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Books That Matter — Dogs: Fantasies That Don't Disappoint

by **Ellen Finnie Duranceau** (Digital Resources Acquisitions Librarian, MIT Libraries) <efinnie@mit.edu>

Column Editor's Note: This column reviews recent books about dogs—not those dime-a-dozen books that tell you how to get a dog to sit and give you pointers on housetraining—but rather books about how and why people and dogs love each other. It's about the particularly enriching qualities of the human/canine bond, and what it means to those who share their lives with dogs.

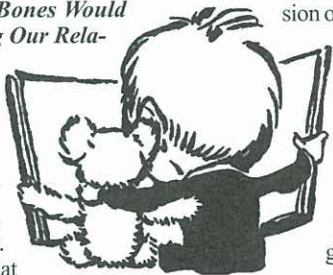
I can't say for certain that these books will be as interesting to the average reader as they were to me, since by almost anyone's definition I'm a dog fanatic. But I feel confident that these are books that matter: If you believe that creatures other than humans matter, then the one species that lives closer to humans than any other seems to me important enough to read about. People and dogs have lived deeply intertwined for more than 10,000 years: Dogs bear witness to our daily lives and deepest secrets, share our beds, meals, smiles, and tears. So perhaps it should be no surprise that if you pick up any one of these books, by the time you are done, you will know more about love, and more about people, as well as more about dogs. And that's a good thing. — EFD

Two recent books focus not so much on how to train your dog, but on how to build a relationship with your dog, and I recommend both highly: **Suzanne Clothier's *Bones Would Rain From the Sky: Deepening Our Relationships with Dogs*** (Warner Books, 2002. 0446525936. 320 pages. \$24.95) and **Patricia McConnell's *The Other End of the Leash: Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs*** (NY: Ballantine Books, 2002. 0345446798. 246 pages. \$25.95) Both take an approach that

is different than that offered by popular dog training books. Both are sensible, insightful, intelligent, empathetic, and grounded in years of experience with dogs.

Clothier is a dog trainer by trade, but she is not your standard dog trainer. She is a humble observer of dogs who has learned how to communicate with them; she approaches dogs not as objects to control, but as beings to be understood and appreciated. Typical of **Clothier** is her willingness (after many years of working with dogs—she did not come to these insights instantly) to challenge and reject the advice of the mainstream dog trainers, who emphasize that people must show dogs they are the “alpha” member of the pack. She rejects those who say dogs should not sleep on your bed, get on the furniture, or have free access to toys...or they will become “alpha” dogs. (Now here's a woman I can trust to understand me and my dogs!) “If there's a single word I could remove from the language of dog lovers and particularly dog trainers,” she says, “it's this: alpha.” **Clothier** concludes that this notion “has served as justification for a fair amount of unfairness and downright cruelty to dogs,” and explains that “advice found in the popular dog literature is purely nonsensical, some is based on poorly understood truth, and some is nothing short of strangely twisted interpretations of what dogs really do with dogs.” She prefers the concept of “status” and offers a cogent discussion of this idea and its implications for working with dogs.

We need, in **Clothier's** view, not to dominate dogs, but to provide dogs with leadership, attention, and understanding. She debunks many myths about dog aggression and offers instead a gentle way of being with dogs.



Her emphasis is on seeing dogs as spiritual beings. She says:

“We hold ourselves above [our dogs] as if something dreadful might happen if we allow ourselves to embrace the notion that perhaps the dog lying at our feet chewing on a tennis ball is also a sentient being with feelings and emotions and thoughts and humor and language and loves and fears and creativity, and we may choke hard on the idea of the dog as a spiritual being. Of course...if our dogs do feel and think and reason (though not as incomplete versions of us but as fully splendid versions of themselves) then we'd best think long and hard about how we've been treating man's best friend.”

Through case studies and real-life examples, **Clothier** emphasizes getting a dog to do what you want the dog to do by understanding the dog: “The trick is to discover in what way (or ways) your dog is motivated to act as you'd like him to.” She likes to ask “how do we accomplish this together?” and “what can I learn from you?” believing that the questions stimulate thinking in terms of relationships and seeing and hearing in new ways. (Not bad questions to take into other domains of life, come to think of it.) She believes we can learn about forgiveness and nonjudgmental love from dogs and looks for ways to “become the kind of person my dog believes I am.”

I was deeply affected by **Clothier's** book—the only thing I did not like was the title, which discloses little of the book's value or approach. So, focus on the subtitle, not the title, and if you read only one of these books, I recommend that it be this one.

McConnell's book fills a similar niche as **Clothier's**, in that **McConnell**, who is an animal behaviorist, doesn't want to teach us how to get a dog to “sit” when we say “sit,” but rather how to understand a dog's world view, so we can more effectively interact with the dog. This makes for fascinating reading.

The chapter title “Translating Primate to Canine” captures both her purpose and her success in this book; its best quality is its ability to remind us that we are primates, and as such relate to the world around us differently than canines do. To offer one characteristic example, she includes pictures of dogs being hugged by people, looking a bit uncomfortable, as if they are just tolerating the hugs, while their humans smile blissfully, because this kind of full-frontal squeeze is a very primate behavior. Dogs never press their chests against one another and in fact tend to approach each other from the side; a frontal approach like this, especially if it includes eye contact, is very threatening to a dog.

Like **Clothier**, **McConnell** advocates understanding dogs and building a relationship with

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comments on structure, language, imagery, allusion, and irony, it also gauges the spectrum of the comedy genre and points to **Dream's** place on it. The second chapter inspects gender relations — “Love, Marriage and the Battle of the Sexes” — and offers actual examples of either historical or literary works that influenced **Shakespeare**, or other works that have drawn upon **Dream** (including **Shakespeare's** later works). At the close of the chapter are twenty (give or take a few) “Topics for Written and Oral Discussion,” open-ended questions that are appropriate for in-class or take-home essays, group discussions, journaling, and other critical reflection. A bibliography of suggested reading closes the section. **Nastbakken** continues this format

with the remaining chapters: “Social Distinctions: Royalty, Gentry, and the Common People;” “Popular Culture: Holidays, Court Entertainments, and Play-Acting;” “Imagination and Beliefs: Dreams, Fairies, and Transformation;” “Performance and Interpretation;” and “Contemporary Applications.” An extensive bibliography wraps up the book.

Both **Halio** and **Nostbakken** require active critical thinking of their readers; they do so, though, by offering divergent examples and evidence pertaining to the themes in **Shakespeare's** ageless romantic comedy. **A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Guide to the Play and Understanding A Midsummer Night's Dream** complement each other well, yet they also stand firmly alone. Both books — and both series — would befit undergraduate and high school library collections. 🐾

them, not buying into the popular notions of becoming the “alpha” member of the pack and applying dominance to get your way with your dog. She discredits the accepted methods of dog training that are shockingly widespread, which have people shaking their dogs by the neck, yelling at them, and throwing them onto their backs, all of which **McConnell** dismisses as the worst kind of error in attempting to apply how dogs relate to one another to dog training.

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas is a careful observer (as one would expect of someone trained as an anthropologist) whose book *The Social Lives of Dogs: The Grace of Canine Company* (NY: **Pocket Books/Simon and Schuster**, 2000. 0743422368. 256 pages. \$13.95) chronicles the adventures of her dogs and their interspecies household in New Hampshire with telling observations and engaging characterizations. This book is another one that opens the floodgates of relief to those who just can't follow the “be the alpha of your pack” advice of popular dog training manuals. She is not afraid to stake out quite a different position. She doesn't train her dogs, she learns from them; but she does teach her dogs five things: “the meaning of no; to come when called; to urinate and defecate outdoors only; not to take our food; and never to chase a car.” This is a good book to read if you are interested in why dogs do what they do, and how they relate to other dogs and humans. Although her first book (*The Hidden Life of Dogs*) was fascinating, this one is easier to relate to and more rewarding for those who are more traditional dog owners, not quite ready to admit what dogs want is “each other” (as her first book concluded) but that they also need “people” (as she concludes in this book).

Thomas stands unapologetically outside the mainstream; she feels the United States (as opposed to many European nations, for example) is steeped in an unpleasant and unreasonable “dog fascism” in which dogs are confined, contained, and controlled (surgically, behaviorally, and physically) in ways that are undesirable and unnecessary. So while the intriguing stories of her menagerie (including some about her parrots) are full of heartwarming real life with animals, beyond this very entertaining storytelling, the ideas in this book are probably more provocative to the average reader than those of, say, **Clothier** and **McConnell**. **Clothier** and **McConnell** defy popular dog-training notions but don't go as far—at least in the books discussed here—as **Thomas** does in offering some radical questions about how we treat dogs in our society, such as why purebred dogs are bred to retain a certain external physical appearance, or why dogs are so commonly neutered and spayed.

Like all of the books discussed here, **Thomas** also rejects the popular scientific mindset that animals do not have feelings and that “empathic observation raises the issue of anthropomorphism” and therefore must be avoided as unscientific and valueless. She embraces empathic observation, the method at the core of this book and which provides her means of

learning about her dogs. Her keen observations and fluid storytelling, backed by her energy, conviction, and compassion make this a book that engages and entertains—and even persuades.

Allen Schoen shares **Thomas**' belief that animals have feelings that should be honored, not denied, and his book *Kindred Spirits: How the Remarkable Bond Between Humans and Animals Can Change The Way We Live* (NY: **Broadway Books**, 2001. 0767904311. 288 pages. \$14.95) takes this as a starting point in his examination of what animals can do for us and what we can do for them. **Schoen** is a veterinarian who practices alternative medicine, emphasizing that “there are many ways to treat and prevent disease: through nutrition, exercise, love, compassion, and above all, through forming meaningful bonds with the other species on this earth.” He has come to believe in (and convinces the reader of) the value of “co-species connections—that there are many extraordinary levels to the connections between people and animals, and at their best, these connections surpass any currently acknowledged scientific explanation.” He believes humans can evolve more fully in connection with animals, and tells several stories describing these special connections, including dolphins saving a drowning man, and a dog that saved a hiker.

Schoen presents support for his view that animals do feel pain, countering years of scientists who have long thought of animals as “nonthinking, nonfeeling, nonexpressive creatures.” One of the more disturbing aspects of the book is **Schoen**'s revelation that throughout his training, his compassion for animals was ridiculed, and his compassionate approach to relieving pain—convincing farmers, for example, to use nerve block before dehorning cows—was not understood or accepted by other veterinarians.

Regardless of your beliefs about the value of non-Western approaches to medicine (and I tend to be a bit cautious), **Schoen**'s discussion of alternative health and the cases studies he presents are highly convincing. One of the main themes of his book is the limits of Western veterinary medicine; this was not an assumption he came with, but a view that grew naturally out of his own experience, as he found many things “that were unexplainable in Western medicine were quite comprehensible in Eastern medicine.” His success treating arthritis with acupuncture seems particularly compelling, and one other example struck me, based on my own experience with my aging Pom. He notes that three problems that tend to occur together in elderly dogs but which are treated as three different diseases by Western veterinarians—arthritis, kidney failure, and deafness—are seen and treated as one related set of conditions by traditional Chinese medicine. **Schoen** offers non-traditional thinking about dog nutrition, including the use of organic meats, fish, whole grains, and some vegetables, and reviews research on how healing takes place. All of these topics are presented through the lens of stories about his patients, making the book a pleasure to read.

Schoen's overarching theme is the benefits of the human-animal bond and he reviews scientific research that offers support for these benefits in children, the elderly, populations with AIDS, and other groups. He closes by arguing

for some particular co-species connections: raising children with animal companions (he prefers this word to “pet”); rethinking how animals are treated in animal hospitals and labs; changing how animals are raised and slaughtered for food; and building animal shelters near senior citizen homes and orphanages to allow for connections to be built.

Several of the writers discussed here are represented in a warm yellow volume that is a deeply satisfying indulgence in words about dogs—a collection called *Dog is My Co-Pilot: Great Writers on the World's Oldest Friendship* (NY: **Crown Publishers**, 2003. 0609610864. 304 pages. \$25.00). The book was published by the editors of *The Bark*, the terrific literary dog magazine that has—quite accurately—been called the *New Yorker* of dogdom. *Dog is My Co-Pilot* contains some essays and short stories that originally appeared in the magazine, but half of the material is original.

This entertaining, rich, varied, and fun volume includes famous writers like **Alice Walker**, **Caroline Knapp**, **Carolyn Chute**, **Erica Jong** and **Maxine Kumin**; and known dog writers (many of whose books are reviewed elsewhere in this piece) like **Jon Katz**, **Donald McCaig**, **Patricia McConnell** and **Elizabeth Marshall Thomas**. Also included is one of my favorites, **Lama Surya Das**, an American Buddhist teacher whose “*God is Dog Spelled Properly*” asks the question “Can one's spiritual master be a dog?” His answer, of course, is yes, in part because “they teach us about the meaning and experience of unconditional love,” and “how to let go of a grudge” which are among the tenets “at the basis of any spiritual practice.” Dogs, he says, “teach us about faith, trust, and devotion; how never to give up; and how to keep coming back and just showing up, which is more than half the battle.” (I highly recommend **Surya Das**' “*Awakening*” trilogy on Tibetan Buddhism, but that's another column.)

The focus of *Dog is My Co-Pilot* is on relationships with dogs (as opposed to the more popular topics of the “old” dog lit: dog training, dog showing, or dog adventure writing.) It's a book about dog love, a book that will have you laughing, weeping, smiling, and completely indulging yourself in your canine relationships. (Come to think of it, I went out and got my second dog about the time I read this book. Somehow just ONE canine relationship seemed not quite enough... but I'm sure that's not a common side-effect, so please don't miss this book on that account.)

One of the best things about *Dog is My Co-Pilot* is that reading it, like reading **Caroline Knapp**'s *Pack of Two: The Intricate Bond Between People and Dogs* (NY: **Delta Books (Dell)**, 1998. 0385317018. 272 pages. \$13.95) allows you to conclude that your feelings for your dog are *normal*. If you've ever feared people would think you were truly odd if they knew just how much you loved your dog, *Pack of Two* is the book for you. At the opening, she tells us “I have fallen in love with my dog. This happened almost accidentally, as though I woke up one morning and realized: Ooops! I'm thirty-eight and single, and I'm having my most intense and gratifying relationship with a dog.

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But we all learn about love in different ways, and this way happens to be mine, through a two-year old, forty-five pound shepherd mix named Lucille." **Knapp** proceeds to tell us how she found and fell for Lucille, what she gives and what she gets in the relationship. Along the way, some might conclude that **Knapp** is too focused on this relationship or takes the easy way out in loving a dog instead of a person, but I saw a woman growing in confidence and reaching out in new ways as a result of her relationship with her dog, and I enjoyed her open honesty about just how rewarding dogs can be.

Knapp (well known as the author of *Drinking: A Love Story*) analyzes her deeply connected relationship with Lucille. While all the books discussed here are personal and clearly reflect each author's personality and values, this book stands apart in being more self-revealing, more self-conscious, and more deeply personal than the others. One of the great appeals of the story is the empathy **Knapp** generates as she wrestles with how society views her relationship with Lucille, and how she herself views it. She reflects on what role dogs play in romantic relationships and in families, and whether her own relationship with Lucille expands or narrows her social sphere. She concludes that for herself "this dog is an enormous solace to me, a constant companion and witness to my daily life, a being I have come to feel closer to in many ways than members of my own family. She represents a choice, a style of living and loving that may not be conventional but that is valid in its own right..." It is **Knapp's** words I borrowed for the title of this column: "dogs are fantasies that don't disappoint."

Knapp revels in the physical and emotional bond between herself and her dog so that as a reader, you are looking through her window as she strokes and admires Lucille, but also listening to her most personal revelations about her feelings for her dog. It's a very intimate book that probably only a true dog lover would understand and appreciate. Her sometimes anguished heartache of a book—strained but hopeful—is particularly poignant given her untimely death at age 42, in 2002, not too long after its publication.

Kristin Von Kreisler offers another personal story of a woman's life with her dog, but it is quite different than **Knapp's** introspective angst-ridden analysis. At a time of upheaval and anxiety in her own life, **Von Kreisler** found a stray beagle, and the story (*For Bea: The Story of the Beagle Who Changed My Life*. NY: J. P. Tarcher, 2003. 1585422223. 208 pages. \$19.95) of how she committed herself to the terrified, untrained, and unsocialized dog's care is entrancing. I read it wishing I could be sure I would have had the same faith that the little damaged dog would emerge into the self-assured, social beagle that endears herself to everyone and remains **Von Kreisler's** beloved companion for many years.

The book is not preachy and does not focus on the issue of research animals, but **Von Kreisler** does talk about how learning about Bea's past in a research lab caused her to change the direction of her free-lance writing, and she

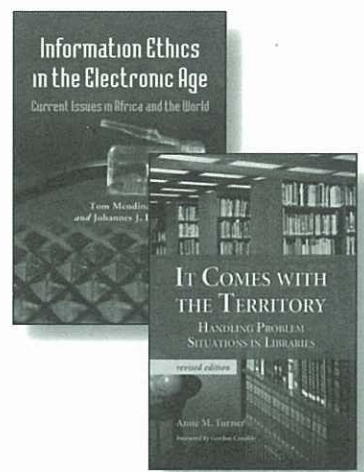
includes an appendix about what readers can do about the use of dogs in research. Neither in broad brush nor in its details is this book about animal rights, however; it is simply a moving story about resilience, love, and devotion that anyone with even a passing interest in dogs would enjoy. If you're a beagle lover, this is not to be missed.

Like **Von Kreisler** and **Knapp**, **Jon Katz** offers a memoir of life with a particular dog. In *A Dog Year: Twelve Months, Four Dogs, and Me* (NY: Random House, 2002. 0812966902. 240 pages. \$12.95) **Katz**, a successful nonfiction writer, tells the rich, funny, and heartwarming story of how he acquired a third dog, a border collie, and how he integrated this dog, Devon, (and subsequently another border collie, Homer) into his life in Monclair, NJ. Life with Devon, **Katz** says is "something of a brawl" and the story of their slowly coming together as a loving team, after starting out as aliens locked in a strange dance with one another, offers a wild romp for any reader who is even mildly interested in dogs. It ends in the kind of quiet triumph and joy that will leave you feeling satisfied and whole, not to mention full of respect for border collies, even ones like Devon that are "emotionally battered...with high energy and low self-esteem." The story of Devon's arrival at Newark Airport and subsequent attempt to herd a suburban van are worth the cost of the book alone.

What all of the books I've talked about here share is also what makes these books important: they build on the premise that dogs are not Skinner boxes with fur—as most scientists have chosen to believe—but sentient beings who stand in special relation to the humans they have evolved with. Dogs spend a fair share of their lives listening to us—so well, that scientists have shown dogs understand our gestures and non-verbal communications better than primates closely related to us, such as chimpanzees. These books share reflections on how dogs' listening enriches us and shows how we can better listen to them, ennobling ourselves in the process.

Happy Reading! Your Book and Dog Lover 

Note to Readers: In my last column, I asked whether any ATG readers might like a review of recent dog books about human/canine relationships, which seem to be streaming onto the market recently. I did have at least one vote for this topic, which is how I came to devote this column to Dog Lit. As a matter of full disclosure, I was born with a serious dog affinity that defies rational explanation. In fourth grade, I checked the "Rin Tin Tin Book of Dog Care" out of the local library as many times as they would let me (I can still see the blue cover with black lettering...). I memorized all the dog breeds long before I knew the multiplication tables. I developed a dog breed-matching database in library school, and have not lived without a dog (except when in dorms or in transition from them) since I was ten. And now, in addition to mothering my human child, I am the insanely doting mom of two dogs: Jasper the pomeranian and Isabel the cavalier King Charles spaniel. And the very best party I attended over the holiday season was a toy poodle's second birthday party. So no, I'm not the typical reader when it comes to dog books. But that's why I read them all, so you could pick just one!

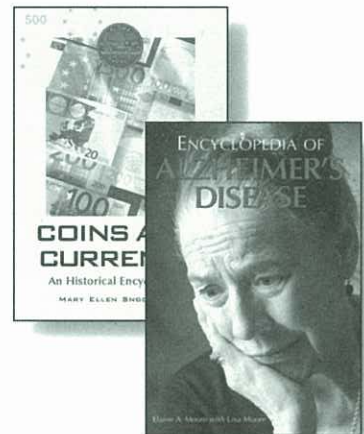


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