



CATS IN LITERATURE

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Since the times of fables and fairy tales cats have continued to feature widely in literature. Some of these stories feature cats in an affectionate, companionable light, while others show the darker side of the animal, harking back to many of its earlier associations. One example is in Edgar Allen Poe's *The black cat*. Despite the nature of this fearsome cat, Poe was actually a cat lover, and had a favourite tortoiseshell called Catarina.

Other literary cat lovers have included the Brontë sisters, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ernest Hemingway, and Henry James. Charles Dickens also owned a cat which was called 'The Master's Cat', who used to distract him from his writing by snuffing out candles with its paw.

POETIC CATS

*Let take a cat, and foster him well with milk
And tender flesh, and make his couch of silk,
And let him see a mouse go by the wall
Anon he waiveth milk and flesh and all
And every dainty that is in that house,
Such appetite has he to eat a mouse.*

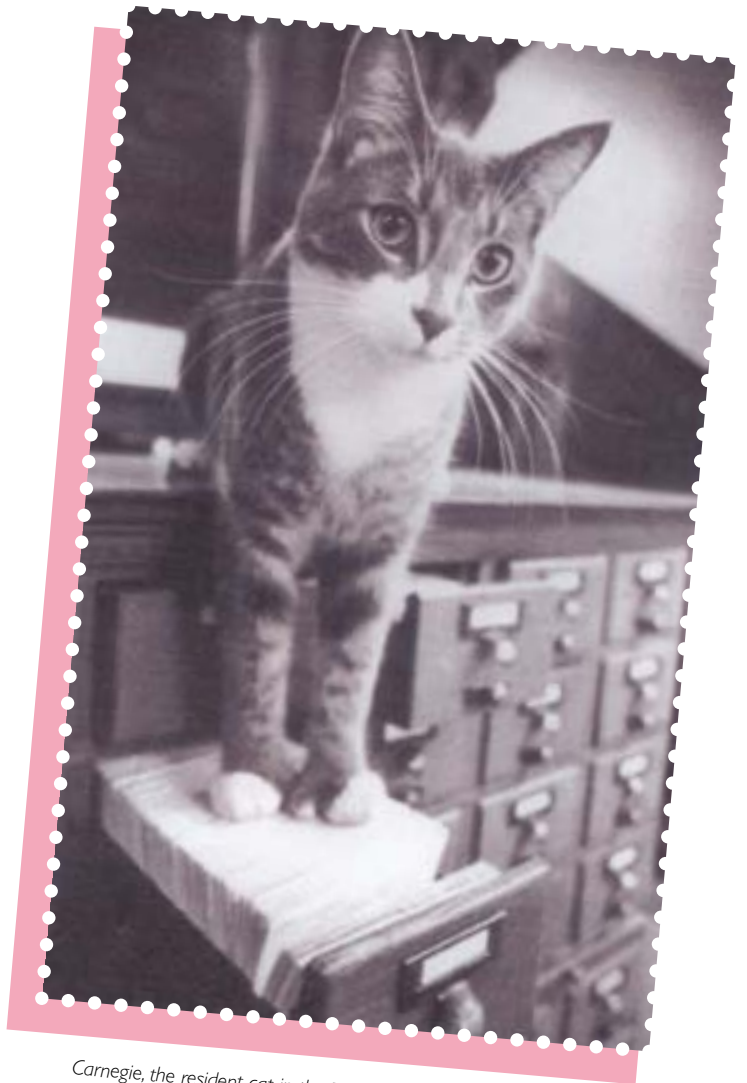
These lines come from Chaucer's *Manciple's tale*, demonstrating - if demonstration were needed - that cat behaviour hasn't changed since the fourteenth century.

Cats have been featured by noted poets down the centuries, including Shelley and Keats, two leading poets of the Romantic Era.

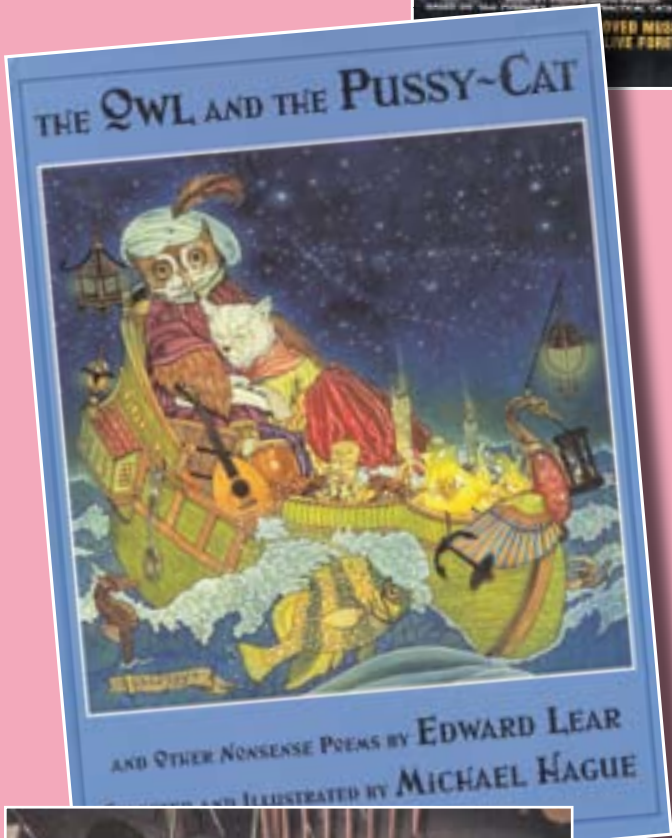
LIBRARY CATS

One of the societies to be formed in the USA is the Library Cat Society (LCS) which was founded in 1987. This organisation promotes the establishment of cats in libraries, whether as a form of rodent control or simply for public relations purposes. It has members across the country, and many of the libraries it is associated with have well-known cats of their own.

The most famous of these were undoubtedly Baker and Taylor, two Scottish Fold cats who lived in a library in Minden, Nevada.



Carnegie, the resident cat in the Rochester Public Library, New Hampshire



Monty, the resident cat at Montgomery Elementary School Library, Farmers Branch, Texas

They were the mascots of Baker & Taylor, the world's largest distributor of books to libraries and bookstores. Another cat promoted by the LCS is Muffin, who was evicted from a library in Putnam Valley, New York, because one of the library's trustees became allergic to cats. Two local residents were so disheartened by the eviction that they deleted the library from their wills, costing it \$80 000 in legacies.

Edward Lear owned a cat called Foss for 17 years, who was part of the inspiration for many of the cats in his **Nonsense verse**. The most famous of these must be the beautiful cat in **The owl and the pussy-cat**.

One of the cat lover's favourite poets must be TS Eliot, whose **Old possum's book of practical cats** was published in 1939. He owned many cats, and his poems grew out of years of making up cat poems for children. His book contains poems about over a dozen cats, all of them unique and delightful, ranging from *Macavity, the mystery cat* to *Skimbleshanks: the railway cat*. The musical **Cats** is based on the book and is a celebration of feline mystery and grace.

At the **CL** we did a search on libraries and cats and found some interesting stories which we share.

Cat lovers are probably familiar with the title, **Dewey: the small-town library cat who touched the world** by Vicki Myron with Bret Witter, published in 2008.

The story began on a freezing January morning in 1988 when the librarian of Spencer Library in Iowa discovered a kitten in their bookdrop. Dewey Readmore Books, as he was named, has since become the most glamorous and well-known cat imaginable - ranging from a calendar pin-up cat to one that was filmed by a Japanese film crew. (See review in **CL**, Nov/Des 2008.)

Yet another famous library cat was Reggie, the motivation for the founding of the Library Cat Society in 1987. Reggie arrived as a full-grown cat on the doorstep of Phyllis Lahti, a librarian in Moorhead, Minnesota, and was established at Bryant Public Library as the cat-in-residence. The gentlest cat around, he earned himself the nickname Prince among the children.

Together with Dewey Readmore Books, he and many others featured in the film, **Puss in boots**, a documentary on library cats.

Note: One wonders if there are any takers who would care to do some research on cats in libraries in South Africa?

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