

WHY CATS WRITE

by Joanne Rocklin

Originally published in THE BULLETIN, the newsletter of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

I recently discovered that my three cats write children's books. They decided they would no longer listen to my work unless I listened to theirs. I agreed. I enjoy their scribbles, and often spend my time listening to them read when I should be working at the computer. In any case, I would like to discuss the topic Finding One's Voice and Choosing a Genre When Writing for Children, using my cats' endeavors as examples.

It is interesting how reading background, temperament and talent are all involved in deciding what sort of children's book to write. My fifteen-year-old tabby, Samtoo, writes picture books and poetry. Samtoo revels in the loveliness of the small detail, for example the sparkle of a horse fly's bug-eye or the melodious "pop" of a can of Fancy Feast. She is a dainty feline who appreciates routine and security, thus enjoying the patterns of rhyme and rhythm. However she does find a clever surprise at the end of a poem or picture book as intoxicating as catnip!

Samtoo knows that a picture book is almost always thirty-two pages long. Her current challenge is honing down her latest manuscript, Millions of Fleas. Samtoo's pet peeve is the careless use of metaphor and simile, reminding me the other day that "quiet as a mouse" certainly does not apply to any mouse she's torn apart and eaten!

Manny, a black and white, meticulously groomed short-hair, prefers writing juvenile nonfiction. He is a practical cat who enjoys research, and has expanded many a hobby or scholarly interest into a fascinating nonfiction project. Manny knows that only those cats who can write clearly and succinctly should attempt this genre. Children like their nonfiction understandable and up-to-date. They also enjoy a new twist to a topic. For example, Manny's current interests are chicken and hairballs. Understanding that books about chicken are everywhere this year, he is still pondering what he can add to the field. But hairballs! No mention in Books in Print! So far the working title of this project is Great Hairballs of the Twentieth Century. I told him I thought he'd bit off more than he could swallow. On the other hand, perhaps I'm envious of his obvious excitement as he prepares his query letter to editors. Excited writers make for excited readers, Manny knows!

Moe is a scruffy, long-haired gray cat with tuna breath. He's seen a lot of the underside of life--under cars, cellars, beds-- you name it. Moe fancies himself a private eye, skulking along walls, leaping out suddenly from behind doors.

Mysterious noise? Moe will investigate. Intriguing, exotic smell? There is Moe again. Moe is everywhere and nowhere, taking it all in. Been around and played around and lived to tell about it. And tell about it he does! In sharp, tense prose Moe writes terrific adventure-mystery novels for youngsters. Moe is NOT nice when he creates his stories. Nice is not where it's at, he growls. To capture even the most reluctant young reader, to get that reader turning pages, you gotta be spittin' mean. You gotta create tension and conflict to get your story rolling. Then you tie it all up in the end, tight and neat as a new ball of string. Hey, it works for Moe, who just sold the paperback rights to his popular Sam Spayed series for youngsters.

So why do Samtoo, Manny and Moe write? Why do I write, for that matter? None of us is famous; we hardly earn enough to live on, not even Moe. And why do we write for children? Are we writing for the child (or kitty) we once were, attempting to constantly recreate the delicious discovery of reading and books?

I've actually posed these questions to my cats. The three of them stared at me disdainfully, then gave the obvious answer.

Meow.

Postscript

Samtoo, Manny, and Moe are now deceased and are greatly missed. But their teachings will always inspire me, as well as the cats (and dog) who followed in their paw-steps.