

Cats Can Be Dangerous to Your Relationships: Cats in the Fiction of Jim Grimsley

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ABSTRACT

In the context of culture's fascination with cats, the present article analyzes the use of felines in two pieces of fiction by the southern writer Jim Grimsley: the short story "The Cathouse Lovers" (1976) and his novel Comfort & Joy (1993 in German, 1999 in English). The two texts differ greatly in terms of the genre, period, as well as the role of cats in the story, yet both of them include the motif of cats that have a negative effect on the romantic and sexual relationships of their human protagonists.

KEYWORDS

cats in literature; American literature; southern literature; gay literature; Jim Grimsley; The Cathouse Lovers; *Comfort & Joy*

Earth is inhabited by intelligent creatures called humans. Almost all of them are owned by dogs and cats.

- Anonymous

The world is captivated by cats: they are kept in households as pets, they appear on products (yes, cats sell), and YouTube serves an endless stream of videos with cats playing, cats hunting, cats being petted, cats sunbathing, and, most of all, cats showing the erratic behavior for which they are admired and loved. In the United States, cats are second in number only to dogs as pets,¹ not to mention millions of barn and feral cats.

The domestication of cats occurred within a shorter period of time and followed a path different from their canine counterparts,² therefore cats are much less predictable in their behavior than dogs. Thanks to their proximity to humans, cats have secured a firm place in cultures across the world, including in various national literatures. The classic Puss in Boots has appeared in one form or another in various European traditions for some five hundred years, not to mention the numerous other works and artifacts featuring felines appearing in other literatures across the globe. Even a cursory look at famous literary cats will reveal how they inspire a wide range of emotional responses in readers. While Josef Lada's character Mikeš brings many moments of delight to Czech children and their parents alike, Pluto in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat" (1843) inspires emotions on the opposite scale in readers in the US and around the world.

The list of authors who feature cats in their works could of course be much longer, and explorations of the use of the feline have been reflected in the work of literary scholars as well. The

1 See Michelle Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2023," *Forbes Advisor*, June 21, 2023, <<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics/>>.

2 See Hikari Koyasu, Takefumi Kikusui, Saho Takagi, and Miho Nagasawa, "The Gaze Communications between Dogs/ Cats and Humans: Recent Research Review and Future Directions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (December 2020): 1, <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.613512>>.

scholarly contributions range from pioneering annotated bibliographies, such as Barbara Byrne's "Cats in Literature" (1974),³ to attempts to provide more systematic and comprehensive analyses, such as Maria Nikolajeva's study "Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats" (2009).⁴ Moreover, in recent years the completely new field of Animal Studies has emerged. Some scholars even speak about an "animal turn," questioning the ethical and philosophical grounds of human exceptionalism by taking seriously the nonhuman animal presences that haunt the margins of history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and literary studies."⁵ It is a matter of prestige for large publishers to release handbooks and companions, such as *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (2018), published by the University of Chicago Press, or *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (2022). What is more, numerous series that explore all the possible aspects of coexistence of humans and other animal species have emerged, such as the *Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature*, the *Routledge Human–Animal Studies Series*, or Brill's *Critical Animal Studies*.⁶ Dozens of monographs have been published in these series as well as outside them, yet many of these studies, however innovative and informative, go far beyond discussions of concrete literary texts in their exploration. Thus it is quite refreshing for a literary scholar to see purely literary contributions, many of which currently focus on narrow and specific sections of literature. A typical example of this approach is Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck's study of detective fiction, *The Place It Was Done* (2023), which, among other aspects of this genre, includes a chapter devoted to the role of pets, including cats.⁷

In a similar vein, the present article looks at how one modern American author, Jim Grimsley (b. 1955), uses cats in his fiction. There is a paradox here: while Grimsley himself is clearly an ailurophile (in a book of photo profiles of southern writers, he is posing with his twelve-year-old cat),⁸ two of his pieces of fiction, the short story "The Cathouse Lovers" (1976) and the novel *Comfort & Joy* (1993 in German, 1999 in English) feature felines that have a negative effect on the romantic and sexual relationships of the human protagonists, their owners.

In spite of this common motif, the two texts differ greatly in terms of the theme, genre, period, as well as the role of cats in the story. To fully understand how and why these texts work, they must be located properly in the author's oeuvre. Jim Grimsley studied creative writing at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill between 1974 and 1978, with his teachers at UNC including Doris Betts, Max Steele, and Marianne Gingher. During his studies he published his first stories not only in the student-run journal *Cellar Door* but also in other publications; "The

3 See Barbara Byrne, "Cats in Literature," *Elementary English* 51, no. 7 (1974): 955–958.

4 See Maria Nikolajeva, "Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats," *Marvels & Tales* 23, no. 2 (2009): 248–267.

5 Susan McHugh, Robert McKay, and John Miller, eds., "Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature," *SpringerLink*, November 15, 2023, <<https://link.springer.com/series/14649>>.

6 See McHugh, McKay, and Miller, eds., "Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature"; "Routledge Human-Animal Studies Series," Routledge, November 15, 2023, <<https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Human-Animal-Studies-Series/book-series/RASS>>; Richard Twine and Claire Parkinson, eds., "Critical Animal Studies," *Brill*, November 15, 2023, <<https://brill.com/display/serial/CAST>>.

7 See Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck, *The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2023), 136–139.

8 See David G. Spielman and William W. Star, *Southern Writers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 76–77.

Cathouse Lovers” represents one of these works. After his graduation, he moved to Atlanta, where he joined the theater scene. His first play staged in the city was *The Existentialists* (1983), which observes the mass murder of a family through the eyes of their cats.⁹ Grimsley saw success with his fiction in the United States only in the 1990s, after many of his novels had been published first in German thanks to the publisher and translator Frank Heibert. *Comfort & Joy* (1999), in which the protagonist’s cats play an important role, is the author’s fourth published novel in English, with earlier versions published in German as *Das Leben zwischen den Sternen* in 1993, in Dutch as *Stille nacht* in 1994, and in French in 1996 as *Confort et joie*. This work is the third novel in Grimsley’s autobiographic trilogy which features the character of Dan Crell as Grimsley’s alter ego. The first novel in the series, *Winter Birds* (1992 in German, 1994 in English) covers the experiences of Danny Crell as an eight-year-old boy, and *My Drowning* (1997) narrates the story of Danny’s mother as a thirteen-year-old girl living in extreme poverty. *Comfort & Joy* describes the budding relationship of the adult Dan Crell, now a hospital administrator, and Ford McKinney, a young pediatrician. Since 2000, Grimsley has published two more literary novels, three fantastic novels, a memoir, as well as a number of fantastic short stories, although in these cats do not play such an important role as they do in the two pieces I want to analyze.¹⁰

“The Cathouse Lovers”

The short story “The Cathouse Lovers” portrays the first meeting of a man and a prostitute. The sex worker Lily is welcomed into the man’s home, where a cat is lying by the fireplace. Lily admires the cat, Snow, yet the man seems to hate the cat, as he grumbles to Lily: “She’s a bitch. [...] Belonged to the girl before you.”¹¹ Later on, the man reveals that the cat is also named Star of India, but “Lucy named her Snow.”¹² Throughout the story it is clear that that the man’s attitude towards the cat is extremely negative. As the evening moves on, after a welcome drink of scotch and soda Lily cooks steaks for the man and herself and they wash the dishes together. After a while the man asks the woman to give him a foot massage, which gradually leads to sex, during which he insists that the girl call him “husband,” declare that she needs him and she’d rather die than lose him.¹³ Yet at one point, “something sharp like thorns pierced her forehead and she sat up. There was Snow, facing the man, white hot, spitting. He jerked out of her and she felt nausea.”¹⁴ Lily retches, vomits on the man and runs away, while the cat continues hissing at the man. The man then engages in a long chase of the cat with a poker, and when he catches her, he strokes the animal several times soothingly. After a moment of calm, he places the cat, now yawling and scratching, into the

9 See Jim Grimsley, “Autobiographical Essay,” in *Contemporary Authors: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Writers in Fiction, General Nonfiction, Poetry, Journalism, Drama, Motion Pictures, Television, and Other Fields*, vol. 265 (Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2008), 170.

10 For an overview of research on Grimsley, see Roman Trušník, “Jim Grimsley: Current State of Research,” *Literature Compass* 17, no. 11 (2020): 1–12. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12598>>.

11 James Grimsley, “The Cathouse Lovers,” *Irregardless* 1, no. 4 (October 29, 1976): 12.

12 Grimsley, “The Cathouse Lovers,” 12.

13 Grimsley, “The Cathouse Lovers,” 13.

14 Grimsley, “The Cathouse Lovers,” 13.

fireplace, holding her in the flames with the poker until the helpless creature burns to death. The short story ends with an image of the room flooded with the nauseating smell of the burnt body of the cat and the man calmly sitting near the fireplace reading a magazine.

The short story demonstrates that the presence of cats can be literally and metaphorically dangerous to one's relationships, as the man's intended sex with the woman was marred by the cat attacking the couple. The experience with cats demanding attention at the most inconvenient times is all too common to all cat owners. While an abrupt admonishment of the offending cat, such as harsh words or even throwing something at it might be reasonable, the man's methodical search for the cat, even stroking it soothingly, then killing it in a most gruesome manner is much less understandable. Yet, on another level, it must be pointed out that this strongly links the short story to Poe's legacy to the American horror tale.

Since the narrator does not have access to the man's mind, readers are left to speculate on the man's motives and on the further implications of the whole story beyond the theme of cats being dangerous to one's relationships. Much less speculation, however, is needed regarding the author's motive to write such a short story, as a number of materials preserved in the collection of Grimsley's papers stored in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University reveal more of the background. The earlier drafts of "The Cathouse Lovers" show that Grimsley wrote this early short story as a first-year student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As he was working on the short story at the beginning of 1975, he remarked in his journal:

Am going to turn in "Cathouse Lovers" for a midterm story. The class will undoubtedly hate it, but I want reactions, especially to the last scene. Is ugly, sure, but so is much of fiction. We are an ugly world sometimes.¹⁵

While the concept of intentional fallacy suggests that we should disregard the author's statements on his own works,¹⁶ in a story like this it is useful to know that it was basically a schoolwork used by the young author to elicit potentially negative feedback from and otherwise provoke his fellow students. Once again, the author's own reference to his story as "ugly" as "is much of fiction" shows the young writer already placing his work into the tradition of Poe's followers and into the broader literary landscape.

A copy of Grimsley's submission of this midterm project has been preserved with numerous comments by his most influential teacher Doris Betts. In addition to many editorial comments and recommendations, Betts, an accomplished fiction writer herself, wrote the following evaluation on the typescript:

This is going to be very fine (Playboy, Esquire.) First part needs much cutting, is self indulgent writing, & takes too long to bring on Rosie. Last part very strong & will work, even the cat. Ever read *The Man Who Died*, D. H. Lawrence? Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow... The [...] stuff is potent emotional material. Linger on those associations — take your time getting one right, Jim. It deserves that. Betts.¹⁷

15 *Jim Grimsley Papers*, box 1, journal "Journal 23W34, Jan 13 1975 – Nov 22 1975."

16 See W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468.

17 James Grimsley, "The Cathouse Lovers, second copy jan 29 1975, James Grimsley," *Jim Grimsley Papers*, box 7, folder "The Cathouse Lovers." Rosie is the name of the prostitute in this manuscript.

The teacher's comments were quite supportive, even suggesting possible publication in two magazines seen as the contemporary holy grail for short story writers at the time. Grimsley rewrote the short story many times, but for a long time failed to find a venue for it. The "fourth copy" (i.e., revision) was rejected by *Esquire*, the "fifth copy" bears a rejection note from both the *Atlantic* and *Playboy*. Indeed, a problem with the text is revealed in the rejection slip from the fiction editor of the *Carolina Quarterly*, Margaret Ketchum, who wrote to the author: "The story has a carefully controlled tone, but the man's character is not developed sufficiently to make the ending more than revolting violence, simple shock."¹⁸ Ketchum's comment succinctly summarizes an issue with the story: the revolting violence is indeed self-indulgent and the external perspective does not invite any deeper interpretation beyond the obvious motif of the cat's influence on the owner's sex life. Indeed, the reaction to the violence which Grimsley sought from his fellow students turned off at least some editors, who are more experienced and demanding when it comes to pleasing their reading public. Thus the text never saw the print in a prestigious magazine.

In the end, the short story was published in issue 4 of the first volume of the *Irregardless* magazine on October 29, 1976. This periodical used a broadsheet newspaper format and exhibited extremely poor typesetting with numerous typos, which contributes to the fact that it has largely been forgotten. The fact that it was the first volume also suggests that publishing the short story in this venue after a series of rejections was the last resort of the author after many desperate attempts to see his short story in print. In this context it comes as no surprise that Grimsley's collection of short stories *Jesus Is Sending You This Message* (2008), which included some of the author's earliest texts, omitted this one.¹⁹

Comfort & Joy

Cats in Grimsley's fourth novel, *Comfort & Joy*, seem to be much less conspicuous than in "The Cathouse Lovers," though they are highly important for the protagonists' relationship. The key events of the novel revolve around Christmas, as the title reference to the well-known carol "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" suggests. While the hospital administrator Dan and the pediatrician Ford have been noticing each other for a long time, they finally begin a relationship one Christmas when an emergency at the hospital brings them together. The pair spend the following Christmas separately with their families. On their third Christmas together they visit Dan's family, who has invited them, and on a whim of the moment they also stop by Ford's family house, to which they have not been invited. Hindered by several issues from the very beginning, the relationship between Dan and Ford has not been an easy one. Besides the fact that Dan is an HIV-positive hemophiliac, Dan and Ford also belong to different social classes, which undermines not only their own partnership but also the relationships of the families to their sons' partners.²⁰ Another issue happens to be that Dan owns cats.

18 Margaret Ketchum to Jim Grimsley, September 29, 1975, *Jim Grimsley Papers*, box 4, folder "Rejection Slips."

19 See Jim Grimsley, *Jesus Is Sending You This Message* (New York: Alyson Books, 2008).

20 For an analysis of the role of class in the novel, see, e.g., Roman Trušník, "It's Not All That Money: Class in Jim Grimsley's *Comfort & Joy*," *American and British Studies Annual* 8 (2015): 57–64.

The motif of the need to accept a partner's cats along with the partner himself will seem much more familiar to most readers than the rather extreme fate of the pet in "The Cathouse Lovers." While in the short story, as its title suggests (in the form of a pun, with "cathouse" also a slang expression for a brothel), the cat plays a key role, in *Comfort & Joy* the protagonist's felines find themselves in the role of supporting characters (or perhaps props) that appear regularly in the key moments in the story.

The story is narrated in anachronological order through a series of flashbacks. The narrative starts on the pair's third Christmas after the men have lived together for some time, and they travel to visit Dan's family. This is the moment the readers are made aware of Dan's cats and of how touchy a subject they still remain. As the two men are chatting in a hotel on their journey, Ford asks about what Dan has done with the cats. When Dan mentions that he took "them to board at the vet," Ford replies, "I don't see why you couldn't just leave some food out."²¹ When Ford asks how much boarding the pets costs, he once again steps into the minefield of the class difference between the men, as Dan, who comes from a poverty-stricken background, feels the need to declare he can afford to pay the ten dollars a night, as the cats stay in one cage. Yet the true role of the felines in the relationship transpires here, as the narrator tells us: "Had it not been for these same cats, Dan might have moved into Ford's house six months sooner, or so Ford always claimed."²²

Indeed, in the following flashbacks it is revealed how Dan's cats have interfered in the men's relationship. When Ford asks Dan for dinner for the first time, the mood is not very celebratory, as Dan openly reveals that he is a hemophiliac, and, as it was common at the time for most hemophiliacs, he is HIV positive: "It's really funny. I guess 'funny' is the right word. I've had two lovers in my life. Two. But I've had blood from thousands of men. In my veins."²³ The dinner itself ends abruptly due to Ford's shock at the disclosure. Still, on the following day Ford visits Dan at home to persuade him that, while as a medical doctor Ford is aware of all the dangers of Dan's diseases, he is willing to give their relationship a try. Throughout the men's discussion, Dan's cats make their presence felt all the time: "A cat sidled along the wall behind Dan and tried to lunge past his feet. He scooped the cat from the floor, draping it over his shoulder. [...] Dan deposited the cat on a chair, where it stretched and watched him adjust the stereo [...]. Leaning back, as the cat perched beside him on the adjacent cushion [...]. The cat lay peacefully in his folded hands."²⁴ The attention the narrator devotes to the cats on the three pages of this scene foreshadows the felines' role in the men's relationship.

21 Jim Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1999), 15–16.

22 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 16.

23 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 104–105. To fully understand the severity of the information, the time in which the story was conceived and executed is vital. While no time is specified in the text, Grimsley began work on the novel on December 30, 1989. The scene also appears in the original German version published in 1993, in which Dan relates that he has been positive for eight years (94), unlike in the American version, in which Dan says he has been positive "for years" (104). At that time the mortality rate due to the HIV/AIDS was increasing steadily in the United States, where it peaked in 1995 when the groundbreaking triple antiretroviral therapy turned HIV/AIDS into a serious but manageable condition. The beginning of the original hand-written manuscript can be found in *Jim Grimsley Papers*, box 6, notebook "Comfort and Joy, by Jim Grimsley, December 30, 1989." For the German version, see Jim Grimsley, *Das Leben zwischen den Sternen*, trans. Frank Heibert (Berlin: Edition diá, 1993). For basic information on HIV/AIDS in the United States, see, e.g., "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States: The Basics," *KFF*, June 7, 2021, <<https://www.kff.org/hiv/aids/fact-sheet/the-hiv-aids-epidemic-in-the-united-states-the-basics/>>.

24 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 106–108.

At the beginning, the cats seem to only contribute to the domesticity in Dan's household. When alone, as "Dan would sit with his cats and a book and stare at the wall."²⁵ As the men continue to live separately, the pets appear when the exhausted and sleepy Ford comes to visit Dan: "On Dan's couch, with the cats curled above him on the back, Ford lay his head on his arms and dreamed."²⁶ Yet it is more and more obvious that the cats are creating an obstacle for the men as Ford later tells Dan, "I had one good dream, though. I dreamed you got rid of your cats and moved into my house." The potential cohabitation represents a major step forward in their relationship, which is jeopardized by the cats. Indeed, the condition Ford has set is unacceptable for Dan: "'There's nobody in the world who would want my cats,' Dan answered, and that was the end of the conversation."²⁷

The issue of Dan's cats continues to cause problems in the relationship, despite the fact that Ford gradually gets accustomed to the animals. When after an exhausting bleeding episode Ford makes Dan stay in his home, Ford tries to ease his partner's mind: "I'll feed the cats. I'm keeping you here today."²⁸ As the relationship develops, the question of Dan's cats emerges over and over again, but Dan remains adamant. Ford finally gives in, as Dan's refusal to move to Ford's place ("You know I can't move in with you and leave my cats."²⁹) evolves to the point when Dan's offer that "If I move in with you, my cats come too," is met with Ford's curt reply of "Fine."³⁰ Soon after, Dan moves in with Ford, with the immediate effect on the cats' lives also duly reported in the novel: "Dan boxed the cats, and their frantic crying and scraping of claws filled the rooms."³¹

Nevertheless, the problematic felines appear once again as Ford begins to have doubts about the relationship: "He pictured himself storming back into the house and throwing Dan's boxes, Dan's cats, Dan's clothes, into the yard."³² Ford has not come to have affection for the cats, but just to tolerate them. Earlier, when he called Dan during his trip to his family home during their second Christmas season as a couple, "Ford asked about Dan's knee, his trip, *even* about the cats."³³ Still, the animals do gradually become a part Ford's home as well: "The fragrance of coffee filled the room. From the back door came the scratching of cats asking to be let in. Ford opened the door, and they rushed to their food."³⁴ In spite of Ford's gradual acceptance of the cats, they remain a sensitive topic for the men, as the introductory discussion about the vet demonstrates. On the other hand, the animals are no longer "Dan's cats," they become simply "the cats."

Considering how important the cats are for the development of the story, it is quite interesting to note that throughout the whole novel the pets are referred to only as the cats. Not only do readers never learn the names of the cats, the actual number of them is also not revealed.

25 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 198.

26 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 198.

27 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 204.

28 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 212.

29 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 224.

30 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 226.

31 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 238.

32 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 238.

33 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 262. My emphasis.

34 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 272.

Conclusion

The present article, the goal of which is not meant to be a profound theoretical analysis with far-reaching consequences, may be dedicated to all the cat lovers who may have problems with their relationships to people. Have you ever thought that your cats may actually be the cause of the trouble? On a more serious note, it is a fact that owning a pet places a lot of responsibility on the owner, and the pet will necessarily influence the owner's life more than the cat's human would usually like to admit. Indeed, these two texts written by a confirmed cat lover illustrate exactly this point. Even though "The Cathouse Lovers" may be disregarded as a text of questionable literary merit, a piece best analyzed in terms of Grimsley's experimental juvenilia, in spite of all its shortcomings the short story does convincingly remind us that a cat may make its presence felt at the most inconvenient moment. A similar motif appears in a more mature novel published two decades later: the very cats that bring comfort and joy to the home of a single person, may actually contribute to the fact that the said person remains single. All in all, neither of Grimsley's texts presents the unhindered admiration of cats which is all too common in contemporary social media and elsewhere.

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