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Oral Thesis Speech

2026 Illustration

Hello everyone!

Thank you so much for coming to my thesis defense! My name is Samantha Schenatzky and for my thesis I created a 32 page picture book about a little black cat trying to find a home. But starting off, a little about me and Draco, I moved here 3 years ago to start school at PNCA. When I moved here from Las Vegas, I knew nobody in Portland. I was moving alone to a new and unfamiliar city. Though this isn't the first time I've moved to an unfamiliar place. I get it from my parents. My mother and father immigrated with my baby sister and I in 2003 from Germany. We were the only ones in the entire family to ever leave the country, and straying so far away from home was scary and daunting, but they did it anyway to make a better life for us. Growing up in Florida I had my first cat named Snowbell, we got her when I was around 4. Although my dad was allergic to cats, he always loved them. Growing up, my mother told me how her mom always had a litter of kittens sitting outside in the backyard of their house in Bettenberg. This started my early connection to cats, always having one around kept me calm and I just enjoyed their soft quiet company. But fast forwarding to 2023, moving to Portland to start a new chapter in my life, the only companion I had was my cat. He was a means of comfort, I immediately took on the parent role when it came to him. He is my child and I care for him. I would do anything for that stinky cat because he offers me the most valuable things in return, love and companionship. He knows when I'm upset, offering purring and laying next to me. I think anyone who has a cat can relate to this, or at least a dog. When I met Draco, he was a street cat in

Vegas. He didn't have a home, and people just fed him casually. When I adopted him he still wanted to be an outside cat, but things changed once I realized there were threats we had to protect him from, such as coyotes, cars, other cats, and of course Halloween. To stay on the safer side you are supposed to keep black cats inside halloween night, due to bad people and superstitions. I explored some of these stories last semester when I was doing my research on black cats for my thesis. Through extensive research it is unfortunately common that animals with dark or black fur have a harder time getting adopted, thus prompting them to never finding a home. They also call this "Black dog syndrome" where black dogs in shelters are less likely to be adopted than others, or given back.

I thought the best thing I could do was to create a pitch packet to show an editor to become a book. Coming into thesis last semester, I was under the impression of completing a fully finished 32 page picture book. However, that's almost impossible to do while working a part time job, being in school full time, and having a time frame of 3 months. When pitching a book to a publisher, the last thing they want to see is a fully finished book. This could scare them away because there's not much room for editing. Leaving space for edits and reimagining things while keeping loose sketches, give more time and thought into a book they can hopefully publish and sell in the future. Creating a dummy of the book where its sketches, values, and finished pages give an entire idea of how I work and what those three stages of my artwork look like in real time.

This leads me to the concept. I wanted to create a children's short story about a little black cat that's looking for the right family. Of course he doesn't have a name because he hasn't found anyone to adopt him yet. The theme of this book is finding a place where you belong. Throughout the story, he is met with hopefulness, and disappointment. He stays vigilant on

trying to find someone to take care of him, but he won't settle if it doesn't feel right. This is also a relation to animals being sent back to shelters or given back for no or small reasons. Last semester I read a story from a shelter about a black cat who was given back because they didn't photograph well. I've also heard even worse stories that some animals are given back to shelters for the tiniest little things.

Although I can't lie ... Making this was difficult, but luckily I had Terry to guide me through the process, as well as having taken picture book class, it made things a little easier. At the beginning of the semester one of the first things I did was create the Indesign file for my project. I went to a nearby cafe and worked. I researched how to correctly set up a book and boring copyright pages and pasted them into my file and made sure everything was set up so that I could paste my images and text in seamlessly. Thumbnailing is the next step and is one of the most important aspects of making a picture book, taking a birds eye view of your entire spreads helps being able to see how it progresses from start to finish. Writing out adjectives at the top of each illustration helps narrate the story and reminds me of what emotion the cat is feeling on each page. Terry and I had talked about scheduling and how I wanted to pace myself throughout this semester. I even made a google docs page for every week, crossing off each week what I had completed to make sure I was on track. This was great practice because it simulated something similar to real life work when you're expected to meet deadlines. Every week we talked about what needed to be done, and by next Wednesday I would have it ready for him. I think we did a pretty good job on staying on task and working together to get this book ready. Working this way helped a lot and I would definitely do it again. Of course If I wasn't in school, I would have given myself more time during the thumbnailing stage and really expressed every concept until there were no more ideas left in my brain. For Comic and picture books, publishers want to see a

range of three different skills that you can share with them, this is layouts (black and white sketches), value pages (grayscale pages), and final illustrations. This gives an ideal layout for the look and feel of the book you're illustrating for. The whole book was created digitally in procreate, using shape based illustrations with multiple textures to mimic the look of traditional art. During my midterm review I met with David, Terry and two other industry professionals that had a lot of insight to give. Their feedback helped greatly and some of the things they mentioned was to create more of a transition in the beginning of the book, give our character some more background story. I was also given feedback to use a simpler font layout. I researched common children's book fonts and landed on apple gothic. Gothic is simple and easy to read, especially for children.

Now, I'm going to take you guys through my story.

- Go through the book -

For my cover I decided to do a wrap around, I'm really fond of how they look and I wanted to place the little black cat in front of a house looking cautious. His little tail is also in the shape of a question mark. This sets an establishing scene of who he is, and I wanted him to be right in the front and center, because he is the main character.

And the back is just a blurb I wrote so that it keeps the audience guessing on if he finds a loving home or is given a name finally.

For the endpages I wanted something cute and simple and kept fall themed elements such as flowers, leaves and mushrooms to fill the space. At first I played with some different ideas such

as Draco in different cat poses, and then recurring images of Draco, but felt this was a little more simple and stayed on theme.

I used the copyright and title page to create this character background. You see the little black cat in a box full of other kitties, and on the title page you notice it's just him and one other cat, when we start on the first page, he's the last one left. He even takes the scarf left behind in the box to warm himself up.

-Read first page.-

I think this is a pretty great establishing shot, and when we get to page two, it says “ He longed to have a warm home with someone who could love him, He was sweet, caring, and funny.” This is the first close up we see of him and he's imagining what maybe a family could look like.

-read pages -

He goes through this repeated interaction throughout the story, maybe this will be my family, and yet he sees how they treat him and he doesn't agree.

- Read pages -

Even with the children in the park, he thinks he finds his people because they're all wearing scarves just like him. But the boy says his grandma says black cats are bad luck, prompting them to reject him. It puts you in his shoes and other black cats alike.

This is my favorite value spread in the entire book. It's a calm resting spot where the cat looks at himself in this little puddle, wondering why he's being treated this way, why he can't find a home. He knows he's good, but is just waiting to find someone who sees that. I also think I love

this spread so much because it has a foreground middle and background where there is this emotional closeup of him.

- read next pages -

He comes across alley cats that he thinks he could fit in with, but alley cats are especially territorial. They don't like other cats and he finds that out pretty quickly when introducing himself.

- read next page -

As you can see this is where the change of seasons comes in, it's starting to snow and it's no longer autumn anymore. There's reefs and Christmas trees up. It is now a little more dire for the little black cat to find a home.

- read pages -

He sees this girl and is instantly afraid, everyone he's encountered has been mean and scary, so this is the first time you see him not so hopeful. Food is one of the main tactics that people use to integrate cats to trust them. It's initiating comfort with that person, and she knows that this will make the cat trust her when she gives him something to eat. -

Read the full page spread. -

I love this page because it mentions how she is also alone and even asks him the very question that he has been asking everyone he's encountered. The spreads are probably my favorite in the

entire book because it has such an emotional impact when the page is turned. It leaves for more of an impactful and emotional impression for the reader.

-read final pages-

And throughout the story there are a couple of secondary narratives, which is where there is another element in the illustration that isn't written in. For one, the changing of the seasons. We start off in the fall and it transitions into winter, another hard time for unadopted animals. The other is that there is a cute little mouse following him around, it ends up also finding a home. So, that's how this story ends. I want this book to be an emotional journey a child can easily understand and feel for. The "perfect home" in the story isn't a mansion or a fancy apartment. It's a place of mutual recognition. In the end, Draco isn't just adopted, he's seen. Before I found him, I never really sought out or wanted to adopt a black cat, the cat distribution system just worked that way and it made me realize he has such a special and personable personality that only the closest people to him notice. Black cats especially are some of the nicest breeds of cats that are out there, they're silly, talkative, and extremely loving. And I wouldn't have really known that if he hadn't come into my life. I want this book to change perspectives ,not just for children but for adults as well. This book could also be seen as relation to adoption within the childcare system. A study published by Science direct in 2023, taken from data extracted from Adoption and Foster Care Analysis that was collected in 50 States, in 2014, indicated that Black children were underrepresented in adoption, and indicated that the likelihood of adoption for Black children was one third lower than that for White children. The analyses revealed that White children were 1.27 times more likely to be adopted than Black children. So unfortunately there is a correlation that is similar to the black cat adoption rates in shelters. It's unfair and ways heavy on my heart. I

want everyone to be represented fairly, and if someone in the story can relate to the little black cat, then I feel he is a means of comfort to that person or child.

I had never really written my own children's book before and there were some struggles with it for sure. I began writing it last semester when I started my proposal. I had written around 600 words, and it shortened a lot because there were too many elements that didn't need to be in the script. For example, I didn't need to specify what the house looked like when meeting the first lady, I realized that it could just say house instead of big white house. There were a lot of times where I shortened the text because I could narrate them with my illustrations rather than writing it out. By no means am I a writer, but I would love to collaborate with someone in the future who is, and create more stories through partnership. I also am not really a great designer, I tried my best with finding fonts but everything I used would more or less be a placeholder. Fonts and layout is more of the book designer's job, not so much mine, but I would have a say in what I like best.

What I would do differently if I had more time is to make the story and book longer, as well as just reworking some pages to be more visually interesting. One of the biggest things I learned from this project is correct formatting. If you don't format everything correctly, printing is going to suck. I printed out the book for the first time a couple of weeks ago to get a feel for the physical book, and I'm glad I did because it ended up being very informational. The text was too big, and some images didn't fit. Printing a dummy of the dummy was important to be able to physically see the page turn and register how everything was formatted when it's physically in your hands.

For the future I want to continue illustrating children's books or covers and potentially get this in front of an agent to hopefully be published. My dream is for the book to be in a children's

library or bookshelf. Growing up I always loved reading stories about cats, and this book could be something a child with the same interest, picks up and enjoys. Finally, I want to thank Terry the most for helping me throughout this project, he was so helpful and caring with me, he always made me feel seen and gave me so many good ideas when I was stumped. He acted as my editor and kept me on schedule. Truly, my inspiration for this book though is Draco, I love him so much and he has always put a smile on my face. His story is so similar to other cats and I want it to be a reminder to not ever overlook black animals in shelters, to be able to give them a chance. Since this book has many underlying messages, I also hope it sheds light on overall adoption, not just animals.

In conclusion, what this project has taught me over the course of this semester is to be confident in myself. It has also taught me how to collaborate with others and ask for help when I need it. I got a lot of insight into how to work in a professional setting, timing and pacing myself. I feel confident going forward into the future of becoming a working illustrator that can communicate, collaborate, and meet strict deadlines for whoever I'm working for. That concludes my thesis presentation, thank you for listening. Draco is in the back, accepting treats. Thank you for listening! Now I will open the questions up to the panel.