

## *Will a Cat save the world? (Christos Boulotis' cat stories)*

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### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Από την Αρχαιότητα ως τις μέρες μας τα ζώα παίζουν ένα σπουδαίο ρόλο στα παραμύθια. Στις οχτώ γατίσιες ιστορίες του Χρήστου Μπουλώτη πρωταγωνιστούν ... οι Γάτες. Γάτες που διαφέρουν μεταξύ τους ως προς τον χαρακτήρα τους, αλλά είναι βασικά καλά και ανθρωπόφιλα πλάσματα, «ήρωες του Καλού». Σε μερικές ιστορίες (*Ο Μητσόγατος στη λαική αγορά*, *Ο γάτος που έκλαιγε μαργαριτάρια*) απλώς βοηθούν τους ανθρώπους, αλλού, όμως, δίνουν σπουδαία παραδείγματα αγάπης και φιλίας (*Η σκυλήσια ζωή του γάτου Τζον Αφεντούλη*, *Ο ρακοσυλλέκτης γάτος Μπαμ-Μπουμ και το φεγγάρι*), μέχρι να θυσιάσουν τη ζωή τους για το κοινό όφελος (*Ο συννεφόγατος*). Μέσα από τη διασκέδαση και το χιούμορ των γατοιστοριών οι μικροί αναγνώστες μαθαίνουν τις πιο σημαντικές αξίες της ζωής. Συγχρόνως εμπλουτίζουν το λεξιλόγιό τους χάρη στην ποιητική γλώσσα που τόσο ευαίσθητα χρησιμοποιεί ο Μπουλώτης.

Stories in which animals talk are a very ancient genre, dating back to the classical past (Aesop, Phaedrus). Such stories were used to teach a moral, to satirize humanity, to allegorize spiritual or political messages, to invert hierarchies in a carnivalesque mode (Stephens 1992:132). At that time they were not meant for children: they belonged to a genre for grown-ups, that at some point has turned into children's literature. It is widely known that a separate children's literature (unknown in Classical, Mediaeval and Renaissance times) is a relatively new endeavour, beginning in the 18th century, when a wide interest in childhood arose. Children can be classed alongside slaves and animals as the recipients of the sentimentalism and humanitarianism that characterized the latter part of the same century (Cunningham 1995:61).

It is well known that animals have long played an important role in literature for children (La Fontaine, Perrault. and so on). Just as the natural world has always been a fundamental subject for children's literature as a whole, so animals have been a favourite subject in books for young audiences. Moreover, since the children have a very vivid imagination, the fantasy element (talking animals for example) is suitable for them. Becoming an adult implies being far from nature, as one's mind must be logical and rational. Adults know well the differences between animals and humans, how our species is defined. Children, on the other hand, haven't learnt these markers and rules yet: their existence unfolds on a play ground in which boundaries could potentially be trespassed. They can accept extraordinary situations, believing that they are true and real (Blount 1974). As well as analogizing children and animals, both Ch. Darwin and I. Taine compared them to primitive peoples. For Taine the mental state of a child is 'that of primitive peoples at the poetical and mythological stage': the Romantic child is reconstituted as the evolutionary child, more primitive and more poetic, literally closer to animals, than adults. The child appears then almost as a «missing link» between animal and human, primitive and civilized, but at the same time a hierarchy is assumed, inferior/superior animals, primitive/civilized man (Cosslett 2002: 479-480). Perhaps the child can reclaim as fiction what the adult has to lose as primitive superstition, because the childlike frame of mind allows a temporary regression to the primitive and poetic anthropomorphic vision of Nature. In children's stories three different types of the talking animal genre exist together (parody, moral tale, nature study): in this way scientific and evolutionary ideas about the relation of man and animals are presented, attacked, parodied. Nowadays talking animals characters struggle to become true subjects not objects. While modern animal realism eschews antropomorphis, modern fantasy espouses it, for the very purpose of combating the anthropocentrism that subscribes to an utilitarian scale of value for animals (Elick 2015: 6).

Starting from Aesop it is possible to find different animals with stereotyped characters: the

lion is strong, the wolf cruel, the fox shrewd, the dog faithful. Cats are known for their sense of independency and autonomy (like Kipling's *Cat that walked by himself*). For this reason they're not often regarded as the typical «home-pets». Their intelligence is a sort of shrewdness, aimed at achieving their goals. That's why they're considered as «negative» characters in the tales of Western countries, from Aesop (VI B.C.) to Phaedrus (I A.D.), La Fontaine, and so on. In those stories the cat - as cruel and crafty predator - stipulates a mutual agreement: the animal will hunt mice and other harmful parasites to obtain in exchange food and warm hospitality from human beings, without any affective relationship with them. On the other hand, in Eastern countries, cats have a reputation as «positive» beings, such as in ancient Indian and Egyptian religions, where we meet cat goddesses, like Sashti and Bastet.

The first example of “positive” cat character in Western countries is probably Charles Perrault's (1628-1703) famous *Puss in boots* (Blount 1974: 25). This tale, conceived during the *grande époque* (1695-1703) at the court of Louis XIV, although somehow inspired by popular tales, wanted to represent something new and amusing. This cat-hero uses his skills to help his poor master to achieve richness, fame and love. Owing to the «revolutionary» dynamics in his tale (somehow parodying aristocracy), Perrault goes much further than his contemporary La Fontaine, whose cats uphold to the stereotyped “self-centered” characters. Generally the cat is the well stocked outlaw companion (or even adversary) to the fox, like in the Grimm Brothers' tale *The fox and the cat* and in famous Collodi's *Pinocchio*.

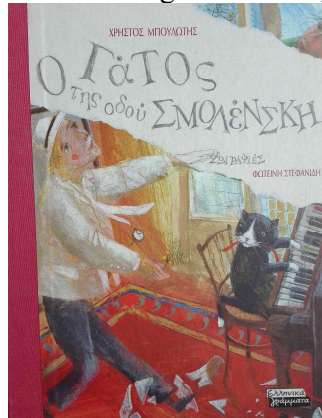
Christos Boulotis' cats differ from the typical cat-heroes, as we know them from the fairy tales, for the positive values they show, such as tolerance, self-commitment aimed at helping others, both animals (dogs, fishes, birds) and, above all, humans. Christos Boulotis is a very «cat-friendly» writer. Cats play the main role in eight of his books, whose plots are focused on cat stories. Besides this, Christos Boulotis<sup>1</sup> is an archeologist, a writer, and a poet. As storyteller he blurs the borders between reality and fantasy. His stories are inspired by everyday's reality, even when the subjects he deals with are fictional. He sees in storytelling an act of resistance, stating that he is afraid of grown-ups who don't read stories, because through the stories it is possible ‘to exorcize ghosts and turn weaknesses to strengths’. The success of his books stands on the simplicity of the language he uses, language which is free of pompous, impressive or didactic expressions, as well as on the richness of emotions for the valuable and beautiful things in life (Kalogirou 2016: 789). Boulotis' words and images come right from the heart and are intended to return back there again. Also remarkable is a very sharp sense of humour and irony, that allows adult readers to appreciate his works too.

Boulotis' cats show all the external feline features, such as fur, whiskers, ears, and cats' tastes and preferences, but they feel and act as human beings: they are capable of human feelings, and often interact with human beings in peer level relationships. The cat is a sort of Boulotis' *alter ego* (he speaks about a significant cat, a kind of cat-hero in his childhood: his father's black cat Kephelas). We find cats in many of Boulotis' children's stories, such as *The drizzle, Daub and a Christmas dream (Seven strange holidays stories)*<sup>2</sup>. However, thus far eight of his stories have as a protagonist a cat<sup>3</sup>: *The Cat from Smolensky street, Leopold the Cat at the School of Fine Arts, The Cat who “cried” pearls, Mitsos the Cat at the market, Cat John Afendulis' dog life, The romantic Cat of the abyss, The Cloud-Cat, The “ragcat” Bam-Bum and the Moon*. They are richly illustrated by favourite Boulotis' illustrators (the painters Photini Stephanidi and Vasilis Papatsarouchas), and are regarded as masterpieces in the genre. Especially Photini Stephanidi shows unique sensitivity in her ability to figurately express by tender poetical images the writer's literary message, “emphasizing its magic character” (Kalogirou 2016: 799). Boulotis and Stephanidi are just working to another book of the collection, about a cat, *who left with the swallows*.

Almost all the stories develop in a present time or very close to the present. Space is usually urban, and in most cases instantly recognizable as the city of Athens (except for the *Cat of the Abyss*, which takes place in a little town at the seaside), whereas sometimes references to streets, squares and monuments are openly expressed. As mentioned before, realist as well as fantasy features always melt together in Boulotis' stories; references to Athens seem to give a seemingly realist character to

situations which belong in fact to the world of fiction.

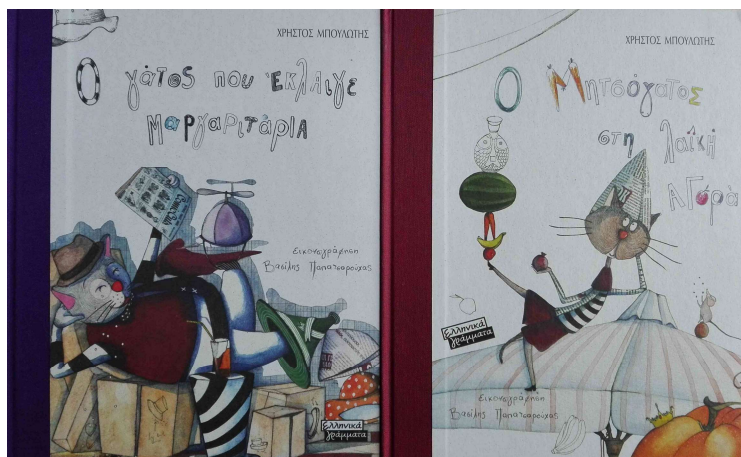
Boulotis' cats are anthropomorphic and speak the human language. No-one in the human world seems to be amazed by that. Only the *Smolensky-street cat* (the first of Boulotis' cat to appear) openly claims to speak Greek, and that is considered sort of 'weird' by everyone. Later Boulotis' cat-heroes will speak human language without causing amazement, nor explaining the reason of that.



The Smolensky street cat (or «kitten») is a nameless one. He refuses to have a name because he can't bear the restraints that a name brings along. He likes music, so he gets acquainted with a house in Smolensky street (in the district of Exarchia, where Boulotis lives) inhabited by an old lady, a piano player herself. He becomes a guest of the house and has long conversations with a man who exists in a ... portrait: the old lady's father-in-law, born in Russia, who teaches him some Russian idioms! He learns above all to play piano and becomes so skilled, that he dreams of holding a concert at the Athens *Megaron Musikis* (Palace of Music). The whole tale perfectly combines two aspects (reality and dream), which theoretically don't match. On one hand the scenery in which the story takes place (the streets of Athens, a theatre, a concert hall) are real and easily recognized, even the human characters in the story are Boulotis' acquaintance. On the other hand, as in every tale, the fantasy aspect prevails within the realistic frame: the absolute power and force of dreaming play here a very important role more than in other cat stories. Not only an animal like a cat can speak, but also some objects all around it can do the same, such as a wind-up mouse (Smolensky street cat's best friend!) and grandpa's portrait. The fantastic elements of the story are overwhelming, especially at the end, when the cat disappears. Everyone in the house is concerned about that, looking for him everywhere. Finally the old lady finds him inside grandpa's portrait, dearly rubbing his feet. From his new dimension in the framed picture, the cat explains then that he passed away without notice, in order to let his beloved ones look for him and find him. Boulotis adopts this delicate metaphor to symbolize the power of memory, the only thing capable of keeping departed ones alive. A thought that is expressed in Boulotis's favourite sentence "All we love, never dies", as love makes all possible.



The story of *Leopold the Cat* takes place at the Fine Art Academy of Athens, where Boulotis himself is a professor. Despite of the realistic setting, this history has however a more fantastic character. Leopold (whose mother is a famous singer in the Athenian quarter of Kesariani, while the father is a Spanish sailor, always away from home) wins the first place and enters the Fine Art Academy. He is both-handed and is particularly skilled in portraying mice. The pictured mice are so perfect, that one day a real mouse falls in love with one of the portrayed she-mice! She comes to life thanks to the power of love and exits the canvas. Following this example all the other (10,022!) portrayed mice suddenly exit their canvas and frames, and scatter throughout the city. The Athenians run into a panic, fearing that all those mice will end up nibbling even the Acropolis. Leopold is gravely criticized and is summoned by the Prime Minister in order to find a prompt solution to the problem. By imitating Brothers Grimm's Pied Piper, Leopold successfully returns all the mice back into their canvas playing a pipe. He doesn't forget to draw also a cat in every painting, who should prevent the mice from escaping! Owing to this, the Prime Minister rewards Leopold with the Athens golden medal. Meanwhile, the "real" mouse in love with the portrayed mice decides to go into the picture and so stay with her forever. Once more love wins!



*The Cat who "cried" Pearls and Mitsos the Cat at the market* unfold in Athens too, even if there are no street names. Arsenios and Mitsos (respectively *The Cat who "cried" pearls*, and *Mitsos the Cat at the market*) live and act in the typical everyday reality of Athens. Both of them bustle to help their neighbour, fighting against every injustice. Arsenios all of a sudden starts to weep out wonderful pearls – instead of tears – when he laughs. He decides to give them as a gift to the people, so that they may live more comfortable and be happier. A wicked mayor is envious of Arsenios' secret and sends him to jail in order to grab all the pearls and become rich. The story has a "happy ending", though: Arsenios breaks free and is acclaimed as a hero by his neighbours, while the mayor is punished. Mitsos, who likes vegetables more than fish, and often goes to the local market, becomes the hero of the neighbourhood, as he helps the market vendors in their everyday struggle for life. He plays the detective unmasking thieves and swindlers, and finally succeeds in throwing out a little wicked wizard who causes the vegetables to go rotten.

The following three books, *Cat John Afendulis' dog life*, *The Romantic Cat of the Abyss*, *The Cloud-Cat*, deal with more universal topics: friendship, love, and altruism coupled with the enrichment coming from being different.

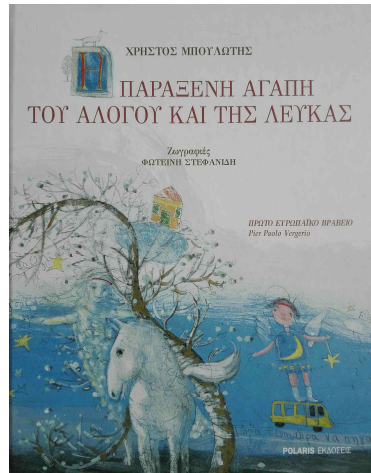


Boulotis' love for tolerance and diversity is especially well shown in his stories *Cat John Afendulis' dog life*, and *the Cat of the Abyss*. John the Cat, formerly an immigrant in America, comes back to his country and befriends with the dog Whiskey. The two of them, together, commit themselves in taking care of their neighborhood, trying to make peoples' lives happier. Their friendship is so extraordinary as to capsize the proverbial belief "enemies like cats and dogs" to "friends like John the cat and Whiskey the dog". It's an intensely poetic story, whose end is melancholic but not sad: the two friend fly out for a trip by a magical boat in the skies of Athens leaving behind a bright light: the memory light of their friendship that will shine on the whole neighborhood.





The love story of *The Romantic Cat of the Abyss* tells about the fish enemy, the fisher-cat Ernan. One day the fish kidnap the cat and take him as a prisoner into the abyss. Meanwhile, a giant crab kidnaps the daughter of the fish prime minister. Ernan rescues the princess, falls in love with her. He decides to stay and to live with her forever in the abyss, by means of a new pair of ... gills, that he magically acquires thank to the power of love! The love romance between the cat and the fish princess – a wonderful love-link between two “natural enemies” – leads us to the theme of Boulotis’ masterpiece, *The Strange Love of the White Horse and the Poplar Tree*<sup>4</sup>, that is the love between two distinctly different creatures.



The story of the *Cloud-Cat* is a real apotheosis of altruism already present in the former cat-stories. When reading we learn that “a little white cloud” appeared once “on the sky of our town” (Athens). The cloud soon turns into a real cat, a white kitten, dwelling in the city and taking part to the people life. One day he meets a crippled old lady, who is very sad because her jasmine-tree is about to die from lack of water. Deeply moved inside, the kitten squeezes himself into rain-drops eager to fade away to save the dying jasmine. He doesn’t care that in this way he will sacrifice his life as, rescuing the plant from certain death, he is happy to put a smile into the old lady’s face. After all, a little bit of him is bound to survive inside the jasmine flowers!

Boulotis’ most recent cat story, *The “ragcat” Bam-Bum and the Moon*, is perhaps the most significative: it represents the crowning of that attitude to solidarity characterizing the whole Boulotis’ narrative for childhood. The fantasy element is based upon the fact that not only animals, but also other entities (i. e. the moon) feel and act like human beings. The plot takes place in Exarchia square in Athens, a well-known point for political demonstrations and often clashes. The hero cat of the story is named “Bam-Bum” after his strange way of meowing. As a matter of fact, he has been inadvertently abandoned after his birth by his mother, who fled with her other kittens, during a political demonstration; for this reason he has not learnt to mew properly, but he just tried to imitate the bombing noise he had heard when he was born. Meanwhile he has become friend of a very nice boy who would like to take him home, but Bam-Bum declines the offer and remains independent and free, although homeless. Bam-Bum is very sensitive toward his neighbor and incline to solidarity: when he sees many people scavenging into the waste to grab any potentially useful items, he becomes a “ragcat” to help them.



In Exarchia  
carefully  
meets some nice  
another cat  
Bam-Bam. He

square (that is  
described) he  
people, and  
whose name is  
had arrived in

Athens with a refugee child, but unfortunately he has lost his companion. With the help of the moon the two cats - together with other people from Exarchia square - fly into the sky to look for the refugee child companion of Bam-Bam. Actually they find him, so both refugees – child and cat – find each other and stay together. Once more one of Boulotis' cats offers an example of philanthropy and love, that is highly formative for his little readers. During the flight all the passengers see from above someone they love (i. e. Bam-Bum's lost mother), and they are happy for that. The story ends with a short poem praising peace and freedom, Boulotis' message to his young readers.

#### Acknowledgements

*Special thanks go to my dearest friends Salvatore Palazzotto, Tzina Kalogirou and Maxine Lawson for their precious help in translating this article. To Christos Boulotis and his magical cats I just say: "Merci d'exister!"*

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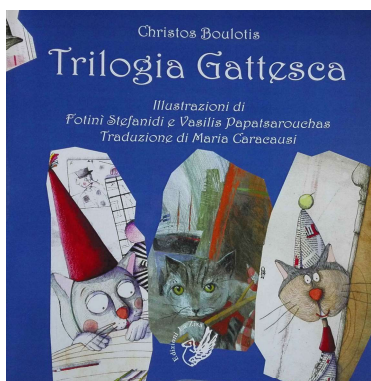
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## ΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΕΙΣ

<sup>1</sup> Born in 1952 in the Aegean island of Lemnos, he lives in Athens. He is archaeologist and professor (he has a doctorate from the Universities of Heidelberg and Würzburg and supervised at several Greek universities, as well as working at site excavations). Besides that he is writer and poet. His career as an author of children's literature took off in 1987, with the award-winning *The Strange Love of the White Horse and the Poplar Tree* (European prize of Pier Paolo Vergerio, 1989). Since then, he has published over 60 works intended for young readers, some of which have been anthologized for primary schools. Most of his writing appears in richly illustrated books and some have been adapted for the stage. ([www.ekebi.gr/frontoffice/portal.asp?page=NODE&cnode=248&pe=86&clang=1](http://www.ekebi.gr/frontoffice/portal.asp?page=NODE&cnode=248&pe=86&clang=1))

<sup>2</sup> *Η Βροχούλα, ο Μουτζούρης κι ένα Χριστουγεννιάτικο όνειρο, Εφτά ιστοριούλες γιορτινές και παράξενες*, εφτά, Athens 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Ο γάτος της οδού Σμολένσκυ*, Athens 2007, *Ο γάτος Λεοπόλδος στη Σχολή Καλών Τεχνών*, Athens 2007; *Ο γάτος που έκλαιγε μαργαριτάρια*, Athens 2009; *Ο Μητσόγατος στη λαϊκή αγορά*, Athens 2007; *Η σκυλήσια ζωή του γάτου Τζον Αφεντούλη*, Athens 2009; *Ο ρομαντικός γάτος του βυθού*, Athens 2012; *Ο συννεφόγατος*, Athens 2012, *Ο ρακοσυλλέκτης γάτος Μπαμ-Μπουμ και το φεγγάρι*, Athens 2017. Also available an Italian version of three of Boulotis' cat stories: M. Caracausi, *Trilogia gattesca*, Palermo 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Η παράξενη αγάπη του αλόγου και της λεύκας*, Athens 1987 (English version: *The Strange Love of the White Horse and the Poplar Tree* by Bruce Walter Athens 2011).