

KS3 Bookclub

Thomasina: The Cat Who Thought She Was A God, Paul Gallico
Varjak Paw, S F Said

Thomasina

The basics...

- **Genre (type of book)?** Children's fiction, love story
- **Written in which person?** Third and First person - 3rd: the all-knowing narrator, 1st: the cat either as Thomasina or as Bast-Ra
- **Tense?** Past, a story that has already happened.
- **The heroes/protagonists?**
- **The villains/antagonists?**

Looking into it in a bit more depth...

- **What are the main events that happen in the story?**
- **Mary-Raudh:** Raud is Gaelic for red. **Why do you think she was given that name?** Red is seen as a colour of passion, fire, blood (necessary for life itself), war, danger, strength, anger, determination, power, love. Red-heads are often attributed with the characteristics of being overly-passionate, stubborn, spirited, temperamental, weird, of Celtic origin, uncontrolled, other-worldly, an object of desire in man's eyes, and as having a connection with the devil and/or witchcraft,
- **What part do storms play in the story?**
 - when Mary first sees the cat after she is dead and races out into the storm
 - the storm that brings the cat back to Mary-Raudh
- **Why do you think they were storms, and not just normal rain?**

Big events that change the course of the story. They are violent, brutal and physically change the state of things. Can also be cleansing, wiping away the old to start the world afresh. A rebirth. Fate (God) takes the characters up in its wind and does with them as it will (however painful in the short-term), the storm becomes the physical manifestation of this. Storms are also seen as being other-worldly, an un-Godly destructive power, and often associated with witchcraft, e.g. the Weird Sisters in Macbeth.
- **This is a story about being reborn/coming back. Who was reborn/came back, when and how?**

Thomasina - from Thomasina to Bast-Ra
from Bast-Ra to Thomasina
Mad Lori/Lori - we learn to see her in a whole new light
Mary-Raudh - from the brink of death and back
Andrew MacDhui - a part of him died with his wife and he learns to love again
M-R says to the doctor that her father is 'dead', after he chloroformed the cat, and she stops talking to him. She talks to him again when the cat comes back.
- **What brings them back/saves them?** Love, the memory of love (Mrs McKenzie's lavender bags) and the power to risk the suffering all again in the name of love.

- Throughout most of this book it walks a very fine line between being Christian literature and literature bringing to life the power of Ancient Gods and witchcraft (Mad Lori came by her knowledge of herbal medicine from “the little people” - p226). **Why don't you normally see these two positions taken in the same book?**
- **Which way do you think it falls in the end? Which God wins out?**
- **How does this book define the roles of a man and a woman?** e.g. Dr Strathsay: “love of the woman” being different to love of a man - p233
- Thomasina had a huge number of names - thomas/thomasina/Bast-Ra/Lady of the East/Lady of Sept/Sekmehy-Bast-Ra, the tearer and render, destroyer of apophis, the evil serpent at the foot of the celestial tree (p137)/Talitha (p143) - means ‘little girl’ from the Biblical story of Jesus saying to a dead child, ‘little girl, arise’ - **why do you think that was? How do they mirror the cats journey throughout the book?**
- **What did Lori's names all signify?** Mad Lori/ daft lori/ Lori
- **What did Andrew MacDhui's names all signify?** Mr MacDhui/ Veterinary MacDhui/ Andrew/Daddy(p340)
- God featured in a number of forms, but differently to different characters. **What does the word ‘god’ mean when applied to these different forms?** - cat “Bast-Ra”, MacDhui “the big, wonderful, smelly man was god again” p340, Peddie's god, Lori's god

Varjak Paw

The basics...

- **Genre (type of book)?** Fantasy, Adventure, coming of age
- **Written in which person?** third person - the all-knowing narrator.
- **Tense?** Past, a story that has already happened.
- **The heroes/protagonists?**
- **The villains/antagonists?**

Looking into it in a bit more depth...

- **How did storms play a key role in this book?** They took Varjak to Holly's shed
They were there again as he went back home
Apart from being a pivotal part in the plot, they can also be used as a physical representation of the feeling a key character is carrying. We call this **pathetic fallacy**. It is attributing human feelings and responses to inanimate things or animals, such as weather.
- **How did the roles of status show up in this book?**
- **Can it be seen in our own social structure?** - upper class/lower (working) class.
- **Why does class matter so much in this book?**
- God makes an appearance in this book too. **What is his name, his characteristics, his attributes?**
- **Who sees him? Who believes in him? How does everyone feel about him?**
- **How does Varjak communicate with him?**
- **What difference does this cat God make to the story?**
- **What similarities and differences are there to any real life religions' thinking of God?**
- **Who/what did the Toy-maker guy signify/represent?**

Compare and contrast...

There are a number of shared themes between the books, how do they relate to each other?

• Getting to know god

- How do the characters in each book do it?
 - How are they similar and how are they different?
 - Which have the biggest impact
 - Do the god's empower or control?
 - Are they intervening gods, or are they stand-on-the-side-and-offer-moral-support gods?
 - What do the gods look like?
 - Which is the best cat god?
- Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) god mixed with ancient gods - ancestors, Egyptian, pagan (Mother Earth). Things change in the stories because of a bending of nature - miracles, messing with physics, Neither have an all powerful god, but a god that works with the 'system' relying on individuals to make the 'right' choice.

• Understanding one's self and one's failings

- Both books are journeys of discovery, getting to know yourself and overcoming your own weaknesses. What weaknesses did all the characters have?
- Which were the most destructive weaknesses?
- Which were the hardest to overcome?
- Did they come out better characters for their journeys, or just different?
- Who was the most successful in becoming the better person under their own steam, and who needed the help of others?

• Over-coming pride to learn a new way of being

- Who had the hardest journey overcoming their pride?
- How did their pride manifest?
- Pride is often attributed to cats. Were the cats in these stories proud because they were cats, or did the author chose cats because the characters were proud?

• Friendship

- How did the protagonists' stories develop because of friendships?
- What role did friends take in the story?
- Who were the best friends?

• Love

- How did love show itself in both of these books?
- There is a fine line between love and resentment in both books, in which relationships could this be seen most clearly? How does this relate to your own personal experience of family?

• Torn loyalties

- Who were they torn between?
- How did the characters resolve this divide in their loyalties?

- **Animal cruelty**

- What was the importance of the cruelty to animals?
- What did it say about the characters involved?
- Was the cruel inflicted by the antagonists worse than the cruelty inflicted by M-R's and VPs families?
- How about the Old lady in the house and the Priest and his pug - isn't spoiling an animal as harmful as deliberately hurting one?

General:

- Can you die of a broken heart?
- What is the difference between miracles and magic?
- Can you believe things that you have not experienced yourself?
- Can you understand things you haven't experienced yourself?

Thought Experiment

We share the same words for colours, but who is to say we all see the same thing? What if my yellow was actually more like your orange, or my blue was your green...?

The Himba tribe in Namibia have no word for blue, as a result they do not see it, but instead view the world in shades of green. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-blue-and-how-do-we-see-color-2015-2?r=US&IR=T>)

Science can pretty much tell what we all see, but unless we have our eyes examined, you might not know if you were colour blind. Some people can go a very, very long time until they discover that they don't see colour, or that they cannot tell the difference between red and green.

But even if you do know that you can't see a colour, such as red or green, can anyone accurately explain that colour to you so that you can understand what it would look like without ever actually seeing it?

- Try and explain a colour to a theoretical someone who is completely colour blind.

This tells us that there is a world of difference between academically knowing something versus having actual experience of that thing.

This thought experiment teaches us that there will always be more to how we see reality, including consciousness (awareness of one's surroundings) itself, than objective observation. It essentially shows us that we don't know what we don't know.

The thought experiment also gives us hope for the future; if we could add to our senses and find ways to expand conscious awareness, we could open up entirely new areas of our understanding and exploration of our world and reality.

Activity

The Beetle in the Box

This is based on some thinking done by the British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (born in Austria).

- You need a group of people.
- Each person has a piece of paper on which they draw a rectangle (the box).
- Then they draw a beetle in that box without anyone else seeing what that beetle looks like. It can be how ever they want it to be. It is their beetle so they can do it however they fancy.
- Pick one person.
- Now everyone else gets another piece of paper and draws a rectangle in it, but instead of drawing their own beetle inside the 'box', they draw the beetle that the person who was picked describes.
- The person who describes their beetle is not allowed to look at everyone else's picture as they draw. They just describe their own beetle as best as they can.

According to Wittgenstein, we all know the beetle in our own box, but we have no idea of what anyone else is seeing in their box, so ultimately all we can do is talk about our own beetle, not beetles in general. Over time, people will talk about what is in their boxes, but the word "beetle" simply ends up meaning "that thing that is in a person's box."

This experiment points out that the beetle is like our minds - we can't know exactly what it is like in another person's mind, how it feels to be them, what they are experiencing, or the uniqueness of their perspective.