

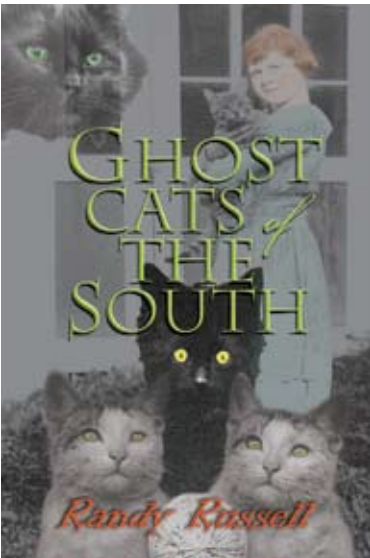


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These Cats Get More Than Nine Lives

You may have heard about Oscar, the cat that makes rounds in a Rhode Island nursing home, just like the doctors. When Oscar senses an elderly resident is near death, he curls up in bed with that person. Sure enough, within a few hours, the resident is gone. Oscar has proven so accurate over the years that staff members now call residents' families when the cat begins his vigils, to give them advance notice of their loved ones' deaths.



Don't believe it? Oscar was written up in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2007.

Randy Russell, a student of cat behavior, is hardly surprised by Oscar. Give Russell half a chance and he'll tell you about cats that can sit in women's laps and detect

that they're pregnant, cats that can sense the earliest hints of sickness on your breath, cats that can tell you're hungry five minutes before you realize it yourself.

The makers of Meow Mix recently placed ten homeless felines in a storefront window in New York City and asked passersby to vote the cats one by one out of the "house." As with any good promotional gimmick, the contest had a catch—the kitties voted out were placed in permanent homes.

Randy Russell can go Meow Mix one better. He'll tell you about the stone cottage in the mountain town of Sylva, North Carolina, where the delicious smells of baking attracted countless stray cats over the years. Every Halloween, cats would line up on the porch and select the trick-or-treaters with whom they wanted to live. When those lucky children arrived home and examined their treats, they discovered that the kindly old lady in the stone cottage had made them each a special cat cookie that exactly matched the cats that had chosen them, right down to the color of the fur.

Like the Meow Mix promotion, Russell's tale has a catch—the kindly old lady in the stone cottage was a witch.

In addition to being a student of cat behavior, Russell is a self-styled "ghostlorist"—that is, a folklorist with a special interest in ghosts.

"Sadly overlooked in published folklore are people's encounters with the ghosts of past family members of the four-legged variety," Russell says. "Conversely, visits from departed pets are easily the most common ghost experiences I hear when people share their real-life encounters with me. And cats refuse to be left out of most anything."

During his travels across the South, Russell has heard tales of a ghostly cat that digs for pirate treasure on the beach, a ghostly cat that fell into a vat of boiling mash and became part of a batch of moonshine, a ghostly cat that helped a truck driver rescue a pair of accident victims in an overturned car. Some ghostly cats are devoted enough to help bereaved parents deal with loss. Others are vicious enough to return in the afterlife to take vengeance on cat-killing lawyers and philanderers.

Not wanting such rich folk tales to be lost, Russell has collected them in a new volume called *Ghost Cats of the South*, a companion to his highly popular *Ghost Dogs of the South*.

"For me, being asked if I believe in ghosts is the same as being asked if I believe in mountains," Russell says. "Yes, of course I do. They're right there. I have collected literally hundreds of first-person ghost experiences from across the South, shared with me when a comfortable corner, and a moment's confidentiality, could be found."

As for first-person experiences of ghostly cats, Russell has found them highly unpredictable. "Ghost cats, like cats themselves, don't always behave the way we would want them to," he says. "But cats are their own reward, of course. Just ask one."

Ghost Cats of the South

by Randy Russell

October 2008 · Folklore

5 x 7 ½ · 270 pages

Paperback · \$19.95 · 978-089587-360-6