

Wanda Gág's Millions of Cats:

A Perfect Picture Book

by

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Wanda Gág was born in 1893 in New Ulm, Minnesota to Bohemian parents who considered artistic expression part of everyday life. She spoke only German until she started school and as a child heard the Grimm tales in their traditional peasant style. This nurtured her natural storytelling ability which was later reflected in her books for children. She was educated as an artist first in Minneapolis-St. Paul and later in New York and was finally recognized for her artistic talent when the Weyhe Gallery in New York gave her a one-person exhibit. There her work was noticed by Miss Evans, an editor for Coward-McCann. According to Elizabeth Montgomery, when Gág showed Miss Evans the manuscript of *Millions of Cats*, she immediately loved it (146). The book was published in 1928 and won a Newbery Honor Award in 1929. It was the first true picture by an American artist and as such is a landmark in the field of American picture books. The following analysis examines text illustrations, and the total design of *Millions of Cats*, a perfect picture book.

The text of *Millions of Cats* can stand by itself. Wanda Gág made up the story for children and each time she told it she improved it a little. Finally when she was satisfied, she wrote it down (Montgomery 145). It is a simple fantasy that has a folktale quality; it sounds like a story that has been handed down through the generations. There are a number of elements of the story that contribute to the folktale quality, including its timelessness—it begins as many tales with “once upon a time . . .” Its characters are not given names but are simply referred to as a very old man and a very old woman. Although the setting is detailed in the illustrations, the tale could take place almost anywhere. In summary, it’s anybody, any place, any time. The plot is very simple. The very old man and woman are lonely; the man sets off on his quest to find his wife her desired “sweet little fluffy cat.” He journeys far to a hill “quite covered with cats.” He faces the problem of which cat to bring to his wife and finally chooses all of them. The “hundreds and thousands and millions and billions and trillions of cats” follow him on the journey home. Two incidents on the way home make him realize that perhaps he has made a mistake in choosing so many—the cats drink a pond dry and eat the grass of an entire hillside! His wife scolds him when she sees all the cats because she is the practical one who knows that they can never feed so

many. She suggests that they let the cats decide which one they should keep. The very old man asks the cats "Which one of you is the prettiest?" and that leads to a vicious quarrel in which they finally eat each other up. Their pride is their undoing. All that is left is one frightened kitten who tells the couple he is homely and thus didn't answer the question about who was the prettiest. The kitten is brushed and fed and loved and they all live happily thereafter. Children find a security in the theme of the modest and ugly one becoming a winner and finding a good home.

The power of the text is not only in the plot structure itself but also in the individual words and their rhythm which had been carefully tested with children. The verbs used to depict the old man's journey include "sets out, climbs, trudges, and walks." When the cats quarrel among themselves they "bite, scratch, claw, and make noise." But it is the refrain of the story that carries the most power—

Cats here, cats there,
Cats and kittens everywhere,
Hundreds of cats,
Thousands of cats,
Millions and billions and trillions of cats.

After hearing the verse a couple times, children will chime in and all readers go away from the book literally humming the tune. The entire refrain or a part of it occurs at important places in the plot: when the old man first discovers the hill of cats, when he journeys home with them, when they drink the pond dry, when they eat the grass, when he arrives home, when the cats quarrel, when the couple discovers the little humble kitten, and as the last sentence in the book when they are all content at home.

Like the text, the pictures too tell the story and could stand on their own. However, when the two are woven together, we have a perfect example of a picture book. The rectangular format of the book is especially effective in depicting the all important journey. Also, the hand lettering done by Gág's younger brother, fits the drawings and adds to the book's simple qualities. The text adds balance to the pages as it flows around the illustrations. The first illustration is on the cover of the book where the black, yellow, and orange colors depict the very old man journeying back home with his millions of cats. We immediately know that it is a story of innocence—we see the blossoming flowers and trees covered with leaves as examples of literary imagery. As defined by Glenna Davis Sloane, this story is a comedy, a "hopeful story of the renewal of the human spirit" (20). The imagery introduced on the cover is repeated throughout the book, although the illustration is not repeated in the book itself. The endsheets are yellow and orange and show a

design created by numerous pictures of a single cat, pairs of cats, and bowls of milk, separated by foliage. The title page shows a healthy cat secure under a tree and surrounded by flowers. Already the reader knows that out of these millions of cats somehow one will be selected. The tree forms an umbrella shape over the cat and symbolizes security. This symbolism is repeated at the end of the book. When the scruffy cat is alive after the quarrel but doesn't know whether he will be given a home, he sits on top and outside the security of the umbrella-shape. The spread where he is growing to health is an upside down umbrella. The scene at the end depicts the very old man, woman, and cat in the umbrella shaped secure room of the house, and the very last illustration shows the cat sleeping in security under an umbrella of leaves.

The black and white pen and ink drawings fit the simple story and show the sturdy peasant qualities of the very old man and the very old woman. On the first page of the book, they stand outside of their home, even outside of the fence and give the reader the feeling that they are in search of something. The very old man is the more content because he is smoking his pipe, which he doesn't do again until they discover the homely cat at the end, and then again when they are all content inside the home. The illustrations of the couple outside of the house at the beginning and inside and content at the end bring the reader full circle. At the beginning the very old woman is the discontent one—she is further removed from the secure home and has her hands on her hips. Double page spreads are used to signify the importance of the journey in the book—one spread is used to show the journey to the hill of cats and four to show the journey home. The journey back must have seemed longer to the very old man with all those cats surrounding and following him! The only other double page spread in the book is the one of the modest kitten shown alone while lapping up the dishes of milk and getting stronger and healthier in the process. This spread and the journey ones show a real sense of movement and give the book balance. Sometimes the old man is depicted twice in the same double page spread to show the flow of action as he progresses on his journey home. The clouds on all double page spreads of the journey help to carry the reader's eyes across the page. Other pages are perfectly balanced with text and illustrations that lead the reader's eyes onto, through and off the page. One such spread is when the old man is collecting the different cats to take home. The illustrations are formed by a v-shape at the bottom and are almost perfect mirror images of one another. Three pages are given extra importance by having the words by themselves on the opposite page. They are when the old man discovers the hillside of cats, when he decides to choose all of them, and when all are snug at home at the end. These represent the object of the quest, the decision, and the

conclusion. An interesting detail to note about the pictures is that Wanda Gág has signed most of them. Children enjoy searching for her signature.

After examining the book, one knows that Wanda Gág understood cats. Like Beatrix Potter, she liked to use animals as models and in fact did use two kittens for these illustrations. The reader can virtually see millions of cats in her illustrations, yet feels that each cat is a bit different. The image of the quarreling cats is especially powerful. When the cats fight, one feels the anxiety of the old man and woman. They run up toward their secure home and peep out the window. Their anxiety is shown by their posture, and by the way he holds her arm and clutches the curtain.

The hero of the tale, the old man, is shown at his biggest when he decides to choose all the cats to bring home to his wife. He has made a decision that he feels will make his wife the happiest. He is depicted the smallest when the couple run to the safety of their home during the cats' fight. Here he feels the most helpless and defeated. He is of average size when they are secure in the home with their cat at the end. There are many symbols of security in this illustration the wedding pictures in the background, the warm light, the food, the rocking chairs, her knitting and the cat playing with the ball of yarn, his relaxed posture with his feet on the stool, and his smoking the pipe.

Millions of Cats shows the author to be a master artist and storyteller. Wanda Gág stated:

I aim to make the illustrations for children's books as much a work of art as anything I would send to an art exhibition. I strive to make them completely accurate in relation to the text. I try to make them warmly human, imaginative, or humorous . . . (*Yesterday's Authors* 1:142).

This devotion to her art is exemplified in this classic which will continue to be enjoyed as a timeless tale by generations of children everywhere.

Works Cited

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