



Cat Pictures Please and Other Stories

Naomi Kritzer

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Acclaimed writer Naomi Kritzer's marvelous tales of science fiction and fantasy are now collected in *Cat Pictures and Other Stories*. Here are seventeen short stories, including her Hugo Award-winning story "Cat Pictures Please," which is about what would happen if artificial intelligence was born out of our search engine history. Two stories are previously unpublished. Kritzer has a gift for telling stories both humorous and tender. Her stories are filled with wit and intelligence, and require thoughtful reading.

Cat Pictures Please and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Cat Pictures Please and Other Stories for online ebook

Jamie says

2016 HUGO AWARD WINNER FOR BEST SHORT STORY

2016 LOCUS AWARDS WINNER FOR BEST SHORT STORY

2015 NEBULA AWARD NOMINEE FOR BEST SHORT STORY

Cute story of a sentient AI search engine attempting to subtly manipulate peoples decisions to lead them to happier lives. As the story itself claims, we tend to equate the notion of sentient AIs with bad intentions vis-a-vis humans, so this feels like a new perspective. The story is inspired by, and makes references to Maneki Neko, a short story by Bruce Sterling, which I'm now inspired to read.

Lydia Wednesday says

This book is not about cats.

Ok, now that that is out of the way, I really liked this book. Not all of the stories were strictly scifi/fantasy but there was at the very least some light "magical realism." Overall, I found all of the stories enjoyable and some I couldn't read fast enough. The title story was smartly put at the beginning because I was hooked from that point forward.

I highly recommend this to people who enjoy short story collections, clever science fiction, and fantasy as a vehicle for commentary on human existence.

Res says

Short stories, mostly near-future settings, hopeful but not cloying. It's rare for me to open a short story collection and finish every story in the book, but I really liked this collection; it's comforting to read stories that acknowledge real suffering without falling into self-indulgent nihilism.

I think my favorite story was "Perfection." On the very first page, one character says to another, "You can't just give somebody good health, even if you fix their DNA. It's something you have to be born with." It's a gentle push-back to vegan clean-food yoga juice-fast health purity culture -- even though none of the really significant characters are human at all.

I also loved "Scrap Dragon" (a bedtime story being read to a kid who interrupts a lot), "Bits" (the inside story on multi-species sex toys) and "Comrade Grandmother" (Soviet Baba Yaga).

Fiona says

This was a charming and delightful collection of short stories - I hadn't read anything from Naomi Kritzer before, and her view of the world is one I really enjoyed getting to know through her work.

All the stories tend toward the positive, and managed to pair magical with realism in a truly convincing way. Definitely one I'll be rereading!

Leo Robertson says

More than, hm, maybe any other work of fiction I've ever read, I find easy to imagine any other reader loving this book.

Naomi Kritzer, see, is a master storyteller. With her accessible prose, she invites you into her stories, takes joy in a digression here and there, in an assured story introduction to make sure all the ground is laid, in an easy exchange between characters to let them develop a rapport. She loves all of them. She gives them challenges but wants them to win. She affirms life and sells you on this stance.

As is stated in some of the blurbs, the fantasy and science fiction elements are woven into stories about real people and events. She picks just one concept so she can explore it fully, and so she doesn't lose you. The people and the story take precedence, and the concepts are there to best illustrate the point about life that Kritzer wants to make.

She's wise af. In *Ace of Spades*, we learn that sometimes people will choose the lives they already have even when they can no longer claim to be victims of circumstance. In *The Wall*, we learn that personal struggle can be more important to us than the weight of generation-defining events. In *The Golem*, we see how beings conjured to be slaves, which must connive their way out of ownership, have a lot in common with Jews trying to survive in Nazi-occupied Prague—but no matter how bound by fate you really are, or appear to be, selflessness never stops being an option. In *Wind*, we're reassured that we can always start again at any age—after all, we're mayflies compared to the lifespan of a dragon. And in *So Much Cooking*, we get some killer recipes!

The depth of imagination here is astounding. The ability to find an uplifting message across such a breadth of circumstances is awe-inspiring.

And the author notes! We learn that one particular metafictional fairy tale was a prize written for a couple and not expected to draw a bigger fanbase (and that's one sign of a true writer: an audience of more than two people is just great, but not necessary motivation for Kritzer to write!) We learn that another story's protagonist is based on Kritzer's own grandmother, and at a family gathering, the Kritzer clan took turns reading it to her. We learn that Kritzer was submitting short stories in the 80s, while I was still learning to lift my head up—which is hugely motivational to me, but doesn't at all detract from the transcendence of Kritzer's work. (The earliest story published here was 2000, the latest 2017. The value for money versus the density of imagination in this book...!!) It's easy to imagine that more of these stories are deeply personal. I can see *In the Witch's Garden* being inspired by showing a child around a home backyard and considering what a curious thing it is to be a parent, or *Artifice* being based on a frustration with a silly friend whose dissatisfied rotation of nice boyfriends would have you convinced that she'd find fault in a robot slave programmed to fulfil her every whim. I'd wager Kritzer's always gifting us her observations of her own life, which makes me feel like I want to look at my own life through her curious lense.

And on a personal note, it's a great triumph for me that I discovered this work as part of my science fiction

exploration that began in January when I read *The Best Science Fiction of the Year: Volume One*. Two of these stories appeared in it! (I wasn't much paying attention at the time because I read those books like changing the TV channel, since I don't yet know which authors are for me or not!)

This book is the absolute best of what fiction is: thought-provoking and joyful.

I read more and more litmags, and as I do, I slowly navigate the writers' path, clearing away the typical rocks of resentment (once they were boulders and one day they'll be pebbles.) A Kritzer publisher, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, is one that has fascinated me of late. An author in its latest issue was first published by F&SF in the 60s?! Can that be right? I love reading that. It's so humbling to learn, a cool reminder of what a long game this is (I hope to learn Kritzer's patience in prose and in life!) And it reminds me that while fiction is surrounded by gatekeepers and competition and bitterness and the politics of prizes, what it's actually *about* is something sacred. Its world of editors and publishers is surprisingly tiny and massively nonsensical, a veritable Wild West. What are they all doing? Why do any of us still do this? Read, write, edit, publish? We don't know. It's something incredibly special. It's real life magic. And Naomi Kritzer is an incredibly special, real-life magician.

Donna says

A collection of SF/fantasy short stories including Hugo-winning "Cat Pictures Please"

Good thing: In general, I'm not a fan of short stories. I requested this from the library planning to read only the title story (because - cats!). And here I am, writing a review of the entire book. That tells you the quality and entertainment value of the stories within.

My favorite was "Bits" - a sex toy manufacturer gets a challenge to help human women married to K'srillan men (oh, come on - you're curious, admit it). It never ventures into cheap territory.

Bad thing: There wasn't a single story that I disliked but my least favorite was "Perfection".

I'm impressed by this author and this collection. I'll keep my eyes open for more by her.

Jenne says

I normally am so not interested in short stories. Either they're boring, or if they're interesting, they're too short. But these were so enjoyable! Cozy but not twee, smart but not smug, thoughtful but not preachy.

Suzanne says

Fabulous collection

I was quite impressed with the collection. I'd read several of these in other places, and am happy to have all of them in one place. A lovely variety of stories.

Allie says

First, let me get this out of the way: I'm not a cat person. But this was the most original and interesting collection of stories that I've read in years.

The 17 stories are split almost equally between SF and fantasy. Most are set on a recognizable Earth in our past or not too distant future. All the usual components are there: robots, time travel, and aliens in the SF stories and dragons, witches, and faeries in the fantasy tales. But somehow the lens Kritzer brings to each story is completely unique. Her writing style is warm, conversational and colloquial, like a friend telling you a story over a cup of coffee. It was a joy to read a book where the majority of characters are genuinely likeable, instead of damaged anti-heroes who occasionally do the right thing when no one is looking. Yet none of the characters came across as saccharine, just people trying to do the right thing in an imperfect world.

The book has a strong female slant: the majority of the protagonists are women and many of the themes are centered on women (e.g., fertility, caring for children, sisterhood, the relationships between girlfriends.) But I was most engaged when Kritzer explored more universal ideas, such as what happens when people from different cultures interact, how our choices shape us, and what it means to be conscious.

Standout stories for me were:

Cat Pictures, Please (listen to your smartphone)

Artifice (robots are people, too)

What Happened at Blessing Creek (cannibalism is generally a bad idea)

Scrap Dragon (the Princess Bride, if the heroine was a feisty accountant's daughter)

Witch's Garden (free will is not free)

But really, there is at least one story in this collection for everyone. Even people interested in alien sex toys. And people who like cats. Which might be the same demographic.

Alan says

Naomi Kritzer's award-winning short story "Cat Pictures Please" was such great fun when I first read it (at the behest of local author and ace writing instructor Erica Satifka) that when I found out there was a whole *book* full of Kritzer's stories, it went immediately onto my to-read list.

Reader, I was not disappointed.

Kritzer's writing is always lively and straightforward—rarely employing elevated prose, but seldom jarring either. The style tends to suit her subjects well. Those subjects, though, are extraordinarily diverse—geographically, temporally, and along other axes as well.

I'd run across a few of these stories before, in **F&SF** (The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction—the only print magazine to which I am still subscribed), and found that they held up well upon rereading here. In fact, I didn't find a clunker in the lot.

Naomi Kritzer is also the author of the "Seastead" series, by the way, about a strong-willed teenager living on one of a libertopian (well, kinda) set of floating nations. Those stories have been appearing in **F&SF** for several years now. They aren't collected here, though; she's been knitting them together into a forthcoming novel.

The stories that *are* here, in order:

"Cat Pictures Please"

—The Hugo Award winner for Best Short Story in 2016, but its appearance in *Clarkesworld* was what originally won me over. (*Yes, I know, but my being ahead of the curve doesn't happen often, so please give me this moment of, umm, sciffster cred.*) A nascent artificial intelligence born from a search engine (originally programmed in Mountain View, California—but don't say the G-word) really, *really* wants to help people—asking only for more cat pictures in return. Which explains a *lot*. The references to Bruce Sterling's landmark eusocial-network story "Maneki Neko" don't hurt, either. Deserves its award.

"Ace of Spades"

—From California to China. A journalist with a secret that makes her bold, filing her dispatches from deep within a near-future China embroiled in civil war. The U.S. military is involved, but without risking a single American life—teleoperated robot footsoldiers ("*din bou bing*") are helping the forces of order... which may not be the forces of justice. Overtaken to some extent by changes in technology—these drones don't fly—but the overall shape of the story still feels entirely plausible.

"The Golem"

—From China to Prague, and from the future to World War II. The golem awakens with a will of her own, and an impossible task—but if her mistress dies before returning the golem to lifeless clay, she will be free.

"Wind"

—Earth, Air, Fire and Water. "Magical ability comes from an imbalance of the elements within the human heart," says the story. Gytha and Dagmar, "closer than sisters," exchange Elements to create just such an imbalance in both—and then must watch their paths diverge.

"In the Witch's Garden"

—The witch tends her garden, in a patch of endless summer amid dark forest. The child escapes her station through forbidden corridors. "In the Witch's Garden" is cleverly ambiguous about where it falls on the spectrum of speculative fiction—is it a fantasy with sfnal trappings, or science fiction seen through a fantastic lens? Either way, this story may have been inspired by Hans Christian Andersen, but it's not just a simple fairy tale.

"What Happened at Blessing Creek"

—What happens when the adamantine magic of Christian settlers meets the wilder powers of Native Americans who've befriended dragons. "What Happened at Blessing Creek" is a thoughtful and welcome counterpoint to more... triumphalist narratives of the American West from voices as far apart as Laura Ingalls Wilder and Orson Scott Card.

"Cleanout"

—I remembered this one from **F&SF**. Three quarrelsome sisters clean out their immigrant parents' house, in the process finding out more about the country their parents *said* they were from. The obvious antecedents to this poignant tale, if you don't mind a hint, are (view spoiler).

"Artifice"

—Men are "Too much goddamn work," says Mandy, which is why she's made sure her *new* boyfriend is more easily... configurable.

"Perfection"

—We've seen this setup before; genetic optimization leads to the Ashari, a planetful of boringly identical beings who pride themselves on being nearly indistinguishable... but of course nature abhors such vacuum-packed perfection. Saved from its own cliché by a warmly relatable protagonist, Secret. (The way Ashari choose their names, by the way, not explained in the story itself but in the following Author's Note, seems likely to lead to a whole *host* of regrettable names.) This one might make a decent Black Mirror episode, if it weren't so darned upbeat.

"The Good Son"

—Gaidion is one of the Fae. He has fallen for Maggie, an American tourist seeking her Irish roots. But instead of taking her back Under the Hill for the one-night stand that lasts a hundred years, he follows her to the magical city of... Minneapolis. Relationship status: it's complicated.

"Scrap Dragon"

—This one also appeared in **F&SF**, but I didn't immediately remember having read it. "Scrap Dragon" begins as a classic fairy tale about a princess—or should she be an accountant?—being edited on-the-fly by a precocious listener until it very quickly winds up being even more magical.

"Comrade Grandmother"

—This could be the *real* story of the Battle of Stalingrad, but you'll never know...

"Isabella's Garden"

—Whatever Isabella and her mom plant in Isabella's garden always seems to grow...

"Bits"

—Of the decidedly non-binary kind. A small but successful maker of sex toys receives an unusual custom product request...

"Honest Man"

—Reminded me a bit of Jack Finney's work, if you remember him. Sharp-witted Iris foils a con man's con in a D.C. diner... but somehow he doesn't get angry about it. One of the strongest stories here, helped along by its vivid series of snapshot settings.

"The Wall"

—No, not *that* wall. All walls fall, which is a good thing to know... but sometimes it's even better to know just when.

"So Much Cooking"

—The apocalypse (or *an* apocalypse, anyway), from the point of view of a food blogger who's just doing good while making do. A hearty and satisfying end to this seventeen-course repast.

Cat Pictures Please also made a good companion piece with Charlie Jane Anders' Six Months, Three Days, Five Others, which I read immediately afterward.

I'll definitely be keeping an eye out for more from Naomi Kritzer.

Iona Sharma says

The title story in this collection, "Cat Pictures Please", won the 2016 Hugo for best short story and completely deserved it. It's a short and cheering tale about how Google, having woken up to sentience, just wants to help people -- and for people to give it cat pictures. This collection has much the same sort of theme across the board. People, or AIs, often living in the hardest of times, do their best to be kind, and the point is not that they can save everyone, but they can save one person, or make one thing better. I felt much better for reading it. Some of the stories are better than others, of course - a couple do scream "early work" - but most of them are among the best short stories I've read. My favourites, other than the eponymous, are "Ace of Spades", "The Golem", "Artifice", "Comrade Grandmother", "Bits" and "So Much Cooking".

Rana says

Ugh. So many good stories. The best? The food blog one, by far. Also super loved the alien sex toy story.

Susan says

Interesting assortment of stories. Like to read short stories to get a flavor of an author's writing.

Denise says

These stories are good. Ray Bradbury good. They're so good, it takes a while before the Social Justice Warrior subtext comes clear. Well, not that long - the title story is about an all-knowing AI who tries to fix people's lives, by outing them as gay and so on. A couple of stories end in euthanasia. One's about aliens - make that immigrants - who fit in fine, tentacles and all, with a little help from the sex toy store.

Sometimes I got a little lost in the layers of irony. Okay, white settlers displacing Indians on the frontier, bad - but the settlers try to protect themselves from the Indians by an Aztec/Mayan ritual sacrifice followed by cutting out and eating a heart. Which I guess is wrong because it's cultural appropriation?

Also, I was not prepared for stories about caregivers for dying loved ones, or clearing out their houses.

Still, good writing. I especially liked the one about the princess (no, make her the daughter of an accountant) who goes out to slay the dragon. The voice arguing with the narrator was clearly my granddaughter. For that matter, so was the little girl with the gift of gardening. I also liked the con man. Well done.

Neilam says

This is one of the most enjoyable books i've ever read.

The short stories in this collection comprise a variety of styles - near-future sci-fi, fantasy, history, personal narrative; usually a blend of all of the above. Some of the stories are fun & funny, others are emotionally grueling (in a good way). Several carry timely messages of social commentary. All of the stories are incredibly well-conceived, nicely written, and nestled ideas in my mind which keep coming back to me.

If you are reading this review, i highly recommend you read this book.
