

# WILDCAT CONSERVATION LEGAL AID SOCIETY

## WILDCAT CHAT

---

May 2010

*Dear Wildcat Friends:*

*A must for your summer reading list is Carl Van Vechten's "The Tiger in the House." Originally published in 1920, Van Vechten explores the history of felis catus—their turbulent relationship with humans and the kinship to their wild lineage. Van Vechten surmised that every domestic cat is basically one paw step away from returning to the wild.*



*Van Vechten (1880-1964) grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, attended the University of Chicago, and in 1906 moved to New York City. He was a noted reporter, essayist, and author. In his later years, Van Vechten became an accomplished portrait photographer. A second book edited by Van Vechten and dedicated to felis catus, "Lords of the Housetops," published in 1921, showcases a selection of 13 short stories, including Edgar Allen Poe's, The Black Cat; Honore de Balzac's, The Afflictions of the English Cat; and Mark Twain's, Dick Baker's Cat.*

*Van Vechten's eloquent prose coupled with a reporter's mater-of-factness, makes "The Tiger in the House," a timeless classic and a must read for any feline aficionado!*

*A few excerpts, from Carl Van Vechten's "The Tiger in the House:"*

I have written, how skillfully I cannot tell, on the manners and customs of the cat, his graces and calineries, the history of his subjugation of human kind. Through all the ages, even during the dark epoch of witchcraft, and persecution, puss has maintained his supremacy, continued to breed and multiply, defying, when convenient the laws of God and man, now our friend, now our enemy, now wild, now tame, the pet of the hearth or the tiger of the hearth, but always free, always independent, always an anarchist who insists upon his rights, whatever the cost. The cat never forms soviets; he works alone.

We have much to learn from the cat, we men who prefer to follow the slavish habits of the dog or the ox or the horse. If men and women would become more feline, indeed, I think it would prove the salvation of the human race. Certainly it would end war, for cats will not fight for an ideal in the mass, having no faith in mass ideals, although a single will fight to the death for his own ideals, his freedom of speech and expression. The dog and the horse on the other hand, perpetuate war by group thinking, group acting, and serve further to encourage

popular belief in that monstrous panacea, universal brotherhood.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is, indeed, no single quality of the cat that man could not emulate to his advantage. He is clean, the cleanest, indeed, of all the animals, absolutely without odour or soil when it is within his power to be so. He is silent, walking on padded paws with claws withdrawn, making no sound unless he wishes to say something definite and then he can express himself freely. He believes in free speech, and not only believes in it, but indulges in it. Nothing will make a cat stop talking when he wants to, except the hand of death.

He is entirely self-reliant. He lives in homes because he chooses to do so, and as long as the surrounds and the people suit him, but he lives there on his own terms, and never sacrifices his own comfort or his own well-being for the sake of the stupid folk with whom he comes in contact. Thus he is the most satisfactory of friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

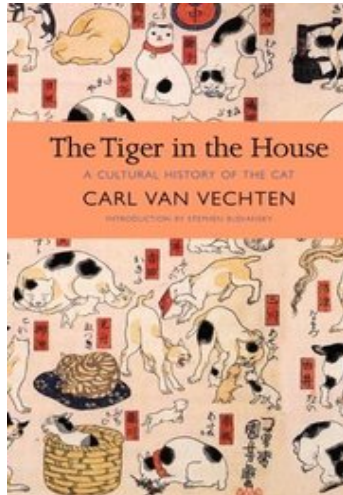
The cat is virile, and virility is a quality which man has almost lost. St. George Mivart insisted that the cat rather than man was at the summit of the animal kingdom and that he was the best-fitted of the mammalians to make his way in the world. I agree perfectly with St. George Mivart. I do not see how it is possible for any one to disagree with him. But the cat makes no boast of his pre-eminent position; he is satisfied to occupy it. He does not call man a "lower animal" although doubtless he regards him in this light. I have dwelt at some length on his occult sense. It can scarcely be overestimated. He has not lost the power of gesture language. With his tail, with his paws, his cocking ears, his eyes, his head, the turn of his body, or the waving of his fur, he expresses in symbols the most cabalistic secrets. He is beautiful and he is graceful. He makes his appearance and his life as exquisite as circumstances will permit. He is modest, he is urbane, he is dignified. Indeed, a well-bred cat never argues. He goes about doing what he likes in a well-bred superior manner. If he is interrupted he will look at you in mild surprise or silent reproach but he will return to his desire. If he is prevented, he will wait for a more favorable occasion. But like all well-bred individualists, and unlike human anarchists, the cat seldom interferes with other people's rights. His intelligence keeps him from doing many fool things that complicate life. Cats never write operas and they never attend them. They never sign papers, or pay taxes, or vote for president. An injunction will have no power whatever over a cat. A cat, of course, would not only refuse to obey any amendment whatever to any constitution, he would refuse to obey the constitution itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cat is admired for his independence, his courage, his prudence, his patience, his naturalness, and his wit. He is, as Madame Michelet reminds us, essentially a noble animal. There is no mixture in his blood. This is true that you can tell any member of the family at a glance. Tiger, lion, and house-cat differ more in size than in appearance. The originality of the cat is to offer in himself an exquisite

and harmless miniature of his wild brothers. He lives like a great lord and there is nothing vulgar about him. The delicacy of the animal is one of his fascinations.

\* \* \* \* \*



*“The Tiger in the House” is available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Borders. Used first and second editions can be found through various book dealers via <http://www.bookfinders.com>.*

*I welcome your comments and questions. Email: [wildcatchat@wccclas.org](mailto:wildcatchat@wccclas.org)*

*Signing off,*

*Lisa*