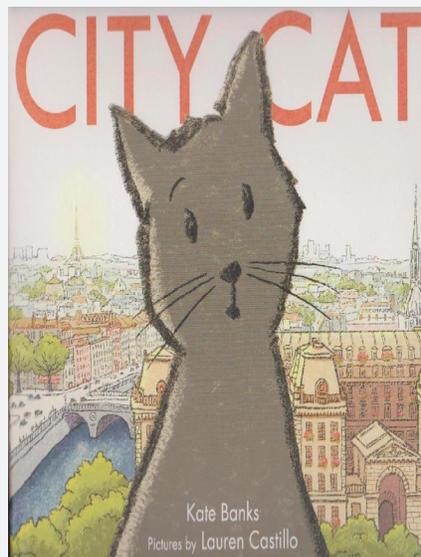


Second Reaction: Trailing a Cat Through Europe

Banks, Kate. *City Cat*. Illus. Lauren Castillo.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Renée Englot



A stray cat makes her way through eight European cities, her visits coinciding with those of a family on a road trip. Kate Banks' poetic text gives flavors of the spots they visit. Lauren Castillo's illustrations highlight one or two famous landmarks per location. Each illustration features the cat and each spread a flag. The smaller illustrations, just before the page turn that leads readers into a new country, hint at how the cat makes her journey from one place to the next. There's no real narrative arc, nor is there any character development. It's more a poetic travelogue from a cat's eye view. I shared this picture book with an audience of two six-year-olds, a nine-year-old, two eleven-year-olds, and a thirteen-year-old. As I shared the book, I encouraged them to find the cat in each picture, to look for the flags, to guess which country they were in, and to try and identify the landmarks.

Banks's language is at times quite lovely: "City Cat scales ragged walls/she romps through ruins set in stone" (unpaged). Despite the uneven meter and the hit and miss rhyme scheme, the text flows reasonably smoothly as a read aloud. The illustrations use limited splashes of full color to highlight and to add variety.

City Cat is, in some ways, hard to categorize. The publisher's description calls it an easy-to-read book. In many ways, it does appeal to this young audience. The number of words per

two-page spread is limited. The human children in the book are quite young, probably under five years of age. The theme of a cute kitty in the city appeals to young children, as does the basic look and find, searching for the cat and the flag in each illustration. On the other hand, there are many words in the text quite beyond the independent reach of the easy-to-read crowd: *wayfaring*, *beckoning*, *boulevard*, *obelisk*, *gilded*, *wayward*, *rollicking*, *gallivanting*, *masquerading*, *serenading*, and *brazen*. Castillo's illustrations hold much appeal for older children. There's the challenge of identifying nations based on flags (unless, of course, you cheat and use the end pages). There's the added challenge of identifying locales. Neither city, country, nor landmark are named in the text. It's generally an older, more sophisticated listener who has familiarity with flags and famous landmarks. Following the story, a two-page spread identifies the landmarks pictured in the cat's journey. Included with these bits of trivia are the translations of the word cat in the languages of the countries she visits (Spain, Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, and Germany). Some of the place descriptions bridge a thematic connection to cats. Did you know that approximately 200 cats live rent free in Rome's Colosseum? (This elicited a "Well duh!" from the thirteen-year-old, "How would they get cats to pay rent?") These last two pages and their much more extensive text lost the interest of my six-year-old listeners. The eleven-year-olds, who had visited some of the places pictured, were much more patient with these blurbs. The thirteen-year-old, who initially wanted nothing to do with "a little kid's picture book," was won over by the guessing games. In the end, I'm not entirely sure to whom this book will appeal or who its target audience might be. It would be fun for families planning European travel to read it together before or after their trip.

All of us had assumed that the cat would come to live with the family she dogged across Europe. SPOILER ALERT: We were wrong.

Work Cited

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About the Author

Renée Englot is a former middle grades teacher. She now works with schools as a storytelling artist in residence. She also has the pleasure of teaching a storytelling course for the Hollins University graduate program in children's literature where she earned her own MA.