

*The Community Cat Chronicles* is a collection of linked stories about the cats, not quite house pets and certainly not strays, that live around the apartment blocks of Avenue 1. They mark and defend their territory, but share it with the human residents who devote time and resources to keeping them fed and healthy.

A tender, heartwarming portrait of a neighbourhood shared by cats and humans, *The Community Cat Chronicles* is filled with rich storytelling and vividly drawn characters, and is sure to be beloved by animal lovers everywhere.

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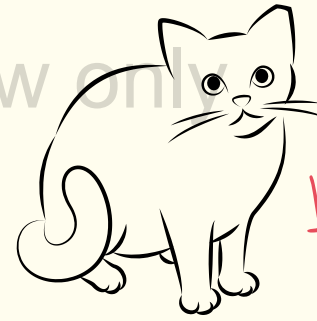


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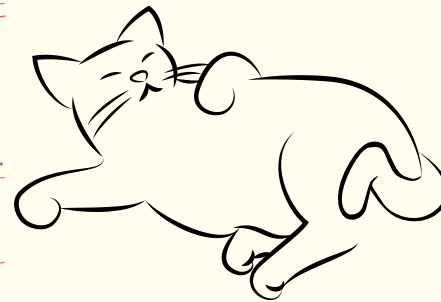
the community cat chronicles

Lachlan J. Madsen • Eleanor Nilsson

For Review only

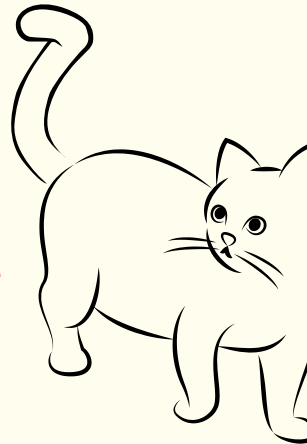


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chronicles



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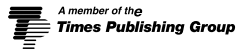
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To the cats with a thousand names  
and those who tend to them

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# For Review only

Eugene

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It all started when his mum got furious with him for playing video games almost every day and into the night. “If you don’t get off that device, I’m throwing it out the window and you after it! John, take that boy out of the house. What? I don’t care where you go.”

His stepfather glanced out the window. It was almost dusk. “He can help me feed the cats.”

Eugene’s face took on a mulish look. He didn’t like cats.

“Cats’, is it now?” said his mother. “I thought it was one cat.”

“Oh, sometimes a couple,” said his stepdad carefully, hoping to sidestep an argument.

He put three small tins in his pocket, picked up a double fold of an old newspaper and headed out the door. “Bring the torch, will you?” he called back. Reluctantly, Eugene followed him down the stairs.

His stepdad handed him the newspaper. “Fold it firmly

and then tear it into four even pieces. Put them down on the cement with a space in between each.”

Eugene wondered why grown-ups had to be so bossy, but at least his stepdad wasn't shouting at him, so he did what he was told and made a neat job of it. He backed away as the creatures came nearer. There was something creepy about the way they walked and how they held their tails.

“No need to be scared. They're not interested in you. Only in what's in my pocket.” His stepfather took out the tins. “This confident one coming now – the big black and white tom. Find a name for him.”

Eugene always said the first words that came into his head. “Mister Bubbles.”

“If you like.” His stepfather sounded surprised. He would have thought a tougher name than that. The cat had had a rough past: you could tell from the wide scars right across the skin of its back. “Now open this for him. It's Tuna Ultra Surprise. He likes this one.”

Gingerly, Eugene opened the tin, its sharp edge pulling back towards him, threatening to slice his fingers off.

“Now empty all of it out on the newspaper.”

“But if I do that he'll come for it.”

“That's the idea.” His stepdad was trying to be patient. “He won't eat you. It's the tuna he wants.”

Eugene threw it from a height onto the newspaper, some of it spattering on the cement.

His stepdad sighed deeply. “He won't think that's polite, and now you've got a mess to clean up.”

“Not if he's hungry.”

Sure enough, Mister Bubbles obligingly licked up every drop of the tuna.

Now another cat, a calico, was emerging from the shadows of the void deck. “This one doesn't always come, but when she does, I give her half.” He handed the tin to Eugene. “By the look of her she gets fed elsewhere.”

After they had offered a ginger the remaining half, his stepdad said that was enough. They couldn't support the whole neighbourhood on his wage. Eugene had noticed a scrawny tabby, hanging around in the shadows. “What about that one? It looks hungry.”

“She's too afraid to come to us. I'll feed her when she does.”

“What if she doesn't?”

“She will, when she's hungry enough.”

Eugene picked up the messy remains of newspaper and turned for home.

“We'd better not go in yet. Your mum wants you doing something that won't damage your eyes – and your brain, most likely.”

“I wonder if cats would damage *their* eyes if they were on computers a lot.” He imagined them sitting in a concentrated way in rows of office desks with high sides, partly hidden from one another.

“They’ve got too much sense. And they see better to start with, certainly in the dark.”

“Why do they?”

“We can look it up when we get home.”

They walked over to the hawker centre, searching for cats on the way.

“That one over there, the pale ginger, her name is Patience. A very still cat. And the big tabby, that’s Constable. He hangs around outside the police station during the day, as if he keeps regular hours.”

“Does he work weekends as well?”

“Seems to. What could we call the grey and white, sitting by the taxi stand?”

“Grab?”

“And the one by the yellow wall?”

“Kuning.”

“Right.” His stepfather smiled. “You’re getting the hang of it.”

Kuning left her wall and sidled up to Eugene, preparing to rub her head against his bare legs. He shied away.

“No! No!” said his stepdad. “If a cat is friendly, it must be patted. It’s good luck. It’s got a bit of fluff on its back. See if you can take it off for her.”

Kuning thought that what he was giving her was a pat, so she rubbed herself firmly against his legs.

“What if they’re *not* friendly?”

“Cats that won’t be friendly, that run under cars like that

black one over there, are dismissed and no attempt is made. They are ‘undercars’.”

Eugene laughed. He liked the way his stepdad talked about the cats, different from how he usually was. The words he used were different too. More playful, with a rhythm to them. Like a kind of bible language for cats. It was as if there were a whole world of them out there, waiting to be discovered, named and understood.

“What about the cat at our block? The skinny tabby. She’s not an undercar. Can she have a proper name?”

“You may give her a name, but it’s on standby till the cat is more welcoming.”

Two aunties, outside the hawker centre, didn’t speak English but were trying to tell them something. They were pointing to a large, dark tabby, and were scratching their arms to alert them. “Awas,” they said, pointing. “Awas” meant “warning”.

There was certainly something wrong with Awas, but his stepfather didn’t think it was because he was being “scratchy”. He seemed to be choking. Saliva was pouring out of his mouth and his eyes were wide and frightened. As he coughed on the pavement his stepdad crept up behind him and grabbed him across the stomach. “I’ll open his mouth and you shine the torch in.”

Eugene hesitated.

“Look, he’s choking to death. *Just do it!* Shine it into the corners. Now, up there. Hold it!”

His stepdad thrust two large fingers into the cat's mouth, and pulled, as gently as he could. Something came out, accompanied by a spray of blood. He checked its mouth again, and then let the cat go. It bounded under a car.

"It's too late," said Eugene, "to be an undercar. He's got a name."

"Lucky we came by," said his stepfather. He held the object up. "A fishbone! He's been living high tonight."

"Will he be ok? His mouth was bleeding."

"Yes. Well, it was sharp. It got caught on the roof of his mouth. Tore it, that's all. He'll be sore for a couple of days."

Eugene was thinking about what would have happened if they *hadn't* come by. Perhaps they should mount a regular evening cat patrol.

As they stayed out longer, well past dusk, they made many, as his stepfather called them, "false sightings": a paper bag, a black tyre, a shadow, a reflection, a sound. Just as a cat could melt away into an object, so could an object take on the shape of a cat. They had been looking for cats so much that now they were seeing them in the gaps in between. "Time to go home," said his stepdad, after they had mistaken the shadow of a branch for a thin black cat.

As they walked back to the apartment and, he hoped, to his tablet, Eugene was thinking that before tonight he hadn't exactly disliked his stepfather, but he hadn't much liked him either. Now he was wondering if maybe he *did* like him, after

all. At least he was more interesting than he'd thought. And it was good the way he'd saved the cat as if he'd known exactly what to do.



# For Review only

## About the Authors

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Photo by Paul Scobie

**Lachlan J. Madsen** is a creative writer/producer who has lived in Singapore for almost 20 years, working in television. He has considerable experience in the children's genre, including writing and producing for the Seven Network (Australia), Disney and Nickelodeon. *The Community*

*Cat Chronicles* is one of his many passion projects inspired from residing in the Singapore heartlands, while observing and tending to the beloved community cats. He has a penchant for biopics and is currently researching and writing a screenplay based on Singapore's Shan Ratnam and collaborating with Eleanor Nilsson on a TV series based on the controversial Sister Elizabeth Kenny.



Photo by Emma Fitzwood

**Eleanor Nilsson** used to work as a teacher. She has had 24 books published for children, three of which, *Tatty*, *The 89th Kitten* and *Pomily's Wish*, also feature cats. *The House Guest*, for young adult readers, won The Australian Children's Book of the Year Award, two State Awards, and was

shortlisted for the Gold and Silver Pencil Award in Holland. Several of her other titles have been translated into Japanese, German, Italian and French.