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Author(s): Jeanne Schinto
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Stifling the cat's meow

by Jeanne Schinto

SOON AFTER EDITING an anthology of contemporary dog stories, I was approached about doing a companion cat-story volume. I haven't the same affection for cats that I do for dogs, but the assignment seemed reasonable and I started collecting short fiction from the seventies, eighties and nineties. In no time I had a tottering heap: stories by Alice Adams, Wright Morris, Paul Theroux, Robley Wilson, Jr., John L'Heureux, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Francine Prose, Bobbie Ann Mason, Joyce Carol Oates, Valerie Martin, Cornelia Nixon, Michael Bishop, Gina Berriault, Lynda Schor, Ursula LeGuin, Jana Harris, Ann Beattie, Molly Giles, Jack Matthews, Max Steele, Steve Barthelme, Philip F. O'Connor, Jerry Bumpus, Paul Bowles, Catherine Petroski, W.P. Kinsella, William Goyen and Larry Woiwode—to name only the Americans. Clearly, finding material would not be a problem. Dog-story writers are rampant; cat-story writers are, apparently, more so.

For perspective, I reread Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," the story of a husband who, crazed by a cat, axe-murders his wife and tries to hide his crime by walling her up in the basement—only to have the crime given away by the cries of the cat he has inadvertently walled away with her. Poe's narrator describes his classic as a tale of "mere household events." Mere? Well, I suppose it depends on the household. I settled down with my stack of modern fictional felines, assuming I wouldn't meet up with that sort of offhanded misogyny again.

By this time, word of my project was out, and more stories tumbled through my mail slot daily: by Pamela Painter, Phillip Lopate, Arturo Vivante.... Instead of welcoming the bounty, however, I found myself feeling a dizzying dread. It wasn't because there were so many, but because of what so often happened in these tales. For although no serious harm comes to any of the women portrayed in the newer fiction, it often comes in spades to the cats. Cats and kittens of every color and stripe are poisoned (Beattie, Morris), hacked to pieces (Matthews), bludgeoned (L'Heureux), hanged (Woiwode), starved (Martin, Schaeffer), stabbed (Woiwode again). Yes, I know, it's only symbolic. But symbolic of what? (And what *does* it mean when Jana Harris' teenage protagonist, the drug-crazed Iona Hink, goes to the hospital for treatment of a cat bite, only to find that the doctor wants a pap smear and all her gynecological records?)

It's now clear to me that while these smart authors traffic heavily in the old crazy cat-lady stereotypes, they don't subscribe to them. Instead, they use these worn notions for their own, mostly admirable, fictional purposes. Still, especially for a woman, it can be an unsettling experience to (unfortunate word choice) dissect many of these creations.

CAT-WORSHIPPING WOMEN used to be portrayed as crazy because they didn't have men; these days, it's because they don't need them. "Frustrated" was the term that used to be attached both to the spinster and her yowling, furniture-humping cat. "Selfish" is the current coinage—applied to women who see to their own needs instead of, obsessively, the needs of others. Paul Theroux's narrator, for one, has no qualms about leveling the accusation at the climax of his story, "Sex and its Substitutes." And while there is no overt violence visited upon the cats of the cat-loving Margaret, nor upon Margaret herself, damage *is* done to Margaret's character.

She and the narrator are both foreign service officers at the American embassy in London; she lives alone and has what the narrator describes as "a velvet feline growl." She also has six cats upon whom she dotes fanatically. At a cocktail party, she and the narrator become acquainted over the subject of cats. Does he like them? "I'm a secret believer in cats," he tells her. But is this an allegiance invented for wooing purposes only?

When the two become involved, he discovers just how deep is her devotion to cats. Her flat is a shrine: filled with cat calendars, cat photos, cat wallpaper, cat paperweights, cat lampshades, cat-stenciled towels, cat-printed coffee mugs, cat-embroidered sheets and dinner napkins. She is also, he reports, "catlike in the panting gasping way she made love." And it seems to unnerve our hapless narrator, who gradually comes to realize that cats would be the whole of her society—if, that is, he didn't offer her the one thing the cats couldn't provide.

Eventually, he comes to resent his status as a sex object. He also seems to resent the aloof Margaret's steadfast self-sufficiency. Did she learn it—or maybe catch it—from her cats? When Margaret is asked to bend the rules for an African American with visa problems, she refuses. The trouble is, Margaret once heard this man belittling cats. "I started to speak," our narrator tells us, "but again she hissed at me... It embarrassed me to think that her secretary was listening to Margaret behaving like one of her own selfish cats."

Ann Beattie's crazy cat-lady Gloria, in "Hale Hardy and the Amazing Animal Woman," finds herself in a romantic predicament similar to Margaret's—pursued by a man jealous of her cats—though she lives in a typically offbeat Beattie world. Beattie, for her part, seems thoroughly aware of all the gender-specific cat lore of our literary past, and delights in absurdly exaggerating it. The piece reads like a spoof, and it must be, considering its unlikely plot.

Not exactly a sex kitten but a dotty cleaning lady in her thirties, Gloria adores her five cats; Hardy, a college drop-out, has fallen into a kind of wacky love with her. He daydreams of "her paw-feet, her cat-eyes," and of having "little kittens" with her. Inexplicably, Hardy also dreams of a trip to the Grand Canyon, and wants Gloria to go with him, especially since she has a car and he doesn't. But she won't budge: she won't leave her cats. So Hardy kills them.

With the cats gone, Gloria and Hardy are free to travel—"to forget," Hardy tells the distraught Gloria, who has no idea that Hardy is the cat-killer. On their second day out, though, Gloria becomes convinced that their motel manager is one of her cats come back. Gloria, who believes she herself has been reincarnated, meets more of her cats along the way, in Nebraska, in New Mexico.... Hardy dismisses it all as crazy cat-lady hokum, and Gloria, who once thought she might be able to fall in love with him, starts to hate him. The story ends with Hardy locked out of Gloria's car, sitting on its hood, eating ice cream and "gazing into the vast pit of the canyon," which surely must be his directionless life. Will Gloria let this spoiled, self-centered kid back in the car? Probably. She can't get rid of him, or her cats, any more than she can get rid of her "womanly" cat-ladyish compassion.

IN SOME OF THESE STORIES it happens, exactly as it does in real life, that a special type of human cruelty is inflicted upon cats. They aren't killed outright; instead, they are left to die, out of sight, in the countryside, the supposed place of their roots. Abandoned felines are a recurring motif in contemporary stories of unstable, unreliable, or emotionally unsatisfactory relationships. Often the animals are abandoned by characters, like Joyce Carol Oates' in "The Seasons," who can't decide if pushing a cat out of a car on a back-country road is a punishment or a kind of backhanded reward for a pet whom they secretly envy. Wildness. Independence. Freedom. Cats *are* freedom, aren't they? Anyway, if cats really are as fiercely independent as they seem to profess to be, then won't they be just fine out there all by themselves?

On the other hand, sometimes cats disappear not because someone has conveniently dumped them, but because they have walked out of our complicated contemporary lives intentionally. That must be why so many recent stories about dreams of escape often involve these creatures. Ironically, the last thing the heroine of Bobbie Ann Mason's "Residents and Transients" wants to do is run away; indeed, she wants desperately to stay put on her parents' Kentucky farm, with its barnful of cats. It amounts to the same thing, though—the melancholy Mary Sue wants to get away from her husband who has been transferred to Louisville by his company and expects Mary Sue to follow.

Like Beattie, Mason reveals a cleverly skewed sensitivity to all the crazy cat-lady clichés that have preceded her story: "I don't want you to think I'm this crazy cat freak with a mattress full of money," Mary Sue tells Larry, her dentist-lover. At another point she announces, "I am nearly thirty years old. I have two men, eight cats, no cavities. One day I was counting the cats and I absentmindedly counted myself." As Mason sees it, however, no amount of self-awareness will spare Mary Sue the choice she must make.

In the end, it's not Mary Sue or any of the cats who meet a violent end and teach her the lesson she needs to be taught, it's that other symbol of sexuality, the rabbit (earlier, as it happens, the cats' prey). Trying to cross the road, one is run over: "Its forelegs are frantically working, but its rear end has been smashed." Now, like Mary Sue, it's running in place, straddling the middle, all its decision-making postponed forever. Still, we sense, Mary Sue has decided to cross that road, too; she's going to leave her husband, not necessarily to be with Larry ("I don't have to be an Einstein to tell that you're bored with me," he tells her). She'll do it to be true to herself.

DESPITE THIS MORE POSITIVE picture of the independent-minded woman with cats which is gradually emerging, in the end I abandoned my cat-anthology project. I couldn't take the gore. I wanted to

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bring reading pleasure, not revulsion. Still, I do come across a cat-story gem now and then, which makes me want to return to this idea in another decade. There is, for example, Alice Adams' "The Islands," which I first read in *Ontario Review* and which this year has received an O. Henry Award. Adams' story is far more emotionally complex than any of the other stories I've collected—probably because its theme isn't merely sex, or death, or a combination thereof, but love.

The life and death of Pink, the narrator's cat, is shadowed by another story—another love: that of the narrator's husband, D. It's also motored by remembrances of her dear friend, Zoe, also deceased, who gave her Pink in the first place. But do not make the mistake of assuming that it's their deaths, their loves about which the narrator is actually speaking. In the opening she herself soundly rejects the idea that her love for Pink is merely metaphorical:

> What does it mean to love an animal, a pet, in my case a cat, in the fierce, entire and unambivalent way that some of us do?.... Does the cat (did the cat) represent some person, a parent, or a child? some part of one's self? I don't think so—and none of the words or phrases that one uses for human connections seems quite right: "crazy about," "really liked," "very fond of"—none of these describes how I felt and still feel about my cat.[1]

Self*less*ness, not selfishness, is what this cat story is about. And what better way to portray it than through images of a being who has no "self" at all, except the one we attribute to it? Selfless love is neither independent nor dependent, as we deep down know. Transcending all other considerations of ego and of will, it simply is. May all our fictions of the future reflect that irrefutable fact.

[1] Alice Adams, *Ontario Review*, Vol. 35 (Fall-Winter 1992), p.64.

To study war some more

by Ruth Rosen

Gendering War Talk, edited by Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, 328 pp., $49.50 hardcover, $14.95 paper.

LIKE HUSBANDS WHO WONDER what housewives do all day long, few men in peace studies have any idea what feminists have been writing about during the last two decades. Three times since 1983 I have found myself at international peace conferences, only to discover how few men had bothered to acquaint themselves with feminist critiques of war and conflict. Feminists, however, like good wives who pay close attention to their husbands' work, have been scrutinizing new developments in peace studies. Jumping the boundaries of their disciplines, they have questioned unexamined assumptions that shape men's views of peace and security.

Whenever I spoke at such events, I had to return to basics. The most elementary feminist analysis—which would have bored an audience of feminist scholars—amazed and impressed men who had never heard a gendered critique of knowledge, let alone of peace and war. Call it the new feminist peace scholarship. My bookshelves groan under the weight of this expanding literature. An exciting interdisciplinary field, it is enriched by feminists' critique of knowledge and their eagerness to excavate the political dimensions of everyday life. It is also a subversive literature, for some of these feminist scholar-activists offer sharp critiques of the highly gendered character of the culture and political economy on which our national security, state and foreign policies are based. Tantalizing examples: feminist scholars have refused to regard peace as the mere absence of war; they have reformulated women's rights as human rights and redefined security to include freedom from violence and poverty; they have shown how cultural representations of war resurrect militarism, and deconstructed the defense language used to justify a national security state.

Some of this literature has appeared as books, but many articles remain hidden in journals or anthologies not readily accessible to ordinary readers. Warmly welcomed, then, is a new collection of essays written by some of the pathbreaking pioneers in this interdisciplinary effort.

You can almost hear the writers in *Gendering War Talk* speaking to each other—and for good reason. In the spring of 1990, Dartmouth College hosted a Humanities Institute titled "Gender and War: Roles and Representations." For ten weeks, the participants engaged in intense dialogue, educating and challenging each other to reconsider old interpretations and to refine new ideas. Afterwards, some of the participants turned their work into essays for this published collection.

This is not a book about women's experiences in wartime, although several of the essays do focus on how gender relations are disrupted by the violent disintegration of civil society. Nor do the editors embrace the seductive essentialist view that women are naturally peaceful or that men are the violent partners of the species. (Unlike, say, Helen Caldicott's famous *Missile Envy*, which promoted the idea that men make missiles in response to their envy of women's reproductive creativity.) To be sure, the editors recognize that war is "the arena where the division of labor along gender lines has been the most obvious and thus where sexual difference has seemed the most absolute and natural." Still, they make no claims for female moral superiority, fully aware that women have actively engaged in—or supported—all kinds of atrocious acts against humanity.

Rather, these essayists—in good postmodernist spirit—want to challenge all the traditional ways we have thought about war. They invite the reader to view war not only as lived history, but as a culturally produced activity. Cross-cultural and multidisciplinary, they roam the globe, visiting the Middle East and Latin America, as well as more familiar sites of American conflict, in search of links between gender relations and war. Along the way, they draw upon literature, film, drama, history, psychology and philosophy, employing a wide variety of critical and theoretical methodologies.

DESPITE THIS DIVERSITY, at least two broad themes nicely connect the essays to one another. One is the recognition that wars in the twentieth century have never been wholly isolated—either geographically or culturally—from civilian society. Focusing on the twentieth century, the contributors accurately observe that we can no longer distinguish between the "war front" and the "home front" after a century that has witnessed civilian bombing, civil wars and repeated genocide. Some of the essays therefore examine the ways these two "fronts"—and the gender relations they reinforced—have shaped the cultural, social, economic and political experience and representation of war.

Who, for example, after a war ends, wins the power to enshrine its memory in culture? In a fascinating essay titled "Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Films," Sonya Michel argues that the American film industry has played a decisive role in winning our wars. In such films *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) or *Coming Home* (1978), the disabled veteran, a staple of Hollywood, is restored to masculinity, often (but not after Vietnam) at the expense

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