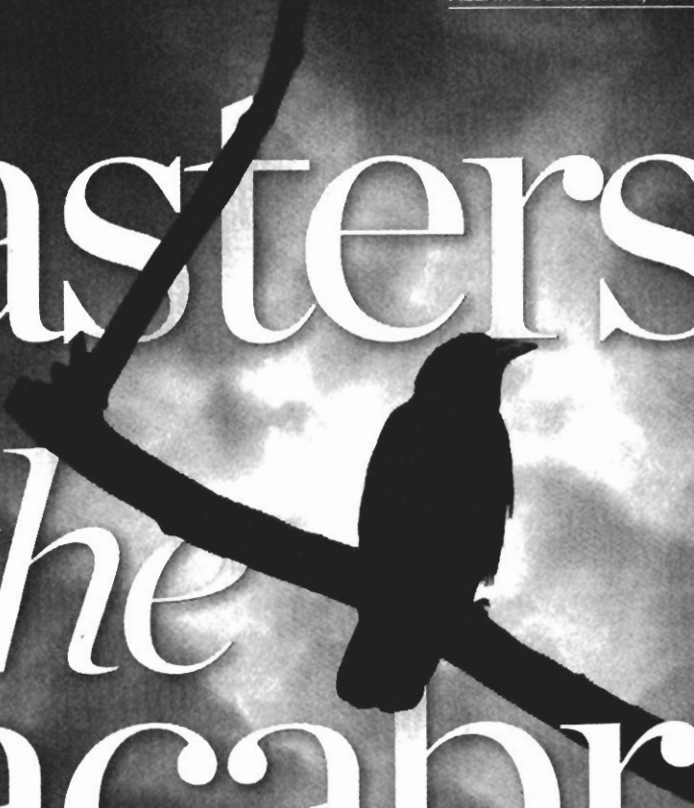


Masters of the Macabre



**MEET THE
FELINE MUSE BEHIND
THE WORKS OF
EDGAR ALLAN POE.**

It's Halloween. Quick: Name the scariest cat story you can think of.

There's a good chance you thought of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*.

Many cat lovers have mixed feelings about Edgar Allan Poe. The celebrated author, poet and critic wrote what is arguably the most infamous cat-related short story in American literature. To judge from the dark tale, he was no fan of felines; *but in real life, Poe was a man who had an uncommonly deep love and admiration for cats — and for one magical housecat in particular: his own longtime companion, Catterina.*

Who Was Catterina?

Little is known for certain about Catterina. Even her exact name remains vague, thanks in part to Poe himself. In letters, he refers to her as Catterina, Catter and Kate.

Her physical appearance, too, is a matter of contention and conjecture. Poe described her as large and totally black, with “not a white hair about her and is of a demure and sanctified demeanor.” But several of Poe’s acquaintances later recalled her as being a tortoiseshell or calico. In a letter written while he was residing in Philadelphia, Poe refers to his cat as Kate. By 1846, when the family relocated to New York, the pet had become Catterina. Do the discrepancies suggest that Catterina was not one cat, but two or more that Poe had over several years?

Catterina arrived in the Poe household in Philadelphia sometime between late 1839 and early 1840. Whether she was a young stray who followed him home one night or was a gift to the writer is unknown. The small and struggling family included Edgar, his invalid young wife, Virginia, and her mother, Maria Clemm (affectionately known as Muddy). Poe biographer Hervey Allen recorded in *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume 2*, “Catterina, the cat, then in her burgeoning kittenhood, purred on the ample plateau of Mrs. Clemm’s lap.” The evocative domestic scene suggests that, like many pets, Catterina served as a surrogate child for the couple.

In time, young Catterina grew to be an exceptionally ingenious feline, inspiring Poe, an inveterate logistician, to pen a brief essay in 1840 celebrating her abilities. In his essay *Instinct vs. Reason — A Black Cat*, he describes with discernable pride how his resourceful companion used her instinctive intelligence to jimmy open a latched door leading into the kitchen, a ritual he never tired of watching.



A Feline Muse and Companion

In 1846, after years of precarious existence in several ramshackle rooming houses, the family relocated to a small, wooded cottage in what is now the Fordham section of the Bronx, the last place they were together as a family. The sensitive Catterina was finely attuned to Poe’s comings and goings and reportedly suffered intense separation anxiety during his absences, refusing to eat until he returned.

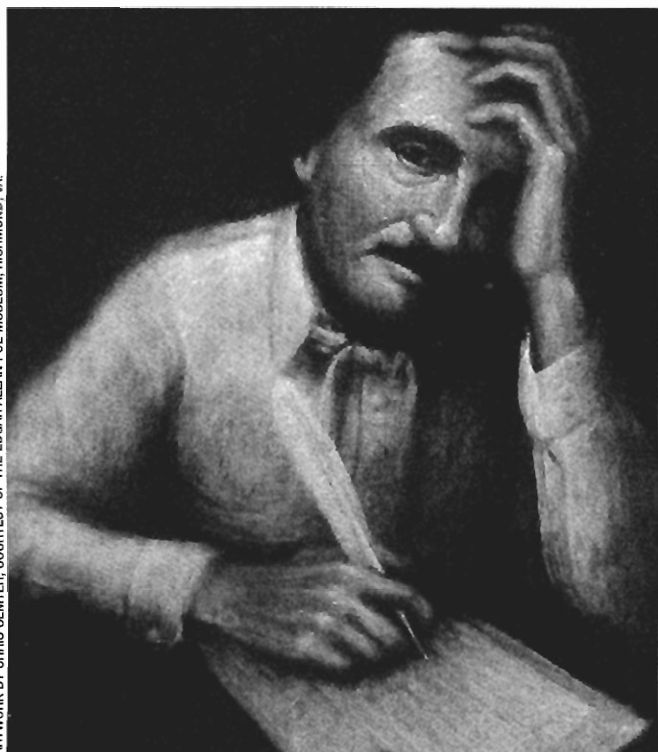
She was also seemingly possessed with rare, almost mystical gifts. Poe’s wife suffered from tuberculosis, a recurring motif in the author’s work. A family friend and advocate, Mrs. Grove Nichols, recalled visiting the Poes’ humble cottage and observing how Catterina seemed to alleviate Virginia’s consumptive attacks, providing warmth and companionship to the suffering young woman: “She lay on a straw bed, wrapped in her husband’s greatcoat, with a large tortoiseshell at her bosom. The wonderful cat seemed conscious of her great usefulness.”

As comforting as Catterina was to the frail and ailing Virginia, the empathetic cat proved even more essential to her long-suffering Edgar.

Catterina seemed to be Poe’s private muse, a calming conduit of creativity.

Notoriously standoffish and difficult in his relationships with people, Poe’s relaxed intimacy with his housecat companion provided both solace and inspiration to the writer. In *Poe: A Life Cut Short* (Random House, 2009), author Peter Ackroyd writes, “Catterina would settle herself on his shoulders while he was writing, and purr with delight. A visitor said that ‘she seemed possessed.’”

Catterina seemed to be Poe’s private muse, a calming conduit of creativity. To some observers it must have seemed that the singular cat was, in effect, dictating to the writer in some private language he alone could understand. Their symbiotic relationship raises an intriguing question: Between animal and human, just who was doing the caretaking?



ARTWORK BY CHRIS SEMTER, COURTESY OF THE EDGAR ALLAN POE MUSEUM, RICHMOND, VA.

Poe's Dark Side

While appreciative of Catterina's singular gifts, Poe may have harbored darker, more ambivalent feelings toward his domestic companion, particularly when he was under the influence of alcohol. Never one to shy away from the morbid and superstitious, Poe wrote in *Instinct vs. Reason — A Black Cat*, that, "It will be remembered that black cats are all of them witches." He was no doubt aware of the popular folktales of the day which had long held that cats were emissaries from another world.

The author tapped into these shadowy motifs in his celebrated short story *The Black Cat*, where the fictional storyteller's unsettling view of cats stands in stark contrast to Poe's own benign, real-life affections for Catterina. The story's housecat, Pluto, serves as an ill-fated sacrificial scapegoat for the narrator's loss of reason and eventual insanity. Suffice it to say that the cat comes to an unfortunate end.

How closely does the fictional feline Pluto compare with its real-life counterpart Catterina? It's a question that has intrigued and troubled readers for years, and it can be a disquieting one for cat lovers. Many modern day scholars believe that Catterina served as the inspiration for the story's namesake, although this theory is purely speculative.



What Became of Catterina?

After Virginia succumbed to tuberculosis in 1847 (Catterina was in attendance to the end), Poe fell deeper into the abyss of alcoholism and despair, dying in a Baltimore

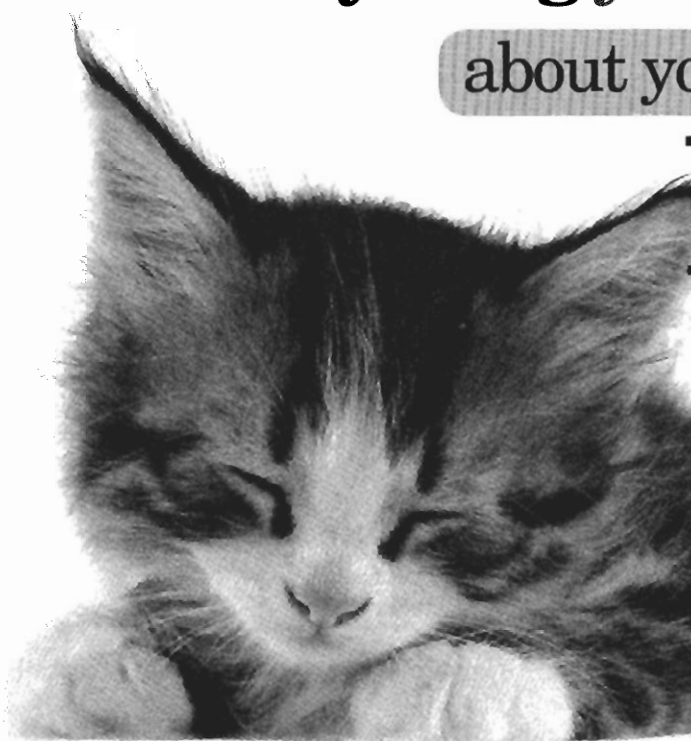
hospital at the age of 40 under mysterious circumstances.

What became of Catterina is yet another mystery. After Poe's death, the extraordinary cat vanished from history. Some accounts hint that she died of starvation or contracted rabies. In *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (Harper Perennial, 1992), author Kenneth Silverman writes that after Poe's death, "Muddy packed up the family's belongings at Fordham, finding Catterina, Poe's cat, dead when she returned to the cottage for a last load of boxes."

Whatever her origins or eventual fate, Catterina Poe remains one of the most influential muses and unique ghost writers in American literature, forever wrapped around her master's shoulders, whispering in his ear the words that only he could hear. 🐾

Steve Uhler is a freelance writer in Austin, Texas. He gratefully acknowledges the assistance of his daughter, Marlie Frasier, for her valuable help in researching this article.

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