

Poetry for Cats

by Con Chapman

Call me crazy, but I like to write poetry. For cats.



Cats are a good training ground for poets. They are largely indifferent to poetry, like the overwhelming majority of people, but that still makes them a more receptive audience than my wife, who is openly hostile to the stuff.

Writing poetry for cats is low-level mental stimulation, like doing crossword puzzles or Sudoku, but *you* make up the problem to be solved, rather than some faceless drone at a newspaper syndicate, so when you're done you've created something. Albeit on a par with a gimp necklace at summer camp.



It takes very little activity, or inactivity, on the part of my cats to serve as my muse. Here's a cat poem I thought of just last night:

*I take my laser pen in hand
and shine it in a circle.
My little cat goes chasing 'round,
it drives him quite berserkle!*



Then I take what I've written, crumple the paper up into a ball, and throw it across the room. My cat pounces on it, extending our fun, and conserving precious resources through recycling. I'm trying to reduce our humor footprint.

Just because I write poetry for my cats doesn't mean they're sissies. They're both males who will stay out all night, getting into fights with all manner of beasts. They bring us sustenance; field mice, birds, chipmunks. Once Rocco, the younger of the two, horse-collared a squirrel from behind, like a member of the New England Patriots' defense, and dragged it, dying, to our back patio. As a former high school middle linebacker in a 4-3 alignment, I found this to be a most gratifying spectacle.



Horse collar tackle

T.S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" is perhaps the most famous collection of cat poems, but it has always struck me as a bit fuss-budgety, like its author, a native of St. Louis who became a British subject in 1927, thereby missing out on *seven* World Series titles by the St. Louis Cardinals. What a dope! That book, of course, was turned into the hugely successful Broadway show *Cats*.



T.S. Eliot: And you call yourself a Cardinals fan!

My wife once bought us tickets to see the show for my birthday, assuming that because I liked cats, I would like the show, but she sensed my indifference to Eliot's work at dinner. As we left the restaurant for the theatre we were approached by two show tune mavens who breathlessly asked us if we had tickets we were willing to sell. We gave each other a look that lasted as long as the flutter of a hummingbird's wings, then sold the ducats at a premium. This is the first and only known instance of scalping by a Presbyterian woman since the church was established during the Scottish Reformation in 1560.

Cats: Thanks, I'll pass.

Lots of poets have had cats, chief among them Samuel Johnson, whose cat was named "Hodge". I had a girlfriend whose cat was named after Johnson's. When we had her refined friends over she'd tell the story about how, when Johnson learned of a wave of cat-napping sweeping London at the height of the popularity of catsmeat pies, he looked down at his cat and said "They'll not have Hodge!" Sort of NPR humor, as Harry Shearer would say—loads of muted titters. We broke up; she got the cat, and I got the hell out of there.



Johnson: How do you know you won't like cats meat unless you try it?

For my money, the greatest of all cat poems is *For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffrey* by Christopher Smart (1722-1770), from *Jubilate Agno*. It's a work that every pet store owner and cat groomer should have up on their wall, in needlepoint. Surely you know its stirring opening lines:



Christopher Smart, wearing his "everyday" mortarboard

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffrey.

For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.

For at the First glance of the glory of God in the East he worships him in his way.

For is this done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

For he rolls upon prank to work it in.

Musk is the smelly substance obtained from a small sac under the skin of the abdomen of the rodents cats kill, and to "roll upon prank" refers, in a charming 18th century way, to cats' preferred method of

applying it. Yep—that's a real cat there, not some Broadway-bound dancer-pussy.



Oh—I neglected to mention that when Smart wrote the above, he was a resident of Bedlam, the London hospital for the mentally ill.

Call him crazy.

Available in Kindle format as part of the collection "Cats Say the Darndest Things" on amazon.com.

