



Catboy

**A novel study on
pet overpopulation**

BCSPCA

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Novel study: Catboy

Catboy tells the story of Taylor, who has recently moved from a small northern town in Ontario to the diverse metropolis of Toronto. Everything in the city is new to Taylor, including a feral cat colony he discovers when taking a shortcut through the junkyard with his new friend, Simon.

Taylor, called Catboy by an older bully, quickly takes an interest in the cat colony. And when a new condominium development threatens the cats' survival, he vows to come up with a solution. Along the way, Taylor gets support from his mom, his classmates, his teacher, a group of feral cat volunteers and the junkyard security guard, Mr. Singh.

Structured in a way that allows the reader to learn along with the protagonist, *Catboy* touches on some important information regarding feral cat colonies, as well as the issue of anthropomorphizing animals. Unfortunately, it neglects to discuss the sterilization of feral cats or their effect on wild birds, both issues that could be raised in classroom discussions of the story.

While focusing the novel's plot on Taylor and the cat colony, the author also intersperses messages about cultural diversity, gentrification and the question of morality vs. legality – all of which offer the possibility of further critical thinking and discussion.

Overall, *Catboy* offers a page-turning and thought-provoking read to students.
Reading level: Grade 4 and up.

Introduction:

There are many ways to use novels in English Language Arts to meet the B.C. Ministry of Education's learning standards. By using the novel *Catboy* by Canadian author Eric Walters, students will gain a deeper, more meaningful understanding of community and feral cat colonies.

Classroom novel studies can use a variety of different formats. The literature circle is the format outlined in this lesson with accompanying worksheets and examples, but teachers can use any format they choose for this novel.

In addition to the literature circles activity, this lesson also includes a creative writing assignment, outlined on page 7, and three extension activities found on page 6.

Some issues that are not properly addressed or need clarification in relation to the BC SPCA's position on cat welfare (page 20 and 21), are included on the highlighted excerpts pages 4 and 5. Background information on pet overpopulation is included on page 3.

Subject/Grade: English Language Arts Grade 4, 5, 6, 7

Learning Outcomes:

- Take an active role in interpreting, questioning and making connections to real situations in their community.
- Apply a variety of reading and critical thinking strategies to increase their comprehension of community cat populations.
- Develop a broader understanding of self, family and community.
- Think critically about ideas and information to deepen, extend and transform understanding.
- Consider multiple perspectives, beliefs and point of view in Canadian and other cultural contexts

Materials

- *Catboy*, novel by Eric Walters
- *Hunter*, novel by Eric Walters (if using writing assignment)
- Literature Circle Roles worksheet
- Highlighted Excerpts
- Extension Activities (optional)

Procedure:

1. Introducing the novel: Bring four or five items that go with the book (cat food, kennel, stuffed raccoon, part of a leftover lunch, car part, brick, turban, condo development brochures). Share them with the students before they read the novel. This helps initiate inquiry about the book. The students can try to guess what the book is about based on the items, writing down their ideas and changing/adding to them while they read the novel.

2. If you are not using the literature circle format introduce the students to the expectations and procedures of doing a novel study when the format you are using.

Introducing literature circles: Explain each role as outlined in the Literature Circle section on page 9. If this is the first time you are doing literature circles with your class you may choose to do one as a class so that students understand their roles. This could be done with a short novel or even a picture book.

If students are confident in doing a novel study using the literature circle format, form groups of four to eight and hand each student a role worksheet. As they read chapter 1, let them use the examples on pages 10 and 11 for each role. After students have read each chapter they discuss the work from each role as a group and then change roles after each chapter.

Literature circles can also be done as a class. You can either have multiple students have the same role and work independently or have small groups work as one role. Students then share their roles with the class and switch to a different role for the next chapter.

3. Highlighted Excerpts: As students read each chapter make sure they are aware of any excerpts from that particular chapter included on the Highlighted Excerpts on page 4 and 5. This will provide more accurate information from an animal welfare perspective on cat welfare.

4. Writing Assignment : A creative writing assignment using both *Catboy* and *Hunter*, Eric Walter's complimentary novel which tells the Catboy story from the cat's perspective, is included in this lesson. The assignment is designed so that students develop empathy for cats by writing from a cat's perspective.

After all students have read *Catboy*, ask them to reread chapter 1 and then have one student read the first chapter of *Hunter* aloud. After some class discussion of how the author tells the same story from a different point of view, give students the writing assignment worksheet, page 7 and ask them to choose a different chapter of *Catboy* to rewrite from *Hunter's* perspective. Students can then share their writing with the group chapter by chapter (not all chapters may be represented).

5. Extension Activities: Three optional activities are outlined on page 6. These activities are designed to enhance the students' understanding and comprehension of the novel and the issues around community cats.

The BC SPCA also has three other lessons that use cat welfare issues to teach learning objectives for Social Studies, Science and Math. They can be downloaded **at spca.bc.ca/teacher**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON PET OVERPOPULATION

Feral or community cats are the subject of the novel *Catboy*. In the novel, the main character's concern for the cats in the junkyard results in the trap and release of most of those cats. The message in the book is good overall but some details, outlined above should be brought into the discussion about feral and community cats. The Highlighted Excerpts section, on page 4 of this lesson, addresses some of the misinformation and welfare issues not mentioned in the novel.

Cats are the number one companion animal in Canada with over one quarter of all households having one or more cats. Despite this, the vast numbers of homeless, feral and unwanted cats represents one of the greatest animal welfare challenges facing communities and humane organizations.

While well-intentioned, simply feeding a homeless cat population without ensuring one hundred percent spay/neuter provides the nutritional resources that result in increased reproduction and larger litters for the remaining intact animals. This subjects offspring to further suffering and continuance of the reproductive cycle.

Good management of a colony includes an effective trap, neuter, vaccinate, identification and release of adult ferals. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring good welfare for the adult feral cats, rehabilitating and rehoming abandoned cats, and the socialization and adoption of feral kittens. A wildlife mitigation strategy should be part of a well-managed cat colony protocol. Management of colonies should include daily monitoring and detailed record keeping.

The feral or community cat situation is significant in every city and town. These cats are sometimes loosely owned by caring individuals who feed them regularly but often no one takes responsibility for the health care and neutering of the animal.

Community cats are a result of abandoned, unneutered cats and kittens. Community cats that have regular contact with humans and kittens younger than 12 weeks can often be rehomed. But kittens that are born outdoors and have little to no contact with humans before they are four months old become feral and are usually not adoptable as pets. All of these cats should be neutered in order to end the continual breeding and cat colonies.

BC SPCA Definitions:

Community cats: Umbrella term for any unowned or loosely owned (fed by a person but not considered theirs) cats. Can be feral or abandoned.

Homeless abandoned cat: a cat who was once in the care of guardian but is now living as an ownerless cat.

Feral cat: an ownerless cat born out of captivity, without human socialization.

Highlighted Excerpts

Catboy provides some basic understanding of cat colonies and feral cats and the issues they face living outdoors on their own. However, there are some important issues that are either not addressed, wrongly represented or not clearly defined in the book. Below are some excerpts that need clarification or correction.

Chapter 3, page 22:

Mr. Singh says, “Nobody ever owns a cat. Ever. He (Blinky) may have lived with you, but you did not own him. You can own a dog, but not a cat.”

Though cats have not been domesticated for as long as dogs and are not bred in the same capacity and for the same reasons as dogs, cats can be great pets and live happily indoors with their guardians. Cats can be clicker trained, kept indoors and depend on their guardians for survival. The reasons society views cats differently is due to the habits and expectations many guardians have when adopting a cat.

Chapter 10, page 62:

He dug into his bag and removed a piece of bread. He ripped it into small piece and tossed it at the cats. I quickly divided my sandwich and did the same. Page 70 : It had bones and French fries and buns. “For your cat friends.”

Though this is well intended, feeding cats food like bread, bones and French fries, is not good because it doesn't meet their nutritional needs. Bones especially are not a good idea because they can splinter and cause internal health issues if digested. Feeding cats a nutritionally balanced commercial cat food is the best option.

Chapter 10 page 63:

Mr. Singh says, “These cats are not pets. They are too wild. When they (kittens) are very little, they need to be with their mother to survive. When they are older, they are already too wild. They can never be pets. Never.”

This is not true. If socialized before the age of 11 weeks kittens can fairly easily become pets. Even some “feral” cats can with time and patience become pets. Many cats the people consider feral are actually abandoned pets and if given the chance can be reintroduced into homes as pets. There are different degrees of feralness in cat colonies. It depends on their history of positive or negative interactions with humans.

Chapter 17, pages 115:

I took a deep breath and charged at the dogs, swinging the pole, clanging it against the hubcap and screaming at the top of my lungs!

Charging dogs and screaming would normally result in getting a dog more excited and a dog would likely lunge and bite. Taylor put himself at risk in this situation.

Chapter 28, page 179:

Dr. Reynolds explains to Taylor that the trapped cats will get examinations, vaccines, food, water and if needed a tranquilizer.

This should have gone one step further to include spay/neutering of the cats. Earlier in the book, Doris from the Feral Cat Association mentions that cats multiply quickly, which is true. A Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR) program is the best way to control and reduce cat colonies in communities. It should also be mentioned that normally when trapping cats it is not a good idea to release them into a different area but rather return them to their established territory. In this case though, because of the construction, the Leslie Spit is probably a good option because it could hold hundreds of feral cats. We can only assume they would only relocate to this area if they were confident the cats would establish themselves there.

Chapter 28, page 187:

I ignored Simon and sat down on the pavement so Rocky and I were practically eye to eye.

Humans should never get close or interact with wildlife.

Extension Activities

Anthropomorphizing

Taylor's interpretations of the interactions between the cats and Rocky the raccoon are anthropomorphized. Though anthropomorphizing can be used as a literary tool it is important to know what behaviours are interpreted this way versus real cat behaviours.

Have student find three examples where Taylor gives the cats human qualities or characteristics. Ask them to explain why they do or don't think that cats have these characteristics.

Animals are often anthropomorphized in movies and literature. Have students write down three examples of cats that are anthropomorphized in movies and literature. Ask them if this effects people's attitude towards animals.

Personal Connections

Catboy was not only about one boy's connection with cats; many of the characters and situations may be similar to that of your students. Ask students to find an example in the book where they feel some connection and ask them to write a journal entry about their own experience or what they had in common with a certain character.

Thinking critically about the issues

Ask students to reflect on the questions below and then as a class share their answers.

- How can you tell if a cat outdoors is owned, abandoned or feral?
- Do cats who live in colonies like Hunter's contribute to the pet overpopulation problem?
- How do cat colonies affect the community both positively and negatively?
- What more could have been done to help the cats who were trapped before they were released?
- Compare the life of a feral cat with that of a companion/owned cat. Include in your comparison food, water, health, shelter and hazards.
- Compare the life of an indoor companion cat and a companion cat who is allowed outdoors. What are the pros and cons for each?

Writing assignment

Reread chapter 1 of *Catboy* and then read chapter one of *Hunter*.

Rewrite one of the chapters (except chapter 1) of *Catboy* from a cat's perspective. Then read that chapter in *Hunter* by the same author and compare his version to yours.

Literature Circles

Literature Circle Roles

Discussion Director: Come up with at least five questions for discussion that will make the group think rather than just give a one or two word answer.

Example questions:

- Do you agree with.....
- Why do you think
- Describe.....
- What is another way that.....
- How is the (event, situation) similar to
- How is the character influence by his/her relationship to
- What do you think will happen.....
- Why do you think the author.....

Summarizer: In your own words briefly recount the important events that happened in the chapter.

Vocabulary enricher: Find at least five words that you may not know in the story and define them based on the context of the story. They could be words you know but that are used in an interesting way in the chapter. Include the page number of the word and the reason you chose it.

Connector: Connect what happens in the story to real life (people, places or events). Decide if the events are realistic and if this did or could happen to you or someone you know. You will need to write about why certain happenings/events could or could not happen and give supporting evidence. You can also compare events in the story to other stories you've read that are similar.

***Character Analyzer:** Write about the characters. What are they like and what makes you think that? Compare them with people you know.

***Illustrator:** Illustrate a specific scene in the reading selection. Be creative. Draw a comic strip, create a poster or make a diorama of a scene from the chapter.

***Predictor:** Predict what will happen next. What will a character will do, what event will happen or what will take place next? When you are making predictions, you will need to predict based on clues from the text and your own feelings about why you think it will happen next.

***Passage Performer:** Act out a scene from the chapter.

* optional roles

Chapter 1 Example

Discussion Director:

How does Taylor's new school seem different from his old school?
How does Taylor feel about his move to Toronto?
Who do you think threw the brick at the cats?
Why do you think Simon thinks cats are dirty?
Why does Taylor feel uncomfortable taking a shortcut home through the junkyard?
How has Taylor's life changed since he moved to Toronto?

Connector:

All cities have colonies of abandoned or feral cats. Cats who are born outdoors or who have been abandoned find places to live where they won't have much interaction with humans.

There are people who like cats and those who don't. The actions of the bullies in the story are real. People abuse and hurt animals even though it is against the law.

Students in Taylor's class speak many different languages. Some were born in Canada but can still speak the language of their family's culture. For some of the students English is their second language. This is just like many students in BC schools.

Vocabulary Enricher:

undercarriage (pg 1) - the underside frame of the car
diversity (pg 3) - different cultures, traditions, ideas
precariously (pg 7) - not stable
ravine (pg 10) - the embankment around a stream or other flowing water
lair (pg 11) - a place where wild animals go to rest or sleep.

Summarizer:

Taylor is adjusting to his new life and school. He moved to Toronto with his mom. They used to live in a small town with his grandparents so the big city is an adjustment for Taylor. His new school has students that speak 15 different languages at home. Taylor and Simon, his friend of two weeks, take a shortcut home after school through the hole in a fence of a junkyard. Taylor is not comfortable going through the junkyard but when Simon tells Taylor that there are dozens of cats in the junkyard this piqued his interest because Taylor likes cats and misses his cat Blinky who had to be put down a year ago. Simon thinks cats are dirty. The boys sit and watch the cats but are startled when a brick flies through the air toward the cats.

Character Analyzer:

Taylor is a very thoughtful boy. He wants to stay out of trouble and tries to make the best of his new move. He tries to help out his mom by getting supper started and cleaning up.

Simon is Korean. He gets good grades in school but still does extra work at home because his parents expect him to always do better.

Taylor is like Adam Goldberg on *The Goldbergs* because he is thoughtful, kind and a good son.

Illustrator:

Draw a picture of cars in the junkyard - some flattened, some up on bricks. Include the fence around the yard with the one part that has a hole in it. Add some cats roaming around and particularly the white cat with black feet.

Predictor:

Taylor and Simon will peek around the cars to see where the brick came from and try to run away to avoid being hit. They will be run out of the junkyard. They will watch through the fence to see who threw the brick. They will come up with a plan for a way to protect the cats from being hurt by whoever is throwing the bricks.

Passage Performer:

Act out the boys sneaking into the junkyard, hanging out by the car watching the cats and then seeing the brick fly through the air near them.

Discussion Director

Come up with at least five questions for discussion that will make the group think rather than just give a one or two word answer. Example questions:

Do you agree with.....

Why do you think

Describe.....

What is another way that.....

How is the (event, situation) similar to

How is the character influence by his/her relationship to

What do you think will happen.....

Why do you think the author.....

Summarizer

In your own words briefly recount the important events that happened in the chapter.

Vocabulary Enricher

Find at least five words that you may not know in the story and define them based on the context of the story. They could be words you know but that are used in an interesting way in the chapter. Include the page number of the word and the reason you chose it.

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Write about the characters. What are they like and what makes you think that? Compare them with people you know.

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Illustrate a specific scene in the reading selection. Be creative. Draw a comic strip, create a poster or make a diorama of a scene from the chapter.

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Predict what will happen next. What will a character will do, what event will happen or what will take place next? When you are making predictions, you will need to predict based on clues from the text and your own feelings about why you think it will happen next.

Passage Performer

Choose a scene from the chapter and act it out.



THE BRITISH COLUMBIA SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS POSITION STATEMENTS CAT WELFARE

WELFARE OF CATS

The BC SPCA is dedicated to promoting the health and welfare of cats, and celebrating the close bond and mutual relationship between people and their companion cats. Through education and advocacy the BC SPCA works to raise the profile and intrinsic worth of cats to encourage society to take responsibility for cats in their communities.

Guardians are expected to provide their cats with a good quality of life based on the Five Freedoms. In addition, guardians are expected to contribute to the reduction of cat overpopulation through early spay/neuter, ensuring their pets are permanently identified should they become lost or stolen and preventing cats from preying on wildlife.

COMPANION CAT HOUSING

Provisions for good welfare vary from cat to cat depending on their unique personality, age and health requirements. The BC SPCA recommends housing that balances the welfare and safety needs of cats with protection of wildlife. Most cats can experience good welfare indoors with environmental and social enrichment. For cats with a strong drive for outdoor access, a secure enclosure and/or walks with a harness and leash can provide additional enrichment and protection from health and safety risks such as predation.

HOMELESS AND ABANDONED CATS

The abandonment of cats is a criminal offense under the Criminal Code of Canada and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act. The BC SPCA supports preventing abandonment through public education.

Cats left to fend for themselves suffer poor welfare and, if unneutered, contribute to pet overpopulation. When well-intentioned citizens intervene to provide some aspects of care to a homeless cat, the BC SPCA advises individuals take steps to determine ownership of the cat and return the cat to the guardian. If individuals choose to care for a truly abandoned cat they should take steps to ensure the cat receives good welfare as per the Five Freedoms.

CAT COLONIES

The BC SPCA recognizes that colonies of cats exist in many regions of B.C. Cats (particularly females) will live in groups (colonies) where resources are available and colonies may be comprised of both homeless abandoned and feral cats. The BC SPCA supports the concept of well managed colonies where the principle goal is ending homeless and feral cat populations.

Good management of a colony includes an effective trap, neuter, vaccinate, identification and release of adult ferals. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring good welfare for the adult feral cats, rehabilitating and rehoming abandoned cats, and the socialization and adoption of feral kittens. A wildlife mitigation strategy should be part of a well-managed cat colony protocol. Management of colonies should include daily monitoring and detailed record keeping.

BACKGROUND

Cats are the number one companion animal in Canada with over one quarter of all households having one or more cats. Despite this, the vast numbers of homeless, feral and unwanted cats represents one of the greatest animal welfare challenges facing communities and humane organizations.

While well-intentioned, simply feeding a homeless cat population without ensuring one hundred percent spay/neuter provides the nutritional resources that result in increased reproduction and larger litters for the remaining intact animals. This subjects offspring to further suffering and continuance of the reproductive cycle.

DEFINITIONS

Homeless abandoned cat: a cat who was once in the care of guardian but is now living as an ownerless cat.

Feral cat: an ownerless cat born out of captivity, without human socialization.

Five Freedoms: A concept first developed in 1965 by The Brambell Committee, formed by the UK government to examine the conditions on commercial farms. Now internationally recognized, the Five Freedoms are considered applicable to all animals.

The BC SPCA's Five Freedoms (adapted from the original list) are:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst;
2. Freedom from pain, injury and disease;
3. Freedom from distress;
4. Freedom from discomfort;
5. Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being.