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EXPERT COMMENT: Cat Person: a creative writing expert on why you should read the short story for the #metoo age

Tony Williams, Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Northumbria University, discusses Kristen Roupenian's debut book: *Cat Person*, which has gone viral worldwide for its take on modern-day dating.

It's safe to say that when Kristen Roupenian wrote *Cat Person* she did not expect it to end up trending on Twitter and in global news outlets, or that its publication in *The New Yorker* might be rapidly followed by her signing a million-dollar deal for a short-story collection. Short story writers have learned not to expect anything by way of worldly fame and success. By breaking out into the wider cultural sphere, the story has prompted widespread debate about how we value literature and how we read it.

The success of *Cat Person* is of course bound up with its subject matter; the portrayal of a young woman, Margot, and how she is forced to negotiate the seemingly unpleasant behaviour of Robert, a man she dates. The story sparked passionate debate among readers, elevating it beyond the ghetto of short fiction to global conversations about gender, sex, violence and power.

To judge by online responses, lots of men hated the story – and lots of women loved it. In particular, many young women felt that the story articulated their own experience, and in this way a claim was put forward about the story's importance: here was a story that expressed something a lot of people had experienced, which had never been expressed in quite this way before. And wasn't this, after all, what literature was all about?

Other (usually male) readers argued that the story was a bad one, apparently

on the grounds that they disliked Margot or that the story set Robert unfairly in a bad light. It's clear here how literary judgements about the quality of a piece can become mixed up with other kinds of judgement, such as whether we like the characters, or whether the subject matter is worthy.

Readers, of course, identify with characters, but the way Cat Person has become a cipher in a larger conversation about gender politics has tended to polarise the readings of the two main characters. The story sells Robert down the river, or he's a monster. Margot is a blameless proxy for the reader, or she's a naive, self-regarding fool.

Non-binary fable

In fact Cat Person is better than that. It's able to take part in the wider conversation precisely because it doesn't take sides like that. Margot is naive and she is self-regarding – there's a wonderful, laugh-out-loud moment when Robert reveals anxiety over her high school boyfriend and she preeningly imagines telling him:

My high-school boyfriend is gay ... In fact, he's not even a hundred per cent positive that he identifies as a man anymore; we spent a lot of time over break talking about what it would mean for him to come out as non-binary.

What Roupenian is setting up is itself non-binary; not a fable of good and evil but of miscommunication – a clash between two people who don't understand each other, which begins deliciously and become creepier and creepier.

Roupenian confirms this sense of Margot's complexity when she says in an interview with The New Yorker that she has:

More genuine sympathy for Margot [than for Robert], but I'm also frustrated by her: she's so quick to over-read Robert, to assume that she understands him, and to interpret his behaviour in a way that's flattering to herself.

Conversely she says that she hopes readers lose sympathy for Robert "at the end of the story", when he calls Margot a "whore". Up to that point, we're supposed to see them both as flawed human beings, a mixture of sympathetic and less sympathetic qualities.

It's complicated

So what of the end of the story, the point which seems to resolve and even diminish those complexities? When Robert becomes abusive, our sympathy should evaporate and we're forced to acknowledge that all our sympathies should lie with Margot. It seemed to me on first reading a cheapening, a waste of the story's resonant, teasing balance of effects in favour of mere polemic. It seemed to sacrifice literary value in favour of saying something "important". And no doubt that's what some readers have been irritated by – how the ending, by condemning Robert, seems to endorse Margot and all she stands for, when the truth might be more complicated than that.

And yet. What the story is about – how women are always negotiating with men, always facing the possibility of abuse – is precisely enacted in this brutal, reductive ending. When Robert calls Margot "whore", he himself closes down our sympathies. Margot isn't perfect, but her naivete doesn't deserve this, and pales in comparison as a character fault.

The way that abusive behaviour obliterates complexity in real life is mirrored by the way it obliterates nuance in the story. Yes, Roupenian seems to be saying, this would be a richer and more fulfilling story if it didn't end this way – but things do end this way, and we need to face up to that.

This article was originally written for The Conversation. You can read the original article [here](#)

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