

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Incredible Cats

David Greene

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About the Book

Have you ever thought your cat was 'almost human'? If so, you'd only be partly right, as the remarkable abilities of these creatures make them not so much human as superhuman. Every cat, from the humble tabby to the rare Persian, is capable of mental, physical and even extrasensory feats unique in the animal kingdom. They can predict the weather, anticipate danger and natural disasters, cross vast distances in search of lost owners, save people from death by fire and flood, cure apparently hopeless illness and carry out complex tasks with perfect ease.

During the ten years of worldwide investigation, the author has talked to both pet owners and researchers to discover not only what cats can achieve but how science attempts to explain their powers. He also examines the secret language of cats, suggesting how we might communicate with them more effectively, and looks at the role they play within their own society. The portrait which emerges of this well-loved family pet is far stranger and more intriguing than the fondest owner could ever imagine.

About the Author

David Greene is an experimental psychologist who first became interested in the study of pets when he noticed their beneficial effect on the youngsters with whom he was working. In particular, children who owned cats seemed less prone to emotional and social difficulties than many of their schoolmates. The author has since devoted an extensive effort of research into gaining a better understanding of the ways in which cats are of benefit to humans.

In addition to his psychological research, David Greene carries out a general behavioural consultancy practice for both families and industry.

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Line drawings by Richard Armstrong.

To

Pudden, a discerning and affectionate friend, and
Shirlee and Leroy, two handsome Burmese who were such a
help in my researches

Incredible Cats

The Secret Powers of Your Pet

David Greene

VINTAGE

Chapter One

Incredible Cats

WATCHING YOUR CAT at work or play, marvelling at his quick intelligence and enchanted by his elegant grace, you may have been tempted to think - 'He's almost human.'¹

But you would have been wrong, for cats are not so much human as superhuman!

Every feline, from the most aristocratic Siamese to the humblest tabby, possesses powers so remarkable that they are not to be found in any other animal on earth. Behind those soulful eyes and soft coats lurk the spirits of wild ancestors from whom the present-day pet is descended - spirits which endow even the most apparently placid and domesticated of cats with unique and mysterious abilities.

I have been studying these powers for more than ten years in a quest which has taken me around the world. I have talked to owners, interviewed breeders and watched researchers engaged in the difficult, and often frustrating, task of finding scientific explanations for many of this extraordinary creature's more improbable accomplishments.

I have met some of the world's most valuable and pampered pets as they dined from gold plates in elegant penthouse suites under the watchful gaze of armed bodyguards. And I have also accompanied animal welfare workers on their rescue missions around the rubbish-littered backstreets of the city slums as they fought to save abandoned strays from starvation, sickness and death.

My purpose in writing this book is to share with you, probably a cat owner but almost certainly a cat lover, all I have discovered about the secret life of these amazing animals, including the powers which enable cats to:

- use extra-sensory perception to predict danger to themselves, their companions and their owners;
- perform intellectually demanding tasks so difficult that many humans could not accomplish them;
- give early warning of natural disasters;
- cure apparently hopeless cases of mental and physical illness;
- save people from apparently inescapable injury or death;
- track down their owners across thousands of miles;
- survive accidents that would spell certain death to almost any other creature;
- communicate eloquently, with other animals and humans, by means of a complex language of sounds, movements and odours.

After reading this book I am sure you will agree with me that, far from exaggerating their potential, the description 'Incredible Cats' hardly does them justice.

Three of the many stories from my research files vividly illustrate a few of these powers in action. The first concerns a part-Persian her owner named Sugar. But the newspapers which reported her exploits came up with a far more fitting title. In banner headlines across the nation they called her 'Supercat'.

Sugar - the cat that crossed half a continent

Sugar was born in the small Californian town of Anderson on the Sacramento River. A weakly kitten, she had an unusual deformity in her left hip bone. It was this disability which

later helped to provide the vital confirmation of her identity and so gave her a place in the cats' hall of fame.

When Sugar was two, her owner, Mary, moved from Anderson to a new home in Oklahoma, some 1,500 miles away. The journey had to be made by car, and knowing that Sugar loathed even the shortest trip, Mary came to the reluctant conclusion that it would be kinder to leave her pet behind. A good home was found with a kindly neighbour and Mary said a tearful goodbye. But Sugar, though comfortably settled, had no intention of being abandoned. Two weeks later, a phone call from the neighbour brought Mary sad news. Her pet had vanished and, despite an intensive search, no trace of her could be found.

As the weeks and months went by without further news, Mary reluctantly accepted that Sugar must be dead. Fourteen months later, as she worked in her garden, a familiar half-Persian cat suddenly appeared and made its way wearily across the lawn towards her.

For a moment woman and cat just stared at one another, Mary in amazement, the cat with what might have been a glint of triumph in her gaze. Then, with a miaow of delight, Sugar bounded across the grass and, giving little hops of welcome, rubbed herself affectionately against her mistress's legs.

The cat was exhausted but otherwise in excellent condition, needing only a fish supper and a good night's rest to restore her to perfect health. After walking half-way across the United States, Sugar had somehow managed to locate the right house in the right street of the right town.

At first Mary's friends were, not surprisingly, extremely sceptical of the story. But when an examination of the cat's left hip revealed the same unique bone deformity, no doubts remained. Somehow - and none of the animal experts I have talked to can offer any completely satisfactory explanation for the feat - Sugar had successfully trailed her owner half-way across a continent.

Although Sugar's powers are remarkable, they are by no means unique. We shall be looking at accounts of equally amazing journeys later in the book, and also seeing what progress science is making in discovering exactly how cats are capable of such apparently impossible achievements.

The second story is one whose happy ending was only possible thanks to some kind of feline ESP.

Sticky - the cat in the bag

Tom and Sticky were born on a farm outside the West Country town of Okehampton. Tom was a distinguished black and white cat, a sturdy animal who, even as a kitten, was a fearless explorer. Sticky, the runt of the litter, got her name from thin, stick-like legs. As a kitten she was frightened of everything and, even though she grew slightly bolder as time went by, Sticky remained a timid creature.

Tom and Sticky stayed on at the farm after the rest of the litter had been found homes, and soon became inseparable companions. While Tom prowled the countryside with all the pride of an undisputed monarch, the faithful Sticky trotted loyally along at his side. Together they roamed the fields and pastures, hunted mice around the farm and slept side-by-side in the barn.

Then the farmer died and Alice, his widow, moved to the town of Newton Abbot. Because her new house was rather small, it was only possible to keep one of the cats and she chose Tom - always her favourite.

Sticky was given to her sister Joyce, who lived in Plymouth, so, after years of companionship, the two friends finally parted. One morning, about eight months after the move, Alice noticed that Tom appeared unusually agitated. Instead of sleeping in his favourite corner by the fire, the cat was restlessly pacing the room, ears flattened and erect tail flicking from side to side (powerful silent speech signals of annoyance, as we shall see in [Chapter Three](#)). Suddenly he

launched himself with terrifying ferocity against the door, his claws tearing at the woodwork and leaving deep scratches in the paint.

Bewildered, and unable to calm him down, Alice phoned her sister for advice. But when Joyce came on the line it was to report problems of her own. Tearfully, she told her sister that Sticky had disappeared from home earlier the same morning. A neighbour claimed to have seen the terrified cat being chased down the street by a gang of youths, but despite a search no sign of the animal could be found.

'I'll drive over and help you look,' said Alice, her own difficulties with Tom immediately forgotten. She intended to leave the cat at home, but no sooner was the back door opened than he raced past her legs to the car. Because she was in such a hurry, Alice decided to take Tom with her. Later she was to be thankful that she had.

When they reached Plymouth, Tom leaped out and ran down the street, taking absolutely no notice of Alice's frantic cries. At the corner, however, he paused and turned to stare at her, tail flicking urgently. Alice called her sister and the two women set off in pursuit. The cat led them through a maze of side streets, never faltering and only pausing from time to time so that they could keep up.

Finally, as they reached a patch of derelict land, close to the harbour, Tom vanished from sight. It was only his loud and excited miaowing that enabled Alice and Joyce to trace him to a dank underground chamber, part of an old wartime shelter. The gloomy interior was stacked with the accumulated rubbish of years. But Tom had not hesitated. He was frantically scratching at a large, burlap sack whose neck was tightly bound with twine. As Alice and Joyce stared in horror, the sack moved slightly. Something was trapped inside it.

That something was Sticky. She had been roughly treated by her captors before being tossed into the bag and left as dead. Thanks to the skill of a local vet and patient nursing

by Alice, Sticky was restored to health, and after that the sisters decided that Tom and Sticky belonged together, so they were reunited. When I visited them at their comfortable home, the pair were curled together by a fire - the picture of feline contentment.

Neither Alice nor Joyce can explain how Tom apparently knew of his sister's anguish, nor how he was able to find her so easily in a strange city.

Do cats really have nine lives? The question is posed, and perhaps answered, by my final story.

Jacob - the cat who lived underwater

On a pitch-black and bitterly cold night in December 1964, the Dutch motor vessel *Tjoba* was making her way cautiously down the River Rhine. Suddenly there was a violent collision, the *Tjoba* heeled over and, almost immediately, started to sink. Within minutes she was on the bottom, leaving her crew splashing for their lives in the freezing water. All were saved, but there still seemed to be one casualty. Jacob, the ship's six-year-old cat, had been trapped below decks and gone down with the vessel. It was eight days later that giant cranes were manoeuvred into position above the wreckage to carry out the laborious task of raising the wreck and clearing the waterway of its obstruction. Divers attached hawsers, winches took the strain and the remains of the vessel were slowly raised from the mud of the river bed.

When the *Tjoba* had finally been brought to the surface, the crew were allowed aboard to save what they could of their waterlogged belongings. As he pushed open his cabin door, the master started back in amazement. Jacob, shivering with cold and extremely hungry, came hurrying over to beg for food. He had survived more than a week underwater in a bubble of trapped air!

HOW THE LONG RELATIONSHIP BEGAN

There have been wild cats in Europe, Asia and Africa for many thousands of years, but it was a long while before man decided that here was an animal worth domesticating. Although it is impossible to state exactly when this was achieved, we do know that Egyptians used cats to guard their granaries against rodents more than two thousand years before the birth of Christ.

Respect for the cat's powers quickly changed to veneration and the animal was made sacred to Isis or the moon. It was worshipped with great ceremony as a moon symbol not only because the animal is more active after sunset, but because, with the dilation and constriction of its pupils, a cat's eyes seem to reflect the moon's own waxing and waning. The cat was also the sacred animal of the goddess Diana, the daughter of Isis and the sister of Horus, the Sun God, Diana, who represented the sun's life-giving heat, was depicted as having the head of a cat, perhaps from that creature's fondness for basking in the sun.

From Egypt the cat made its way to Rome and became the symbol of liberty. Statues of the Goddess of Liberty show her holding a cup in one hand and a broken sceptre in the other, with a cat, that least restrained of all domesticated animals, lying at her feet.

From Rome the cat marched with the conquering legions across the length and breadth of vanquished Europe. Exactly when the animal arrived in Britain is not known, although the unmistakable imprints of cat paws have been found on tiles excavated from the Roman towns of Silchester and Uriconium. It appears that the workmen had just put the tiles out to dry when a cat wandered across them and left an indelible pawprint in history. When archaeologists started to unearth the remains of a Roman villa at Lullingstone, destroyed by fire around AD 200, the skeleton of a cat, almost certainly a family pet, was found amidst the blackened ruins.

Today, some 4,000 years since cats and humans started sharing hearth and home, the pet is as popular as ever. Indeed so eager are many people to own the 'ideal' animal that special breeding techniques are being employed to create a race of 'custom cats'. Top American establishments such as Fabulous Felines and Prestige Pets of New York now produce cats precisely tailored to satisfy a demanding clientele. For around £200 you can now purchase a Himalayan, claimed by its breeders to be the world's friendliest and most affectionate cat. The breed, half Siamese and half Persian, with Siamese markings on a Persian coat, is notable for its warm, friendly nature, liking nothing better than to sit for hours on an owner's lap being petted. And for those who prefer kittens to cats, Prestige Pets also have on offer Mini Himalayans, guaranteed never to grow bigger than a four-month-old kitten. This is achieved by breeding from the runt of the litter over many succeeding generations.

But although the long association between mankind and cats has been close and, for much of the time mutually beneficial, it has not always been an especially happy partnership for the pet. For a unique feature of this relationship is the intensity of feelings which are aroused. Where cats are concerned, there appear to be no half measures: you either love them or loathe them.

Famous cat-lovers have included the American author Raymond Chandler, Sir Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer and the prophet Mohammed. Raymond Chandler talked to his black Persian, Taki, as though she was human and jokingly called her his secretary because she sat on manuscripts as he tried to revise them. Churchill's cat, Jock, shared both his master's bed and his supper table. The war leader often sent servants to find Jock and refused to start eating until his cat was present. While working in Africa, Schweitzer - who was left-handed - sometimes wrote prescriptions with his right hand so as not to disturb his cat,

Sizi, who liked to fall asleep on his left arm. Mohammed considered dogs unclean but approved of cats. On one occasion he cut off the sleeve of a robe to avoid awakening a sleeping cat as he rose to pray.

But cats have also had their equally distinguished detractors, including the composer Johannes Brahms, Napoleon Bonaparte, Noah Webster and Dwight D. Eisenhower. When not at the keyboard, Brahms's favourite form of relaxation seems to have been sitting at an open window and attempting, usually with success, to kill neighbourhood cats with a bow and arrow. During one campaign, an aide to Napoleon was startled by the emperor calling loudly for assistance. Opening the door, he discovered his master half naked, sweating with fear and lunging wildly with his sword at the tapestry-covered walls. The cause of his terror - a small kitten! In his famous dictionary, Webster had little good to say for the cat, which he described as a 'deceitful animal and when enraged extremely spiteful'. And Eisenhower's loathing of cats was so great that he gave his staff orders to shoot any seen in the grounds of his Gettysburg home.

These extreme personal views mirror social attitudes towards cats. For although there have been periods of human history in which they were worshipped as gods, there have also been times during which cats were tortured as demons or slaughtered in macabre acts of symbolic rebellion.

When a cat died in ancient Egypt it was buried with full pomp and ritual, and while Egyptians, in common with many other societies of that age, occasionally showed mercy over the slaying of another human, killing - or in some cases simply injuring - a cat, even by accident, was punished by death.

Compare this to the attitudes prevailing in Europe during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when both cats and their owners were under constant threat of

execution. Historical research by animal behaviour expert Dr James Serpell of Cambridge University reveals that between 1560 and 1700 many hundreds of innocent and often elderly owners were brutally done to death for no other reason than their friendship with cats. During the trials of the St Osyth witches at Chelmsford, Essex, in the March of 1582, for example, one Ursula Kemp was charged with having four familiars, or spirits: 'Whereof two of them were hes, and the other two were shes: the two he spirits were to punish and kill unto death, and the two shes were to punish with lameness and other diseases of bodily harm.' The two he-spirits were Titty, who appeared in the guise of a grey cat, and Jac, like a black cat.

Another of the accused, one Alice Manfield, was said to have four imps, Robin, Jack, William and Puppet, two hes and two shes 'all like unto black cats'. Such meagre testimony was usually sufficient to condemn the terrified old women to an agonising death at the stake, often in the company of their equally unfortunate pets.

But it was a desire for rebellion rather than the fear of sorcery which led eighteenth-century French apprentices to take part in the hideous torture and massacre of innocent cats in a mood of great jollity and high good humour. The historian Robert Darnton explains that these pets were chosen for their symbolic value in a protest against wages and working conditions. To the mob they represented both magic and sexuality. By killing his mistress's well-loved cat, says Darnton, the apprentice was offering both a sexual insult and implying that she was a witch.

Equally ambivalent views may still be found today, although seldom expressed in such cruel terms. My research files are overflowing with letters, interviews, press cuttings and eye-witness accounts all confirming that where cats are concerned, intense feelings are aroused. A recent survey I conducted, based on cruelty reports in national and local newspapers, indicated that in four out of five cases

involving the sadistic mistreatment of animals, the victim was a cat or kitten.

Equally, of course, there are hundreds of tales testifying to the deep bonds of affection which can be formed between man and this most independent of pets. Take, for example, the touching story of long-distance lorry driver Walter Saul and the kitten he named IMM - International Motorway Moggie!

They first met in the unlovely surroundings of an Istanbul lorry park where Walter had left his truck for the night. As he was climbing into the cab at the start of his long drive home, Walter's attention was attracted by shrieks of feline terror coming from a nearby wood pile. Hurrying across, he discovered two snarling dogs lunging at a terrified tortoiseshell kitten which had taken precarious refuge in a crack between the stacked timbers. With great difficulty, and at considerable risk to himself, Walter succeeded in driving away the snarling dogs. His next task was patiently to coax the terrified creature from its sanctuary. At long last he succeeded in extracting him and carried him to the truck. The kitten was shivering, filthy, bedraggled and half starved. Yet holding him in his hands, and feeling the little heart racing fearfully beneath his gentle fingers, Walter later explained how he had experienced 'an overwhelming desire to make myself responsible for his well-being'. It was a decision he never came to regret, despite the expense and inconvenience it caused him. His first task was to calm the kitten down and persuade him to eat. That proved a challenge in itself, since the kitten was too young to lick milk from a saucer and had to be fed from a syringe. But, under Walter's tender, careful nursing, International Motorway Moggie quickly regained his health and strength. As the lorry sped along the highways of Europe, IMM was gradually encouraged to try a more substantial diet consisting of chopped chicken and mashed pilchard.

Far from being frightened by the strange surroundings of the cab, IMM quickly adapted to life on the road and liked nothing better than to snuggle down on Walter's lap as his truck carried them towards the Belgian coast and the boat home.

Well aware of the strict regulations surrounding the importation of animals into England, and having absolutely no intention of trying to smuggle the kitten into the country, Walter's first task, after parking his lorry on the cross-Channel ferry, was to report IMM's presence aboard. He was perfectly willing to spend around £500 of his own money to keep the kitten in quarantine for the statutory six-month period.

What he was not prepared for was the reception awaiting them in England. Officials curtly informed him that IMM could only be brought into the country provided he produced the necessary import documents. Any attempt to avoid the regulations would lead to Walter's arrest, a fine of £1,000 and IMM's destruction.

Walter phoned his employer and asked for leave so that he could take IMM back to Belgium, where the kitten could be quarantined while the demands of red tape were satisfied. Not only did his employer immediately give him the time needed, but even offered to pay his return fare. So, within an hour of setting foot on English soil for the first time in weeks, Walter found himself heading back to Belgium instead of home to his family.

Once in Belgium, the pair's luck changed after a sympathetic official and his wife offered to give IMM a home until the import papers arrived. But by the time that happened, the family had grown so fond of IMM, now a sleek and beautiful cat, that they begged Walter to be allowed to keep him. A mutually satisfactory compromise was eventually reached. IMM stayed in Belgium but Walter got 'visiting rights' to call in on his old friend whenever his travels took him through the port. This he does regularly,

never forgetting to pack a tin of IMM's favourite chicken when he calls.

'IMM's a mate,' he explained quietly, 'and you don't let your mates down.'

Walter Saul's behaviour and the Belgian official's reaction to IMM's plight are typical of the devotion cats sometimes inspire in people. But what is it about cats which arouses such extremes of love and hate?

Part of the answer to this complex question can be found in those strange and mysterious powers which this book is all about. But it also involves the personality of those who are emotionally attracted by cats and the ways in which these animals are able to satisfy deep psychological needs.

CAT PEOPLE VS DOG PEOPLE

You often hear pet owners refer to themselves as 'cat' or 'dog' lovers and talk about some of the qualities both they and their pets have in common.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, believed that a desire for close identification with certain animals is deeply rooted in the human unconscious. He called this need 'totemism' and pointed out that, in some societies, it takes the form of religious worship. He suggested that when people practice totemism they are trying to acquire some of the mental or physical attributes which the animal in question is believed to possess.

Tribal divisions may form around different totem animals and great antagonism may develop between the opposing groups. Among modern societies, totemism can be seen in the Chinese martial art of Kung Fu, the movements of most of its diverse schools being based on various animals - the cat for cunning, the tiger for speed and ferocity, the monkey for deception, the praying mantis for perseverance, the snake for speed, and so on. Practitioners of these different