

Adventures in

Catsterland

A writer recounts her unexpected journey into feline fandom

by ARNA COHEN

When I took the plunge into Facebook a few years ago, I was fascinated and flattered that people from every decade of my life and every branch of the family tree were popping up out of nowhere to be my friends. I'm happy to say that I've now accumulated 86 of them. OK, so that's not a very big number. Almost everyone has way more friends than I. Even my cat.

Yes, you read that right—my cat. With no effort at all, my magnificent seal point Siamese, Monster, has racked up 200 furriends on Catster.com, the online feline social network. What this means for me, aside from a confused mixture of intense pride and insane jealousy, is that I no longer have time to keep up with what my friend is making for dinner or my brother's travels in Thailand. Monster does not read, so it falls to me to update him on Harrison and Kitty Pryde's stormy relationship, movie reviews from Da Tabbies O Trout Towne, and sales figures for Newman's debut self-help e-book, *Poopology*.

Before you call the guys in the white coats, let me explain! In November 2009, I was seeking sources for an *All Animals* story about why cats should wear collars and tags. I thought I'd struck gold when an Internet search turned up a thread on this very subject, but there was one hitch: To contact commentators, I had to join the site hosting the forum, Catster. Or rather, my cat had to join. And I wasn't sure I wanted to go there. I mean, humans weren't discussing collars and tags—the cats were. And some of them were wearing clothes. This wasn't the kind of company I, or my cat, kept.

Not having many other options, I did what I had to for the sake of my craft. I created a profile capturing Monster's essential characteristics: energetic, vocal, stubborn, affectionate, extremely intelligent, always hungry, and supremely self-absorbed. His motto: "It's all about me." Within days, I had several excellent sources, and Monster had a dozen friends.

I thought that would be the end of our involvement with the online cat community, but Monster continued to be bombarded with friend requests and virtual presents (his beautiful blue eyes

draw in those felines like bees to honey). In just a few months, he had more friends than I without even leaving the house. My email was overrun with messages for him. Then he discovered diary writing, and I was sucked into the wormhole leading from the world as I'd known it to the delightful lunacy of Catsterland.

Monster's first entry

I can't complain about my life. I live in a big house with lots of stairs and open space, and the staff lets me do almost anything I want. Or I find ways to get what I want. When I wanted a really big cat tree, I simply jumped on the countertops 20 times a day for three years until one appeared. When I want a different kind of food, I just barf up whatever she's feeding me until she switches brands. When I want a warm blankie on my chaise lounge, I shed extra hard until one is spread out. They don't call Siamese the smartest breed for nothin'!

Monster's diary has led me to discover some of the nicest people I've ever met in real or cyber life, an outgoing community of animal lovers as enthralled with their cats as I am with mine. Catster cats exchange birthday greetings, congratulations, medical and behavioral advice, and heartfelt support when a cat crosses the Rainbow Bridge.

"What I like the most ... is the love that is shown for other people's pets," says Laura

Strickland of Scottsdale, Ariz., mother of the poop-obsessed Newman—one of the most popular Catster cats with nearly 5,000 furriends. "That's been the most support I've gotten when I've had pets pass away—the notes they've sent, the gifts they've given. You just don't get that from other friends who don't have animals."

I asked Strickland why Newman is so focused on fecal matters, and she pointed to the proliferation of diary entries on the topic. "Newman just kind of latched on to it mainly because he's young and he's not afraid to talk about it. Whereas [his housemate] Samoa would be totally embarrassed. She doesn't even like anyone seeing her go in the litter box."