

Humour

Frightening felines

Do you let black cats cross your path? Or do you attempt to parallel their direction and wind up walking sideways into brick walls and swimming pools? If the latter, reading this column should cure you.

The ridiculous superstition about black cats arose from several factors during the Middle Ages. In the first place, your average medieval serf didn't like cats all that much. Bumper stickers reading "Have you kicked a cat today?" could be seen on the hungry oxen used by these hungry farmers to pull their plows. The cats simply weren't doing their job of keeping the rat population down, and serfs all over were coming down with the plague as a result. It also didn't help that cats could see in the dark and were often out in the fields, ignoring the fact that the sun wasn't out, instead of cowering sensibly in the caves or huts or whatever with the humans.

Black was unpopular too. We are not talking here about people who could afford to put up a bunch of sodium-vapor street lamps . . . er, cow path lamps. They were afraid of the dark. Who could say for sure that the sun was going to come up tomorrow? The threat of night to them must have been like the threat of nuclear war is to us. Black would have caused some real stress.

Naturally, a black cat had to be the worst kind of cat. So, some marketing genius came up with the idea that black cats were — get this — *Incarnations Of The Devil On Earth*. The idea caught on, and probably even caused panic in the cow paths.

Think about that for a minute. There were a lot of black cats. If they really had been incarnations of the Devil, evil would have been spread so thin that the worst thing that could have happened to anyone in the Middle Ages would have been that they were kicked by their hungry oxen, or maybe bitten by a black cat. Since far worse things, such as starvation, pestilence, war, and total disaster, were occurring, it is safe to assume that the premise was inaccurate.

However, medieval farmers had no way of figuring this out. They were not scientifically trained, and they also didn't have the advantage of mod-

ern Hewlett-Packard calculators on which they could figure out the total amount of evil and divide it by the number of black cats.

What could they do? It was hard enough to stay alive without having to worry about a black cat sneaking into their huts to steal their souls. Killing all black cats would have been one answer, but that wasn't a practical solution. As I mentioned before, there were a lot of black cats, and your average medieval serf simply didn't have time to go around hunting them down, what with farming keeping the hut free of rats and all. Not only that, but the feudal baron (who was the landlord and the really big cheese at the time) probably owned the only black cat in the neighborhood, and if someone went around killing his landlord's pets, his own lifespan wasn't going to be anything he could brag about to his grandchildren. (Not that it was anyway).

On second thought, killing the cats wouldn't have done any good after all. The Devil just would have come back as a bunch of black rabbits or something and they'd have had to start all over again, with even more rabbits than there had been cats.

Anyhow, the best solution the medieval farmers could come up with was not to allow a black cat to cross their paths, thus providing us with the famous superstition. Surprisingly, the idea didn't die during the Renaissance. Black cats continued to be avoided. You want proof? Ask yourself. "Did Michaelangelo paint any famous black cats? Did Brahe name any lunar craters *Felis Cattus Noir*? Did Newton postulate gravity after a black cat fell on his head?"

Now, this legacy of unreasonable fear has been passed on to us. However, it's entirely possible that we can end this foolish superstition for once and for all. Let some black cats cross your path today. Don't be afraid. They won't attack you. Are you a man or a mouse?

Greg Whiting

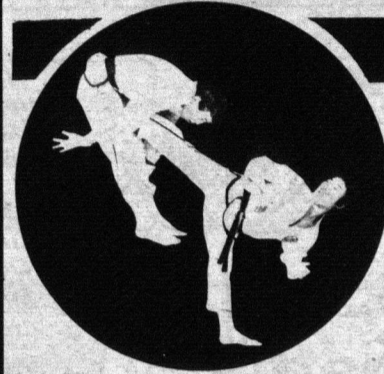
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