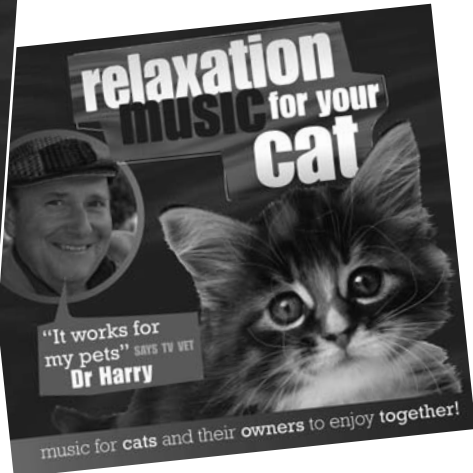


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*"Cats-to the rest of the world at any rate-embodiment both our worst and our best traits."*

"He really is beautiful," said Susan, a big, smart woman with a big, smart grin. "He's clean and elegant, sensitive to your moods and, in his own way, he is utterly devoted to you." I was, of course, the one who fed him, I thought, but I didn't want to interrupt.

"He's got the long hair you like, and the brilliant green eyes." She let her phrases casually roll. "He's got that smooth way of walking down the hall. One of these days, you're going to pick him up and kiss him. And he's going to turn into a handsome man, with the same beautiful hair and the same striking eyes. And for once he'll be able to take you in his arms and embrace you right back. And then he's going to say to you, "Aren't you sorry you had me fixed?"

At this point Cyrus squirmed to be let loose, and Susan, flashing that big easy smile, followed him out of the room. In the years that have followed, I have wondered if my roommate knew how much her good-natured ribbing touched on the truth. I have since married a terrific man, a cat lover like myself. And in some crucial characteristics-the loyalty paired with a sense of self, the healthy pride, the green eyes, though not, I must note, the surgery-he does resemble the cat who now shares both our lives. This common joke came true, after a fashion, and Susan and I had a good laugh over this when she came East for my wedding. But since then I have had reason to question the apparent coincidences my deceptively easygoing roommate pointed out. For although these memories make me smile, she's sharp enough to have alerted me to their more serious shading as well, bringing me back as good friends will to some basic lessons about the nature of love and growth, of what I need for myself and what I can-or want to-share of my life that I first learned and that I continue to explore through my relationship with my cat.

It can seem strange, at first, to think in such profound terms about this most domestic of relationships. But if we allow ourselves to consider it seriously, we will see that there is great power and great potential here, built up in the closeness of our bond and in the special understanding that can exist between female human and feline. A sympathy exists between us, a sense of common cause between the petting and the purr that allows us to grow and dream, that allows us, the human half of the equation, to draw on previously untapped parts of ourselves.

# The Feline Mystique

On the Mysterious Connection Between Women and Cats

By Clea Simon

"Will I ever find someone to love?" I remember asking my therapist that about ten years ago, not for the first time and not for the last. "Will I ever be able to sustain a relationship, I mean one with someone other than my parents, for more than six months at a time?" For whatever reason that week, I was feeling particularly desperate.

"You already have," my shrink, a petite woman packed full of wisdom, told me. "I've seen you, learning and growing together. Allowing your lives to come together." I waited, wondering who I had forgotten. "But for better or worse, this relationship is with your cat."

I remember feeling a little peeved about her answer. Wasn't she taking me seriously? But then I flashed back to a few years earlier. My then roommate Susan had come home to find me, as usual, seated by the window, cuddling Cyrus, the grey mixed breed longhair I'd adopted the year before.



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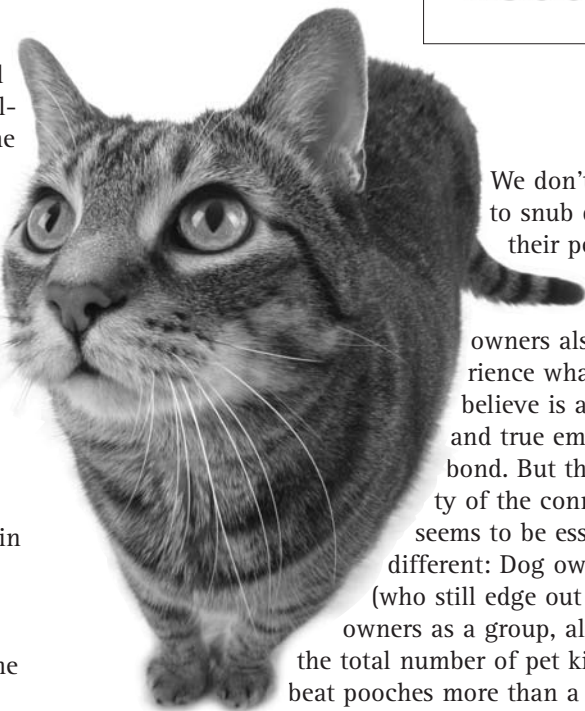
Consider, for a start, just how easy it is to make light of this relationship in any of its stages: the lonely single woman who sees her cat as her mistress, her lover, or her boss is the stuff of endless jokes and urban legends. As is the depressed wife who confides in her cat, rather than her husband, or the 'crazy old cat lady' who collects felines like her peers collect porcelain knickknacks. Cat and woman, bound to each other and often separated in some essential way from the world, this pairing has provided material for myriad parodies.

As long ago as 1801 playwright George Colman used the name Lucretia McTab in his comedy *The Poor Gentleman* to signal to readers that this character, a confirmed spinster, was tabbycat like, a stereotypical cat woman. To fulfil the caricature, he made her foolishly proud, so deluded about her own worth that she snubs her benefactors because they are of lesser blood. She was followed in the British popular press by *Old Dame Trot* and her *Comical Cat* in 1806 and *Dame Wiggins* of Lee in 1823 who cohabited with 'seven fine cats,' both early cartoons that won their laughs at the expense of similarly single cat loving women of a certain age, and there are many who accept these characteristics—the pride, the aloofness, the anti-male bias—about all of us cat women and look no further.

The basis for the easy humour, the stereotypes that serve as fodder for office jokes and TV sitcoms, lies in our recognition of a type. We can all envision the classic 'witch,' a hag with a scary cat. We have also grown accustomed to its contemporary equivalent, caricatured in Nicole Hollander's cartoon 'Sylvia': The neurotic thirty-something who pampers her pet because she lacks a man or a baby. These stereotypes live on because they are so immediately recognisable, they've become a form of social shorthand to signify maladjusted women. But these simplistic images acknowledge a larger truth. In their negative way, the proliferation of such images serves as evidence of the connection between feline and female.

The language of metaphor reveals the depth of the bond. Think of cats and how they are described: as sleek and graceful, to use some of the more positive words. Slinky or fluid or poised. Or as duplicitous and sly, by those who dislike them. But always, essentially, in terms ordinarily reserved for feminine attributes. And think of the colloquial language used to describe women, whether we be catty or kittenish, 'cat fighting' when turned on each other or 'catting around' when we play the field. Whether we be idealised into the sexy night-time prowler who is Catwoman or dismissed as simply 'pussy,' women and cats are so closely identified as to be, in our descriptive language at least, almost interchangeable, particularly when either of us retreat behind our essential personal mysteries. We are feline; we epitomise sensuality. We radiate cool: "Two tricks over the years have taught me how to conceal my tears," wrote Colette, the most feline of French authors. "That of hiding my thoughts, and that of darkening my mascara." Compare that enigmatic, elegant image to the kohl-rimmed eyes of the calmly staring tabby, and remember that the cat is the basis for the riddling sphinx. Cats—to the rest of the world at any rate—embody both our worst and our best traits.

We have become linked in the world's eyes, elevated to contemporary icons: The young girl who learns to care for, and be gentle with, her kitten. The working woman who relaxes when she drops her briefcase and bulging purse to place her hand, instead, on her pet's soft, warm fur. And the older woman, too often alone, for whom the quiet cat on the windowsill, is a more generous companion than her memories. Reaching beyond the more simple, laughable stereotypes, these pairings represent different facets of the real connection between each person and her pet. We see such relationships repeated throughout our lives; we may find ourselves in first one and then another, much as we model ourselves on different archetypes—daughter or mother, career powerhouse or crone—at various times. Even if we do not fulfil all these roles, even as we leave those we've outgrown behind, we sense the rightness of such iconic images, the bond between a woman and her feline companion.



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We don't mean  
to snub dogs and  
their people.

Clearly, dog owners also experience what they believe is an honest and true emotional bond. But the quality of the connection seems to be essentially different: Dog owners (who still edge out cat owners as a group, although the total number of pet kitties beat pooches more than a decade ago) report their relish in becoming physically involved in their pets' active lives, walking and running and romping with them. In surveys, dog owners overwhelmingly respond that they feel closest to their pets while playing or exercising with them. Their bonding comes primarily through sweat and motion. We cat owners, and there are more than 35 million of us in the United States, split our responses among more domestic pastimes; according to the American Animal Hospital Association, we report that we bond most closely either while sleeping with our pets or while stroking or grooming them.

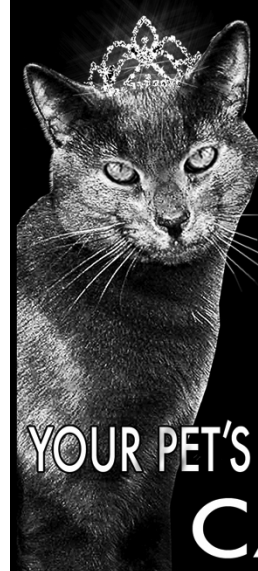
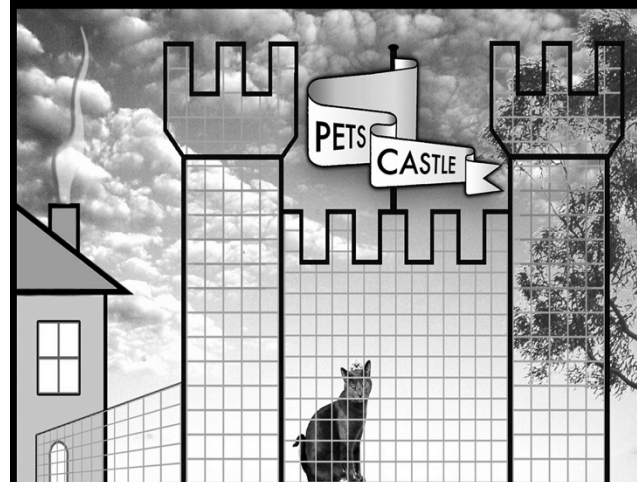
The nature of our connection adds to our mystique, to the element of unknown that confuses so many outside observers of our relationship. It's a different kind of tie than the classic bond that linked Timmy to his Lassie, and it works particularly well with the strengths that we, as women, have been encouraged to develop in communication, cooperation, and understanding. As is so often true with dog people versus cat people, the major difference can be seen as a pitting of extroversion against introversion, of activity, if you will, versus intimacy.

The truth, of course, grows not only from which animal we prefer but from how we choose to relate. I know of one woman, for example, who cuddles her dachshunds as if she were nursing them, unfolding all her secrets into their dark velvet ears. She is the exception, however, and if we are to look at the pet owning population as a whole, the paradigm becomes clear. Dog people, on the whole, seem to enjoy being taken out of their lives by their pets; we cat owners, and we do include an increasing number of men in our midst, instead welcome our pets into the emotional fabric of our lives. In many ways, we use our cats as mediums into ourselves, seeing, in how we view our cats, who we are, and discovering, in how we treat them, what handling we think we deserve from the world. Both types of bonding have their value, but we who have become cat people treasure the quiet and personal nature of our relationship, the steady purr over the joyful bark. It is, like so many things female (and perhaps, like so many things undervalued in our go-go competitive world) a subtler treasure. And in this quiet, private space we find our courage and spirit, we find new value in our feminine nature, we find the strengths that we may have misperceived as weakness. In short, as we uncover the layers of this connection—the bond between the female and the feline—we find real jewels, core truths from which we can all learn.

Clea Simon is a writer who lives in Cambridge, Mass. She is the author of four books—her most recent, 'Mew for Murder' is a cosy mystery that tackles issues of responsible pet ownership, cat 'hoarding,' and more. Available through Amazon.com. More of Clea's work can be viewed at [www.cleasimon.com](http://www.cleasimon.com)



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