

HOW

cats help creativity



Elizabeth Sulis Kim has written for magazines and newspapers including 'The Guardian', 'The Independent', and 'Glamour'. She grew up with cats in the West Country and used to volunteer at a cat shelter in Italy. She now lives with her husband and senior cat, Misty.

Long-time companions of writers and artists, can cats genuinely help our powers of creativity?

Want to pen that novel or memoir you've been thinking about for years? Muriel Spark, author of 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie', has some advice for you (though it comes from the lips of her character Mrs Harkins in 'A Far Cry from Kensington', I'm sure it was on the author's mind, too):

"If you want to concentrate deeply on some problem, and especially on some piece of writing or paperwork, you should acquire a cat. Alone with the cat in the room where you work... the cat will invariably get up on your desk and settle under the desk lamp. The light from a lamp... gives the cat great satisfaction. The cat will settle down and be serene, with a serenity that passes all understanding. And the tranquility of the cat will gradually come to affect you, sitting there at your desk, so that all the excitable qualities that impeded your concentration compose themselves and give your mind back the self-command it has lost. You need not watch the cat all the time. Its presence alone is enough. The effect of a cat on your concentration is remarkable, and very mysterious."

Writers and artists have long loved cats. William S. Burroughs, perhaps best known for his experimental novels and essays exploring drug-taking, also wrote an autobiographical novella, 'The Cat Inside'. In it, he chronicles the cats he lived with throughout his life. He writes: "I postulate that cats started as psychic companions, as Familiars, and have never deviated from this function."

Our feline friends have long been associated with magic and



Charles Dickens was a famous feline lover.

Did you know?

There are websites dedicated to listing famous writers who were also great cat lovers.

otherworldliness. In Ancient Egypt, we know cats were linked with the divine, considered messengers between this world and the supernatural. The Egyptian goddess Bastet was worshipped in the form of a cat.

The Argentine short story writer Jorge Luis Borges expressed this feline connection with the divine in his poem 'To a Cat':

*'By the inexplicable workings of a divine law,
we look for you in vain;
More remote, even, than the Ganges or the setting sun,
yours is the solitude, yours the secret ...
You belong to another time. You are lord of a place bounded like a dream.'*

In Britain's past, witches and cunning folk were said to receive help from supernatural entities known as familiar spirits; often these were in the guise of cats. Witches were said to make a pact with their animal companions who would be able to provide magical assistance when needed. This has brought about the archetypal image of a witch and her cat.

CREATIVE MAGIC

In some ways, creativity is our modern conception of magic. Creative inspiration is an often inexplicable, unpredictable thing that is hard to pin down. It comes to us in some moments and not others, its source unclear and undependable. A good story provides that suspended

Cats seem to be able to provide a creative spark.

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Research suggests cat people have more creative tendencies.

sense of disbelief which allows us, as readers or viewers, to leave our own lives behind and step into the shoes of another, visit the past, jump into the future, reach other worlds, and have new or even supernatural experiences.

It's little wonder cats have become the number one side-kicks of well-known authors. Look for cat-loving writers and you shall find them. Charles Dickens loved cats. So did Patricia Highsmith, Sylvia Plath, and Ursula K Le Guin. Ernest

Hemingway loved them so much that they were given free rein to roam in his Key West home, which to this day is still inhabited by around 50 descendants of the famous author's six-toed cat, named Snowball.

According to Aldous Huxley — author of iconic dystopian novel 'Brave New World' — "If you want to be a psychological novelist and write about human beings, the best thing you can do is to keep a pair of cats." Journalist

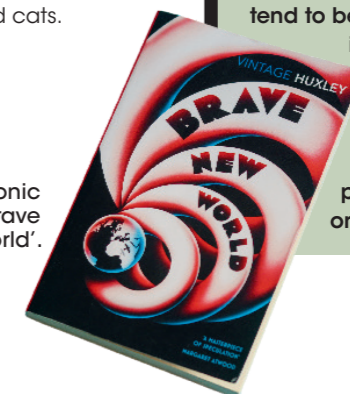
and author Gloria Steinem said that a cat is "a writer's most logical and agreeable companion." The list goes on and on.

It's not just writers but artists too. Georgia O'Keefe, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol, Henri Matisse, and Salvador Dalí, among others, all loved cats.



What story would you write?

Huxley's iconic work 'Brave New World'.



HOW CATS HELP

We have a lot of anecdotal and historical evidence about this connection between cats and creativity. But what does research tell us?

A web-based study led by Sam Gosling, psychologist at the University of Texas in Austin, asked 4,565 individuals whether they were dog people, cat people, neither, or both. The same group were then given a personality assessment. The results found that cat people were 12 per cent more neurotic than dog owners, but also 11 per cent more open. According to the study, those who score higher in openness tend to be more adventurous,

imaginative, emotional, more interested in art, and open to unconventional ideas. But are creative people drawn to cats, or do cats inspire

creativity? It's probably a bit of both. In the internet age, we do know that one of our greatest past times is watching cat videos on YouTube. This may seem like the peak of procrastination, but according to a 2012 study conducted by researchers at Hiroshima University, looking at cute animal videos actually increases productivity. While productivity does not equate to being creative, it does mean getting things done. Every creative person, at some point in their lives, needs to commit to getting paint on canvas or words on a page.

More generally, Dr Meg Arroll, psychologist and author at Ten Harley Street consulting rooms says pets are amazing for our mental and physical health: "This includes higher cognitive functions like creativity. Research shows that owning and caring for pets, such as cats, helps to reduce stress and blood pressure, control our perception of pain, act as a treatment for mental health conditions, and combat isolation."

Managing stress, emphasises Dr Arroll, is crucial for creativity, as stress diminishes our sense of self efficacy — the belief in our ability to perform in certain situations. "There may be a more direct relationship between cats and creativity, but this hasn't been explored widely in research studies. For now, know that your moggy is helping in numerous aspects of your life, and you in theirs."

Could your cat inspire you to write that book you've always thought of?

Top tip!

If you're a budding writer who is looking to improve your craft and get tips on how to hone your skills, visit: www.writers-online.co.uk

“ Like cats, our creativity needs nourishment. ”

HARNESSING INSPIRATION

Cats and creativity are both elusive and mysterious. How can we harness the powers of Bastet, or our household moggy, and conquer creative block? The American author Ray Bradbury said both creative inspiration and cats "come silently in the hour of trying to wake up and remember my name." For many writers, that means getting to your desk in the early morning. He recommends writers: "Treat ideas like cats... make them follow you."

We know that (most!) cats don't respond well to authority. You can't force cats to do anything, just as you can't force creativity, but you can invite both. While cats don't always respond to our call, we know one sure-fire way to draw a cat to you is to let them know it's dinner time. Like cats, our creativity needs nourishment. Spending our lives in front of an empty page and hoping for the words to come from the abyss probably won't be very conducive. Live your life passionately, fully, and well. Experience human emotions. This could mean reading widely. Be mindful of what you're living through. A life well-lived can fill the well of dreams, creativity's nourishment.

Many creatives find breaks, often in the



Did you know?

Many writers immortalised their pet cats in their work, including T.S. Eliot.

form of walks, help them through creative blocks. Similarly, when you do find yourself with a cat on your lap, you know you're stuck there. Your typewriter is far away. Or maybe your easel. Your mind can wander.

The cat might creep up on you when you're sat at your desk, executing an idea dreamed up during cuddle time. No more distractions — the cat is watching you and will hold you accountable. Now, it's time to work on that painting, novel, or whatever creative project you've postponed. When you don't know how to continue, look into the wise eyes of the resting cat beside you, feel your breath slow down in rhythm with their calming purr, and quite mysteriously, perhaps the words will come to you.

