

Farewell, dear friend

Dr Finn Mackay acknowledges the very real grief when it's time to say goodbye

I have never got over the death of my first cat, Jake. A kitten gifted to my parents by some neighbours, he grew into a huge and handsome grey tomcat, and I grew up alongside him. This fierce and prolific hunter allowed my toddler self to drag him around by his head, and, on one terrible occasion, laid stretched out next to me on a play mat while I cut off his whiskers with a pair of craft scissors! Surprisingly, he put up with such treatment and remained a patient and affectionate friend through all of my childhood; he met me on my walk home from school and slept on my bed every night. He died when I was 12, my north star, and I wish I could remember the sound of his purr.

Such grief is real and painful, sometimes it is experienced differently to the loss of a human friend or companion; sometimes it is felt more deeply. There are many reasons why this might be the case and this whole area of human experience is now a topic of study in academia, particularly in my field, which is sociology. There is a large and growing multidisciplinary area called animal studies, and pet grief is one of the important issues covered.

Those of us who have known this grief, know that losing a pet triggers many feelings and memories, not just for the animal to whom we

have had to say goodbye, but for previous loves, both human and non-human, and for previous times and stages in our own life. A cat may live with us for 20 years, through house moves, different jobs, relationships and other changes. Our feline companion can therefore become our anchor in what can seem like very uncertain times. In fact, it is just when the world seems to be moving too fast, that our animals remind us to slow down, pause and take care.

In 2009 the British Mass Observation Project, which was first established in 1937, included an animal component in their household survey and received over 200 responses describing how animals featured in daily life. What emerges from this data is that pets play a central role within the family and are grieved as family members when they pass on.

Those responding to the survey provided diaries, recollections and statements about their relationship with animals in general and pets specifically. In academia nothing is assumed or taken for granted, so analysis of the findings by scholars such as Alison Sealey and Nickie Charles have started right from the beginning by first ascertaining what people even meant by the term 'pet'. It will seem obvious to us of course, but a pet was defined as an animal that is given a name, that lives within the home and which is not eaten! What was interesting though, was that there was clearly some discomfort about the notion of keeping a pet or owning a pet, with respondents steering firmly away from the word "own". We can probably all relate to that discomfort. Many of us cat fans are likely to prefer to think that we share a home with our cats or that we live together as a family; suggesting that we 'own' our cats can demean that relationship. ►

Dr Finn Mackay is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the West of England. Part of her degree course involves a lecture on companion animals including pet grief. Steph Dearing's *Making memories* (within the Autumn 2015 issue of *The Cat*) formed part of Finn's lecture.

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A two-way relationship

Some scholars within animal studies do not use the term 'pet' at all, and instead use terms like companion animal or non-human animal. This is partly an attempt to honour the relationships between humans and pets and to highlight that this relationship is two-way. Cats are not passive objects in our families. Like humans, they build relationships on their own terms, choosing what form and pace friendships will take, as well as deciding who they prefer or who they will be most affectionate with; just like people, only perhaps more honest about it! We can therefore say that cats have agency and that they actively form kinship relations with humans.

A philosopher called Judith Butler has conducted important work on what she calls 'grievability', or the politics of whose lives are considered grieve-worthy and whose aren't. This depends on cultural norms about the value of the life lost and the role of that life in any given community. For a life to be grievable, it must be considered irreplaceable, the grief of those that remain is seen as transformational for them and their grief is experienced in a physical bodily way. Butler was mainly investigating human lives, but her theories could also be applied to animal lives; as has been done by the scholar David Redmalm who found that people can experience all the above characteristics of grievability upon the loss of their pets.

Society's view of grief

However, many of us might have experienced a sense that it is not acceptable to grieve a pet in the same way as a human, we might have been made to feel guilty about our grief, or pressured to repress our emotions. This is what I call a zero-sum approach. It can be found in lots of areas, but here it is the assumption that compassion and love is finite, measurable and comparable and that it can be reduced to appropriate percentages or levels for different groups, including animals. We know that animals are not valued as much as humans; this historical and current inequality means that animals are not seen as worthy of love and compassion, or therefore grief, in the same way that humans are. To suggest so, is often treated like some sort of attack against humankind, as if one cannot love both humans and animals at the same time, or as if care for animals equals a disregard for human life, rather than a general expansion of compassion for all sentient beings.

Pets' lives are important, they matter in their own right and in relation to us. Pets interact with us, they form connections with us and we try to enrich their lives as they do ours. We know that the lack of human language and, more importantly, the lack of human anxieties and failings make this bond different and stronger.



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We develop new ways of communication based on physical affection, caring and the meeting of needs as varied as identifying preferred wet or dry food and the correct amount of eye contact.

Currently I am blessed with two gorgeous cats in my family and on good days or bad, I am comforted by them. I rub faces with them, breathe in the smell of their fur, close my eyes and listen to their purr and I love not only them, but every cat I've known from then to now. These lives are as much a part of the tapestry of my life as my human loves, and, as we cat lovers know, ours is a tapestry woven together by furballs of various spots and stripes, by shedded whiskers, cast off claws and the occasional lost kitten tooth. Every one of these relationships was as unique as each cat themselves, and I mourn every one because love should not stop at the border of our own species. ●

At Cats Protection we know how devastating it can be to lose a much loved cat. If you are struggling with the loss of a cat or are worried about how you would cope then please visit our new webpages at www.cats.org.uk/grief

Later this year we will also be launching our new *Paws to Listen* grief support service where you will be able to talk in confidence to one of our dedicated volunteer listeners who will be able to offer you emotional and practical support.