Bernie keeps a barn full of animals the rest of the world has no use for—two retired trotters, a rooster, some banty hens, and a Muscovy duck with clipped wings who calls herself The Lady. When the cat called Whittington shows up one day, it is to the Lady that he makes an appeal to secure a place in the barn. The Lady’s a little hesitant at first, but when the cat claims to be a master ratter, that clinches it.

Bernie’s orphaned grandkids, Abby and Ben, come to the barn every day to help feed the animals. Abby shares her worry that Ben can’t really read yet and that he refuses to go to Special Ed. Whittington and the Lady decide that Abby should give Ben reading lessons in the barn. It is a balm for Ben when, having toughed out the daily lesson, Whittington comes to tell, in tantalizing installments, the story handed down to him from his nameless forebearer, Dick Whittington’s cat—the legend of the lad born into poverty in rural England during the Black Death, who runs away to London to seek his fortune. This is an unforgettable tale about how learning to read saves one little boy. It is about the healing, transcendent power of storytelling and how, if you have loved ones surrounding you and good stories to tell, to listen to, and to read, you have just about everything of value in this world.

An Honor Book for 2005, "Whittington" is, at the very least, worthy of this placement. (The 2005 Newbery Award Book is "Kira-Kira," a book I have not read and cannot make a comparative judgment.)

"Whittington" is a special book for several reasons (to be outlined here). I find the stories to be a concatenation (series of stories linked together), skilfully linked. But don’t trust my opinion. Here is an example: In reference to a story the cat Whittington is narrating:

"One curious thing. While his cat was tied down for the operation, Dick noticed that her rear paws were dark purple, almost black. The sacred cats of Egypt had dark purple paws. [....]"
"Then Whittington [the cat narrator] stretched out one of his own rear paws so everyone could see. It was dark purple."

That connection gives me chills, not in fear, but for the exciting story connection. As I looked for a second example, I came across so many delightful passages and several tear-worthy ones that I dropped the idea to share another. Leaving out so many wonderful parts of the story would be unfair to the reader. This is a delightful and marvelous (full of marvels) book! Reader, this book will instruct and entertain and make your life a little more bearable for a short while.

But here are the story lines (which I will share).

1. The germ of the idea for the multiple story lines comes from the old tale of Dick Whittington and his cat. Intertwined is the story of a magical cat who brings riches to his master, as told in a Persian fairy tale.

2. Then there is Dick Whittington himself, who lived during medieval England and actually became lord mayor of London three or four times (number depends on which source you consult). Because he used his wealth to do good for the poor, he became a folk hero.

3. The story of the barnyard animals, each animal's history, and how they formed a little family in this little plot of land.

4. The story of Ben and Abby, brother and sister who work together in tending the animals and becoming part of the family. Yet, Ben has dyslexia and is on the verge of being held back at the end of his current school year. How he learns to read is an integral part of this concatenating story.

5. The story of Bernie, their grandfather, and how he collects animals and children is, of course, the broad framework for all the other stories.

6. However, the most important story is the book itself in hinging all the stories together. After all, how is it that animals talk, form a cross-species family, and tell long stories? This story has to be established and told in such a convincing manner that the reader immediately suspends disbelief (as this adult reader did) to make the story happen in one's mind and heart.

That pretty much gives the big picture. What is required henceforth is readers who put the words together in their brains and feel the story in their hearts to create the magic of Story.

At the conclusion I was so surprised when big, fat tears rolled down my face, not in sadness, but in joy. The tradition basic to and in the story continued. The clues that this would be so are right there in the story, but still took me by surprise.
"Whittington" is a darn good Honor book!

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