INTRODUCTION

Nolan's mother has bright green hair and a million surprises. Without warning she sells everything they own, buys a camper van, and whisks him off on a road trip. Destination unknown.

Feather travels in private planes and expensive cars, tagging along with her rock star father. Every minute of her life is planned. And she hates it.

Nolan and Feather have nothing in common—until a serval leaps into their lives. Together they vow to protect the beautiful, dangerous wild cat. But someone else wants the serval too, and she'll stop at nothing to get it.

_Shadow Cat_ is an absorbing and thought-provoking adventure story for children aged 9+, about the friendship of two young people who are each dealing with difficult lives caused by parents they love. The story is skilfully told, around the themes of fame, bipolar disorder—and the proper protection of wild animals.

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

“Shadow Cat is a story of survival. Of secrets and young people trying to deal with things, in one case far too complicated, and of friendship.”

“This is a brilliant new novel by a very well-known and respected author.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gillian Cross has been writing children’s books for over twenty years. Before that she took English degrees at Oxford and Sussex Universities, and she had various jobs including working in a bakery and being an assistant to a Member of Parliament.

She is married with four children and lives in Dorset. Her hobbies include orienteering and playing the piano.

She won the Carnegie Medal for _Wolf_ and the Smarties Prize and the Whitbread Children’s Novel Award for _The Great Elephant Chase_.

Find out more about Gillian Cross and her books at Gillian’s website.
TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK

◆ How did you feel when reading this book? And when you’d finished it?
◆ Which parts of the story do you remember most?
◆ Did you skip any parts? Which ones?
◆ Was there anything that took you by surprise?
◆ Were there any parts you didn’t make sense of?
◆ What was the thing you most liked finding out from the book?
◆ What kind of a book did you think it was going to be?
◆ What would you say about this book if you were telling someone what you’ve just read?
◆ Does the story work for you? Could you follow it? What does the book say to you?
◆ Has reading the book changed or affected you? At the end of the story did you feel as if you’d shared a real experience?
◆ Did you stop and start, or did you want to read it all through in one go?
◆ Are there parts you want to read over again?
**THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS**

**Characters in the story**

Which characters in *Shadow Cat* stand out for you? Why?

Think of three or four key words to describe them. What actions or descriptions in the book back up your description?

**Choose one person from the story and write a full description of him or her, using this character sketch template.**

There are some things which may not be exactly described in the book, and so you would need to imagine them, based on how the character acts and comes across in the story—for example the details of how people look, and some of their likes and dislikes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character sketch of</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name, and part played in the story</td>
<td>e.g. Nolan – main character</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where he/she lives</td>
<td>e.g. in a camper van</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>e.g. Mother: Ro; Feather; school friends: Ben and Garrett</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appearance: hair, eyes, build</td>
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<td>Personality</td>
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<td>Likes and dislikes</td>
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<td>Strengths</td>
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<td>Weaknesses</td>
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<td>Feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopes and dreams</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does he/she deal with things?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What does he/she care most about?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What books do you think he/she likes reading?</td>
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THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Nolan and Feather: two different lives

Except this half hour before breakfast. This is the only time she can choose what she does. Her real life. As they trudge up to the camper van, she wonders what it’s like to be Nolan. To be completely free, all day, without any schedule to worry about.  (p150)

‘Feather’s got everything! A fantastic horse, designer clothes, a lovely place to live, people to cook her meals —’ No walking to the shops. No need to look after her mother…  (p153)

Nolan and Feather each think that the other has the better life.

Make lists of the good things and the difficulties in each of their lives. Which life would you prefer?—or would you choose a different life from these?

What are your reasons for your preference?

Being rich and famous

…I recognised her face from a thousand news photographs. I’d seen that face at parties and first nights. On holiday in big, luxury yachts. Stepping out of private aeroplanes and walking into smart hotels. Wherever she was, she looked beautiful and expensive…  (p179)

Above is a description of Feather’s mother Sally, the wife of Midir, lead singer of the Gentry.

With your class or reading group have a formal debate on the proposition that ‘This house believes that you have a better life if you are rich and famous.’ Have a go at using a formal debate structure with four speakers, proposing, and opposing, with summary speeches, and then questions and voting from the rest of the group.

Tips for debating:

◆ Research your facts thoroughly – for both sides of the argument
◆ Have notes, but just refer to them, don’t read them out like an essay
◆ Make your points clearly, with persuasive arguments
◆ Be confident in your speech and body language
◆ Listen carefully to opposing arguments

Your favourite band

It wasn’t really my kind of music. Much too fierce and noisy. But I always pretended to like it because Ro was wild about the band. They were part of the happy times before she and Dad split up and she played their songs so often I knew them all backwards.

In Shadow Cat Nolan’s mother Ro is a follower of a rock group called The Gentry. Do you have a favourite music group? What are they called and what music do they play? What do you specially like about them and how do you support them? In the story Ro is thrilled to meet Feather, the daughter of the lead singer of The Gentry. Imagine you get to meet your favourite band—maybe at a festival, or by chance on holiday or on your home patch.

Describe your meeting, and your feelings about it, in the form of an email to a friend—or in a diary entry.
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

The power of the press

Bulbs start flashing as soon as the plane door opens. For a second Midir and Sally pose in the doorway, each with an arm around Feather.

...‘Don’t give the press too much time,’ Vix always says. ‘Let them feel they’re lucky to get a picture at all.’ (p10)

Because her parents are famous rock stars, Feather lives in constant awareness of the press and publicity about their lives. Think of examples from the book when newspaper publicity drives how Feather’s family deal with things—especially when the serval has escaped.

Look at newspaper and magazine stories about celebrities—what do you think about these stories? Why do you think they are popular?

Bipolar disorder

I was in Glasgow too, because Ro was in hospital there, being treated for bipolar disorder. Dad took six months off work to look after me, and we stayed in a flat in Glasgow, waiting for Ro to get better. (p302)

People with bipolar disorder swing up and down between high moods when they feel abnormally happy, energetic, or irritable, needing little sleep, and then periods of depression when they have no energy and a negative outlook on life.

Find out some more about bipolar disorder.

As you got to know Ro through the story did you realise that she had this disorder? Think of some examples of her high and low times. We see that Nolan is familiar with her moods and how to deal with them—do you think he knows that she has this particular illness? From the way he thinks and cares about his mother, what do we get to know about Nolan’s character?
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Setting the scene

Strathmarne. The name made a picture in my head...as soon as she said it I could see a wide valley, filled with heather and trees. And, up on the hillside, a big grey house with turrets and pointed windows and walled gardens.

Most of Shadow Cat is set in Scotland in an area near a town called Strathmarne, and the castle described above belongs to Midir, the lead singer of The Gentry. This is where the escaped serval is running wild.

From the descriptions in the story have a go at drawing a sketch map of the Strathmarne area. Here are the main features you could include on it—and some excerpts from the book to help you to position things.

We were in a car park, halfway along a narrow ridge. And all around us was wild, open country, with slopes covered in heather and little patches of trees. On one side of the van was a steep little valley with trees at the bottom. On the other side was the road... Going left, the road led uphill, into a thick wood. But if I turned right, following the ridge down, there was a village about five miles away. (p77)

There was just one street, with houses on both sides of the road and a little shop-and-post-office. (p80)

It took me about ten minutes to reach the edge of the wood. I was right about the stream. It ran down the centre of the valley, in a narrow, dark channel underneath the trees. And on the other side of it, on the far edge of the wood, was a little stone building, just a bit too small for a house. (p90)

At the end of the wood, the stream ran out into a marshy, open space full of reeds. Behind that was a sheet of black water—a little lake, with a steep slope on the right and trees along the left hand side. And beyond the lake were a couple of green fields. (p91)

‘Go straight on down and you’ll see the turn for the campsite on your right, just after you’ve left the village.’ (p126)

The house (at the campsite) was on the same ridge as the car park, but much further down. There was a fine view down on to the fields at the end of the loch. (p128)
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Shadow Cat—the Serval

And now I could see a long upright back, with a pattern of stripes that perfectly matched the reeds. Black and golden. Light-dark-light-dark-light-dark.

It was the cat. (p93)

Throughout the book there are descriptions of the serval. Gather them together and then find out more about these beautiful wild cats.

Here’s a research checklist to start you off:

HABITAT: .................................................................
SIZE: .................................................................
COLOUR & MARKINGS: ........................................
TRACKS: ............................................................
HUNTING & DIET: ................................................
BEHAVIOUR: ........................................................

You could also draw a picture of a serval or write your own description or poem.

Artwork © Mark Eal. Photography © Shutterstock and RapidEye/iStockphoto
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Wild animals in captivity: caring about the serval, and caring for the serval

Caring for a captive animal takes time, money and knowledge to provide everything the animal needs, such as food, water and the correct environment, to prevent suffering and ensure its welfare.

See the website for the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals:
http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/wildlife/captivity

I crouched down by a gorse bush and called in a quiet, low voice, ‘Come. Come-come-come.’ It was silly – like chanting a spell – but I wanted to see the cat again. (p.94)

Nolan and Feather become increasingly attached to the serval and are afraid that it will be caught and kept as an exotic pet with its claws removed and its teeth filed down. The tension in the story grows as they attempt to keep it free, building up to a climax and then resolution, as a safe place is made for it in Midir’s estate.

Imagine you’re a journalist for a Sunday paper magazine and that you meet with Feather and Nolan to interview them about their adventure with the serval. Make a list of questions you could ask, and next to each question make notes for Nolan’s and Feather’s replies.

You could then use your questions and notes to write their story for your magazine.
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

*Shadow Cat—the book’s title*

What do you think about the title of this book? What does it tell you about the story, and what kind of story did you expect from this title?

If you were to give the book a new title, what would it be?

**Design a cover for the book, using your new title.**
THEMES TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

An adventure story

*Shadow Cat* is a great adventure story, with a main character—Nolan—who has to face danger and difficulties, and an ending where his efforts are successful, and the difficulties are resolved.

**Write your own adventure story!**

Here are the things to include for a really good story!

- Location: give your story an interesting setting—like Strathmarne in *Shadow Cat*
- Hero and/or heroine—like Nolan and Feather
- Danger, or maybe a challenge or a quest for your hero to tackle—he needs a reason for his adventure!
- Enemies to face
- Twists in your story—ups and downs which get in your hero’s way
- A scary, exciting climax—where your hero is captured or trapped or in danger
- All the strands of the story sorted out so that you know what happens to everyone—the happy ending!
# More Reading

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<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gillian Cross</td>
<td><strong>More Books by Gillian Cross</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>After Tomorrow</em></td>
<td>OUP</td>
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<td>Anne Cassidy</td>
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<td><em>I Know What You Did Last Wednesday</em></td>
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<td>Sonya Hartnett</td>
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<td>Daniel Pennac</td>
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<td>Walker</td>
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