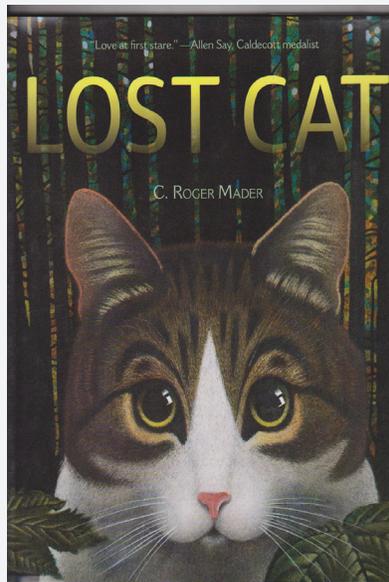


First Opinion: Abandoned, Lost, and Found

Mader, C. Roger. *Lost Cat*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

Ruth Sanderson



Young children have an innate fear of being abandoned by their parents. Everyone has experienced or seen young toddlers hanging on to a parent's leg while screaming for him or her not to leave them—at preschool, or with a babysitter, to name a few examples. Stories of abandonment can be difficult for children to process. In *Lost Cat*, written and illustrated by C. Roger Mader, a cat named Slipper is inadvertently left behind when her elderly owner, Mrs. Fluffy Slippers, moves out of her house to go live with her daughter and her family. Abandoned, alone, and soon lost, the cat must now find someone new to live with. Because the story is told primarily from Slipper's point of view, and the humans in the story are shown only from the legs down, the child reader will quickly identify with the cat character. However, Mader prevents this story from being overly frightening through the interplay of his subtle text choices and the effective design of his well-rendered pastel illustrations.

At first, the story establishes in words and pictures how secure Slipper the cat feels with Mrs. Fluffy Slippers, showing sweet illustrations of Slipper as she curls up on a pair of slippers (unpaged). The child viewer is swiftly engaged. So when the cat is left behind, chases after the moving van to no avail, and spends the night in the dark woods, feelings of fear and insecurity arise in the reader. An especially poignant page contains a distant shot of Slipper in the woods,

silhouetted against a dramatic red sunset sky, with just one word: “Lost!” Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods comes to mind, a story that many children never ask to be repeated. Will *Lost Cat* be a story that children will want to hear again?

In my opinion, they will. Mader immediately and cleverly changes the mood in the very next scene, where the text states, “She had tried her best to find Mrs. Fluffy Slippers, but now she would look for someone new to adopt” (unpaged). A full body shot of the cat striding off and looking confident and expectant against the morning sunrise is a dramatic contrast to the previous page where the cat is small and lost in the woods. By giving the cat control over her own destiny quickly after she is abandoned, lost, and afraid, the author creates a lighter and more adventurous mood. Slipper is not passively waiting for rescue, or for someone to adopt her. The story now becomes the cat’s quest for someone new for her to adopt. A character with agency conveys a sense of power and control. And, as the cat’s fear falls by the wayside, the child reader will be relieved, as well, and want to join in the quest for a new companion.

The mood of the story continues to lighten with the entertaining play on words when people are named by their footwear, and the low perspective “cat’s eye view” within the illustrations. As she comes upon a number of humans, Slipper rejects each one for various reasons. Ms. Muddy Boots has a dog, Mr. Cowboy Boots has a smelly truck, High Tops is too pushy, and Mr. Big Boots gives her a scary ride on a motorcycle. Mader further engages the viewer with varied expressions on the cat’s face in the detailed illustrations.

Finally, when a number of people (legs and shoes) pass by the mailbox under which the cat is hiding, she decides to follow a pair of shiny shoes, knowing it is the right choice. When they reach the home of Shiny Shoes, Slipper looks poignantly up in an illustration that must be turned sideways to view, and the reader suddenly becomes the child, looking down on the cat and the tops of the shiny shoes. This is a brilliant use of perspective to create a feeling of participation in the reader, and also a switch from the cat’s point of view to the human’s point of view. The cat now seems to be asking the reader, “May I adopt you?”

In a twist at the end that might be predicted by adult readers, the family of Miss Shiny Shoes turns out to be none other than Mrs. Fluffy Slippers’s family, with whom she now lives. The story ends on a safe and secure note, as Slipper “slept on the same old rug by the same old bed, snuggled up with the same old slippers.” In spite of the scary beginning, I would recommend this book highly, as the theme of abandonment is handled adroitly by the author. In giving the cat control over her own destiny, and in creating a very appealing character in glowing pastel illustrations, along with a cat-centric perspective, Mader has created a picture book that children will likely enjoy again and again.

Work Cited

Mader, C. Roger. *Lost Cat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. Print.

About the Author

Ruth Sanderson is an author/illustrator acclaimed for her many fairy tale picture books, including an Italian cat story, *Papa Gatto*. Her forthcoming book is *A Castle Full of Cats* (Random House, 2015.) She is the codirector of the MFA in Writing and Illustrating for Children at Hollins University in Virginia. Her website is www.ruthsanderson.com.