



*Cats walk between worlds, bringing the magical and the commonplace together. They are the heart- and soul-menders, our kindred spirits, poetry on four paws, and we humans would be lost without them. At least, that's what I believe. Abys Among Us & Stories for the Feline-Inclined is a celebration of the cats I have known and what they have taught me.*

## **ABYS AMONG US & OTHER STORIES: FOR THE FELINE-INCLINED**

By T. J. Banks

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A photograph of a brown and white tabby cat lying on a colorful, quilted bedspread. The cat is curled up, resting its head on its paws, and appears to be sleeping. The bed is positioned in front of a window, with bright light streaming in from the left, creating a soft glow on the cat's fur and the quilt. The window frame is visible on the right side of the image.

*Abys Among Us*

*& Other Stories*

*for the Feline-Inclined*

*by T.J. Banks*

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-706-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2020

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Banks, T. J.

Abys Among Us & Other Stories for the Feline-Inclined by T. J. Banks

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020912313

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*T. J. BANKS*

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## THE STEADFAST SIAMESE

I sat back and gazed around the salon. Debbie, the woman I had an appointment with, was running late, so I was kicking back with a crossword puzzle. It was a pleasant summer morning, and I had just evaded several people trying to give me cats. So you might say I was feeling pretty smug.

I looked up as the door open. A tall blonde woman – Debbie – stood in front of me with three very tiny kittens. They had, she explained, been found at a construction site: spooked by the noise, their mom had taken off. Long story short, Debbie was fostering them for a local rescue. They needed bottle-feeding, which was why she'd brought them to work with her.

As kittens go, they were a mixed bunch. With cats, not everybody in a given litter necessarily has the same dad. Debbie's fosters included a tuxedo male, a beige-and-white female, and – my heart did a double flip here – a Siamese-y-looking guy with tiny white spats. Thanks to Houdini and Christy, my first two Siamese, I'd always had a weakness for the breed. "Can I hold him?" I asked Debbie.

"Sure," she said with a smile. I carefully picked up the little Snowshoe Siamese. He crawled up on my shoulder and fell asleep.

It was the same ploy that Zorro had used on Tim all those years ago. It must be a classic move from the kitten playbook, I thought. Or maybe, just maybe, the ghost of my old half-Aby friend was whispering in this kitten's ear, coaching him. *C'mon, kid. The humans always fall for this one. I used it on the woman's mate, and he was mine in a heartbeat.*

I wouldn't have put it past Zorro. And the kitten was a quick study.

Before I knew what was happening, I heard myself saying that I would adopt the kitten once he was old enough to leave Debbie's care. I, who had said "No" without hesitation to all those people wanting me to take their problematic felines off their hands, had caved and just because a kitten had curled up trustingly on my shoulder and nodded off. I suddenly understood how Tim had been trapped.

It might've been a trick of the light, but I'm pretty sure that I saw Zorro walk through the salon wall just then with a backwards glance at his new protégé: *You owe me, kid.*

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By the end of July, Magwitch had sworn off the nursing bottle and come home with us. He definitely had abandonment issues, as I discovered one night when I went out to the garage for something. I flicked the light switch on and found myself staring down into a pair of frightened but determined blue eyes. Magwitch had hitched a ride on my sneaker and was clinging to it now with every bit of strength he could muster. I had become his new mom, and he wasn't going to lose me like he'd lost his real one.

He was little but fierce, and the name "Magwitch" suited him. Back in high school, we'd had to read *Great Expectations*. I hadn't particularly cared for the book at the time – it took me years to appreciate how beautifully put together it really is – but the name of Pip's benefactor had always struck me as a very cat-worthy one.

I'd forgotten about the power of naming, though. Magwitch, like Dickens's convict, started off as a lawless character. He pulled underwear off the drying rack in the cellar and chewed up

a check that I'd left on the kitchen table. He also stole Zeke's glasses. (Six months and one new pair of glasses later, they finally re-appeared.)

In time, however, Magwitch reformed – mostly thanks to Phoebe, who looked at him and saw a kitten who needed mothering badly. Not that she skimped on the discipline. Nope, Phoebe was an old-fashioned cat mama; and she knew only too well from her previous life what could happen to kittens who didn't mind. But she loved him dearly, and he responded like a little parched plant that was finally getting the care it needed.

He also found a friend in Phoenix, my Ruddy male Abyssinian. Some neutered male cats, I've noticed, become very paternal toward the younger ones. Derv Sr. had done so with Zorro back at the old house; Bandit had adopted first Topaz, then Hawkeye. And now Phoenix – an outgoing good-natured guy, a Will Rogers among cats – was taking Magwitch under his paw.

As Magwitch grew, he began looking more and more like a traditional Siamese. The faint brown tabby-ish markings on his sides -- his "racing stripes," we called them – faded into his *café-au-lait* coat, and his points darkened to a rich Sealpoint. His eyes deepened to a deep, rich blue, just the shade of my great-grandmother's lusterware tea set.

Granted, he lacked the distinctive Siamese voice. But Magwitch was very conversational and could do a wide variety of sounds. He'd greet me with these delightful bird-like trills, his tail curled like a Sealpoint question mark. I used to think that it was a Zen sort of thing because Magwitch tends to be a very philosophical guy; as time went by, however, I learned that it was simply his way of saying that he was glad to see me.

Over the years, cats and kittens have come and gone around here. Both Zeke and I took turns at fostering for various rescues. Most of them went on to good homes, but some – Phoebe, Freya,



and Thor – ended up staying. Violet, who started out as a boarder, ended up staying when her owner’s circumstances changed.

These unexpected but pleasant twists kinda come with the territory when you work with animals. So, unfortunately, do the losses. From 2011 through 2013, we lost six cats to cancer, kidney failure, and heart disease.

Phoenix was one of the casualties. In 2010, he was diagnosed with renal disease. I changed his diet, did a lot of Reiki with him, and hoped like hell for the best. As it turned out, he lasted a year-and-a-half and didn’t need fluids until the very end. It was the longest that I’d been able to keep a cat with kidney issues going, and I look back on that year-and-a-half now as a precious gift.

He died in December, right before the holidays. Sometime later, when I was puttering about the spare room, Magwitch jumped up on the bed and hurried over to me. He stood up on his hind legs and put his paws up on my chest. That had been Phoenix’s signature move, his way of letting me know when he wanted to be picked up and held.

Magwitch, I knew, didn’t like being picked up. But he was showing me that he would do his best to fill the void that his friend’s passing had left.

---

A long time ago, Mary and I were discussing Siamese. I was telling her about Iris, my mom’s unusually low-keyed Siamese. She was, I remarked, very gentle and sort of shy.

“Shy Siamese are like Mafia wives,” retorted Mary, who’d started off working with Siamese before switching over to Abys. “They don’t exist.”

Magwitch wasn’t in on that particular conversation, but I don’t think he’d buy it. He remains fairly shy to this day. When

he does trust, however, his inner Siamese really comes out. He follows me around while I'm doing chores, and we talk. Well, he trills, chirrups, and does his assorted other voices for me, and I answer in humanese.

"*Eh – eh –EH!*" he says emphatically. He sits down and looks at me with those lusterware-blue eyes.

"I've loved you from the beginning," I tell him, scratching his Sealpoint head, and that seems to satisfy him.

"A Siamese only gives his heart to a human once," I wrote in my novel *Houdini*. In many cases, that's true. Christy, my first Sealpoint, was devoted to me, chasing off any other felines seeking my attention. And many years later, Starfire, another Sealpoint kitten, attached herself to Zeke: in fact, as she grew into a beautiful and imperious cat, she regarded him as her particular property. Her human kitten, as it were. The bond between them was a powerful one...so much so that when she was dying of kidney failure 16 years later, she held on until she sensed that he was ready to let her go.

Magwitch takes after them in that respect, although he might not be thrilled by the comparison with Star. (He knew her in his kittenhood.) He is loyal from the tips of his Sealpoint ears down to his white paws. (Ask his girlfriend Freya, his foster mama Phoebe, or any of his cat buddies.) Of course, he's also very high-strung, and we have the occasional misunderstanding. But he comes around fairly quickly.

This past spring, I was having some work done in the unfinished section of the basement: the hatchway steps were being re-built, which meant that the doors had to be left wide open. I thought I'd gotten all of the cats out of that part of the basement, but Magwitch had slipped by me. When I finally found him, he was clinging to a high shelf across from the workbench, paralyzed with fear by the noises coming from the hatchway. In

all probability, he couldn't have gotten out since the old steps were gone and the new ones hadn't been put in place yet. But his terror was very real. Somewhere in his Snowshoe Siamese brain, he retained memories of the construction site where he and his littermates had been found and of his mother's disappearance. The noises had brought it all back to him in one horrible rush.

It took some chasing him around the work area – and more than a little shouting -- but I got Magwitch out of there with the help of my handyman's teen-aged son. I closed the connecting door, spent but relieved.

A few hours later, I found Magwitch resting on the low cricket chair up in my bedroom. He was his own cat and well at ease again. His blue eyes were shining with happiness and something that looked a whole lot like gratitude. Cats get PTSD, too, and I suddenly knew...without knowing how I knew...that he was thanking me for rescuing him from a situation that had caused his old fears to flare back up. For understanding him.

*By the way* – he was getting tired, and his eyes were sapphire slits now – *I forgive you all that screeching. You meant well. Besides, you're my human.* He drifted off to sleep, knowing that he was safe.

The next morning, he was back on the job, following me around and filling me in on anything that I might've missed during the night.

Magwitch may not be 100 per cent Siamese, but he is definitely 100 per cent steadfast in his affections. And that makes him a starring player on Team Siamese in my book.



## MOONLIGHT

*(This poem first appeared in **Chicken Soup for the Soul:  
The Magic of Cats**, July 2020.)*

You walk between worlds  
between dreams  
a lilac lynx  
stepping out of the shadows  
to sit by my side.  
You are the white-gold light  
against the winter-bare trees  
come morning  
a promise a whisper  
a morning-glory of a cat  
wrapping yourself round my heart.  
You shimmy & you shimmer  
beckoning with citrine eyes;  
you conjure & cajole  
purring, burbling stories  
a feline Scheherazade  
an Empress  
all smoky mauve, steel, and grace,  
sashaying toward sunrise  
dismissing the night  
with a flick of your elegant tail.



## THE ONCE AND FUTURE EMRYS

Emrys, my male Aby, always welcomes Zeke enthusiastically. Yesterday, he ran up to my son, then glanced at me sitting at my desk: he broke away from his buddy and jumped on the desk, looking at me anxiously. "It's OK, Emrys," I told him. "You can go to Zeke." He raced back over to the other side of the room. Clearly, he had "guy stuff" to talk to Zeke about, but he didn't want to be rude.

Zeke and I laughed. Could it be, I wondered, that Emrys knows more human-ese than he has been letting on?

Emrys is my third stud cat and my fifth male Aby. He came to me on a summer afternoon and settled into his new bachelor's pad – i. e., Zeke's old bedroom – with gentlemanly ease. He was friendly and affectionate, and something about him reminded me strongly of Phoenix.

After supper, I came up to have a chat with him about a new name. "Phoenix?" I queried hesitantly. It had been over six years since my beloved Ruddy's passing. Surely the time was right for a Phoenix II.

The new guy looked back at me gently. *It's a good name, human. But it's not mine.*

"Ambrose?" We'd never had an Ambrose, and there'd been a cat named Ambrose in one of Derek Tangye's books, which I loved.

The big gold eyes were thoughtful. *Close, they said, but not quite right. Try again, human.*

"Emrys?" Zeke had given me the first season of the BBC's "Merlin" on DVD, and I had been reveling in it. The series' premise is this: magic has been outlawed in Camelot by Uther

Pendragon, Arthur's father, and as a result, Merlin must keep his magic and his true name, "Emrys," secret.

The young Aby's eyes lit up. *That will do*, he told me.

I went to bed very happy. The emptiness left by Phoenix's death all those years ago was miraculously gone. Toward morning, however, I woke up with a wisp of a memory floating around in my brain. Emrys...a journal...one of my early stories....

Later, I pulled a copy of the *Emrys Journal* from the bookcase section of my mother-in-law's secretaire. This particular issue dated back to the spring of 1991 and contained my first published story – "Her Own Voice." I hadn't looked at it in years. And not knowing much of the Merlin legend at the time, I certainly hadn't made the connection between it and the journal's name.

By the way, a little more research revealed that Emrys is the Welsh form of Ambrose and means "Immortal." You see, the legendary wizard's full name in Welsh is Myrrdin Emrys. Perhaps that had been what *my* Emrys had been trying to tell me, as he'd nudged me toward his rightful name.

---

My initial fascination with the name Merlin actually had very little to do with Camelot and a lot to do with Joan Howard's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Is Magic*, a book that my sixth-grade teacher had read aloud to us. In it, two children, Ronnie and Jill Saunders, are adopted by a little black cat who "behaved as if he had known the young Saunderses all his life." By sheer chance, they stumble upon his real name – Merlin -- and he comes when he hears it "as if he had been waiting for it and thought they were never going to get it right." (Apparently the feline Merlins/Emryses have to deal with some not-very-quick-on-the-uptake humans in both life and literature.) He proceeds to take his new charges on a number of



magical adventures involving a rowboat ride with a kangaroo named Mrs. Wallaby-Jones, very fetching in her 1950s-style coat and hat; a Swiss clock that they can actually slip into; and the mysterious thirteenth floor of their apartment building...a floor that is *not* supposed to exist but that Merlin knows the way to.

Years later, a real-life Merlin-cat found me. Tim and I had gone down to his parents' condo on Carolina Beach: as I was heading upstairs to their unit, a light-gray tabby moseyed over to me. I sat down on the step to pat him, and he responded with many head-butts and purrs. For a stray, he was very sociable.

"Oh, Bob, I told you not to let Tammy see him!" my mother-in-law, Bobbie, exclaimed to my father-in-law.

Bob, an animal person, ignored her exclamation. Instead, he took a picture of me with my newfound friend. It also happens to be Zeke's first photo. (I was pregnant with him but didn't know it yet.)

Bobbie and Bob headed back to Connecticut the next day. The handsome tabby made a point of stopping in to see how we were doing and, being an obliging sort of guest, stayed for a meal or two. Tim began calling him "Watermelon" because of his stripes.

"You can't call him 'Watermelon,'" I protested. "That's not a very good name for him." So we came up with "Merlin" as a compromise.

Sadly, he took off soon afterwards, and we only saw him once briefly before we left for home. My in-laws caught sight of him a few times when they returned in the fall; then our melon-striped friend vanished for good. All that remained was the photo, which Bob made a frame for and gave to me. On the back, in his very distinctive script, he wrote, "The cat who got away!"

Merlin might've gotten away, but his story and photo made an impression on a very young Zeke later on down the line. Or so

I discovered when I gave him his first kitten, a beautiful dark-gray tabby who'd waylaid me at a pet shop.

Zeke's hazel eyes lit up. "He's quite a little feller," my son said, taking possession of the kitten (and somehow managing to channel my late father at the same time). We got cable that weekend as well, so Zeke spent a blissful weekend watching cartoons with his new buddy.

The following week, a closer examination by our vet revealed that the "little feller" was actually female. "Spell it with a 'y,'" Tom suggested. "It's too good a name not to use."

Merlyn was extremely shy. "You know, there's a rumor that Merlyn doesn't really exist," my brother Marc joked, and it was true that few people ever saw her. But she was always very affectionate with Zeke and me.

Her shyness was sometimes at war with her vanity. Once, she was about to run away from a guest when the woman exclaimed, "What a beautiful cat!" Merlyn did the quickest about-face I've ever seen. *Really?* her sweet tigery face said. *I did my stripes a little differently. A bit daring, but I think it suits me.*

She died at 16-and-a-half of kidney failure. By that time, I'd started going with cremation for our cats, frequently burying their ashes in my gardens. But, as I held Merlyn's flower-decorated tin, I suddenly remembered the day she'd escaped from Tim's cat enclosure. I saw her terrified face as she cowered on top of it, bewildered by the great outdoors and all the street noises around her....and gently slipped the tin into a large painted box in my bedroom. She's still there.

The last Merlin was, of course, my sad little foster Bombay, whose first family had given him up. Months of detoxing followed, and he eventually found a loving home with Lori, a kind woman who understood what he needed. He traded in the

Merlin moniker for that of Tinycat and now lives her and a cat buddy in Seattle.

---

But Emrys wasn't like any of them. In fact, the only cat he kept reminding me of was Phoenix. He had that same warmth and sociability. A little more subdued perhaps. Emrys was a quiet, friendly brook, whereas Phoenix had been a burbling, brisking spring.

"It's my imagination," I told myself. "The personalities are similar, that's all." There was, as far as I knew, no connection between Mary's cattery and the one that Emrys had come from.

I had been talking about him on-line with Debbie, a fellow breeder and good friend of Mary's. In fact, she'd been actively involved in placing the Singin' Abys following the car accident that had sent Mary to a convalescent home for the last few months of her life.

Debbie asked about Emrys's pedigree. So I gave her his parents' names, which were all I had at the time. She wrote back almost immediately: "I see the pedigree of your boy's parents, which go back in part to Mary Ellen's lines on his mom's side."

I sat there, reading her words and grinning. The Cheshire Cat had nothing on me. "If anyone could send us an Aby from the afterlife," I'd once joked with another friend, "it would be Mary." And now, in a roundabout way, she had done just that. The Singin' connection – which I thought had died with Dawnie – had come back to life with Emrys. *That*, I felt sure, explained his strong likeness to Phoenix.

Granted, Phoenix hadn't been part of Mary's breeding program. He'd been considered strictly pet quality. But they had, I felt sure, shared an ancestor, making Phoenix my new boy's

great-uncle a few times over or a cousin many times removed. “Thanks, Mary,” I said softly.

Susan later found and sent me the link to Emrys’s on-line pedigree. It turned out that *five* of Mary’s Abys were hanging out in his family tree. One of them, Chereve’s Roman Candle of Singin’, had been my Dawnie’s father, making her Emrys’s great-grandaunt. But there was still no clear evidence that Phoenix had occupied even a twig on that particular tree.

Not long ago, however, I was hanging out with Emrys in his room. Remembering something that I had to do, I rose from the wingback chair. Emrys jumped onto a covered bench that I frequently used as a footstool: then he stood up on his hind legs and, placing his front paws up on my leg, just *looked* at me. It was so very Phoenix. I picked Emrys up and held him against my shoulder, just as I had my other Ruddy boy so long ago.

“She had lost him, and he had come back to her and so was doubly precious to her.” Or so Jill, the young heroine of *Houdini*, tells herself about her beloved Flamepoint Siamese, who has found his way back to her. That’s kinda how I feel about Emrys, as he sits on my shoulder, nuzzling my ear or checking to see if I’ve put moisturizer on. (Like Fey, he enjoys the taste of it.) Second chances are like roses in November – unexpected and all the more beautiful for their unexpectedness. Emrys is my rose in November, my *beskert* or “meant-to-be” cat. Through him, both Dawnie and Phoenix live again.

Emrys has been here for three years now, and everyone who meets him falls under his spell. He is friendly, affectionate, and the most magical of the Merlin cats -- but, then, he carries the wizard’s true name.



*Cats walk between worlds, bringing the magical and the commonplace together. They are the heart- and soul-menders, our kindred spirits, poetry on four paws, and we humans would be lost without them. At least, that's what I believe. Abys Among Us & Stories for the Feline-Inclined is a celebration of the cats I have known and what they have taught me.*

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-706-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2020

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Banks, T. J.

Abys Among Us & Other Stories for the Feline-Inclined by T. J. Banks

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020912313

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a check that I'd left on the kitchen table. He also stole Zeke's glasses. (Six months and one new pair of glasses later, they finally re-appeared.)

In time, however, Magwitch reformed – mostly thanks to Phoebe, who looked at him and saw a kitten who needed mothering badly. Not that she skimped on the discipline. Nope, Phoebe was an old-fashioned cat mama; and she knew only too well from her previous life what could happen to kittens who didn't mind. But she loved him dearly, and he responded like a little parched plant that was finally getting the care it needed.

He also found a friend in Phoenix, my Ruddy male Abyssinian. Some neutered male cats, I've noticed, become very paternal toward the younger ones. Derv Sr. had done so with Zorro back at the old house; Bandit had adopted first Topaz, then Hawkeye. And now Phoenix – an outgoing good-natured guy, a Will Rogers among cats – was taking Magwitch under his paw.

As Magwitch grew, he began looking more and more like a traditional Siamese. The faint brown tabby-ish markings on his sides -- his "racing stripes," we called them – faded into his *café-au-lait* coat, and his points darkened to a rich Sealpoint. His eyes deepened to a deep, rich blue, just the shade of my great-grandmother's lusterware tea set.

Granted, he lacked the distinctive Siamese voice. But Magwitch was very conversational and could do a wide variety of sounds. He'd greet me with these delightful bird-like trills, his tail curled like a Sealpoint question mark. I used to think that it was a Zen sort of thing because Magwitch tends to be a very philosophical guy; as time went by, however, I learned that it was simply his way of saying that he was glad to see me.

Over the years, cats and kittens have come and gone around here. Both Zeke and I took turns at fostering for various rescues. Most of them went on to good homes, but some – Phoebe, Freya,

and Thor – ended up staying. Violet, who started out as a boarder, ended up staying when her owner’s circumstances changed.

These unexpected but pleasant twists kinda come with the territory when you work with animals. So, unfortunately, do the losses. From 2011 through 2013, we lost six cats to cancer, kidney failure, and heart disease.

Phoenix was one of the casualties. In 2010, he was diagnosed with renal disease. I changed his diet, did a lot of Reiki with him, and hoped like hell for the best. As it turned out, he lasted a year-and-a-half and didn’t need fluids until the very end. It was the longest that I’d been able to keep a cat with kidney issues going, and I look back on that year-and-a-half now as a precious gift.

He died in December, right before the holidays. Sometime later, when I was puttering about the spare room, Magwitch jumped up on the bed and hurried over to me. He stood up on his hind legs and put his paws up on my chest. That had been Phoenix’s signature move, his way of letting me know when he wanted to be picked up and held.

Magwitch, I knew, didn’t like being picked up. But he was showing me that he would do his best to fill the void that his friend’s passing had left.

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A long time ago, Mary and I were discussing Siamese. I was telling her about Iris, my mom’s unusually low-keyed Siamese. She was, I remarked, very gentle and sort of shy.

“Shy Siamese are like Mafia wives,” retorted Mary, who’d started off working with Siamese before switching over to Abys. “They don’t exist.”

Magwitch wasn’t in on that particular conversation, but I don’t think he’d buy it. He remains fairly shy to this day. When

he does trust, however, his inner Siamese really comes out. He follows me around while I'm doing chores, and we talk. Well, he trills, chirrups, and does his assorted other voices for me, and I answer in humanese.

"*Eh – eh –EH!*" he says emphatically. He sits down and looks at me with those lusterware-blue eyes.

"I've loved you from the beginning," I tell him, scratching his Sealpoint head, and that seems to satisfy him.

"A Siamese only gives his heart to a human once," I wrote in my novel *Houdini*. In many cases, that's true. Christy, my first Sealpoint, was devoted to me, chasing off any other felines seeking my attention. And many years later, Starfire, another Sealpoint kitten, attached herself to Zeke: in fact, as she grew into a beautiful and imperious cat, she regarded him as her particular property. Her human kitten, as it were. The bond between them was a powerful one...so much so that when she was dying of kidney failure 16 years later, she held on until she sensed that he was ready to let her go.

Magwitch takes after them in that respect, although he might not be thrilled by the comparison with Star. (He knew her in his kittenhood.) He is loyal from the tips of his Sealpoint ears down to his white paws. (Ask his girlfriend Freya, his foster mama Phoebe, or any of his cat buddies.) Of course, he's also very high-strung, and we have the occasional misunderstanding. But he comes around fairly quickly.

This past spring, I was having some work done in the unfinished section of the basement: the hatchway steps were being re-built, which meant that the doors had to be left wide open. I thought I'd gotten all of the cats out of that part of the basement, but Magwitch had slipped by me. When I finally found him, he was clinging to a high shelf across from the workbench, paralyzed with fear by the noises coming from the hatchway. In

all probability, he couldn't have gotten out since the old steps were gone and the new ones hadn't been put in place yet. But his terror was very real. Somewhere in his Snowshoe Siamese brain, he retained memories of the construction site where he and his littermates had been found and of his mother's disappearance. The noises had brought it all back to him in one horrible rush.

It took some chasing him around the work area – and more than a little shouting -- but I got Magwitch out of there with the help of my handyman's teen-aged son. I closed the connecting door, spent but relieved.

A few hours later, I found Magwitch resting on the low cricket chair up in my bedroom. He was his own cat and well at ease again. His blue eyes were shining with happiness and something that looked a whole lot like gratitude. Cats get PTSD, too, and I suddenly knew...without knowing how I knew...that he was thanking me for rescuing him from a situation that had caused his old fears to flare back up. For understanding him.

*By the way* – he was getting tired, and his eyes were sapphire slits now – *I forgive you all that screeching. You meant well. Besides, you're my human.* He drifted off to sleep, knowing that he was safe.

The next morning, he was back on the job, following me around and filling me in on anything that I might've missed during the night.

Magwitch may not be 100 per cent Siamese, but he is definitely 100 per cent steadfast in his affections. And that makes him a starring player on Team Siamese in my book.





## MOONLIGHT

*(This poem first appeared in **Chicken Soup for the Soul:  
The Magic of Cats**, July 2020.)*

You walk between worlds  
between dreams  
a lilac lynx  
stepping out of the shadows  
to sit by my side.  
You are the white-gold light  
against the winter-bare trees  
come morning  
a promise a whisper  
a morning-glory of a cat  
wrapping yourself round my heart.  
You shimmy & you shimmer  
beckoning with citrine eyes;  
you conjure & cajole  
purring, burbling stories  
a feline Scheherazade  
an Empress  
all smoky mauve, steel, and grace,  
sashaying toward sunrise  
dismissing the night  
with a flick of your elegant tail.



## THE ONCE AND FUTURE EMRYS

Emrys, my male Aby, always welcomes Zeke enthusiastically. Yesterday, he ran up to my son, then glanced at me sitting at my desk: he broke away from his buddy and jumped on the desk, looking at me anxiously. "It's OK, Emrys," I told him. "You can go to Zeke." He raced back over to the other side of the room. Clearly, he had "guy stuff" to talk to Zeke about, but he didn't want to be rude.

Zeke and I laughed. Could it be, I wondered, that Emrys knows more human-ese than he has been letting on?

Emrys is my third stud cat and my fifth male Aby. He came to me on a summer afternoon and settled into his new bachelor's pad – i. e., Zeke's old bedroom – with gentlemanly ease. He was friendly and affectionate, and something about him reminded me strongly of Phoenix.

After supper, I came up to have a chat with him about a new name. "Phoenix?" I queried hesitantly. It had been over six years since my beloved Ruddy's passing. Surely the time was right for a Phoenix II.

The new guy looked back at me gently. *It's a good name, human. But it's not mine.*

"Ambrose?" We'd never had an Ambrose, and there'd been a cat named Ambrose in one of Derek Tangye's books, which I loved.

The big gold eyes were thoughtful. *Close, they said, but not quite right. Try again, human.*

"Emrys?" Zeke had given me the first season of the BBC's "Merlin" on DVD, and I had been reveling in it. The series' premise is this: magic has been outlawed in Camelot by Uther

Pendragon, Arthur's father, and as a result, Merlin must keep his magic and his true name, "Emrys," secret.

The young Aby's eyes lit up. *That will do*, he told me.

I went to bed very happy. The emptiness left by Phoenix's death all those years ago was miraculously gone. Toward morning, however, I woke up with a wisp of a memory floating around in my brain. Emrys...a journal...one of my early stories....

Later, I pulled a copy of the *Emrys Journal* from the bookcase section of my mother-in-law's secretaire. This particular issue dated back to the spring of 1991 and contained my first published story – "Her Own Voice." I hadn't looked at it in years. And not knowing much of the Merlin legend at the time, I certainly hadn't made the connection between it and the journal's name.

By the way, a little more research revealed that Emrys is the Welsh form of Ambrose and means "Immortal." You see, the legendary wizard's full name in Welsh is Myrrdin Emrys. Perhaps that had been what *my* Emrys had been trying to tell me, as he'd nudged me toward his rightful name.

---

My initial fascination with the name Merlin actually had very little to do with Camelot and a lot to do with Joan Howard's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Is Magic*, a book that my sixth-grade teacher had read aloud to us. In it, two children, Ronnie and Jill Saunders, are adopted by a little black cat who "behaved as if he had known the young Saunderses all his life." By sheer chance, they stumble upon his real name – Merlin -- and he comes when he hears it "as if he had been waiting for it and thought they were never going to get it right." (Apparently the feline Merlins/Emryses have to deal with some not-very-quick-on-the-uptake humans in both life and literature.) He proceeds to take his new charges on a number of

magical adventures involving a rowboat ride with a kangaroo named Mrs. Wallaby-Jones, very fetching in her 1950s-style coat and hat; a Swiss clock that they can actually slip into; and the mysterious thirteenth floor of their apartment building...a floor that is *not* supposed to exist but that Merlin knows the way to.

Years later, a real-life Merlin-cat found me. Tim and I had gone down to his parents' condo on Carolina Beach: as I was heading upstairs to their unit, a light-gray tabby moseyed over to me. I sat down on the step to pat him, and he responded with many head-butts and purrs. For a stray, he was very sociable.

"Oh, Bob, I told you not to let Tammy see him!" my mother-in-law, Bobbie, exclaimed to my father-in-law.

Bob, an animal person, ignored her exclamation. Instead, he took a picture of me with my newfound friend. It also happens to be Zeke's first photo. (I was pregnant with him but didn't know it yet.)

Bobbie and Bob headed back to Connecticut the next day. The handsome tabby made a point of stopping in to see how we were doing and, being an obliging sort of guest, stayed for a meal or two. Tim began calling him "Watermelon" because of his stripes.

"You can't call him 'Watermelon,'" I protested. "That's not a very good name for him." So we came up with "Merlin" as a compromise.

Sadly, he took off soon afterwards, and we only saw him once briefly before we left for home. My in-laws caught sight of him a few times when they returned in the fall; then our melon-striped friend vanished for good. All that remained was the photo, which Bob made a frame for and gave to me. On the back, in his very distinctive script, he wrote, "The cat who got away!"

Merlin might've gotten away, but his story and photo made an impression on a very young Zeke later on down the line. Or so

I discovered when I gave him his first kitten, a beautiful dark-gray tabby who'd waylaid me at a pet shop.

Zeke's hazel eyes lit up. "He's quite a little feller," my son said, taking possession of the kitten (and somehow managing to channel my late father at the same time). We got cable that weekend as well, so Zeke spent a blissful weekend watching cartoons with his new buddy.

The following week, a closer examination by our vet revealed that the "little feller" was actually female. "Spell it with a 'y,'" Tom suggested. "It's too good a name not to use."

Merlyn was extremely shy. "You know, there's a rumor that Merlyn doesn't really exist," my brother Marc joked, and it was true that few people ever saw her. But she was always very affectionate with Zeke and me.

Her shyness was sometimes at war with her vanity. Once, she was about to run away from a guest when the woman exclaimed, "What a beautiful cat!" Merlyn did the quickest about-face I've ever seen. *Really?* her sweet tigery face said. *I did my stripes a little differently. A bit daring, but I think it suits me.*

She died at 16-and-a-half of kidney failure. By that time, I'd started going with cremation for our cats, frequently burying their ashes in my gardens. But, as I held Merlyn's flower-decorated tin, I suddenly remembered the day she'd escaped from Tim's cat enclosure. I saw her terrified face as she cowered on top of it, bewildered by the great outdoors and all the street noises around her....and gently slipped the tin into a large painted box in my bedroom. She's still there.

The last Merlin was, of course, my sad little foster Bombay, whose first family had given him up. Months of detoxing followed, and he eventually found a loving home with Lori, a kind woman who understood what he needed. He traded in the

Merlin moniker for that of TINYCAT and now lives her and a cat buddy in Seattle.

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But Emrys wasn't like any of them. In fact, the only cat he kept reminding me of was Phoenix. He had that same warmth and sociability. A little more subdued perhaps. Emrys was a quiet, friendly brook, whereas Phoenix had been a burbling, brisking spring.

"It's my imagination," I told myself. "The personalities are similar, that's all." There was, as far as I knew, no connection between Mary's cattery and the one that Emrys had come from.

I had been talking about him on-line with Debbie, a fellow breeder and good friend of Mary's. In fact, she'd been actively involved in placing the Singin' Abys following the car accident that had sent Mary to a convalescent home for the last few months of her life.

Debbie asked about Emrys's pedigree. So I gave her his parents' names, which were all I had at the time. She wrote back almost immediately: "I see the pedigree of your boy's parents, which go back in part to Mary Ellen's lines on his mom's side."

I sat there, reading her words and grinning. The Cheshire Cat had nothing on me. "If anyone could send us an Aby from the afterlife," I'd once joked with another friend, "it would be Mary." And now, in a roundabout way, she had done just that. The Singin' connection – which I thought had died with Dawnie – had come back to life with Emrys. *That*, I felt sure, explained his strong likeness to Phoenix.

Granted, Phoenix hadn't been part of Mary's breeding program. He'd been considered strictly pet quality. But they had, I felt sure, shared an ancestor, making Phoenix my new boy's

great-uncle a few times over or a cousin many times removed. “Thanks, Mary,” I said softly.

Susan later found and sent me the link to Emrys’s on-line pedigree. It turned out that *five* of Mary’s Abys were hanging out in his family tree. One of them, Chereve’s Roman Candle of Singin’, had been my Dawnie’s father, making her Emrys’s great-grandaunt. But there was still no clear evidence that Phoenix had occupied even a twig on that particular tree.

Not long ago, however, I was hanging out with Emrys in his room. Remembering something that I had to do, I rose from the wingback chair. Emrys jumped onto a covered bench that I frequently used as a footstool: then he stood up on his hind legs and, placing his front paws up on my leg, just *looked* at me. It was so very Phoenix. I picked Emrys up and held him against my shoulder, just as I had my other Ruddy boy so long ago.

“She had lost him, and he had come back to her and so was doubly precious to her.” Or so Jill, the young heroine of *Houdini*, tells herself about her beloved Flamepoint Siamese, who has found his way back to her. That’s kinda how I feel about Emrys, as he sits on my shoulder, nuzzling my ear or checking to see if I’ve put moisturizer on. (Like Fey, he enjoys the taste of it.) Second chances are like roses in November – unexpected and all the more beautiful for their unexpectedness. Emrys is my rose in November, my *beskert* or “meant-to-be” cat. Through him, both Dawnie and Phoenix live again.

Emrys has been here for three years now, and everyone who meets him falls under his spell. He is friendly, affectionate, and the most magical of the Merlin cats -- but, then, he carries the wizard’s true name.





*Cats walk between worlds, bringing the magical and the commonplace together. They are the heart- and soul-menders, our kindred spirits, poetry on four paws, and we humans would be lost without them. At least, that's what I believe. Abys Among Us & Stories for the Feline-Inclined is a celebration of the cats I have known and what they have taught me.*

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