

Melissa Nelson

College Reading and Writing

Kim Groninga

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### **Cyrus, Are You Siamese?**

*We are Siamese if you please; We are Siamese if you don't please; We are former residents of Siam; There are no finer cats than we am; We are Siamese with very dainty claws; Please observing paws containing dainty claws; Now we lookin' over our new domicile; If we like we stay for maybe quite a while.*

These lyrics from *The Lady and the Tramp* (Disney) bring to mind those two naughty Siamese cats, Si and Am, as they examine their new surroundings. When reading it, one can't help but hear it in their sing-song voices. This is often an accurate description of the silly, naughty, fun, loving, and talkative breed.

Several years ago, after the tragic death of a family friend, I was adopted by a Siamese cat. The family friend would be considered an animal hoarder today. After her death, my parents took in all of her cats to help find them homes. I had recently found my home empty of any animals, and I decided to take one of the cats. When I went to look at all the cats, they had been sequestered away from my parents' cats in my old room. I walked in, prepared to grab a kitten and leave. Instead, I was greeted by a yearling Siamese who, while screaming at me, attempted to climb up my legs using *all* of his claws. So, to prevent the shredding of all the skin under my jeans, I picked him up and gazed into his eyes. His eyes were a bright blue and slightly crossed. He stopped crying and started to purr as I held him. I took him home with me that day. I had intended to take a kitten, but instead I took the yearling that ripped my heart out with his claws, and voice, but gave me his heart with a purr.

I named him Cyrus (pronounced *SEER-us*), because anyone who knew his first name was gone or unable to tell me his name. He was very silly and did anything to make me laugh. When we first were living together, he had to be as close to me as possible at all times. He hated being left alone, and more than once I would come home to some minor havoc he had done while bored. Once, he chewed up the back of a pair of shoes I had. By that point, I had to get him a companion for when I was gone. I brought over one of my mom's cats. With another cat there he was happy, and stopped eating my shoes if I left them alone for too long.

Cyrus demands attention, and he loves when I'm in bed watching TV or reading. To him that's our cuddle time. He does what I call "squishing." He kneads my bare skin, and I move him off of me onto a super-soft, oversized stuffed animal that I have. He kneads the animal and slowly heads back to my skin again. Once he hits my skin, I move him back like a typewriter at the end of the line. Sometimes he will rub his nose onto the fuzz of the animal and suck on it. I have always found that strange, but I assumed that it was because he had been taken from his mother too early.

Cyrus is now about 13 years old and still does everything he can to make me laugh. He talks to me as much as a person would and tells me all about his day. He hates closed doors, drawers and cupboards. I can't shut doors inside the house, or I have paws sliding under the door grabbing at things until the door is opened again. He refuses to leave cupboard doors closed. Once, while staying at my parents' house, he gave my mom a *Sixth Sense* moment (Shyamalan). She walked into the kitchen, and ALL of her bottom cupboard doors and drawers had been pulled open and left that way, with Cyrus was nowhere to be seen. He is the strangest cat I've ever had, and I love his quirky personality.

#### **Why I Want to Know More**

Cyrus has no idea that he's a cat. He's always determined to drink out of my glass and eat what I'm eating. I have always wondered if his strange traits are part of his breed, if we have a special bond, or if it is just that he is a special cat. While I was debating what topic to write about, Cyrus joined me to tell me all about his day. I decided to investigate if he was a characteristic example of his breed, or just plain weird.

I would like to know more about the history, lineages, and personality of Siamese cats. I acquired my Siamese through a series of sad events, so I don't know where he came from originally, and have no way of finding that out. So learning more about the breed is the next avenue.

#### **What I already know**

Siamese cats have been around for a very long time. They are a breed of cats that have specific markings. Their bodies are white, cream, or even a light gray with "points" on the face, feet, ears and tail. These points can be designated as Seal Point, Blue Point or Lilac Point. I believe there are more than those, but these are the most

common and the ones I know the name of. The kittens are born completely white and after a few weeks they darken.

Siamese are a very vocal breed and often talk to their owners and other animals. Cyrus tells me how he's feeling at every chance. Siamese are very playful, and often live very long lives. I have heard they often get cranky as they get older at everyone but their "person," but I have had no experience with this. My cat loves everyone who visits, often strolling through for admiration and showing off his skills on the cat tree. People who hate cats adore him; he has a sweet disposition that makes others want to cuddle with him.

They have two basic head shapes, the "Wedge" and the "Apple" shape. Wedge-shaped heads are the extreme look of the Siamese, but they are actually the newest design of the cats. The extreme look is more often seen in images of the Siamese. Apple-headed Siamese cats have a head more like the rest of the cat breeds. Cyrus is closer to the "Apple" shape than the "Wedge."

### **The Search**

When I decided to find out if Cyrus was a typical example of the Siamese breed, I realized that I would need to begin by finding out more information about what "typical" was for one. I wanted to look into their history, breed standards, and personality characteristics. So with those three basics in mind I headed for the library.

I spent a lot of time searching the web. I started looking for a purebred cat association. I'm familiar with the American Kennel Club, the major purebred association for dogs, but I didn't know who to turn to for cat breed information. I found a cat breed association called the Cat Fancier's Association (CFA), and I decided to work with this as my main source of breed standards. They are often a reference for other web sites and are the largest cat association in America. I found a lot of websites that were dedicated to the Siamese, but a large proportion of them were run by people, rather than reputable sources or organizations. A lot of the sites pointed me back once again to the CFA site.

As I was watching videos and searching for visual information relating to the Siamese, I found a *Cats 101* episode. This show on Animal Planet gives highlights of four different cat breeds, including health, characteristics,

what the best homes for that breed are. It also gives a glimpse into what it would be like to own one of the breeds highlighted (*Cats 101*), or in the case of a Siamese, *being* owned by one.

*Cats 101* had a segment on the Siamese, and in it they showed examples of what the coat colors were. I had thought that one color looked different than what they had shown (*Cats 101*), but I wasn't sure if I was wrong or if Animal Planet had used wrong information. So I went to find a good source to show *exactly* what the coat colors were, and how to tell them apart. The CFA site led me to a club called the National Siamese Cat Club, or NSCC, and is recognized by the CFA. An article, by Betty White, showed clear examples of coat colors. (White 2).

While searching for books in the library, I had a hard time finding ones that were dedicated solely to the Siamese. References within cat breed encyclopedias had a lot of really good general information, but I found the same information over and over, with only a few variations. Because of the repetitive information, I went back to the CFA for more breed specific information.

I next looked for journal articles that related to or involved the Siamese. I found several great articles, and one that included how cats were historically "domesticated" (Driscoll) I also found articles that echoed my own feelings on how Siamese cats seem to not realize that they are cats, because in their own minds, they are as human as their people (Helgren 2). I found it amazing to see the sentiments I use to describe Cyrus reflected in someone else's article.

While going through the piles of information, anecdotes, videos, and photos, I found myself comparing them all to Cyrus. I found a lot of information that I already knew and a lot that I didn't know.

### **What I Learned**

Siamese cats originate from Siam, in what is now Thailand. They were palace and temple cats who lived in sacred temples as guards, mousers, and were also revered as reincarnated souls of royalty (Fogle). The kings and temples were the only ones allowed to have the animals due to this devotion. In the 1800's, the royalty gave the cats as gifts to visiting dignitaries (*Cats 101*). They began to take over the world after that. They were shown in 1871 at a cat show in Britain, and stole hearts from then on (Fogle). The "Tamra Maew" or "Cat Poems" is an illustrated manuscript believed to have been written between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Thailand (Clutterbuck). It illustrates and describes several different cats, including the *Wichien Maas* or Moon Diamond.

The Moon Diamond illustration shows a cat with “Eight points of pure black” on a coat white as the moon (Clutterbuck).

Currently there are two body shapes of the Siamese, the Modern and the Traditional, or Apple-Head. The CFA only recognizes the Modern Siamese as show-worthy, and disparages the Traditional Siamese lines as a “sure sign of mixed ancestry, and indiscriminate breeding” (White 1). The Modern Siamese is described as long, lean, svelte, and with exaggerated facial features (Siamese Show Standard). They have very large ears, tilted bright blue eyes, and a wedge-shaped head that sits on a very long tubular body (Ardry). The Traditional has a larger head, with the same blue eyes and color points. The facial features are not as exaggerated, but still carry the expressions of a Modern (Helgren 2).

One of the most interesting things I found about Siamese cats is why the kittens are born white. Siamese colorations are derived from genes synonymous with albinism (*Cats 101*). The coloring is from an enzyme that restricts color to the parts of the body that are farthest away from the heart (Fogle). So the coldest parts of the body are darker because they are *colder!* Newborn kittens are pure white because the womb is a warm environment. The colors will begin to develop after a few weeks in the air. Their brightest contrast of white and color will happen around one year of age. As they grow older, the points and body will darken (Simmons). Also, the colder the environment, the darker the points will be (Helgren 1). I have noticed that Cyrus will get darker in the winter. I had always thought it was lack of sunlight, but in reality, it is lack of *warmth!*

The Cat Fancier’s Association recognizes four standard coat colors. They are Chocolate Point, Seal Point, Lilac Point, and Blue Point. There are eight “points” on a Siamese are the mask on the face, feet, legs, tail ears and should all be the same shade (Siamese Show Standard). In Thailand, they argue that the genitalia should be recognized as the ninth point (Crossette). Seal Points should have a light brown/cream with “dark seal-brown” points (Helgren 1). The Seal Point Siamese were the first Siamese color recognized, and all of the rest of the colors were recognized as standards after it (Verhoef-Verhallen). The color for a Chocolate Point should be ivory with “milk chocolate” for the points. The Lilac and the Blue points are actually the same color, but the Lilac is a

mutation or dilution of the Blue (Helgren 1). The Blue is a white bodied cat with slate-grey coloring on the points. The Lilac is shining white, with very light grey points. The Lilac has almost no color on the points (White 2).

I have always called Cyrus a Lilac Point. He has a very light gray on his points, so pale that in certain lights, it does look lilac. So as I've been researching, I realized that I was wrong. He's actually a Blue Point; he's too dark to be called a Lilac. Although, to be honest, I like the name Lilac better than Blue, because it sounds more exotic!

Legends build around exotic animals that have been around for a long time. Siamese have a few legends attached to them. Legends that explained their crossed-eyes, also known as the "Siamese Squint" (Helgren 2) and kinked tails were fun and interesting to read. Crossed-eyes and kinked tails are considered major faults now, but at the beginning of the breed kinked tails were all the rage (Simmons).

A Siam princess was getting ready to bathe but needed a safe place to keep her rings. So she gave them to her faithful companion cat to keep safe. The cat was so intent on keeping her rings safe, that she developed a kink in her tail to prevent them from falling off. In another version of the legend, the princess tied her companion's tail in a knot to prevent their loss (Simmons). Cyrus doesn't have a kinked tail; his tail is his indicator on how he's feeling. It shows all of his emotions, and I can't imagine him not being able to use his whole tail. With a kink in it, he wouldn't be able to flick just the tip up and down.

A legend about the crossed-eyes of the cats tells a tale of one who was guarding a priceless object. He took his duty so seriously that he stared and stared so hard that his eyes crossed, and stayed that way. Cyrus has very expressive eyes, and his are slightly crossed (Fogle). He has depth perception problems, but compensates for that by going after the hand that is holding his string.

While all this information has been interesting to find, I knew that Cyrus was not going to be a show cat with his perfect conformation to the breed standards. I really wanted to know if all Siamese owners hold conversations with their cats, have to fight with the cat for control of a keyboard, and have to hide treats in places they can't get to. I really was looking to find out if he was a crazy cat, or a perfect example of a precocious Siamese.

One of the really strange things that he does is his “squishing,” or, as it is known in the cat community, wool-sucking (Hillestad). This is associated with cats that were taken away from their mothers too early. This kneading helps the baby get milk, and is also a comfort thing. In Siamese cats, it can develop in adults (Helgren 1).

Wool-sucking can be destructive in nature (Hillestad). Cyrus is only mildly affected, and uses it to show affection. I have an overlarge, stuffed animal that he loves to do this to in the place of my bare skin. Looking around, I can see that wool-sucking is common in cats (Hillestad). He just likes to cuddle with me and his stuffed animal, and doesn't rip up other things. Finding a name for what he does was amazing. He's done it for as long as I've had him, and is a demand for cuddle time.

The most prominent thing about a Siamese is their striking looks of course, but their beauty is more than skin deep. They are smart, silly, witty, charming, and very talkative. When thinking of a Siamese, one instantly thinks of looks, and then that voice! When watching the *Cats 101* video, I noticed that the cat used as an example uses his whole body to talk (*Cats 101*). As he was sitting there telling everyone how he was feeling, I could see his lungs filling up with air before he meowed again. Singers are told to sing from their diaphragm, and Siamese use it to talk as loudly as possible.

Cyrus *LOVES* to talk to me and tell me about his day. He was the most talkative cat I've ever seen, until I started to watch videos of other Siamese cats. I can truly say that he is very typical of the breed in that respect. Almost every article, book, and website that I could find had some sort of comment on their voices:

“Outspoken nature.” (Fogle)

“Chatty nature... even strident in its talking.” (Helgren 2)

“They can keep up a conversation with you- or with themselves- for hours on end.” (Verhoef-Verhallen)

“To the untutored ear, the Siamese yowl can be scary, but in fact the cat is merely conversing.” (Helgren 2)

“Whether it is by vocalizing or body language, the Siamese is determined to communicate... They tend to be vocal in direct proportion to the desired end, always demanding the last word!” (White 1)

Each one of the quotes could be said about my own Siamese. Cyrus greets me at the door every day to tell me how his day went. He will sit and stare at the cupboard that has his treats in it, and tell me how much he would like one. The treats are in a cupboard that he can't get open, or I would not have any left! If he can't find me, he will start talking to himself until I say, "Where's my little buddy?" Then he runs through the house screaming until he finds me. My mother often tells me that if she didn't know that he does all of this, she wouldn't believe it!

While he may not be a perfect show ring example of a Siamese, he's the perfect example of himself. He is a Blue Point Traditional Siamese, with a huge personality and an even bigger voice. I found out a lot about the Siamese as a breed. I learned that while Cyrus is not a fine example of show quality Modern Siamese, his personality and voice are a perfect fit within the breed. He is "Siamese if you please" and "Siamese if you don't please" (Disney).

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