



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSH HOLINATY

The
FUTURE
— is —
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They've long been thought of as passive, even indolent, pets,
but lately it seems felines have been calling the shots.
Are we all in danger of becoming cat people?

BY
OMAR MOUALLEM

If you've been in the throes of unemployment long enough then you know the indignity of trawling Craigslist's hidden job market. I'd reached this point some years ago, and among the usual content-farming ads that fill the "writing/editing" section, one listing stood out: "Seeking writer for a book of cat stories."

I'd had a few cats in my childhood, and some of them I even liked. I didn't know if the publisher wanted fiction or non-fiction, an anthology or a picture book, until I got a call back. It would be non-fiction—270 pages of heroic, intuitive, valiant felines that change the way we see them. Or, at least, change the way women 41-and-up see them. Weeks later, I signed the publisher's contract with her pinkest, featheriest pen.

Amazing Cats is the type of book purchased near Canadian Tire checkout counters, so not exactly something that gets you a Shelagh Rogers interview. It hit the shelves in 2008, did its duty with the coveted Kathys-in-HR demographic, and retreated. Then, a few years later, it started reappearing online and in bookstores. It even got its first review (positive!). And then I spotted it in the staff picks at my local independent bookstore. But the readers were different now. They were younger, cooler, artsier, somewhat ironic. Hipsters. Something had gone awry.

Maureen Davies, executive director of the Calgary Cat Association, has also noticed more interest in the organization's two annual cat shows. (These include Kitties 'n' Bloom, a high-stakes best-in-show competition that goes this weekend at Shouldice Arena.) Despite a decades-long decline in the local cat-fancier club ("It's an aging hobby," Davies explains), spectator attendance has been growing of late.

This shouldn't come as a surprise. In recent years cats have outpaced dogs as Canada's favourite pet. According to the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS), 37 percent of Canadian households have at least one cat, accounting for 10.2 million felines, while

just 29 percent have a dog. The adoption rate for dogs has been in slight decline since the recession, but cat and kitten adoptions are growing by about four per cent annually, and have surpassed those of man's alleged best friend. What is behind this outbreak of ailurophilia?

Lolcats. Keyboard Cat. NONONO Cat. Nyan Cat. Maru. Lil' Bub. Hen-

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ri, the Existential Cat. Happy Cat (a.k.a. I Can Has Cheezburger?). Colonel Meow. Long Cat. Business Cat. Serious Cat. Ceiling Cat. Laser Cats. Breaded Cats. Cat Beards. Roombas (and their cats). Cats that look like Hitler. Cats that look like Ron Swanson. Grumpy Cat and her franchise of books, commercials, movies, and whatever else her L.A. talent agent can snag her.

"It's the best thing that's happened to cats," says Barb Cartwright, CEO of the CFHS. To capitalize, the organization held its first Just for Cats film festival in Toronto earlier this week. Starring all the A-list cats, plus up-and-comers from the Canadian indie feline film scene, the festival will tour Canada raising money for shelters and should land in Red Deer this fall (sans host and First Cat Lady Laureen Harper). "Over time, we can probably prove this fascination with cats on the Internet helped cat adoptions go way up between 2009 and 2050," Cartwright says, "but there's no way of measuring that now without a meta-analysis."

Could Internet memes really be turning us into cat people? Or is it another viral epidemic—toxoplasma gondii, the parasite travelling from cat feces to mammalian brains that, at least in rodents, causes an irresistible attraction to cats? Or, perhaps it's just a lifestyle change. One thing is for sure: the cat is having a moment.

THERE WAS NO WAY I COULD WRITE AMAZING CATS and come out the other end the same man. I spent five months interviewing bona fide cat-lovers—hearing how their pets saved them from carbon-monoxide leaks, listening to them wax poetic about the animal's astounding agility and physique, watching them stroke it like one does an angora sweater. Before long, I was sitting in a glass room of the Edmonton Humane Society watching an instructional DVD on how to care for cats while a blue torty named Darwin gnawed my shoelaces and blabbered incessantly. Her baby-like features—frontward eyes, enlarged head, button nose—probably tapped into a biological instinct, but it was more than that. This cat had personality.

Never mind the stereotypes that cats are manipulative, vindictive, aloof, disturbed. Some are dotting, affectionate, intelligent creatures, while others are total dicks. They're a lot like people that way. And, indeed, my wife and I treat ours—Darwin and now her seal-point Siamese frenemy Orwell—as members of the family.

So much has changed in cat ownership over the last few decades. I'd had three cats before, but they were more like trials that ended badly, usually because the animal offended my mom. Cramer was

tearing up her curtains so he had to go. India deposited her poos in the pantry, seemingly always under Mom's feet, so she too was dishonourably discharged. And Giuseppe? After the tomcat sprayed everything, he volunteered to leave by scurrying out the front door to get some, well, you know. He never returned.

They weren't bad cats. They just had bad owners. An extra litter pan on the main floor; a couple of scratching posts and a snip of the balls would have taken care of their outbursts. These measures are common sense today, but weren't always. As cat owners become more educated about their pet's instincts, largely thanks to vets and shelters, cats are becoming more manageable and desirable companions.

For many, dogs have long been considered members of the family, but, culturally, cats are just getting there, a social process that began with Ed Lowe's 1947 invention of kitty litter. It meant a cat could live exclusively indoors, thereby completing 10,000 years of domestication. Cat-owners today have an arsenal of toys to satisfy the hunting urges of their pets. And on average they each have 1.9 kitties (incidentally, the same number as children per Canadian family), a fact that has forced the territorial animal to become more sociable despite its wants and needs.

There's a growing market for serious pet owners, whether they're cat or dog people. Peruse the aisles of Global Pet Foods and you'll see more sacks of \$30 organic foods than even Lowe could have dreamed up. Ottawa recently opened a one-stop shop for cat supplies, while three Canadian cities have opened or plan to open cat cafes this year. Once only available in the land of Hello Kitty, these community hubs allow patrons to sip lattes while stroking soft, sociable kittens.

And cat people need not fear being stigmatized anymore, not since Prada's spring 2010 line presented more cat patterns than your great aunt's closet. United Bamboo followed with a calendar of felines in miniature versions of its new spring wear. Modernist cathouses and culturally insensitive cat tipis are a Google search away, but to keep up with the trends, there's Hauspanther, an online store for hipster cat marginalia, and *Cat People* magazine—"146 pages of interviews and

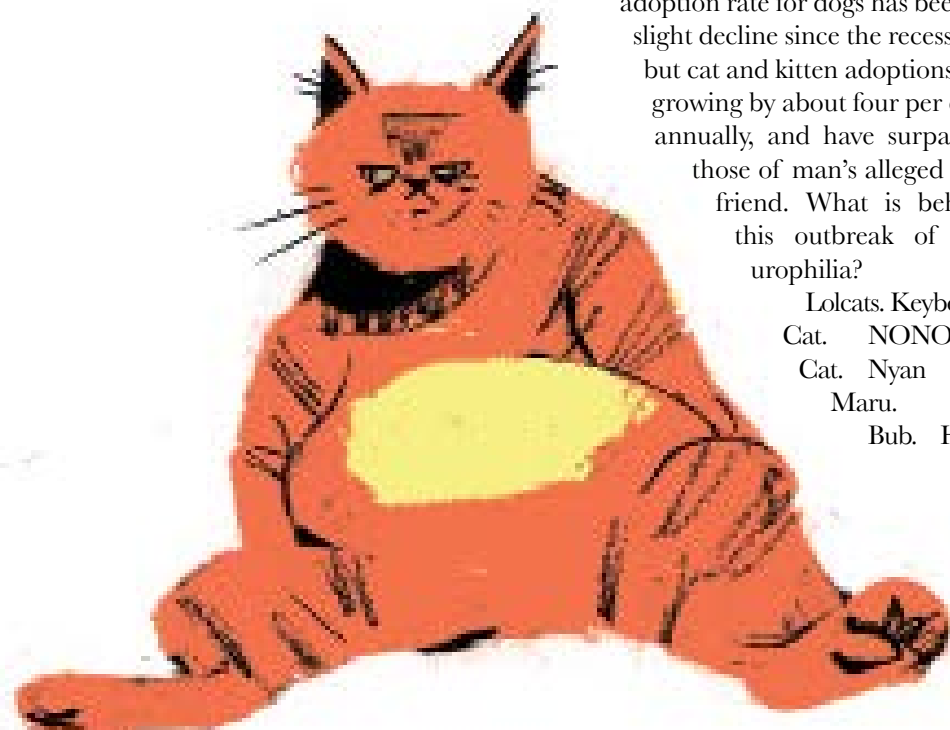


work by cat-obsessed artists, designers, photographers and writers."

I even purchased a \$1.99 iPad app that lets my pets "paint." It's just one of a surprising number of cat games in the App Store. Each time a cat swats a digital mouse, it leaves a paw-shaped paint-stroke that, with a few flicks of my fingers, I can share on Facebook. It seems to have rewired Darwin's brain. No computer screen, however small, is safe from her. The angelic chime of booting up my Mac now sends her into a euphoric frenzy. It's as if she knows the Internet was made for cats.

THERE ARE THEORIES.

1) Cats rule the Internet because the type of person hunched over a laptop conjuring Reddit memes is one who'd own a cat—



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introverted, house-bound.

2) Cat videos play on comedic method of expectation and execution. Cats are perceived as boring, so when they do something—anything—even remotely remarkable it's highly entertaining.

3) We've always been cat-crazy, but only now have the tools to expose it. Instagram and YouTube are dog parks for cats.

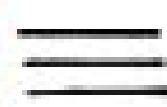
4) Social media is turning us into cat-like creatures—fickle, narcissistic, social, but on our own terms—and we're simply expressing our empathy.

5) Artists have long had an affinity for cats going back to Mark Twain and Victor Hugo, and, as culture bearers, they're in control of the media we consume and share. After all, says Calgary poet Nikki Reimer, "artists are emotional, and moody and sensitive, and cats are those things, too. Plus artists and writers often sit for long periods of time doing their work, and there's nothing a cat likes more than sitting for long periods of time on you or next to you." Or on your laptop, whichever's warmest.

Her late Bella has an eBook of her finest poetry titled *Cat: Selected Compositions for Computer Keyboard 2004-2013*. Assembled by Reimer's husband Jonathon Wilcke, also a poet, it includes such lines as "whereas jazz musicians blow over chords, Kerouac blows over memory5666666666666666666666666666662'/'."

If you've indulged in cat art—a poem, a photograph, a blog or two—you have people like Reimer to thank. When she lived in east Vancouver, neighbourhood cats gravitated toward her on their walks. Reimer—dubbed "the Cat Whisperer" by Wilcke—started photographing them for an exhibit called *Cats of East Van*. Later, she curated *Van City Kitty*, a blog that profiled Vancouver's best cats. She has painted countless portraits of her own pets, but also paid hundreds of dollars for more professional works.

"This is my Bella," says Reimer, standing on her bed, pointing to a



framed watercolour portrait of a brown tortoiseshell by artist Carrie Walker. She turns her focus to the tabby on its right. "That's clearly Amy in the middle. And that was Bill," she says before bouncing to the floor. She's surprisingly chipper today considering she spent last night in the hospital treating a cat bite.

Bella, her kindred spirit, died six months ago at the ripe old age of 16, and this week she and Wilcke felt ready to get Amy a friend. She picked Sammy, a moustached kitten from the MEOW Foundation, specifically because the previous adopters had returned him. "I was super-judgey of anyone who would return this cat," she says. She quickly found out why.

Sammy—a third-generation street cat—was terrified and a terror. One day, as Reimer was gathering him to return to the agency, he sunk his teeth so deep into her hand that she needed a tetanus booster. As the nurse injected Reimer, she asked, "So do you think you'll get another cat?"

"I already did," whispered the Whisperer.

APRIL IS "KITTEN SEASON," WHICH SOUNDS ADORABLE TO EVERYONE but animal welfare professionals. According to the CFHS, twice as many cats than dogs came through shelters in 2011 and a third were euthanized. Calgary's Humane Society hasn't put down a healthy animal in over a year, but it struggles with its cat intake.

Despite there being one pet cat for every three Canadians, there are still more cats than houses that want them. Shelters are on a deliberate campaign to change that and the way we view the animals. This is noticeable to anyone who's recently driven up to the Calgary Humane Society and seen its freestanding sign "Cool Cats Here," or who's read the 30-some "reasons to adopt a black cat" messages posted throughout the shelter. Events like Kitties 'n' Bloom and Just for Cats all pitch in to this initiative.

Currently, 68 percent of Canadian cat owners spend a total of \$0 to obtain their pets. Others don't even bother to look for their cat when it goes missing. "A lot of cats here could have owners out there looking for them," says Rachel Evans of the Calgary Humane Society, "but are lost because people don't ID their cats properly or think, 'Oh, it's a cat—they run off.'"

"There's been a concentrated effort to get people to take care of their cats the way they take care of their dogs," says Cartwright. This sounds horrible to us smug cat people who've rolled our eyes at dog-training lessons, like



the Ruff House classes I witnessed at the local humane society, wherein a circle of adults sat around a stuffed puppy and trainer. But the entire adoption process is really about placing a value on the cat. Once people invest in it, even if it's a donation, and once they pay a mandatory annual licence fee, the perspective changes.

It's working. Whereas the old way of obtaining a cat was by the scruff of its neck from a cardboard box labelled "free kittens," shelter adoptions have grown by 20 percent in two decades.

But beyond the benevolent propaganda and ubiquitous cat content, cats are simply a more convenient pet for people who live in condos and other small spaces.

Rachel Evans, who's worked in animal welfare for seven years, says, "I've noticed more people deciding to get cats instead of dogs because more people consider it a better pet for an urban lifestyle, or at least it's easier for a cat to adapt to an urban lifestyle."

DOMESTICATION MAY HAVE BEGUN WITH AGRICULTURE, when the ancient grain-growing Natufians of the Levant region welcomed the critter for pest control, but more humans live in cities today than ever before in recorded history. It's probably true of cats, too. More than half of Canadian house cats now live in urban areas and about the same percentage are indoors only. It's a political issue among some of us cat parents.

Last year, my friends Kate and Mike solicited me with rudimentary questions, mostly litter-related but also about how to train their first cat to return inside after it's let out. "Keep him indoors," I said. It was not welcome advice. Kate insisted Baron enjoy the outdoors, just as his evolutionary mechanisms intended. In proverbial terms, I was the helicopter parent and they the believers in free-range rearing. There are no winners in this debate.

As more cats move from barns to homes, feline diabetes is epidemic, according to a U.K. study. The emotional health of indoor cats also comes into question. Helicopter parents cope with the guilt of not letting the

animal be itself. Surely hunters and athletes as perfectly formed as felines deserve to act on such instincts. But at the same time, there are grave dangers outside. "A cat that goes outside has a short life-span," says Davies of the Calgary Cat Association. "It's going to get diseases or be hit by a car, or taken by an animal."

It's even more complicated from an environmental perspective. In the United States, cats are responsible for 1.3 to 3.7 billion bird deaths a year, according to the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute. "They're not a natural predator," explains Evans of the Humane Society, which strongly favours keeping them inside. "Cats don't exist in North America naturally." For this reason and others, *felis catus* was listed on the 100 of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species by the Invasive Species Specialist Group. Consider them part of the "anti-cat lobby," a term coined by anthropologist John Bradshaw, author of *Cat Sense: How the New Feline Science Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet*.

As we invest more in our cats, both financially and emotionally, these are the issues that claw at us, but there are other uncertainties. In his thoughtful book, Bradshaw also posits that we may be asking too much of an animal that's not yet fully tamed and, worse still, that we might be removing the most desirable specimens from the gene pool. He writes, "The drive to neuter as many cats as possible, with its laudable aim of reducing the suffering of unwanted kittens, may be gradually eliminating the characteristics of the very cats best suited to living in harmony with humankind: many of the cats that avoid neutering are those that are most suspicious of people and the best at hunting."

Now nine in 10 housecats have their reproductive organs snipped or sewn simply for our own convenience and without consideration of what this means for the species' future. If we continue spaying and neutering at this rate, it may be left to professional breeders to meet the market, thereby pushing Canada's favourite pet in the direction of pedigree dogs.

Felis catus—a species so untamed that it could regress to the behaviours of its wild-cat ancestor *felis silvestris* in just a generation without human care—must adjust to a new way of life, one without the natural world and its menagerie of prey. Can it keep up with our demands, and are there enough apps to keep it interested?

And what about our own fickle habits? With Grumpy Cat's movie deal and bestselling book now available in 14 languages, it's clear that Internet cats have jumped the shark. As with all cultural crazes, they will eventually be spit out like hairballs. But maybe the end of the cat's "moment" will bring a fuller appreciation of man's new best friend. **S**

