

# James Herriot's Cat Stories Short Guide

## James Herriot's Cat Stories by James Herriot

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# Characters

In James Herriot's *Cat Stories*, the narrator Herriot is less prominent than in his earlier books. He is still the observer of human behavior and foibles, but in these tales about cats and their owners, he is less interactive, and lets the patients and their owners speak for themselves. Most of them are townspeople, and their animals are companions, unlike the more utilitarian, and often business-like relationships the Dales farmers have with their livestock. What interests Herriot is the relationship between pet and owner, which often takes on a mirroring quality. Thus, the owner of a little sweetshop who is quite a salesman, is supported by his cat Alfred. "And it had always struck me forcibly," says Herriot the observer, "that he was exactly like his master in that respect. They were two of a kind and it was no surprise that they were such devoted friends." A similarly close friendship is also found between an old man and his pet cat Frisk, an animal that seems to have the proverbial nine lives. When he finally succumbs to a recurring, mysterious illness, his owner soon follows him into death.

James Herriot's *Cat Stories* Besides the sometimes scurrilous humans — and a few are quite reminiscent of Dickens's characters — there are the cats. They are noble, friendly, generous, sociable, and smart. They, too, are sometimes observers of the strange human beings that own them, especially Oscar, the socialite cat, who enjoys attending and viewing various social events in the life of the small town.

Three of the cat stories involve Herriot's own felines, a pair of kittens that come to stay at his rural home. In spite of his proficiency as a vet, he finds it difficult to tame these two feral strays.

They are the essential cats, who are free, independent, and make contacts with humans on their own terms.

## Social Concerns

In his earlier novels, Herriot's major interest is in the people of Yorkshire.

Tenacious, hard working, often desperately hard pressed for survival, their success or failure depends on their harsh land and their animals. And their personalities have been shaped by the sparse and beautiful landscape of the Dales. Their relationship with their livestock and farm creatures is by necessity intensely practical. Yet in many instances, they also demonstrate a close, warm feeling and concern which transcends the purely utilitarian considerations. In his volume of cat stories, Herriot's narratives take on a different aspect. By concentrating on a single animal, the cat, the emphasis shifts from the human aspects to those of the animal. In his introduction, Herriot himself explains that he has always had a special relationship with cats.

"They were the main reason why I chose a career as a vet. In my school days my animal world was dominated by a magnificent Irish setter called Don with whom I walked the Scottish hills for close on fourteen years, but when I returned from these rambles, there were always my cats to greet me, arching around my legs, purring and rubbing their faces at my hands." Due to the topic, this collection of short stories serves to bring out the special characteristics of the feline as Herriot sees them — not cool and aloof, but friendly, affectionate, and interested in people. In many ways, these stories also reflect the warmer, more human side of the people of the small Yorkshire towns, since cats, unlike cows and sheep, do not have an intrinsic practical value, and were cherished mostly for their companionable qualities.

Recent years have shown an increased interest by suburbanites as well city people in an animal that makes an ideal pet since it can be kept completely housebound, needs little space, and is a great companion for older people in urban apartments.

James Herriot recognizes this recent increase in felines as pets and their impact on the veterinary profession as well as his readership.

## Techniques

In this collection, Herriot continues a technique which has proven successful in his earlier books. Each chapter is complete in itself, an anecdote which is linked to the next one merely by its topic, cats. As has been pointed out by some of his critics, there is a certain danger of the formula becoming mechanical and the material becoming worn out. This is not true in the carefully selected tales of this book, which draws from Herriot's best work. There is enough variety to keep the reader's interest, and the author's strength lies, as always, in his colorful descriptions of the Yorkshire countryside, as well as his satisfaction with his work which shines through all his accounts. Stories about animals, especially domestic pets such as dogs and cats, sometimes tend to be sentimental, but Herriot manages to avoid this through his matter-of-fact style, as well as his realism, which does not gloss over problems and tragedies. The bonds between owners and animals are genuine and effectively understated.

# Themes

Cats are affectionate and intensely interested in humans. Nevertheless, they are somewhat remote and mysterious, and their comings and goings follow more their own whims than human logic. Oscar, the socialite cat, travels across town just to watch the antics of humans during a weekly card game, and Debbie, a little stray, carefully seeks out a home for her kitten before she dies. Sometimes their likes and dislikes of humans are unpredictable and cannot be forced. Several of the stories in this volume deal with Dr.

Herriot's own relationship with two stray kittens, whose trust he does not seem to be able to earn. Affection and love are freely given but only when the cat chooses to do so.

A secondary theme is the values that pet cats offer to lonely humans, especially the old and the infirm. Alfred, the sweetshop cat, almost duplicates his owner's gregarious personality, and when he is stricken by illness, his master quickly deteriorates himself. And in "Emily and the Gentleman of the Road," a small cat makes the life of a destitute and homeless man bearable.



## Key Questions

Animal stories have a universal appeal, but the traditional "hero" of such stories is the dog as the ideal human companion. Cats as literary objects are not as common, although in recent years, their popularity as pets has increased. How do cats as fictional protagonists compare with dogs?

What qualities are stressed in either animal? How do writers portray their respective relationships in regard to humans? What qualities do cats represent, and why? Are these qualities symbolic of changing attitudes and concerns in our society? Felines are traditionally seen as being more remote and independent. Is there any significance that these qualities seem to be so attractive to today's pet owner?

1. Both Herriot's dog and cat stories deal with man's favorite pets, but there is a marked difference in the relationships between his dogs and their masters and the cats and their owners.

How do the characters who live with cats differ from those with dogs? Are cat owners different in personality, attitude, and philosophy from dog owners?

2. In his introduction, Herriot claims that cats are his favorite animals. Is there evidence of this preference in his other books?

3. Probably the most personal narratives are the stories that deal with James Herriot's own felines, the two stray kittens that take residence in his garden shed. What does their relationship with him reveal about the author?

4. Many of the cats in these stories are reflecting the personality of their owners. Is it true that people resemble their pets or vice versa?

5. One of the strengths of Herriot's animal stories is that he never anthropomorphizes them. How does he manage to make the animals interesting without seeing them as humans in fur?

How does he prevent the stories from becoming sentimental?

6. Most of the cat stories reflect life in the small Yorkshire town, unlike the earlier books which deal with the farmers in the country side. How does the change of setting affect the tone of the stories?

7. It could probably be said of Herriot that he never met an animal he didn't like. How about his human characters? Are there any villains, and if so, what are they like?

## Literary Precedents

Many famous writers such as T. S. Eliot, Colette, Rudyard Kipling, Emile Zola, and Paul Gallico have cherished their cats and have written anecdotes, poems, short stories, and even novels about them. Herriot's cat stories differ from a large segment of literary cat tales because they are completely realistic, and the author has not tried to give the animals human traits and emotions. There is no worldly-wise Hiddigeigei as in Joseph von Scheffel's novel of the same name, no ridiculous Jellicle cats as we find them- in T. S. Eliot's poems, and no social critics like Tobermory by Saki. Herriot's cats always remain feline, but they retain exactly those qualities which have impressed cat lovers everywhere. In the heroes of Herriot's stories readers can recognize their own pets.



## Related Titles

The Yorkshire country setting, many of the characters, and several of the episodes are found in the other four books by Herriot — *All Creatures Great and Small* (1972, please see separate entry) *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1975), *All Things Wise and Wonderful* (1977), *The Good Lord Made Them All* (1981), and *Every Living Thing* (1992, please see separate entry).



# Copyright Information

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