



Cat's Eye by Margaret Atwood

ABOUT THE STORY

Cat's Eye tells the story of a young girl, Elaine, whose family settles in Toronto after years of travelling for her father's job as an entomologist (someone who studies insects). Because of his job, Elaine has spent most of her childhood living in remote places with just her brother to play with. She makes friends with a group of three girls but, after they start being unkind to her, she realises she has to make new friends. The book deals with the main themes of fitting in and identity, and is mostly told in flashbacks as the protagonist (now a painter and back in Toronto for an art retrospective) recalls her childhood. The extract below describes her first encounters with two of the friends, before the third friend, Cordelia, becomes one of the group.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author and poet who was born in 1939. As a child, she spent a lot of time travelling due to her father's job as a forest entomologist. She decided she wanted to become a writer from a young age and, after graduating, taught English at a number of American and Canadian universities. She started *Cat's Eye* in 1964 but then left it and didn't start work on it again until the late 1980s, when she herself had a teenage daughter and was able to observe at first hand the teenage relationships about which she was writing. As well as being an author, she is also the inventor of the LongPen, a technology that allows remote signing and writing of documents.

Chapter 10

Grace is always the teacher, Carol and I the students. We have to do spelling tests and sums in arithmetic; it's like real school, but worse, because we never get to draw pictures. We can't pretend to be bad, because

5 Grace doesn't like disorder.

Or we sit on the floor in Grace's room with piles of old Eaton's Catalogues. I've seen lots of Eaton's Catalogues before: up north they're hung in outhouses for use as toilet paper. Eaton's Catalogues remind me of the

10 stench of such outhouses, the buzzing of the flies down the hole underneath, the box of lime and the wooden paddle for dumping the lime down, onto the piles of old and recent droppings, of all shapes and colors of brown. But here we treat these catalogues

15 with reverence. We cut the small colored figures out of them and paste them into scrapbooks. Then we cut out other things—cookware, furniture—and paste them around the figures. The figures themselves are always women. We call them "my lady." "My lady's

20 going to have this refrigerator," we say. "My lady's getting this rug." "This is my lady's umbrella."

Grace and Carol look at each other's scrapbook pages and say, "Oh, yours is so good. Mine's no good. Mine's awful." They say this every time we play the

25 scrapbook game. Their voices are wheedling and

false; I can tell they don't mean it, each one thinks her own lady on her own page is good. But it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too.

I find this game tiring—it's the weight, the

30 accumulation of all these objects, these possessions that would have to be taken care of, packed, stuffed into cars, unpacked. I know a lot about moving house. But Carol and Grace have never moved anywhere. Their ladies live in a single house each and have

35 always lived there. They can add more and more, stuff the pages of their scrapbooks with dining room suites, beds, stacks of towels, one set of dishes after another, and think nothing of it. I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse

40 of my own. Something is unfolding, being revealed to me. I see that there's a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all. I don't have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well,

45 make loud explosive noises, decode messages, die on cue. I don't have to think about whether I've done these things well, as well as a boy. All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the Eaton's Catalogue with embroidery scissors, and say I've done

50 it badly.

Partly, this is a relief.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

disorder (line 5): a situation in which things are not tidy

outhouse (line 8): an outside toilet

stench (line 10): a very bad smell

lime (line 11): a white substance for putting down the toilet

paddle (line 12): a short flat piece of wood with a handle

reverence (line 15): a feeling of respect and admiration

wheedling (line 25): asking for something continuously in an annoying way

accumulation (line 30): the amount of something that is collected over time

braids (line 39): plaits of hair

embroidery (line 49): the activity of decorating cloth with coloured stitches



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Before reading

- 1 You are going to read an extract from a book called *Cat's Eye*. What do you think the 'cat's eye' in the title could refer to? Work in pairs or small groups and make suggestions.
- 2 The book is about a girl who moves to a new city and makes new friends. Which of the qualities below are important to you when making new friends?
 - that they like the same things as you
 - that they are of the same gender
 - that they say the same things as you
 - that they have had the same life experiences as you
- 3 Read *About the story* and *About the author*. Although the book isn't autobiographical, what similarities do you notice about the author and the protagonist of the story?
- 4 Read *About the story* again. What do you think Elaine is like? How do you think she might be different to the girls she makes friends with in Toronto? Work in pairs and discuss your ideas.

While reading

- 1 Read the text and tick the things that the narrator mentions in the extract.

1 her teacher at school	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 a pretend game she plays with Carol and Grace	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 a description of her old house	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 a cutting game that she plays with Carol and Grace	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 games she used to play	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 her family	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 her opinions about the games she plays now	<input type="checkbox"/>
- 2 Read the text again and answer the questions. Find evidence in the text to support your answers.
 - 1 Does the narrator like the two games she plays with Carol and Grace? Why/Why not?
.....
 - 2 What difference in the use of Eaton's Catalogue does the narrator describe? What does this show about her old life and her life in Toronto?
.....
 - 3 Are Carol and Grace always truthful with each other?
.....
 - 4 What kind of games did the narrator use to play before she moved to Toronto? Did she play them with boys or girls?
.....
 - 5 What differences are there in the extract between the narrator and Grace and Carol?
.....

- 3 Read the relevant part of the text and answer the questions.

- 1 Read lines 1–5. What does the narrator's choice of language tell you about Grace and her relationship to the other two girls?
- 2 Read lines 29–33. What does the author's choice of language tell us about Elaine and her past life?
- 3 Read lines 41–51. What advantages and disadvantages of the games she played in the past and the games she plays now does the narrator describe? Why does she say she finds the games now a relief?
- 4 Read lines 27–28. What is the thing you have to say? Why does the narrator begin to say it too? What do you think might happen if you didn't say it?

After reading

- 1 Read this quote, taken from another part of the book, and discuss the questions in small groups.

You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.

- 1 What is this quote saying about one's past in relation to present time? How does this relate to shaping one's identity?
- 2 In the extract you've read, which past events have come to the surface for the author?
- 3 Why do you think those particular past events have surfaced? What significance do they have to the present events she is describing?
- 2 Now think about a past event that you can remember clearly from your childhood, which has shaped your identity in some way. It could be a game, an individual event or even a short period in your life, but should be something that you can remember vividly. Make notes on the following points:
 - when it happened
 - what happened
 - detailed descriptions of people, scenery, events
 - the effect it has had on your life
- 3 Write a letter to a friend describing the event. Make your letter as descriptive as possible.