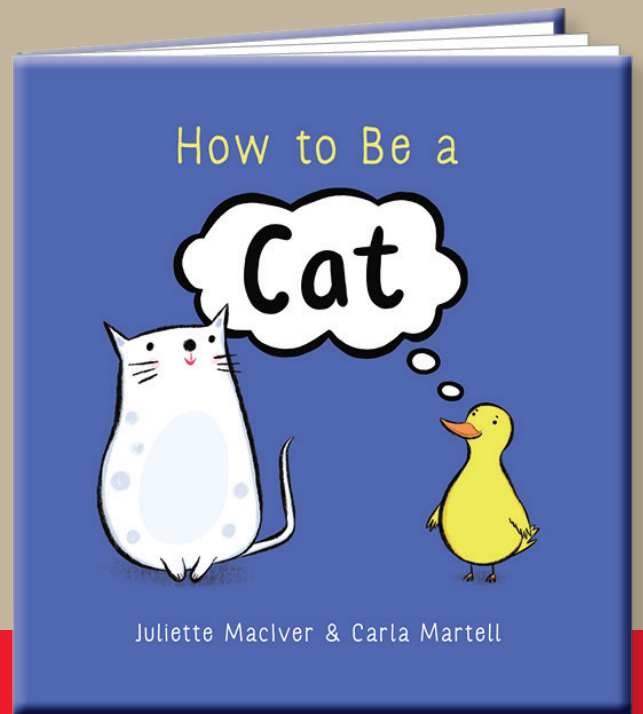


How to Be a Cat

By Juliette Maclver

Illustrated by Carla Martell



• Reading • Writing • Art

Synopsis

How to Be a Cat and its forerunner, *Duck Goes Meow*, tell the story of a duck who is part of a cat family. In this new story, Mother Cat is demonstrating the art of doing 'cat stuff' to her kittens – and Duck. From washing 'fur' to stalking prey and climbing a tree, Duck follows along, doing a duck version of what the kittens are being taught. But when some big cats tease Duck, doubts begin to form ... "Am I a cat? Do I belong?" Mother Cat reassures Duck that "not all cats are made the same", and that Duck possesses all the skills required to be a cat.

About the Author

Juliette Maclver is an award-winning children's picture book author of many children's titles such as the wonderful Marmaduke Duck series, *Henry Bob Bobbalich*, *Grasshoppers Dance*, and most recently, *Duck Goes Meow*. She has twice won the picture book category for the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults and in 2023, she received international recognition in the form of a prestigious White Raven. She is the six-time recipient of the Storylines Notable Book Award and has received multiple nominations for NZ, Australian and US children's book awards.

Juliette has a Masters Linguistics, and a Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. She lives near Wellington with her husband and four children.

About the Illustrator

Carla Martell is an illustrator and designer based in Auckland. All those years getting in trouble for doodling in class (usually animals with hats on) eventually paid off, as she is now illustrating children's books, designing for animation and dreaming up new multimedia projects. Most of Carla's illustrations are drawn by hand (often in pen and ink) then digitally combined with handmade textures and typography. She's a big fan of printmaking, writing words that go with pictures and turning her hand to making images move. She is also a licensed artist, creating designs for products such as gift wrap, greeting cards, wall art and homewares.

Writing and Illustration Style

How to Be a Cat is a heart-warming companion book to *Duck Goes Meow*, which was the winner of the 2023 NZ Book Awards for Children and Young Adults Best Picture Book. Juliette, an expert in linguistics, has masterfully chosen every word in this story to create its flawless rhythm and rhyme, which will appeal to those in the 3–7 age group. The repetitive phrase ‘and Duck does, too’ also encourages young readers to join in as the book is read aloud. Reflected in a real-life, furry-feathered friendship between a mother cat, her kittens and some ducklings, this story explores the themes of unlikely friendships and the desire to belong and feel connected. The book’s ending is perfect – warm and fuzzy, funny and, of course, happy!

Carla’s bright and beautiful illustrations bring the story’s cute cast of characters to life. She uses pencil, watercolour, pen and ink and digital composition, and the type is set in Shaking Three font. Illustrating in a simple yet sophisticated style takes great expertise. Carla’s use of bold colours, ‘white space’ and varied compositions ensure each scene is unique and interesting. Her humour is evident throughout the book. Her characters’ delightful body and facial expressions have oodles of flair and flounce!

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

During the shared reading session, encourage the students to ask and answer questions. Prompt them to relate the book to their own personal lives and experiences. Read the story aloud and encourage the students to join in, particularly on the repetitive phrases. Use some of the following questions to help the students react to the words and pictures and share their thoughts and feelings about the characters and events. If the students have read the companion book *Duck Goes Meow*, you could briefly revisit the characters and what happened in that book prior to reading.

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Look at the front cover and read the blurb on the back cover.

- Why might Duck be wondering about being a cat?
- Can a duck learn to be a cat? Why or why not?
- What do cats and ducks have in common?
- Can Duck learn to climb a tree? Why or why not?
- Do you think Duck is happy being a duck? Explain your answer.

COMPREHENSION:

- Look at the illustration on the title page. What do you think the kitten is about to do? What might Duck be thinking at that moment? (p.1)
- Read the text on Line 1 of page 3 (the first page of the story) and then look at the illustration. What is unusual about the text? (p.3)
- Have you heard of the word ‘mew’ on Line 2? Do you know what kind of action this is? If students don’t know, explain that a mew is a high-pitched sound that kittens make. (p.3)
- Predict which animals in the illustration will go ‘Meow’. How do you know that? (p.3)
- What sound do you think Duck will make? (p.3)
- Were you surprised when Duck said ‘Meow’ rather than ‘Quack’? Did you expect the author to write that? Why or why not? (p.4)
- On page 5, Mama thinks that it is time to have a chat with Duck about being a cat. What things do you think Mama will teach Duck? Do you have a cat? What things does your cat do? (p.5)
- Do you think Mama’s kittens need to be taught how to be cats, too? Do you think Duck wants cat lessons? Explain your answers. (p.5)
- Mama demonstrates how to wash her fur. She licks her paws and then rubs her paws over her body to get clean. The kittens copy her, but Duck doesn’t have paws or fur. How do you think Duck will get on with this task? Does it matter that Duck doesn’t do exactly what Mama did? Why or why not? (p.7)
- Duck found a way to wash. Do you think that was clever? Why or why not? How do you think Mama felt about it? Explain that cats don’t really like water or swimming, so Duck’s way of washing wouldn’t be so popular with Mama or her kittens. (p.8)
- On page 9, Duck watches Mama teach how to climb a tree. How do claws help Mama and her kittens to climb up the tree trunk? How do you think Duck will get to the top of the tree? Think about how ducks are built compared with how kittens are built. What would happen if a cat didn’t have claws? (p.9)
- Duck got to the top of the tree. How do you think Duck felt at that moment? Do you think that when you’re taught something that everyone has to do the task in exactly the same way? Do you think Mama expected Duck to copy her exactly? Explain your answers. (p.10)



- What does the word 'prey' mean? What prey do cats hunt and eat? (p.11)
- Mama demonstrates how to stalk, wait and pounce to chase prey. How is showing someone to do something better than just telling them how to do it? How do you learn best, by seeing something done or by hearing about how something is done? Why is that? (p.11)
- On pages 12 and 13, it is Duck and the kittens' turn and Duck's turn to practise pouncing. Why are flying insects, fluttering leaves, running mice and scuttling spiders good for learning pouncing skills? When kittens play with everyday objects, such as balls of wool and cotton reels, they learn good hunting skills, too. What are they learning? Why do cats in the wild need to be able to hunt? How does the saying 'practice makes perfect' relate to these kittens and Duck? (pp.12-13)
- How does Duck have an advantage over the kittens when it comes to trying to catch a flying insect? (p.14)
- On page 15, Mama says to use your teeth to eat. Ducks don't have teeth. Do you think that will stop Duck from joining in with the kittens? Why or why not? (p.15)
- Why does the mouse on page 15 run away when the author starts talking about eating? Do you think Duck would like to eat cat biscuits? Why or why not? (p.15)
- What might Duck be eating? (p.16)
- What does the word 'keen' mean? How have you been keen when you've learned a new skill? (p.17)
- What are the two kittens and Duck doing? Why is practising their new skills a good idea? (p.17)
- What do you think might happen next when the author says 'Then'? Explain that the three dots is a punctuation mark called an ellipsis, and that an ellipsis is sometimes used to show a pause for effect in order to create suspense. Why do you think authors do that? (p.17)
- How does Duck feel when the three big cats come along and start laughing? Have you ever had a similar thing happen to you? How did you feel? (p.18)
- The kittens hiss on page 19. How do kittens in real life feel when they hiss at someone or something? How has the illustrator shown us that the kittens are angry and annoyed rather than frightened? (p.19)
- Is Duck brave to stand up to the three big cats? If you were Duck, would you have done the same? Why or why not? (p.20)
- Why does Duck hang back and not run home fast like the two kittens? How might the three big cats' mocking and mean behaviour have affected Duck? Why does Duck feel small and begin to question whether they are a cat or not? (p.21)
- What does the author mean when she says Duck was 'all out of place'? Has a situation with a bully or bullies made you feel unnerved, scared or out of sorts? How did you resolve it? Who helped you to resolve it? (p.21)
- Mama says 'Don't listen, love'. The word 'love' is a term of affection. What other words mean the same thing? For example, *dear*, *sweetheart*, *darling*, *angel*, *boo* and *beautiful* are all terms of affection or endearment. The author used a word with only one syllable so that the rhythm sounded perfect to read. (p.22)
- Mama also says that 'Not all cats are made the same'. Why is this a comforting response? Why is it good if everyone is not the same? (p.22)
- Have you heard the term 'down pat'? What does it mean? (p.23)
- What does Duck's body language tell you about how it is feeling while talking to Mama? (p.23)
- Does Mama make Duck feel better by the end of the story? Has someone in your family or a friend made you feel better after a similar situation? How did they comfort you? (p.24)
- Did you expect Duck to say 'Purr' at the end? Did you like the ending? Explain your answer. (p.24)

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: HOW TO BE A DUCK

Mama taught Duck how to be a cat. Imagine that the roles were reversed, and that a mother duck taught one of the kittens how to be a duck. Choose one duck behaviour that a mother duck could teach, such as swimming in a pond, diving to catch a water insect, quacking loudly or cleaning feathers. In groups or together as a class, write rhyming text that the mother duck could say.

ACTIVITY 2: RHYMING WORDS

Rhyming picture books are wonderful to read aloud. Authors sometimes use rhyming dictionaries to help them find suitable rhyming words. In a rhyming dictionary, words that rhyme with one another are grouped together. Choose a word from the story, such as *cat*, *me*, *too*, *race* or *small*. Create a fun page for your very own rhyming dictionary. Feature your chosen word, then list all the words that you can think of that rhyme with it. If you need help, look up your word on an online rhyming dictionary and list some more rhyming words that you hadn't thought of. Display your rhyming dictionary page designs on a classroom wall.

ACTIVITY 3: TEACH ME

Mama showed her two kittens and Duck how to wash fur, stalk prey and climb up trees. Imagine that another animal, such as a kangaroo, a crocodile, a monkey or a kiwi taught Duck instead. Write a list of the things that your chosen animal would teach. For instance, a monkey might teach Duck how to eat fruit such as a banana, how to swing in the trees and how to groom family members. A kangaroo might teach Duck how to jump, to box and to curl up and sleep in a large pocket!

ACTIVITY 4: ANIMAL ANTICS

Kittens are playful creatures. On pages 12 and 13, the kittens stalked, pounced and chased spiders and mice and played with a cotton reel and a ball of wool. Think about the fun some ducklings might get up to. For instance, they might splash about in puddles, dive from a rock into a pond, play games of chase with one another and so on. Draw three of these duckling antics and share them with a friend.

ACTIVITY 5: A TONGUE TWISTER

On page 11, the words 'flair' and 'flounce' start with the letter sounds 'fl'. Explain that alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words. A fun way to introduce alliteration is to read some tongue twisters. For example, *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*. In pairs, groups or as a whole class, make up your own tongue twister. Use Mama as the subject of your tongue twister. For example, *Mama the moggy mewed and meowed after munching on mice on Monday*.

ACTIVITY 6: DUCK'S DREAM

The book ends with Duck snuggling up in Mama's fur and falling asleep happily. What do you think Duck dreamed about? Write an entry in Duck's dream journal. You could answer the following questions: *Where was Duck in the dream? Who was in the dream? What happened to Duck in the dream? How did Duck feel?* Draw a picture to go in the dream journal. There are endless dream possibilities. Encourage the students to use their imaginations and share their dream journal with a friend.

Written by Janine Scott