

“The Fire Cat”: A Timeless Coming-of-Age Story by Esther Averill

A coming-of-age story... for cats? In 1960, Newfield Publications released Esther Averill's new easy reader for children, “The Fire Cat.” This wasn't Averill's first book about cats. In fact, *The Cat Club* series, to which “The Fire Cat” is book number 11 out of 13, became so popular during its time that the series was published into 6 different languages. While all the books were a success, what makes “The Fire Cat” so endearing? What makes it so timeless and poignant to readers even over half a century since its first publication?

Throughout the short 63 pages of the story, the main character, Pickles, a yellow cat with black spots and very big paws, undergoes a subtle, yet magnificent transformation, but it is one that though deep and thought provoking, is simple enough for small children to understand. As with most coming-of-age stories, Pickles begins in low or naive circumstances, endures hardships, embraces opportunity and hard work, and eventually matures into a more well-adjusted, more knowledgeable, and wiser character. Were the protagonist a young child, one might say the story followed the child through complex relationships, those supportive, demeaning, authoritarian, and even highlighted the self-awareness of the child itself. But “The Fire Cat” is a very simple book about a stray cat -- with simple words, simple sentence structure, and even very simple illustrations. This book is so popular because children easily pick up on Pickles's transformation, but adults and deeper thinkers readily see the depth of understanding into the working of human nature and personal relationships. In the coming-of-age story, “The Fire Cat,” Averill shows Pickles's progression towards maturity through his relationship and understanding of the other cats around him, his relationship and understanding of the people around him, and his relationship and understanding of himself.

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Nowadays, it is uncommon to see such depth of understanding into human relationships and human nature in a very simple children's book - and perhaps even less so with those books that aren't even centered around humans! But through the careful analysis of Pickles and his relationships with those around him - feline and human alike - and by analyzing Pickles's own understanding of himself, even small children can see how a cat - or a young boy or girl - can learn, grow, change, and improve. All children have “big paws,” meaning all children have great potential and big dreams. But not all children have the emotional or intellectual ability to understand how desires and dreaming can lead to change and success. Pickles shows children how to do this.

While this analysis has focused on Pickles and his transformation, adults reading Averill's story will hopefully also see the huge impact that patient and nurturing adults can have on those so-called “stray cats” who seem to constantly be getting into trouble and hurting others. Pickles didn't transform on his own, but he was shadowed by watchful adults who simultaneously gave him care as well as space and freedom and provided opportunity to use those “big paw” in positive ways. Though Averill's story was published over 60 years ago, this message still rings true and gives hope to every parent, mentor, and teacher of the little “stray cats” under their stewardship. Normal development of children requires similar coming-of-age experiences and similar adults who show faith in the children they love. And joyfully, those children who successfully overcome their challenges and become productive, healthy, and happy adults, can say like Pickles to Mrs. Goodkind, “this is only a beginning.”