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# Barn Cat

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## Reading Guide

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### Preliminary Remarks

- The following assignments offer tasks and activities from which the teacher or students can choose.
- Many tasks are suitable for talks or presentations to the class.
- Some tasks overlap with others.
- The material can be edited and students may copy instructions, questions, and answers into their exercise books.

### The Author Speaks

When I lived in Wisconsin, my husband and I often visited the dairy farm where one of our friends had grown up. My mother-in-law had a house cat that was born in the barn there. This cat would have grown up as a half-feral barn cat if my husband hadn't chosen her out of a litter of kittens to become his mother's pampered pet.

During those years, I volunteered as a "rehabilitator" at a wildlife sanctuary, raising the songbird babies that fell out of their nests, teaching them to fly and forage for food, and releasing them when they were ready to fend for themselves. Other volunteers worked with orphaned mammals such as raccoons, squirrels, and possums. One summer, an illegally acquired Eastern box turtle was brought to the sanctuary, restored to health, and ferried back to the park in Pennsylvania where a couple on a camping trip had picked it up, intending to keep it as a pet.

All these stories stayed with me though I got divorced and left Wisconsin, first for Boston and then for Washington, D.C. Like my characters, Lily and her mother Kumiko, I was originally born in Japan. For some people, finding a home means returning to the place where they were born, but others make a new home among families and communities they made through marriage or friendship. I wrote **Barn Cat** to explore the different ways we can all find a home.

Because cats (though mine did not come from barns) are essential to my concept of family and home, I've dedicated this book to the memory of Ernest and Algernon, who shared my last two homes with me. In writing this book, I was assisted by the current pair, Miles and Jackson. Like Lily and Kumiko, cats are paradoxes: independent adventurers who can become committed home-bodies.

### About the Author

Kyoko Mori has written three novels (**Shizuko's Daughter**, **One Bird**, and **Stone Field, True Arrow**) and three nonfiction books (**The Dream of Water**, **Polite Lies**, and **Yarn**). Kyoko lives in Washington, DC with her cats, Miles and Jackson. Her hobbies include running, knitting, cooking, and bird-watching. She teaches writing at George Mason University and in the low-Residency MFA Program at Lesley University.

**Pre-Reading Questions**

**COVER:**

Look at the kitten on the cover. What do his pose and expression say about him?

**TITLE:**

A barn cat is often used to rid farmhouses of rodents and other small pests. Barn cats are usually feral and roam alone. How does the barn cat's life differ from that of a house cat?

**Activities While Reading**

**SETTING:**

There are two major settings in this novel: Wisconsin and Lily's childhood home in Tokyo. While reading, make a list comparing these two places through Lily's eyes. What makes them different? Are there any ways in which they are the same?

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES:**

Write a brief (two to three sentence) chapter summary that describes how Lily changes her understanding of her mother.

Post-Reading Questions

SETTING:

Is Denmark, Wisconsin home for Lily? If not, where is home for Lily?

CHARACTER:

How does Jill serve as a mediator between Lily and her mother?

In what ways do you think Lily wishes she could be more like Jill?

Do we believe Kumiko when she says she came to America to give Lily a better life? Or did she lie to Don for other reasons?

What conclusion does Lily come to?

What do characters such as Jill, Ozzie, and Horatio teach Lily?

POINT OF VIEW:

This novel is told entirely through Lily's eyes. Lily focuses on her relationship with her mother but hardly considers Jill's mother. Even though she has not seen her for many years, Jill still tries to keep in touch with her mother by writing letters. Write a letter from Jill to her mother, outlining the main events of Lily's visit.

THEME:

Motherhood is a major theme in **Barn Cat**. Many times, someone else acts like a mother. (An example: Lily adopts the barn kitten Horatio.) Write about how different characters take on this role. Belonging is also an important theme. Describe how Lily struggles to find a place to belong.

TITLE:

Now that you have finished reading, think again about the title. Who fits the description of a barn cat in the story?

SUMMARY: Write a 90 to 100-word summary of Lily's journey back home.

BOOK CRITIQUE:

Explain what you liked or did not like about **Barn Cat**. You can use specific passages to prove your point.

WRITING ACTIVITY:

Write a very short story from the point-of-view of Horatio the cat. Describe his growing relationship with Lily. How does his view of Lily change over time?