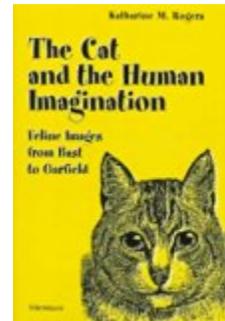


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katharine M. Rogers. *The Cat and the Human Imagination: Feline Images from Bast to Garfield*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. 222 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-10826-8.

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Although Rogers makes no such claim, her comprehensive study is an example of the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration fostered by the relatively new field of anthrozoology. In exploring the appearances of the cat in human arts, Rogers demonstrates the deep influence of a specific animal on the human mind and spirit and the equally deep impact of human art and attitude on the animal. Human attitudes toward the cat are reflected, changed and/or reinforced by the animal's depiction in the arts.

The cat has, in the long history of its cohabitation with man, been both deified and demonized, achieving in the present century Roger claims—at least in the European and Euro-American cultures—acceptance as man's equal which she feels is not afforded to other domestic species. The dog, for instance, is seen affectionately as a sort of honorary human, beloved but not respected as an independent, adult being as cats seem to be. As a result cats and dogs play distinctly different symbolic roles in Western iconography.

Other studies of the cat in human arts, such as Juliet Clutton-Brock's *Cats Ancient and Modern* (1993), while professing to explore the cat's impact on human culture, ignore feline literary appearances. Barbara Holland's *The Name of the Cat* (1988), Carl Van Vechten's *The Tyger in the House* (1920), and Judy Fireman's *The Cat Catalog* (1976) all include reference to the cat in literature and serve as references in Roger's study. Fireman includes short essays on both children's and adult's cat literature as well as several short essays on the cat in art. There is also a useful but by now badly outdated annotated bibliography, *Four Centuries of Cat Books* (1972) edited by Claire Necker, which supports Roger's claim

that cats have had a major impact on the human imagination over the centuries of their shared domesticity. But of the works that precede Roger's, Holland's is the most useful to anyone interested in the roles the cat has played in at least Western literatures and provides helpful bibliographical material that supplements Rogers' work.

Rogers includes both children's and adult's literature, popular and elite, as well as virtually every anthology of cat stories and poems—which these days are a legion—selecting one or two examples from each for plot summary if not analysis. And she alludes to a vast number of cat novels for the young reader as well as for the adult reader, many with short commentaries about plot and/or the attitudes reflected. This provides her reader with not a complete but a nonetheless comprehensive survey of the cat's claim on the human mind.

There are some oversights, as perhaps there must be in so vast a field, and some inaccuracies. One wishes for a wider reach of national and ethnic literatures—if only to include such wonderful non-French, non-English or American cat protagonists as Akif Pirincci's *Felidae: A Novel of Cats and Murder* (1993). *Felidae* would point up one inaccuracy among Rogers' generalizations about human treatment of cats. She claims that while dogs in literature appear most frequently as victims of man's cruelty and indifference, cats never do. Yet Pirincci's cat narrator senses immediately that the house he and his human can opener move into has been the site of Frankenstein-like experiments and that cats have been the victims of these mad human investigations. *Felidae* also includes genetic experiments and an extermination scheme with obvious echoes of Nazi activity. This is reinforced by the fiendish genetic experiments on cats of the Alchemist in the 1997

novel *The Wild Road* by the British novelist Gabriel King which Rogers would have without question included in her study had it been published at the time.

The Wild Road also evokes scenes from Britain's past in which cats are associated with the devil and burned as witches along with their human companion animals (I suppose one might say that such examples offer proof of the cat being accorded treatment suitable for an animal afforded the same status as a human). In other chapters cats are blamed for spreading the plague and exterminated indiscriminately. In fact, in her chapter "The Tyger in the House," Rogers discusses Canadian novelist Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* in which the blind cat Motyll serves as the reader's eyes, providing a radical interpretation of the story of Noah and the Ark as well as of the meaning of the Biblical Flood. Yet Rogers fails to mention that Motyll and her kittens have been the victims of the experiments of Dr. Noyes (Noah), experiments based on the creative efforts of the mad scientist Jehovah.

There are, as well, some significant English and American cat novels and autobiographies Rogers overlooked, providing room for future researchers and critics to explore the mysterious fascination of the feline for the human imagination. In Michael Ventura's *The Zoo Where You're Fed to God* (1994), which Rogers does not

cite, two domestic cats play supportive but essential symbolic roles. They are The Inside Cat, a fat contented orange tiger who moved out with Elizabeth Abbey when she left her husband, and The Outside Cat, who remains with the novel's protagonist, James Abbey, and is in large part responsible for his rediscovery of the deep biophilia that exists between humans and other animals. Unfortunately, a bond that once saw all species as parts of interconnected habitats is reduced here to the shared captivity of city and zoo. Even without discussing Ventura, Rogers' book succeeds in establishing that humans seem to suspect the cat of access to something we have lost or forgotten or retain only vestiges of—perhaps the wild, freedom, independence. All of these ramifications are explored in the literature and art, popular and elite, Rogers discusses. The fullest treatment is afforded the Cat in Egypt and the enduring connection between women and cats, but on the whole her discussion is encyclopedic and descriptive. There are vast fields here for further investigation, and Rogers' study lays essential groundwork for future bibliographical and analytic investigation of the cat's hold on the human imagination as well as of the impact of the human imagination on the cat.

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