with Tom reflects a similar willingness to act out of concern for others. The Mitchells provide Tom, a troubled young man, with care and acceptance. The family encourages him to rely less on his father and to take responsibility for planning his own future. Dave's interaction with Tom, a student at New York University and former petty thief, forces him to reevaluate his image of his own father as a rigid, quicktempered man. Tom talks of Mr. Mitchell's great compassion, and gradually, through conversations with his new friend, Dave begins to recognize his father's positive qualities as well.

The Mitchell family also offers friendship and help to Kate, a person shunned by others. The death of one of Kate's kittens teaches Dave to come to terms with loss. After Kate inherits a fortune from her brother, newspaper reporters crowd her apartment, and one steps on and seriously injures a young kitten that ventures out of its box. Kate ends the kitten's agony, wraps its body in a paper towel, and disposes of it matter-of-factly in the wastebasket.

Kate, vulnerable with strangers but tough underneath, here proves her resilience. She refuses to let the kitten suffer or to spend time lamenting, and Dave admires her for these qualities.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the beginning of this book Dave says, "My father is always talking about how having a dog can be very educational for a boy. This is one reason I got a cat." How is having Cat educational for Dave? Why does he choose a cat instead of a dog for a pet?
2. In the beginning of the story Dave talks about his father as very stiff and quick-tempered. When does this image of Mr. Mitchell begin to change?
3. Dave is willing to sacrifice a vacation to chase Cat when the pet jumps from the car. Why? Would you have acted in the same way?
4. Imagine Dave telling the story of Cat to his children, twenty years after the events took place. What would he say?

What do you think Tom would remember about Dave after twenty years?

5. Neville has stated that one of her purposes in writing is to show the reader how hard it is to be a "plain decent human being." What are some of the difficulties Dave faces on his way to becoming a decent human being?
6. In one chapter Dave notes that his family collects people the way Kate collects homeless cats. Neither Tom nor Kate is homeless, but Dave sees them both as peopleless, not part of any family. How are Kate and Tom alike? How are they different?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read another book for young adults that portrays family relationships, such as *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson, *Sea Glass* by Laurence Yep, *One-Eyed Cat* by Paula Fox, or *Danny, the Champion of the World* by Roald Dahl. Compare the novel you choose with *It's Like This, Cat*. In which book does the major character seem more like a real person? What problems do the major characters face in each book?

How do the major characters solve their problems? How has each book helped you better understand family relationships? Support your answers with examples from the books.

2. If you have a pet, explain the relationship between you and your pet.

Compare your experiences to Dave's.

3. Choose one chapter in the book and rewrite it from Cat's point of view.

4. One of the first realistic fiction books published for young adults, *It's Like This, Cat* is more than twenty-five years old. What qualities make the book valuable and interesting today, even though some scenes are outdated? Support your statements with illustrations or examples from the book.

5. Read another book written by Neville and compare it to *It's Like This, Cat*. Analyze Neville's writing style. You might concentrate on her use of dialogue, setting, or character development.

For Further Reference

Arbuthnot, May Hill, and Zena Sutherland. *Children and Books*. 7th ed.

Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1986.

Contains brief commentary on the merits of Neville's work.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*, Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. Includes a biographical sketch plus background about the creation of Neville's books.

Sarkissian, Adele, ed. *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, Vol.

2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. An extensive entry by the author tracing her life's history and interest in writing.

Related Titles

Other books by Emily Neville feature young heroes coming to grips with personal problems. *Berries Goodman* is about a nine-year-old Jewish boy who lives in a suburb where Jews are not welcome. In *Garden of Broken Glass* the four main characters live on the edge of despair in a slum setting.



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