



# The Cat Who Could Read Backwards

*Lilian Jackson Braun*

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## **The Cat Who Could Read Backwards** Lilian Jackson Braun

Jim Qwilleran is a prizewinning reporter who's been on the skids but is now coming back with a job as feature writer (mostly on the art scene) for the Daily Fluxion. George Bonifield Mountclemens, the paper's credentialed art critic, writes almost invariably scathing, hurtful reviews of local shows; delivers his pieces by messenger; lives with his all-knowing cat Koko in a lushly furnished house in a moldering neighborhood, and has a raft of enemies all over town.

He offers the newcomer a tiny apartment in his building at a nominal rent, and Qwilleran grabs it, surmising the deal will involve lots of cat-sitting. Meanwhile, a gallery whose artists get happier treatment from Mountclemens is owned by Earl Lambreth. The acerbic critic has praised paintings there by a reclusive Italian named Scrano; the junk assemblages of Nino, who calls himself a ``Thingist," as well as works by Lambreth's attractive wife Zoe.

It's Zoe who, one night past closing, finds her husband stabbed to death in the vandalized gallery. Days later, Qwilleran, guided by an insistent Koko, finds Mountclemens's knifed corpse on the patio behind his house.

## **The Cat Who Could Read Backwards Details**

Date : Published August 5th 2003 by Berkley Trade (first published 1966)

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Author : Lilian Jackson Braun

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# From Reader Review The Cat Who Could Read Backwards for online ebook

## Mike (the Paladin) says

I am surprised in a way at finding myself giving a "series mystery" book four stars (since I make it a point to hand out very few "5s" that's a big score for me). I don't read a lot of mysteries and only ran across MS. Braun because I was looking for audio books for my wife. She was in ill health for a long time and had trouble holding and later seeing to read text, so I was constantly scouring the public library shelves and used book stores for audio books. Sometimes I would take them to work with me and listen in my vehicle. I discovered that (most) of these were very interesting.

Allow me to digress here a second and point out that for some reason there are some books later in the series that seem (to me) to have virtually no plot whatsoever, even my wife who would ask me to search for these books commented on it. In those it's very like a record of what the people around town are doing in their day to day lives...and an "oh by the way, a murder happened and we solved it". These seem a little odd to me.

This is the first book in the series and is somewhat different than the setting/story type that the series will settle down into. Here we meet Qwill (Jim Qwilleran ) who was at one time a "crack crime reporter" but has (at least in his own eyes) fallen. He's writing on the "art beat". In the course of the story Qwill "meets" Kao K'o-Kung (Koko) a Siamese cat owned by the victim. Qwill begins "taking care of Koko" but of course they'll stay together.

Throughout the series Koko will do things that lead to the solving of mysteries and seem to show uncanny abilities and intelligence, or maybe they're just amazing coincidences (ya right). It's never really stated that Koko understands all he seems to but of course we know he does.

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## Jenn says

I read this a long time ago and I'm not sure why it's still on my TBR list

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## Bill says

This is my first exposure to Lilian Jackson Braun's cozy Qwilleran and Koko (the Siamese cat) mysteries. I had previously avoided them as the concept of the reporter, aided by a cat, solving mysteries didn't really appeal to me. However as I've begun to explore the mystery genre more and more and due to recommendations from a number of Goodreads friends, I finally bit the bullet and took the plunge (how's that for mixed metaphors). And I have to say, this introduction to Qwilleran, the new reporter on the art beat of the Daily Fluxion, and his burgeoning acquaintance with Koko, his landlord's Siamese cat, was most enjoyable. This is definitely a 'cozy' mystery, a murder of a local art critic welcomes Qwill (and his bristly moustaches, which seem to have a life of its own) to his new job on the art beat. Qwill previously was a crime reporter on another paper, but due to unexplained circumstances, now finds himself exploring the local art scene of the Fluxion, a paper in some unnamed city. As he explores the art scene and familiarizing himself with it, he rents an apt from the Flux' art critic and his Siamese cat and finds himself embroiled in

this mystery; one murder, maybe two, maybe three. I wanted to give this mystery a 3 star, maybe a 3.5, but ultimately, it was such an enjoyable read and the characters were interesting and the mystery was a pleasure to delve into, that I had to give it a 4 star. Looking forward to reading more of the developing relationship between Koko (the real detective) and Qwill in mystery number 2, *The Cat who Ate Danish Modern*.

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### **James says**

5 stars to Lilian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards*. The cozy mystery is a major fan favorite, but who would think it could rate a full 5 stars! To me, I only compare books for ratings in their own genre, so among cozies, I think this is a top notch read.

I am very intrigued with this series. I loved the introduction of the cat. And the city backdrop was very fun. I was surprised to see the author had a 20 year span between the first few books and the remainder of the series, but I ultimately liked the jump to Moose County in the future. I almost adopted a Siamese cat due to these books!

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### **Deanna says**

*The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* by Lilian Jackson Braun is the first in a series of cozy mysteries. Jim Qwilleran is a middle aged reporter starting a new position at the Daily Fluxion as an art writer assigned to write stories about the local artists for the newspaper's feature section despite his complete lack of knowledge about art. As he begins introducing himself around town, the one constant he finds is that everyone hates his newspaper's art critic George Bonifield Mountclemens III. Then a local art dealer is murdered followed shortly by the homicide of the art critic.

The star character in the story is the spoiled Siamese cat owned by Mountclemens, Kai K'o-King or Koko for short. Qwill meets Koko when he is invited to dinner, and they become better acquainted when Qwill cat-sits for a few days. What is most apparent is that Qwill needs to work on his cat communication skills because Koko is the one who knows what is going on and leads Qwill to the clues.

The mystery was ok, and the cat was magnificent. 4 stars.

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### **Dani (Dani Reviews Things & Love in a time of Feminism) says**

**Rating: 3.5\***

I don't read a lot of mysteries, but I had to read this for my university's book club. This is even more out of my norm, since it's not a modern thriller but more of a classic whodunnit, published before I was born.

The story is narrated by Qwilleran (not the only guy with an odd name), who takes on a job as an art reporter despite having a history of crime reporting (and no art knowledge whatsoever). But never fear, as his old job follows him to the new, with a death in the art world.

I found this to be quite a quick read. This is partly because the book is only 260 pages, but I think part of the

reason is also that its spurred on a lot by dialogue, not laden down with too much detail. The characters were all very strange and often funny. That being said, it did take a while to get to the actual death that sets everything off. There was a lot of laying the foundation.

It helped that Qwilleran was new in town, as the reader could be introduced to the full cast of characters along with the narrator. It actually added some build up initially to allow the reader to guess who was going to die and why, but it eventually got a bit tedious for me.

The ending was unexpected, but it was also a bit disappointing, if that makes sense. I was guessing throughout who the murderer could be and what their motive was, and I kept switching between a few suspects. I didn't suspect who it turned out to be, which I suppose is a good thing, but the reasons were just a bit...dull. Also, someone crucial to the whole saga only gets introduced at the end, which I felt was a bit of a cheat, as it didn't give the reader even a chance to figure things out on their own.

The whole cat aspect was a funny little touch, with the cat in question actually helping to share some clues (but also some red herrings). I think anyone who has owned or loves cats will appreciate how Koko's personality was so ...feline. So regal. What a cat. The art critic who owns the cat was also odd, but also a bit cattish himself, preferring to be a recluse and having a contempt for others.

All in all, I'm glad I gave it a go, but I don't think I'll be switching to mysteries as my primary genre anytime soon. Good thing I'm making the club read sci-fi next!

See this review in its natural environment, Dani Reviews Things.

You can find me on Twitter and Instagram.

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## **Alondra says**

4 Stars

What a fun piece of fluff. This was just enjoyable and the main character Qwilleran is not irritating or over the top. Koko or should I say Kao K'o-Kung; the Siamese cat. Qwillerans descriptions of his interactions with the cat were hilarious; you have to be a cat owner to understand (maybe). I like his easy manner, unapologetic honesty and dry sense of humor. Just fun reading.

Need a cozy mystery while it is cold?? This book is for you.

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## **Nancy says**

The mystery plot is decent but it took awhile to get going. The resolution felt extremely rushed and was a bit out of left field, which I don't enjoy in a murder mystery.

The book was written in the 1960's so parts of it are predictably dated. An electric pencil sharpener is a shocking piece of cutting edge technology. There's a very casual attitude to smoking and getting on a plane involves a lot less security. Also, I was very confused about a clue until I remembered that an electric clock is not the same as a digital clock and doesn't behave the same when unplugged. I was fine with all of that. Dated technology doesn't bother me.

What bothered me was the very masculine air to the book. Qwilleran walks through the newsroom on his first day and notes the "inevitable girl reporter." At one point he describes a satisfying salad as a "man's salad". Women are described chiefly by how they look and if the male characters think they're "a dish" or not. The only female character who is not described as feminine is named Butchy. No joke, that's her first name. She's described as husky, and she never grew out of her tomboy phase because apparently her large frame wouldn't let her. She's not allowed to be feminine, is what I took away from it. I was not surprised when it was later inferred that Butchy was a lesbian. Because of course. \*sigh\* That's all very dated, too, but I'm much less inclined to be fine with it.

Qwilleran does no cooking for himself. I could feel myself getting fatter every time he went out to eat somewhere.

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### **Fefi says**

Non mi intendo per nulla di come debba essere strutturato un giallo, quindi per questa prima storia della lunga serie, posso solo dare la sufficienza, comunque Koko, il gatto siamese detective mi piace molto, anche perché io ho avuto un siamese e so bene che non sono gatti uguali agli altri. Non ho capito molto della caratterizzazione dei personaggi e mi sembra che la storia si risolva troppo velocemente nelle ultime pagine. Comunque vado avanti con il libro successivo.

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### **Clare O'Beara says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this story of how gruff cynical reporter Jim Qwilleran acquires his detecting sidekick, Koko the Siamese cat.

Qwill at this point is a hardworking, gone-sober reporter in a city, with little money and no love interest. He's definitely not looking for a snooty cat. A crime intervenes and Koko is left without an owner.

I liked these early books better than the ones where Qwill comes into a lot of money and lives a rural life just below the Canadian border. Qwill is presented with major social issues by virtue of his job. On the other hand, the later books do bring in a cast of engaging characters and the author does a lot with her Moose County setting, including occasional jaunts.

The second Siamese cat, Koko's dainty girlfriend, first appears in *The Cat Who Ate Danish Modern*.

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## Jessica says

An intriguing start to a new (for me) cozy mystery series. I enjoyed the characters and the unfolding of the plot. The murders happened later in the book than usual, with a quick resolution. I'm interested to see how things will pan out with the apartment now in the next book.

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## Christopher Hicks says

This is the first book in this series and it's the second one I've read. I wish I'd read this one first. It tells the story of how Jim ends up with Koko the Siamese Cat. It was a fun fast read with lots of great characters and an interesting storyline. I like murder mysteries that keep my attention without being too violent but can also be funny at times. I think I may have found a new series for me read for awhile. ?

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## Tonile {My Cup and Chaucer} says

Written in 1966, Lilian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* is certainly not the oldest book I've ever read, nor is it one of the best books I've ever read, but it was unique because of one of the main characters. Koko the Siamese cat, who can read a freshly published newspaper backwards by tracing the letters and who has a knack for uncovering clues that piece together difficult crimes. This book in a way reminded me of an Alfred Hitchcock film – a lot of build up to a brief yet explosive finale. I suspect this may have been because it was the first in a series, and certain characters deserved lengthy descriptions. With that said, the book was well written, with a dash of surprising red herrings and an almost constant upheaval of what the reader thinks they know about the mystery.

I would go so far as to say that *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* is more a mystery than a crime novel, or a cosy crime at that. It may not be as 'cosy' as others, like many written by her excellency Agatha Christie, but it is a polar opposite to some of the more grizzly and gruesome crime novels abundant today. In this first story of Jim Qwilleran (Qwill) and Koko, Qwill accepts a job working on art pieces for a newspaper called the *Daily Fluxion*. He appears to have had a relatively decorated career that took an unexpected halt, but this point isn't explained at all. Perhaps in other novels in the series? The first half of the novel sets the scene – we meet a handful of exceptional artists, each quirky in their own ways, one bitterly disliked art critic, and of course the masterful Koko.

In a nutshell, a pompous critic named George Bonifield Mountclemens III (yes, that's his name!) has ruffled a number of feathers with his biased and scathing reviews of most of the local artists. He selectively favours a small few, while burning bridges with the others. At first the reader even doubts his existence! But Mountclemens definitely exists, and Qwill finds himself inhabiting a small apartment attached to Mountclemens' antique and dilapidated home. Within a number of pages, there is a brutal stabbing, an attack by vandals, and a suspicious accident at a small gathering. Something is not right within the art world.

I was extremely surprised and almost somewhat let down by the conclusion. I do, however, have a strong liking for the feline component of the novel, Koko. From his first appearance, Koko is described as a supremely intelligent and elegant cat who appears to know a great deal more about the world than an average cat should. The author has a gigantic love of cats that is made abundantly clear throughout the novel, as cats are described positively numerous times. Anyone who knows me even slightly well knows that I too love

cats, so this series will hold a great deal of appeal for me. I won't rush out to read the next, but that's more because I'm put off by the sheer number of books in the series – over 25 in total! It's a great idea though, a cat detective. I like it a lot.

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## **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

Although I started listening to the Cat Who series with *The Cat Who Ate Danish Modern*, *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* is actually the first in this series of cozy mysteries. The narration was just as good as in the other book. Sadly, I couldn't say the same for the story itself.

First, I think the story is beginning to show its age in an entirely unacceptable way, as we deal with a woman the book somewhat subtly indicates is a lesbian and then very un-subtly names "Butchy". The plot then goes on to paint her as a possible murder suspect; a highly unattractive and masculine woman; and someone whose motives and actions are not very nice even if she isn't the killer. I was kind of appalled. The second problem had more to do with the plot itself. Specifically, that there wasn't one. The main character basically sits back and lets events unfold until at the end he stumbles on (literally) a character we have never met before and who turns out to be the bad guy. Talk about unsatisfying! And our main character doesn't even capture this bad guy, oh no. His cat does instead! Now, the cat tripping the bad guy is a plot device I'm ok with once in a mystery featuring a cat. But that happened in the other book too and twice is just too much. I don't think I'll be going on with this series.

*This review first published on Doing Dewey.*

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## **Ange H says**

This is the first book in the series, published in 1966. Like most of *The Cat Who...* books I've read, I found the mystery - a series of murders in the local art scene - to be the least compelling part of the experience. This was a great introduction to newsman James Qwilleran. For fans of the series, we know what fate has in store for Jim, but his circumstances are very different in this original novel: divorced, broke, unemployed. He lands a job as a features reporter for *The Daily Fluxion*. Arch Riker, a recurring character in the novels, is an old acquaintance of Jim's who works there as well. Jim meets photographer Odd Bunsen and bartender Bruno at the hallowed Press Club, where they all love to hang out. We find out about Jim's trademark mustache and his tomato juice addiction. (I don't think it's ever specifically stated, but I got the impression that alcoholism played a part in Jim's past.) And most importantly, we find out how he met Koko and began their great partnership.

It was fun reading what it was like to work on a newspaper before computers, the internet, cell phones. There was also some sly commentary on the art world and its pretensions. Throughout, details humorously betray the late-60's setting of the novel, such as the reaction when it was revealed that one of the paintings described might fetch as much as -GASP! - \$150,000. And there was a lesbian character - a female welder, naturally - named (I kid you not) Butchy.

All in all, this was a very quick and enjoyable read, and now on to the next book in the series, *The Cat Who...Ate Danish Modern*. More art world mystery and mayhem? Do we meet Yum Yum in this installment? Stay tuned.



First Published: 1966

Body Count: 3 (view spoiler)

Next up: The Cat Who Ate Danish Modern

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## **Jerry B says**

Fine 1st entree in long running series for cat/mystery fans...

With nearly two dozen novels in "The Cat Who..." series, Braun has obviously struck a chord with mystery and cat lovers. Almost a classic yarn in the ilk of Elliot Queen, there's no sex and no profanity in this nice clean straightforward story of three murders -- a puzzling whodunit. Jim Qwilleran is introduced as the leading man; an accomplished journalist, he takes an "Art Beat" job with a small paper for which he's hardly qualified but makes the best of it. He hears so much about the paper's hated official art critic, one G.B. Mountclemens, that he can't wait to meet him. Ironically, he likes the guy and decides to rent out his lower apartment. His low rent paves the way for quite a bit of cat sitting, and so we meet the brainy Siamese "Koko", who in addition to normal feline fickleness, independence, and fastidiousness, is a bit of a sleuth himself (in addition to reading newspaper headlines!). When the owner fails to return from a trip and winds up murdered, our hero starts sifting for clues along with his reporting chores. Between his twitchy mustache and hints from the cat, the case is solved quite neatly in just a couple of hundred easy to read pages.

Braun has cats of her own, undoubtedly the inspiration for her series, and cat lovers will be amused at the Koko's antics and the spoiled treatment he is accorded. He eats much better than most humans! But the story doesn't just rest on the cat -- Qwillerman is a likable guy who pursues his puzzles doggedly, while he and we learn a little about art and art galleries along the way. His interviewing skills and easygoing manner with people make him a natural at sniffing out the truth. For a few hours of fun relaxation and entertainment, try this tale!

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## **Heather says**

Ahh...A beloved classic. Time to re-read this series.

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## **Jennifer Girard says**

3.5

I was so surprised with this one! I'm a crazy cat lady so the title was very appealing to me. I thought it would be very quirky and over the top but it works so well that I didn't mind it!

It was so quick to read to, it was refreshing. I'll continue the series for sure!

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## **Jimmy Hanson says**

"5" For feline entertainment, about a "3" for mystery technique.

I used to love these novels when I was in high school [some 13 years ago] and decided to rent them from the library again from sheer nostalgia. It was as entertaining as I remember it being, from the point of view of an openly excited reader and a cat-lover to boot.

The introduction of Qwill to KoKo is more poignant than I remember it being, simply because he [KoKo] is a bit more of a snob, being with his previous owner - a rather self-dignified art critic - for about 95% of the novel. Here and there he connects with Qwilleran and gradual the scenes between them get longer and more detailed. From there, the story becomes less about what's happening or who did what, so much as 'watch-KoKo ... what-is-he-going-to-do-next??' anticipation.

The wrap up seemed rushed to me and the 'bad guy' someone I couldn't even remember, barely mentioned earlier in the first third of the book itself. Everything was explained through a volleyball toss between Qwill and Art, Odd and a few others over chips and drinks over the last three pages. I'm tempted to read them again - just to try and make more sense of the mystery and murder reasoning itself - but anticipate the next novel - and the introduction of my favs, Yum Yum - more.

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## **Anne says**

**Just the thing to distract one from the end of the world.**

I enjoy the wit and lightness of this series. I usually dig into heftier tomes, but with the horrific presidential election and a cancer diagnosis, some engaging entertainment is in order.

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