



## Picture Book Activity



**Mama Cat Has Three Kittens**

**By: Denise Fleming**

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# **Mama Cat Has Three Kittens**

## **Written and Illustrated by Denise Fleming**

### **Henry Holt and Company, 1998**

#### **Synopsis**

The idea that, within a family, one child prefers to act differently is a recurring theme in children's books. This story features Mama Cat and her three kittens, Fluffy, Skinny, and Boris. Mama Cat does the things that you would expect a cat do, wash her paws, walk on stone walls, sharpen her claws, chase leaves, dig in sand, and take the proverbial "*cat-nap*." Fluffy and Skinny stay close to Mama Cat and copy what she does. Boris, on the other hand, seems to take little interest in Mama Cat's activities – preferring to snooze. Eventually, Mama Cat, Fluffy, and Skinny tire – and now it's Boris's turn! The book ends with a playful plot twist that is sure to be a hit with the toddlers for whom the book is intended.

The book's simple phrases break down the action, using repetition to lead children to anticipate the next event. When being read out loud, the reader can easily engage children to participate by asking them what they think will happen next. This approach will add drama and heighten the enjoyment of the surprise ending.

Beautifully illustrated (covered more in detail later in this paper), each picture not only features the cats, but contains trios of other creatures including: caterpillars, ladybugs, snails, and bumblebees. A mouse pokes his head in from time to time, being careful to not attract the attention of the cats. These visual elements introduce another plot line in the story. This book should be a real "*hit*" with the "*read to me*" crowd, up to 5 years old.

#### **Honors and Awards: *Mama Cat Has Three Kittens***

Source: <http://denisefleming.com/Pages/booklist.html>

-  ALA Notable Book, 1998
-  1998 Charlotte Zolotow Award, Highly Recommended Title
-  New York Public Library's List of One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing
-  Nick Jr. Magazine, Ten Can't Miss Classics, 2000

#### **About the Author**

Denise Fleming is an artist that lives in Toledo, Ohio with her husband, David, her daughter, Indigo, seven cats, and one dog. She loves her animals and her cat, Gigi, was the inspiration for Mama Cat (KidsRead, 2004).



Her father built furniture when she was young and Denise and her sister were always creating things in her father's workshop or producing plays and events like "spook houses" for the neighborhood. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, she participated in classes at the *Toledo Museum of Art* and had paintings featured in an international art exchange program. Her first published work was used as a cover of a teacher's magazine (Orban, 2000).

She continued to seriously study art in high school, won several awards there for her work, and continued her education at *Kendall College of Art*, where she met her husband, David, who is also an artist. They were married after graduation and started working on a variety of projects. Because they prefer to work as freelance artists, the two have taught themselves all types of skills from carpentry to furniture building (Fleming, 2001).

## Illustrations

The book is beautifully illustrated with vivid pictures; bright, bold colors; interesting textures; depth; and character. The illustrations are created with colored cotton fiber pulp and stencils (Christolon, 1998). The resulting stylized artwork is unique and gives her books a flavor of their own. Working with this medium, Denise Fleming is able to pepper her pictures with extra touches of eye-catching colors. Mama Cat, for example, is a black cat, but Fleming uses speckles of blue and bursts of fuchsia to give her a multidimensional appearance. Cat lovers will especially appreciate the way Ms. Fleming has captured the majestic nature and individuality of felines. Combining her pulp painting techniques with different shades of fluorescent colors, the cat's eyes glow and command viewers' attention (Publishers Weekly, 1998).

The pictures in this book are large enough to be readily seen and appreciated from across the room – a real advantage with "*story time*" reading groups. The artist skillfully uses composition to draw attention to the activities of Mama Cat, Fluffy, and Skinny. For most of the book, Boris is napping off to the side, but his tabby orange fur makes sure that he stands out too. The backgrounds used are all a delight to behold and the illustrations make each page an adventure.

Since she started working with pulp painting (creating paper), she has primarily focused her energies on this medium. Her brilliant, vivid images are created by mixing colored paper pulps and pouring them through hand-cut stencils. She believes that her artwork has now come full circle – from startling, bright and colorful paintings from her youth; through realistic and detailed images, and now back to the types of images she imagined and created in her childhood (Orban, 2000)



Revisiting the stylistic drawings of childhood is why Ms. Fleming uses pulp paper. She admires the expressive large shapes and vibrant colors in children’s paintings and believes this technique helps re-create those feelings. When using traditional materials and brushes, she states that she cannot capture the adventure and brilliance of children’s artwork. She says that she gets ideas for her work from words the rhyme, phrases, animals, or colors in her garden (Cummings, 1995).

## Creating the Illustrations: Pulp Painting

All the images for her books are created by pouring colored cotton pulp through hand-cut stencils. This results in images that are set in hand-made paper – the paper is the picture and the picture is the paper. The results are truly stunning and lend a dreamy feel that captures the imaginations of her readers (Fleming, 1998).

Each image that accompanies *Mama Cat Has Three Kittens* is created with cotton rag fiber that has been beaten to a fine pulp and suspended in water. Adding pigments and chemicals, the pulp has been colored and textured. This serves as her “paint.” Squeeze bottles and cups are used to apply the processed pulp to her underdrawings of hand-cut stencils (Orban, 2000).

Sound like fun? Check out her Web site at [www.denisefleming.com](http://www.denisefleming.com). There is a link that describes her papermaking process in detail. In April of 1999, Fleming conducted a seminar on her techniques at the *Baltimore County Public Library*. Step-by-step directs and illustrations of the process are available at their Web site at: [http://bcplonline.org/kidspage/kids\\_flem\\_papermaking.html](http://bcplonline.org/kidspage/kids_flem_papermaking.html).

## Reading Activities

**Goal.** Brothers & Sisters can be alike, or can be different.

**Vocabulary.** Kittens, Claws, Sharpen, and Pounce.

**Questions/Comments As you read.**

1. After each page describing Mama Cat’s activities, ask children what they think each of the kittens will be doing (This will be 5 questions).
2. When Mama Cat curls up to nap, and Fluffy and Skinny curl up to nap, ask, “What do you think Boris will do?” Repeat this question after the next set of pages, which indicates he stretches, yawns, washes his paws (2 questions).
3. For each illustration, ask children to identify other “*creatures*” that are also in the picture.



## Student-Centered Activity

On one wall, put up a sign that says, **ALIKE** and on another, **DIFFERENT**. Ask students to draw what they think Boris would dream about as he naps. Review all the drawings and ideas with the class and instruct students to tape their picture on the **ALIKE** wall if their drawing indicates that Boris is dreaming about something that his brothers or sisters do in the book. Ask students to tape their picture on the **DIFFERENT** wall if their drawing indicates that Boris is dreaming about something that his brothers or sisters do not do in the book.

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