

The Cat Men of Gotham: Tales of Feline Friendship in Old New York

Peggy Gavan

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Peggy Gavan's atmospheric *Cat Men of Gotham* retells forty-two true stories of Old New York felines and the men who cared for them. Culled from newspaper and magazine archives from the 1880s to the 1930s, these tales about cat mascots and hard-working mousers were popular public relations material for city businesses and politicians and standard feel-good copy for news-hungry New Yorkers.

Gavan organizes her entertaining, history-laden accounts by cat occupation. There are tales of good luck seafaring cats; vermin-fighting fire, police, and post office cats; schmoozy hotel and restaurant cats; and the pampered pets of a string of colorful artists, writers, and tycoons.

Most tales are lighthearted, focusing on the spectacular achievements of the featured felines—many could walk on their hind legs and box. Others touch upon the harsh lives of pets in eras when they were valued for their skins, animal abuse was commonplace, and there was little available veterinary care. Pity poor Holey, a kitten who fell down into a four-inch-wide shaft between two Lower East Side tenement buildings and spent two years living under the elements until someone figured out how to rescue her with a lariat.

While cats are at the hub, Gavan inserts a wealth of information about New York City's architectural development, too, fueled by its many devastating fires. The book covers Manhattan neighborhoods and a few in the Bronx and Brooklyn, relating the transformation of the sleepy Dutch colonial outpost into a bustling port and hard-driving center of immigration, culture, and business. Lively prose conveys the author's passion for the city and its rich history.

Cat Men of Gotham will be most enjoyed by those who are familiar with New York City history but also by anyone who has ever been amused by or in love with cats.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May/June 2019)

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