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Carmel author on love, loss and what she learned

A memoir coming to terms with catastrophe—and a cat



Sasha was an exuberant little kitten who instantly seemed to love Carmel's Wanda Straw and help inspire her book "Sasha Noodle String Theory."(Courtesy of Wanda Straw)

By **LISA CRAWFORD WATSON** |
newsroom@montereyherald.com |



This is a community that understands a lot can be resolved by the presence of a cat. He won't try to fix anything. He'll simply alter our perception of it. Without even trying. That's the way Sasha was. His given name was Tang, but it didn't suit him, having been based on something as pedestrian as his fur.

Anyone who's read T.S. Eliot knows a cat needs to have "a name that's peculiar and more dignified," which is why a reference like "Sasha Noodle String Theory" was significantly more appropriate. At least, for this cat.

It's also the name of a book released last month by Carmel author Wanda Straw. Which would lead readers to believe the book is about a cat. Which it is and which it is not since it's about ever so much more than one cat. Even Sasha knew that.

The author might tell you her book is about heartbreak and loss and overcoming grief — which is hopeful — and which means it's about the stuff of life. Which often is so much easier to read than to experience. Besides, we're often so much more willing to listen to someone else's story. This is partly why "Sasha Noodle String Theory" is such a good read.

This book beckons to be read more than once. And, at 235 pages, why not? The first read is engaging, entertaining, and, at times, emotional. The second read is about paying attention to the words, the craft of it, and all the details we might have missed in the entertainment. The author has read it about 100 times, she says, and it still moves her, deeply. Which is why she wrote it in the first place.

Straw once read that the most stressful situations to deal with are the loss of loved ones, of relationships, of a home, and a job. Between 2004 and 2006, she completed the list, pummeled by one loss after another, each enough to take her down on its own.

"Having gone through more loss in two years than I thought possible," said Straw, "I got to a place I'd never gotten to before. I wanted to tell the stories and not forget any of it — the words, the memories, the way it should be shared. And so, I began writing."

Coming to terms with a cat

Wanda Straw began her book by sharing her childhood fear of her own shadow, and how her grandmother taught her how to vanquish her dark side. Sasha taught her how to shed light on it.

Straw never considered herself a cat person. She was more about the blunt, can't-help-themselves honesty of dogs.

"I always silently felt sympathy for people who adored felines," she wrote. "Their devotion was so extreme and strange to me. How could anyone love an animal so indifferent, strong-willed, and independent?"

And then she met Sasha, an exuberant little kitten who instantly seemed to love Straw, his surroundings, and string. Maybe most of all, string. Straw quickly decided the difference between Sasha and herself was that she was trying to stop the bleeding by tying a tourniquet on her life, while he was absolutely delighted by the loose ends in his.

Turns out the twosome were together only two years. Some say Sasha both came into and left his person's life at exactly the right moment.

Back story

Wanda Straw grew up in a homespun household in Pennsylvania, with two siblings and a three-legged Dalmatian named Duke. After a reluctant move to Indiana and high school graduation, she went off to college, ultimately earning a Master's in telecommunications from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.

Straw's move to California was nearly as reluctant as her childhood move to Indiana, until she landed in San Francisco, drove down Highway 1 in a top-down convertible, and communed with the coastline. She's now lived on the Peninsula long enough to be a local, has read the writers who came before her, and realizes that writing in a rented cottage by the sea would be cliché if it weren't Carmel. It's culture.

After working at a restaurant in Carmel, Straw's life led her to Big Sur, where she became the general manager of the renowned Sierra Mar restaurant at Post Ranch Inn.

"I loved the staff, I loved the location, I loved what we created there, at Sierra Mar," she said. "But I realized I had so many tales to tell, all of them satellites of the same story. So, I decided to take a leap of faith, leave my job, and start writing."

She also went to work, part-time, as dining room manager in the culinary program at Rancho Cielo. Straw had heard of the youth campus in Salinas but didn't yet know that it invests in young people facing challenges, through education, vocational training, counseling and life skills development. She also didn't know how much she would fall in love with the people, the place, and the program.

"Rancho Cielo just kept coming into my awareness," she said. "To go from working at Post Ranch, with some of the most affluent, privileged, entitled people, to working with people who don't all know where they're sleeping that night, is humbling. I absolutely love working with the students at Rancho Cielo."

After so many hours spent working late into the night, believing her Carmel cottage might be the only one still lit in the silence on the street, Straw knew she had finished her book when her heart told her she couldn't make it any better. After reading through her pages one more time, she realized it was the last moment when her story belonged only to her and to Sasha before she put it out for publication.

"This book is as much about overcoming grief as it is about allowing for love," said Straw. "I'm kind of in awe that I wrote it because it came from such an honest, real place. I believe I talked about sorrow and loss in ways that can connect people, much the same way I talked about hope. Perhaps everyone has been someplace you don't think you can come back from, and then you do. Life has a way of taking care of us, if we allow it."

Sasha Noodle

STRING THEORY

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and
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STORIES

WANDA STRAW

Book cover

“Sasha Noodle String Theory” is available at Pilgrim’s Way in Carmel, at River House Books at The Crossroads Carmel, and on Amazon, in soft-cover and Kindle. Straw will have a socially-distanced book signing at Cultura Restaurant in Carmel March 21 from 2-4 p.m.

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**Lisa
Crawford
Watson**
