

William Jordan

# A Cat Named

Embracing  
the Bond

# DARWIN

Between Man and Pet

MARINER BOOKS



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A  
CAT  
NAMED  
DARWIN



*Embracing the Bond  
Between Man and Pet*

WILLIAM JORDAN

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A CAT NAMED DARWIN

BOOKS BY  
WILLIAM JORDAN

*Windowsill Ecology*

*Divorce Among the Gulls*

*A Cat Named Darwin*

TO HOOVER  
*who led me the rest of the way*

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With any book that takes as long to think and write as this one, the people who support you, who hold your hand and help you up and declare your genius, et cetera, et cetera — these special, essential people tend to recede into the fabric of daily, pedestrian existence and are sometimes forgotten when gratitude is officially passed out. Worse yet, the ones who assisted with the heavy lifting, reading the various drafts and suffering the endless drone of your voice as you read to them — they tend to become so familiar as to be taken for granted, like the ground or the air, and sometimes get overlooked. The fear of such inexcusable gaffes is my dark little paranoia. In the event I commit them, I am repenting in advance and vowing eternal chagrin. However, life goes on. Do we must, and do we should with sincerity and in earnest. Let chance have the rest.

In that spirit I offer my deepest gratitude to Michael Daves, Paul Ciotti, Patrick Pfister, Michael Parrish, Robyn Shirley, Bridget McCarthy, Jeannine Oppewall, and Sherry Virbila for reading and/or listening. Much gratitude and many thanks also to Doug Mader for his patience in explaining Darwin's medical history; to Daryl Mabley and Christine Belezza for offering other points of medical view; and to Douglas Domingo-Foraste for his kindness in correcting my Latin.

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And to my parents, the profoundest acknowledgment of their love and encouragement.



I was born a *Homo sapiens*.  
Then I became a biologist.  
Then, I became a cat.

You have no idea.  
Read on, friend.

## CONTENTS

Introduction 1

- 1 PICKING A HUMAN UP 11
  - 2 A DOG'S MEOW 21
  - 3 BREAKING UP 32
  - 4 INVENTORY IN ENGLAND 46
  - 5 NUPTIALS 61
  - 6 HONEYMOON PROGNOSIS 64
  - 7 HOPE, INTIMACY, JEALOUSY 71
  - 8 FRIENDSHIP AND EQUALITY 81
  - 9 HOSPICE CARE 95
  - 10 NIGHT WALK 112
  - 11 HOME INVASION 123
  - 12 SWEET EPIPHANIES 150
  - 13 TENDER MERCIES 166
  - 14 *Missa Felina* 174
- Epilogue 189

## INTRODUCTION

IT'S THE SOLITARY ONES who are most vulnerable — those of us who live by ourselves and have time, probably too much time, to think. It happens gradually, imperceptibly, like temperature rising or water seeping, and one day you find yourself noticing new lines, say, in his facial markings. You notice the way he greets you, nuzzling your outstretched finger, then sliding his mouth along your fingertip to the corner of his jaw. You notice the whites of his eyes as he watches you continuously, not out of wariness, but out of a gentle, calm trust we humans would call love. You notice the nuance in the way he moves, the subtle pauses and postures that express his own personality and distinguish him from other cats — and you hear the particular timbre of his voice and know intuitively with a crawling of the nape when he's threatened by another cat out in the wilds beyond the door. You realize at some point that his movements and gestures are a language, his tail wrapping gently around your leg, or his head pressing deliberately into your hand, or his mouth opening in a wide fang-bearing yawn of greeting as you walk into the room. The way he stretches forward and claws the rug,

the little crook in the end of his tail, the unique tufting of his belly fur . . .

These quiet, introspective revelations are the gift of the cat to the solitary person, for the cat is a creature with whom you share solitude. A human being, on the other hand, is a creature with whom solitude is generally a failed relationship. With one the essence of success is communion. With the other it is communication. One depends on spoken language and rational intellect, the other on the language of gesture and intuition, and whereas communion with an animal is considered inferior to communication with a human being, the truth is, the need for companionship of any sort is a human species trait, and in the absence of a human companion, the mind grows like a vine around any living thing. The first time your mind grows around a cat, you do not realize you have fallen in love.

Communion with a cat takes time to mature, and it is irreversible. Those who find it are forever altered and cannot go back to the way they once were because the mind, the soul, the eye of self, arises from the physical substance of the brain, and that substance has been altered. The brain records experience continually in a running record, which is crucial to the working of conscious awareness. When you notice a new pattern on your cat's face — the stripes have always been there, but for some reason one of them now stands forth — this revelation occurs because the mind compares the current perception with visual memories. The longer you live with a cat, or any living thing for that matter, the more detail you see because the brain has had more time to record. This in turn sharpens the perception of detail in the present, the mind comparing present with memory and memory with present, back and forth, forth and back, in a

resonating fusion of memory and instant that we experience as conscious awareness.

And how does the brain record these memories? We know in a general way that it does so through physiological changes. Neurons make new connections with other neurons; neurons recruit other neurons, so when one becomes active, its activity stimulates its immediate neighbors to join in; eventually a pathway forms along which the impulses of memory and perception run; complex chemicals are probably also involved in storing memories, and who knows how many other operations of brain physiology? This means that a physical mechanism — a neuronal machine — is slowly, gradually assembled in the brain to service the relationship, and details accumulate in the mind as more neurons, more synaptic connections are dedicated to your companion. Those who work at home and live the single life can easily spend 80 to 90 percent of existence with their animal comrades, which means that a very large mechanism indeed must be constructed.

You don't realize how pervasive this mechanism has become until your companion is taken ill; then the world cracks and crumbles around you. Its suffering becomes your suffering. When it lies in pain and silence you immediately grow depressed. If it shows the slightest sign of recovery, the sun shines into your soul and your spirits soar euphoric. In other words, the health of your companion controls your moods as if your nerves were linked directly together. You are fully aware of this influence, you just cannot control it.

And when your companion dies, the pain is almost unbearable. The longer and the deeper you love him, the greater the price in grief. It's as if part of your self has been amputated

without anesthetic, which it probably has — literally — because the machinery needed to generate the miraculous subtlety and nuance you experience with your loved one is, in one ineffable instant, rendered moot. It has no more reason for being.

Without purpose, without meaning, that part of the brain devoted to your friend will now be altered. The gray matter is needed for life and the brain has now to be recast around the emptiness where you and your companion once lived.

Meanwhile the memory mind continues to operate as if your friend still lived, projecting images in all the places he loved to be, and you see him everywhere, lying on the bed, sleeping on your desk, jumping over the wall and walking gracefully to greet you on your return home. The fact is, those we grow to love continue to live in the synapses and molecules of memory and as long as we exist, so they exist as part of the brain. That is what happens when anyone loves anyone, or anything. It doesn't matter to the neurons deep in the brain whether those whom you loved were human or animal. The mechanism is the same.

When we are young and heading out into life, we are going to marry, of course, get a good job, raise a family, live a long, peaceful life surrounded by loved ones. Of course we are. What is there even to discuss? Not to marry, not to have a family, not to paint one's life by the numbers — that is not an option and it is not to be countenanced. It has to be denied. We must dream high when we are young, navigate toward a star, putting off for many years the fact that happiness is a state of denial. In case we need motivation, society presents us with a symbol of failure: the spinster with her cats, the aging bachelor with his dog. Fail-

ure in life, loneliness. Deep inside we pull back in pity and relief, thanking God that such will not be our lot.

Life, however, has a way of hindering dreams. People get divorced. They die from accidents or early disease. They pursue pleasure for a few years, and the few years become many; time passes them by. They fail to find the right one. Some discover they prefer freedom to marriage. For any number of reasons life does not work out as we had known it would, and people find themselves without human intimacy.

A cat then appears in the yard and we notice it lurking around. Without the urgencies of family responsibility, the notion of putting out food fills the blankness beneath the conscious mind, and the cat soon turns up every evening at the appointed time. One thing leads to another, and before long the cat comes into the house. It rubs against your leg, meows for food, jumps onto your lap. A name comes to mind. And you are on the way to conversion. Cat, dog, parrot, potbellied pig, hamster, canary, et cetera, et cetera — for any number of reasons, people find themselves with animals in lieu of humans, and if you could read their deepest feelings and thoughts, you would find that many of them are much happier than you might imagine. There are many paths through life, and some continue past the picket fence and the cozy bungalow of conventional dreams.

However, the vast majority of people do take the normal path, settling down with husband or wife, begetting a family. The world runs according to their values, as it must. The machinery of civilization with its industries, farms, hospitals, universities, government, all depends on people who course through life in that vast river of humanity known as

the mainstream, accepting without question the traditional way in which we humans view ourselves against the backdrop of planet, cosmos, eternity, infinity. That view, with its self-promotional exultation, is essentially a Human Chamber of Commerce: "What a piece of work is a man, How noble in spirit, how infinite in faculty . . . in apprehension how like a god." Or, "God said, Let us make man in our image/ . . . and let them have dominion . . . over every creeping thing/that creepeth upon the earth." And ever since Darwin, "The Pinnacle of Evolution."

There is no understanding Life in its larger, planetary sweep so long as one adheres to this anthropocentric point of view, and we shall come back to this fact. Suffice it to say that the cat offers another way of seeing things.



All of which implies a set of core values essential to mainstream philosophy. These values are compressed into one hard, tough little three-word pellet of an expression: "Get a life."

"Get a life" most often implies that one is wasting time in trivial pursuits and ought to do something more significant with one's time. Keeping in mind that an extremist is anyone whose opinions are extremely different from your own, the mainstream person senses intuitively that those who cross the divide between animal and man have values that pose some sort of threat. In fact, the love of other creatures could, theoretically, revolutionize the nature of civilization. Civilization is manufactured in large part from living things, and if a majority of humans were to embrace all forms of life, treating them as kin with respect and reverence, the cost would come back to us in countless proscriptions and deprivations. Animal experimentation, animal husbandry, amusement parks, aquaria, and



circuses would be strictly curtailed or eliminated altogether; the trade in ivory and ornamental furs would be eliminated; and 2 billion Asian men, deprived of tiger penis and rhinoceros horn, would be reduced to bleating castrati.

“Get a life” speaks to all of that. As a rebuke, it ranges in strength from gentle, patronizing reproach to utter, baleful hatred, depending on how radically the person addressed appears to differ from mainstream society, and when the lover of animals advocates animal rights, “get a life” becomes “fringe zealot.”

The point being that it is natural and normal and inevitable for people sweeping past in the mainstream to belittle the lover of animals. Normal, mainstream people are not capable of understanding the mindset that lovers of animals evolve toward their companions for the simple, physiological reason that the brains and the minds of normal people grow chiefly around their spouses and children and only secondarily around their pets. Humans require the overwhelming share of attention. Animals get emotional leftovers. Mainstream human values, therefore, function as a social mechanism, like the invisible hand of Adam Smith, to glorify the human image of its species self. Those who take alternative paths must expect a certain level of prejudice and persecution and accept it, because that is how reality works.

Now if the deep love of one’s animal companion is essentially a surrogate affair — a relationship that often grows in the absence of human companionship — and if society tends to look with raised brow and wrinkled nose at folks who go this road, that is not to say the rewards are necessarily inferior to those derived from the company of humans. In fact, one of the