

The Cat in the Palace

A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,930

LEVELED BOOK • Y

THE CAT IN THE PALACE

Connections

Writing and Art

How do you think Uncle Jasper will bring Anna back from her fantasy world? Write the next part of this series.

Social Studies

Choose a famous palace to research. Use a Venn diagram to compare it with the Queen's palace in the story.

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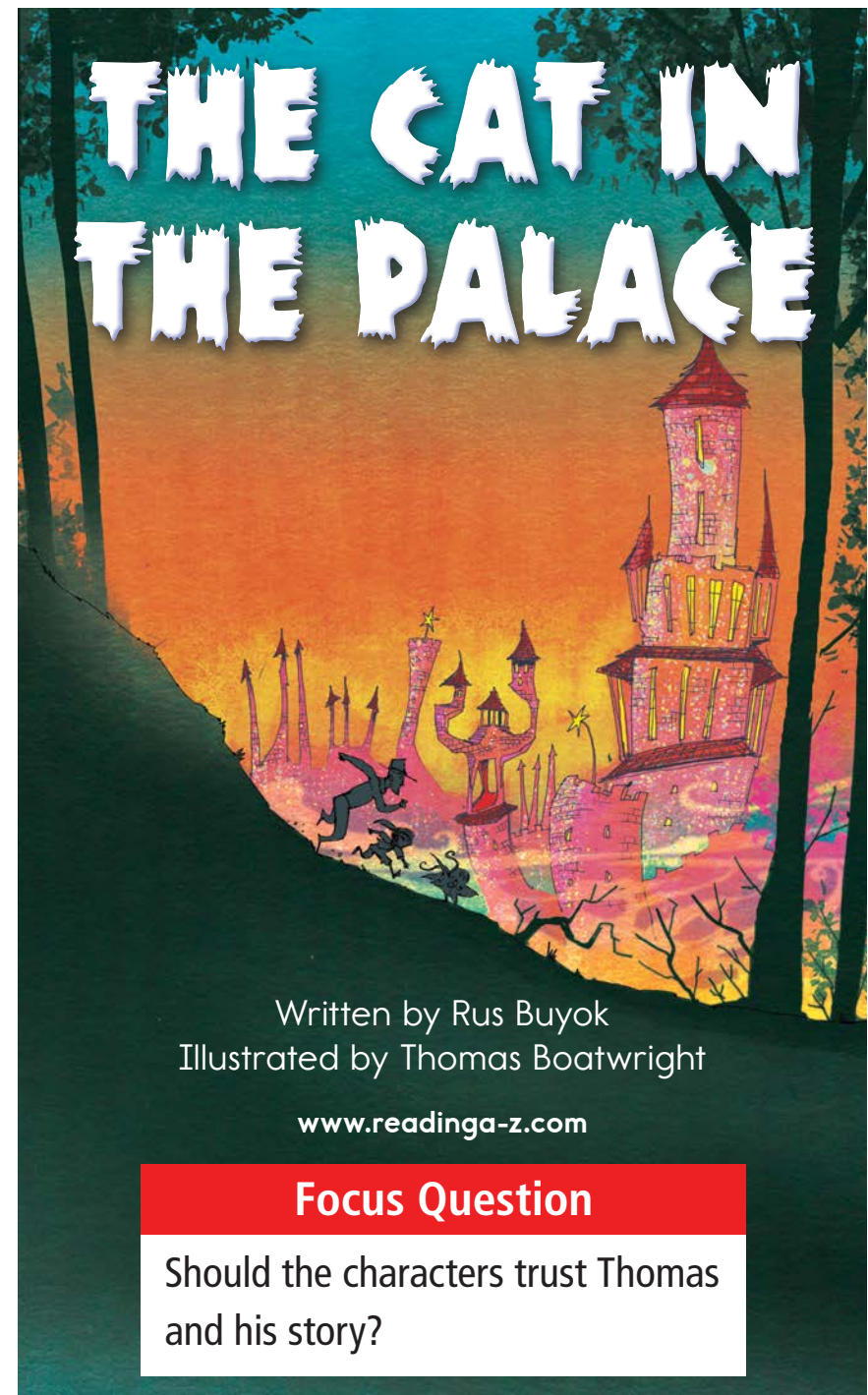
Written by Rus Buyok • Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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Glossary

congeal (<i>v.</i>)	to thicken or become solid, especially in cool temperatures (p. 4)
disintegrate (<i>v.</i>)	to break into very small parts (p. 4)
extravagant (<i>adj.</i>)	excessive, wasteful, or extremely expensive (p. 8)
intricacy (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being detailed or complex (p. 3)
manifest (<i>v.</i>)	to appear; to become clear or obvious (p. 5)
minions (<i>n.</i>)	unimportant or weak followers of a strong leader (p. 10)
modicum (<i>n.</i>)	a small bit or amount (p. 15)
off-kilter (<i>adj.</i>)	unbalanced or uneven; unusual or strange (p. 8)
prismatic (<i>adj.</i>)	having the ability or tendency to break light into many colors (p. 3)
subterfuge (<i>n.</i>)	the act of using tricks or deceit to reach a goal (p. 6)
unnerving (<i>adj.</i>)	causing one to feel uneasy or afraid (p. 8)
unperturbed (<i>adj.</i>)	not bothered or worried (p. 8)



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Focus Question

Should the characters trust Thomas and his story?

Words to Know

congeal	modicum
disintegrate	off-kilter
extravagant	prismatic
intricacy	subterfuge
manifest	unnerving
minions	unperturbed

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Correlation

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"What's she holding?" I ask.

"In her mind, it's baby Sarah in all her wiggling pink cuteness," Thomas says.

"Why don't we see a baby?"

"Because she's so far into the illusion that Mother only has to keep a **modicum** of maintenance to satisfy her. Often, people see what they want to see to keep from facing the truth. It's easier to stay in a world of fantasy than deal with the pain of reality."

"What do we do now?" I ask. "How do we snap her out of it?"

"I know a way," Uncle Jasper says.



"In there," Thomas says, almost fearfully. Uncle Jasper hesitantly reaches for the knob, holding me back with his other hand. A gust of fresh air hits us as we look inside to see a room about the size of my bedroom at home. A crib sits in one corner and a bed in the other. The place looks neglected: cracked walls with peeling wallpaper that once held bright balloons, tattered bedding, and a worn floor with piles of sand in the corner.

In the center of the room, a woman sits in a creaking rocking chair, holding a bundle of blankets. The woman coos and sings a sweet song. She pulls her black hair streaked with gray away from her face, and Uncle Jasper gasps, "Anna."

"She can't hear you," Thomas explains. "She's so lost in the illusion that it's become her reality. We're like ghosts to her."

"She looks so happy," Uncle Jasper says.

"She would. To her, everything here seems perfect and wonderful."



I thought the massive wall I created when the creatures were chasing Uncle Jasper, Seth, Odie, and me was impressive. Now, as we witness the **intricacy**, complexity, and delicacy of the Queen's palace, my wall seems crude—the difference between a child scribbling with crayons and the *Mona Lisa*.

Towers stretch into the atmosphere, seemingly supported by nothing more than tendrils of stone surrounding **prismatic** stained glass windows. The central building sparkles as if covered with precious stones.

After days of trudging silently through nearly pitch-black forests and avoiding the mutated cephaloids, this beacon of beauty and civilization is a wonder to behold. Even as we watch from the underbrush at the edge of the trees, the building changes.



A tower transforms into an arched walkway between two other towers. A wall extends outward, creating a new room as windows appear, grow, and fill with glass. The roof of the main building seems to **disintegrate**, then **congeal** itself into another story.

"If she's using this kind of power, we may already be too late," Uncle Jasper whispers.

"I'm not giving up on Sarah, Jake, and Anna," I retort, probably too loudly.

"I'm not suggesting that, but navigating the castle will be like going through a labyrinth that changes with the Queen's whims."

"If I can build the Great Wall of China in a matter of seconds, I can find our friends in there."

"The Queen would know the moment you used your power," Uncle Jasper sighs. "Then we'd be trapped, and she'd take Sarah, Jake, and Anna somewhere else. If we had the other cephaloids, we could create a distraction."

Seth snorts and says, "I'm not the one who scuttled in the opposite direction and then had the girl construct an insurmountable wall between us and them."

"I convinced Sarah and Jake to trust me and brought them to Mother, expecting . . . I don't know what I expected. Once she had the two of them in her clutches, she walked away from me like I was nothing—again. She has more power than ever, and she made no effort to save my brothers and sisters in your world."

"I still don't trust you," Uncle Jasper says.

"That's understandable," Thomas replies, "since you have no reason to, yet. I was telling the truth when I said I wanted to help you, and to prove it, I'll take you to Anna." With that, Thomas bounds down the hallway, and we follow as fast as we can. After a few minutes, he stops short in front of a door that looks completely out of place. It is white, with four panels and a knob—the kind of door you'd see in any modern house.





“Eventually, we learned to spur people’s imaginations to make ourselves stronger, and then we brought them over to our world. Jasper, you were not the first—there were others before you. Mother never came to bring us back, but we held on to our hope that someday we could go home.” Thomas is silent for a moment, as if lost in memory or sadness, before starting again.

“When you, Sarah, and Jake came to the mill, you were so strong that we could all manifest easily. That had never happened before, and so I thought you must be the ones who could make Mother strong enough. Then, when you went through the door, I don’t know what came over me, but I followed you. To my surprise, I made it, though I was much changed.”

“That must have been Sarah,” I say, and Thomas the cat nods.

Seth and Uncle Jasper repeated this argument continuously during our trek, and hearing it again sets my teeth on edge.

Uncle Jasper has a point about my power, though that doesn’t help with my desire to imagine the entire palace being pulled apart brick by brick, pane by pane. I take a deep breath, then another one, focusing my mind on absolutely nothing.

Over the past days, Seth has been teaching me different techniques to clear and calm my mind because if I focus too much on one thing, it could **manifest**—and alert the Queen.



"So it's **subterfuge**, then," Seth says with a mischievous smile from his perch on Odie's back. After their initial tension, they have become quite a pair, with Seth calling Odie his *mighty steed*. "Most excellent. I've already devised a sufficiently simple strategy. As these structures engage in their transformations, they essentially become fluid, meaning one could simply pass through—"

"Or get buried alive," Uncle Jasper snaps. "It's too risky."

"What other choice do we have?" I interrupt, my frustration boiling over. "Do you have something that would get us in any faster? I could go up and knock on the front door."

Uncle Jasper is quiet for a while as he looks at the ground. Finally, he says, "Okay, but we go after dark."

"The Queen may be finished making her modifications by then," Seth warns.

"After dark," Uncle Jasper replies firmly, leaving no room for argument, and we go about making ourselves comfortable as we wait for the sun to set. I lie down in a tuft of long grass between two tree roots and am soon fast asleep.

* * *

"I won't lie. I did bring you all here, but not entirely for the reasons you think," Thomas sighs. "This is my world. I'm part of it, but I was trapped on the other side of the door—we all were. You see, for you to cross into our world, it requires very little energy because reality for you is solid and consistent. Something like me requires an incredible amount of energy, not only to cross over but also to maintain my existence."

Thomas jumps down from his perch and sits before us, looking each one of us in the eye as he speaks: "We discovered this when Mother sent us over. Mother was already weak from creating us. Sending us to your world took an even greater toll; she didn't have enough will left to bring us back.

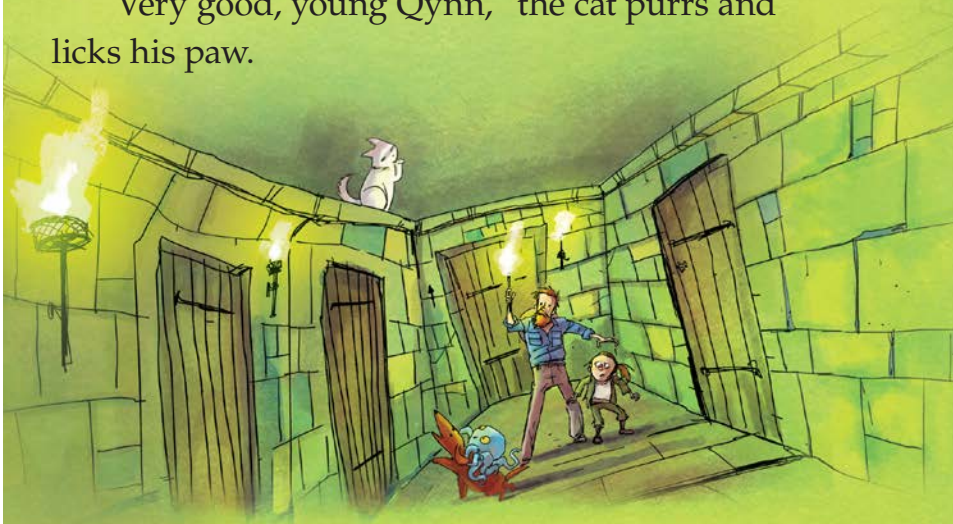
"We were to find people with strong imaginations that Mother could convince to help her maintain her world here, and once she was strong enough, she would bring us back.

"Many of us were lost in your world for a long time, unable to pull ourselves together enough to even be seen, but over time we learned that if we were around certain people with exceptional imaginations, we could manifest.

"Someone who wants to help you," the cat says, though something about the way it licks its lips makes his statement unbelievable. "I've been waiting. We should keep moving forward."

With the last sentence, something snaps into place in my mind and I realize who the cat is: "Thomas?"

"Very good, young Qynn," the cat purrs and licks his paw.

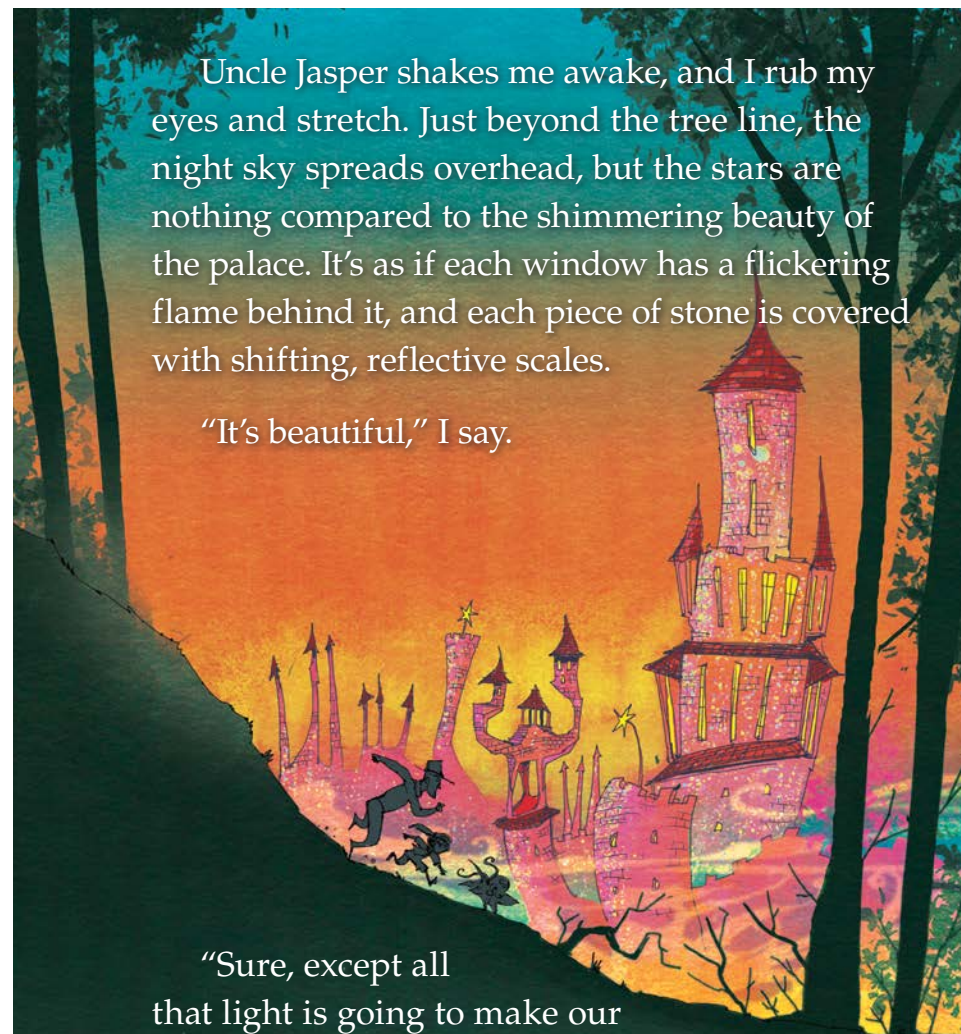


"Thomas was the boy who led us through the Hollow and the Cave of the Lost to find you and Anna," I explain to Uncle Jasper. "What happened to you? How'd you get here?"

"He was one of those kids?" Uncle Jasper asks. "We can't trust him—he's one of the Queen's **minions**. Those children lured me and Anna into this world so she could capture us."

Uncle Jasper shakes me awake, and I rub my eyes and stretch. Just beyond the tree line, the night sky spreads overhead, but the stars are nothing compared to the shimmering beauty of the palace. It's as if each window has a flickering flame behind it, and each piece of stone is covered with shifting, reflective scales.

"It's beautiful," I say.



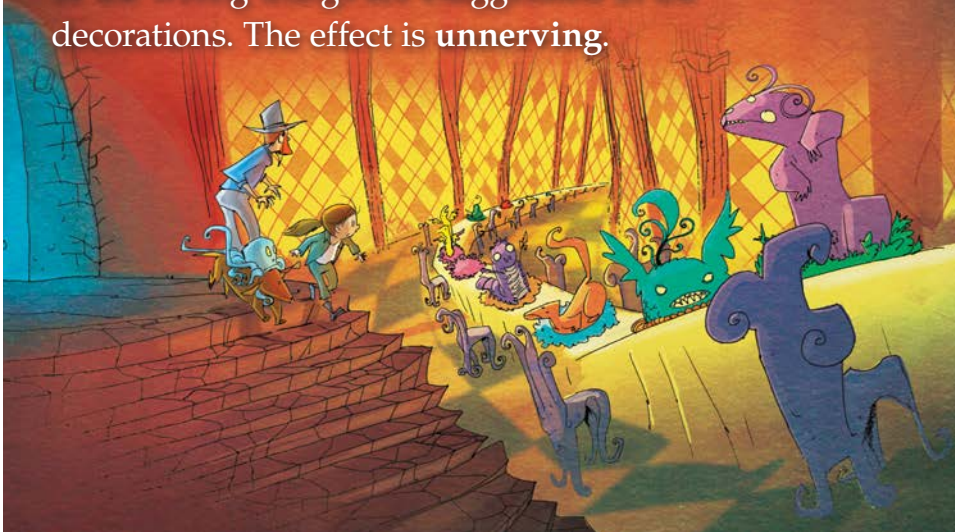
"Sure, except all that light is going to make our job more difficult," Uncle Jasper grumbles. "It seems quiet, so we should make our move now."

A few moments later, we're running down the hill, crouching as low as we can, trying to stay silent. Even Odie picks up on the tension and becomes almost like a shadow—albeit a shadow with a cephaloid on its back.

We arrive at one of the palace's outer walls. Both Jasper and I look at Seth with an expression that asks what we should do next. He seems **unperturbed**, as if he knows what will happen.

Suddenly, an opening appears on the wall and becomes a large window. From the top, what looks like shimmering liquid glass cascades down. Without a word, the four of us bolt through the opening and into the castle.

We stand in what could be a dining hall (if someone wanted to feed the population of a small city) at the end of a table so long it disappears into the distance. Empty chairs sit at regular intervals before **extravagant** table settings. Somehow, though, everything appears **off-kilter**, as if the lines and edges don't meet at the right angles, or the wrong things are exaggerated in the decorations. The effect is **unnerving**.



Across the room, we find a thick wooden door held together by iron straps. It opens easily. Uncle Jasper quickly ushers us through, and we're in another hall, this one with low ceilings and burning torches set into the walls. Wooden doors identical to the one we have just come through line the hall at random. An earthy smell permeates everything, reminding me of a cave.

Uncle Jasper picks up one of the torches, and we follow him, trying not to make noise on the stone floor. The hall curves and bends, seemingly back in on itself, though it never crosses itself. We hear nothing, see nothing, until we come around a bend and suddenly find a fluffy white cat sitting atop a ledge near the ceiling.

Seth has to restrain Odie's excitement by wrapping tentacles around his muzzle, but the dog's excited whines still emanate.

"You're awfully brave," the cat hisses in a voice I recognize but can't place, "or incredibly stupid."

"I would hope the former, but the latter could be relevant," Seth quips. "Who might you be?"

