



The familiars (Sep 2010)

Author: [Epstein, Adam Jay](#)

Ages 9-12 Fiction 

Series: [Familiars, 1](#)

Description: When an alley cat named Aldwyn passes himself off as a magical companion to Jack, a wizard in training, Aldwyn and his fellow "**familiars**," a blue jay and tree frog, must save **the** kingdom after **the** queen of Vastia kidnaps Jack and two others.

Book Appeal Terms: [Definition of Appeal Terms](#)

Genre: Animal fantasy; Fantasy fiction

Themes: To **the** rescue!

Character: Anthropomorphic

Storyline: Action-packed; Plot-driven

Pace: Fast-paced

Tone: Funny; Suspenseful

Writing Style: Attention-grabbing

Min/Max Grade level: 4 - 7

Lexile: [920](#) **Accelerated Reader:** [IL: MG](#), [BL: 6.3](#), [AR Pts: 10](#)

Author Information:

Adam Jay Epstein & Andrew Jacobson

Publisher information:

New York: Harper 2011.; 256 p.

Booklist:

Grades 4-6 Aldwyn, a scruffy, quick-witted alley cat on the lam, poses as a magical animal when he ducks into a shop to avoid capture and ends up purchased as a boy wizard's familiar. Despite needing to keep his mundane nature hidden, Aldwyn settles easily into his new role, bonding with his human loyal, Jack, and befriendng two other children's familiars: Gilbert, a tree frog, and Skylar, a blue jay. When an evil witch

kidnaps the children and kills their mentor, only their familiars can save them. Stock characters—the underdog orphaned hero with hidden talents; the bossy, know-it-all girl; the dim, comic-relief friend; the wise old mentor—move through a predictable fantasy quest that is nonetheless agreeable. The dual authors, their intentions toward animated movie-dom clear, write competently but perfunctorily. A secret history about the true role of familiars and a world populated with imaginative wildlife adds interest to the clichéd but charming adventure. -- Hutley, Krista (Reviewed 06-01-2010) (Booklist, vol 106, number 19, p67)

School Library Journal:

/ Starred Review */* Gr 4 – 7 — This series opener won't disappoint. Escaping from a bounty hunter, a streetwise cat becomes the familiar of a boy magician-in-training. Almost before Aldwyn gets to know his new surroundings, Jack, his sister, and a fellow student are kidnapped and it is up to him; Skylar, a magic-adept bluejay; and Gilbert, a clumsy, red-eyed tree frog, to rescue their "loyals." The consistently suspenseful narrative moves quickly and is full of twists and turns. The characters are genuinely familiar : Aldwyn feels inadequate and works hard to conceal his humble origins; Skylar has secretly studied human magic and can be arrogant about her abilities; bumbling Gilbert thinks mostly about food and fears the father he has disappointed. The history of the queendom of Vastia is smoothly worked into the narrative. This winning combination of action and humor will keep readers turning pages right up to the ending, which successfully concludes this adventure but leaves room for more.—Kathleen Isaacs, Children's Literature Specialist, Pasadena, MD --Kathleen Isaacs (Reviewed August 1, 2010) (School Library Journal, vol 56, issue 8, p98)

Publishers Weekly:

After starving alley cat Aldwyn steals food from a fishmonger once too often, he is chased by a notorious bounty hunter intent on exterminating him. He takes refuge in a pet store that sells animal familiars to local wizards and is purchased by Jack, a young apprentice. Aldwyn likes his cushy new life in Stone Runlet with Jack and two other students, but he struggles to convince his fellow familiars --a blue jay named Skylar and a tree frog named Gilbert--that he's as magical as they are. When a prophecy foretells

that three spell-casters from Stone Runlet will save the world, the formerly benevolent Queen Lorabella kills the students' mentor and takes the young novices prisoner, leaving it to the familiars to rescue the children. Screenwriters Epstein and Jacobson's children's book debut is a grand adventure with entertaining characters and magic-induced fun, written in an appropriately cinematic style (Sony Pictures Animation has optioned the story). Even adults will appreciate a tale in which street smarts mix with book learning, and resourcefulness and confidence are matched by loyalty and respect. Final art not seen by PW. Ages 8–12. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed August 9, 2010) (Publishers Weekly, vol 257, issue 31, p)

Kirkus:

The calculated invocation of too many tropes makes for a joyless fantasy debut. Aldwyn may be an orphaned alley cat with a mysterious past, but he has street smarts in abundance, so when young wizard-in-training Jack adopts him as his "familiar," Aldwyn knows he's on to a good thing. To secure his position among the other familiars --Skylar, the know-it-all bluejay, and Gilbert, the goofily genial tree frog--he pretends to possess magic as well. But when the three apprentice wizards are kidnapped by an evil sorceress, Aldwyn's lie puts their already-impossible rescue mission in danger. There isn't a fantasy cliché left out of this tale nor anything particularly clever or original in their use. The familiars might as well have been named Harry, Hermione and Ron, with only the barest nod to nonhuman traits; the magical system is painfully muddled; the plot is driven by random encounters and ridiculous coincidences; the climactic Big Reveal is telegraphed far in advance; the denouement serves only as a blatant advertisement for a sequel. Pass. (Fantasy. 8-12)(Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 2010)