



Do you ever truly own a cat?



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.

Or do cats actually belong to themselves, like humans? Elizabeth Sulis Kim poses the question.

On the phone recently, an estate agent asked who I would be sharing a flat with — I told her: "My husband and my cat." It always feels wrong on my tongue to say 'my cat'. She's her own cat, isn't she? It's a common conundrum, and one I sometimes overthink. 'My' infers ownership. 'Cat' reduces Misty to an entire species, essentially stripping her of her identity.

In the meanwhile, this chain of thought distracted me. I continued the conversation on autopilot, answering 'Misty' to the estate agent's next question. "Not your cat's

name," she said, roaring with laughter — I had to move the phone away from my ear. "Your husband's name!"

WHAT TO CALL A CAT?

Can I just call her by her name? "My friend, Misty, who is a cat, by the way." I can imagine the eye rolling. I'm kind of rolling my eyes too, mainly because it's socially unacceptable to say such things, and I wouldn't want to reveal myself as the crazy cat lady everybody probably knows I am (Misty is in my Facebook profile picture and my cover image — and she regularly crops up in Instagram posts). Everybody knows I'm basing my

flat search around where she would be most happy.

I suppose we use possessive pronouns for those nearest and dearest to us, so it might follow on that we use them for our feline friends too. My mum, my husband, my cat. Yet, in the family hierarchy, reducing a loved one to a possessive pronoun and a species feels wrong. At least it feels that way to me.

Misty is a childhood friend. A family member. Something akin to a sister. She is her own person. To describe her as anything less feels like speciesism, when, in all honesty, I like her more than



Did you know?

The majority of cat owners say hello to their furry family before their human family, according to a recent study.

most humans! But we also bought Misty. Well, my mum did 15 years ago.

CATS DOMESTICATED THEMSELVES

A purchase normally denotes enslavement or buying a consumer item. For cat lovers, that's not usually the case; a cat completes your family, and, often, once they move in, they're free to come and go as they please.

These days, many people take in shelter cats or have cats move in voluntarily. That further blurs the lines between pet and pet owner. It's also worth remembering how cats first came into our lives: apparently by choice.

Around 8,000 years ago, cats domesticated themselves in the Fertile Crescent — a region in the Middle East often deemed the 'cradle of civilisation'. Cats moved into farming communities, likely drawn by

the rodent populations that lived near humans, in turn providing our ancestors with their voluntary pest-control service. Enjoying this reciprocal relationship, thousands of years later we still live with cats.

Often, Misty visits the neighbours. She has many friends who feed her, but she always comes back to sleep at our house. It's that fierce independence that captures the hearts of many who love cats — they could move away but, instead, they decide to stay.

But cats still occupy that strange role between pampered royal and perpetual baby — even Misty, who is a senior cat. For the most part, she relies on me for food, for shelter, for water, and for love. Especially now she has retired from mousing. It's me who takes her to the vet and cleans her litter tray. But that's not

ownership — that's caring for a dependent.

Do we ever truly own 'our' pets? Can we own another animal, period? Because, it seems to me, there's little room for proprietary terms with love.

When I look at Misty, her wise eyes narrowing against the flicker of the fire, I do not see a creature who belongs to me. Instead, the words of Argentinean writer and poet Borges come to mind: "You belong to another time. You are lord of a place bounded like a dream."

HOW DO CAT LOVERS DESCRIBE THEIR CATS?

I'm already using the possessive term, for want of a better word. It's how we describe animal companions among friends, family, and colleagues. It shields other people from our sentimentality, and what they might think of



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as anthropomorphism (I'd counter that — to deny Misty of her personhood is anthropodenial). But I'm not alone in my discomfort over the use of proprietary terms. Is your cat ever *truly* your cat? Or do cats, like people, belong to themselves?

When asked how she brings up her cats in conversation, Janet says: "My feline family; my furry family," when speaking of them to others, and I'm 'their human'. When I speak to them, I most often refer to them by their nicknames (Leia, Andie, Robbie, Jazz) or sweetie pie."

"I just call him by his name," says defiant Martin. "Though, when asked about him by

acquaintances, I have used proprietary terms."

Meanwhile, Beth refers to tomcat Bertie as 'my Bertaliscious Snugglemuffin'. Terms of endearment are common among cat lovers. Misty earned herself the nickname Mistiana Jones when, in her prime, she went on adventures slaying rabbits in the Scottish Highlands.

"I say my cat or my baby — just as I refer to my human babies — I do have both," says Nina. "For me, it implies belonging, not ownership. I never use the term 'pet' — I don't like it. I use words like 'animal companion'."

"She's my little princess," says Helen, while Daisy calls

her cats her 'babies'. I can get on board with that. When Misty is not 'a lord of a place bounded like a dream', she is my baby. Those large, cute eyes can't help but trigger in me a maternal instinct, even if she's really a grandma in cat years. She has ensnared me alright.

"I don't call them my babies, but I do say I'm their person and they are each other's siblings (even though they are unrelated)," says Kathleen. "I don't think any of us chose each other — we just all ended up together through fate in, I guess, what has turned out to be a nuclear family unit!"



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How we refer to our cats reflects our affections for them.

