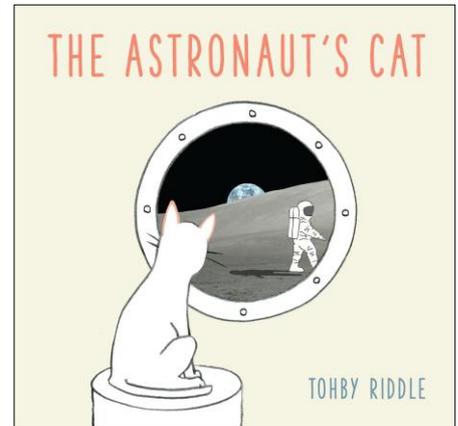


The Astronaut's Cat

By Tohby Riddle



April 2020 ISBN 9781760524944
 Hardback
 Recommended for 4-8-year-olds

Summary

The astronaut's cat is an inside cat – on the Moon! But she dreams about the strange outside world – and the mysterious blue ball that rises into the ink-black sky . . .

Tohby Riddle is known for his clever use of mixed media to create wonderfully thought-provoking and original ideas. *The Astronaut's Cat* is no exception. Here he mixes black and white NASA Moon photography with pared-down line drawings of the astronaut, her spaceship and her cat, to create an eerie and offbeat view of life on the Moon. And the book's contrasting colour schemes – both inside and outside the spaceship and later in the richly colour-soaked Earth – compliment this choice of media, as well as amplify the book's strong environmental themes.

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The Astronaut's Cat is a very endearing, quintessential Tohby Riddle masterpiece: equal parts off-beat humour and gentle pathos, it is whimsical, funny and surprising with a satisfying narrative that will appeal to a wide age-range.

**Interesting sidenote:* The typeface for this book is Futura Medium and the author only found out after he chose it that this was the font used on the plaque left on the moon by the astronauts of Apollo 11.

Use in the curriculum

The Astronaut's Cat can be used at early Primary level (Foundation & Year 1), as a simple story that needs visual decoding to understand, especially, the dream sequence of life on Earth. Years 2 & 3 can take on more of the decoding and interpretive work as 'as independent readers involve(ed with) sequences of events that span several pages and present unusual happenings within a framework of familiar experiences'.

- Younger students can focus on the 'pets' theme, while older students might want to explore what the astronaut is doing on the Moon and what this means in the context of the story's themes.
- The sparseness of the layout invites students' imagination and creation of their own illustrations and stories.
- Deciding whether the text is a happy or sad story should provoke excellent discussion in Years 2 & 3.
- The exercises below provide an entry to education in visual literacy and thematic study.

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Themes

- Moon
- Earth
- space
- pets
- environment
- home

Discussion questions

- Before reading *The Astronaut's Cat* examine closely the book's front cover and title and ask the following questions:
 - Where do you think this story will be set?
 - Who is it going to be about?
 - Where are the cat and the astronaut living?
 - What is the blue semi-circle?
 - How does the book's cover make you feel?
- Read the story through once and then close the book and ask the following questions:
 - Why does Cat like living in a spaceship at the beginning of the story?
 - Can you remember what she dreams she might do if she could play on the Moon?
 - By the end of the story, do you think she is really happy on the Moon?
 - Where do you think she would prefer to live?
 - What is it about the Earth that she prefers?
 - Which would you prefer to live on and why?
 - Did you like the story and why?
- It's always interesting to remember that a book's creator makes lots of decisions about details, colour and text to help make their story richer and more interesting. In each of the following three dot points try to guess what Tohby Riddle was trying to achieve in *The Astronaut's Cat*.
 - The Moon is barren, meaning that it doesn't have any living things on it, and the spaceship is almost the same, but the Earth is full of living things. There are lots of different creatures in the air and on the land, colourful plants and beautiful landscapes. How did this make you feel about the idea of living in each place?
 - The Moon is always shown in black and white and the spaceship is shown in muted yellow and cream colours. It is only the Earth where colours are vibrant and varied. Did this make you feel one place might be much nicer and more fun to live in?
 - Did you notice that the story begins with very short and basic sentences that grow in complexity as Cat begins to dream? And that it returns to the short and basic again when she wakes from her dream. Did that change how you read the story as it progressed?
- Turn to the page where the astronaut is 'working' outside. What is the astronaut doing and do you think this is really work? Now turn next page and see what the astronaut is looking for. Do you think the astronaut is still working?
- There are some things that Cat most definitely does not like about the Moon. Can you name all of them? [*Hint: think about breathing, the temperature during day/night time, flying objects and sounds. How do these things differ on Earth?*]

Extension Question: Can you find three more facts about the Moon? These can be about anything you find interesting. Some suggestions might be why the Moon changes shape in the sky or when people first stepped foot there.

- A symbol is something that stands in for a word, sound or idea. When we see a picture of a dove, it often represents the idea of peace. When we see a black shrouded figure, it warns us someone is evil or threatening.

Turn to the page with Cat playing with her ball, eating and sleeping on the spaceship.

- What is the symbol shown near the blue ball? What does it tell us about the ball when Cat is chasing it?
- Did you notice anything familiar about Cat's ball? What do the ball and the Earth have in common for Cat?
- Can you think of other examples of famous symbols?
- Sometimes words can be shown in different ways for emphasis.
 - Turn to the page where Cat is thinking about micrometeoroids flying around.
 - How have the words in the top half of the page been placed to show us how fast these tiny rocks can whizz around the Moon?

Now look at the page opposite and the word *Dinnertime*.

- What is the symbol for speech here that shows us Astronaut is doing the talking?
- How are the colour and letters different to most others in the book and what does that say about how important Dinnertime might be to Cat?
- Compare the image of Cat sitting with the astronaut (and her single pot plant) with the first image of her asleep in the book (on the page featuring, *The astronaut's cat is an inside cat. And she likes it like that*).
 - Does she look happier or sadder after her dream about the Earth? Look closely at her whiskers for a clue.
 - Why do you think she feels this way?
- Do you think animals dream like Cat in the story?
- What sort of things do you think a cat on Earth might dream about?

NB: In his 'Notes on the making of *The Astronaut's Cat*' Tohby Riddle has included a page of instructions for students to follow to create their own collages.

<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/The-Astronauts-Cat-Tohby-Riddle-9781760524944>

Related texts

Picture books

Cummings, Phil. *Touch the Moon*, Allen & Unwin 2019.

McKimmie, Chris. *Scarlett and the Scratchy Moon*, Allen & Unwin 2013.

A selection of other books by Tohby Riddle

Yahoo Creek, Allen & Unwin 2019.

Nobody Owns the Moon, Viking 2008 and Berbay Publishing 2018 (10th anniversary edition)

Milo, Allen & Unwin 2016.

Unforgotten, Allen & Unwin 2012.

My Uncle's Donkey, Viking 2010.

Dog and Bird See the Moon, Puffin Baby 2007

The Singing Hat, Farrar Straus Giroux 2001

What the author says

'While this book is set on the Moon, it raises themes to do with Earth. When humans first saw Earth from outer space – via photos from the Apollo space program in the 1960s and 70s – it informed a new understanding of Earth, its preciousness, and its place in the universe. *The Astronaut's Cat*, being set on the Moon, but observing Earth, too, offers a similar perspective on us and our planet nowadays.

'At a time when there's talk of colonising the Moon and Mars, in part because we've mismanaged resources on Earth and severely damaged its ecosystems and might need somewhere else to live, this book might remind us to value and cherish planet Earth anew. Earth is not disposable or replaceable. There is nowhere else that is naturally habitable for the lifeforms of Earth. Earth is all we have. This is an ever-important and ever-relevant idea.

'The book is based on a real cat. Sort of. I used our family cat as the model for the astronaut's cat. She is white, with pink skin and odd eyes (like David Bowie). She's deaf too, but not in the book! She is mostly an inside cat and spends a lot of time looking out the window at the world. With hindsight, I think this influenced the writing of the story.'

— Tohby Riddle

The author

Tohby Riddle is an internationally award-winning author, illustrator and cartoonist based in Katoomba, NSW.

Tohby has written and illustrated many well-loved picture books and illustrated books (including *Unforgotten*, *Nobody Owns the Moon* and *The Greatest Gatsby: a visual book of grammar*); was the cartoonist for *Good Weekend* magazine for nearly ten years; and is a former editor of *The School Magazine*, a literary magazine for children.

In 2018, one of the world's greatest living writers, Haruki Murakami, translated Tohby's book *My Uncle's Donkey* into Japanese, after discovering it in a Melbourne bookshop. His picture book *Here Comes Stinkbug!* was named a 2019 CBCA Honour Book, and his most recent book is the widely acclaimed *Yahoo Creek: an Australian mystery*.

