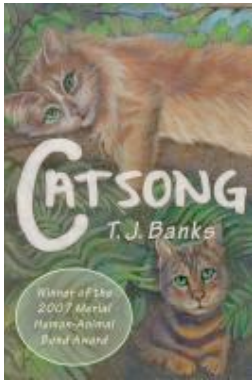


CATSONG

T.J. Banks

Winner of the
2007 Meriel
Human-Animal
Bond Award



Winner of the 2007 Merial Human-Animal Bond Award, Catsong is a collection of stories about all the felines who have wandered into T. J. Banks's life over the years. Meet Zorro, the con artist with the healing paws ... Iris, the caregiving Siamese ... Hawkeye, the office cat ... Solstice, the Abyssinian who taught the author about all kinds of miracles ... and many others. Ultimately, CATSONG is a book about love, loss, and the joy that cats bring into our lives.

CATSONG

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T. J. BANKS

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THE HOUSE BLESSING

A lot of times, as I found out, you get a half-Abyssinian. Which is not a bad thing, mind you. But sometimes you get the whole Abyssinian.

I had wanted an Abyssinian cat ever since I'd read Gladys Taber's *Amber: A Very Personal Cat*. Granted, we did have Zorro, a charcoal-gray Aby-tabby mix who had wandered into our yard when he was 8-weeks-old and who, after checking our house out, had decided we were worth staying with. And despite his coloring and the conspicuous tabby stripes on his mottled coat, he had the agility, dexterity (he's the only one of our cats who has ever figured out that he needed to put his paw *around* a doorknob to make Things Happen), and highly intuitive way of communicating with people that, as I later learned, marked his purebred relations.

But my Abyssinian dream seemed destined to remain just that. After Tim's death, I went to a Cat Writers' Association (CWA) conference out in California and stopped in at the cat show next door. I found myself lingering by the Aby cages; later, I returned to the room I was sharing with fellow cat writer Sally Bahner and sheepishly took a handful of Aby breeder cards out of my pocket.

"I think it's a sign for you to get an Abyssinian cat," Sally remarked with amusement.

I chose to ignore the sign then. But the Abys found me anyhow. They're very determined that way. Watch them at a show sometime and notice how they keep trying to jimmy those locks on their cages. Three years later, I hooked up with a couple of Aby breeders, one of whom, Mary Ellen Hape, became a good friend and mentor. From her cattery, Singin', came Damiana, a Blue Aby kitten whom my cattery, Damiana-z, was named for, and Celtic Fire (a.k.a. Celtie), a Red Aby spay. And from another out-of-state

cattery came an amber-eyed Ruddy kitten whom Marissa and I saddled with a name bigger than she was: Summer Solstice.

From the beginning, Solstice was an odd mixture of shyness and playfulness. She came across as being more self-effacing, less people-oriented than either Damiana or Celtie; but she was also the wise-guy kitten, the one who always started the wrestling matches and play-fights. She was under-sized and fighting an upper-respiratory infection that just wouldn't seem to quit. She'd go around the house making these snuffling snort-hog noises, which sounded bizarre coming from such a dainty feminine-looking kitten. Despite this, she managed to acquire an ardent beau in Topaz, our young Flamepoint Siamese. He was, and is, nuts about all our Aby girls – their little pointy faces and Dumbo ears apparently make his heart sing – but Solstice, with her scrappiness and her whiskers that were too big for her cougar face, was the Song of Songs, as far as he was concerned.

We lost beautiful big-eyed Damiana to some unforeseen genetic complications a few months before her first birthday. That left Solstice as the sole hope of our cattery. But she wasn't putting on weight, and my vet Tom had a hunch that those snort-hog noises might be due to a polyp in her throat, similar to one he'd removed from Damiana's. His hunch turned out to be uncannily on target: he removed a sizable polyp and pronounced Solstice ready to go to an upcoming cat show and then up to Mary's cattery in Rochester, New York for stud service.

What followed was probably the longest honeymoon in cattery history. Every week for three months, I called Mary for an update on Solstice's romance with a studly fawn male, only to learn that there wasn't any. Mary, who has a wicked sense of humor and a gift for turning a phrase that any writer might envy, summed it up like this: "She's there saying, 'Oh, no, I *can't* do that. I'm the Virgin Queen, and my mommy wouldn't let me.'"

Truth be told, Solstice sounded as forlorn as any child who'd been sent to summer camp or boarding school against her will: and my heart really did smite me every time Mary told me how pathetically eagerly my little "Cougar-ette" would greet her

whenever she came into the room. And long-nosed Topaz wandered around the house, moping for his beloved.

But another, far more serious problem arose. Despite the surgery she'd gone through the previous March, Solstice was having trouble breathing again. A visit to Mary's vet confirmed that the polyp had come back in full force: in view of that fact, there seemed to be no point in putting her through the added stress of breeding. "Spay her," Mary told me over the phone. "Keep her as a pet and just love her."

No problem there. As I was driving up to the Sturbridge cat show a week later to pick Solstice up, I worried, though, that *she* wouldn't remember *us* after her three-month honeymoon-that-hadn't-been-a-honeymoon-at-all. But when I unlatched her carrier door, Solstice bolted straight out of it and up into my arms.

I knew you'd come, those eloquent amber eyes of hers said. *I knew you wouldn't forget me....*

"I never saw a cat so glad to be home," Mary said emphatically.

One hurdle jumped, two to go. First, there was the biopsy to make sure that the polyp wasn't malignant. *No*, I thought, remembering Damiana with her enormous far-seeing eyes and even more enormous ears, *not this one, too*. But the biopsy was negative, and Tom went ahead with the surgery, spaying her and removing a seven-ounce polyp. The wonder wasn't that she'd been going around making those ungodly noises but that she's been able to breathe at all.

She began vacuuming up food. Dry cat food, canned cat food, people food – it didn't matter. Solstice was an Aby with a mission, as far as eating went. *You never know*, the amber eyes would say as she quizzically sniffed a rice cake. By the time her stitches came out, her weight was up to 5.7 – a whole pound heftier than she'd been prior to this last operation.

I believe in signs. And Solstice's complete recovery, coming so soon after the loss of Damiana and several other family pets, was proof positive that we'd finally made our way out of that sad, dark

grieving place. There *were* happy endings. Bad things *could* be turned around. And good things *did* happen to good kitties.

On my living room wall is a small gilt-framed piece of poetry entitled “The House Blessing.” I never knew who wrote it, but the author certainly knew how to turn a phrase:

*God bless the corners of this house,
And be the lintel blest;
And bless the hearth and bless the board
And bless each place of rest;
And bless the door that opens wide
To strangers as to kin;
And bless each crystal window pane
That lets the starlight in;
Ad bless the roofree overhead
And every sturdy wall:
The peace of man, the peace of God,
The peace of love on all.*

One morning – oh, maybe a month or two after the surgery – I happened to turn and see Solstice sitting on top of the radiator right under it. Always a pretty little cat, she had just then what I could only call a glow – a positive *aura* – that radiated from her big cougar-eyes straight down to her apricot underbelly.

“Are you ‘The House Blessing’?” The words were out of my mouth before I realized it.

The amber eyes deepened appreciatively. *I was wondering when you’d notice*, they said gently.

Sometimes you get the whole Abyssinian. And sometimes, as in Solstice’s case, you get a miracle.

THE OFFICE CAT

Hawkeye checks out my bee balm -- and, of course, the birdfeeders near the bee balm -- from my office window. That done to his satisfaction, he leaps onto my desk and stretches his silver-flecked black paws across some of the notes for my novel-in-progress. *I'll just look these over for you*, he assures me, his yellow eyes solemn. *Not to worry*.

And I don't. Phoenix, my lovable harum-scarum Ruddy Abyssinian male and Hawkeye's best bud, would probably chew my notes to bits on general principle. But Hawkeye, aside from kidnapping an occasional woolen glove or leather bookmark that's just asking for it, is fairly respectful of human property.

It's nice having an Office Cat again. I haven't really had one since my beloved Cricket died eight years ago. Cricket started out as a big-eared -- dare I say it? -- cub reporter, sitting on my lap while I typed, her amber eyes lighting up as she *thwapped* one key after another. Or all of them at once. I had more typos than usual in my work, but she seemed immensely satisfied with the results. (Tim and I suspected that she was working on a novel.)

Later, as Cricket matured into a plushy editor-cat, she took to stretching out on the floor near my desk or draping herself over the printer. She was, she indicated gently, willing to brainstorm article and story ideas with me; but she felt that the time had come for me to go it alone as far as the actual writing went. She was, she purred, a Concepts Cat and could I drag that catnip toy a little closer? (The contract for her book must've fallen through.)

After Cricket's death, the other cats wandered in and out of the study, but none really shared her feeling for writing and the tools of the trade. In fact, Topaz, an equal opportunity sprayer, felt that the computer keyboard -- the electronic typewriter -- hell, even my handwritten rough drafts were fair game. I had to Febreze the rough draft of my time-travel novel *Souleiado* in order to finish editing it without gagging.

When we moved to our new house and I set up shop in the small room off the kitchen, I began keeping the door shut. I missed having the cats around while I worked, but it was too difficult keeping Topaz and the other sometime sprayers out. So, except for an occasional invasion by Star -- who naturally refuses to believe that any room could possibly be off limits to *her* -- or a brief stay by a new or sick feline, the study remained cat-less. Until Hawkeye re-assessed the situation, that is.

Hawkeye, who is a Very Serious Guy with his black face and silver markings or “specs” around his eyes, is also a Very Loving, Lovable Guy. But he has, as he has informed us time and again, Issues. His Feelings Get Hurt, he insists, and it takes him awhile to Get Over It.

One of Hawkeye’s current Issues involves Phoenix. Now they are, as I’ve said, best-est buddies: they are both the same age (two) and act like littermates, wrestling and chasing each other through the house. Both are gluttons for attention. But Phoenix, with true Aby flair, takes it a paw-step further: he stands up on his hind legs and, placing his front paws up on my chest, looks beseechingly at me till I pick him up and cuddle him.

Now Hawkeye doesn’t care much for being picked up. But he’ll come over to me while I’m sitting down and do push-me-pull-yous on my knees while he miaows happily about his day. It’s endearing, but it doesn’t have the show-stopping quality of Phoenix’s paws-up maneuver.

And Hawkeye knew it from the get-go. He would sit there, looking reproachful and pondering the Injustice of Things. After all, he had been here First. He had to one-up Phoenix somehow.

So he began slipping into the study. *Don’t mind me -- I just thought I’d come in and make sure the plants are all right.* Then, having given the plants a pep talk, he’d settle down in the window near them and watch the birds at the feeder. *Just doing field research,* he’d assure me.

After awhile, he began moseying over to my desk. He’d lie down and watch me scribbling away. *That description’s giving you trouble, huh?* the yellow eyes would say sympathetically, as

he put his head down on the paper. *Well, I like it. Very comfortable.*

Once, Phoenix came in with him. *So, this is where you work. The happy-go-lucky Aby glanced at the plants. You get eats on the job, too? Cool.*

It's O. K. You could see that Hawkeye was trying to sound casual so that Phoenix didn't start getting ideas about being an Office Cat, too. Some things you don't want to share, even with your best bud.

Hawkeye's a few weeks into the job now, and we both feel good about working together. Of course, Hawkeye can be a surprisingly strict editor sometimes. One night, I was getting ready to close shop -- it was after 10 p. m. -- so I nudged him awake, explaining that I didn't usually work this late.

He opened one eye. *You should. You've been slacking off a bit, and it's starting to show. I've been meaning to mention it.* And he shut the eye tightly.

I sat back down and pulled the rough draft back toward me. You know, he may just be on to something.

THE THREE LIVES OF IRIS

My first life was at the cattery, curled up against my mother's belly with my littermates. We didn't have our masks or points then -- in fact, we didn't look all that much like cats. More like little white rats. But we could purr up a storm. And being Siamese, we found our voices early. I had the loudest miaow, which surprised Teri, our owner, because I was also the shyest of the litter, hanging back and taking my time to get to know the humans who came to look at us.

My brothers and sisters eventually left the cattery for good homes, but Teri kept me. She called me "Lucy" and told me how beautiful I was, "just like a Monet painting." I had no idea what that meant, but I purred for her, anyway. Because I *was* beautiful. My points had come in, and they were a soft blue-gray mixed with cocoa-brown. Very striking against the creamy hydrangea of my base coat. Visitors to the cattery would stop and look twice at me: they were especially taken with my eyes, which were purply-blue and shimmery.

But whenever anyone offered to buy me, Teri always smiled and told him or her, "No." She was keeping me for the cattery, she said: I would go to shows and some day have lots of kittens like my mother.

I kneaded my paws against Teri's shoulder. *Kittens*, I thought. *How nice*.

Then I got sick, and I heard the vet say that there would be no kittens. Ever. The infection had left me barren.

Teri took care of me and loved me as much as she always had. But there were a lot of cats at the cattery. So, when somebody called to inquire about me as a pet for her elderly mother -- the caller had seen my picture somewhere -- Teri gave it some thought. And this time, she said, "Yes."

I had to travel in a special pet carrier on board a plane. The trip was long and frightening, and the place where someone had

stowed the carrier was dark and stuffy. I cried for Teri and everything I'd known. After what felt like several of my lives stitched together, the darkness gave way to light. A young-ish woman (the one who had called about me, I guessed) and her child took me from the cargo place and brought me to my new mistress. They also gave me my new name, "Iris"...because, they said, my eyes were the color of an iris flower.

The elderly woman fell in love with me right away. And the son who lived with her fixed up a nice corner for me. But all those hours on the plane had frightened me: I ran upstairs and hid under the woman's bed just in case they were thinking of putting me back on it. Eventually, hungry and tired of hanging out with the dust bunnies, I crept out. My new mistress fussed over me, and her son gave me food and water. When I had finished, I gave myself a good grooming and began checking out my surroundings. The house was small but comfortable. There were lots of little breakables, but I could maneuver around those. These new people were kind, and that was all that mattered.

"*Mer-row?*" inquired a voice. I turned, and there, sitting in the hallway was Alex, a red tabby Maine Coon cat with a head like a lion's and an affable expression. He touched noses with me. He had been lonely: it had been a long time, he said, since there had been another animal in the house.

Alex was elderly and, for a Maine Coon, very thin. He wasn't feeling quite himself lately, he admitted: he tired easily and had days when he just didn't have that much conversation in him. On his good days, however, he would lie next to me and tell me about his life as a stray before coming here. About Katie, the Springer Spaniel who'd died the year before, and how he used to paw open the kitchen cabinets and knock down cracker and cereal boxes for her to chew on. How she'd bark when people were *leaving* the driveway, not when they were pulling into it. Not the brightest dog in the world, Alex allowed, but a good sort nonetheless.

Then Alex went away in the big blue carrier and didn't come back. Not in his body, at least. But sometimes I would turn a corner, and there he'd be, a magnificent spirit-cat, big and

leonine, just as he must've been before I'd known him. He would shimmer in and out, as kindly a presence as he'd always been. Not that the humans could see him, of course. Their vision was too limited.

What they could see, however, was that I was lonely without him. So they brought home a Ruddy Abyssinian kitten to keep me company. Stormy was very playful...always tipping over wastebaskets and rolling around inside them...knocking our mistress' lipsticks off her bureau and chasing them down the stairs like catnip mice. I was delighted. I had always wanted a kitten to mother, and now, in a roundabout unexpected way, I had one.

But, just as unexpectedly, things changed. Or, rather, Stormy did. She grew bigger, more aggressive. Being indoors made her unhappy for some reason, and she would sneak outside whenever she found a door that hadn't been carefully shut. Failing to find one, she would take to the rafters down in the cellar.

When she did emerge from the shadows down there, she acted more like a wildcat than a house cat, hissing and chasing me from room to room. Finally, I took refuge in what had been the son's bedroom. (He had married and gone elsewhere to live, though he was always stopping in to check on us, just as the younger woman and another brother did.) My dishes and litter box were moved in there, and for the next year or so, I rarely left it. Whenever I did, Stormy would seemingly materialize out of nowhere and begin thwacking me with her great Ruddy paws. So it was easier to keep to my little haven.

Looking back, I think that Stormy sensed something was wrong long before I did. Our mistress, who was very old by our reckoning, was growing more confused and frightened. She became as fragile as the figurines she collected, crying and muttering about faces peering in the windows at her. So she began pulling all the shades down, making the house sad and gloomy. But the things she feared were still there in her mind, as real to her as Stormy and I were. Perhaps more.

Something is preying on her brain, I thought, *making her act differently*. Not with me—she was always gentle and loving with me – but definitely with Stormy. Stormy had always been a much more energetic cat, getting into everything she could lay her paws on, and all that wild energy of hers made our mistress more nervous. She took to yelling and swatting at Stormy. Stormy, in her turn, became miserable and acted up even more. Bullying me gave her an outlet for her misery. I didn't like it, of course. But I understood.

Then, one day, we went to the vets' to get our teeth cleaned. The woman's daughter drove us there: she always brought us in for our shots and things. I don't remember much about that day because the vets' helpers gave us something that made us sleepy as newborn kittens.

What I do remember is waking up and finding Stormy in my cage. Only she was softer...a glimmer in time, as it were...and her eyes glowed like leaves in summer sunshine. Gazing into those eyes, I suddenly understood that she had become spirit, just as Alex had. Her heart had stopped during the procedure, she told me; she'd studied her body and decided not to go back into it.

We touched noses gently, and things between us were once again as they'd been in the beginning. She hadn't meant to be unkind: that had been the fear taking hold of her, and she was free of it now. Then she slowly faded away, leaving only a shimmer of light where she'd been sitting.

I did not see Stormy again. Her spirit was, I knew, too wild to haunt houses, especially one where she'd been so unhappy. So I set about re-claiming the house for myself. I could lie on the velveteen loveseat without anybody hissing and chasing me off. I could enjoy being a cat again.

Things were worse with my mistress, though. She kept crying, "I want to go home!," not realizing that she already *was* home. She was still very loving, kissing my head and talking to me constantly. The talk was a ragbag of words, spilling all over the place, but I would sit close to her, purring. It didn't mend her –

there's only so much purring can do – but it did ease her, and the fear would die out of her eyes for a little while, at least.

At night, when I saw her growing tired, I would head toward the stairs and wait for her; slowly, each move jarring her (her back hurt her, and she walked hunched over), she would follow me up to her bedroom, as docile as though she was my kitten. Which, in a way, I suppose she was.

Sometimes she would shut me in a room and forget about me. Fortunately, her children were always stopping by, so one of them would always let me out. And once, she left the outer porch door open: I stepped gingerly out onto the top step and sniffed the air, not sure what I would find. Stormy, I knew, had gone far beyond the trees and tool shed. There had been an overgrown field there, she told me – it had been one of her friendlier more talkative days – filled with tall swishy grasses, blue chicory, butter-and-eggs with their pleated yellow petal caps. And rabbits....But the woman's daughter pulled into the driveway just then. She saw me right away and carried me back into the house. So I never did find out about the world beyond the trees.

The companions started coming after that. Most were kind, though some, the weekend ones, clearly didn't want to be there. My mistress was growing more and more difficult, throwing screaming rages that exhausted everyone, herself most of all. Only Mishka could handle her.

Mishka was the best of the companions, the one who came faithfully every Sunday night and stayed through Friday morning, no matter how bad things got. She was a young woman, but she had a wise and understanding soul. She could coax my mistress into something like calmness and helped me walk her upstairs at night. Mishka would go back downstairs once she was in bed; I would stay and keep watch, just in case those faces showed up in the windows. I never saw them, but my human must've because she would suddenly start crying and screaming. My ears quivering, I would high-tail it downstairs and sit with Mishka in the kitchen until the wailing stopped.

We went on that way for a long time. The rages got worse, and some of the weekend companions didn't come back. I didn't care for the rages either: they made it seem like someone else was there and not the human who had loved me so very much. But, even in my fear, I understood that that screaming witch of a woman wasn't my mistress – that she was buried somewhere deep inside where even I couldn't find her.

Mishka understood that, too, and between the two of us, we took care of her. Perhaps being a cat, I did better. Human vision is, as I've said, extremely limited.

One bitter-cold morning, after Mishka had left for classes, my mistress went outside without her coat on. Some strange people brought her back. They covered her with a thick blanket and asked her what she had been looking for.

I could've told them. She'd been looking for herself. For the person she had been.

My mistress' oldest son and daughter came hurrying in. They talked to her; she turned in their direction but did not seem to see them. She was truly lost now. I wrapped my tail around my paws, and a sorrow I didn't fully understand took hold of me.

The next morning, my mistress went away and didn't come back. Mishka stayed with me that first night and fed me; but she left the next morning, and I never saw her again. I stayed in the living room, waiting and wondering. Then my mistress' daughter and *her* child came and took me away to live with them. I was glad. The house was cold and sad, and having it to myself no longer felt like a good thing.

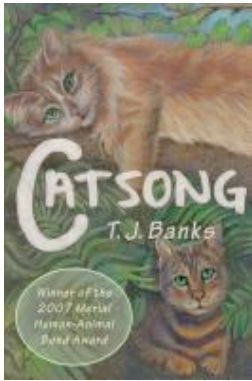
My new-old humans had other cats. Among them were two other Siamese and three Abyssinians who were kin to Stormy but not as wild. Circe, the Blue Abyssinian, was not quite a year old and had been sickly as a little kitten: she had outgrown it, but she still had a tremendous need to be mothered.

One day, shortly after my arrival, Circe leaped up on the sofa where I was lying. She just *looked* at me. Before I knew it, she was cuddled up against my side, purring. I started purring, too – in

fact, you couldn't tell where my purr left off and hers began. And, suddenly, I knew that this was where I belonged.

Gradually, I made friends with the other cats. In a way, it was like being back at the cattery. The woman and her young son did everything they could to make me feel cherished after what I'd been through. The bad memories slipped away. I could just be me...mothering Circe...flirting with Bandit, the big black cat with the gentle eyes and soft miaow...rolling on the breezeway sofa with all four paws in the air like a kitten....

Circe snuggles up close to me now, and I begin washing the top of her head, my purr burbling up in me like a song remembered. This is my last life and my best one: I shall savor it.



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