

Catch Up With Editor Steven Hales

Learn more about the inspiration behind his book "What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Cat."

By Stacy N. Hackett

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Steven Hales edited "What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Cat." 1. What was your inspiration behind the book?

There is a recent trend in philosophy to write books that try to bring our ideas out of the ivory tower, and aim to show the philosophical issues that underlie the most prosaic activities and interests. For example, Stanford philosophers Ken Taylor and John Perry host a philosophical radio show, and respected presses such as Open Court and Blackwell have launched entire series of books devoted to popular philosophy. I've tried to make some modest contributions to this endeavor, and "What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Cat" is one. My inspiration was to show pet lovers a way into philosophy, how the life of the mind is intimately connected with one's life with cats.

2. What was the most difficult part of producing the book?

As the editor of the book, the hardest part was getting all of the contributing authors to submit their pieces promptly, follow my guidelines and make sure that they were writing for a general audience and not a technical journal. Organizing academics is like herding cats!

3. What was the most rewarding part of editing the book?

I was really pleased with how well all the essays came together, the inventiveness of the authors and their genuine love for their cats. It was also great fun for me to research feline symbolism and the sacred role that cats have played going back to the ancient Egyptians. Plus it is always enjoyable to work out philosophical connections in ordinary activities, and to think about the nature of feline minds, whether one is more rational than one's cat, the true differences between dog people and cat people, whether you can ever truly understand the experiences of your cat, moral obligations toward cats, and the like.

4. What type of feedback have you received so far?

It has been really positive. The book has been selling well, and here is what Midwest Book Reviews has to say: " 'What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Cat' [is] a winner: It analyzes the deep emotional impact on our lives cats can hold, offering vignettes ranging from insights on cat health care routines and issues to definitions of cruelty, cats in the afterlife, and more. A series of chatty yet insightful articles lets non-philosophers move easily from feline ownership to the world of philosophical reflection."

5. What is your writing process?

There are four things that work best for me. Just get some words out. Even if I don't quite know where I'm going, or what the overall structure will look like, just putting some ideas in word form helps me get organized. Set daily goals. If I am doing nothing else but writing (not teaching, grading, or going to meetings), then I set my daily production at two pages of single-spaced writing. If I get that done before lunch, then I'm done for the day. If it takes 12 hours, then it does. Get started early. I'm a morning person, and am most productive if I sit down at the computer with a cup of coffee first thing and get going. Develop efficient time management. If it's an editing project I'm working on, then I make up detailed spreadsheets of all the contributing authors and components of the book. I have timelines for when various stages have to be accomplished, and I regularly contact my contributors with gentle reminders about deadlines.

6. Do you have any other books?

Yes, several. I've written two books of technical philosophy aimed for a professional audience, edited three textbooks meant for students and have edited three books of popular philosophy. Besides "What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Cat," I've also published "What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Dog" and "Beer & Philosophy."

7. Do you own a cat or other pets?

We have a Golden Retriever named Sophie, and three goldfish — Goldie, Bubbles and Sundrop. Unfortunately, my wife is allergic to cats, or we would certainly have a cat as well. If my 6-year-old daughter had her way, we would have several!

8. Do your pets influence your writing?

Not consciously. But I have no doubt there is a subconscious influence just from observing them and interacting with them. I'm sure my thoughts on animal mentality and their place in the moral community are informed by the relationships I have had with pets. There is nothing like a healthy dose of practical observations to inform one's abstract theory.

Stacy N. Hackett shares her Southern California home with two Cornish Rex cats, Carson and Evita, and Jackson, an orange tabby.