

Book Review

John Bradshaw Cat Sense: The Feline Enigma Revealed

Allen Lane (London 2013) 336 p.

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Abstract

This is a review of John Bradshaw's *Cat Sense* (2013), a comprehensive, accessible and beautifully written book that explores cats and their relationship to human beings through multiple lenses, including history, archaeology, biology, psychology, behavioral science and policy.

Keywords: cats; cats and people; domestication; cat behavior; cat physiology; cats and wildlife; future of cats.

Resumen

Esta es una reseña del *Cat Sense* (2013) de John Bradshaw, un libro completo, accesible y bellamente escrito que explora el mundo de los gatos y su relación con los seres humanos a través de múltiples lentes, incluida la historia, la arqueología, la biología, la psicología, la ciencia del comportamiento y la política.

Palabras clave: gatos; gatos y humanos; domesticación; comportamiento del gato; fisiología del gato; gatos y vida silvestre; el futuro de los gatos.

One need not be a “cat person” to enjoy John Bradshaw's *Cat Sense: The Feline Enigma Revealed* (Allen Lane, 2013), a book whose style is both sweeping in its scope and careful in its examination of the details. Readers with a general interest in animal behavior and the history of animal-human relationships will be drawn in by the author's lively style and vivid prose. Those who know cats well will be rewarded with a rich trove of information and analysis about an animal that sometimes gets a bad rap for being “enigmatic” or “aloof”, and will learn in the course of the book why these labels are neither fair nor accurate.

Cat Sense is revelatory: even animal experts will learn a great deal. It is accessible and well-written: despite covering complex topics, it avoids jargon and is pitched at a level that any well-informed and interested reader can handle (it is even humorous in places). And it is comprehensive: the book takes us on a

journey covering thousands of years, looking at cats through the lenses of history, archaeology, biology, psychology, behavioral science, literature and policy. There are even some nice personal touches, where the author brings in anecdotes about his own cats. Although almost 300 pages, it is a quick read – a testament to Bradshaw’s writing ability.

John Bradshaw is visiting fellow at the University of Bristol Veterinary School, and founder of the Anthrozoology Institute at the University of Southampton. His research focuses on human-animal interactions and companion animal welfare, and his concern for “making animal welfare science accessible to pet owners”¹ shows in the themes he chooses to highlight in the book. The main question that Bradshaw poses in *Cat Sense* is an important one: how can we better understand cats so as to give them a decent chance of co-existing with human beings and leading happier lives as the world around them changes rapidly? The book’s smart design – the beginning chapters review the history of cat domestication, the large middle section explores various aspects of cat physiology and behavior as well as how cats relate to each other and to humans, and the final chapters are on “the cat’s current place in the world” – allows for a good lead-up to discussing the above question and others that will be of great interest to animal welfare and animal rights advocates.

As much as the book is a font of information about cat behavior and physiology, a surprising conclusion that I came to – thanks to Bradshaw’s comprehensive review of how cats see, hear, smell and feel, why they play, why they do not show emotions, and a host of other aspects of feline life – is just how much we do *not* know about them. As Bradshaw reports, it is only in the past few decades that feline science has taken off, lagging far behind canine research in particular. To take just a few examples, it was fascinating to find out that we do not really know why cats (and only some, for that matter) respond to catnip; what the scientifically proven ideal time is for a kitten to be adopted; whether domestic cats are stressed by being confined indoors; whether cats can recognize their littermates as relatives; and what a cat’s tail movements signify during play. Likewise, as the chapter on “Thoughts and Feelings” tells us, relatively little is known about cat intelligence, or how they “make use of their sensitive noses”, topics about which scientists seem to know much more in the case of dogs. As Bradshaw writes (p. 149), “the cat’s ability to reason seems limited... Nevertheless, it is entirely possible that scientists have yet to design experiments that allow cats to demonstrate their true abilities.”

Along similar lines, a number of passages in the chapter on “Cats and their People” include words such as “probably”, “presumably” and “almost certainly”, emphasizing just how much work remains to be done to figure out cats’ relationship to humans. This chapter, nonetheless, is enlightening even for long-time cat owners. It is important to know, for example, that cats do not like to be stared at; that “the most satisfying exchanges” between cat and person are “often those that the cat chooses to initiate”; and that purring is not meant to show that a cat is “contented, but instead to prolong the circumstances that are making it so”. Two key conclusions from the chapter are worth underscoring. One is how little many cat owners know about their cats’ needs and the sources of their stress (an important one being relationships with other cats, including in the same household). Another is that people expect a great deal of cats, in part due to the animals’ apparent ability to adjust easily to their environment. As Bradshaw asserts, “cats face great pressure to change their ways” and they must therefore “evolve new ways to organize their behavior, at an unprecedented speed.” Specifically, the conservation lobby wants to restrict cats’ hunting territory. This point will be revisited below.

The final chapter, “Cats of the Future”, offers some intriguing food for thought. Bradshaw asserts (p. 255) that cats’ “very popularity is adversely affecting their well-being” and that humans must better understand cats’ emotional needs and stressors in order to guarantee their future well-being. He makes a bold argument for both training cats and undertaking genetic modification of cats’ behavior and personalities so they can more quickly and successfully adapt to “twenty-first-century lifestyles” (p. 260), while acknowledging that in arguing thus, he is being people-centered. He concedes that the genetic intervention he proposes – selective breeding of domestic cats to choose for “best temperaments” to ensure good house pets – goes against the “increasingly widespread practice of neutering cats before they breed,” which is done to address feline overpopulation, a cause of both cat suffering and human-cat conflict. He even posits that this widespread neutering “risks pushing the domestic cat’s genetics back gradually towards the wild” (p. 271). This is a valid point for debate; it is also one that, as he notes, has not been discussed much.

This review would not be complete without pointing out a few criticisms, none of which take away from the overall value of the book. Beginning with the minor ones: in a few places, it would have been useful to have more footnotes so readers could follow up on certain topics. In several of the chapters, the

¹ <http://www.bris.ac.uk/vetscience/people/88445/biography.html> [last consulted 17 April 2019]

text is well-referenced and points readers to further sources. But at times, particularly in the earlier chapters, this is missing. In Chapter 7, on “Cats Together”, some passages seem contradictory and could be confusing to a non-scientist (for example, the section on learning versus imitation). Likewise, in chapter 9, “Cats as Individuals”, the text is somewhat contradictory on the issue of cat socialization through early handling. Chapter 6, “Thoughts and Feelings”, provides an extremely interesting discussion of cats’ inner lives. Its explanations of whether cats are really displaying, for example, grief or jealousy, make sense on one level. On another, Bradshaw himself notes how much work remains to explore cats’ emotions and behavior through scientific experimentation. So I found myself pushing back in places on his dismissal of cats’ ability to experience certain feelings.

More important, in my view, are the gaps in the final chapters. Chapter 10 deals with “Cats and Wildlife,” a controversial topic. Bradshaw makes a crucial point early the book, to which he returns throughout, especially in chapter 10. This is that cats and people have “lived alongside one another” for millennia “without the cat ever becoming fully domesticated”; it is only extremely recently, with the advent of “nutritionally complete catfood” in the late 20th century, that “all cats, not just the pets of the well-off, were relieved of the necessity to hunt for a living.” As he notes, however, cats’ “predatory past...cannot be obliterated overnight.” This leads to the key question of how “today’s cat enthusiasts” can let their cats “express their hunting instincts without causing wildlife the damage which evokes so much criticism from the anti-cat lobby.”² Indeed, in chapter 10 he argues (p. 239) that “today, the most significant challenge facing cats is a growing reputation as destroyers of wildlife.”

The antagonism between these two groups – cat enthusiasts (and cat owners) and the anti-cat lobby, which can include wildlife proponents – is evident in the debate around how to confront the problem of the overpopulation of unowned (feral, stray or “community”) cats in both rural and urban areas in many countries. Cat enthusiasts increasingly advocate some form of “trap-neuter-return” (TNR) program, in which unowned cats are captured, sterilized and returned to where they live, so as to gradually reduce their numbers in a humane way. Conservationists, meanwhile, sometimes call for culling these cats, or “trap-and-kill”, a method that is considered inhumane and, many argue, ineffective.³ TNR has caught on in many countries, to the point where local governments sometimes formally support it.⁴ It was therefore a bit disappointing that Bradshaw did not engage the topic of TNR more substantively. He does touch on it in chapter 10, and he concedes that it might be the best use of resources (and certainly more acceptable than culling feral cats). One might have expected, however, some more grappling with the issues around TNR, given its popularity and its placement at the center of human-cat relations today (as discussed above, Bradshaw explores the question of widespread neutering in the final chapter, though his focus there is more on pet cats than on TNR of unowned or feral cats.) It is worth noting that chapter 10 offers a nuanced discussion of cats and wildlife, underscoring that the evidence of cats as wildlife destroyers is “equivocal” and that habitat destruction by humans and predation by animals other than cats might have more significant impacts on wildlife than cats do.

Finally, in “Cats of the Future”, Bradshaw makes a surprising omission. He devotes a fair amount of space to his argument for the genetic modification of cats to improve their adaptability to being owned, and thus their chances of living happier lives. He also spends time discussing training cats towards the same ends (this will inevitably raise the eyebrows of anyone who has spent time with a cat, though Bradshaw does have some plausible suggestions). What he does not deal with much at all, however, is the need for *humans* to change in order for these ends to be met. This is a lost opportunity to discuss responsible ownership. If, as Bradshaw argues, the breeding of likable cats is probably viable only in the hands of ordinary people (as opposed to being a commercial operation limited to breeders), then the average person will need a lot of help – training, one might say – to end cruel and widespread practices such as abandonment of pets, allowing them to breed uncontrollably and neglecting or mistreating them.

But these are relatively small drawbacks in an otherwise wonderful and wide-ranging book.

² All of the quotations in this passage are from p. 82 of the book.

³ See, for example, SCHAFFNER, J.E., Community Cats: Changing the Legal Paradigm for the Management of So-Called ‘Pests’, in *Syracuse Law Review*. 67 (2017) 71 (especially Introduction); ALLEY CAT ALLIES, Why Trap-Neuter-Return Feral Cats? The Case for TNR. Web page: <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/why-trap-neuter-return-feral-cats-the-case-for-tnr/> [last consulted 11 April 2019]; and AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, Resolution 102B. Adopted by the House of Delegates. August 14-15, 2017 (especially Report: Introduction).

⁴ This is the case, for example, in the cities of Barcelona, Zaragoza and Ceuta in Spain [see DUFAU, A., Estatuto jurídico del gato callejero en España, Francia y Reino Unido (Valencia 2017), pp. 82-85]. In the United States, well over 300 local governments “incorporate TNR into their animal control policies and practices” [HOLTZ, E., Trap-Neuter-Return Ordinances and Policies in the United States: The Future of Animal Control. Law & Policy Brief (Bethesda, MD; ALLEY CAT ALLIES, January 2013), p. 3]. Further, in 2018, Chile made TNR its “official approach to community cats” (see ALLEY CAT ALLIES, Chile Makes TNR Mandatory. Web page: <https://www.alleycat.org/chile-makes-tnr-mandatory/>) [last consulted 11 April 2019].

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