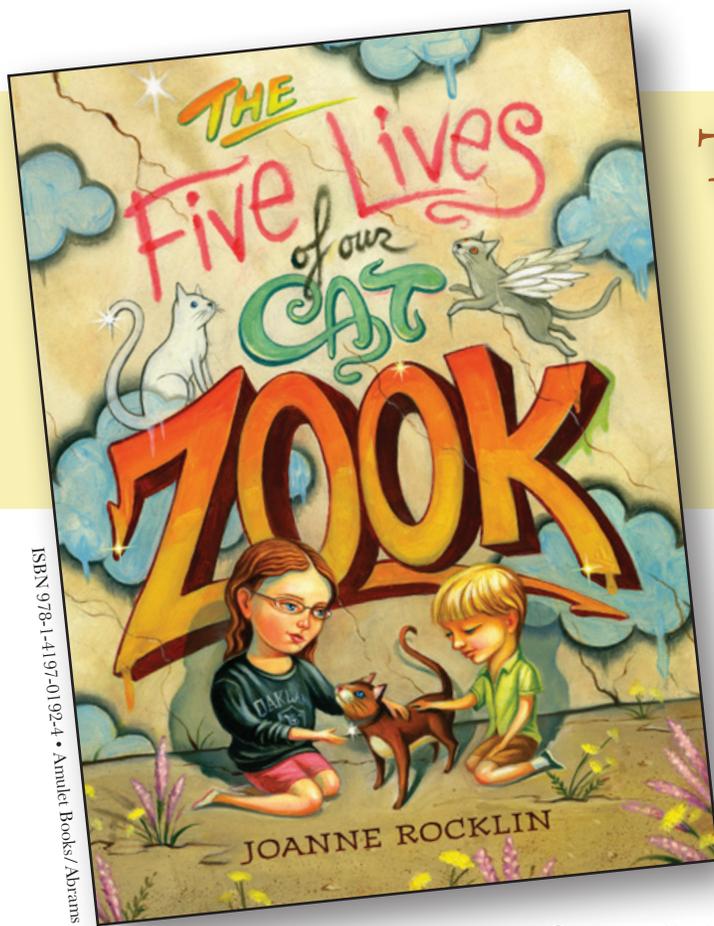


The Five Lives of Our Cat Zook

ACTIVITY KIT



THE FIVE LIVES OF OUR CAT ZOOK

By Joanne Rocklin

Author of *One Day and One
Amazing Morning on Orange Street*

OONA AND HER BROTHER, FRED, love Zook (short for Zucchini) more than anything, which is why when he gets sick, they have to tell a few whoppers so they can break him out of the vet's office and take him home. To keep Fred from worrying,

Oona tells him that Zook has used only five of his nine lives, and then makes up stories about Zook's past exploits. Oona's tales are inspired by those told by their father, who died two years before.

Each of Zook's lives has echoes in Oona's own family life, which is going through some ups and downs. Her mother has started a relationship with a man named Dylan—whom Oona secretly calls “the Villain.” But Oona's whoppers can't hide the truth about Dylan or, unfortunately, about Zook's fate.

★“The only imperfection in this novel is that it ends.”

—BOOKLIST, *starred review*

★ ★ This heartwarming story about friendship, trust, family, and coping with loss, will enchant young readers. ★ ★

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- * *The Five Lives of our Cat Zook* centers around themes of loss and change. What does Zook symbolize for Oona and her family? What connection does Zook have with the death of Oona's father?
- * How does the old adage "you can't judge a book by its cover" apply to Oona's impressions of Dylan and to her Secret Love?
- * Oona and her little brother, Fred, love the alley behind their house with the camellia branch that hangs over the fence and yellow and purple flowers bursting through the cracks in the concrete. "ELVIS LIVES" is spray-painted on one of the alley's walls. How does this graffiti connect with the story's theme of endings and beginnings?
- * Oona's actions when obtaining and subsequently trying to rescue Zook from the vet have moral implications. What do you think Oona's actions reveal about her character?
- * How did Oona change throughout the course of the story? What story events triggered these changes?
- * Select five adjectives to describe *The Five Lives of our Cat Zook*. Describe how they apply to your understanding and response to the story.
- * *The Five Lives of our Cat Zook* is chock full of a variety of characters ranging from senior citizens to children from several different religious and cultural backgrounds. With which character did you most identify? Why?
- * Re-read Oona's Theory of Happy-Ending Times and discuss how this plays out in your life. Do books—and life—end with one grand happy ending, or are there a series of "happy-ending times" as Oona's theory suggests? Did the story end the way you expected? What was your emotional response to the conclusion of *The Five Lives of our Cat Zook*?



ACTIVITIES

That's a Nice Bike . . .

Oona is a collector of “conversation starters” some of which she tries out on her Secret Love when she is working at O’Leary’s Pizzeria. “Nice day” seems to break the ice in one conversation that Oona initiates. What are some other conversation starters? Make a list and try using them with your friends and acquaintances.

What’s in a Name?

Oona’s life is governed by the many “theories” that she creates—from the Name Theory to the Wishing Theory. Per Oona’s Name Theory, the two o’s in her name represent two eyes. Oona considers herself a talented “noticer” and believes that the two o’s in her name underscore this special talent. What does your name say about you? What do the names of family and friends reveal about them?

Picture This

Joanne Rocklin, the author of *The Five Lives of our Cat Zook*, infuses her writing with rich description that allows the reader to easily picture the world that Oona and her family inhabit. Read the following examples from the story:

“There once was a very, very old woman and a very, very old man. They lived right smack in the center of Rebusina, in an old dark brown Victorian house with green scallops like half-moons around the windows, and a twisty buttercup-yellow staircase going up to the pink front door.”

“Fred draws a large blue head with green googly eyes and sticking-up black hair and a mouth with yellow jagged teeth, breathing red jaggedy fire. We all stare at it.”

Try your hand at creating an illustration of the old couple’s house or Freddy’s monster using the details given in their descriptions. Can you find other vividly described elements in the story that you can clearly picture in your mind’s eye?

Here, kitty kitty

Zook is the world’s greatest cat, or at least that’s what Oona and Freddy think. Are you a cat person or a dog person? What traits of behavior are quintessentially feline? There are many sayings about cats:

Cats have nine lives
When the cat’s away, the mice will play
Don’t let the cat out of the bag
Curiosity killed the cat
It’s the cat’s meow
Look what the cat dragged in

Can you think of any others? Think about these sayings and discuss them with your friends or classmates. What do they mean, literally and figuratively?

READING WITH REBUSES

OONA TAKES HER ROLE as big sister seriously. She considers teaching her little brother Freddy how to read one of her most important jobs. Oona uses rebuses (pictures that represent words or parts of words) to help Freddy make sense of print. Solve the following rebus puzzles and then create a few of your own! Remember, "RW" stands for "rhymes with."

<p>TH RW </p> <hr/>	<p>D RW </p> <hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
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OONA'S RAINBOW WHOPPER THEORY

OONA TELLS WHOPPERS. “Whoppers are lies, plain and simple. Some whoppers are worse than other whoppers, and those are nothing to be proud of. But some whoppers are stories.”

Oona categorizes her whoppers by color—her Rainbow Whopper Theory.

Read Oona’s description of each color of whopper below, then create your own example of each kind of whopper to complete the chart.

Oona’s father told green whoppers—stories that are “alive and growing and changing all of the time.” On the back of this page, create your own green whopper of a story by quilting together pieces of your life and bits of your imagination to fashion a new tale that has traditional story elements—like dragons and villains or fairy godmothers and three wishes.

WHOPPER	EXAMPLE
RED whoppers “are the kind that make other people think you’re greater than you are.”	
BLUE whoppers “save your scaredy skin, or someone else’s, to smooth things over for a while.”	
BLACK whoppers “have only one purpose: They are meant to hurt someone.”	
WHITE whoppers “make someone feel better.”	
YELLOW whoppers “are the whoppers that you don’t tell. The kind when you leave something out and keep the secret all to yourself.”	

SNACK ATTACK

O'LEARY'S PIZZERIA IS FAMOUS for their fried zucchini. It's the only green thing Freddy will eat because the green gets covered up by the delicious batter. With an adult's help, try making your own fried zook!

Fried Zucchini

Ingredients

- 1 c. flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1 c. milk
- 2 Tbsp. oil
- 1 lb. zucchini, cut into 3- or 4-inch sticks or into 1/3-inch thick coins
- Oil for frying

In large bowl, sift flour with baking powder and salt; set aside. In separate bowl, lightly beat one egg; and add milk and oil. Slowly add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients, beating until smooth. Wash zucchini but don't peel it. Cut into sticks or coins and pat dry. If desired, dredge zook lightly in flour. Dip pieces, one at a time, in batter. Fry in hot oil (be sure an adult does this step!), turning often, until zook is golden brown. Remove from oil with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Sprinkle with more salt, if desired. Let zook cool slightly, then dig in!

BACKGROUND CHECK



OONA'S BEST FRIEND, Riya, and her brother, Kiran, call themselves "multi-culties." Their mother is of Indian descent and their father is of Swedish ancestry. Maria is from Mexico and her husband, Mario, is from Italy. Together they run O'Leary's Pizzeria. O'Leary is an Irish name.

What's your ancestral heritage? Do you celebrate traditions or ceremonies in your family that are related to your family history? Talk with your parents or grandparents to fill out the chart below. Are you a multi-cultie?



My mom's ancestry:

My dad's ancestry:



What do you know about the countries/cultures in your background?
List some facts below:

Five Questions with Joanne Rocklin

Amulet Books: Tell us about the pets you've had throughout your life. I'd also like to hear about how you named them.

Joanne Rocklin: Pets have always been important in my life, and also in the lives of my kids. My first pet as a child was a parakeet, named Bluebell, simply because she was blue. I've always wished I'd given her a more dignified and/or meaningful name! The cat who lives with me now is named Mitzie, short for the Hebrew word "mitzvah," which means "good deed." My husband and I found her lurking outside a restaurant. She was hungry and skinny and (we discovered later) had a BB gun pellet lodged in her flank. I based Zook, the cat in my book, on Mitzie. We gave Mitzie the gift of our home, and she gave me the inspiration for my story. Unlike Zook, however, Mitzie had no collar, so I have no idea where she came from. Today she's a very contented, fat, and beautiful cat.

AB: How did you come up with the idea of different-colored lies? What color whoppers do you find yourself telling?

JR: The conflict in my story deepens when Oona tells a lie about Zook. But it's a lie of omission, in that she leaves out some important information about where he comes from, rather than an outright lie. Most people know about "white lies" (those small lies often told to spare people's feelings . . . or that's how I usually think of them). I began to wonder about the "colors" of other types of lies, and developed my Rainbow Whopper Theory. I imagined a lie of omission to be yellow! I would like to be able to say that I mostly tell the good "green," storytelling type of whopper, the kind of whopper that Oona's late father told. But I'm sorry to say that I have told every color of lie in my lifetime . . .

AB: Is being a "noticer" part of being a writer?

JR: Yes, I think so. And writers are often quiet and shy—they've spent their lives on the outside looking in, observing things and absorbing it all. But creative people are also "feelers" and "rememberers" as well as "noticers": they are affected by the world and want to write about it—or dance, draw, or sing about it!

AB: Your writing is filled with vivid, beautiful descriptions. How did this become such an important part of your writing? Do you have any tricks for writing with expressive detail?

JR: I often feel that the detail is the absolute core of writing for me, and I'm very, very aware of its power. A detail often begins a story, calls up an emotion, or even creates a character. Here are some details from *The Five Lives of Our Cat Zook*: an alley, a diamond, extra cat toes, a rebus, a blue flower pot, graffiti (Elvis Lives!), pizza, a T-shirt—the list is long and could be longer. So when I am describing anything in my story, I am careful to make sure that my details are special—unique and descriptive. Not just a flower but lavender and catmint. Not just a cat but a cat with an unusual number of toes and with fur markings like the map of California! And if

Want to read more?

Check out *The Five Lives of Our Cat Zook* by Joanne Rocklin (\$16.95, Amulet Books, 9781419701924).

For information, interviews, and more:

Please contact Morgan Dubin: mdubin@abramsbooks.com, 212-229-7128

I'm very patient and keep on writing, those details will begin to connect with one another. The magic of writing a story is that details become imbued with meaning, echo one another, and give shape to the plot. I never know how or why that happens, but it does!

AB: Oona says, "The alley smells of cat pee, but we don't mind. Cat pee isn't a bad smell if you have a cat that you love." Are there any smells that are not particularly pleasant that you love for strange reasons?

JR: Wet dog. Food-smearred babies. Skunk (not too close) on a country road while walking with a good friend. Rain on hot asphalt. Burnt toast for breakfast, prepared by someone little. Love is the important connection here! The centers for memory, emotion, and the sense of smell are all located near one another in the brain, so it doesn't surprise me that smells have powerful effects on us, based on associations.

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Additional Discussion Questions

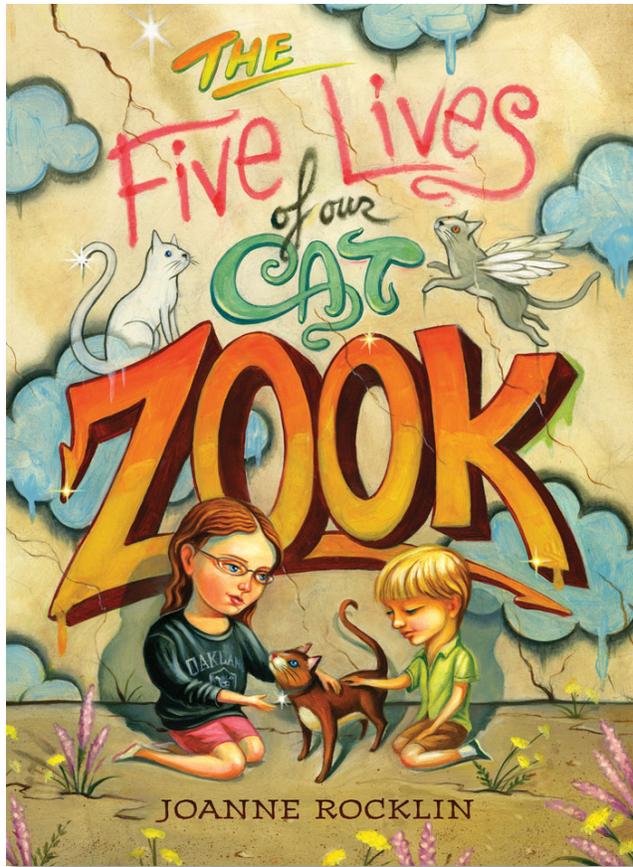
1. Oona says, “I think it’s important to notice how words are written.” What do *italics* tell you about a word? How do you feel when you read something that’s **bold**? What other visual clues are used in writing, and what do they mean to you?
2. When did you first learn about the Cats-Have-Nine-Lives Theory? Why do you think this is a theory about cats—as opposed to dogs, for example, or goldfish?
3. Why does Oona tell Fred stories about Zook’s possible nine lives?
4. The *Five Live of Our Cat Zook* deals with themes of loss and change. What does Zook symbolize for Oona and her family? What connection does Zook have with the death of Oona’s father?
5. Think about the most recent whopper you told. Was it blue, red, black, or yellow? (Refer to pages 20-21.)
6. What are the differences between “observing” and “seeing”? Do you consider yourself a “notice”?
7. Do you believe in the Common-Letter-of-the-Alphabet Theory? (See page 155.) What are three important things about yourself that all begin with the same letter?

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In this warmhearted middle-grade novel, Oona and her brother, Fred, love their cat Zook (short for Zucchini), but Zook is sick. As they conspire to break him out of the vet's office, convinced he can only get better at home with them, Oona tells Fred the story of Zook's previous lives, ranging in style from fairy tale to grand epic to slice of life. Each of Zook's lives has echoes in Oona's own family life, which is going through a transition she's not yet ready to face. Her father died two years ago, and her mother has started a relationship with a man named Dylan—whom Oona secretly calls "the villain." The truth about Dylan, and about Zook's medical condition, drives the drama in this loving family story.

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Common Core State Standards Activity Kit Alignment – Grades 3 to 7

English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1, RL.3.3, RL.3.4, RL.3.10, RL.4.1, RL.4.3, RL.4.4, RL.4.10, RL.5.4, RL.5.6, RL.5.10, RL.6.1, RL.6.4, RL.6.6, RL.6.10, RL.7.1, RL.7.6, RL.7.10

English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Foundational Skills: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.3.3, RF.3.3.c, RF.3.3.d, RF.3.4, RF.3.4.a, RF.4.3, RF.4.4, RF.4.4.a, RF.5.3, RF.5.4, RF.5.4.a

English Language Arts Standards » Writing: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2, W.3.3, W.3.4, W.4.2, W.4.3, W.4.4, W.5.2, W.5.3, W.5.4, W.6.2, W.6.3, W.6.4, W.7.2, W.7.3, W.7.4

English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1, SL.3.1.d, SL.3.6, SL.4.1, SL.4.1.d, SL.5.1, SL.5.1.d, SL.6.1, SL.7.1

English Language Arts Standards » Language: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1, L.3.1.a, L.3.4, L.3.5, L.4.4, L.4.4.a, L.4.5, L.5.5.a, L.6.5, L.7.5