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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆

Choosing to Be

Kat Tansey
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The effect of cats and dogs on the lives of humans is well documented. In some cases, pets become close friends; in others, animals save the lives of humans by warning them of danger, such as fire.

In *Choosing to Be*, author Kat Tansey shows us both—a cat who is not only a companion, but one who saves the protagonist's life by keeping her from committing suicide. The book takes the animal—human relationship one fanciful step further, depicting a pet cat as a Zen master. For readers who can suspend reality and let imagination take over, this slim volume proves to be both refreshing and inspiring.

While the book is fiction, readers quickly recognize that the author has mapped the story to her own life experiences. After all, Tansey admits that she was the victim of chronic fatigue syndrome and depression, conditions which affect the story's narrator who is also named Kat. But *Choosing to Be* is not an autobiographical sketch; it concentrates on Kat's semi-imaginary relationship with two felines—Poohbear Degoonacoon, a male Maine Coon cat, and Catzenbear, a kitten.

The line between fiction and reality is crisscrossed numerous times as Kat moves through the process of discarding depression and embracing the will to live. The fictional element is that her primary spiritual guide—the being who shares his calm wisdom with her and makes her see herself in a different way—is a talking Poohbear. He begins by telling Kat, "You need to open yourself up to answers you cannot even envision yet." This is the reader's first clue to the journey that will unfold.

Poohbear convinces Kat to obtain a kitten because, he says, "We could use some new life around here, one who looks at everything with the awe of seeing it for the first time." Kat agrees and gets a kitten, Catzenbear, from Poohbear's breeder.

Catzenbear doesn't speak, but the role the little kitten plays is crucial in helping to right Kat's listing emotional ship. Poohbear makes excellent use of Catzenbear' kittenish antics to demonstrate life lessons to Kat.

Poohbear is a delightfully inscrutable character—the personification of the master teacher. It is easy to forget that he is "merely" a cat, but Tansey reminds readers frequently through her descriptive writing.

The talking animal in fiction is not always believable, but here the author deftly uses the technique to demonstrate how she embraced the freedom of "Buddha mind" to begin the road to recovery. Along the way, Poohbear helps Kat discover "hindrances" to which we all succumb. With Pooh's guidance, she learns the ultimate lesson: "wisdom and understanding are the antidotes to delusion and ignorance."

Whether or not they believe in talking cats, *Choosing to Be* is a little story that might well have a big impact on how readers choose to live.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (April 15, 2009)

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