The Legend of the Black Cat

Despite an unlucky history, black cats make lucky charms for those who adopt them.

By Polina Olsen

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Witches on broomsticks, bats, and especially black cats announce Halloween's coming each year. Animal shelters cringe with tales of cruel pranks and even satanic rites. Some halt black cat adoptions; all say keep animals inside.

But legends about black cats vary by country. They bring love to British lasses and help German witches cast spells. And whether considered by the culture to be devil or angel, black cat stories stretch from antiquity to modern times.

Early stories may account for modern superstition. Some say Freya, the Norse love goddess, rewarded the two black cats who pulled her chariot by turning them into witches. In Greek mythology, Galenthias turns into a cat and becomes priestess to Hecate, goddess of the underworld.

By the Middle Ages, people believed the devil transformed into a black cat. As witches' animal helpers, or "familiars," black cats enhanced magical rites. Thousands of cats died when, in 1233, Pope Gregory IX warned that the devil meets worshippers disguised as a black cat.

In Northern India, a chordewa is a witch who changes her soul into a black cat. When she visits the sick and licks their lips, they die. Even in Algonquin Indian legends in America, Pook-jin-skwess, a black cat witch, transforms into humans.

The Salem witchcraft trials included black cats. Mary Lacey saw one suck the body of Goody Carrier after she hanged. When, in 1867, a Pennsylvania woman gave three drops of cat's blood to a child with the croup, authorities accused her, too, of witchcraft.

But on the other hand, in ancient Egypt the cat goddess Bast favored black cats. The British, too, believe black cats bring good luck. Kept in a Yorkshire fisherman's home, they are believed to ensure safe return from sea. If black cats wander aboard ship, good fortune comes with them. If chased away, good fortune leaves, the legend goes.

British proverbs show the black cat's importance in love and health:

Black cat cross my path;
Good fortune bring to home and hearth;
When I am away from home;
Bring me luck wherever I roam.

It is considered good luck if a British bride sees a black cat on the way to the wedding. In Cornwall, passing a black cat's tail over the eyes cures soreness. In Wales, they are believed to prevent sickness:

A black cat, I've heard it said;
Can charm all ill away;
And keep the house wherein she dwells;
From fever's deadly sway.

While today we don't turn to black cats to provide healing for sore eyes or a safe landing, their magic brightens all who cross their path. Animal-behavior expert Temple Grandin discusses the charms of black cats in her book "Animals Make Us Human."

"A handful of studies show a relationship between fur color and behavior," she writes. "Black cats are more social overall, whether it's with other cats or humans." Their laid-back manner makes them particularly good pets.

If you're adopting from a shelter, Grandin advises, look for a black cat.

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