



James Wolcott

The Catsitters
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A Conversation with James Wolcott

Q: You've had a distinguished career as a cultural critic, so many readers will be expecting your first novel to be a grandiose work. Yet, *The Catsitters* is an intimate comedy. Why did you write this kind of novel the first time out?

A: I don't enjoy reading titanic novels that vault out of the author's ambition to prove that he rules Gotham City, the contemporary scene, and literature itself. (I say "he," because these big-statement novels are nearly always written by men.) Such fiction strikes me as more willed than imagined or experienced, and the thought of writing such a book never entered my mind—you'd have to be a masochist to spend years writing the kind of novel you wouldn't enjoy reading yourself. I wanted to do a novel that would treat Manhattan as a floating downtown art colony in the manner of Dawn Powell.

Q: You could have told this story from an ironic distance, yet Johnny's guilelessness shines through to the end. There's no hip New York gossip or jaded downtown (or uptown) nihilism, and you even have a man's love for his cat as a central theme. Why did you take the lighthearted approach?

A: I've read a lot of New York novels where every character cracked one-liners as if David Letterman's writers were supplying them material. Snappy, ironic banter soon sounds metallic (not to mention annoying), and it's not true to the way people speak and behave, even in slick circles. Reading such fiction, you'd think that the city was stocked exclusively with young millionaire stock traders in limousines, their anorectic model-girlfriends, fashion editors, dominatrixes, and, at the other extreme, heroin junkies curled up in fleabag apartments with their pre-op transsexual roommates under a single dim lightbulb. It's either decadent materialism or bohemian squalor, with little in between. I wanted to write about those in the middle, the sort of people you see in the subway studying sheet music or highlighting lines in an audition script—the aspirers who may become successes someday, but maybe not.

Q: Is it significant that Johnny is an actor by profession?

A: Definitely, because being an actor allows him to try things out and treat himself as a dramatic character in real-life situations—as raw material morphing to meet the moment. Being an actor forces him to be adaptable, to entertain other identities, and not be rigid in his responses. (In contrast to his personal life, where he's too set in his ways). I also wanted to do a novel that would be dialogue-driven rather than thick with interior monologues and descriptions of memorable sunsets; a theatrical framework enabled me to put the characters on their own stage, and pare away anything extraneous. There's also an autobiographical component. I was a theater nut in high school and thought about majoring in drama in college (not as an actor but as a tech person or director). With Johnny Downs, I was imaging an alternate life for myself: Suppose, I thought, I had stuck with drama and become an actor instead of a writer—where would I be now in that parallel universe? What kind of actor and person would I have become if I "read" people the way I devoured and devour read books, movies, TV? Johnny is the nicer version of that daydream. (His pal Gleason is the not-so-nice version.) Also: I like actors. It's perennially fashionable to knock actors for their vanity, childishness, lack of intellect (a bogus stereotype: I've interviewed keenly intelligent actors, from Kate Nelligan to Helen Mirren), and smoochy camaraderie (actors are referred to in the English press as "luvvies"); but the level of scrutiny and rejection actors receive and the naked presence they display on stage absolves them of every petty charge as far as I'm concerned. Compared to actors, writers have it easy. Actors, especially theater actors, are always braving a firing squad.

Q: Do you think Johnny is an innocent, or does he have some control over his own fate?

A: I don't think that Johnny is an innocent so much as that he's in his own protective bubble, and when the bubble bursts he isn't sure what to do, since what worked in the past is now failing him. What I hope is appealing about him is that he's willing to learn, willing to listen to what Darlene has to tell him about the other side of the equation. He doesn't try to pull some macho bluff and insist a woman accept him on his own terms or else. Like so many men, he resists change, but unlike so many men he recognizes that, as they say on Star Trek, "Resistance is futile."

Q: Darlene is such a vivid literary creation—witty, clever, a bit over the top and, of course, not really what she seems. Where did she come from?

A: I'm afraid Darlene's origin must remain a secret. I still channel her now and then, but I can't pinpoint the source of transmission.

Q: How did you come up all of Darlene's rigid and hilarious Do's and Don'ts for men?

A: Some of them come from other sources—I first heard the radio personality Barry Farber introduce the "pocketbook test"—but most come from things I actually did myself, or avoided doing, then were codified for the novel.

Q: Each woman in the novel—Darlene, Amanda, Annette, Caroline, Kris—is every different from the others. How did you, a male writer, flesh out such plausible women characters?

A: I've always enjoyed the company of women more than the company of men. Men either talk shop or sports (or, during the stock-market boom, money), and the conversations begin to sound like a slow afternoon at the barber shop. Women are natural analysts: They analyse other women, they analyse men, and analyse themselves like diamond specialists. But while I was writing the novel, I also kept in mind something a woman once told me: "No man can completely understand a woman, but we don't completely understand ourselves. Every woman is Hamlet to the nth power." This kept me humble when trying to suss out women in real life, or on the page.

Q: What does Johnny learn about what it means to be a man during the course of the novel?

A: That at the core a real man has to practice devotion. To another person, to a profession or vocation, or even to a cranky cat. It's very easy for men to hole up in themselves, but today's aging bachelor is tomorrow's muttering hermit. When I look back on my single days, I recognize how much of a miser I was, hoarding my time and privacy, afraid or unwilling to let in new experiences or people. The

result was that I missed out on a lot, safe within the tiny fortress I carved out for myself.

Q: As a cultural critic you've had the opportunity to review the work of many authors. How prepared are you to reverse the role and have your work reviewed?

A: To paraphrase Sean Penn in *Casualties of War*, everybody gets to fire at everybody else, and that's how it ought to be. In the future no one will be able to say, "You've taken shots at everyone else without ever putting yourself on the line." Because now I have. Besides, I believe that even those reviewers who come to *The Catsitters* bearing grudges or harboring suspicion will be won over by how funny Darlene, Gleason, and Downs are. Once the dialogue starts rolling, the author's identity and byline baggage will become a minor side issues, if that. This novel drives itself.