

A catastrophic verdict

Could kitties make better jurors, dreams **Richard Barr**



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According to a recent Barr survey (sample size: one), the greatest subject of nightmares for solicitors is sitting your finals without having prepared for them. Even retired solicitors have still reported having such dreams. This is closely followed by dreams of appearing in court.

I will now introduce a third. I had been invited to take part in a live television programme, which involved a number of people telling stories, with the audience then deciding who was telling the truth.

I remember being more terrified than on any real occasion when I had been tormented by our local county court circuit judge, who would regularly play cat and mouse with hapless young advocates and reduce them to quivering blobs of jelly, occasionally offering them the comfort of

having their cases non-suited; I never did find out what it meant to have my case "non-suited", but I was happy to accept it and run out of the court building as fast as my little legs would carry me.

I cannot remember now why anyone would think it good idea to have me tell the truth or lie in the presence of a studio audience.

My story involved a dog which had issued a writ against the suppliers of pet food, claiming that the product had caused it to suffer from flatulence.

An embellished case

I had forged a High Court writ (please forgive me Lord Chancellor – I was young at the time) which I waved in front of the camera. I embellished the story with an account of how the dog went into court and communicated to the judge by a series of barks. Two barks for yes, one for no. It went well until the plaintiff dog saw out of the corner of its eye the court cat.

The dog then forgot how to communicate with the judge, left the witness stand and was last seen trying to pursue the cat up the ragged curtains that shielded the judge from sunlight on the rare days when the sun shone brightly.

The other contestants were allowed to sit at ground level, with the audience around them in a horseshoe arrangement.



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From my eyrie I looked down on them, but could not see much because the studio lights shone straight into my eyes. During the rehearsals they had to make many adjustments because the lights reflected off my glasses and started little fires in the audience.

I blithered and blathered, forgot some lines, repeated others and fervently wished that the entire framework that held me would collapse and bury me in it. For once in my life I longed to be in the cosy clutches of that county court judge. I would have given anything to be non-suited. At length, while studio managers were looking at their watches and making swirling motions with their fingers, I drew to a close and moved back out of the limelight, causing my glasses once again to glow so that I looked like a lesser character from Dr Who as I

stared bewilderedly out at the audience.

Then came the voting, but I need to keep you on the edges of your seats a little longer (I suffered then, so why should you not now?) and introduce the cat that has not only been summoned for jury duty by a Boston (Massachusetts) court, but has been told to attend even after the owners pointed out that she did not understand or speak English.

Feline friends

Feline jurors are the way forward. Obviously there will have to be some adjustment to the jury box such as comfortable cat baskets and convenient litter trays, along with plentiful supplies of their favourite food. Cats would of course be encouraged to sleep during the duller parts of the cases and a means would need to be found to record their verdicts at the end: claws out for guilty, in for not guilty.

The verdict on my story was (and here imagine you are watching *Strictly Come Dancing*, so you must now wait for many seconds before reading on) that it was considered a lie – by a majority. The worrying thing was that there were some in the audience who did believe me. If those people had been on a jury, would their verdict be better than one from twelve cats good and true? I fear not. **SJ**