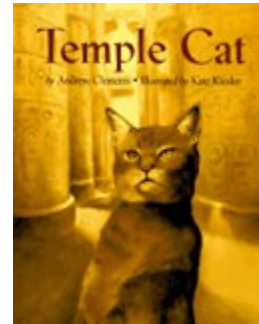


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Clements. *Temple Cat*. New York: Clarion Books, 1996. 32 pp. \$14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-395-69842-6.

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Temple Cat

This is the story of a cat who has spent a very pampered life living in an Egyptian temple. He has been regarded as a god since he was a kitten, and all of his needs have been anticipated by an army of servants. When he manages to get a look at the outside world from a tree in the temple garden, the cat yearns for freedom. After sneaking out of the temple one night, and spending several days on his own, he finally finds a new home with a family who loves him, and discovers that this is far better than living as a god.

The book is beautifully illustrated by an artist who clearly has some understanding of cats, and who appears to have taken her inspiration for the Egyptian motifs from the popular historical period known as the *New Kingdom*. She conveys a convincing image of ancient Egypt in the rendering of clothing, jewelry, architecture and wall decorations. Rather than attempting to copy specific hieroglyphic texts, Ms. Kiesler has wisely chosen merely to give an impression of the writing on the temple walls. The one false note in the ancient renderings appears on page 8, where the cat lies on a distinctly modern looking pillow in front of a scene that would have been found in an Egyptian noble's tomb, not in a temple. The artist has captured this scene very well, but it is not appropriate to the story. The men, with their arms raised in praise, actually represent people from the ancient near east bringing gifts to Egypt, not Egyptians worshipping, as the text on the opposite page, "They worshiped him as a god," seems to imply.

These slight inconsistencies in the illustrations are

relatively unimportant, and as an Egyptologist I have only one real criticism of the book. The story perpetuates a commonly held misconception that the ancient Egyptians worshiped animals, which, strictly speaking, they did not. This misunderstanding dates all the way back to the fifth century B.C. and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus. Where his writings on Egypt are concerned, Herodotus was essentially an observant tourist. Although some of his observations may have been accurate for the time of his visit to Egypt (about 2,000 years after the Great Pyramid was built), he also recorded a great deal of misinformation, including the idea that the Egyptians held all animals sacred.

The ancient Egyptians didn't separate humans from the rest of the animal world to the same degree that we do today. They believed that the gods had created all living creatures, and that all creatures worshiped the gods in their own ways. By the same token, Egyptians believed that their gods had both human and animal aspects and that a god or goddess would sometimes take the form of an animal whose characteristics he or she shared. This did not mean that the animal itself was regarded as a god. One exception to this was the Apis bull, a living creature who, at least in historical times, was considered the manifestation of the god Ptah of Memphis. The Apis bull was black with distinctive white markings and only one animal at a time was recognized as the Apis. When this bull died, a search was made for a calf with the same distinctive markings. When the calf was identified, he was established as the next Apis. There is no evidence that an individual cat was ever given this kind of status. In

fact, although the sun god Re was sometimes referred to as the Great Tomcat, it is far more common to find female cats associated with goddesses (Bastet and Sakhmet) than male cats associated with gods.

Most youngsters and their parents, adult friends and teachers will not be bothered by question of the cat's divinity, any more than the cat is himself. One of the most charming aspects of this story is that the cat is very much a cat, not an animal with human thoughts and feelings. He enjoys what a cat enjoys—hunting, lying in the sun,

being scratched behind the ears—and when he takes it into his head to explore the world outside the temple, he just does it, without any plan or goal in mind. The story is well written, the illustrations are delightful, and this book should give great pleasure to children and adults alike.

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