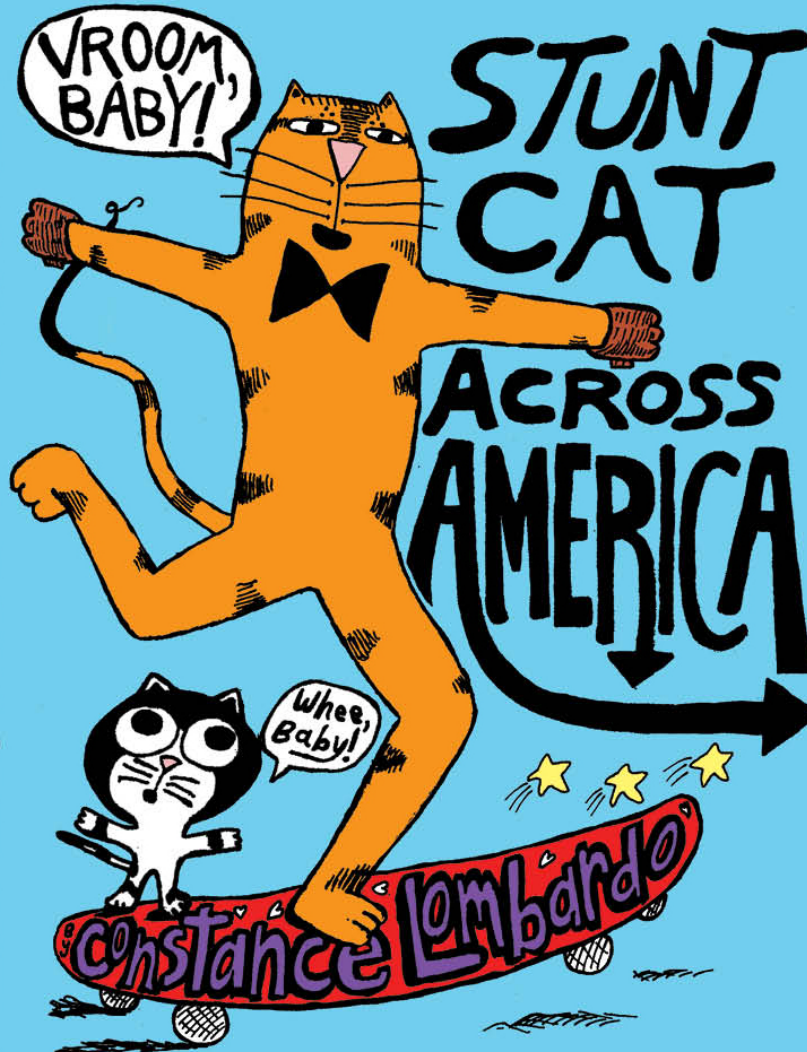
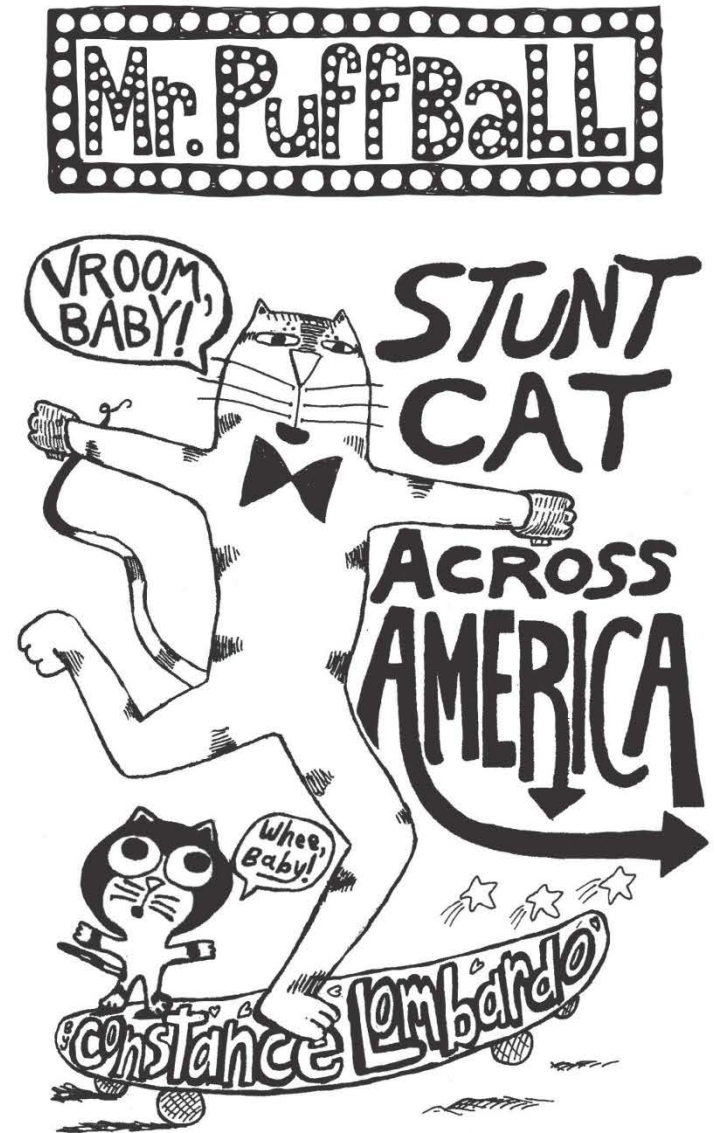


"Mr. Puffball's adventures are just too crazy to resist!"
—Tom Angleberger, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Origami Yoda*

Mr. PuffBall



ALSO BY CONSTANCE LOMBARDO
Mr. Puffball: Stunt Cat to the Stars



HARPER

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Prologue

The Final Straw Pile



There I stood, atop a huge mound of sticks, stones, crumpled newspapers, and leaves, waiting to die. Or at least be seriously uncomfortable.

For weeks I'd been Director DeMew's stunt cat on a series of educational videos:



This stunt was the worst yet. Fire + toxic smoke + pointy things = big-time ouchies. We'd shot the scene over and over. The fireproof goop applied earlier by Maybelline the makeup cat was wearing thin. Plus my nose itched. How I wished I were elsewhere, sipping a cool glass of lemonade. But I wasn't elsewhere. I was a stunt cat.

She was a director with a megaphone. "Somebody light that huge mound on fire! Now!"

"Please to wait!" said a voice I knew only too well. My trainer, Bruiser, appeared from out of nowhere and raced over to Director DeMew.

This is the madness, Lady Director! So much of Fire no cat can take! Give Puffyball the breaks!



"CUT!" hissed Director DeMew. "Will somebody tell me why this giant beefcake is in my face?"

One of the crew whispered to Director DeMew (and into her megaphone).

CREW CAT: Bruiser feels we're endangering Mr.

Puffball with reckless incendiary practices.

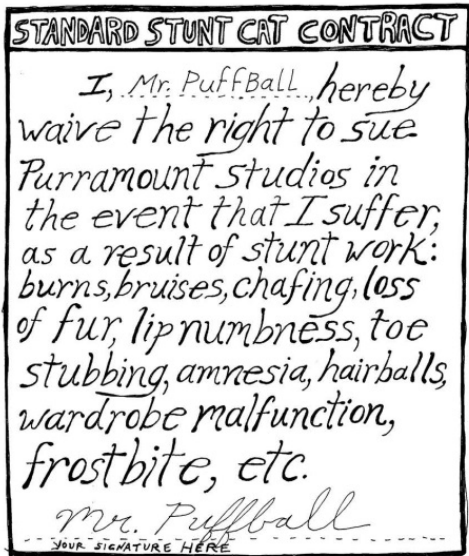
DIRECTOR DEMEW: And I should care why?

CREW CAT: Mr. Puffball could get injured.

Maybe even fatally. Smoke inhalation,
lacerations, palpitations, etc.

DIRECTOR DEMEW: And I should care why?

This could go on forever. Yes, *Danger* was threatening to become my middle name, even though I'd prefer Burt. Or Victor. But I'd signed on the dotted line:



So I took a deep breath. "Let's do this thing!"

"Puffyball, you tuff like Bruiser," said Bruiser.

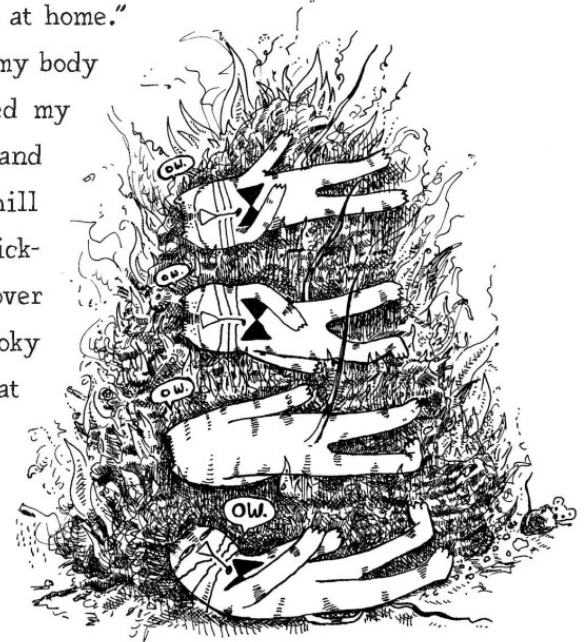
"Mr. Puffball, what really matters," said Maybelline, "is you look great."

Maybelline was right. With my extra-black bow tie, I looked like a tough-guy celebrity full of derring-do.

"Quiet on the set!" said Director DeMew. "Take fifty-two! And . . . action!"

The fire blazed. I blinked against smoke that made my eyeballs go watery, then dry, and then scorching. I wriggled free of the ropes and said, "Kids, don't try this at home."

Then I made my body hard, squeezed my eyes shut, and rolled downhill through the licking flames, over every last poky bit, to safety at last.



Two crew cats doused me with cold water. My heart skipped a beat as my flesh went from fiery to freezing in zero seconds flat. I ached all over. "Enough with the ouchy stuff," my brain told my body. "Have you considered law school?"

"Puffy," said Bruiser, slapping me on the back (ow), "you true stunt cat hero guy."

I looked up, way up, into his kind, muscular eyes, and said, "Thanks, Bruiser." But what I thought was, *No. Not anymore.*

I made a wobbly beeline over to Director DeMew to announce my life-changing news, no matter how it might devastate her.

She raised her megaphone and said, "That's a wrap on Cautionary Tails Video #7: *Blazing Fire Mounds and You!*" I shivered before her. "And somebody get this kid a towel."

Time to speak my truth. "Director, being a stunt cat has put me in touch with my manhood. But it's not touching the deepest part of me: my inner movie star. I must follow my bliss. Plus my tail got scorched again. So I've made an important decision: I will stunt no more forever."

"But Mr. Puffball, tomorrow we're filming Cautionary Tails Video #8: *Electrical Outlets and Metal Utensils: Friends or Foes?*"

"Sorry, but I'm through. And no amount of cajoling, begging, or offers of huge sums of cash—" Before I could finish my sentence, Director DeMew raised her megaphone once more.



And so ended my days of being Mr. Puffball, Stunt Cat to the Stars. Or did it?