

BETSY
LEWIN



LIFE
WITH
CATS

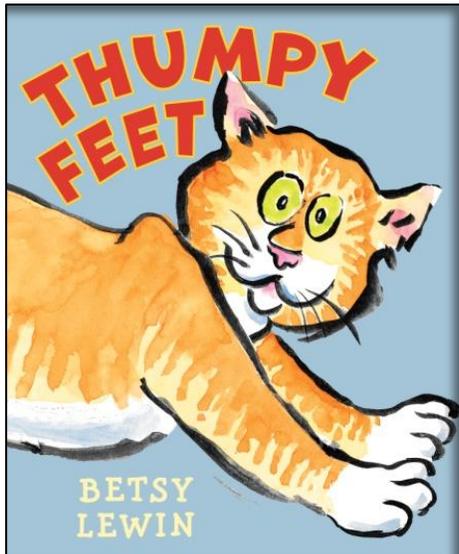
1. He stood under an old Osage orange tree, a big, handsome, blue-gray guy with golden eyes. After checking with a few neighbors, and satisfied that he was a stray, we carted him home—all seventeen pounds of him. He was the first pet Ted and I had together. We had both grown up with dogs, and this cat's nutty behavior was puzzling. We thought he was crazy, and we named him Jerky. He was a sweetheart, and we came to feel a bit sheepish about his name, but it still suited his antics. He would go racing around the apartment then suddenly fall over in a dead sleep. One time we heard our parakeet squawking his head off and caught Jerky swinging from the cage. One night he alerted us to a leak in our fish tank by stomping all over us in bed with sopping wet feet. When he died, we were heartbroken, and vowed never to get another cat; but four months later . . .
2. He sauntered over to us as we sat on our stoop, an orange tabby with a sweet face, and fell on our feet. "Please keep me," he said. We did. We named him Dundee. This time we decided it would be a good idea to have two cats—company for each other and a hedge against heartbreak for us, so . . .
3. We brought home Bones, a longhaired tuxedo cat who was about to be kicked out of a home with seven other cats and a dog. He clawed his way up one side of us and down the other. "Please keep me," he said. We did. Dundee came stifflegged down the stairs with murder in his eyes when we brought Bones home. It was war for three days, and we thought we'd have to take Bones to a shelter. Our vet's advice was to wait until the weekend to see if things settled down. They did. Twelve years later we lost Bones, and Dundee followed shortly after. No more cats! It was just too painful in the end, but . . .
4. That fall we saw a pair of black ears poking through the pile of fallen leaves in our garden. It turned out to be a little black kitten. We decided to feed him, but he would remain an outdoor cat. After a trip to the vet for the proper shots, and one hundred dollars later, we decided he would be an indoor cat. He was a feisty little guy with a truly evil streak, but we loved him anyway. We named him Slick, partly for his shiny coat and partly for his "street" attitude. One day our vet called to say he had a tabby cat who needed a good home, so . . .

5. We brought home Chopper, so named because he had a big chest and bowed front legs like a cartoon bulldog. Slick and Chopper had sort of a love-hate relationship. We would break up a fur-flying fight only to catch them later curled up together on the couch. After fourteen years Slick died of lung cancer. We were in Mongolia at the time of his death and grieved more because we were not with him at the end than we did that he died. That was inevitable. We still had Chopper, and he soothed our aching hearts. Chopper died at twenty-one or -two years old. We had him for seventeen years, and the vet had guessed he was four or five years old when we got him. We thought we might die, too. We ordered friends not to even mention cats to us. But one night we found a flyer stuffed in our mail slot. "Sweet little female tabby does not deserve to go to a shelter. Please give her a home." There was a phone number to call. We looked at each other. "Should we call?" I said weakly. "I don't know," said Ted. "It's ten thirty," I said. "Probably too late to call." "No, it isn't," said Ted, so I picked up the phone and dialed. There was hardly a ring when a voice answered "Hello?" . . .

6. The next morning a neighbor delivered Sophie in a box to our door. Now we heard the neighbor's story. She had been feeding Sophie in a parking lot. One night there was a horrific electric storm, and the neighbor was so worried about her little charge that she got out of bed at midnight and drove to the parking lot. She took a box and a pair of garden gloves in case the cat resisted rescue. She never had a chance to don the gloves. Sophie leaped into the box. She was a mess. Her fur was matted beyond brushing. The neighbor took her to the vet, then to a grooming parlor, where they shaved her except for her head and tail. When she poked her little head out of the box in our hall, we melted. She looked like a little lion with big, round, green eyes. The vet judged her to be between three and five years old. We've had her now for six years, and it's a mutual love affair.

Have we learned our lesson about "no more cats"? Probably not, but for now we adore Sophie and are thankful she's a part of our lives. By the way, "the neighbor" has become a good friend of ours, too.

Ted and I have dedicated some of our books to our cats, and a few of them have even appeared in books. My most recent book, *Thumpy Feet*, is all about Sophie.



★ "Chock-full of personality and charm, *Thumpy Feet* will be warmly welcomed by readers everywhere."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

BETSY LEWIN is the author and illustrator of many books for children, including *You Can Do It!* An I Like to Read book. She received a Caldecott Honor for *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*, by Doreen Cronin. Betsy lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, Ted Lewin, also an award-winning children's book author and illustrator, and their cat, Sophie, who supervised much of the work on *Thumpy Feet*.

THUMPY FEET
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