

Obsessed With Cats!

The guide for the humans who can't get enough of them



by *Marina
Jackson*

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The guide for the humans who can't get enough of them

For the obsessed and the devoted

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Obsessed With Cats!

Welcome

You are obsessed with cats.

*Marina
Jackson*

You already knew this. It's why you're here.

You've rearranged your sleeping position for a cat. You've whispered "excuse me" to a cat blocking a doorway and meant it. You've watched a cat sleep and felt, with complete sincerity, that you were witnessing something rather wonderful. You've taken photographs. Many photographs.

But here's the thing about being obsessed with cats — the more you know about them, the deeper the obsession goes. Because cats are not just beautiful, infuriating, endlessly entertaining creatures to share your sofa with. They are genuinely, fascinatingly, surprisingly extraordinary.

They have a history that stretches back thousands of years and touches almost every civilisation on earth. They have instincts so finely tuned they border on supernatural. They have inspired legends, sparked superstitions, been worshipped as gods and persecuted as demons — sometimes within the same century. And somehow, through all of it, they have remained entirely, magnificently themselves.

This guide is for you — the obsessed, the devoted, the person who stops to stroke every cat they pass in the street and doesn't apologise for it. It won't make you any less obsessed. If anything, it will make you more so.

You have been warned.

Written with love for the humans who love their cats completely.

Obsessed With Cats!

Chapter 1: Where It All Began

The extraordinary history of the creature on your sofa



Your cat is lying on the sofa right now — possibly on the good cushion, possibly on your coat, almost certainly in the spot you were about to sit in. They look perfectly at home. Because they are. But here is something worth considering as you move your coat and sit somewhere else: that cat is the descendant of one of the most successful, most widely travelled, most historically significant animals on the planet. And they know it.

The story of cats and humans is not a short one. It spans ten thousand years, crosses every continent, touches almost every civilisation that has ever existed, and shows no signs of ending any time soon. It is a story of mutual benefit, genuine affection, superstition, reverence, persecution, and an enduring fascination that has never really dimmed.

It starts, as so many good stories do, in the wild.

Chapter 1: Where It All Began



The Wild Ancestors

The domestic cat — your cat, the one currently ignoring you — is descended from a small wildcat called *Felis lybica*, the African wildcat. If you were to see one today, you would recognise it immediately. It looks almost exactly like a slightly leaner, slightly more intense version of a domestic tabby. Same markings, same build, same expression that says "I see you and I am deciding whether you are worth my time."

These wildcats roamed across North Africa and the Middle East, living largely solitary lives as skilled hunters. They were not tame. They were not friendly. They were extraordinarily good at catching small animals — mice, rats, birds — and they were very, very good at surviving.

What brought them into contact with humans was not affection. It was grain.

Around ten thousand years ago, as human settlements began to grow and people started storing food, something rather useful happened. The grain stores attracted rodents. The rodents attracted wildcats. The wildcats, being extraordinarily good at their job, stayed. The humans, being practical people who very much wanted their grain protected, let them.

It was, from the beginning, a relationship built on mutual benefit. The cats got a reliable food source. The humans got pest control. Nobody was particularly sentimental about it — at least not at first.

That would come later.

Chapter 1: Where It All Began



The Cats of Ancient Egypt

If you want to understand why cats carry themselves the way they do — that particular combination of dignity, entitlement and absolute certainty that the world exists for their benefit — you need to understand what happened in ancient Egypt.

The Egyptians did not merely like cats. They worshipped them.

It began practically enough. Egyptian grain stores were enormous, the stakes were high, and cats were exceptionally good at keeping them free of vermin. A cat in your granary was a cat keeping your family fed. That alone would earn considerable goodwill.

But somewhere along the way, goodwill became reverence. Reverence became worship. And worship, in Egypt, meant something very serious indeed.

The goddess Bastet — one of the most beloved deities in the entire Egyptian pantheon — was depicted with the head of a cat. She was the goddess of home, fertility, protection and joy. She represented the warmth of the sun, the safety of the family, the fierce protectiveness of a mother. She was immensely popular. Her festival at the city of Bubastis was, according to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, one of the most joyful and well-attended celebrations in all of Egypt.

To harm a cat in ancient Egypt was not merely bad manners. It was a crime punishable by death.

Chapter 1: Where It All Began



The Cats of Ancient Egypt

When a household cat died, the family would go into mourning — shaving their eyebrows as a mark of grief. Cats were mummified with the same care and ceremony as humans, sometimes buried with mummified mice to sustain them in the afterlife. Entire cat cemeteries have been discovered by archaeologists, containing hundreds of thousands of carefully preserved feline remains.

Hundreds of thousands.

The Egyptians were, by any measure, completely obsessed with cats.



Cats and the Roman Empire

As the Roman Empire expanded across Europe, North Africa and beyond, it took cats with it. The Romans had a pragmatic appreciation for cats — they were excellent at keeping military camps and grain supplies free of rodents — but they also developed a genuine fondness for them as companions.

Roman households kept cats, artists depicted them in mosaics and paintings, and as Roman soldiers and traders moved across the empire, cats travelled with them. It is largely thanks to the Romans that domestic cats spread across Europe as widely and as quickly as they did.

The Romans also associated cats with liberty — the goddess Libertas was sometimes depicted with a cat at her feet, the cat representing freedom and independence. Which, if you have ever tried to tell a cat what to do, feels entirely appropriate.

Chapter 1: Where It All Began



Cats Across Asia

Cats found their way eastward too, and the cultures they encountered embraced them warmly.

In Japan, cats became deeply embedded in the culture. The most famous symbol is the Maneki-neko — the beckoning cat — a small figurine with one paw raised in greeting, believed to bring good luck and prosperity to any home or business that displays one. Walk into almost any Japanese shop or restaurant today and you will find one near the entrance, paw raised, welcoming fortune through the door.

Japan also gave the world the concept of cat cafés — the first opened in Taipei in 1998 and the idea spread rapidly to Tokyo, then across Asia, then worldwide. The Japanese love of cats runs deep, and the country has some of the most famous cat islands in the world — including Tashirojima, where cats outnumber humans significantly and are treated as honoured residents.

In China, cats were associated with good luck, prosperity and the ability to ward off evil spirits. A cat in your home was considered a blessing. The word for cat in Mandarin — māo — sounds similar to the word for octogenarian, and so cats became associated with longevity and good fortune.



Chapter 1: Where It All Began



Cats In Norse Mythology

Not all cat mythology comes from warm climates. The Norse goddess Freyja — associated with love, beauty, fertility and magic — travelled in a chariot pulled by two enormous cats. These were not small domestic tabbies. They were described as large, powerful and grey, gifts from the god Thor himself.

Vikings believed that being kind to cats would bring Freyja's favour — good weather for farming, good fortune in love, and prosperity for the household. Farmers would leave out saucers of milk for cats to ensure a good harvest. Brides would hope for sunshine on their wedding day by being kind to cats in the weeks before.

The Norse relationship with cats was one of genuine respect. These were not creatures to be trifled with. They pulled the chariot of a goddess. They deserved good treatment — and apparently, good milk.



Chapter 1: Where It All Began

The Dark Years

It would be dishonest to tell the history of cats without acknowledging the period that sits uncomfortably in the middle of it.

In mediaeval Europe, the relationship between cats and humans took a very dark turn. The Church became suspicious of cats — particularly black cats — associating them with paganism, witchcraft and the devil. Pope Gregory IX, in the 13th century, declared black cats to be diabolical, and what followed was centuries of persecution. Cats were killed in enormous numbers across Europe, associated with witches, evil and supernatural darkness.

The cruel irony of this period — and historians have noted it — is that the mass killing of cats contributed significantly to the spread of plague. With fewer cats to control the rat population, rats thrived. Rats carried fleas. Fleas carried the Black Death.

The persecution of cats was not just cruel. It was catastrophic.

Gradually, over centuries, the balance shifted back. Cats returned to favour, their pest-control value reasserted itself, and the darkness of that period faded — though its echoes linger in the superstitions around black cats that persist in some cultures even today.

Chapter 1: Where It All Began



How They Conquered the World

Today there are an estimated 600 million domestic cats on earth. They live on every continent except Antarctica. They have sailed on ships, crossed deserts, survived wars and crossed oceans. They have been kept by pharaohs and fishermen, queens and farmers, writers and warriors.

They arrived in Britain with the Romans. They crossed to America with European settlers. They travelled the Silk Road with merchants and spread across Asia with Buddhist monks who kept them to protect sacred manuscripts from rodents.

Everywhere humans have gone, cats have gone too. Not because they were forced to – cats are not the sort of creature that does anything against their will. But because the arrangement suited them. Humans provided warmth, food and shelter. Cats provided pest control, companionship and that particular quality of presence that is very hard to define but very easy to feel.

Ten thousand years later, the arrangement continues. The cat is still on your sofa. You are still completely fine with this.

Some things, it turns out, are simply meant to be.



Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat

Understanding the creature you share your home with



You have lived with a cat. You know cats. You have fed them, stroked them, been ignored by them, been woken up by them at 3am for reasons that remain unclear, and been regarded with that particular expression that suggests they are tolerating your presence as a personal favour.

And yet.

There is almost certainly something going on inside that elegant, infuriating, endlessly fascinating head that you have never fully understood. Because cats are not complicated in the way that problems are complicated. They are complicated in the way that interesting things are complicated — layered, surprising, and entirely worth the effort of understanding.

Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat

This chapter is about what actually makes a cat a cat. Not the mythology, not the history — the real thing. The biology, the psychology, the instincts, the quirks. The stuff that explains why your cat does the things your cat does, and why, once you understand it, you will love them even more than you already do.



Born to Hunt

Whatever your cat looks like right now — curled up on a blanket, blinking slowly in a patch of sunlight, draped across your keyboard with absolute disregard for your working day — underneath all of that is a hunter.

A very, very good hunter.

Cats are obligate carnivores, which means they are biologically designed to eat meat and only meat. Unlike dogs, who are omnivores and can adapt their diet considerably, cats have no real choice in the matter. Their bodies require nutrients — taurine, arachidonic acid, vitamin A — that can only be obtained from animal protein. They cannot synthesise them from plant sources. They never could. Evolution built them for one purpose, and that purpose is catching things.

Everything about a cat's body reflects this. Their eyes are positioned at the front of their face for binocular vision — depth perception that allows them to judge distances with extraordinary precision when pouncing. Their pupils can dilate enormously to let in maximum light in low-level conditions, and contract to a narrow slit in bright light to protect their vision. They can see in approximately one sixth of the light that humans require. In the dark, they are remarkable.

Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat

Their hearing is equally extraordinary. Cats can hear frequencies far beyond the range of human ears — up to 79,000 Hz compared to a human's 20,000. They can rotate each ear independently, like small furry satellite dishes, to pinpoint the exact location of a sound. They can hear a mouse moving under a floor. They can hear things you will never hear. They are listening, always, even when they appear to be asleep.

Their whiskers — technically called vibrissae — are not just decorative. They are sensory instruments of extraordinary precision, connected to a rich network of nerves that detect even tiny changes in air currents. A cat moving through darkness uses their whiskers to navigate, to sense the shape of spaces, to detect the movement of prey. The whiskers on their face are roughly the same width as their body, which helps them judge whether they can fit through a gap. They also have whiskers on the backs of their front legs — a fact that surprises almost everyone the first time they hear it.

And then there are the claws. Retractable, razor sharp, and kept that way specifically because cats walk on their pads rather than their claws. Every surface your cat has ever scratched — your sofa, your curtains, that one specific corner of the carpet — has been an act of maintenance. Keeping their primary hunting tools in perfect condition. You are welcome to be annoyed about the sofa. Your cat remains unapologetic.



Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Twilight Hunters

Cats are often described as nocturnal, but this is not quite accurate. The correct term is crepuscular – most active at dawn and dusk, the transitional hours when light is low and the small animals they hunt are themselves most active.

This is why your cat loses their mind at six in the morning. This is why they tear around the house at full speed for no apparent reason at ten o'clock at night. This is not madness. This is biology. Their internal clock is telling them that this is hunting time, that their body is primed and ready, that something should be caught – and if there is nothing to catch, well, the corner of the rug will have to do.

The technical term for this behaviour is the "zoomies." The scientific term is Frenetic Random Activity Periods, or FRAPs. Your cat has no idea what any of this is called. They are simply doing what their body is designed to do, at the time their body is designed to do it, with the particular intensity of a creature that has ten thousand years of hunting instinct and absolutely nothing to hunt.

Interactive play, for this reason, is not optional for a well-adjusted cat. It is a genuine need. A cat that cannot express their hunting instincts – the stalk, the pounce, the catch – is a cat that may redirect those instincts in ways that are less convenient for everyone involved. This is not naughtiness. It is unmet need. Something worth remembering next time the zoomies strike at midnight.

Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Independent Mind

Cats are independent. You know this. Everyone knows this. But it is worth understanding why, because the independence of cats is not rudeness or indifference — it is the result of a very specific evolutionary history.

Dogs were domesticated from wolves — pack animals with a deeply ingrained social hierarchy, a need for belonging, and an instinct to follow a leader. They were bred, over thousands of years, specifically for cooperation with humans. Their entire psychology is oriented around the group.

Cats were domesticated from solitary hunters. The African wildcat did not live in packs. It did not follow a leader. It did not need to cooperate with anyone to survive. It was entirely, completely self-sufficient. It hunted alone, ate alone, navigated its territory alone, and had no particular need for company.

What is remarkable — genuinely remarkable — is that despite this heritage, cats chose to live alongside humans anyway. Nobody trained them into it. Nobody selectively bred them for sociability the way dogs were bred. They simply decided, at some point along the evolutionary path, that humans were useful and then, gradually, that humans were something more than that.

The fact that your cat sits with you, sleeps near you, seeks you out, brings you things, headbutts you, slow blinks at you from across the room — none of this was guaranteed by their biology. They do it because they want to. Because they have decided you are worth it. Because in their own particular, independent, entirely self-directed way, they have chosen you.

Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Comfort of Routine

For all their mysterious independence, cats are creatures of profound routine. They find deep comfort in predictability — in knowing when they will be fed, where they will sleep, what the pattern of the household day looks like.

This is, again, rooted in their nature as hunters. A hunter needs to know their territory intimately. They need to know what is normal so they can immediately identify what is not. Any change to the familiar pattern is information — something has moved, something is different, something may require investigation or caution.

This is why your cat notices immediately when you rearrange the furniture. Why they must inspect every single bag you bring into the house. Why a new piece of equipment, a visitor, a different routine, can unsettle them in ways that seem disproportionate. They are not being dramatic. They are doing their job — assessing changes in their environment with the thoroughness of a creature whose survival, historically, depended on it.

It is also why the return of a familiar routine is so comforting to them. The same feeding time, the same quiet evening, the same spot on the sofa — these things are not just comfortable. They are reassuring at a deep, instinctive level. You are not boring your cat with routine. You are making them feel safe.



Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Nap as a Lifestyle

Cats sleep between twelve and sixteen hours a day. Some sleep more. This is not laziness. This is biology.

Hunting is an energetically expensive activity. The explosive speed, the precision of the pounce, the physical intensity of the catch — these things require significant energy reserves. A cat in the wild that expended energy unnecessarily would be a cat at a disadvantage. Conservation of energy between hunts is not idleness. It is strategy.

The sleep of cats is also structured differently from human sleep. They cycle through light sleep and deeper sleep rapidly, and they can move from apparently sound asleep to fully alert in a fraction of a second. If you have ever watched a cat apparently deeply asleep suddenly open one eye with an expression of complete awareness, this is why. They are never entirely off. Some part of their brain is always monitoring the environment, always listening, always ready.

The loaf position — front paws tucked underneath, compact and contained — is a resting position that keeps a cat ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. It is not just charming. It is practical.

Even asleep, your cat is impressive.



Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Grooming Ritual

Cats spend up to fifty percent of their waking hours grooming themselves. This is not vanity. It is, once again, rooted entirely in their nature as hunters.

A clean coat is a coat that carries less scent. A hunter that can be smelled by their prey is a hunter at a disadvantage. The thorough, methodical, almost meditative grooming ritual that your cat performs multiple times a day is, at its root, scent management — keeping themselves as odourless as possible.

It also regulates body temperature, distributes natural oils through the coat, removes parasites, and stimulates circulation. Cat saliva contains a natural antiseptic, which is why cats instinctively lick wounds. The grooming ritual is, in short, a complete maintenance system built into the daily routine.

There is also a social dimension to grooming. Cats that are bonded with each other will groom one another — a behaviour called allogrooming — focusing particularly on the head and neck, the areas they cannot easily reach themselves. This is a profound expression of trust and affection. If your cat has ever licked your hand or your hair, they are allogrooming you. You have been accepted into the inner circle. You should feel honoured.



Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat



The Purr

The purr deserves its own section because it is, scientifically, one of the most interesting things about cats.

Cats purr by rapidly dilating and constricting the glottis — the part of the larynx that surrounds the vocal cords — as they breathe in and out. This creates the characteristic rumbling vibration at a frequency of between 25 and 150 Hz. It happens continuously on both the inhale and the exhale, which is why a purring cat sounds like a small, warm, furry engine.

Most people know that cats purr when they are content. What is less widely known is that cats also purr when they are anxious, unwell, in pain, or giving birth. The purr is not purely an expression of happiness. It is, researchers believe, also a self-soothing mechanism — a way of calming themselves in stressful situations.

More fascinatingly still — the frequency at which cats purr, between 25 and 50 Hz, has been shown to promote bone density and healing in laboratory studies. There is a genuine hypothesis, still being researched, that purring may have evolved partly as a mechanism for self-repair — a way for a resting animal to maintain bone strength and promote recovery from injury without expending the energy of movement.

Your cat may, in other words, be healing themselves every time they sit on your lap and purr.

Chapter 2: What Makes A Cat A Cat

And possibly healing you too. Studies have found that cat owners have lower rates of heart attack, lower blood pressure, and reduced levels of stress hormones compared to non-cat owners. The presence of a purring cat has measurable physiological effects on the humans around them.

You thought you were just having a cuddle. You were, in fact, receiving treatment.



Obsessed With Cats!

Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think

The facts that will make you look at your cat completely differently



You think you know your cat.

You know their preferences, their moods, their particular brand of chaos. You know the meow that means food and the one that means come and look at this immediately. You know the exact spot behind the ear that makes them close their eyes and lean in, and the exact moment — felt rather than seen — when they have had quite enough of that, thank you very much.

But here is the thing about cats. Just when you think you have them figured out, they reveal another layer. Another quirk. Another piece of genuinely extraordinary biology that makes you put down whatever you were doing and say — out loud, possibly to the cat — "I did not know that."

This chapter is full of those moments.

Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



Your Cat Has A Unique Nose Print

Just as no two human fingerprints are identical, no two cats have the same nose print. The pattern of ridges and bumps on a cat's nose leather — the soft, slightly textured area at the tip of their nose — is entirely unique to that individual cat.

Nobody is currently using this for identification purposes on any large scale, which feels like a missed opportunity. But it does mean that your cat is, quite literally, one of a kind in a way that can be forensically verified.

You are welcome to spend the next ten minutes looking at your cat's nose. It is worth it.



Cats Cannot Taste Sweetness

Humans have taste receptors for five basic tastes — sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. Cats have taste receptors for four of these. The missing one is sweet.

Cats have a mutation in one of the genes responsible for the sweet taste receptor that renders it non-functional. They are genuinely incapable of detecting sweetness. This makes complete biological sense — as obligate carnivores with no need for carbohydrates or fruit sugars in their diet, there was simply no evolutionary pressure to maintain the ability.

This is why your cat has never shown any interest in your cake, your biscuits or your chocolate. It is not restraint. They literally cannot taste it.

Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think

What they can taste that humans cannot — there is some evidence that cats can detect certain compounds in water that humans cannot, which may explain why some cats are particular about their water source, preferring running water to still. The fountain you bought them that they use enthusiastically while you watch with equal parts delight and mild resentment is, from their perspective, genuinely superior water.



A Cat's Collarbone is a Floating Bone

Unlike humans, whose collarbones are fixed firmly between the breastbone and the shoulder, a cat's clavicle is not attached to any other bone. It sits freely within the muscle of the shoulder, connected by soft tissue rather than bone-to-bone joints.

This is what allows cats to squeeze through extraordinarily small spaces. If a cat can fit their head through a gap, their body can generally follow — because without a fixed collarbone to restrict the width of their shoulders, they can compress and rotate in ways that seem physically impossible.

It is also part of what allows cats to land on their feet. The flexible shoulder structure, combined with an extraordinarily supple spine that can rotate up to 180 degrees, gives cats their famous righting reflex — the ability to twist their body mid-fall and orient themselves feet-downward before they land.

This righting reflex activates in as little as 30 milliseconds. It is entirely instinctive and entirely involuntary. Cats do not think about it. They simply do it. Their body knows.

Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



Cats Meow Almost Exclusively at Humans

Adult cats in the wild do not meow at each other. Kittens meow to communicate with their mothers, but once they are adults, cats communicate with other cats almost entirely through scent, body language and a range of other vocalisations – chirps, trills, chatters, hisses, growls.

The meow – that particular sound that comes in such an extraordinary range of tones, volumes, urgencies and emotional registers – is, researchers believe, something cats developed specifically to communicate with humans. It is, in effect, a language cats invented for us.

Different cats have different meow vocabularies, and those vocabularies are shaped by what works with their particular human. If a certain meow gets the response a cat wants – food, attention, the door opened – that meow will be used again. Cats learn which sounds work on their specific humans and deploy them accordingly.

You are not imagining it when you think your cat is talking to you. They are. They developed a language specifically for the purpose. The least you can do is pay attention.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



A Group of Cats Has a Wonderful Name

A group of cats is called a clowder.

A group of wild cats is called a destruction.

Both of these feel entirely accurate.



Cats Have a Third Eyelid

If you have ever seen a cat looking slightly sleepy or unwell and noticed a pale, translucent membrane partially covering their eye from the inner corner, you have seen the third eyelid — technically called the nictitating membrane.

Most mammals have this structure, but in humans and most primates it has reduced to a small pink fold in the corner of the eye. In cats it is fully functional. It acts as an additional layer of protection for the eye, sweeping across to clear debris and keep the surface moist without fully closing the eye — meaning the cat can protect their vision while remaining alert.

In a healthy, relaxed cat the third eyelid is usually not visible. When it becomes prominent, it can indicate that a cat is very relaxed and drowsy — or, in other circumstances, that they are unwell. It is one of the things worth watching.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think

Cats Walk Like Camels and Giraffes

Most animals move their front and back legs in an alternating pattern when they walk — right front with left back, left front with right back. Cats do not do this.

Cats move both legs on the same side of their body together — right front and right back, then left front and left back. This is called a "pacing" gait, and among mammals it is shared by only a handful of species, including camels and giraffes.

This gait gives cats their characteristic fluid, almost liquid movement — that particular quality of motion that makes them look as though they are flowing rather than walking. It also makes them extraordinarily quiet, since their rear foot lands almost exactly where their front foot has just been, minimising disturbance to the ground beneath them.

Cats are, in other words, built for stealth in ways that extend all the way down to the way they place their feet.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



The Oldest Cat on Record Lived to 38

The oldest cat whose age has been reliably verified was a cat called Creme Puff, who lived in Austin, Texas, and died in 2005 at the age of 38 years and 3 days. Her owner, Jake Perry, also owned another cat called Granpa Rexs Allen who lived to 34 — which suggests either extraordinary care, extraordinary luck, or possibly both.

For context, 38 in cat years is approximately 168 in human years.

The average domestic cat lives between 12 and 18 years, with indoor cats generally living longer than outdoor cats. The oldest cats tend to be those kept indoors, fed well, given regular veterinary care, and — if the case of Creme Puff is anything to go by — apparently fed a diet that included bacon, eggs and coffee, which is not something any vet would recommend but which seems, in this specific instance, to have worked out.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



The Extra Toes Club

Most cats have 18 toes — five on each front paw and four on each back paw. However, some cats are born with a genetic mutation called polydactyly that gives them extra toes. Polydactyl cats can have six, seven or even eight toes on a single paw.

These cats were historically considered extremely good luck by sailors, who believed the extra toes gave them better balance on ships and made them more effective hunters of the rats that plagued sailing vessels. The writer Ernest Hemingway was given a polydactyl cat by a ship's captain and became so fond of them that his home in Key West, Florida — now a museum — is still home to approximately 60 polydactyl cats, many of them descendants of his original cat.

They are known, delightfully, as Hemingway cats.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think

Smarter Than You Think

This one tends to surprise people. Dogs are often considered more emotionally intelligent, more socially attuned, more similar to humans in their inner lives. But structurally, the cat brain has more in common with the human brain than the dog brain does.

The cerebral cortex — the part of the brain responsible for rational decision making, problem solving and complex thinking — has a similar structure in cats and humans. Cats have both short-term and long-term memory. They dream — the rapid eye movement during cat sleep is identical to human REM sleep, and researchers believe cats experience dreams, probably related to activities from their waking lives.

Cats also experience a full range of emotions — they feel fear, contentment, frustration, affection, grief and joy. They can suffer from depression and anxiety. They can experience something that looks very much like jealousy. They can hold grudges. They remember kindness and they remember unkindness, sometimes for years.

They are, in other words, far more emotionally and cognitively complex than their reputation for aloofness might suggest.

They simply choose, with characteristic feline discretion, not to make a show of it.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think

A Token of Love

If your cat has ever deposited a toy — or, less pleasantly, a small deceased creature — at your feet, you may have received this gift with mixed feelings. The intention behind it, however, is entirely loving.

Cats in the wild bring prey back to their family group — particularly mothers bringing food for kittens. When your cat brings something to you, they are doing the same thing. They are feeding you. They are providing for you. They are, in their own particular way, taking care of you.

The cats who bring the most gifts tend to be the cats who are most bonded with their humans. It is an expression of deep affection dressed up as a slightly alarming present.

The correct response, for the record, is to accept the gift with grace and gratitude. Your cat worked very hard on that toy mouse. The least you can do is acknowledge the effort.



Chapter 3: Stranger Than You Think



Scent Glands in Surprising Places

Everyone knows that cats rub their faces against things to mark them with scent – the cheeks, the chin and the forehead all contain scent glands. But cats also have scent glands between their toes.

This is why cats scratch vertical surfaces – not only to maintain their claws, but to deposit scent from the glands in their paws. When your cat scratches the sofa, they are not merely destroying your furniture. They are signing it. They are leaving a message – a chemical communication that says, to any cat who might encounter it, that this territory is claimed.

They are also, it should be noted, entirely unconcerned about the furniture.



Obsessed With Cats!

Chapter 4: The Bond

Why cats and humans were always meant to find each other



There is a moment that every cat person knows.

It might happen in the first week, or it might take months. It cannot be forced or hurried. It happens entirely on the cat's terms, in the cat's own time, when the cat has decided — through whatever complex internal process cats use to make such assessments — that you are trustworthy.

The moment is usually small. A slow blink from across the room. A chin rested on your knee. A cat who previously regarded you with cautious neutrality suddenly, quietly, choosing to sit beside you. Not on you, not demanding anything — just beside you. Present. Choosing your company over every other option available to them.

It is, if you have experienced it, one of the loveliest feelings in the world.

Chapter 4: The Bond

This chapter is about that feeling. About why it happens, what it means, and why the bond between humans and cats — unlikely as it might seem given everything we know about feline independence — is one of the most genuine and rewarding relationships most of us will ever have.



The Cat Who Chose You

The key word in any discussion of the human-cat bond is choice.

Dogs, through thousands of years of selective breeding, have been shaped into animals that are oriented toward humans — that need human company, that are distressed without it, that are biologically primed to seek connection and approval. A dog's bond with their human is, in part, a product of deliberate design.

A cat's bond with their human is not.

Nobody bred cats to love people. Nobody selected for affection or sociability or attachment over generations of careful breeding. Cats came in from the wild, made a practical arrangement, and then — gradually, on their own terms, without any evolutionary pressure to do so — developed genuine emotional connections with the humans they lived alongside.

Chapter 4: The Bond

When your cat chooses to be near you, they are not doing it because their biology compels them. They are doing it because they want to. Because something about you — your voice, your warmth, your particular smell, the way you sit in the evening, the quality of your presence — is something they have decided they like.

You were chosen. Freely, voluntarily, without obligation.

That distinction matters enormously.



What the Science Says

For a long time, the emotional lives of cats were dismissed or minimised. Cats were considered aloof, self-interested, incapable of the kind of attachment that dogs were known for. This was, it turns out, largely wrong.

Research published in the journal *Current Biology* in 2019 found that cats display secure attachment to their owners in ways that are directly comparable to the attachment behaviour seen in dogs — and in human infants. In the study, cats whose owners left the room showed signs of stress. When their owners returned, the cats settled. The presence of their human was a source of security and comfort.

Further research has found that cats recognise their owner's voice and respond to it differently from the voices of strangers — even when they choose not to show it. Cats know who their person is. They simply express that knowledge on their own terms.

Chapter 4: The Bond

Cats also synchronise their activity patterns with their owners over time — becoming more active when their humans are active, resting when their humans rest. They learn the rhythms of their person's life and orient themselves around them. This is not coincidence. It is attachment.



How Cats Show Love

Cats do not show love the way dogs do — with exuberant, full-body, tail-wagging enthusiasm. Cats show love quietly, subtly, and in ways that are easy to miss if you do not know what you are looking for.

The slow blink is perhaps the most well-known. A cat that holds your gaze and blinks slowly is giving you what researchers call a "cat kiss" — a deliberate, conscious act of trust. In cat language, holding eye contact without blinking is a challenge or a threat. Choosing to break that eye contact slowly, softly, deliberately, is the opposite — it is saying "I am comfortable with you. I trust you. You are safe."

You can do it back. Hold your cat's gaze, soften your expression, and blink slowly. More often than not, they will blink back. You are having a conversation. It is one of the loveliest conversations available to a human being.

The headbutt — technically called bunting — is another profound expression of feline affection. When a cat presses their forehead or cheek against you, they are depositing their scent on you from the glands in their face. They are, in the most literal possible sense, claiming you. Marking you as theirs. Including you in their inner circle of trusted, beloved things.

Chapter 4: The Bond

You are being claimed by a cat. There is honestly no greater honour.

Kneading — that rhythmic pushing of the paws that cats do on soft surfaces, sometimes called "making biscuits" — is a behaviour that begins in kittenhood, when kittens knead their mother's belly to stimulate milk flow. When an adult cat kneads on you, they are expressing the deepest, most instinctive contentment they know. They are, in that moment, completely safe and completely happy. You are their safe place.

Bringing you things, sleeping near you, following you from room to room, sitting with their back to you — all of these are expressions of trust and affection in the language of cats. The cat who turns their back on you is not being rude. They are demonstrating that they feel safe enough to take their eyes off you. In the wild, turning your back on something means you are not afraid of it. Your cat is not afraid of you. That is the point.



Chapter 4: The Bond



The Healing Power of Cats

The therapeutic benefits of cat ownership have been studied extensively, and the findings are, for those of us who suspected it all along, extremely gratifying.

Cat owners have a 30 percent lower risk of dying from a heart attack or stroke than non-cat owners, according to research from the University of Minnesota. The presence of a cat lowers blood pressure, reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and decreases heart rate in measurable, physiological ways.

Stroking a cat releases oxytocin — the bonding hormone associated with love, trust and wellbeing — in both the human and the cat. The act of petting a cat is, literally, a chemical exchange of affection. Both parties benefit. Both parties are changed by it.

The purr — as we explored in the previous chapter — vibrates at frequencies associated with bone healing and tissue repair. There is a growing body of research suggesting that living with a purring cat may have genuine physical health benefits beyond the purely psychological.

Cats are used as therapy animals in hospitals, hospices, care homes and schools — their calm, self-contained presence providing comfort in ways that are difficult to quantify but impossible to deny. They have been shown to reduce anxiety in children with autism, to provide comfort to people with dementia, to ease the loneliness of elderly people living alone.

They do none of this with any apparent effort or intention. They simply are what they are — warm, present, purring — and that is enough.

Chapter 4: The Bond



Grief, and Being Grieved For

Cats grieve.

This is not sentimentality. This is observable, documented behaviour. Cats who lose a companion — human or animal — show clear signs of grief. They search for the missing individual. They lose appetite. They become quieter, less active, less engaged. They may sleep more, or sleep in unusual places. They may vocalise more than usual, as if calling.

The bond that cats form is real enough that its loss is felt. That is not a small thing.

And humans grieve for cats with an intensity that is sometimes dismissed or minimised by people who have never experienced it. The loss of a cat is a genuine bereavement — the loss of a daily companion, a constant presence, a relationship built on trust and quiet, mutual affection over years.

If you have lost a cat, you know this. You know the particular silence of a house where a cat used to be. The absence of weight on the end of the bed, of a presence in the favourite chair, of that small particular sound at the food bowl.

It is a real loss. It deserves to be grieved properly. And the fact that you grieve so deeply is simply the other side of the bond — evidence of how real it was, and how much it mattered.

Chapter 4: The Bond



The Right Human for the Right Cat

Anyone who has ever had more than one cat will know that the bond is not the same with every cat. Some cats choose you immediately and completely — from the first day, they are yours and you are theirs and the matter is settled. Others take months to warm up, reveal themselves slowly, surprise you with affection when you have almost given up expecting it.

Some cats are lap cats. Some are proximity cats — near you always but not on you. Some show love through play, some through bringing gifts, some through that particular habit of sitting and simply watching you with an expression of mild, affectionate scrutiny.

The relationship between a human and a cat is, like all the best relationships, entirely individual. There is no template and no guarantee. There is only the slow, mutual process of getting to know each other — of learning what this particular cat needs, what they love, what frightens them, what makes them curl up in perfect contentment.

And then, one day, you realise you know all of it. You know this cat. You know their sounds and their moods and their preferences. You know when something is wrong before there is any obvious sign. You know what they need before they ask.

That is the bond. Quiet, deep, entirely specific and entirely real.

Obsessed With Cats!

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic

The extraordinary stories humans have about cats throughout history



Perhaps it is the eyes — those luminous, vertical-pupilled, seemingly all-seeing eyes that catch the light in the dark and glow. Perhaps it is the silence — that uncanny ability to move without sound, to appear without warning, to watch without expression. Perhaps it is simply that air of knowing — the sense that a cat understands considerably more than they are letting on, and has decided, for reasons of their own, not to share it.

Whatever the reason, humans have been spinning stories about cats for as long as humans have been spinning stories. They have been worshipped and persecuted, celebrated and feared, associated with gods and with devils, with good fortune and with catastrophe, with the moon and with the dead and with the deepest magic of the natural world.

This chapter is their story. Or rather — some of their stories. There are rather a lot of them.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



The Witch's Familiar

No cat mythology is more enduring — or more consequential — than the association between cats and witchcraft.

In mediaeval Europe, as the Church tightened its grip on daily life and the persecution of alleged witches began in earnest, cats — particularly black cats — became entangled in the darkest chapter of their history. They were believed to be the "familiars" of witches — supernatural companions that aided witches in their dark work, carrying messages, performing tasks, embodying evil spirits.

The black cat in particular became a symbol of malevolence. To own one was suspicious. To be seen in the company of one was dangerous. Cats were killed alongside accused witches, burned and drowned and hung as accessories to a crime that did not exist.

The irony — and it is a devastating one — is that the destruction of cats across mediaeval Europe contributed directly to the explosion of the rat population, and with it the spread of the Black Death. The very creatures being killed for their supposed connection to evil were, in fact, the most effective natural defence against the disease that would kill a third of Europe's population.

History has been unkind to cats. Cats, characteristically, have survived it anyway.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



Black Cats — Luck or Curse?

The superstitions surrounding black cats are a fascinating study in cultural contradiction.

In Britain and much of Europe, a black cat crossing your path is considered good luck — a belief that persists to this day, and that has made black cats a popular symbol on greeting cards and wedding favours. In Japan, black cats are similarly considered good fortune, particularly for single women seeking love.

In the United States and parts of continental Europe, the superstition runs the other way — a black cat crossing your path brings bad luck, an echo of the mediaeval association with witchcraft.

The same animal. The same action. Completely opposite interpretations depending on where you happen to be standing.

Black cats are, statistically, among the least likely cats to be adopted from shelters — a sad modern legacy of ancient superstition. They are also, for what it is worth, among the most beautiful. There is something about a perfectly black cat — the way the light plays across their coat, the luminosity of their eyes, the particular elegance of their silhouette — that is genuinely spectacular.

If you have ever loved a black cat, you already know this.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic

Nine Lives

The idea that cats have nine lives is one of the most widely known – and most widely misunderstood – pieces of cat folklore.

The origin of the number nine varies depending on the culture. In many Western traditions, nine is a particularly powerful number – three times three, considered deeply significant in magical and religious contexts. The phrase "nine lives" may simply reflect the fact that nine was the number associated with luck and resilience in the cultures where the legend originated.

The basis for the legend itself is easier to explain. Cats genuinely do survive situations that would be fatal to most other animals. Their righting reflex, their flexible skeleton, their ability to distribute the impact of a fall across their body – all of these give cats a remarkable capacity for survival. There are documented cases of cats surviving falls from extraordinary heights, recovering from serious injuries, and emerging from situations that seemed unsurvivable.

They do not, of course, literally have nine lives. They have one, the same as everyone else. But they live it with a physical resilience and a capacity for survival that has inspired legends for good reason.



Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic

Cats and the Moon

The association between cats and the moon appears in cultures across the world and across history — and it is not difficult to understand why.

Cats are most active at dawn and dusk. They move through the night with ease, their eyes catching and reflecting light in that characteristic, luminous way. They are creatures of the in-between hours, the liminal times — neither fully day nor fully night, neither fully wild nor fully domestic.

In ancient Egypt, the goddess Bastet was associated with the moon as well as the sun — her protective, nurturing aspects linked to the lunar cycle. In Norse mythology, the cats that pulled Freyja's chariot were associated with the feminine mysteries of the moon. In many folk traditions, the full moon and the cat appear together as symbols of magic, mystery and the natural world's hidden power.

There is something about a cat in moonlight — the silver fur, the gleaming eyes, the absolute stillness — that feels genuinely ancient. As though you are seeing something that humans have been seeing, and feeling something about, for ten thousand years.

Perhaps you are.



Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



Cats as Guardians

Across many cultures, cats have been associated not just with magic but with protection — specifically, with guarding the boundary between the living world and whatever lies beyond it.

In ancient Egypt, cats were believed to protect the home from evil spirits and venomous creatures. Amulets in the shape of cats were worn for protection. The goddess Bastet, in her fiercer aspect, was a protector against evil and disease.

In Japanese folklore, the nekomata — a supernatural cat that develops magical powers with age — was ambiguous in nature, capable of both harm and protection depending on how it was treated. The Maneki-neko, by contrast, is an unambiguously benevolent figure, its raised paw beckoning good fortune and warding off misfortune.

In Celtic mythology, cats were associated with the Otherworld — the realm of spirits, ancestors and magical beings. They were threshold creatures, capable of moving between worlds, seeing what humans could not see, knowing what humans could not know.

This persistent association — across cultures that had no contact with each other, across thousands of years of history — suggests something. Perhaps simply that there has always been something about the presence of a cat that feels like more than it appears. That the watchful eyes in the corner of the room, the creature who sits at the window looking at something you cannot see, the companion who knows when something is wrong before you have said a word — perhaps it has always felt, a little, like something other than just a cat.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



Famous Cats in History

Cats have shared their lives with some of the most remarkable humans in history – and occasionally stolen the show entirely.

Cardinal Richelieu, the powerful French statesman, was so devoted to his cats that he left provision for them in his will and employed two servants specifically to care for them. He reportedly had up to fourteen cats at a time and would work with them draped across his papers.

Florence Nightingale owned more than sixty cats over the course of her lifetime, and was a vocal advocate for their therapeutic benefits – a position that modern science has entirely vindicated.

Winston Churchill's cat, Jock, sat with him throughout the Second World War. Churchill insisted that Jock be present at important wartime meetings, and reportedly refused to begin dinner until the cat was seated at the table. His affection for cats was so well known that, following his death, a bequest was made to ensure that a marmalade cat named Jock should always reside at his home, Chartwell. Jock VII currently holds this position.

Ernest Hemingway's polydactyl cats – discussed briefly in the previous chapter – became so central to his life and work that over fifty of their descendants still live at his former home in Key West, cared for by a dedicated staff and visited by thousands of tourists every year.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



The Cat in Literature

Cats have appeared in literature for as long as literature has existed — and they have consistently refused to behave themselves on the page any more than they do in real life.

Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat grins and disappears, leaving nothing but its expression behind — a perfect metaphor for the way cats seem to exist slightly outside the normal rules of reality. T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* gave the world a whole taxonomy of feline personalities that anyone who has ever lived with multiple cats will recognise immediately. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* remains one of the most unsettling pieces of gothic fiction ever written, the cat at its centre carrying all the weight of guilt and horror that the genre demands.

In Japanese literature, cats appear everywhere — from the supernatural cats of classical folk tales to the beloved cat narrator of Natsume Soseki's novel *I Am a Cat*, published in 1905, in which a housecat observes and comments on human behaviour with the particular blend of affection and contempt that feels entirely authentic.

Cats on the internet — the modern equivalent of literature, or at least its most widely consumed form — have generated more content than almost any other subject. Grumpy Cat, Lil Bub, Henri the Existential Cat — the internet did not create the human obsession with cats. It simply gave it a platform proportional to its actual scale.

Chapter 5: Legends, Myths & Magic



What Cats Know That We Don't

There is one last piece of cat mythology worth examining — the persistent, cross-cultural belief that cats can perceive things that humans cannot. That they see spirits. That they sense illness before symptoms appear. That they know when someone is about to die.

The supernatural explanations can be set aside. But the observations behind them are real, and the mundane explanations are, if anything, more impressive.

Cats can detect subtle changes in barometric pressure that precede storms and earthquakes — there are numerous documented cases of cats behaving oddly before seismic events. Their hearing and smell detect presences and changes that are entirely below the threshold of human perception. Their sensitivity to subtle shifts in human behaviour, body language and scent allows them to detect illness, distress and emotional states that their humans may not have consciously registered themselves.

Oscar, a therapy cat at a nursing home in Rhode Island, became famous for his apparent ability to predict patient deaths — curling up with patients in the hours before they died with a consistency that was documented in a paper in the New England Journal of Medicine. The most likely explanation is that Oscar was detecting the specific scent compounds released by dying cells — a smell imperceptible to humans but entirely within the range of feline olfaction.

He was not seeing death coming. He was smelling it.

Obsessed With Cats!

A Note From The Author

I have been obsessed with cats for as long as I can remember.

Not just fond of them. Not just happy to have one around. Properly, completely, entirely obsessed — in the way that means you stop to stroke every cat you pass in the street, that you rearrange your life around their comfort without a second thought, that you have felt, on more than one occasion, that a cat looking at you was somehow seeing considerably more than you were comfortable with.

This guide started as a simple idea — to write something that celebrated cats in the way they deserve to be celebrated. Not just as pets, or companions, or charming domestic accessories, but as the genuinely extraordinary creatures they are. Animals with ten thousand years of history behind them. Biology that borders on miraculous. An ability to form bonds with humans that nobody designed or planned for and that happened anyway, because that is what cats do.

If you are reading this, you already know all of this in your bones. You did not need me to tell you that cats are special. You just wanted someone to agree with you enthusiastically and at length.

I am very happy to oblige.

*Marina
Jackson*

You have loved cats your whole life. You have rearranged your sleeping position for them, cancelled plans for them, and felt, watching them sleep, that you were witnessing something genuinely wonderful. You already knew they were extraordinary.

Obsessed With Cats! is a warm, fascinating and completely unapologetic guide to the creatures who have shared our lives for ten thousand years – their history, their biology, the bond they form with us, and the legends they have inspired across every culture on earth.

Because the obsession was never the problem. It was always the point.

You're not just a cat owner. You're a Crazy Cat Lady.



Written with love for the humans who love their cats completely

*Marina
Jackson*

www.crazycatlady.uk

