

## Episode 2.21 KITTIES!

June 8, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. Okay. Literally, how is it June? What is time? And while you're explaining things, could you also tell me what are families, and bodies, and histories and...? Surprise, I've been visiting my family this week and it's got me in a little bit of a tailspin. It's fine. That's not what I want to talk about. What I want to talk about is the fact that because I'm away from home, all of my usual stress-coping strategies aren't as accessible as they usually are, and so to help ground myself through this week of travel and visits, I'm going to tell you about one of my all time top coping strategies. Get ready. It's going to get lit. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] This week, week. I'm going to talk about cats. Can you believe that I haven't done an episode about cats yet? This is wild to me. Somebody on Twitter pointed out that in the minisode with Kaarina about the pleasures of complaining, we did both like talk about our cats quite a bit, but that wasn't a conversation about cats in general, and why cats are great, and why cats are a feminist icon. Shout out to shout out to everyone on Twitter who suggested topics for the minisode this week. And shout out in particular to my pal Lucia, who suggested Pancakes and AI, my own cats, as a possible minisode topic, which then inspired me to sort of branch out a bit. So I'm going to talk about cats in three different ways. I'm going to tell you a little bit about why and how I have cats. I'm going to talk a little bit about cats and mental health, and I'm going to talk a little bit about the weird gendered figure of the Cat Lady and my super mixed feelings about that. So let's get started. I finished my PhD in 2013 and I moved that year from Guelph to Edmonton. And one of the things I told myself when I was moving, I was finished grad school or starting a postdoc and I was telling myself that I needed to come up with better ways to sort of sustain a work life balance. And so I made two promises to myself. I told myself that I would get a pet and that I would join a choir. And there is still an episode in the future where I'm going to talk about group singing and all of the wonderful things about it. But in this episode I'm going to talk about the getting a pet thing. So I grew up with dogs. I always had dogs growing up. I lived with roommates in Guelph who had and still have a really wonderful dog. If you would like to see a series of beautiful and artistic shots of that dog, her name is Amelia and she is very frequently featured on my friend Rosa's Instagram. And so you should go to [instagram.com/RosaLoess](https://www.instagram.com/RosaLoess), L O E S S, you will look at a lot of really beautiful pictures of Amelia who is a very good dog. Anyway, I lived with that dog for almost four years. I was moving to Edmonton and I didn't have access to a dog anymore, but I also really didn't have the lifestyle for a dog. I work long hours. I travel a lot for work. It was just not feasible to sort of make that kind of commitment, and so I decided I was going to get a cat having absolutely no experience of cats. Fortunately, what I had were my friends, Claire and Marcel, both of whom have had cats for a long time and are much more experienced, and they accompanied me to the Edmonton Humane Society to find a cat. And what I did when I got to the humane society was tell them that I

wanted the most dog-like cat that they had and that I had no experience with cat owning, and so would not be able to handle a cat that was difficult, and that I needed one that would just sort of hang out in my apartment and be chill being on its own and not wreck my stuff. And they presented me with this enormous tuxedo tomcat, whose name at the time was Tux, and they said that he wasn't much of a looker and so he'd been at the shelter for some time and nobody was really interested in him. At the time he was having some gastrointestinal difficulties and he was overstress grooming and so he had a really dull coat and was missing, had bunch of patchy hair on his tail, and he was a little bit underweight, and he wasn't a particularly sort of sociable or outgoing cat, and so he just wasn't making an impression on anyone. But the volunteers loved him and knowing nothing about cats, I was like, "yeah, okay, I'll just take your word on it." So I took this cat home. I named him Al Purrdy on the spot. In case you don't know Al Purdy is a Canadian poet. Al Purrdy the cat has two R's in his last name because it's a cat pun, because I'm cool. And I brought him home. I released him out of his carrier into my apartment. I put some litter in his litter box. He went and peed in it. And I was like, "cool, great cat ownership. We've done it." And only now years later after having had Al for five years now— it will be five years this September— I realized how incredibly much I lucked out on that first cat who is indeed everything that I asked for. Just a remarkably chill and super dog-like cat who's, who is exceedingly calm and easy to care for. It was a really good intro to this species for me, because I don't think in those early days I could have handled what I got in my second cat. So very recently in November I moved into a condo which allows me to have two pets and I decided that Al would probably benefit from a companion. And so I adopted Pancakes, who I've spoken about on previous episodes as being a challenging cat. Pancakes is indeed a much higher intensity cat, probably closer to the sort of the stereotype of what cats are like. And I have also talked about my friend Ashra, who has been phenomenally helpful in helping me to sort of work out, you know, how to be a good caretaker for a cat that has higher needs like Pancakes does. So having had cats for almost five years now, and having opted to become somebody who is outnumbered by the quantity of cats they have, I guess I'm officially a cat person now. And being somebody who lives with cats now, I've discovered a number of really interesting things about them that are distinctly different from my experience of growing up with dogs. And I remember I tried to look this up so that I could share it with all of you and then I couldn't find it. But I read this really interesting article about animal intelligence years ago, and the challenges of measuring animal intelligence. And how dogs tend to measure really well on animal intelligence tests because they were domesticated so long ago that they, they sort of function on the same wavelength as humans., and so they want to please you and thus attempt to succeed during intelligence tests in a way that then causes them, you know, to, to do well on intelligence tests, right? They want to make you happy. Cats have been domesticated for significantly less time and don't operate on the same wavelength as humans in that way. So they don't have that sort of drive to satisfy whatever the human's desire is and so they tend to be really hard, it tends to be really hard to measure their intelligence. They are sort of more alien to us than dogs are. And I think for a lot of cat owners that sort of how people

articulate what they find appealing about cats. There's something about the otherness of cats that is, you know, satisfying in some way. And the article I've found that best articulates this is a recent piece in *The Establishment* by Renee Fabian called "Cats Are The Unsung Heroes Of Mental Health." And the article talks about how dogs are very frequently used as therapy animals, and that we're all sort of familiar with this idea of like, you know, bringing a bunch of puppies to a campus to help people with stress, which is great and I super, super advocate for obviously because dogs are great and puppies are the best. But in this article, the author is talking about cat owners with mental illness who have also found, who have found cats to be enormously helpful and that cats play a really specific kind of role in mental health therapy that isn't necessarily filled as successfully by dogs. So, you know, there is that basic like "a pet is a pet, is a pet," and having a pet around can make you feel less lonely. Animals boost your serotonin. Petting an animal, like actively distresses you. It's super good for your brain chemistry. It makes you feel less isolated. It's really good if you suffer from forms of depression that make it hard to get out of bed in the morning. Having an animal that your responsible for becomes that thing that makes you get up and do it. Even if you, you have to get up and feed them. You have to get up and take care of them. They will scream at you until you do. So that's you know, that's good for all kinds of animals, dogs, and cats, and bunnies, and ferrets. I'm extending this only to furry animals. Whatever your mammal of choice is. There's also something in this article about the "cuddle chemical," which is oxytocin and the pleasure, just the pleasure of like, hugging something that is furry and warm. It's just always good. But cats can be particularly good for certain kinds of therapy and that is particularly the case around boundary issues. So people who struggle with boundary issues, dogs can be— as therapy animals— are not necessarily the best because dogs generally don't have boundaries. They're super accepting and super sort of lacking in limitations with the people they love and that you know is, is necessary and good in some situations. But cats have a lot of behaviors they won't put up with. They articulate and reinforce their boundaries very clearly. That's the whole sort of aloof cat that only loves you on its own terms like, that stereotype, right? So the fact of the sort of cat's boundaries they're, they're, they're insistence on setting their own terms around how they will interact with other creatures, including you can be really good in particular sort of mental health situations. And this, this has been the case for me in really interesting ways. So Al Purrdy is a cat with very few boundaries. He's not much of a lap cat, but otherwise, you know, you can pick him up, you can squeeze him. He lets me use them as a pillow. He is a very chill, easy going, dog-like cat, which is what I asked for. He likes everybody who comes into my apartment. He's friendly, he's easy. Pancakes was feral very recently and has very clear boundaries and they are, there's just nothing you can do to force her to overcome those boundaries. If she doesn't want to engage, she is gone. She disappears. This is why getting her into her carrier is a nightmare. But her very clear boundaries, what is acceptable, what is not, what makes her feel safe, what makes her feel frightened and the way that over time, as I respect those boundaries and make her feel safe, she becomes more and more comfortable, not just with me but with other people who come into my home as well. It's such an incredible modeling of a particular form of self care,

that this animal is actually so much better at articulating and maintaining healthy boundaries than I am. And I feel like I am learning a lot from her, including the fact that it is super okay just to say no. Just to be like, "no, this makes me feel unsafe, or unhappy," or like, "it just kind of don't like it when you look at me like that, so I'm going to go somewhere else," and it's just remarkable. It's a remarkable sort of refusal to give into the social pressure of a situation. Anyway, I'm going to link to this article and I think it's a really interesting take on our relationships with cats. So despite all of this, there is still this, this really interesting kind of troubling stigma around cat ownership, particularly as a sort of gendered category, right? The Cat Lady, the association of cats with spinsters, the sort of sadness of being a woman who owns cats, and that is a thing that I find myself up moments still feeling prey to. When I told my dad that I was getting a second cat, he said, "oh, are you becoming a cat lady?" I was like, "you said that with disdain." Like that is, that's a disdainful category, and a category that in all sort of superficial and non superficial ways I very clearly fall into like a single professional woman in her thirties who lives alone and owns multiple cats. Like, I am a stereotype about a cat lady, undeniably. And I like them a lot, and I think that they are great, and then take a lot of pictures of them because I think that they're really cute. And yet the stereotype persists in a way that I don't think attaches to people who have dogs as much, including single people who have dogs. And I do think that there is something about the extroversion of dog ownership, which is to say you take your dog out in public, you go to dog parks, you go on walks, dogs require you to leave the house. Cats are associated with introversion, with domesticity, with being alone in your home, and those are all things that are profoundly more stigmatized, particularly as a sort of a sign of lack of mental health or lack of social function. And so there is a way that being a cat lady sort of marks you publicly as being dysfunctional or improperly socialized in particular ways. And I'm sort of, you know, setting a challenge for myself to try to figure out how to embrace that identity and, and not feel as stigmatized by it, while at the same time continuing to refuse to just own a bunch of shit with cats on it. Because you know, we all have to have our limits. Though, if you own a bunch of shit with cats on it, more power to you because shit with cats on it is super cute. Anyway, the obvious actual goal of this episode is for you to all send me a ton of pictures of your cats, so please send me pictures of your cats on Twitter. Tag me in the pictures of your cats on Instagram. I want to see everybody's cats. I obviously want to see your other pets as well, but mostly I want to see your cats. So cat folks out there come at me. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] All right. You know who else loves kitties and thinks they're great? Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So today I'm going to talk about boundaries. They're really, really tough to establish, and to maintain, and to value. So here is one way that I've been thinking about boundaries in my own life and I thought it might be helpful to you. So here goes. Being in your life is a privilege, not a right, and I mean that as it applies to other people. They don't have the right to your time, your attention, your company. That's a privilege that they earn. And I try to remember that boundaries are a way of saying, "here are the conditions of being with me," whether it's a friendship

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relationship, or a romantic relationship, or sexual relationship, or work relationship, here are the conditions of being with me, and if you can't meet those conditions, then you don't have the privilege of being with me. Oof! That's easier said than done. That's something I'm working on. It's something that's in flux. It's something you can work towards. You don't have to say one day, "okay, if this person does this, then it's over." But also you can say that, you can make those kinds of decisions. But I want you to remember that you get to control your body, your time, your attention, and nobody is entitled to those. They're your territory and you get to decide what happens there. So remember how valuable you are. Remember that you are worth respect, and care, and trust, and accountability. And I wish you the best of luck establishing and maintaining the boundaries in your life. If you have any tips for me because I'm still learning about this stuff, keeps me a tweet @kaarinasaurus or with the hashtag #secretfeministagenda, or send me an email. I really like your emails. K A A R I N A . M I K A L S O N@gmail.com. Have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

You can always find show notes and the rest of the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And never, ever forget to rate and review for show. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This week's episode of Secret Feminist Agenda was recorded and edited in Toronto, which is a Dish With One Spoon territory. The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]