

Calabash Cat and His Amazing Journey

by James Rumford

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Reviewed by
Marjie Van Gunten

Written like a fable, this charming story teaches that personal perspective is not sufficient information from which to draw global conclusions.

The story was inspired by a calabash gourd cut in the shape of a cat and decorated with intricate designs that had been burned into the gourd using a hot iron tool. The author purchased the calabash cat from a local artist while living in the small African country of Chad.

Rumford wondered if other calabash animals might have been created by the same process and the story began to take form: At the edge of the great desert, the Calabash Cat meets a camel ... who carries him across the desert to the grasslands where he meets a horse ... who gallops across the grasslands to the jungle ... and so the fable unfolds. Each new animal encountered by our intrepid traveler proudly proclaims than the cat has now arrived "where the world ends." But, in the end, the eagle exposes the foolishness of all the other animals and shows the Calabash Cat a world without end.

Everything about this book supports the narration of the story. Each time the cat thinks he has reached the end of the world, the text is right justified, creating a sense of closure. But as the next animal appears and the journey continues, the text is once again centered on the page. The background color of each page is a warm orange-brown, like the skin of the calabash gourd that inspired the book. Against this simple backdrop appear the animals, each decorated

with black geometric patterns resembling designs burned into the calabash. The only other color in the book comes from a thick line that runs through the pages like a path and that changes hue as each new leg of the journey unfolds. Each two-page spread has the text in English and in the beautiful script of the Arabic dialect used in Chad—a wonderful visual reminder that English is only one of many written symbol systems.

This book offers a way to introduce or review basic locomotions as animals walk, gallop and leap. Instrumental accompaniments to the movements can help young children discover different ways to "locomote" the mallets across the bars. The changing colors of the rainbow-hued path that runs throughout the book suggest changes in tone colors. The visual patterns

used for each animal might become a source of inspiration for older children to create ostinato patterns to use in retelling the story.

There are multiple messages in this beautiful book as we are asked to see the world through eyes ... and languages ... and artistic styles other than our own. This book offers a window into a small part of the Arabic world and reminds us that it is a rich and diverse world, which our students need to learn to respect in the face of current events. Readers who enjoy this book may also enjoy *Traveling Man* by the same author. It tells the story of Ibn Battuta, a little-known but historically important 14th-century Muslim figure, and is illustrated with jewel-like art that evokes Persian miniatures.

