First Opinion: City Cat: A European Adventure Enhanced by Postmodern Elements


April M. Burke

Upon first viewing the book City Cat, I was immediately struck by the large grey cat, drawn carefree with charcoal or crayon in the center of the cover. Although the cat’s calm expression is difficult to interpret, one of its eyebrows is raised quizzically. Just behind this creature, the title is clearly written in capital letters above a cityscape. Closer inspection reveals what might be the Eiffel Tower, slightly illuminated, on the horizon. The opaque grey of the cat’s fur is juxtaposed against the colorful city, making me curious to see what the author, Kate Banks, and the illustrator, Lauren Castillo, had planned for this kitty.

Opening the book revealed endpapers containing a map of Europe with City Cat seated calmly in the center. A legend tells the reader that this plucky cat’s journey was quite extensive—including visits to eight major cities in six countries! This is followed by beautifully illustrated front matter, including a picture of City Cat resting on an inviting and elaborate doorstep. On the opposing page, under the dedication and book information, there is a small drawing of a family packing their car.
The peritextual elements I’ve described contain important and intentional information for the reader, which should not be overlooked (Serafini 457–59; Sipe 291–304); but I learned this the hard way. I read the inside of the jacket flap after I had read the book. I became frustrated when I could not understand the relationship between City Cat and the family nor the book’s ending. Indeed, it is only on the inside flap that one learns that City Cat is a stray cat and a stowaway. After rereading the book with this additional information, the story made sense.

Due to the importance of the book’s jacket, endpapers, and two informational pages at the end, I argue that, by Goldstone’s standards, *City Cat* contains elements of postmodern children’s literature. Goldstone explains that in postmodern children’s literature, order is not necessary, and it is the reader’s responsibility to make connections between the primary text and additional information. Goldstone argues that readers must coauthor postmodern texts by filling in information intentionally left out by the author (362–70). In the case of *City Cat*, the map filling the book’s endpapers and the supplementary information on the last two pages provide resources not only for understanding the plot, but also for enhancing the reader’s understanding.

Although I was initially confused by the book’s design, this did not detract from the prose and illustrations—both of which I found beautiful. Banks’s incorporation of alliteration, rhyme, and repetition give the text a lyrical and rhythmic quality. For example, consider this beautiful line describing City Cat, “She sits on piers with perked-up ears and gazes out to sea” (unpaged). Although every page was a delight, the two illustrations I found particularly striking were of City Cat crossing the Bridge of Sighs and City Cat looking at Big Ben.

Banks’s prose is complemented by Castillo’s illustrations of City Cat appearing in different locations as the pages are turned; together these create a sense of movement. City Cat’s tiny body intensifies the dramatic, spacious, and often panoramic cityscapes surrounding her. Her perspective is not unlike a child’s. City Cat is not only closer to the ground, but, like a child, she must navigate her environment differently than an adult person.

City Cat certainly gets around! From a French café to The Colosseum, the lively scenes and quick-paced prose not only keep the reader engaged, but also serve to introduce young readers to diverse sites in Europe. The author and illustrator contrast the modern with the ancient in interesting and unexpected ways. For example, on one page City Cat perches atop a building next to a gargoyle, and on the next page, she catches a high-speed train (Castillo unpaged). City Cat, the family, and each of the countries’ flags are easily identifiable in the pictures, which makes it fun to find them. One could ask a young reader to match the flag on each page to the legend on the inside cover to answer the question, “Which country is City Cat exploring now?” (endpage). The book’s design allows for these types of adult-child conversations. The informational pages found at the end of the book include the word for cat in each language of the country City Cat visited. It is the inclusion of these types of details which make *City Cat* both fun and educational.
City Cat is a delightful book to explore. Like City Cat and the family, Banks and Castillo give readers the opportunity to visit and learn about a variety of European destinations. Which beautifully depicted location will be your favorite?

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

**April M. Burke** is an assistant professor of Educational Linguistics at Central Michigan University. Burke is a licensed K–12 teacher from Maine where she taught middle and high school. She conducts research on the use of standardized tests with English language learners and the effects of policies on the education of language minority students. As an educator, Burke seeks to aid preservice teachers in acquiring not only content knowledge, but also critical thinking and advocacy skills.