

Cat Is the Perfect Heroine for 'Wabi Sabi'

CatChanel Managing Editor Nikki Batalis reviews this winning children's book, and its celebration of the feline form.

By Nikki Batalis

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"Wabi Sabi" uses collages and haiku to weave a magical spell in a tale of a cat seeking the meaning of her name. The Japanese term "wabi sabi" isn't easy to understand or explain. It is rooted in the ancient Chinese traditions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and roughly translates to finding the beauty in imperfection, or in things that are modest, humble and simple.

But what is easy is appreciating the beauty and craftsmanship in the new children's book "Wabi Sabi," written by Mark Reibstein and illustrated by Caldecott Medal winner Ed Young (Little, Brown & Co.; \$16.99, ages 3-6). In fact, "Wabi Sabi" was recently named one of the year's Best Illustrated Children's Books by The New York Times.

I find it interesting that the author selected a cat as the protagonist in this tale of self-discovery. In the story, a cat named Wabi Sabi, who lives in Kyoto, Japan, embarks on a journey to find out the meaning of her name. She asks her best friend, another cat named Snowball; she asks a "smart but kind of mean" dog named Rascal; she traverses a big city to seek out a wise old monkey who might have the answer.

She finally discovers the meaning of wabi sabi when she looks into a bowl of tea and sees her own reflection:

"Seeing herself plain
and beautiful, she whispered,
'Now I understand.'"

The cat's simple, elegant lines make it the perfect example of wabi sabi. The artwork created by Young for the book – beautiful earth-toned collages – shows us wonderful representations of the feline form: the triangular-shaped face and ears, the rounded body, the curling tail. (For fun, check out the YouTube video of Reibstein and Young as they discuss their work on the book – and see Reibstein's orange-and-white cat in the background as the author talks and writes.)

This lovely and philosophical book is intended for young children, but anyone who appreciates beautiful artwork – and the celebration of the feline form – would enjoy it. I felt a sense of calm just looking at it; maybe that's what wabi sabi is all about.