

The Cats of Old San Juan



THE PIRATE'S REVENGE BOOK CLUB GUIDE

*For family reading groups, library book clubs, and
anyone who wants to talk about this book.*

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This book is a middle-grade fantasy, best suited for ages 9 and up. It contains real danger: sword fights, a monster, characters who die, and morally complicated choices. These moments are handled with care but not softened. If you're reading with younger kids, the later chapters (18–23) are where things get intense, and you may want to read those together so you can talk through them.

Pick what interests your group. You don't need every question. Two or three good ones can carry an entire conversation. There are no right answers. The best discussions happen when someone says something nobody else saw coming.

If You're Reading Together Over Multiple Sessions

The book has natural stopping points. Here's one way to break it up:

Session 1: Chapters 1–8 (The World)

The kittens, El Morro, the catacombs, discovering the pirates, the Wizard, King Haragán, and the secret meeting. This is setup, but it's packed with character. Good place to talk about the three kittens' personalities, the state of the wall, and whether Haragán is a bad king or just a comfortable one.

Session 2: Chapters 9–17 (The Collision)

La Casa de los Gatos, the pirate ship, the Cat o' Nine Tales, the invasion of El Morro, Rosana meets Captain Kitty, the escape through the sea door, and the underground river. This is where the world breaks open. Good place to talk about Captain Kitty, what makes a villain interesting, and what happens when nobody listens to a kid who's right.

Session 3: Chapters 18–23 + Song of the Cats (The Reckoning)

Alfie alone with the monster, the flying machine, the armor, the battle, and the aftermath. This is the

Book 1 of a 5-book series

If you find yourself asking “but what happens next?” Good. There are four more books coming.

PART ONE

FOR EVERYONE

Three Kittens, Three Ways of Being Brave

Campeón charges in. Cali adapts. Alfie endures. The book never says one approach is better than the others, but it does test all three.

- Campeón spends most of the story wanting to be the hero by himself. The armor literally cannot be operated alone. It takes four cats working together. What is the book saying about the kind of hero Campeón wants to be versus the kind of hero the situation actually needs?
- When Alfie is trapped alone with the monster, he doesn't fight. He sits down, talks to her, and feeds her a catnip pancake. He says: "You're not a monster. Monstrousness is just a state of mind." Then he builds a rope out of dead cats' old clothes to pull a lever and escape. Is Alfie brave? He'd probably say no. What would you say?
- Cali gets pulled underwater in the river and nearly drowns. When she wakes up, the first thing she asks about is Alfie. She doesn't panic about herself. She also doesn't get to have her own big heroic moment the way Campeón and Alfie do. She's the one who keeps everyone moving, makes the escape plan, finds the sea door. Is that kind of steadiness valued the same way as a dramatic rescue?
- Which of the three would you want beside you in a real crisis?

The Cat o' Nine Tales

One of the funniest scenes in the book. Captain Kitty presents his most terrifying weapon: a raty burlap bag. The crew stuffs wax in their ears. The kittens brace themselves. And out comes... a tiny, ancient cat with a white beard. His weapon is storytelling. Specifically, terrible storytelling. He tells stories so boring, so endless, so structurally unsound that his victims confess everything just to make him stop.

- Is Horace actually effective? He does get information out of his victims. Is boring someone into submission a real kind of power?
- Alfie is the one who finally defeats Horace, not with a sword but by critiquing his stories like a writing teacher. Instead of getting angry, Horace takes the notes and wants to work on his stories. What does it say about Alfie that he wins a battle by being a better reader than the storyteller?
- The crew is genuinely afraid of Horace. They plug their ears. They avoid eye contact. One pirate jumps off the side of the boat. Is this played for comedy, or is there something real underneath the joke?

Mad Meow

Mad Meow Malloy might be the most complicated character in the book. He's a pirate. He's violent. He also lost his wife and children in the hurricane that threw the pirates forward in time, and his grief has never healed.

- When Mad Meow finds Campeón and Cali in the underground caves, he sheathes his sword. He says he won't hurt them because they remind him of his own lost children. Then, two chapters later, he draws his sword on León in a flash of rage. Can someone be genuinely kind and genuinely dangerous at the same time?
- Peggy tells Mad Meow to stop grieving for Calico Jackie: "We looked and we looked and we looked and found nothing. Stop yer dreaming. She indeed be gone." But Mad Meow can't let go. Is he holding onto love, or refusing to accept reality? Is there a difference?
- Mad Meow turns out to have a personal connection to one of the kittens. Neither of them knows it when he first carries her to safety. If you've finished the book, the Go Deeper section has more on this.

Nobody Listened

Campeón sees the pirate ship. He tells the king. Haragán says he was dreaming. The Major is doubtful. The adults dismiss him.

Then the pirates invade and everything Campeón warned them about comes true.

- Have you ever been right about something and nobody believed you? What did you do?
- Is Haragán a bad king, or just a comfortable one? The cat band pushes him off his throne and he can't get back up. He's so used to being carried that he's physically helpless. He closes his eyes and hopes it's a dream. That's darkly funny, but is it also sad?
- Major Mooch is about to ask Rosana on a date when the invasion starts. He's composing a little love poem in his head. Then Mad Meow's sword appears in front of him and his whole world ends. The book gives him this sweet, private moment right before everything falls apart. Why do you think the author did that?

The Voice Telling the Story

The book has an unusual narrator. Right from the first line: "In Spanish, El Morro means 'small hill' or 'headland,' and when spoken sounds like a cross between a meow and a purr. Try it. El Morrrrrro."

This narrator talks directly to you. They have opinions. They say things like "I'm not saying Campeón was right to be as he was, but that's how he was." They call Alfie "a fluffy pincushion who had nothing to do with artillery other than making a nice, wide target."

- Does having a narrator with a personality change how you experience the story? Does it feel like someone is telling you this story, or like you're reading it on your own?
- Did you trust the narrator? The narrator describes Alfie as a "fluffy pincushion" who makes "a nice, wide target" and seems to see him as the comic relief. But Alfie turns out to be the one who tames the monster, defeats Horace, and shows the most compassion. Was the narrator wrong about Alfie from the start?

Do Something Together

Cast the Movie. If this were animated, who voices each character? Captain Kitty needs to be charming, dangerous, and a little funny. Alfie needs dry comedic timing. Mad Meow needs to sound like he might cry or punch you at any moment. Go around the group. Everyone picks one character's voice actor and defends their choice.

Listen to the Pirate War Song. The pirates sing a war song in Chapter 10 as they prepare for battle. There's a real recording of it on meowable.app (where the audiobook and full series soundtrack live). Listen to it together. Compare what you imagined while reading to what it actually sounds like. Does hearing it change how you experience the scene?

Map It Out. Grab some paper and draw the cat kingdom inside El Morro based on the descriptions in the book: the Great Hall, the kitchen, the bedrooms, the catacombs below the cemetery, the sea door in the floor, the eastern wall, León's tower workshop. Compare your maps. Did everyone imagine the same layout?

PART TWO

DELVE DEEPER

Spoilers ahead. This section discusses the ending of the book. Save it for after everyone has finished.

Alfie in the Monster's Cave

When the monster grabs Alfie, the book does something unexpected. Instead of cutting back to Campeón for the rescue, it stays with Alfie. Alone. In the dark. With a creature that just tried to eat him.

Alfie has no sword, no backup, and no inhaler. He's terrified. But he notices the bones of other cats who didn't make it. He finds a dagger and a fanny pack full of Nana Rosana's catnip pancakes. And instead of fighting, he sits down and offers the monster food.

The monster's name is Mathilda. She says "I haven't always been this way. I haven't always been a monster." Alfie says "You're not a monster."

- This might be the bravest scene in the book, and it doesn't involve a sword. What makes it brave?
- Alfie uses food to reach Mathilda. Nana Rosana's cooking, specifically. Food keeps showing up as a way characters connect with each other throughout the book. What other moments can you think of where food matters?
- When Mathilda falls asleep from the catnip, Alfie has to get past her. He builds a rope from the clothes of dead cats and hooks it to a ceiling lever. That's resourceful, but also grim. The book doesn't shy away from the fact that other cats died here. Did that register for you while reading?

Nana Rosana's Choice

For most of the book, Rosana is the caretaker. She cooks, she feeds everyone, she keeps the wall running. The book describes her as someone who "lived for everyone's comfort and well-being but her own." It's presented as a virtue.

Then the ending happens.

Everyone assumes the pirates kidnapped her. Major Mooch vows to mount a rescue. But the final scene reveals Rosana standing on the deck of the Salty Sea Cat. Not as a prisoner. The book says Captain Kitty and Horace didn't break her mind, but "broke something loose inside her." She looks back at El Morro one last time, smiles at the Captain, and sails toward Africa.

- What "broke loose"? Was she unhappy at the wall all along, or did something change during the pirate invasion?

- Is her departure a betrayal of the cats who depend on her, especially Campeón and the kittens? Or is it the bravest thing anyone does in the whole book?
- The book told us she lived for everyone else but herself. Given how she ends up, is the book actually questioning that kind of self-sacrifice? Was it sustainable?
- Major Mooch is going to try to rescue someone who doesn't want to be rescued. How do you think that plays out?

Captain Kitty and Rosana

Their dynamic is one of the most interesting things in the book, and it's easy to miss on a first read.

When Captain Kitty first meets Rosana, she whacks Peggy McGraw with a cast-iron skillet. The Captain claps, impressed. She swings at him next. He catches it, holds a sword to her throat, and then eats one of her puff pastries and tells her it's "divine." He bows and introduces himself like a gentleman.

Later, Rosana tries to drug the pirates with sleeping powder hidden in catnip cream puffs. The Captain figures it out in seconds by testing a puff on Manx. But instead of punishing her, he seems almost entertained.

- Is the Captain genuinely drawn to Rosana, or is he manipulating her? Does it matter if the result is the same?
- Rosana is the only character who stands up to Captain Kitty more than once and survives. What does that tell you about what the Captain values?
- Captain Kitty kills Old Scratch because Scratch tried to take the map from him. He locks the kittens in a dungeon and leaves them to die. But he doesn't harm Rosana. Is he selective about his cruelty, or is something else going on?

Mad Meow and Cali

Mad Meow is Cali's biological father. Calico Jackie was his wife. Cali was lost in the same storm that separated him from his family. Neither Mad Meow nor Cali knows this when he first carries her to safety in the caves.

- Does knowing change how you read their earlier scenes? Go back to the moment Mad Meow sheathes his sword. He says the kittens remind him of his own lost children. He's more right than he realizes.
- Cali has a dream on the pirate ship where she sees Captain Kitty and a cat who looks like Mad Meow. She's remembering something she shouldn't be able to remember. What do you think the book is doing with that dream?
- Cali was raised by Iggy, who found her floating on driftwood after a storm. She loves him. Now she knows her biological father is a pirate. The book doesn't force her to choose. Is that realistic, or is the book avoiding a hard question?

The Real Place Inside the Fantasy

El Morro is real. You can visit it. The cemetery where the kittens play on the gravestones is real (Santa María Magdalena de Pazzis). The streets and the ocean are real. The cats that live along the wall in Old San Juan are real. Puerto Rico's mangrove forests are real, though the book places them in a fictional location near El Morro.

- If you've been to El Morro or Old San Juan, did reading this book change how you think about the place? If you haven't been, do you want to go now?
- The bioluminescent plankton in Chapter 10 are real. Puerto Rico has three bio bays where the water glows. The mangrove forest is real but not in that location. The author takes real Puerto Rican places and reshuffles the geography to serve the story. When is it okay for fiction to rearrange a real place?
- The author lives in Puerto Rico. The book mentions real streets, real landmarks, even a real hurricane. How does knowing the author lives in the world she's writing about change how you read it?

One Last Thing

The book ends with "Song of the Cats," a long poem that retells the entire story in a playful, rhyming way. The poem describes serious events (the invasion, the monster, the deaths, Rosana leaving) in a lighthearted style.

Read a few stanzas aloud together. There's also an animated version of the Song of the Cats on [meowable.app](#) if you want to watch it as a group. Does retelling the story as a song change how it feels? Is it a celebration, a way of processing what happened, or both? And why do you think the author chose to end the book this way instead of just ending it?

The Cats of Old San Juan: The Pirate's Revenge is Book 1 of 5. It's available in hardcover at mjsurrena.com/the-pirates-revenge. The audiobook and original series soundtrack are on meowable.app.

For classroom use, download the free Educator's Guide at mjsurrena.com/learning-center with lesson plans, vocabulary, and Reader's Theater scripts.

MJ offers free virtual visits for book clubs and reading groups. Contact mjsurrena@gmail.com.

For more about the series, including updates on Books 2-5, visit mjsurrena.com/books.