

# Uncover the delightful 'Secret Life of Pets'

By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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For their fifth fully animated feature-film collaboration, Illumination Entertainment and Universal Pictures present 'The Secret Life of Pets', a comedy about the lives our pets lead after we leave for work or school each day.

For one bustling Manhattan apartment building, the real day starts after the folks on two legs leave for work and school. That's when the pets of every stripe, fur and feather begin their own nine-to-five routine: hanging out with each other, trading humiliating stories about their owners, auditioning adorable looks to get better snacks and watching Animal Planet like it is reality TV. The building's top dog, Max (C.K.), a quick-witted Terrier rescue who's convinced he sits at the center of owner Katie's (Kemper) universe, finds his pampered life turned upside down when she brings home Duke (Stonestreet), a sloppy, massive mess of a mongrel with zero interpersonal skills. When this reluctant canine duo finds themselves out on the mean streets of New York, they have to set aside their differences and unite against a fluffy, yet cunning, bunny named Snowball (Hart), who's building an army of pets who've been abandoned by their owners and are out to turn the tables on humanity... all this and making it home before Katie returns at dinnertime.



Illumination Entertainment founder and Ceo Chris Meledandri and his longtime collaborator Janet Healy - who together have produced the films of the 'Despicable Me' franchise, as well as the blockbusters Minions and Dr. Seuss' 'The Lorax' - produce the comedy that is directed by Chris Renaud, co-directed by Yarrow Cheney and written by Cinco Paul, Ken Daurio and Brian Lynch.

## A word from the producers

"The inspiration behind Pets was all of the pets that my family and I have owned since I was a little kid," says Meledandri. "We grew up with a cat and dogs and a bird, and what I realised as I became a parent was that we all invested these pets with rich emotional lives. Whenever we'd come home we would be thinking about the joy in their faces in seeing us and thinking about them doing things that were a little bit naughty. We realised we were asking exactly what they had done while we were out."

“It struck me that I wasn’t alone in wondering about what the inner lives of our pets were,” he continues. “The minute I started to look at my own pets that way, I realised that everybody looks at their pets through that lens... We’re fascinated with their inner lives and highly curious about what they’re doing and thinking when we’re not around.”

Meledandri is adamant that no production is conceptualised without the deep involvement of Janet Healy, with whom he has produced all of the films in the Illumination canon, and oversees the Production arm of the company, Illumination Mac Guff in Paris.

“Janet is the best producing partner I could ever imagine having, and at this moment in time we’re producing multiple films together. She brings a level of leadership, creativity and energy to every aspect of every movie...I honestly believe that she has to be the best producer working in animation today,” states Meledandri.

Healy sparked to the film’s premise. “We project so much character onto our pets - the things we want them to be. Even when those qualities aren’t there, we continue to feel that they have this secret, full life that we’re not a part of. When Chris told us this high-concept idea, we thought it was amazing. He’s a great leader, because he’s so decisive and understands animation and character like no one else.”



Working with the writing team of Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio, Meledandri and Healy first asked them to develop this idea into a screenplay. Brian Lynch - known for his work with Illumination on ‘Minions’, ‘Hop’ and their highly successful theme park ride Minion Mayhem - took the helm.

Daurio explains how it all began: “The first thing that Chris pitched to us was the image of a dog watching his owner leave the house. As soon as the owner leaves, the dog dumps his food in the trash and opens the fridge to find something better to eat. That was the initial image that was planted in our head, and it stayed with us throughout this entire process.”

## Inspiration behind the setting

As they pondered upon the setting, the duo was drawn to a New York apartment building. “Early on, we decided we wanted this story to take place in an apartment building,” Paul says. “That gave us access to a lot of pets and the idea that when the owners are away, they party. They gossip and drink out of the toilet; things they would never do if their owners were watching.”

This is Lynch’s third collaboration with Meledandri, and he appreciates Meledandri’s character-centric approach. “Chris always says, ‘We’ll come up with the story and the set pieces later. Let’s work on who our lead character is, what happened to him or her before and what we want the audience to know about them and feel about them. We will go from there,’” offers Lynch. “It has always been helpful to work that way.”

Lynch loved extrapolating upon these pets’ secret lives, revealing: “This film is a salute to how much all of us love our pets. No matter what they do in the movie, the new friends they meet or the death they defy, they still have to be back at the end of the day to see their owners come home. Even if they go on crazy adventures during the day, the highlight of every day is when their owner comes home.”

The moment that Max’s owner brings Duke home from the pound has a special inspiration of its own. “I imagine Max feels a bit like my nine-year-old son must have when my wife and I came home from the hospital with a new baby: ‘Where did this guy come from? Who asked him here? My life was fine before he arrived and, no, I don’t want to share everything that I’ve got that’s so perfect,’” laughs Meledandri.

## The directors

The theme of pets being excited to see their owners, even after a short period of time being apart, also drew director Renaud to the film and his aim was to portray the pets in a “very contemporary way”.

“What I wanted very early on in the animation style was to make the animals... animals, and not depict them in a wholly anthropomorphic way,” provides Renaud. “When we look at animation problems, we would ask each other, ‘How does he get from point A to point B? How does she spin around or lift her paw.’” That extended to more complex scenes. “For instance, we have a moment where a few dogs hear something that sounds like somebody’s in trouble. But they’re instantly distracted by a butterfly flying by and run off in the other direction.”

Co-director Cheney elaborates: “Our goal was to have the audience look at the actions of these animals and think that is something their own pet would do. Instead of a film where the animals are wearing clothes and walking around on two legs,

we wanted to make our animals act like animals.”

When the production team set out to define the comedy’s characters and their distinctive personalities, it was critical to strike a balance between a higher intelligence and one that felt like it was coming from the pet itself. They knew that the minute they crossed the line and depicted a human trapped in a pet’s body, they lost the essence of the idea. It was crucial to make audiences feel: “This is the way my dog or cat acts when I’m not around.”

## **Win**

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## **ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN**

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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