**Kater Murr**

Going public can occasionally earn you strange and absolutely unexpected bonuses and honors. Listen to this:

Once upon a time, as they say in fairy tales; es war einmal, as the Grimm Brothers said in the original German, I returned home from my office and passing through the front door, I found behind the screen a quite large package that had been left by the postman. Since I was not expecting anything, I played the guessing game of "what could this be; who could have sent it?" First, I gathered the external evidence:

Stamps: many -- German.

Return address: a city in Germany that I did not immediately recognize.

Sender: A name that I did not recognize.

Size: about 10" x 13 "

Weight: fairly heavy.

Packaging: tight. No jiggling.

All this evidence suggested absolutely nothing to me. Opening the package with more than a little curiosity and caution (it was during the time that mail bombs were becoming frequent,) I found inside a coffee-table-sized-and-quality volume entitled:

E. T. A. Hoffmann

*Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*

Mit M. M. Prechtls *Galerie berühmter Katzen*

(Verlag C. H. Beck, München c. 1996. 375 pp.)

In English: Hoffmann's *The Life and Opinions of Murr, the Tomcat*, illustrated by the artist Michael Mathias Prechtl, and containing his *Gallery of Famous Cats*. Enclosed with the book was a card:

"Best regards from Murr to Thomas Gray and Philip J. Davis, M.M.P."

A gift from a person I did not know at all! And a real gift; not just another calendar or 100 address stickums from a charitable, non-profit outfit.

The book itself was a splendid and costly example of book production -- large type, a gallery of twenty four full page color illustrations of famous cats of legend or of reality together with their creators or owners, and in addition, with numerous black and white in-text illustrations of characters of the story. In short, a handsome gift for someone who loves cats and loves the Tales of Hoffmann, for it was that Hoffmann, the Hoffmann of the opera by Offenbach, of the ballet Coppelia -- the mechanical doll -- by Leo Delibes, whose novel *Kater Murr* was here enclosed. But nota bene: Kater Murr is not a children's book, but rather the life and opinions of the remarkable Hoffmann, a musician, a symphonic conductor, a jurist, as well as an author and a fantasist.

The book arrived at my door at a time when I was very busy and I set it aside. A few weeks later, I picked it up and examined it carefully. What a surprise! There, together with Rembrandt and his cat, Dürer and his cat, Collette and her cat, T. S. Eliot and his cat, Toulouse-Lautrec and May Belfort's pussy cat, Schrödinger's gedankenexperimental cat, together with seventeen other world notables and their cats, I found myself depicted in academic robes and introducing to the world Thomas Gray, a cat of my fictional imagination. On the reverse side, artist Prechtl wrote a précis of the story I'd written together with the critical judgement

"Die geistreiche, wundersame Geschichte sollte Pflichtlektüre fuer all Liebhaber philosophische Katzen sein."

(This wonderfully witty and spirited story should be required reading for all lovers of philosophical cats.)

Here was one of the finest plugs I've ever received for my books. To explain what was going on, I have must back up a bit. Through my profession as mathematician, I got to know a number of the Cambridge (England) mathematicians, in particular, Prof. Michael Powell of the Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics. Through my connections with Mike, who was a Fellow of Pembroke College, I got to stay on a number of occasions in one of the Guest Rooms of Pembroke. Invited to lunch from time to time, invited to High Table, I got to know a number of the Dons, the Dean, the Bursar, the Head Porter (a most important fellow) and their peculiar ways and attitudes.

Furthermore, and this is most important for my tale, I got to know Thomas Gray, the College Cat. Thomas, who in point of fact was a female, was named by the undergraduates, in ignorance of her true sex, after the famous poet Thomas Gray who for a long while was a Pembroke Don and roomed in the college.

Thomas Gray the cat, was midnight black with a few white splotches, and at the time I first met her had already had several litters of kittens. She was not exactly a friendly cat; admittedly, she was very well fed by the students and the kitchen staff, but given to moods after the manner of cats. She could sometimes be found on the second floor (American notation) where she had a box outside the Bursar's Office; more often just lying about in the Quad.

Returned home to Providence, an idea for a mild spoof on Cambridge Academic life took hold of me, and in 1988 *Thomas Gray, Philosopher Cat*, appeared with satirical illustrations by Marguerite Dorian.

Cat literature is enormous; a good book store may stock several dozen cat titles and even devote a special section to them. Despite this stiff competition, "Thomas Gray" made a bit of a splash, both in American and in England, and was translated into several languages including German. One of the prominent Sunday London papers got wind of *Thomas Gray,* sent their reporter and photographer to Cambridge to capture the real world Thomas. Held in the hands of the Senior Tutor, a reluctant Thomas appeared the following Sunday in a full page spread in full color.

Additional sequellae:

Native English authors and photographers jumped on my bandwagon and within a few years there appeared in the U.K. individual photo books (minimal textual material) of

University Cats

Cathedral Cats

Cats in Stately British Homes

Pub Cats

I wrote a follow-up entitled *Thomas Gray in Copenhagen.* Despite an enthusiastic review in a Danish paper by the leading Hans Christian Andersen scholar, my tale went nowhere. Perhaps I selected the wrong publisher: one whose list was not cat-friendly.

Whenever I revisited Pembroke College, I was told privately that, the Dons remarked behind my back: "Ah, our cat man is back." I could easily elaborate on the multiple motivations behind this epithet, but I will disdain.

And then, there came the day when a letter reached me "written" by the real Pembroke College Cat.

Dear Professor Davis:

I am writing to protest against my being called an imposter. I am outraged! I am the real Thomas Gray, the Pembroke College cat. I have been honored on a two-page spread, full color, in the Sunday Telegraph; I am visited by scholars and annoyed by tourists who are interrupting my siestas and embarrass me with their cooing and calling as I queue at the fish market.

Obviously, I am famous, but I have never coveted this fame. I am only enduring it with patience. Worse than anything else is my old and deep embarrassment -- now made public -- of having been given a male's name. If this is not male chauvinism, what else would you call it? A bunch of world famous scholars who, apparently, were unable to handle the bot of research necessary to establish the sex of a cat and name her properly!

I have not read your book and do not intend to do so. I am not a literate cat, not even a philosopher. It's all advertising. I have only seen the illustrations, and there isn't a single one which interested me: people never seem to eat anything exciting, you can't even tell what is in my dish.

I advise you not to try my patience again.

(Signed) The real Thomas Gray

I've made a stylistic analysis in the manner in which the *Bible*, Homer and Shakespeare have been analyzed, but there was insufficient text here for me to make a firm determination of who sent me the letter.

Finally -- but there is never a guaranteed `finally' once your stuff gets on the shelves --- about six years after its appearance, the fictional Thomas Gray made their appearance, as I have already mentioned, in the splendid edition of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*, illustrated by Michael Mathias Prechtl.

Who is Prechtl? A bit of scrounging around yielded part of the answer: a German artist and book illustrator with many shows and prizes to his credit. His work -- what I've seen of it, is heavy, realistic, colorful, satiric; obviously the artist loves cats and knows his cat legends.

Generally speaking, I have no use for lists of the "best this and that" : the five best restaurants in the world, the ten most important inventions; that sort of thing; but when one is singled out as the creator of a famous cat, what can one do except thank the list-maker graciously, and tell one's publisher. Perhaps the publisher can run it for a touchdown.

But why Thomas Gray, my Virtual Cat? And why me? What was the connection between my experiences and his? Thus, there are things that one might know and for which there is no real reason to know.