

From The Times  
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# I am a man who loves cats

## Owning six cats is nothing for a fellow to be ashamed of



Tom Cox

Everyone knows about Mad Cat Lady. She's a social cliché, a cautionary tale, a character that, when she started to pop up on *The Simpsons*, was so instantly resonant that she didn't have to be named or introduced. She's the childless woman who lets her cat obsession take over her life, to the detriment of domestic and, finally, personal hygiene. In truth, as a stereotype she seems unfair. After all, there is no established Mad Dog Man - the subtext being that a man's best friend will help him to see out the autumn of his life with dignity, while a woman's will put her alone in a supermarket, giving off a mildewy odour and pushing a trolley containing a malt loaf, some hairnets, a packet of wafer-thin ham and two dozen cans of Felix.

The phenomenon of Mad Cat Man is even less widely reported. One of the reasons for this is that us males are still suspicious of cat ownership. Being a heterosexual man and admitting to another heterosexual man that you like cats can feel a little like telling him that you still sleep alongside your childhood collection of teddy bears.

Even after writing a book about my life as a cat-lover, admitting that my living room is full of hair, scratching posts and plastic sticks with feathers on feels slightly taboo. Of course, I'm not really mad. My house might get a bit smelly when I haven't vacuumed or checked under the sofa for a few days, but it is by no means a health hazard. True, I did once put a necktie on one of my cats when he was asleep, but I have never bought them an item of clothing and I don't call them "fur babies".

I do, however, own six, which can feel a little like living with half a dozen miniature versions of Mariah Carey. No doubt, by the time you read this, another little bundle of narcissistic fur will have wandered in off the street and parked itself on one of the purpose-made hammocks that hang from my radiators. I will probably even learn to ignore the obscene snorty scronking noise it makes while it cleans its bottom. It has happened before, and I'm sure it will happen again. To

understand why I like cats so much, you probably have to go back to a couple of early, defining traumas: the ferocious, semi-wild, invalid cat that my parents had put down not long before my birth, for fear she would savage me, and the sudden, inexplicable death of the Paragon Of Cats, Monty, just a few days after I moved out of my parents' house without taking him with me.

So there's a long-standing guilt driving my moggy obsession - but there's also a love of their comic timing, punk rock attitude (which is far more interesting to witness than any actual punk rock), and the way that, unlike dogs, they tell you no sentimental lies and, instead, prepare you for the harsh realities of the world.

After more than three decades of being pushed around by these loveable autocrats, I am past saving: the kind of pussy-whipped sap who has to wrestle with his own hand to stop it hitting the indicator every time he drives past a branch of the Celia Hammond Animal Trust. Over the years, cats have dictated the nature of my house moves, my holidays, my interior decor. Yet for most of my life most of my friends would not have been aware of this. It wasn't that I tried to hide it (and anyone who walked home from a nightclub with me circa 1999 and watched in embarrassment as I stopped to befriend random moggies on the street will back me up on this). Because he has not been indelibly caricatured, the Mad Cat Man is simply able to slip beneath the radar.

The facts do not match up to the popular perception of men as cat-apathetic. It would also be unrealistic to assume that, despite what popular culture tells us, the male cat-lover is a real-life Dr Evil, or a transvestite secondhand bookshop owner or a metrosexual.

However, scrutinise the popular history of Mad Cat Men, and it arguably contains more extreme behaviour than its higher-profile female equivalent. It was, after all, Edgar Allen Poe who wrote *The Black Cat*, fiction's most notorious chronicle of feline-inspired psychosis.

There are more than nine million cats in the UK, probably more than a billion in the world, and it would be foolish to believe that, even as we speak, a sizeable portion are not being tickled under their chin by men as well as women. Ernest Hemingway might have prided himself on being a bull-fighting-obsessed tough guy, but it's less well-known that he also liked to care for a variety of invalid, rescue and feral pussies (he owned 30, at one point). Louis Wain was: a) famous for drawing hundreds of cutesy cat pictures while being detained in a variety of lunatic asylums; and b) not, by any stretch of the imagination, a woman.

Then there's Winston Churchill. To the world-at-large: leader of men. Behind closed doors: sentimental wally who wouldn't eat until his favourite cat, Jack, was sitting across the dining table. I would also itemise world leaders (Bill Clinton), comedians (Ricky Gervais) and demon fighters (Anthony Head, of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*).

Mad Cat Men have been getting away with murder for a long time, and enjoying themselves in the process. One only has to look at Russell Brand: the tight black jeans, nest of hair and comi-tragic faux-Dickensian monologues don't exactly repel his rabid female fanbase, but the underlying sensitivity suggested by his very public love of his cat, Morrissey, surely doesn't hurt either. That said, the concept of feline ownership as a secret weapon in the wars of woo might be

yet another myth surrounding The Cat Man. Until I met my future wife, all my girlfriends had either been allergic or indifferent to my favourite animal. Now, as the pair of us indulge the egos of our half-dozen miniature lodgers, it is usually me who takes things too far. It was I, for example, who inaugurated the household's Cat Of The Month award, and began to sing Thank You For Being A Ginge at our feral rescue cat, Pablo, to the tune of *The Golden Girls* theme. Yet when builders, acquaintances or even my in-laws are at the house, and the subject of cats comes up, these people look at me in that way that acknowledges that I'm the long-suffering victim here.

The truth is out of the bag now, and the game will soon be up, but in the meantime I plan to make the most of my privileges as an underacknowledged stereotype. I will, however, be drawing the line at the malt loaves, hairnets and Louis Wain prints.

Tom Cox's *Under The Paw: Confessions Of A Cat Man*, published by Simon & Schuster, is £12.99

### **Step away from the teddy ...**

Things that a man should never have too many of:

Cuddly toys. Do we really need to explain why?

Car stickers, especially ones that say "My other car is a Ferrari" and "Honk if you're horny"

Plug-in air fresheners

Pictures of his mother; pictures of your mother

Toy soldiers and/or Hornby train sets. If he keeps them on permanent display, run screaming in the opposite direction Trainers. Owning two pairs is acceptable; any more and he's heading for a pathetic P Diddy complex

Ferrets, especially when kept down trousers

Crabs, ditto

Graphic novels, well-thumbed sci-fi paperbacks, box sets of *Stargate*. Aliens don't exist, OK?

Self-help books, especially ones with titles such as Instant Confidence and Boost your Brainpower