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Strays

'Another Insane Devotion,' by Peter Trachtenberg



Illustration of Peter Trachtenberg by Casey Sorrow

By JENNIFER B. McDONALD
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“Not many things are better than a kitten.”

ANOTHER INSANE DEVOTION On the Love of Cats and Persons

By Peter Trachtenberg
Illustrated. 283 pp. Da Capo Press.
\$24.

A confession: I'm predisposed to love Peter Trachtenberg's new memoir, "Another Insane Devotion," because of that one sentence, which is written without irony and appears in an author's note before the main narrative even gets under way. If you agree with it, I'll bet you a giant toy

mouse that you will adore this book outright for its scrutiny of the domestic cat in all its cuddlesome glory. (Trachtenberg's hilarious descriptions of catty antics are like viral videos transposed into print.) If you don't agree, you may still adore this book for everything else it offers: a suspense story, a love story, a falling-out-of-love story, sex and yearning, literary gossip, economic hardship, conspicuous references to the

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That's a lot to pack into a pet memoir. But then, this is not just a pet memoir. Trachtenberg, whose previous work, "The Book of Calamities," explored the varieties of human suffering, may at first seem to have traded woe and wickedness for cuteness, but make no mistake: his feet remain planted firmly in the shadows. His memoir is about the torments of grief and separation as much as it is about the nature of desire and devotion. He is driven to the page not by the thrill of love but by his inability to trust and fathom it, in others or in himself.

In the autumn of 2008, Trachtenberg learned that Biscuit, one of four cats living in his home in upstate New York, had vanished. He was in North Carolina on a teaching job, and his writer wife, whom he calls F., was in Europe on an artist's residency. They had left their brood in the care of a heedless sitter who "seemed a little afraid of cats." So Trachtenberg, despite being broke, bought a \$365.50 plane ticket on credit to return to New York and pursue Biscuit himself.

If this seems insane, I direct you to the book's title, which is taken from a lyric by the American poet Gerald Stern, in which a man's encounter with a feral cat leads to a rhapsody on love and regret ("I think I gave the cat / half of my sandwich to buy my life"). Trachtenberg's affection toward Biscuit — a little ginger he found "hunched miserably on a tree branch in the rain," who all her life thereafter was known for her "copious wet sneezing" — cannot be overstated. It's as if she's the best girlfriend he never had: "She was so easygoing," he writes, "a miracle of poise." When she wanders off, for "incomprehensible, unknowable" reasons, he becomes a Romantic hero possessed: "I can recount just about every step of my search for her and many of the key incidents of our relationship before then. This is more than I can do for my relationship with F."

Cats provide an ideal metaphor for F. (It's hard to imagine this memoir working had its author been a dog person.) Trachtenberg describes her as a watchful woman possessed of a "brittle cool" who prefers to glide unseen through the countryside and gazes "tensely into the night." "Her solitude," he writes, "along with her quiet and general eccentricity," causes her "social awkwardness." A glance at the acknowledgments and a quick Internet search easily betray F.'s identity, and while this may yield some voyeuristic pleasure, who she is in life is less relevant than what she represents on the page: muse and foil, an object of fascination and vexation, an impetus for Trachtenberg to investigate his own way of seeing and his limitations as a lover, a husband, a man.

Trachtenberg is an impish and intelligent essayist, his writing sinuous and sensual. One of his cats, he imagines, must have seen him and a girlfriend as "two large humans rank with sex and tobacco, toothpaste, deodorant and shampoo, their mouths brutal with teeth, their nostrils like caves." To Biscuit, the scent of the subway clinging to his clothes surely evoked "a canned stew of humans shrieking through the darkness beneath the earth."

Where his whims take him, it's usually gratifying to follow. Only occasionally does he stumble, stretching for pathos and landing in schmaltz, or indulging in disquisitions (on, say, the coupling rituals of French peasants) that read a bit like CliffsNotes history. Remarks on St. Augustine, Descartes and Derrida trumpet his bookishness, but more interesting are the passages in which he dives into the emotional and psychological Dumpster and emerges filthy and naked, primed for confessions of his own.

He confesses to envy, apathy, preening and contrivance. He confesses to insecurity: "The main thing I wanted to see was what she thought of me." At times you feel sorry for him,



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scrambling around on all fours, trying to please creatures he's unsure love him back. "I was grateful that she chose to be so close to me" — this he says of Biscuit, though it may as well be about his wife.

Unlike F., he seems to fear moving through the world unseen, to fret about living and dying without witness. "The facts of my life seem less certain to me when I am alone," he writes. His cats, and F., help fix him in space and time: "Because they are watching, my actions — and maybe even my thoughts — register on me in a way they otherwise might not." How deeply indebted he is to the objects of his devotion is reflected, with the loss of each of them, in the fervor of his lament.

In the end we learn Biscuit's fate, but other questions — will Trachtenberg find peace? will his marriage last? — are left unsettled. Trachtenberg is an extraordinarily perceptive observer of cats and persons, but to observe, after all, is never to truly know. To his great credit, he embraces this, and his uncertainty brings the profoundest rewards. Not many things are better than a kitten, but a book like this comes close.

Jennifer B. McDonald, an editor at the Book Review, is a 2012-13 Nieman fellow at Harvard University.

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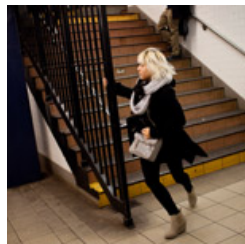


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