

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Catwatching

Desmond Morris

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## *About the Book*

The personality of your cat is a fascinating mixture of affection and independence. You may think you know him as he purrs on your lap, but come across a cat on a dark night, amidst a soap-scene of sex and violence, and it's easy to think he suffers from a dual personality.

However, each ear twitch and tail flick has a meaning. Every single cat carries an inheritance of amazing sensory capacities, vocal utterances, body language and territorial displays. By answering such questions as *What does a cat signal with its ears? Why does your cat tear at the fabric of your chair? Why does a cat rub against your leg? Why does a cat hiss? Why does a cat swing its head from side to side when staring at its prey?* Desmond Morris gives an extraordinary insight into the nature of your cat.

*Also by Desmond Morris*

The Biology of Art  
Men and Snakes (*co-author*)  
Men and Apes (*co-author*)  
Men and Pandas (*co-author*)  
The Mammals: A Guide to the Living Species  
Primate Ethology (*editor*)  
The Naked Ape  
The Human Zoo  
Patterns of Reproductive Behaviour  
Intimate Behaviour  
Manwatching  
Gestures (*co-author*)  
Animal Days  
The Soccer Tribe  
Inrock (*fiction*)  
The Book of Ages  
The Art of Ancient Cyprus  
Bodywatching  
The Illustrated Naked Ape  
Dogwatching  
The Secret Surrealist  
Catlore  
The Animals Roadshow  
The Human Nestbuilders  
Horsewatching  
Animalwatching  
Babywatching

# CATWATCHING

*Desmond Morris*



EBURY  
PRESS

## *Introduction*

THE DOMESTIC CAT is a contradiction. No animal has developed such an intimate relationship with mankind, while at the same time demanding and getting such independence of movement and action. The dog may be man's best friend, but it is rarely allowed out on its own to wander from garden to garden or street to street. The obedient dog has to be taken for a walk. The headstrong cat walks alone.

The cat leads a double life. In the home it is an overgrown kitten gazing up at its human owners. Out on the tiles it is fully adult, its own boss, a free-living wild creature, alert and self-sufficient, its human protectors for the moment completely out of mind. This switch from tame pet to wild animal and then back again is fascinating to watch. Any cat-owner who has accidentally come across their pet cat out-of-doors, when it is deeply involved in some feline soap opera of sex and violence, will know what I mean. One instant the animal is totally wrapped up in an intense drama of courtship or status. Then out of the corner of its eye it spots its human owner watching the proceedings. There is a schizoid moment of double involvement, a hesitation, and the animal runs across, rubs against its owner's leg and becomes the house-kitten once more.

The cat manages to remain a tame animal because of the sequence of its upbringing. By living both with other cats (its mother and litter-mates) and with humans (the family that has adopted it) during its infancy and

kittenhood, it becomes attached to both and considers that it belongs to both species. It is like a child that grows up in a foreign country and as a consequence becomes bilingual. The cat becomes bi-mental. It may be a cat physically, but mentally it is both feline and human. Once it is fully adult, however, most of its responses are feline ones and it has only one major reaction to its human owners. It treats them as pseudo-parents. This is because they took over from the real mother at a sensitive stage of the kitten's development and went on giving it milk, solid food and comfort as it grew up.

This is rather different from the kind of bond that develops between man and dog. The dog does see its human owners as pseudo-parents, like the cat. On that score the process of attachment is similar. But the dog has an additional link. Canine society is group-organized, feline society is not. Dogs live in packs with tightly controlled status relationships between the individuals. There are top dogs, middle dogs and bottom dogs, and under natural circumstances they move around together, keeping tabs on one another the whole time. So the adult pet dog sees its human family both as pseudo-parents and as the dominant members of its pack. Hence its renowned reputation for obedience and its celebrated capacity for loyalty. Cats do have a complex social organization, but they never hunt in packs. In the wild most of their day is spent in solitary stalking. Going for a walk with a human therefore has no appeal for them. And as for 'coming to heel' and learning to 'sit' and 'stay', they are simply not interested. Such manoeuvres have no meaning for them.

So the moment a cat manages to persuade a human being to open a door (that most hated of human inventions), it is off and away without a backward glance. As it crosses the threshold the cat becomes transformed. The kitten-of-man brain is switched off and the wild-cat brain is clicked on. The dog, in such a situation, may look

back to see if its human pack-mate is following to join in the fun of exploring, but not the cat. The cat's mind has floated off into another, totally feline world, where strange bipedal apes have no place.

Because of this difference between domestic cats and domestic dogs, cat-lovers tend to be rather different from dog-lovers. As a rule they have a stronger personality-bias towards independent thought and action. Artists like cats; soldiers like dogs. The much-lauded 'group loyalty' phenomenon is alien to both cats and cat-lovers. If you are a company man, a member of the gang, one of the lads, or picked for the squad, the chances are that at home there is no cat curled up in front of the fire. The ambitious Yuppie, the aspiring politician, the professional footballer, these are not typical cat-owners. It is difficult to picture a ruggery-player with a cat in his lap - much easier to envisage him taking his dog for a walk.

Those who have studied cat-owners and dog-owners as two distinct groups report that there is also a gender-bias. Cat-lovers show a greater tendency to be female. This is not surprising in view of the division of labour that developed during human evolution. Prehistoric males became specialized as group hunters, while the females concentrated on food-gathering and child-rearing. This difference led to a human male 'pack mentality' that is far less marked in females. Wolves, the wild ancestors of domestic dogs, also became pack-hunters, so the modern dog has much more in common with the human male than the human female. An anti-female commentator could refer to women and cats as lacking in team-spirit; an anti-male one to men and dogs as gangsters.

The argument will always go on - feline self-sufficiency and individualism versus canine camaraderie and good-fellowship. But it is important to stress that in making a valid point I have caricatured the two positions. In reality there are many people who enjoy equally the company of

both cats and dogs. And all of us, or nearly all of us, have both feline and canine elements in our personalities. We have moods when we want to be alone and thoughtful, and other times when we wish to be in the centre of a crowded, noisy room.

Both the cat and the dog are animals with which we humans have entered into a solemn contract. We made an unwritten, unspoken pact with their wild ancestors, offering food and drink and protection in exchange for the performance of certain duties. For dogs, the duties were complex, involving a whole range of hunting tasks, as well as guarding property, defending their owners against attack, destroying vermin, and acting as beasts of burden pulling our carts and sledges. In modern times an even greater range of duties has been given to the patient, long-suffering canine, including such diverse activities as guiding the blind, trapping criminals and running races.

For cats, the terms of the ancient contract were much simpler and have always remained so. There was just one primary task and one secondary one. They were required to act firstly as pest-controllers and then, in addition, as household pets. Because they are solitary hunters of small prey they were of little use to human huntsmen in the field. Because they do not live in tightly organized social groups depending on mutual aid to survive, they do not raise the alarm in response to intruders in the home, so they were little use as guardians of property, or as defenders of their owners. Because of their small size they could offer no assistance whatever as beasts of burden. In modern times, apart from sharing the honours with dogs as the ideal house-pets, and occasionally sharing the acting honours in films and plays, cats have failed to diversify their usefulness to mankind.

Despite this narrower involvement in human affairs, the cat has managed to retain its grip on human affections. There are almost as many cats as dogs in the British Isles,

according to recent estimates: about five million cats to six million dogs. In the United States the ratio is slightly less favourable to felines: about twenty-three million cats to forty million dogs. Even so, this is a huge population of domestic cats and, if anything, it is probably an underestimate. Although there are still a few mousers and ratters about, performing their ancient duties as vermin destroyers, the vast majority of all domestic cats today are family pets or feral survivors. Of the family pets, some are pampered pedigrees but most are moggies of mixed ancestry. The proportion of pedigree cats to moggies is probably lower than that for pedigree dogs to mongrels. Although cat shows are just as fiercely contested as dog shows, there are fewer of them, just as there are fewer breeds of show cats. Without the wide spectrum of ancient functions to fulfil, there was far less breed specialization in the early days. Indeed, there was hardly any. All breeds of cat are good mousers and ratters, and no more was required of them. So any modifications in coat length, colour or pattern, or in body proportions, had to arise purely on the basis of local preferences and owners' whims. This has led to some strikingly beautiful pedigree cat breeds, but not to the amazing range of dramatically different types found among dogs. There is no cat equivalent of the Great Dane or the Chihuahua, the St Bernard or the Dachshund. There is a good deal of variation in fur type and colour, but very little in body shape and size. A really large cat weighs in at around eighteen pounds; the smallest at about three pounds. This means that, even when considering almost freakish feline extremes, big domestic cats are only six times as heavy as small ones, compared with the situation among dogs, where a St Bernard can weigh 300 times as much as a little Yorkshire Terrier. In other words, the weight variation of dogs is fifty times as great as in cats.

Turning to abandoned cats and those that have gone wild through choice - the feral population - one also notices a considerable difference. Stray dogs form self-supporting packs and start to breed and fend for themselves without human aid in less civilized regions, but such groups have become almost non-existent in urban and suburban areas. Indeed, in modern, crowded European countries they hardly exist anywhere. Even the rural districts cannot support them. If a feral pack forms, it is soon hunted down by the farming community to prevent attacks on their stock. Feral cat colonies are another matter. Every major city has a thriving population of them. Attempts to eradicate them usually fail because there are always new strays to add to the pool. And the need to destroy them is not felt to be so great, because they can often survive by continuing their age-old function of pest control. Where human intervention has eliminated the rat and mouse population by poisoning, however, the feral cats must live on their wits, scavenging from dustbins and begging from soft-hearted humans. Many of these back-alley cats are pathetic creatures on the borderline of survival. Their resilience is amazing and a testimony to the fact that, despite millennia of domestication, the feline brain and body are still remarkably close to the wild condition.

At the same time this resilience is to blame for a great deal of feline suffering. Because cats *can* survive when thrown out and abandoned, it makes it easier for people to do just that. The fact that most of these animals must then live out their years in appalling urban conditions - slum cats scratching a living among the garbage and filth of human society - may reflect how tough they are, but it is a travesty of feline existence. That we tolerate it is one more example of the shameful manner in which we have repeatedly broken our ancient contract with the cat. It is nothing, however, compared with the brutal way we have

sometimes tormented and tortured cats over the centuries. They have all too frequently been the butt of our redirected aggression, so much so that we even have a popular saying to express the phenomenon: ‘... and the office boy kicked the cat’, illustrating the way in which insults from above become diverted to victims lower down the social order, with the cat at the bottom of the ladder.

Fortunately, against this can be set the fact that the vast majority of human families owning pet cats do treat their animals with care and respect. The cats have a way of endearing themselves to their owners, not just by their ‘kittenoid’ behaviour, which stimulates strong parental feelings, but also by their sheer gracefulness. There is an elegance and a composure about them that captivates the human eye. To the sensitive human being it becomes a privilege to share a room with a cat, exchange its glance, feel its greeting rub, or watch it gently luxuriate itself into a snoozing ball on a soft cushion. And for millions of lonely people – many physically incapable of taking long walks with a demanding dog – the cat is the perfect companion. In particular, for people forced to live on their own in later life, their company provides immeasurable rewards. Those tight-lipped puritans who, through callous indifference and a sterile selfishness, seek to stamp out all forms of pet-keeping in modern society would do well to pause and consider the damage their actions may cause.

This brings me to the purpose of *Catwatching*. As a zoologist, I have had in my care, at one time or another, most members of the cat family, from great Tigers to tiny Tiger-Cats, from powerful Leopards to diminutive Leopard-Cats, and from mighty Jaguars to rare little Jaguarondis. At home there has nearly always been a domestic moggie to greet my return, sometimes with a cupboard-full of kittens. As a boy growing up in the Wiltshire countryside, I spent many hours lying in the grass, observing the farm cats as they expertly stalked their prey, or spying on the hayloft