

we might conclude; but there is also choice in it. For example, they love teasing us – disappearing into the undergrowth and ignoring instruction to come this instant, only to surprise us when we least expect it. Great fun.

Deciding to jump on us to be caressed is a positive choice. Seeking such delight goes miles beyond instinct. And what is at work when a timid cat who hates being picked up becomes ill and surrenders itself to its owner, purring gently as TLC begins to take effect? Many are the stories of cats who first bonded closely with their owners as the result of having to be cared for. Some cats who are ill may wander off secretly to die, but most will sacrifice their independence to regain health. Is their joie de vivre in fact just instinct? For that matter, is it human instinct to go to such trouble to ensure our cats are happy? Obviously not, for in past times most cats were left to fare for themselves. Perhaps we are all getting soft? Yet what greater joy do we experience than when seeing our cat in rapturous contentment, or even when giving a few minutes of pleasure to a cat we stop to pet in the street?

Instinct or choice: the topic is bound to reappear in later pages.

Often it is the cat following a basic instinct that opens up the possibility of developing a special relationship. For example, when a long-haired tabby was found huddled against a doorstep of a semi-detached house on the edge of Bath, he was seeking survival: food and shelter. No cat was welcome in that doggie household but, with that persistence that cat haters see as cussedness, he wouldn't be sent away. At breakfast on the fourth day, he was still there huddled up in a tight ball –

*“[Charles Dickens] summed it up perfectly when he said, ‘What greater gift than the love of a cat?’”*



waiting patiently. This was to be his home!

By the time the owner came back from a day's work late that afternoon, which happened to be Friday, the heavens had opened. The cat, small enough even with long fur, was now an insignificant soaked ball. 'Oh well,' she said. 'You'd better come in.' Tail up, he instantly did. He walked confidently around the house and up the stairs, inspecting each room before returning to the kitchen through which he had arrived. The cat was firmly established by the time the owner went to work on Monday. That evening she thought she should take him to the vet for a check-up.

'What's it called?' was answered by an instantly decided 'Jimmy'.

'Jimmy, LH tabby,' said the vet, writing it down. Questioned how he knew the cat was left-handed, the vet replied, 'Long-haired!' and then inspected a scar on a hip where the LH had been shaved off for an operation; the vet couldn't imagine what, but Jimmy (estimated to be two and a half years old) had obviously been cared for. It was the start of the summer holidays. Had the owners simply tossed him out of a car on their way to the seaside?

Jimmy developed into quite a character; for example, taking a complicated and very indirect route from the ground to the top window of the first floor bedroom via a shed, garage and another window ledge before his final jump. He sometimes landed on the bed gently to pat open the eyelids of the occupants if he thought they were sleeping too late. Unfortunately his memory went awry at 3am one morning and he landed on the bed of the cat-hating neighbours, who phoned demanding his immediate removal and punishment. It was all too clear to Jimmy he wasn't wanted there.

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He tolerated dogs providing they didn't interfere. When a huge German shepherd began raiding his food, blood splattered out of the dog's nose swiped by a claw. Thereafter the dog gave Jimmy a wide berth, a super-tanker going out of its way to avoid passing close to a yacht.

The point of this story is that while Jimmy respected the owner and brushed against her appreciatively when, for example, she was preparing his food, theirs was a pretty matter-of-fact relationship. It was her husband, who did very little for his physical welfare, whom Jimmy came to adore, spending long evenings on the back of an easy chair looking as though he were on the man's shoulder, though maintaining eye contact. He purred gazing into his eyes.

Little is straightforward with cats. One day an owner relishes a Siamese's friendship, the next he will be snubbed. One afternoon the cat lover working in the garden will have a friend never more than a few feet away, following her from job to job. Next afternoon, not only is there neither sight nor sound of yesterday's faithful companion but, when the cat does return home, the merest glance at its stance signals independence – 'Leave me alone.' Yet hours later it will follow her round the house to demonstrate she's a lifelong friend, and the next day will become deeply involved in the gardening by moving the planting line so it is no longer straight, or imitating its owner by digging little holes for the plants.

There is an ultimate test. If a human friend is in trouble, the real cat friend seems to know and play its part, sometimes uniquely relieving the pain of parting with another member of the human family through death or desertion.

While I was writing this I had an operation. Skye, one of my current Balinese cats, and the subject of a later chapter, somehow knew. Unexplainable but true. She yowled and yowled in a quite unfamiliar way just when the operation was taking place. Nothing would console her. She's often reported as unhappy when I'm away, but this was different. A few days later, when I returned home with bandage, she wouldn't take her adoring deep blue eyes off me. There are many such recorded incidents. For example, a woman reader from Penzance in Cornwall wrote to Your Cat magazine about Lily, normally 'very much Daddy's girl' who suddenly wouldn't be kept off her lap when she suffered a sudden pain down her side. 'She was most persistent, pressing her face into my right side and making the most peculiar noises she never made before and I've never heard since ... I'll always feel Lily was trying to help me take away the pain.'

The extraordinary sensory perception of cats in knowing if their owners are in trouble or dead is frequently commented on. Though they cannot bark or howl like dogs, they find plenty of other sounds and signs to show their concern or grief ... with psychic timing. When hope was given up for the owner of Mopps and Smartie and he was dying at home, they slept continuously on his bed, one remaining on duty during the short periods the other had to do essentials elsewhere.

On the death of their owners, cats behave in very different but unusual ways; for example, staying on their owner's favourite chair (or studiously avoiding it), guarding the door to their room, or expressing special concern for the surviving spouse. My daughter's Burmese, Tulip, said farewell in sombre mood to my grandson Mathew by spending the entire funeral service, conducted at home, sitting on his head as he lay in his coffin. In Lincolnshire, an owner told how Thomasina used to sit on her husband's knees, which she did for longer periods until his death. On the evening of the funeral, she said her farewell by jumping onto the cardboard box containing the urn with the ashes, which had been left on top of a chest of drawers. She spent the whole night purring on it 'as if she was saying goodbye'. Though usually a sign of contentment, purring is also said to be restorative and it might well have been her way of coping.

These and many other examples surely demonstrate friendship; nay, love. Though Orientals are known to show especially strong feelings, they are well

outnumbered by ordinary moggies displaying extraordinary friendship or love.

The more we understand about cats, perhaps the more we still have to learn. It is easy to realise how their mystical qualities frightened suspicious people in the past. Cats were naturally associated with witches, and pure black ones were once so exhaustively slaughtered that to this day in Britain we scarcely see one without at least a few white hairs.

Conversely, for generations black cats have generally been associated with good luck, but they are not everyone's favourite and a disproportionate number land up in cat shelters. At the time of writing, the UK's Cats Protection is running a special campaign to



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persuade people to 'adopt their very own lucky charm'. Among famous people who really believed in the black cat's good luck was England's King Charles I. His pet (or symbol) was carefully guarded day and night. Ironically, it died the very day before he was arrested, a key moment in his battle with Parliament that led to the Civil War and Charles I losing his head.

While it has to be admitted that many cats are control freaks, it is their uncanny ability to understand what is going on (a subject to which I will return) that upsets many humans who believe our species has the exclusive right to be in charge and in the know. For many, the dislike, verging on fear, goes with the assertion that 'cats only do what they want'.

'They're stupid. They sleep all day, and want our attention just as we're going to bed and it's too late' sums it up, though usually it is an even less subtle 'I gave you your chance, but you wouldn't come. Now I'm busy so push off.' Okay, we humans are unique with our brainpower enabling us to conquer the world, even if routinely we partly destroy bits of it. But does that give us the automatic right to determine exactly at what time we're free for our cat(s) and when we are 'engaged'?

True cat lovers are those who have learnt this is not the case, and who respect the cat's right to be a cat. Even with another human, harmonious living involves compromise, and with a cat, if we think about it, we can manipulate a constructive meeting of ways. For example, if our cat is sleeping later than usual and is in danger of missing the evening cuddle by all means wake it just in time. As already said, whatever else their faults, cats don't bear grudges. Providing it's not

deep into their sleeping time, they quickly forget it is you who woke them and turn on the engine of their purr, cuddler and cuddlee in harmony. But we cannot expect them to be totally at our beck and call.

Certainly I have learnt to enjoy their company beside me as I write. My cats relax me and cause far less interruption to thought than even the simplest phone call about what time dinner will be. They sense when the writing is going well and seem concerned when it isn't. 'Why don't you marry a cat?' I was once asked by someone who thought I was obsessed. That misses the point. The relationship is special because it is across species. This was something appreciated by Charles Dickens, the novelist, who doted on his cat at a time when most Britons took them very much for granted – much as today we do mice. He summed it up perfectly when he said, 'What greater gift than the love of a cat?'

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David St John Thomas is a well-known writer and publisher. He established and ran David & Charles, the UK publishing house, for 30 years. David has written over 25 books on a variety of subjects and well over a million copies of his books are in print. He also runs a charitable trust with the aim of assisting writers early in their careers. And, naturally, he is a passionate cat lover!

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