

Take 5: Ideas for Independent/Home Learning

Varjak Paw by S.F. Said, illustrated by Dave McKean (Corgi)

1. Explore it

Read this story opening. You might want to hear it read aloud as well as reading it for yourself.

Chapter One

The Elder Paw was telling a story.

It was a Jalal tale, one of the best. Varjak loved to hear his grandfather's tales of their famous ancestor: how Jalal fought the fiercest warrior cats, how he was the mightiest hunter, how he came out of Mesopotamia and travelled to the ends of the earth, further than any cat had been before.

But today, the Elder Paw's tale just made Varjak restless. So what if Jalal had such exciting adventures? Varjak never would. Jalal had ended his days in the Contessa's house. His family of Mesopotamian Blues had stayed here ever since.

The old place must have been full of light and life in Jalal's time, generations ago – but now it was full of dust and musty smells. The windows were always closed, the doors locked. There was a garden, but it was surrounded by a high stone wall. Jalal was the last to cross it. In all the years since then, no one had ever left the Contessa's house.

Now, no one except Varjak was even listening to the tale of Jalal's adventures. Father, Mother and Aunt Juni were dozing in the late afternoon light that trickled through the thick green windows. His big brother Julius was flexing his muscles; his cousin Jasmine was fiddling with her collar. His litter brothers Jay, Jethro and Jerome were playing one of those kittenish games that Varjak could never see the point of, and wasn't allowed to join in anyway.

No one was looking at him. This was his chance. He'd been in the garden before, but the family didn't like it out there, and never let him stay very long.

Talk about how this story opening makes you feel and what you like or dislike about it. Does it remind you of anything you know in stories or real life? How? Think about how it is written. What parts of this really stick in your mind? Which words and phrases do you like the best? What do you like about them? Do they look or sound interesting? Do they help you make a picture in your mind? What do other people think?

2. Illustrate it

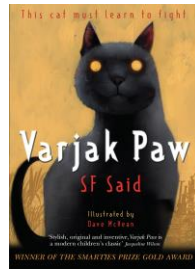
After you have read it a few times, take a pen or pencil and a bit of scrap paper. You can use the back of an old envelope or cereal packet; whatever is to hand. Draw what you see in your imagination. It can be shapes or shading - anything that captures the place and the mood of this story opening. Maybe other people in your family want to draw what they imagine as well. Remember, everyone has their own ideas and imagines things their own way. This is a good thing!

To get started, ask yourself: *Where does this story begin? What happens? How do you know? How does it make me feel? How can I show this in a drawing?*

Re-read the opening and write some words and phrases that have helped you make your picture. Share what you have drawn with someone else: Why have you chosen to draw it this way? Which words and phrases helped you make a picture?

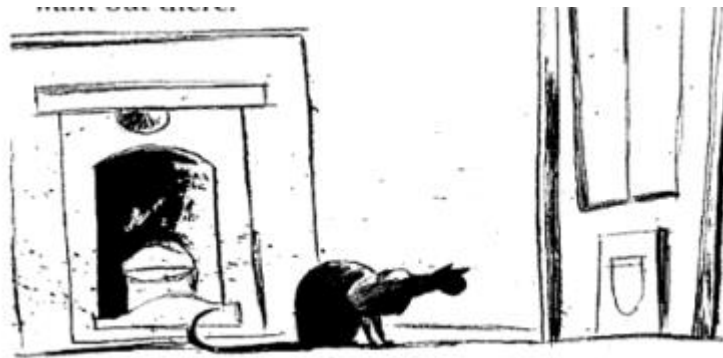
3. Talk about it

Look at the front cover of the book.



How do you think Varjak Paw is feeling? What might he be thinking? How do you know? What might he be looking at? What might have happened just before this image? What might be about to happen? What could 'This cat must learn to fight.' mean? What does the cover make you think the story will be about?

4. Imagine it



Look at this picture from inside the first chapter. What further detail does the picture give you about Varjak's life? Why do you think Varjak is shown staring at the cat flap? How do you think he feels in this moment? What do you imagine is outside the cat flap?

Can you imagine what it might be like for a cat to be stuck inside all the time? How does it feel for you when you can't get outside? What do you do to keep yourself busy and entertained when you are stuck inside? How do these things help you?

5. Create it

Can you imagine what would happen if Varjak took the risk and left the house? What do you think would happen?

Draw and write your story ideas, trying out different ideas. Remember to use stories you already know and like for ideas. You could even publish your story in a handmade book by folding a piece of paper or on the computer, ready to share it with your teacher or your friends and family.