

FABULOUS DAYS SERIES

Anthony Weiss-Gagliardini

**Fabulous Days
with My Cat(s)**

*feat. T.S. Eliot, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tom Hooper, Grizabella, Bustopher Jones,
Bill Clinton, Socks, Karl Lagerfeld, Choupette, David Cameron, Larry, Mark
Twain, Bambino, Tardar Grumpy Cat, John Lennon, Salt & Pepper, Abraham
Lincoln, Tabby & Dixie, Tabatha Bundesen, Creme Puff, Taylor Swift, Meredith,
Salvador Dali, Babou, Garfield, Mitz the Pitz... and Other Felines and Their Sub-
jects (not Masters!)*

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#1

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Cats—from T.S. Eliot to Andrew Lloyd Weber and/or Tom Hooper

*The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,
It isn't just one of your holiday games;
You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter
When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.
First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,
Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,
Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey--
All of them sensible everyday names.
There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,
Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:
Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter--
But all of them sensible everyday names.
But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,
A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,
Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?
Of names of this kind, I can give you a quorum,
Such as Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat,
Such as Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum-
Names that never belong to more than one cat.
But above and beyond there's still one name left over,
And that is the name that you never will guess;
The name that no human research can discover--
But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.
When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.*

(T.S. Eliot—*The Naming of Cats*)

Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (1939) is a collection of whimsical light poems by T. S. Eliot about feline psychology and sociology, published by Faber and Faber. It serves as the basis for Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1981 musical *Cats*.

Eliot wrote the poems in the 1930s, and included them, under his assumed name "Old Possum", in letters to his godchildren. They were collected and published in 1939, with cover illustrations by the author, and quickly re-published in 1940, illustrated in full by Nicolas Bentley. They have also been published in versions illustrated by Edward Gorey (1982), Axel Scheffler (2009) and Rebecca Ashdown (2014).

The contents of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, along with the names of the featured cats where appropriate, are:

- "The Naming of Cats"
- "The Old Gumbie Cat" (Jennyanydots)
- "Growltiger's Last Stand"
- "The Rum Tum Tugger"
- "The Song of the Jellicles"
- "Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer"
- "Old Deuteronomy"
- "(Of) The Awefull Battle of the Pekes and the Pollicles (Together with Some Account of the Participation of the Pugs and the Poms and the Intervention of the Great Rumpus Cat)"
- "Mr. Mistoffelees"
- "Macavity: The Mystery Cat"
- "Gus: The Theatre Cat"
- "Bustopher Jones: The Cat about Town"
- "Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat"
- "The Ad-dressing of Cats"
- "Cat Morgan Introduces Himself" (added in the 1952 edition)

In 1954, English composer Alan Rawsthorne set six of the poems in a work for speaker and orchestra entitled *Practical Cats*, which was recorded soon afterwards, with the actor Robert Donat as the speaker. At about the same time another English composer, Humphrey Searle, composed another narrated piece based on the poems, using flute, piccolo, cello and guitar. This work, *Two Practical Cats*, consists of settings of the poems about Macavity and Growltiger.

The best-known musical adaptation of the poems is Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats*, which was premiered in the West End of London in 1981 and on Broadway in 1982. It became the longest-running Broadway show in history until it was overtaken by another musical by Lloyd Webber, *The Phantom of the Opera*. As well as the characters found in the book, *Cats* introduces several additional characters from Eliot's unpublished drafts, most notably Grizabella. The musical was adapted into a direct-to-video film in 1998. A feature film adaptation of *Cats* was released on December 20, 2019.

When *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* appeared in the first week of October 1939, it might have been thought that its author had lost the plot. It was only 17 years since TS Eliot had published *The Waste Land*, his cryptic lament for the moral and psychic disintegration that both caused and followed the first world war. Now, a mere month into renewed hostilities in Europe, here was Eliot, the man with more claim to cultural authority than almost anyone living, wasting his time (not to mention everyone else's) with light verse about cats, says Kathryn Hughes. The first edition featured TS Eliot's own illustrations on the cover.

Practical Cats consists of short verse profiles of 15 rambunctious felines with fanciful names, including Rum Tum Tugger and Growltiger. It stands in a classic tradition of catty nonsense, reaching back through *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat* (Edward Lear) and the Cheshire Cat (Lewis Carroll) to Christopher Smart's "My Cat, Jeoffry", an 18th-century epic that Eliot himself regarded as the *Iliad* of cat literature. Yet, despite the fact that he had such a pedigree, literary critics of the time couldn't help feeling that Eliot, who was not only the author of *Practical Cats* but, by virtue of his job at Faber, its publisher, too, had misjudged the nation's mood. At this very moment many families were contemplating euthanising their pets for fear of not being able to feed them properly once wartime rationing kicked in. Death and destruction were clearly on their way, and here was one of the country's leading intellectuals writing stuff for kids. The view that the book was a significant indiscretion was shared in Eliot's native US where John Holmes of the Boston Evening Transcript snapped that *Practical Cats* "should have been prevented".

Nor did that judgment change significantly even once the book's popular success became clear (right from the start it outsold *The Waste Land* significantly). "Pleasant, inoffensive and unremarkable", sniffed the distinguished Eliot scholar Burton Raffel and this remained the dominant view throughout the postwar period. It was Andrew Lloyd Webber's determination to bring Eliot's creatures to the stage in 1981 that changed all that. Confronted by the melancholy of the material, critics were jogged into wondering whether there might be more to *Cats*, practical or otherwise, than meets the eye. Now, with Tom Hooper's much-anticipated film version starring Taylor Swift and Idris Elba it is worth thinking again about the magnetic darkness that keeps us returning to TS Eliot's feline universe at times of deep disturbance.

Initially conceived of throughout the 1930s with his young godchildren in mind, Eliot's cat land is every bit as bleak as *The Waste Land*. Both share a sense of chronic disorder, where violence simmers just beneath the surface, regret drowns optimism and wilful self-interest trumps finer feeling every time. Above all, here is the moral grubbiness of what Eliot's younger friend WH Auden dubbed "a low dishonest decade".

In Eliot's text Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer are two young thugs who destroy property for the hell of it—dislodging tiles "loose on the roof / Which presently ceased to be water-proofed", anticipating the blitz by several months. The juvenile delinquents wantonly smash items in the dining room and library (the sites of the civilised body and mind respectively) and think nothing of stealing food from families who can afford it least. Rum Tum Tugger, meanwhile, is a contrarian who takes joy in creating "domestic muddle" just as Macavity, the master criminal, wrecks national security by stealing treaties from the Foreign Office and plans from the Admiralty. Growltiger, "the Terror of the Thames", is an outlaw who preys on cottagers, canaries, geese, hens and the "bristly Bandicoot that lurks on foreign ships".

If Eliot's cat book spoke to the terror of the times, it also mapped the continuing disintegration of his personal life. In *The Waste Land* his unhappy wife Vivienne appears in pleading glimpses. "Stay with me / Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak". But by the time of writing *Practical Cats* in the early 1930s, the couple were separated. The histrionic Vivienne, who had taken to dressing up in a fascist uniform, pursued Eliot aggressively around London, accompanied by her snappy yorkshire terrier, Polly (Eliot, by contrast, remained a dedicated "cat man"). On several occasions Vivienne and Polly laid siege to "Tom" in the Faber office; he would escape by slinking down the backstairs of the Bloomsbury office. It is no wonder, then, that in *Practical Cats*, dogs appear not as individuals but as a barking mob, mindless brownshirts reined in only when the Great Rumpus Cat appears and swiftly restores order with nothing more than a "fearfully blazing" look and a warning yawn.

This sense that Eliot's Catland has important things to say to a world falling apart explains why Lloyd Webber set about adapting the book for the musical stage 40 years after its original publication. 1981, just like 1939, was hardly a time when there was much to sing about. It was the year when ferocious riots in Brixton and Toxteth suggested that Britain really was a nation divided. The very posh and the very rich seemed to be having a lot of fun, settling down to watch *Brideshead Revisited* on the television or else hoping for an invitation to the royal wedding. The markets—we had just learned that word—were apparently going to make us all very rich (or perhaps very poor). Meanwhile many others worried about the sharp swing to the political right—Margaret Thatcher was getting settled, while President Reagan was just getting started. What's more, in an echo of 1939, by the very next year we would be at war once again, this time with Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

So, when the lights went up on stage at the New London theatre on May 11, 1981, and this piece of musical theatre appeared to be set in a broken down post-industrial dump—in which characters are mostly engaged in telling stories about their more glorious pasts and the hopelessness of their futures—it seemed exactly right.

Whether Tom Hooper's new film, which comes out 80 years after the original publication of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, will prove as enduring as Lloyd Webber's original stage production remains to be seen. There have already been murmurs about the way that the dear old 1980s leg-

warmers have been replaced by “creepy” digital fur. Swift’s new song “Beautiful Ghosts” may be better even than “Memory” or it may be no good at all. That, really, is not the point. What matters is whether enough of the uncanny anguish of Eliot’s original work remains. Every age gets the *Cats* it deserves, and what we need, now more than ever, is one with soul, concludes Kathryn Hughes.

Cats rule the internet. Not since ancient Egypt have feline gods held such sway and, given how many desperate office workers have been rescued by their online antics, it should come as no surprise to learn that if there’s one topic capable of distracting us from the grim realities of the news cycle, it’s those neurotic songbird-slayers. Except that it’s not actually cats, it’s *Cats*, as seen by Hephzibah Anderson.

Since the trailer for Universal Studios’ star-studded adaptation of the 1981 musical dropped on Thursday, it’s become the cynosure of baffled scrutiny. For a brief moment, Brexit, Trump, even *Love Island* might as well have ceased to exist. Had it been a hit, of course, it would already have been forgotten, but the unnerving weirdness (or badness, some might simply argue) of Oscar-winning director Tom Hooper’s vision successfully united the internet in rapt revulsion as millions of eyeballs hate-watched the likes of Jennifer Hudson and Rebel Wilson cavort, bewhiskered, through a neon-lit netherworld.

Although that weirdness has been exhaustively overstated, the teaser still makes for peculiar viewing. Idris Elba, James Corden, Judi Dench: thanks to an estimated budget of £230m and some state-of-the-art CGI, they and a hodgepodge of others have been transmogrified so that their faces top fluffy bodies. Perhaps because they’ve retained their own anatomical features (wait, shouldn’t female cats have six breasts?) the much vaunted “digital fur technology” manages to make them look more naked than if they’d been hairless.

Could they have escaped from Margaret Atwood’s dystopian MaddAddam trilogy? The “uncanny valley” theory has been bandied about, and along with countless memes, the trailer has sparked comparisons to George Galloway’s cat impersonation on *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2006 and the Norwegian hippophile who taught herself to run and jump like a horse.

And yet for all the sleep-thieving images the *Cats* trailer squeezes in, those two minutes and 24 seconds simultaneously tell a heartening tale of how culture evolves, charting its own willy-nilly path, joyfully unheeding of distinctions between highbrow and low. Because the ultimate weirdness here rests in the material’s provenance.

Before it became one of the longest-running shows in London’s West End and on Broadway, *Cats* was a collection of light verse penned by a dusty bank manager for his godchildren. Not that we’re talking any old bank manager: TS Eliot was also a remote, tortured Nobelist with some unsavoury views on Jewish and black people. In stark contrast to an oeuvre filled with staid sadness and nihilism, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* is a playful collection, and from its first publication in 1939, it was a hit. Whimsical and eccentric, the poems tap into the very English tradition of nonsense verse (leave it to a Yank), featuring the likes of Mr Mistoffelees “the original conjuring cat”, Macavity “the mystery cat” and Bustopher Jones “the cat about town”.

Andrew Lloyd Webber was a fan from childhood and in the late 1970s decided to set the poems to music, lifting many of his lyrics directly from the poems, as well as adding characters plucked from unpublished drafts and grafting on a slightly morbid plot about rebirth. Nobody saw it during rehearsals, but the resulting show was such a runaway success that it spawned the phrase “better than *Cats!*”.

“Based on the legendary Andrew Lloyd Webber/T.S. Eliot stage musical” are words that flash up towards the film teaser’s end, in an instant recasting the author of *The Waste Land* as a song and dance man. But if you’re thinking this all simply reinforces the dynamics of trickledown culture and the idea of artistic entropy—an idea gloomily embraced by Eliot himself—think again. Yes, Hooper is vying for a Christmas blockbuster, but he seems to have unwittingly restored some of the subversive, overwrought oddness that pervaded the life and work of the Jellicles’ originator.

Etymologically, the word “culture” is rooted in the idea of growth and, despite its strong links to cultivation—despite, too, the best efforts of academics—there remains something invigoratingly rampant and untameable about its progress, as this episode illustrates, notes Hephzibah Anderson,

who also asks: “And what would our inky-fingered bank manager have made of it all?”. It comes as a pleasant surprise to learn that Eliot was a bit of a prankster, fond of whoopee cushions and exploding cigars. Also of note is an under-sung contribution he made to the English language: the *OED* credits the title of one of his early poems as being the first time the word “bullshit” appeared in print, rendering some of the Twittersphere’s less artful responses slyly apt.

The original *Cats* famous adaptation is a sung-through musical composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber, based on the 1939 poetry collection *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* by T. S. Eliot. It tells the story of a tribe of cats called the Jellicles and the night they make the “Jellicle choice,” deciding which cat will ascend to the Heaviside Layer and come back to a new life. The musical includes the well-known song “Memory” as sung by Grizabella. As of 2019, *Cats* remains the fourth-longest-running Broadway show and the sixth-longest-running West End show.

Lloyd Webber began setting Eliot’s poems to music in 1977 and the compositions were first presented as a song cycle in 1980. Producer Cameron Mackintosh then recruited director Trevor Nunn and choreographer Gillian Lynne to turn the songs into a complete musical. *Cats* opened to positive reviews at the New London Theatre in the West End in 1981 and then to mixed reviews at the Winter Garden Theatre on Broadway in 1982. It won numerous awards including Best Musical at both the Laurence Olivier and Tony Awards. Despite its unusual premise that deterred investors initially, the musical turned out to be an unprecedented commercial success, with a worldwide gross of US\$3.5 billion by 2012.

The London production ran for 21 years and 8,949 performances, while the Broadway production ran for 18 years and 7,485 performances, making *Cats* the longest-running musical in both theatre districts for a number of years. *Cats* has since been revived in the West End twice and on Broadway once. It has also been translated into multiple languages and performed around the world many times. Long-running foreign productions include a 15-year run at the Operettenhaus in Hamburg that played over 6,100 performances, as well as an ongoing run in a purpose-built theatre in Japan that has played over 10,000 performances since it opened in 1983.

Cats started the megamusical phenomenon, establishing a global market for musical theatre and directing the industry’s focus to big-budget blockbusters, as well as family- and tourist-friendly shows. The musical’s profound but polarising influence also reshaped the aesthetic, technology and marketing of the medium. *Cats* was adapted into a direct-to-video film in 1998, and a feature film adaptation directed by Tom Hooper in 2019.

Cats is based on T. S. Eliot’s 1939 poetry book *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, with the songs in the musical consisting of Eliot’s verse set to music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The musical is unusual in its construction; along with Eliot’s poems, music and dance are the main focus of the show at the expense of a traditional narrative structure. Musicologists William Everett and Paul Laird described *Cats* as “combining elements of the revue and concept musical”. The plot centres on a tribe of cats called the Jellicles, as they come together at the annual Jellicle Ball to decide which one of them will ascend to the Heaviside Layer (their version of Heaven) and be reborn into a new life. The bulk of the musical consists of the different contenders being introduced, either by themselves or by other cats.

Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats is a collection of light poetry about cats that Eliot had originally written for his godchildren in the 1930s. Due to the rhythmic nature of Eliot’s work, there had been previous attempts before *Cats* at setting his poems to music, though none of these attempts had been met with much critical or commercial success. Musicologist John Snelson wrote of the poems: “[They] provided excellent material for musicalization, as Eliot’s style in this collection is reminiscent of a popular lyricist. The poet uses repeated catch phrases, strong hooks, steady rhythm and outrageous, attention-grabbing, witty rhymes, which are the ingredients of every well-crafted popular lyric”.