

"Something spookily magical goes on in this tale..."

—Pulitzer Prize winner Jules Feiffer, author of *By the Side of the Road*

Jasper



by

Michelle A. Moore

WINNER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN (AAUW) AWARD FOR JUVENILE LITERATURE

Praise for
JASPER

“Highly Recommended”

“Jasper is a very highly recommended story of coming to grips with tough choices, moral dilemmas, -- from the perspective of a cat with a conscience!”

—**Midwest Book Review**

“All ages can enjoy...”

“All ages can enjoy the cat’s eye view of the world, where a man with a potbelly “resembled a turtle, only instead of carrying his shell on his back, the big man carried it in front.” The relationship between Hank, the “unworldly” and literally minded owl, and Jasper, the street smart and self-serving cat provides opportunity not only for growth but humor. A fellow cat worries about Jasper hanging out with Hank: “A great horned owl. He could take your head off!” Hank replies, “I don’t think so . . . Jasper has quite a large head for his body. See how thick his neck is?” And so, Jasper has even wider appeal.”

—**S. Craig Renfroe,**
Main Street Rag

Reader Reviews

“engaging”

“beautiful and insightful”

“Michelle Moore always coaxes her prose and her theme to go the extra mile. This book is beautiful, moving, full of hopeful certainty.”

“strong and tender”

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A hardcover edition of this book was published by Novello Festival Press in 2003

First paperback edition published by Novello Festival Press in 2005

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ISBN 978-1-937556-01-3

Second Edition 2012

Cover Design by Braxton McGhee

Published by:
Cherokee McGhee, L.L.C.
Williamsburg, Virginia

Find us on the World Wide Web at:
WWW.CHEROKEEMCGHEE.COM

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1

He knew the boy was leaving. A wispy dream in a lazy day catnap that turned vivid and real, like all the things he saw before they happened. The pictures came to him unbidden; he preferred to think of sunny days and bowls full of tuna fish, lovely red meat and hands that lived to scratch his chin. Much as he craved his thoughts of comfort and tried to hold them steady in his mind, they slipped away like smoke once the pictures started.

The boy was leaving and there was nothing he could do about it. The big truck would come and then the people in and out of the house, carrying things, always carrying them out. He could see the boy, eyes wide and dark, electric with fear, and the boy's mother, wiry and determined, in constant motion, shifting the little girl from one hip to the other. And the boy's father: tall and broad, talking on the phone, gesturing, pacing, speaking to the mother and the children without looking at them. Jasper could see it all and he shook his head and stretched and tried to think of something fun like grasshoppers, but the image of the boy, his face pale, kept interrupting. It was time to say good-bye.

Jasper opened his eyes and sat for a moment, sensing the day, feeling the insistent sun already hot on his fur. Home was an abandoned fort built by ambitious and resourceful children who had since outgrown the need for forts and clubs and secret blood oaths. It was reasonably dry, and in the temperate Carolina climate, reasonably warm. He was an optimistic cat and still believed that one day he would find a home,

a real home, with regular meals and a warm place to sleep every night.

The truth was that Jasper didn't have the kind of looks that softened the hearts of humans. He groomed himself as well as he could but his coat was on the splotchy side, one ear had been notched in an unfortunate encounter with a Chow, and his right back leg had taken a twist in a separate incident with a Chevy Malibu.

He trotted with purpose through the woods and across the backyards toward the boy's house. At the edge of the big angry man's yard, next door to the boy, the cat crouched down and scanned for any sign of the owner. He lifted his head and tasted deeply of the air. All clear. The big man's back yard was the fastest way to the boy's window even if the man did hate the sight of all cats, especially Jasper. But then, Jasper thought, there wasn't much the big man seemed to like.

With a dozen running strides he was across the danger zone, into the target back yard and heading straight for the boy's bedroom window. The window was open a few inches, the boy's signal to come inside, but before Jasper scrambled up the tree and into his room, he crept around toward the front. No sign of the truck yet. He sighed with relief and scaled the tree. From the window ledge, he could see the boy sitting on his bed, which had been stripped of all sheets and blankets. Boxes were stacked all around the room and the walls were bare, dotted with pinholes and one or two nails. The boy was leafing through a comic book, but even from the window, Jasper could see the boy's eyes were dull and unseeing; he turned the pages far too quickly to absorb them.

A quick leap to the window ledge and then a flattening under the glass, pushing the screen open with his nose, and Jasper was inside. From the window to the boy's lap took two quick bounds and at last the boy's arms were tight around him.

"Oh, Jasper," he said. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come." He

hugged the cat too closely. Jasper squeaked softly, politely for the boy to lighten up, but he could feel the boy's heart beating like the wings of a moth and the wetness that splashed on his head and his back was like something precious so he closed his eyes until the boy loosened his grip.

Finally the boy pulled away enough so that he could look the cat full in the face. The boy's face was pale, just like Jasper's mind pictures, and his eyes were red and swollen. "I wish I could take you with me."

Jasper told the boy that he understood and that he loved him the only way he knew: a long slow blink and purring with his whole body.

For the last year, the boy had fed Jasper with cat food he bought with his own money despite the disapproval of his parents. The mother had taken one look at the cat and shook her head, pulling her toddler daughter close as if Jasper carried some contagion.

He always met the boy at the bus stop in the morning and the afternoon, with gifts if he could manage it, of frogs and field mice and once a tiny wren. All of his gifts were live: the highest form of cat favor, to share the pleasure of the hunt with another. Truth told, Jasper wasn't too keen on the kill. He much preferred the pungent moist lumpiness of canned cat food to the messy irregularity of living on the bounty of his own hunting efforts.

There was a quick movement at the corner of his eye and he heard her, "Kitty, kitty. Want to pet the kitty?"

It was the boy's sister, three years of strident, grabby energy concentrated in one small, quick person. Her face bright, hands outstretched, fingers splayed, she bore down on Jasper like a drunken bee. He tensed and waited for the hair-pulling, skin-twisting pain that was her version of "pet the kitty." Usually he tried to avoid the child but today was moving day and he would not leave the boy until he

absolutely had to.

“No!” the boy said, and stuck out his leg to block the toddler’s progress.

The child looked at Jasper then at her brother, then back to Jasper. Her mouth opened so he could see the tiny white squares that were her front teeth and the bubble-gum pink of her tongue. The scream was a healthy one, full of anger and frustration.

The mother’s face appeared at the door. “Edward! Have you let that mangy cat in again? Outside! Now! I don’t have time for this!”

Edward was the name she called the boy when she was angry. The little girl continued to wail. The mother continued to shout. Jasper gave the boy’s hand two quick strokes with his tongue, just to let him know he’d be waiting and he leaped to the window and was outside.

The long jointed truck was angling into the driveway of the big angry man, who stood on his front sidewalk, fists on his hips, head forward. Jasper slipped into the front shrubbery to watch.

“What the Sam Hill do you think you’re doing?” The big man’s face was red and inflamed, as usual, below razor-parted hair that waved just so over his brow. He wore crisp khakis, belted below his big, hard belly. Jasper licked his paws reflectively and thought of how the man resembled a turtle, only instead of carrying his shell on his back, the big man carried it in front.

The truck shuddered to a halt and the driver’s door opened with a heavy metallic squawk. A lanky man with a clipboard in his hand hopped out and started across the manicured lawn toward the big man.

“Stop!” The man thrust out a meaty arm, palm flat, sausage fingers extended.

“Scuse me?” The driver stopped walking.

“You take one more step on my lawn and I’ll have you in court on

trespassing charges.”

The driver looked down at the impeccable carpet of green then back up at the big man. “Well I am sorry about touching your lawn and all, but in the interest of moving you and your family, I have to tell you, it might not be the last time it happens today.”

The air around the big man fairly quivered with rage. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you, dummy. You’re not moving me anywhere. You’re at the wrong house.” He jerked a forefinger in Jasper’s direction. “They’re moving, not me.”

The driver stared at the big man. “Well why didn’t you just say so?”

When the big man cursed and took a few steps toward the driver and another man got out of the truck, a massive square man with biceps like hams and no expression on his face, Jasper knew it was time to step in. He didn’t like the big man but it didn’t take any psychic ability to see that this could turn ugly and there was something about fights that turned Jasper’s stomach hollow.

Jasper trotted onto the big man’s lawn, appreciating the fine thick texture of the grass. He strolled over close enough to the men to feel the disturbance in the air while keeping a careful eye on the big feet. It was in moods like this that men were prone to boot a cat senseless.

He headed for a large precise circle of a planting bed directly in the big man’s line of vision. A series of spidery young dogwoods grew in a semicircle, surrounded at exact intervals by impatiens alternating red and white. Jasper snaked through the impatiens, into a tight curve around the tree then stopped as if to scent the air. He cut his eyes back at the big man to see if he’d been noticed.

Yes indeed, the big man had stepped on his own precious lawn, to the left of the two moving men, so that he could keep a watchful eye

on the cat. Jasper smiled a secret cat smile and began to scratch like he needed to make a deposit.

“NO!” The big man hustled toward the planting bed, leaving the moving men mid-sentence. Jasper let the big man get two or three steps away, close enough to smell the astringent, anxious smell of him, when he bounded over to the next tree and gave a few quick scratches. The big man followed like the ex-linebacker he was and again, Jasper gauged his distance. The moving men were watching, talking to each other, and as Jasper had hoped, the boy’s father came out of his front door.

“Hey! What are you fellows doing over there? I’m the one that’s moving.”

The movers shook their heads and waved and headed back to the truck. While Jasper watched the other men, the big man had gotten too close and when he grabbed for the cat, his hand rested on Jasper’s back for a second, like a hot grasping vise. Jasper flattened himself and bounded back over to the boy’s yard while the big man growled and muttered.

He slipped into the shrubbery at the front of the boy’s house, where he had a good view of the articulated truck edging down the correct driveway. When the truck stopped, followed by a series of heavy hollow thuds and slams and the rumbling of men’s voices, Jasper watched closely as the rear of the unit opened into a long shadowed cave. Surely there were plenty of places for one skinny cat to hide in such a cavern. He waited for the men to trudge into the house then he crept up the slanted ramp to peer into the opening.

The trailer was a tall, square tunnel with the most confusing array of ghostly smells he’d ever inhaled. Like all cats, he knew that every human had a trademark aroma, distinctive as a fingerprint. People who

lived together developed a family scent. Anything that people brought into their home took on that odor: furniture, books, clothing and even the pets. This steel box smelled like wisps and remnants and shadows of dozens of families, multi-layered and intoxicating. So many stories in the smells.

He blinked and took a few tentative steps inside, his nose to the steel floor. Dimly, he heard the low rumble of the men's voices and heavy footsteps approaching, but his nose was twitching hard and he just couldn't pull away from those fascinating faint perfumes. A series of thumps shook the van, and he turned to the opening to see the two moving men guiding a hand truck with a washing machine straight at him. He darted around them and leaped from the edge, ignoring the ramp.

Safe inside the front shrubbery, Jasper sat and watched and strained to hear something that would give him some clue as to where the boy was moving. The two men didn't talk much beyond the occasional shorthand exchange. Trip after trip, they moved quickly, efficiently, their hand trucks stacked with boxes. The repetition made Jasper sleepy, and so he dozed in the filtered fingers of sun that stretched through the shrubs. He started to give himself a bath but his heart wasn't in it. There was a dull ache in his gut and for once, it had nothing to do with hunger.

It wasn't long before the men were sliding the ramp back into the truck and slamming shut the rear doors. The father came outside and spoke to the men before the truck lumbered out of the driveway and down the street. The front door banged as he went back inside and the boy came out and stood on the front porch, calling Jasper's name in a hoarse, urgent whisper.

Jasper leaned against the boy's legs and blinked up at him. The

boy squatted and set down a paper plate heaped with canned cat food. Jasper dug in.

“This is for you, buddy.” Not that he’d needed the clarification. The boy sat on the lowest front step and watched, rubbing his eyes and petting the cat with long sweeping strokes. Jasper ate until his belly was stretched tight then sat down to bathe. The boy hugged him close and the smell of the boy, a pleasing mix of oiled baseball glove and fresh grass and Cheerios, was all he could smell and he thought this must be like heaven, a full belly and unabashed love, except without the moving van. The boy studied Jasper’s face like he wanted to burn the image in his brain.

“I tried to find somebody to take care of you, Jasper,” the boy said. “But people want kittens. They won’t even come look at a grown cat.” He shook his head. “And now, my dad says --,” he tried to continue but his eyes were spilling again. The hand stroking Jasper had become sweaty and heavy.

Jasper started to squirm.

“My dad says that we have to take you to the animal shelter.”

The boy’s eyes were dark and soft and begging for forgiveness but Jasper heard footsteps approaching the front door from inside. He pulled away from the boy. The boy’s arms tightened but it’s hard to hold a cat with other ideas. And Jasper had the distinct idea that he’d had enough of good-byes. He’d certainly had enough of animal shelters on that first trip, two years previous, the first time he’d ever had the mind pictures.

He’d been dozing in his own wire cage when the images came to him. The cat, a scruffy calico with a foul temper, was crouched on a steel table in the back room. She’d growled, a rusty chainsaw of a growl, and he’d seen the gloved hands holding her down. Another

hand picked up a fold of skin then a hovering needle jabbed. The cat spat and hissed. She quivered a little, her head rolled, and then she sank down like she was melting inside. She didn't move again. Jasper had wakened, shaking with fear, dreading every pair of hands that came toward him. He'd thought it was a nightmare until he looked around for the ill-tempered orange cat.

Jasper had gotten to the middle of the front yard when he heard the father's voice.

"Well, Eddie, go ahead and get him. We don't have all day."

The boy turned toward Jasper and squatted down, one hand outstretched. "Jasper?"

He stopped and looked back at the boy. No, there would be no more animal shelter for him if he could help it. Not even for a few more minutes with the boy, gambling on the slim chance that the parents might wake up to the horror of what they suggested. The father carried a box of houseplants to the car. The mother had a big canvas tote over her shoulder and a small cooler in one hand. With the other hand, she gestured to the little girl, who skipped and hopped around the boy.

"Hey, Eddie, whatcha doing?"

"Go away, Megan." The boy ignored her and kept his eyes fixed on Jasper's.

"Come on, Megan. Hurry up, Eddie." The mother followed the father out to the car and the little girl trailed behind.

Jasper watched the boy and his family and wondered again, as he often did, what it would be like to be a part of something like that tiny tribe.

"Jasper boy? Are you going to come with me or do you have someplace else to go? Are you going to be all right?" The boy whispered and picked at a scab on his arm. He seemed to be talking

more to himself than Jasper.

With two quick silent bounds, Jasper was close enough to touch the boy. So he did, stepping close in a tight circle around him so that he gave the boy a full body brush. The boy's head jerked up and his hand reached out, but the specter of the shelter loomed cold and deadly in Jasper's mind so he stepped outside the boy's range.

"Eddie, are you coming?" The father stood beside the car, both hands on his hips.

"Jasper?" the boy asked. Jasper trotted a few yards away then blinked a long slow caress to his boy.

The little girl spoke up in her thin, reedy voice, "Why is Eddie crying?"

Jasper didn't need to hear the answer and the thought of watching the car pull out of the driveway and out of his life was suddenly too much to ask. He took off in a loping, uneven gallop across the big man's yard without stopping to look.