

The Blue Cat of Castle Town

The Blue Cat of Castle Town is a [children's novel](#) by [Catherine Coblentz](#), illustrated by Janice Holland. It tells the story of the kitten born under a blue moon whose destiny was to bring the song of the river, with its message of beauty, peace and contentment, to the inhabitants of Castle Town.^[1]

The book, illustrated by Janice Holland, was first published in 1949 and was a [Newbery Honor](#)^[2] recipient in 1950. It was based on Coblentz's visit to [Castleton, Vt.](#), in 1946, with her husband, who was interested in seeing a wind turbine being used to generate electricity there. Librarian Hulda Cole told her of a local girl who had made an embroidered carpet^[3] that hung in the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). Among its motifs, inspired by the natural world of its creator, was a blue cat. Coblentz, a Vermont native, drew on real people from the town's history to tell the story of the blue cat's adventures.

Plot Summary

In the early 1830s, in a small town in Vermont, a blue kitten is born. Every kitten must find a hearth, but a blue kitten has the hardest time of all, for he must learn the river's song and then teach it to the keeper of that hearth. His mother is troubled, but notices he has three black hairs on his tail and hopes she can help him evade this quest. She teaches him not to listen to the river, but eventually he cannot help but hear the river talking to him. Irritated, his mother sends him off to learn the river's song and seek his fortune.

The river teaches him the history of the town and gives him much useful advice, only some of which he remembers. He first meets a barn cat, whom he ignores, and a girl who slams the door in his face. He reaches the village green, where he admires his own reflection in a well and falls in, only to be rescued by the pewterer Ebenezer Southmayd. Southmayd is old and has given up making his most beautiful work to turn out cheap, shiny trade items. Singing the river's song, the kitten inspires Ebenezer to make one beautiful, perfect teapot according to the old formula. Alas, the pewterer drops dead when it is finished, and the blue kitten must find a new hearth.

Next he meets a weaver, John Gilroy, who is doing business with two women. They have brought him linen to be woven, from flax they grew and bleached and spun themselves, and though he is contracted to make salt-and-pepper cloth for Arunah Hyde of the Mansion House, he accepts the job, inspired in part by the river's song. The kitten thinks Gilroy will learn his song, but Hyde shows up, angry and in a hurry, and Gilroy returns to the more profitable work and turns the kitten outside. As his stagecoach is tearing off in a hurry, Hyde scoops up the kitten and carries him off to the Mansion House.

There, Hyde is constantly shouting at people to hurry up, make more money, do things faster -- but he also plies the blue kitten with rich cream and delicious salmon, until he grows into a blue cat. Singing the river's song to Hyde, he finds that Hyde has his own song, a dark song of progress and industry and power -- and a plan to decorate the Mansion House's front window with a lovely stuffed blue cat. Fattened up on delicious food, the blue cat barely escapes. Hyde makes one last snatch for him and pulls the three black hairs out of his tail.

The last bowl of cream must have had some poison in it, for the blue cat falls ill and is rescued by the very barn cat he ignored on his first visit. She is a motherly soul and a good mouser, sharing her bowl of milk and her daily catch with him, even after the birth of two yellow kittens. The blue cat recovers physically over the course of the winter, but he has forgotten his song.

Come spring, he sets forth, promising to come back and repay the barn cat and the girl Zeruah, who seems sad and lonely when she brings the cats their milk. He finds the town possessed by Arunah's song, and he searches high and low for the one he has lost. Creeping into the church, he meets the carpenter Thomas Royal Dake, who has it in mind to build a truly beautiful pulpit, but has been told by the building committee to do it more cheaply. He brings the blue cat home to his wife Sally, and talks with her about the financial sacrifices they will have to make if he goes ahead with a more expensive pulpit. Dake, it turns out, knows the river's song, and the cat relearns it from him. Sally agrees that he should build the pulpit of which he dreams, even though it will be difficult for the young family.

The blue cat does not immediately resume his quest, but remains with Dake through the building of the pulpit in white pine and cherry. Then he returns to Zeruah Guernsey, the sad girl on the farm, and to his friend the barn cat, who is very proud of her kittens. Zeruah is lonely and sad, and believes she is ugly. She rebuffs the blue cat at first, then allows him into the house. She listens to the river's song, but makes no move to sing it for some time. Gradually, she begins thinking and talking to the cat. She visits the church and sees Dake's altar, and passes the shop where Southmayd's last teapot still sits in the window.

Finally she begins to put aside her sadness and begins work on an embroidered carpet. Into the carpet she puts flowers from the woods and from her dead mother's garden, her father's favorite white rooster, everything of her world. As she begins to create the carpet, she also tends her house and her garden, and sets a rug by the bare hearth for the blue cat. She embroiders the blue cat into the carpet, and he realizes what he must do to thank his friend the barn cat. One by one, he brings her kittens into the house for Zeruah to add to the carpet.

Zeruah's carpet becomes a legend in the town, and many people stop by to see it in progress. The blue cat sings to them, and gradually Arunah Hyde's song loses its power as the townspeople rediscover the importance of making things with their hands, creating "beauty and peace and content."

The River's Song

*"Sing your own song, said the river,
"Sing your own song.*

*"Out of yesterday song comes.
It goes into tomorrow,
Sing your own song.*

*"With your life fashion beauty,
This too is the song.
Riches will pass and power. Beauty remains.
Sing your own song."*

*""All that is worth doing, do well, said the river.
Sing your own song.
Certain and round be the measure,
Every line be graceful and true.
Time is the mold, time the weaver, the carver,
Time and the workman together,
Sing your own song.*

Sing well, said the river. Sing well."

References

1. [^ The Newbery & Caldecott Awards: a guide to the medal and honor books](#) by the Association for Library Service to Children, page 63
2. [^ "Newbery Medal and Honor Books, 1922-Present". American Library Association.](#) <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberyhonors/newberymedal.cfm>. Retrieved 2009-12-30.
3. [^ "Embroidered carpet, Zeruah H. Guernsey Caswell".](#) <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/10013955>.

See Carpet: <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/10013955>

Book Reviews:

**Reviews Written by
teapot ☒(Scottsdale, AZ USA)**

http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A24PWPB4TPLHLD/ref=cm_pdp_rev_more?ie=UTF8&sort_by=MostRecentReview#RGOVVSXAGJZEP

I read this book as a child and still love it at 60. The book speaks about what it means to be an authentic human being through a parable about a special kitten who must find his way in the world on his own and triumphs over loss, disappointment, and exploitation to find self-realization. "'Sing your own song,' said the River, 'sing well.'" It is never too late to sing your own song, if your heart will let you. How the cat learned to do this is worth learning at any age. Now this is how I interpret what goes on in the story in today's vocabulary, not how the author puts it, but my point is the book is just as relevant today as when originally written. The experiences of this cat will hit home with all too many people today, both children and adults. The book is beautifully written by Catherine Coblenz, a lady who by the way spearheaded the establishment of the Cleveland Park branch of the D.C. Library, where there are etched glass drawings from the book. If kids today would buy in to a book like this and Wordsworth's Happy Warrior, they would have a better chance of growing up whole.

http://www.amazon.com/review/RGOVVSXAGJZEP/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt#RGOVVSXAGJZEP

Teaching The River's Song by Gale Finlayson

Set in a kinder, gentler Vermont this quiet charmer by Coblentz permits readers to relax and savor the humble pleasures of a sleepy village through which a river meanders--a town where craftsmen take true pride in the creation of works of beauty. But then rich resident Arunah Hyde decides to make Castleton the center of the universe, with his fast coaches and dreams of even faster trains. Speed is all that matters as he insidiously weaves his Dark Spell--demanding faster work and shoddy standards, for he is obsessed with Time and cares naught for things of lasting beauty.

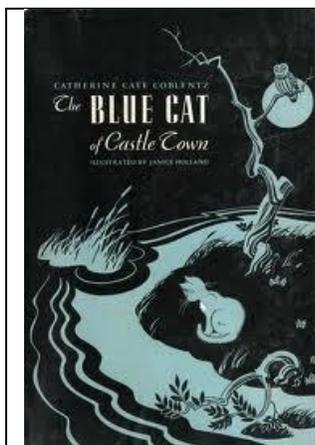
Inspired by a visit to a NY Art Museum the author was impressed by a tapestry which included a blue cat in one of the hand-woven squares. While accompanying her husband on an extended business trip to Castleton, she decided to research the local folk lore surrounding a blue cat, whose almost invisible trail included works of handcraft admired to this day. A church pulpit and a hand woven linen table cloth are among its treasures.

A blue kitten is born in a fragrant field by the river, and to his mother's dismay, and against her strict warning, begins to listen to its song--unable to resist; yes, destined to learn its song. No normal life will this kitten with only three black hairs on its tail live out, for he must teach the river's song to one mortal before he may find his home and hearth. Not an easy task when Arunah Hyde is spreading the dark spell throughout the town; besides, who will listen to the plaintive mewing of an orphan cat? Will the trusting Blue Cat be able to resist the clever trap set by Arunah--who has evil designs on him?

You too can seek and enjoy the Bright Enchantment of this storybook village, if you visit this charming town in September. Then the locals reenact the tale on a delightful Blue Cat Tour, by a uniformed guide, during which the story comes alive for readers and all cat lovers. This has remained one of my favorite childhood books for many decades and may secretly have whispered to me that I should move to Vermont some day.

<http://charlotteslibrary.blogspot.com/2012/06/bue-cat-of-castle-town-by-catherine.html> 6/9/12

The Blue Cat of Castle Town, by Catherine Cate Coblentz



A while back I made a list of fantasy cat books for kids, and an anonymous commenter enthusiastically recommended one I'd never heard of -- The Blue Cat of Castle Town, by Catherine Cate Coblentz (1949--a Newbery Honor book the following year). So I requested it from the library forthwith.

The story of the titular blue cat begins when he is just a little blue kitten, born under blue moon long ago in a meadow by a river in Vermont. His anxious mother knows that blue kittens can hear the song of the river, and follow that song to strange fates. But despite her efforts, the kitten hears. The song praises the power of the individual to create beauty--"all that is doing, do well"-- and the river sends blue kitten on a quest to Castle Town, to sing that song to the people there who might have ears to hear. There is one man in Castle Town, though, that the river warns blue kitten against--Arunah Hyde, whose own song is all about moving quickly through the world racking up more and more money and power...

And so the kitten sets off. He finds in Castle Town that the songs of its great artisans have been stifled by Arunah's distorted priorities, but with his purring, encourages a pewter smith, a weaver, and a carpenter to create beauty. Arunah almost gets a hold of him, but the kitten (now a cat) escapes. His hardest task of all, though, is to bring the river's song to a girl who thinks she's ugly and unloved and worthless, encouraging her to create one of the most beautiful works of art in the whole town...a beautiful embroidered carpet.

The Blue Cat of Castle Town is a magical fable, with a beautiful message (and lots of nice descriptions of artisans at work!). I imagine that if idealistic, self-consciously pious (from time to time) little me had picked up this book I would have loved it, and striven to live up to its moral.

Even now that I am Hardened and Cynical, I still can feel its pull...and I want to go out myself and create something of lovely wonderfulness...(well, actually right this minute, I want to go get my last potatoes planted, but gardens count somewhat, even though no one I know has ever looked at some potato plants and been hit over the head by their stunning beauty). That being said, as a grown-up, I felt that the Message trumped the story to such an extent that I don't think I'll be re-reading it, though it will most certainly linger vividly in my mind!

I will offer it to my nine year old, who is reading cat books at the moment. He will love the beginning cute little kitten part, but I am not entirely certain he will appreciate the fable aspect...

And she visited the Castleton church, and saw the famous pulpit (which I can't find a picture of, which I find hard to believe, and so I am now planning to go there myself (it's 3 hours and 49 minutes away) and take one....). I looked for a nice example of the pewter by the craftsman in the book--Ebenezer Southmayd--and (somewhat ironically, but not surprisingly) found that it is indeed lovey, and [really, really expensive!](#)

Here's the full text of the song of the river (page 16)

*"Sing your own song, said the river,
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Time and the workman together,
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Sing well, said the river. Sing well."*

The best part of the book, I think, is that the stories of these craftsmen are based on real people, who actually made the things described. The book was inspired by a trip the author took to Castleton, Vermont, where she heard of this rug, now in the collection of [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (the blue cat is down at the bottom):

