

# **Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World**

**by Vicki Myron**

## About the Book

Dewey's story starts in the worst possible way. Only a few weeks old, on the coldest night of the year, he was stuffed into the returned book slot at the Spencer Public Library. He was found the next morning by library director, Vicki Myron, a single mother who had survived the loss of her family farm, a breast cancer scare, and an alcoholic husband. Dewey won her heart, and the hearts of the staff, by pulling himself up and hobbling on frostbitten feet to nudge each of them in a gesture of thanks and love. For the next nineteen years, he never stopped charming the people of Spencer with his enthusiasm, warmth, humility, (for a cat) and, above all, his sixth sense about who needed him most.

## Praise for the Book

"I Loved this heartwarming story, with a five-hanky ending, that is not just about an extraordinary cat, but of the resilience and humanity of the people of Iowa and of Spencer in particular"

—*W.P. Kinsella author of Shoeless Joe*

"Iowa has produced a true feline Hall of Famer, a loveable library celebrity named Dewey, who put Spencer, Iowa, on the international map. This book is a purring good read, whether you are a cat lover or not."

—*Jim Fanning, former Major League Baseball player and manager*

"What an extraordinary story of love, courage and devotion. I will not soon forget the good people of Spencer, Iowa, and their wonderful library cat. "Dewey" is truly inspiration for the soul."

—*Jack Canfield*

*Courtesy of Hachette*

## Author Bio

I was born in Spencer and grew up on a farm south of Moneta, Iowa—a town that no longer exists. I graduated from Hartley Iowa High School and moved to Mankato, Minnesota where I worked, married, had a daughter and went to college. I have a bachelor's degree from Mankato State and a master's from Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. In 1982, I returned to Spencer, Iowa to begin working at the public library. In 1987, I was named Director of Spencer Public Library and I served in that position for 25 and ½ years. I retired in 2007 to write this book. I currently reside in Spencer.

I love George Orwell, Frederick Feikema, and the Harry Potter series for fiction. I read all of Torey Hayden's books about abused children and many other non-fiction writers. I rarely read fiction these days unless it is a truly special book.

*Courtesy Hachette*

## Author Interview

### Writing Dewey

By Bret Witter with Vicki Myron

Why was *Dewey* written? Because I was asked to write it. Not just by one person, but by hundreds, for years. Local people, visitors, book agents, professional writers (they wanted to help), people who had only read about him in magazines or seen him in a documentary. There was something magical about this lovable orange cat named Dewey Readmore Books and the small town library where he lived. It was obvious. And people wanted to know more.

So, after years of saying no, I finally said yes. Dewey had recently died, and part of me must have known writing a book would keep him in my life. Not that he could ever go away. I loved him for almost twenty years; everything in the library reminded me of him: the copier where he warmed himself, the front desk where he perched, the Western section where he hid, the book cart he used to ride on. Every morning, he sat at the door waiting for me. When he saw me coming, he'd wave. No matter how bad I felt, that wave made me believe the world was wonderful and everything would be alright. How could I ever forget that?

So with the help of a writer (one finally got to me!), I started putting down on paper all those memories: how Dewey wouldn't come down from the overhead lights no matter how we begged, lounged in front of the heater until his fur was too hot to touch, slept in the box so the patrons couldn't get their tax forms, tortured us over his food and litter, enticed us to play hide and seek with him, attended every children's Story Hour, ran every meeting, and generally turned a cold library into a warm, inviting, friendly place.

I wrote about how he sought out those in need: the elderly man who had just lost his wife; an unemployed farmhand; the homeless man. I told how whenever I wanted to give up, because I was a single mother working full-time and going to school, Dewey sensed it and jumped on my lap. And how when I agonized over a double mastectomy or a less invasive treatment (I chose the mastectomy, but never told anyone until this book), he sat beside me while I cried. He was my best friend; he was always there for me. Always. I hope I've honored his life by capturing some of his magic.

I hope I've also captured something else: the magic of libraries. Libraries aren't warehouses for books; they are meeting houses for human beings. A good library is less an institution than a home. It has comfortable seats, desks, computers, friendly people and, yes, sometimes even a cat. Libraries are society's great leveling agent: they offer job listings, financial information, technology, entertainment, any book you want. For free. I hate it when people tip-toe through a library. "This isn't a graveyard," I want to shout. "It's alive. So live a little!"

Librarians aren't little old ladies who spend all day stamping books and shushing people. We love to have fun, for one thing. But we also have interesting jobs that entail, among other things, planning community events; adopting new technologies; battling censorship; and reaching out to

underprivileged groups. We provide job banks in tough times, free child care for working parents, and, in Spencer at least, translators for errands and doctors visits, the town's only Spanish-language outreach. Be warned: librarians are studying you, and they know what you need. That's their job.

I will never forget Dewey's friend Crystal, a severely mentally and physically handicapped girl so withdrawn that everyone thought she was dead inside. But Dewey sensed something, and he started following her wheelchair. Then he started climbing up and sitting on her wooden tray. She couldn't control her muscles, so she couldn't pet him, but she would squeal with delight. One day, I placed him inside her jacket. Dewey put his head on her chest and purred, and Crystal...she just exploded. She was alive with joy. That, to me, is a Dewey story; that's the kind of cat he was. And that's what libraries do. They change lives. Everywhere in this country. Every day.

I have been surprised by the reaction to *Dewey*. People love the portrayal of Iowa. They are awed by Spencer, a small town that has overcome adversity by pulling together and resisting simple answers (a slaughterhouse, a casino). I agree with them, I love Iowa and Spencer too, but I never thought this was a book about a place. I thought it was a book about an extraordinary cat, and the deep bond that developed between that cat and a woman, and how the two of them dedicated their lives to the last great free enterprise in American society: the library.

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## Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think of Dewey Readmore Books? Was he a special cat because of his personality, his circumstances, or both?
- 2) What was your favorite Dewey story? What was the funniest Dewey story? Which was most touching? Did his habits remind you of cats you have known or owned?
- 3) Vicki Myron believes she had a deep connection with Dewey. For example, he knew when he was going to the vet before she even said the word. Do you believe people and animals can have such a connection? If so, how do they read us so well?
- 4) Why do you think Dewey became so famous?
- 5) What does this book say about small town life? Has it changed your opinion of towns like Spencer, Iowa?
- 6) How much of an impact do you think Dewey had on Spencer? Do you believe he affected the town? If so, how?
- 7) At the beginning of the book, Spencer is going through hard times because of a collapse in land/housing values. Do you see parallels to our current economic situation? Are there lessons to be learned from this town?
- 8) Do you agree with Vicki that it was wise for the town of Spencer to vote against the jobs and incomes that a slaughterhouse and a casino would have provided? What about the decision to embrace big national stores like Wal-mart?
- 9) Vicki Myron says: “In our society, people believe you have to *do* something to be recognized, by which we mean something “in your face,” and preferably caught on camera.” Do you agree? Is this a good or bad thing? What about Vicki’s belief that Dewey was special precisely because he wasn’t like that?
- 10) Some people think Vicki Myron should not have included so many details of her life in the book. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 11) How do you think the circumstances of Vicki’s life affected her relationship with Dewey? How do you think the circumstances of Dewey’s life—particularly his night in the book drop box—affected his relationship with Vicki?
- 12) What did you think of the library board’s desire for Dewey to “retire” to Vicki’s house to live out the last months of his life?
- 13) This book has been described as “a love letter to libraries.” Has it reinforced or changed your attitude about the importance of libraries? Has it changed your opinion of librarians? Would you like for your local library to have a cat?

- 14) Did this book change your opinion of cats? How would you answer the question posed at the beginning of the book: how much of an impact can an animal have? Is your answer different after reading the book?
- 15) What do you think is the overall theme of the book? Is it hope? How animals can affect people's lives? Is it about community?
- 16) Share some examples of how an animal has made a positive impact on your life or someone you know.

*Courtesy of Hachette Book Group*