

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

It's Like This, Cat

by

Emily Cheney Neville

Book Information

Emily Cheney Neville, It's Like This, Cat

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Book Level: 4.7

Interest Level: MG

A teenage boy in New York City gets a cat instead of a dog simply to annoy his father, then begins to learn that his father is a caring human being, not just a strict parent.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: Animals, Cats; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Sons; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Respect All Voices: Respect

Main Characters

Agnes Mitchell (Mom) Dave's extremely sensitive and protective mother, who has asthma attacks when Pop and Dave fight

Ben Alstein a boy from school whom Dave befriends after fighting with Nick; Ben is outraged when Cat kills his salamander

Dave Mitchell an adolescent boy who is struggling to deal with his relationship with his father; he is very attached to his pet cat

Hilda Tom's girlfriend, who tells Dave about Tom's problems

Kate Carmichael (Crazy Kate or Aunt Kate) a middle-aged woman who is thought to be "crazy" by most neighborhood kids because she lives with several cats and distrusts most people; she becomes Dave's friend and adviser after she saves Dave from being hit by a car; Dave calls her "Aunt Kate"

Mary a girl Dave meets on the beach; he makes a date with her after he meets her again in a record store

Nick Dave's best friend from junior high, who gets Dave to go on a double date; their friendship is damaged when they fight

Pop Mitchell Dave's volatile father, who works as a lawyer; he surprises Dave by helping Tom

Tom Ransom a nineteen-year-old boy who meets Dave while Dave is searching for his cat; Tom had to leave school because of financial trouble and lack of support from his father

Vocabulary

bellowing yelling

bickering fighting

expedition trip

ferry a boat that carries people or cars back and forth over a span of water

magistrate an official responsible for overseeing the administration of legal issues

placid very calm

Synopsis

Dave Mitchell's frequent arguments with his father upset his mother so much she has asthma attacks. After one particularly bad fight, Dave flees to the home of his adult friend Kate. Kate is a cat-lover and is temporarily sheltering a stray cat. When Dave goes home again, he takes the cat with him and insists that Pop allow him to keep Cat.

One day Cat disappears, and the building janitor suggests to Dave that Cat may be trapped in the basement of a nearby building. Dave finds Cat in a cage, and a strange boy helps set Cat free. Later Dave's conscience makes him report the suspicious stranger. When Dave hears that the boy was arrested after returning a suitcase taken on a dare, Dave feels guilty again. He writes to the boy, Tom Ransom, to offer Pop's assistance, since Pop is a lawyer.

In the spring Dave and his friend Nick take Cat to Coney Island to run in the sand. There Dave and Nick meet three girls: a redhead, a blonde, and a girl named Mary. Dave likes Mary because she pays attention to Cat.

A few weeks later Nick persuades Dave to go on a double date with the redhead and the blonde. The

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redhead annoys Dave because she flirts and giggles so much, and when Nick teases Dave on the way home, the two boys fight.

The next Saturday Dave is sitting on his stoop feeling lonely because he is still not speaking to Nick, when Tom the "burglar" suddenly arrives and asks Dave if he wants to go somewhere or do something fun. Dave introduces Tom to his mother to keep her from worrying, and the two boys spend a pleasant day together. Dave learns that Tom lives and works in Brooklyn. He is required to have an approved job and housing by the Youth Board after his trouble taking the suitcase.

In early summer Dave visits Tom in Brooklyn, and Tom invites Dave to meet him at Coney Island. There Dave meets Tom's girlfriend, Hilda. Hilda tells Dave how Tom's father did not help Tom when he got into trouble at his college dormitory and could not pay for the damages. When his father refused to help with the bill, Tom was asked to leave school. Dave tells Pop about Tom, and Pop says he will try to help. In the meantime, Dave has to get Cat neutered because he keeps getting into cat fights.

In August, Dave runs into Mary at a record store, and the two go to see *West Side Story*. Afterwards, Dave arranges to meet Mary at Coney Island on Columbus Day. At the end of August, Dave's family is preparing for vacation when Tom stops by to say that his father has moved without telling him. Pop had earlier suggested that Tom try to contact his father again to heal past misunderstandings. Tom's letter comes back indicating that the addressee is no longer at that address. Pop then offers to accompany Tom to his next meeting with the Youth Board. He also helps Tom get a better job.

Although Dave is pleasantly surprised by how Pop helps Tom, he still frequently fights with Pop. When the family is traveling out of town on their August vacation, Cat jumps out of the car window. Pop refuses to help, and Dave goes after Cat. After retrieving Cat, Dave goes to Kate's apartment. His parents are awaiting him there. They work out their differences, and the family goes on vacation.

When school starts, Dave befriends a boy named Ben Alstein. One Saturday, Ben accompanies Dave to the fish market to get scraps for Cat. The two boys spend almost all their money on lunch and end up walking home. Another weekend the boys go to the Bronx Zoo. Ben catches a pair of salamanders during the trip. When the boys return to Dave's apartment, Cat upsets Ben by killing one of the salamanders.

On Columbus Day Dave goes to meet Mary at Coney Island. He enjoys their outing and arranges to meet her again on Election Day, although he ends up missing this meeting because he is sick.

Tom and Kate join Dave's family for dinner on Thanksgiving Day. When Dave takes Kate home, Kate learns her brother has died. The next day Dave hears that Kate has inherited a fortune. Reporters are swarming all over her apartment. One of the reporters accidentally squashes a kitten under his foot, and Kate demands that the reporters leave. Dave's parents help Kate sort things out and take home two stray cats so that Kate's landlord will stop threatening to evict her because of the animals.

Just before Christmas, Dave receives a phone call from Mary saying she is stranded at Macy's. Dave goes to the store and brings Mary to his home. He finally is able to explain to her that he had been sick on Election Day and would have called her had he known her number. She admits that she looked up his telephone number several weeks earlier so that she could call him.

Although Dave's relationship with his father is improving, they still fight. Pop objects to Dave taking a music class, but ultimately, he allows Dave to have one semester of lessons. One night Pop and Dave get into an argument about a television program. Later they apologize to each other. At eleven that night the family is surprised by a visit from Tom and Hilda. Tom announces that he is marrying and joining the army. The story ends with the family celebrating Tom's future and the effect Cat has had on all their lives.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How does Tom find out his father has moved?

After Pop first meets with Tom, he suggests that Tom write a letter to make amends with his father. When Tom's letter is returned, Tom realizes that his father no longer lives at his old address. Pop then offers to help Tom with the Youth Board. The Youth Board confirms that Tom's father had moved, as they have also been unsuccessful in trying to locate him.

Literary Analysis

What kind of mother is Agnes Mitchell?

Dave's mother is very sensitive and protective. She worries about Dave when he goes too far from home, and she also tries to protect Dave when he gets into arguments with Pop. She is very involved in Dave's life and listens to him when he has problems. She tries hard to be a good mother to him but has difficulty dealing with stress. She has asthma attacks when Dave and Pop fight. She is kind and generous to Dave's friends. She treats Tom with respect and kindness when Dave brings him into the house, and she does not pass judgment on Aunt Kate. Instead, she invites Kate and Tom for Thanksgiving dinner.

Inferential Comprehension

How is Tom's father different from Pop?

Although Pop is very critical of Dave, his criticism seems to come from a sincere desire to see Dave succeed. When Dave gets into trouble, Pop gets involved, even if he is not always on Dave's side. Pop takes an active role in making sure Dave is prepared for college when he insists that Dave take courses in high school that will be useful for college. Pop tries to provide a stable family life and also takes an interest in Dave's friends. He helps Kate and Tom, and when Mary is stranded, he tells Dave how to help her. In this way Pop gives Dave the message that it is important to be involved and helpful. On the other hand, when Tom gets into trouble, his father disappears. Tom's father does not seem to care if Tom gets a college education. He seems so involved with a woman who drinks too much and encourages him to spend all his money that he cannot even respond to Tom's letters.

Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that Dave does not want to date the redheaded girl?

In the first place, Dave never calls the girl by her name even though he had been introduced to her at the beach. Secondly, Dave is reluctant when Nick first proposes the date to Dave. He says that he does not want to pay for the redhead's ticket. When the boys go out with the girls, Dave is annoyed when the redhead laughs at something he says. He refuses to allow the girl to hold him when the movie gets scary, and he decides he is not going to participate in another date with Nick and the girls. By the end of the day, Dave is so frustrated that when Nick mocks the redhead's last words to Dave, Dave hits him.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Mom is very upset when she thinks Dave is going too far from home. Have the students do research on the Internet to find a map of New York City that shows either the streets or the subway lines. Have the students

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trace two or three of Dave's journeys through the streets of New York or along the subway line. Have the students discuss whether they think Mom was justified in feeling worried when Dave went on these trips.

Making Predictions Several of the characters in this story seem on the verge of major life changes. Have the students choose one of these characters and write a short story about what they might be doing one year in the future. Have the students use clues from the text to develop their stories.

Identifying Reasons Although Dave has the opportunity to date a girl who flirts more than Mary, he prefers Mary's company. Have the students write a letter from Dave to Mary explaining why he likes her. Have the students focus on the reasons Dave gives in the book to help shape their letters.

Identifying Persuasive Language Dave has difficulty communicating civilly with his father. Have the students choose one of the confrontations in this story and rewrite the dialogue to show how Dave could have done a better job of speaking with his father.