

# Intensive Seminar Helps Cat Poets Sharpen Their Claws

*by* Con Chapman

BECKET, Mass. This sleepy western Massachusetts town is home to St. Judith College, the only institution of higher learning in the world named after the patron saint of cats, but that's not the explanation for the high number of cat lovers here this weekend. "I have learned so much and made so many good friends—some of them human," gushes Judith Sherman about a three-day intensive seminar in cat poetry she attended here beginning Friday night. "I will never rhyme 'cat' and 'mat' again, that's for sure."



Sherman and nineteen other applicants were accepted into a program designed to reverse what Professor Roger Guilbard sees as a disturbing downward trend in the quality of cat poetry. "Poetry about cats reached its zenith in the eighteenth century with Christopher Smart's 'Jubilate Agno' and Thomas Gray's 'On the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes,'" notes Guilbard, an authority on cat poetry. "T.S. Eliot and Stevie Smith

went all cutesy-pie in the twentieth century and it's been downhill ever since."

The thrust of instruction and correction in one-on-one sessions and small group discussions has been to discourage the tendency to anthropomorphize our feline friends, says teaching assistant Glynda Gaelwig, who is studying for a master's degree in English with a concentration in cat poetry. "Excessive sentimentality is the occupational habit—if not the occupation—of cat poets," the slim, bespectacled blonde notes as she takes an unsparing pen to a poem entitled "My Best Friends Are Cats." "We try to get our cat poets to understand that first they must observe and make us *see* their cats, then if it's not too saccharine to let us know how they feel about them."



Melinda Stiffel is first to recite in a roundtable group of poets who will have their work critiqued by other participants and, after clearing her throat, she launches into "Some Things About You I'm Not Fond Of," a poem about her male tuxedo cat, Mr. Scruffy:

*I love you much, I love you truly,  
You're just as cute as a bug,  
But I really wish you wouldn't upchuck  
Field mice upon the rugs.*

"Anyone want to take a stab at that?" Guildbard asks, and Nancy Palsgraff, who writes a weekly pet poetry column for the North

Adams News-Courier, meekly raises her hand. "I think Melinda did what you told us to," she says. "You said to take an unsparing look at our pets and not churn out greeting card poems."

"Fair enough," Guilbard says. "Although the gimlet eye that a great poet must strive for is clouded by affection, it's a worthy first effort. Let's hear what you came up with, Nancy."

Palsgraff shuffles her papers to place "There's Just One Thing I Don't Like About You" on top from the bottom, where she had kept it concealed until prompted in order to hide it from the prying eyes of her fellow students. She looks around the room warily, hoping the criticism of her work won't be too harsh, then begins:

*I think you are perfect in many ways,  
And I don't mean to be a grouch,  
But I'm tired of yelling at you all the time  
When you sharpen your claws on my couch!*



"Ok," Gaelwig says, "now we're getting somewhere. I sense a strain of resentment. You'd *like* to have nice furniture, but you *can't* as long as your cat insists on being—a cat! It's an insoluble dilemma—he can't change his nature. That's the kind of knotty problem that makes for great poetry."

Palsgraff allows herself a tiny little smile of self-satisfaction, and a barely-audible "Thanks" issues from her lips.

"Any comments from the group?" Gaelwig asks.

The hand that shoots up belongs to Con Chapman, the only male in the group, and from the look on his face it is apparent he doesn't think much of what he's heard. "That was nice, Nancy," he says with a sarcastic tone, "*really* nice. Why don't you just get your damn cat a scratching post, and spare us the limp claptrap?"

An audible gasp is heard from the class, and Guilbard clucks his tongue in disapproval. "I've warned you about maintaining a civil tone in group discussions before," he says with a stern expression.



"And E.B. White warned us to avoid the gerundic, and yet you persist in using it," Chapman shoots right back at the professor.

"Well, let's hear what *you* wrote," Stiffel says through a sniffle.

"I'll be happy to 'share' it with you," Chapman says. "This be the verse," he says by way of introduction, invoking "His Epitaph" by Robert Louis Stevenson and the poem of the same name by Philip Larkin, "that I would like to be remembered by." He straightens himself, announces the title—"My Wild Feline Boy"—and begins:

*It's three a.m. and the cat wants in,  
My wild feline boy.  
He's made his way home from a night of sin,  
My errant feline boy.  
With a notch in his ear from an honor-mad fight  
And a tail that is shorter than at last sunlight*

*He stops to eat, then he curls to sleep  
My sated feline boy.*

*He recalls for me a time when I,  
Like he, roamed the streets at night.  
He unlike me, sleeps an untroubled sleep.  
My antic feline boy.*



*"That's awful!"*

There are looks of consternation on the faces of the others except for Palsgraff, still smarting from the criticism her work received. "I think it's *horrible!*" she says with an exhalation of poetic afflatus.

"Would you care to . . . elaborate?" Guilbard asks her gently.

"A cat who fights is a *bad* cat!"

