Our Writing Lives

Cat Poems and Other Junior High Worries

by Marcie Flinchum Atkins

I was not allowed to have a cat. We had a dog and that was plenty, according to my mom. So I often sat in my bedroom, huddled in a corner with my journal, trying to imagine myself owning a cat. When my seventh grade English teacher assigned my class to write poems for homework, I wanted my poem to be about a cat. My mother's advice? Go watch the neighbor's cat for a while, write a poem about something else, or use my imagination. So there I sat, hunched up in a ball in my room, trying to visualize what a cat might do and trying to use the vivid imagination my mother claimed I had.

For days I pondered, imagined, and played with words until I composed the "perfect cat poem." I was proud of my poem and hoped my teacher would be, but I still faced many fears. When I stood up to read my poem, would everyone in the class think my poem was stupid because they knew I didn't have a cat? Would they know I had only imagined my way through it?

When I stood before my class that day in seventh grade, I held the cat poem chest-level and began to read. I wanted to convey the feeling and drama of the poem without sounding ridiculous. I worried because the difference between being cool and being an outcast is often virtually indistinguishable in junior high.

In seconds, the dreaded moment was over, and I sat back down in my seat. I scanned the room for snickering classmates or rolling eyes. Instead, I saw a half dozen other twelve-year-olds gripping their papers, wide-eyed, waiting to read. The other half dozen simply looked relieved. They had already read their poems.

The pit of my stomach churned as I realized that none of my classmates gave a second's thought to whether or not I sounded silly when I read my poem. And certainly none of them had paid much attention to the handful of words I had slaved over for days. And not a one was spreading gossip that I didn't really have a cat.

Soon, my fear shifted from my peers' reactions to my poem to my teacher's reaction. I wondered if she would know immediately that I didn't own a cat. I wondered if she would mark my poem with red ink denoting every mistake and making suggestions in the margins. I was truly surprised when my teacher, Mrs. Griep, gave my poem an A and encouraged me to continue writing.

I thought my writing anxiety would be over when I became an adult. However, when I decided to teach, I also committed myself to attending graduate school. So, each time I take a writing class and I share my writing with others, I get knots in my stomach. As much as I desire to be a writer, I am still plagued with thoughts of someone thinking I am a horrible writer, and that I don't belong in a graduate writing course. And each time, I am reassured that others around me aren't as concerned with how bad my writing is because they are too worried about their own.

Each fall when I step back into the third grade classroom where I teach, I am clearly aware of the anxiety I experience as a student during each graduate course I take. So I understand when students are fearful of writing. I understand when they have lots of good ideas but painstakingly fret over each word as they put it on the page. I understand their inner turmoil, and I recognize the looks of pain and distress on their faces. I have been there. Some want me to look at their rough drafts every few sentences to see if it's what I want. I try to tell them not to worry and to keep writing their ideas down. They, too, are afraid of the red ink mark like I was and still am.

Some students hesitate to write about things they have never done or things about which they know nothing. Faces light up when I tell them to let their imaginations fly. They worry about details. They give excuses. My suggestions? Close your eyes, pretend you are in your story, and write down what you see. Within minutes, I have students, journals in hand, hunched up in balls all around my room, writing furiously. And I hope I can coax them into sharing their writing tomorrow.

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