Writers Love Pets; Pets Love Writers

Did you know that Edgar Allan Poe wrote with his cat Catterina on his shoulders, that a dog saved Pablo Neruda’s life, and that Mark Twain had a cat named Bambino? *Writers and Their Pets* tells these stories and many more, including Flannery O’Connor and her famous peacocks, E. B. White and his dog Minnie, and J. K. Rowling and her West Highland terrier named Brontë.

Also included: Charles Dickens, Marguerite Henry, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, and more.
Writers and Their Pets
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The history of writers and their pets is long and charming.

Writing is a lonely craft, a battle to hold oneself aloof from the rest of the world in order to get words down on a page. Writers have to be solitary, avoiding ordinary distractions that could interfere with their extraordinary work.

But pets remind writers that they are not alone. Pets played one crucial role after another in the lives of the writers here.

Pets are unfailingly loyal, a solace during times of rejection from publishers, critics, and award committees. They watch us carefully, tuning in to our moods.

After a writer ventures into the unknown with flights of imagination, pets represent a safe harbor—companions who appreciate a writer's true self, no matter what mask he or she puts on for the public.

Pets indulge a writer's softer side. Mark Twain was a notorious lover of cuddly cats—but he was vastly outdone by Ernest Hemingway, who at one point had 57 of them! (He hailed them as “love sponges” and “purr factories.”)

Pets can be—in the case of Maurice Sendak and several other writers here—better company than most people. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a dog provided such a source of security that she was able to function as a person and a poet.

Pets can be guardians, a role treasured by Virginia Woolf. Pets save lives emotionally—and in some cases, literally, as Pablo Neruda rejoiced.

Pets supply a way to unwind after hours of motionlessness, a way to get the blood flowing back to the head, which is
what a writer wants. Charles Dickens loved this about his dogs, and William Faulkner rode his horses every day. They can be an aid to good health in all sorts of ways (except for the times horses threw Faulkner off). Grooming pets can be a soothing part of a daily routine, their breath ebbing and flowing with ours.

Pets excel at getting writers out of their own heads and relating to other people and the world. Writers have used pets to woo mates (E. B. White) and make friends out of strangers (John Steinbeck). Pets can make an ideal audience, sounding boards who never tire—unlike weary family and friends.

Pets brighten a writer’s days, as her fabulous peafowl surely did for Flannery O’Connor. For some, playing silly games with a pet can make up for a bad childhood with no play and no pets.

Pets were muses to Gertrude Stein and many others. They can inspire an entire book—like Alice Walker and her irrepressible chickens. And as J. K. Rowling was tickled to find out, they can even help with the nightmare known as writer’s block.

Attachments to pets can be so intense that many writers, like Dorothy Parker and Kurt Vonnegut, had their pets with them when they died. Sometimes pets died shortly after their owners, as with Edgar Allan Poe’s Catterina.

Read on for more stories—amusing, touching, uplifting—of writers and their pets.
Few were as attached to their pets as the enormously popular Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. And few pets have made such a difference in a writer’s life.

An unusually prolific young poet, at age 12 Elizabeth had penned her own epic: “The Battle of Marathon.” She also rode her pony at breakneck speeds, went for walks and picnics, and took part in plays her family put on. But she was often ill or depressed, with head and spinal pain, and as she got older, her fond but tyrannical father seemed quick to confine her.

To this day, her ailment, or combination of them, remains a mystery. Whatever her illness, physical or mental, she became reclusive and anxious. Doctors did little for her except prescribe an opium/alcohol mixture, which may have worsened her symptoms. She spent most of her time in her upstairs room, always dressed in black, keeping caged doves, wasting away in foggy, dusty London.

Her health slowly improved as she headed into her thirties, though she wasn’t writing and saw few people other than immediate family. Then, one day, a friend sent her a radiant, purebred cocker spaniel.

It was love at first sight. Flush (no one knows the story behind the name) was simply adorable. It didn’t matter if he tore her letters, chewed her shoes, or wet her books. He made her laugh when he danced or played a game of climbing atop her head and tumbling down her shoulders. He woke her up each morning by gently nibbling her hands. They took coffee together, with him insisting on drinking out of a cup like hers, even though it made him sneeze. The maid bathed him and dried him with one of Elizabeth’s shawls.

Elizabeth was afraid of many things, and loyal, joyful Flush made her feel safe, in that unique way that pets can soothe us—safe enough to resume contact with the outside world, through letters, and to begin writing poetry again.
Her work was experimental, sometimes shocking, and she wrote in every form—sonnets, ballads, epics, dramas, religious poems. She even wrote one of the great dog poems, “To Flush, My Dog,” praising his glossy golden curls and irrepressible liveliness. Her influences included the English poet John Milton, the Italian poet Dante, and the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

Her first collection of poems revealed her passion for Greek politics. A later poem, “The Cry of the Children,” condemned child labor and helped bring about child-labor reforms. Then, in 1844, her collection Poems brought her great success, attracting the admiration of poet Robert Browning, six years her junior: “I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,” he began his letter.

Again, love at first sight—once Flush was appeased. He bit Robert, not once, but twice. Robert sensibly realized that Flush was just acting as dogs do and won him over with his favorite cakes.

(Flush had a sweet tooth and dined on macaroons, plum cake, and grapes.)

In one of literature’s greatest love stories, Robert and Elizabeth’s courtship had to be carried out in secret, for Elizabeth’s father had forbidden any of his children to marry.

Wealthy London families at the time often had problems with dognappers, and poor Flush was dognapped three times and had to be ransomed. The third time, Elizabeth braved real danger to rescue him herself, paying the ransom though her father had said not to. She wrote to a friend, “I am so flushified, I can write of nothing else!” The adventure emboldened her to do what she did next.

One afternoon in 1846, carrying Flush, of course, Elizabeth met Robert at a bookstore. They made their way to the night ferry, which got them across the English Channel to France, and from there they traveled to the mild, sunny climate of Italy.

A plague of Italian fleas meant that Flush’s golden curls
had to be shorn. But Browning blossomed. She ate in a restaurant for the first time and found happiness and health in Italy in all kinds of ways. Her father never forgave her for eloping, nor saw her again.

When she was 43 she had a son, whom they called Pen: “He doesn’t talk yet much, but he gesticulates with extraordinary force of symbol, and makes surprising revelations to us every half-hour or so,” she wrote. Flush was jealous at first but soon bonded with the boy, encouraged by Browning: “Flush loses nothing … On the contrary, he is hugged and kissed (rather too hard sometimes), and never is permitted to be found fault with by anybody under the new regime. If Flush is scolded, Baby cries as matter of course.”

And her writing flourished. This was the time of her most famous works, Sonnets from the Portuguese (which includes the classic “How Do I Love Thee?”) and Aurora Leigh, about a strong and independent woman who embraces both work and love.

Among the many writers influenced by Browning was Edgar Allan Poe; she was one of the few contemporaries he liked. He borrowed the rhythm of one of her poems for “The Raven.” After she praised it, Poe dedicated his collection The Raven and Other Poems to her, referring to her as “the noblest of her sex.”

In her poems and in life she took stands against social injustice—not just child labor but slavery in the United States and injustice toward Italians by foreign rulers.

Flush died peacefully in 1854. Elizabeth Barrett Browning mourned but carried on. Seven years afterward, she too died, as Robert held her in his arms.

But Flush was not easily forgotten. Many years later, Virginia Woolf made him the narrator of her 1933 novel, Flush: A Biography. It was a witty romp about a dog’s life, but also a biography of Browning and a chance to revisit favorite themes, like the need for oppressed women to find freedom.

In more ways than one, Flush had become immortal.
By age two, Edgar Poe had lost both of his parents. In 1811, the tiny orphan was taken in by the Allan family. They never formally adopted him, and they didn’t get along with him. All his life he mourned his lack of parental affection.

Getting along with people was always going to be a problem for Poe.

Poe preferred the company of cats. “I wish I could write as mysterious as a cat,” he once wrote admiringly.

After dropping out of college, having run up major gambling debts, Poe got himself expelled from the military academy at West Point. He took a job as an editor at a literary magazine in Richmond, Virginia, which allowed him to try his hand at writing. His clever stories and gleefully harsh book reviews boosted the magazine’s circulation several times over, and he only got fired twice in the process. As he moved on to a series of editorial positions at the leading magazines in Philadelphia and New York, he began spending his evenings writing his way to fame with scary, strange tales and poems.

Poe was the first well-known American writer to try to earn a living through writing alone. The result was a financially difficult life and career. Publishers routinely cheated writers, and writers plagiarized from each other without thinking twice. Plus Poe had a bad habit of antagonizing the very people who could have helped him. While working into the night on his gory tales, he supplemented his income with lectures and public readings. Often he was forced to beg friends and neighbors—the ones he hadn’t alienated—for money.

His short story “The Gold Bug” (starring a beetle) won a prize of $100 from a Philadelphia...
One of most important and influential writers in history, this English author wrote 15 novels (10 of them longer than 800 pages), while devoting himself to pets, especially his raven, Grip the Knowing.
Charles Dickens had no time or money for pets during his tough childhood. As his father went to prison for debt, 12-year-old Dickens was taken out of school. He had to go to work in a factory, pasting labels on shoe polish. Images of prison and of oppressed or traumatized children recur in many of his novels.

When his father was released, Dickens’s unsupportive mother wanted her son to keep working. But he was able to manage just a year or two more of school. He wrote short stories and sold them to classmates for marbles.

He worked his way up to becoming a newspaper reporter, then began contributing stories and essays to magazines. When he wrote the first installment of The Pickwick Papers, it was all the rage, and Dickens became the most popular author of the day at age 24. Dickens soared on to such masterpieces as Oliver Twist (the first novel ever with a child as its hero), Nicholas Nickleby, David Copperfield (his own favorite of his books), Bleak House, A Tale of Two Cities, and Great Expectations. His works came out in the installment format, which allowed him to evaluate reactions, and he often changed his plot and characters based on such feedback.

Those who celebrate Christmas have Dickens to thank for much of the Christmas spirit. His novel A Christmas Carol influenced the way the holiday was celebrated, morphing it from a day on the religious calendar to a vast family-centered festival of generosity. The greeting “Merry Christmas” comes from the book, as does “Bah! Humbug!” as uttered by the awful miser Ebenezer Scrooge.

Dickens had a thrilling way with cliffhanger endings to each installment, keeping readers in high suspense. Even people who couldn’t read came up with pennies to have each new monthly episode read to them, creating a whole new tradition of popular literature.

Readers loved his immensely colorful people—Dickens created some of the world’s best-known fictional characters—as well as his sense of humor and his strong
plots. The term “Dickensian” came to describe work featuring miserable social conditions or comically repulsive characters.

His books were so easy to adapt for the stage that sometimes twenty London theaters would produce simultaneous adaptations of his latest story—again, allowing nonreaders to applaud his writing.

A magnificent performer himself, Dickens was drawn to the theater and had nearly become a professional actor when young. He found he could earn more by reading than by writing, and he toured energetically with spellbinding renditions of his works. He was very much a public figure, the best speaker of the age, similar to Mark Twain, who acknowledged Dickens as the pioneer.

Dickens enjoyed a wider popularity during his lifetime than had any previous writer, and he moved to a three-story estate. He had married Catherine Hogarth, settling down and raising their nine children. He called her “Mouse” and “Dearest Pig” when they were getting along, and “Donkey” when they weren’t. Eventually he left Catherine for an actress 27 years his junior, whom he lived with until his death.

An all-out animal person once he grew up and could afford them, Dickens had dogs, a canary, a pony, an eagle, and plenty of cats. His favorite pet was a raven he called Grip the Knowing. It bit the children’s and servants’ ankles, but Dickens admired its talkative ways. Grip learned to mimic speech, and Dickens lovingly recorded the bird’s vocabulary, being his favorite expression.

Grip the Knowing even played a role in literary history. He appeared in Dickens’s novel *Barnaby Rudge*, which was well reviewed by Edgar Allen Poe. Poe was then inspired to pen his legendary poem “The Raven,” all about the bird’s ominous and prophetic utterings.
Alas, a few months after swallowing a white paint chip, Grip perished. Dickens wrote of the bird’s final moments in extravagant, silly detail: “He was heard talking to himself about the horse and [the coachman’s] family, and to add some incoherent expressions which are supposed to have been either a foreboding of his approaching dissolution or some wishes relative to the disposal of his little property, consisting chiefly of half-pence which he has buried in different parts of the garden. On the clock striking twelve he appeared slightly agitated, but he soon recovered, walked twice or thrice along the coachhouse, stopped to bark, staggered, exclaimed ‘Halloa old girl!’…and died.”

After Grip died, Dickens had him professionally embalmed and mounted. He replaced the pet with other ravens, like Grip the Clever and Grip the Wicked.

Dickens wrote neatly with a goose-quill pen in blue ink on blue-gray paper. He insisted on total quiet and had an extra door installed to his study to block out noise. He worked the same long hours every day, and if the words weren’t coming he doodled or stared out the window.

Pets provided relief. He made it a point to walk the streets, his dogs trotting behind him, for exactly the amount of time as he sat writing. He walked fast—he was once clocked at 4.8 miles per hour—and gained an encyclopedic knowledge of London.

He spent the last ten years of his life in the company of a deaf kitten, letting the cat sit with him as he wrote. Exhausted from touring, he died suddenly after a stroke.

In English literature, he is considered second only to William Shakespeare.

“What greater gift than the love of a cat?” Dickens once asked. Cats who needed his attention knew how to extinguish the flame on his desk candle. When his favorite, Bob, died, he was so upset that he had Bob’s paw stuffed and mounted to an ivory letter opener, engraved “In memory of Bob, 1862.”
“When a man loves cats, I am his friend and comrade, without further introduction,” said Mark Twain, a beloved figure in American literature. He was a novelist, humorist, popular entertainer, political philosopher, and travel writer.