



Natsume Soseki's Cat

Interview and text by Yajima Yukihiro, non-fiction writer,
Commentary by Nakajima Kunihiko, Emeritus Professor, Waseda University

You might say that the blossoming of modern Japanese literature began with Natsume Soseki's pet cat.

During the summer of 1904, a cat wandered into Soseki's home in Tokyo's Sendagi district. Although Soseki's wife Kyoko disliked cats and immediately threw it out numerous times, when she wasn't looking the cat would come back, curl up on a wooden rice tub, and go to sleep. One day, Soseki finally noticed the cat and said, "Since it keeps coming back, why don't you let it be?"

Having thus received the seal of approval from the master of the house, the cat became the official Soseki pet. Another stroke of luck for the cat was something said by an elderly masseuse who came regularly to visit Soseki's wife. The old lady stared at the cat, which had stripy black grey fur from head to tail, and muttered that: "This is a remarkably well-omened cat." From that moment, the cat's treatment changed completely, and it was served bonito flakes on top of his food.

Then, several months later, Soseki was asked by Takahama Kyoshi, editor and publisher of the haiku literary journal *Hototogisu*, if he would write something for the magazine. At that time, Soseki had returned from studying in London and taken up a teaching post at the Tokyo Imperial University and the First National College in Tokyo; he was beginning to feel a strong urge to express himself.



Natsume Soseki (1867 to 1916)

Born in Tokyo. Following spells teaching in Matsuyama and Kumamoto, studied in Britain. On his return, took up teaching post at his alma mater, the Tokyo Imperial University, then became a writer. His best-known works include, *I Am a Cat*, *Botchan*, *Kokoro*, and *Light and Dark*.

Source: *Soseki no Omoide*/National Diet Library, Japan

Nakajima Kunihiko, an Emeritus Professor of Waseda University, explains what happened.

“At the time, Soseki was living with a pet cat, and he came up with the idea of writing a novel from the perspective of that cat. It would enable him to view himself from the outside, objectively; it was a major shift in his thinking. The result was his famous work, *I Am a Cat*.

Soseki’s debut novel was published in *Hototogisu* from January 1905. Original, entertaining and intelligent, it startled the public. The novel had an overwhelmingly positive reception, and although only one story had been intended, Soseki wrote installment after installment, eventually publishing three volumes. At a stroke, Soseki had become darling of the literary world.

“Thanks to the appearance of this work in January 1905, modern literature in Japan itself was invigorated,” says Nakajima. “The literary world started to become very active, and Soseki’s work was followed by Shimazaki Toson’s *The Broken Commandment*, and Tayama Katai’s *Futon*.

“You might even say that the cat who wandered into Soseki’s house invigorated modern Japanese literature,” notes Nakajima.



Commentary: NAKAJIMA Kunihiko, Emeritus Professor, Waseda University

Born 1946, Tokyo. Completed the doctoral course of the Waseda University Graduate School of Letters, Arts and Sciences. Managing Director of the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature. Publications include: *Sensitivity in Modern Literature*; *The Letters of Natsume Soseki* (with wife, Nagashima Yuko) and *Picture Postcards Loved by Natsume Soseki* (with wife, Nagashima Yuko).

Writing the “feline death notice”

Although the hero of *I Am Cat* passes away in the novel’s final installment, the original Soseki pet cat was still alive at the time. The cat moved house twice with the Sosekis, and even lived with Soseki at his final abode, the “rural retreat” in Waseda Minami-cho. The cat

saw Soseki end his teaching work and become a full-time writer, before passing away on September 13, 1908.

In spare moments while busily producing newspaper serials, Soseki sent a “feline death notice” to his literary followers, and erected a grave-stone in his garden. On the stone was written the following line of poetry:

“Here lies a thunderbolt in the night.”

Soseki may be comparing the eyes of the cat in the dark to lightening or, as befits the cat of *I Am a Cat*, he may mean that the cat sends thunderous warnings towards human society. Either way, it shows the deep sorrow that Soseki felt at the death of a pet that had become one of his family.

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