



TJ & the Cats
Hazel Hutchins

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**TJ & the
Haunted House**
Hazel Hutchins

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Hazel Hutchins' **TJ & the Cats** and **TJ & the Haunted House**

Story: TJ & the Cats

TJ may not like cats, but that doesn't stop a taxi from showing up at his door bearing his grandmother's four felines. Killer, Cleo, Kink and Maximilian the Emperor — Max for short — invade TJ's life and replace dinosaurs as the topic for his school project. His friend and partner for the project, Seymour, is deeply disappointed; the cats in his drawings all come out looking prehistoric.

The animals' presence in TJ's house leads to a series of adventures, one involving the police and another involving a mass escape. Their presence also challenges the relationship between TJ and his parents.

Story: TJ & the Haunted House

Seymour is convinced that TJ's house is haunted, but TJ does not believe in ghosts. He agrees, reluctantly, to turn his home into a haunted house for a fund-raiser, only to discover that a real ghost may already live there. The ghost, real or imagined, leads TJ to some fascinating family history. TJ finds a way to bring that history alive for his family. The kittens, offspring of two of the cats from the first book, lead the way.

Author

Hazel Hutchins is one of those rare writers whose stories breathe laughter and tears together. Her characters are real, their predicaments funny and tough. She is the author of many beloved books for children, including chapter books *Within a Painted Past* and *The Three and Many Wishes of Jason Reid*, and picture books *One Dark Night* and *Tess*. *TJ and the Cats* is shortlisted for the 2003 Silver Birch Young Readers' Choice Award. Hazel lives in Canmore, Alberta where she and her family have always enjoyed cats, odd-ball facts and intriguing ideas of all shapes and sizes.

TJ & the Cats: Ideas and Activities

- In Chapter 7, Seymour talks about the “circus trick” of making fortune-telling statements that instantly apply to a large number of people. Seymour’s examples are: “You’re worried about something” and “I see you’ve lost something.” Another trick is to come up with statements everyone *wants* to hear. For example, “There is an excellent chance that you will do well in life.” and “You are a very nice person underneath.” Think up five other “fortune statements” using the two categories above. Test your statements on a classmate and have the classmate choose the ones that are most effective.
- Turn your classroom or gym into a haunted house, using some of the strategies from Hazel Hutchin’s book and some of your own. Invite other classes to go through it.
- Darken your classroom, light a flashlight, hold it under your chin, shining up and tell ghost stories like the ones that are told in TJ and the Haunted House. (You might want to avoid the really gory or extremely frightening ones.)
- Hold a debate in your classroom about whether or not ghosts exist. Find books expressing contradictory points of view to back up your arguments.
- TJ is worried that his father is grooming him to run the hardware store. If you were going to spend a day doing an adult’s job, what job do you think you would pick right now? Why? Write about what your day might be like. Illustrate your writing if you like. You could start by brainstorming as a class to get a list of really unusual and interesting jobs.

A letter from the author

Dear Reader,

My own cats like to be part of my writing.

When I begin a new story, writing longhand with pen and paper, Miss Mew insists on sitting in the middle of the paper, purring loudly and shedding all over. It is not easy to write with a cat on the page and hair up your nose.

When I move to the computer for rewriting, Ginger walks on the keys and invents words like z7LNpodi and rpbbbbbbbbbb. She once deleted twelve pages of manuscript — to this day I can't figure out how she did it.

At the stage of printing out the final copy, Miss Mew becomes agitated because she likes to sleep on the printer. The printer can be whirring away and cranking out sheet after sheet, but Miss Mew will still try to position her hairy body on her favorite perch. One day, she's going to get her tail caught before I get a chance to rescue her.

Miss Mew is snoopy — she climbs in bags, baskets, boxes and often gets locked in places by accident. Just last month I heard her howling and howling after my husband left for work. I couldn't find her anywhere inside and I couldn't see her outside when I looked out our large window. Where on earth was she? I finally found her trapped between the screen door and the main door. Cats really can fit in small places!

Many of the things that happen in the story come from my own cats, being attracted by music and bunting the musical instruments, for example, or morning energy explosions. Other things that happen in the story are from friend's cats or from research I did at the library.

Whenever my oldest son had to an animal report for school in grades 1 – 6 he did a report on – you guessed it – cats! That, of course, gave me the idea for Seymour's strategy of doing dinosaurs every year but just adding five new facts.

TJ and Seymour, while being best of friends, do a fair bit of arguing with each other. This is based on my youngest son and his good buddy who spent a lot of time disagreeing – loudly! – but somehow knew how to do it without hurting each other's feelings. They are still good, good friends.

Sincerely,

Hazel Hutchins

More cat facts

- Cats see objects that are moving better than objects that are still. If a cat wants to have a better look at something that is not moving, it will “create” movement by moving its eyes back and forth. I've seen cats do this, but didn't understand why until I did the research for *TJ*.

- Because of an image-intensifying and highly reflective layer at the back of their eyes, cats are able to see well with very little light. This, however, also makes them extremely sensitive in bright light. To better control light that might dazzle them, they have a pupil that becomes a vertical slit. Couple this with their eye lid which works horizontally, and they have excellent control of how much bright light enters their eye. Humans, on the other hand, and day-hunting cats like the lion, have pupils that always remain circular.
- Most of a cat's sweat glands are located in its feet.
- The paw pads and nose leather are the most sensitive parts of a cat's body.
- Whiskers are also very sensitive. They feel air currents and are also essential for hunting at night. A cat with damaged whiskers can kill cleanly only in daytime. In the dark it misjudges the killing bite.
- The cat's tail helps it to balance much like a tightrope walker carrying a long pole. The tail is particularly helpful when cats make quick turns at high speeds.

More

A crossword puzzle based on *Tj and the Cats* is also available.

Visit Hazel's website at www.telusplanet.net/public/hjhutch/home.html to find out more about the author or to join a writing contest.

TJ & the Haunted House: Ideas and Activities

- In Chapter 7, Seymour talks about the “circus trick” of making fortune-telling statements that instantly apply to a large number of people. Seymour's examples are: “You're worried about something” and “I see you've lost something.” Another trick is to come up with statements everyone *wants* to hear. For example, “There is an excellent chance that you will do well in life.” and “You are a very nice person underneath.” Think up five other “fortune statements” using the two categories above. Test your statements on a classmate and have the classmate choose the ones that are most effective.

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A letter from the author

Dear Reader,

My latest book, *TJ and the Haunted House*, has just been published. My editor has suggested I talk about my connection with ghosts. Oh dear. The truth, I have no personal ghost stories.

I do believe that many things happen in life which current science cannot explain, and perhaps will never be able to explain. On the other hand, I get quite upset when people believe all sorts of “crazy stuff” just because someone “says” it happened. When I wrote *TJ and the Haunted House*, I wanted both sides of the argument to be in the story.

Whenever I am in a scary situation — a dark, dugout basement or a vacant, old building or near a graveyard at night — I can certainly feel my heart beating like crazy. Yup, I'm scared. However besides the imaginative part of my “writer's” mind I also have an ever-practical “Hazel” mind that simply says... well, it's interesting that I'm afraid, but if there are ghosts I can't think of any possible reason why they would hurt me. And I go merrily on my way. In situations where I've known the person who has died I feel sadness and sometimes I feel gently close to them, but I certainly never feel afraid.

I do love older houses, the ones with nooks and crannies and rooms at odd

angles. I do feel that the people who have lived in a house somehow leave a mark on the place.

As for being scared in a “fun” way — yes, I like it! When my sisters and I were kids we used to set up “I dare you” games on the lawn which involved reaching into boxes of “worms”. When my daughter was in school and was part of organizing a haunted house, I was totally intrigued by the ideas they used. Many of these ideas are used by Ms. K’s class for their own haunted house.

And I do have another story I’d like to tell you because it ties in with all the “TJ” books. While working on yet another story this morning, T J and the Rockets, I heard a weird, sighing, wheezing sound. Hey — this ties in with ghosts as well because it definitely did spook me! I was all alone in the house and the dog heard it too, in fact the dog began looking around. I began looking around. I looked under the bed. I looked in the bedroom closet. The sound stopped before I could find out where it was coming from.

Three hours later, however, while picking up a paperclip on the floor, I heard it again. I had to find out what it was! This time I crawled around my bedroom on hands and knees playing “hot and cold” with the sound. This place closer. This place farther away. Finally I was right up against the bathroom wall. The wall itself was vibrating and making the sound louder.

I went into the bathroom and opened the little closet. Inside, comfortably shedding hair on the towels, my large cat Ginger was sound asleep and snoring.

Sincerely,
Hazel