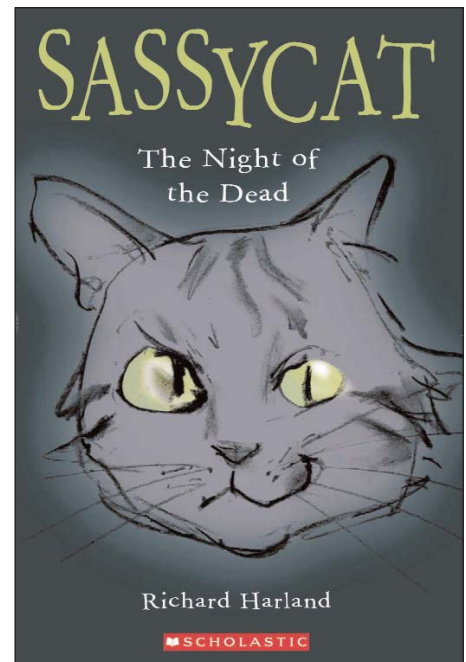


# Sassycat: The Night of the Dead

Written by Richard Harland



## ◀ The Back Story ▶ with Richard Harland

In many places *Sassycat* feels like a funny horror movie. Had you been watching old movies when the idea to write this novel came up? Where did the idea come from?

I started with the idea of writing a cat story – but for a long time I couldn't think of the right narrative to go with a cat's point of view. Then one evening I was watching my own cat Bibi getting spooked – you know how cats seem to get suddenly scared of things that are invisible to us? Okay! I realised that cats lived in a world of ghosts, and maybe other animals did too. What if the animals were protecting us from beings we couldn't even see and dangers of which we were not even aware? Then I had to think up a whole knowledge of the supernatural that the animals understand and we don't.

Writing in the voice of an animal for older readers is tricky, isn't it? (Does anyone remember that *Black Beauty* is told by the horse?) And, on top of that, *Sassycat* is female. Did you worry about getting the voice right?

The key thing was getting the right personality for each kind of animal. Then each voice followed naturally. Only Darlene has a definite 'accent' – the other animals speak with the tone and mannerisms appropriate to what they're saying.

I didn't worry about how catspeak or dogspeak might actually sound (noises in the throat? or is it all body language?) – what you get in the novel is a translation into English!

Could she just as easily have been a dog?

Absolutely NOT! *Sassycat* is the essential feline – essential young feline, anyway. None of my animal characters could have his or her personality transferred to any other animal. And if the main character had been a dog, she wouldn't have been perverse or self-sufficient or a go-it-aloner. The whole story would have been different.

Do you have a cat?

I mentioned Bibi earlier – who just happens to be a tabby with four white socks. (And a white bib, which inspired the name 'Bibi'.) He's grown a bit solid now, but in his younger self he was definitely the model for *Sassycat*. The only difference being that he's a male – but somehow that doesn't seem to matter too much with cats!

## Perhaps unexpectedly, many young people like Rebecca are drawn to cemeteries. What is the fascination?

That's an easy one: it's the fascination of what's scary. When I was a kid, there was a very old tumbledown cemetery beside the local church, and we used to dare each other to walk across it at night. But I swear none of us would have crossed it without the group watching – I know I always made a long detour to avoid it when I was on my own.

## Did you know what was going on in the cemetery before you started writing the novel?

I knew there were ghosts, a whole army of them, but at first I imagined them more as traditional ghosts – like the old woman Rebecca sees very early on. (I was probably thinking of a telemovie called 'Woman In Black' when I thought of her.) As the novel developed, the ghosts became less and less traditional – many different types of them. I had to refer to them as 'entities' when 'ghosts' no longer seemed to fit.

Even the old woman ended up being less traditional than she started out – in her form as a smoke-like spinning column, then the tiny moving dots of colour that create an appearance of solidity when she's really insubstantial.

## How did you come up with the unique idea for the black slimy beings?

The idea of flat black shadows crawling along the ground in the shape of human hands, arms, legs and faces first popped up in a story I wrote called 'A Guided Tour to the Kingdom of the Dead'. The story was set in Egypt, and the image came to me when I was travelling in Egypt – maybe because the pictures on the walls of Egyptian tombs make the human body look very very flat!

Sometimes, the beings also glisten like tar – that was a further development drawn from a dream I once had, of being encircled by streaming rivers of tar.

## Did you know how the story was going to end?

The big surprise was Sassycat's journey into the underworld to rescue Rebecca. I always knew there would be a great battle in which the animals would defeat the supernatural invasion, but the idea that Sassycat needed to go underground and rescue Rebecca only came to me when I was approaching the battle scenes.

## You have written so many stories and books. Are you a very disciplined writer who writes in the same place at the same time every day?

Am I ever! For a long time, I was a very undisciplined writer, who waited for inspiration to arrive. So I ended up with lots of beginnings, but nothing finished. Seriously – about thirty unfinished novels! Also, I knew that my best ideas came to me late at night, so I kept notebooks by my bed and would jump up at all hours to write down some new possibility. Trouble was, I never had the motivation to turn those ideas into actual words on the page. In the end, I discovered that turning ideas into words is something I do best in the morning – and I need to do it every morning. So now I set the alarm for 7, have breakfast and start work by 8 – every morning, no weekends or holidays. I don't hang around waiting for the muse to come – I start writing and soon I'm zooming ahead.

## What do you find most difficult about writing a novel?

There's a stage when I've finished the opening dramatic scenes, which have usually been clear-cut for a while, and I have to work out how to deal with the wider narrative sweep of the novel. In *Sassycat*, for example, everything has to happen up to the time when the tree falls across the creek. Then suddenly there are all sorts of possibilities. What to focus on next?

I truly believe that every story has its proper shape that the writer has to unearth. From all the possibilities, there's one that will turn out best. But it's hard to know which in the early stages. I think I've gradually developed a better instinct for guessing – without knowing ahead.

The easiest part is when you've got that best possible shape and the last part of the novel seems to just write itself. (Even when it's doing unexpected things, like Sass's journey underground – it's as though it was always meant to happen!)

## Which scene in *Sassycat* was the most fun to write?

I suppose the funniest scene – for me, that's the one where the rats explain their dream of becoming lovable cuddly pets. I also remember a special pleasure over the scene where *Sassycat* 'conquers' Suzee and leaves Nathan out in the cold. That started out as just a necessary plot scene and ended up unexpectedly funny and so totally cat-ish!

One of the most deeply satisfying scenes to write was the scene in Rebecca's bedroom, when the entities come closer and closer to Rebecca under the sheets. I wouldn't call that fun to write, but it was involving, stirring, emotional. I had to draw some personal, very basic stuff out of myself to produce that scene.

## And which part was the hardest?

The hardest? Probably Chapter 20, where Thaddeus explains the animal understanding of the supernatural to *Sassycat*. So much to explain – and fascinating in itself – but I couldn't afford to let it turn into a lecture or go on too long and hold up the action. I had to work hard to keep the animals' personalities in the foreground, and I had to struggle to get everything across in as few words as possible.

### About the author:

#### Richard Harland

I was born in the UK but migrated to Australia thirty-five years ago, and live near Wollongong, south of Sydney, with my partner Aileen and my cat Bibi. For a while I was a university lecturer, but

decided to try writing full-time and I have published ten novels for adults and for young readers. Although I suppose readers mostly know me as an SF writer, in *Sassycat* I wanted to explore a different kind of fantasy. There's more about my books at [www.richardharland.net](http://www.richardharland.net).

## Teaching Ideas ✓

### Before Reading ✓

- Ask students whether they have read any books where the narrator is an animal or where we see everything from an animal's point of view. Ask them to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using an animal's perspective.
- Discuss the cover: How do we read the expression on *Sassycat*'s face on the cover illustration? What does the subtitle 'The Night of the Dead' add? Have the students read this kind of subtitle anywhere else – other books, movies?
- What information does the back-cover blurb give us? What sort of reader is it aimed at?
- Ask students to share their attitudes to cats, dogs and cemeteries. Ask them whether these views have been formed by their experiences in everyday life, by stories they have been told by family and friends, or by their experiences of various narrative texts.

### Activity

#### Animal books

List five texts you know in which the main character is an animal. Under each title add the following notes:

- What are the main character traits given to that animal?
- Who is the narrator or whose is the narrative point of view?
- What age reader is implied in the text?

### During reading ✓

- Suggest that students compare the narrative voices in the first two chapters. In what ways are the differences between these voices useful throughout the novel?
- What sort of character is Sassycat? What are her appealing qualities? She refers repeatedly to her personality: do you find aspects of her personality irritating?
- Find some examples of wordplay in the text and discuss their functions in the narrative.
- Ask students to discuss the moments in the plot when there is mystery or suspense, or when they feel surprised.
- Discuss with students which of the animals they would most like to have on their side during a fight.
- Ask students to comment on the function of the map and the design of the chapter headings.

## Activities

## Take 5

Write down five words that describe (a) Sassycat and (b) Rebecca. Provide one example of an event in the plot or a line of dialogue that justifies each of the descriptions.

## Map it out

Draw a map to show Sassycat's long, roundabout journey to the cemetery by way of the bridge.

## Nightmare diary

Write some entries for Rebecca's diary at the time when she's having her nightmares (or what she thinks are nightmares).

## Animal favourites

Complete the following table with an answer for each animal. Where there is no information in the text and you have to imagine an answer, use a different coloured pen.

	SASSYCAT	LORENZO/LIZARD	DARLENE/COCKATOO
Favourite food			
Favourite activity			
Favourite place			
Favourite time of day			
Favourite other animal			
Favourite weather			
	WITZER/TERRIER	THADDEUS/POSSUM	BERNIE/LABRADOR 4 RATS
Favourite food			
Favourite activity			
Favourite place			
Favourite time of day			
Favourite other animal			
Favourite weather			

## After reading ✓

- Ask students whether *Sassycat* turned out to be the kind of book they were expecting, and why it was or wasn't.
- Ask students to tell the class about any local identity in the suburb or town where they live, who is the subject of many stories and regarded as an outsider. The person may be alive or dead, but should not be named or otherwise identified. Have people changed their attitudes to this person? Why?
- Discuss with students any place they know that is said to be creepy or haunted. What sort of place is it? Why are there stories about this place?

## Activities

### Interview

Write up an interview with one of the other animals, in which you ask about his or her first impressions of *Sassycat*. Why was she rejected from the group? Why was she later allowed in?

### Ghost story

Imagine that you are the ghost of Margaret Rebecca Naylor. Make up a story about the way you died and why you can't rest peacefully after death. (This could also be an interview: imagine going down underground to quiz her on her past life.)

### Entity invasion

Rewrite Chapter 17 (where the ghostly entities invade Rebecca's bedroom) from *Sassycat*'s point of view. What would *she* experience?

### Alternative cover

Design a different cover for the book, featuring the ghostly entities and the warped trees.

## Literature study

Use the following ideas to prompt student's understanding of their reading of *Sassycat*.

- Make a list of the main themes in *Sassycat*.
- What are the elements you expect in a successful horror story? (You should use two works of fiction that you have read and two movies to help you decide.)
- Would you describe *Sassycat* as a horror story?
- We've seen people in white makeup and black clothes who describe themselves as 'goths', but what do literary historians mean when they refer to 'gothic literature'? Where did that term come from? Find an example of a gothic novel and read it. Is 'gothic' a term you would use to describe *Sassycat*?