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Warp and woof of man's -- and woman's -- best friend

Two books discuss the responsibilities, joyous surprises of canine companions

Reviewed by Julie Foster
Sunday, April 23, 2006

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The Dogs Who Found Me

What I've Learned From Pets Who Were Left Behind

IMAGES



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By Ken Foster

THE LYONS PRESS; 194 PAGES; \$12.95
PAPERBACK

Woman's Best Friend

Women Writers on the Dogs in Their Lives

Edited by Megan McMorris

SEAL PRESS; 307 PAGES; \$14.95 PAPERBACK

For starters, here are some random bits of data kibble to digest. In the city named for the patron saint of animals, animal feces amount to 6,500 tons a year, or 4 percent, of total residential waste. According to officials, this is nearly the same tonnage created by disposable diapers. Some women who own dogs call themselves "dog moms." Bringing home a cute puppy, is for many couples, a not-so-well-disguised trial run for parenthood. Last year, Americans spent \$36 billion on doggie stuff and \$20 billion on toys for their children. America has 74 million dogs. Canada has 32 million people.

So what do the numbers mean? Two books help untangle this ferocious canine-human bond. And even for those miscreants who identify themselves as cat people, they pass the sniff test.

"The Dogs Who Found Me: What I've Learned From Pets Who Were Left Behind" is an absorbing and quirky memoir by Ken Foster, whose previous work includes a short-story collection, "The Kind I'm Likely to Get," which was selected as a New York Times Notable Book.

The 24-chapter memoir is composed of straight narrative, short lists, how-to pointers, "How to Read a Dog" and "How to Lose Your Best Friend" and e-mail correspondence all about dogs, the people who care for them and those who don't. Foster's style is blunt, funny and poignant. He smoothly melds the events of his turbulent life along with the gritty details of rescuing abandoned dogs into a piece that goes to the heart.

"People ignore stray dogs the same way they ignore stray people, the way your friends in the city insist that they have never seen any homeless people or, when pressed, offer the opinion that these people choose to be on the street and wouldn't want a home if they had one."

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Foster's own transformation began after Sept. 11. Along with his first rescued dog, Brando, a Great Dane/pit bull mix, Foster and his neighbors began visiting a local fire station bearing flowers and cookies. The firefighters in turn offered biscuits to Brando and encouraged Foster to enter the station. After several trips, Foster understood what was really happening.

"I realized how funny it was that we all thought we were coming to check in on them, when the truth was, even then, that the men of the firehouse were inviting us in because they knew it would make us feel better, not them."

Soon after, he began rescuing dogs. Friends accused him of searching out strays, when the reality was he'd opened himself up to a world many have chosen to deny. "Rescuing something takes time, and there is a risk of revealing something about yourself -- your vulnerability -- that isn't fashionable at all." Foster leaves New York for a teaching position in Florida and later relocates to New Orleans, just in time for Katrina. During this period, he suffers heart problems and the loss of two friends. One evening while checking e-mail, he discovers that his friend Lucy Grealy, whose intense friendship with Ann Patchett was chronicled in "Truth and Beauty," had killed herself. At the time, Foster was angst-ridden over the welfare of a rescued dog, Katrina.

"We talked a lot about endings, Lucy and I. The trouble was always figuring out where they belonged and how to wrap things up when in life everything seemed to fade out open-ended, the way Brando and I were both waiting now, thinking that Lucy and Katrina would still somehow come back to us, when the truth was they were both gone."

In "The Paradox of the No-Kill Shelter," Foster absorbs and regurgitates sour truths that ring true. "It is a problem of human responsibility, and no amount of theories or number crunching can solve the moral disconnect that allows people to think they're above taking responsibility for the living things around them -- not just their own life, not just their families, not just their friends."

The editor of "Woman's Best Friend: Women Writers on the Dogs in Their Lives," Megan McMorris, began with the goal of collecting "stories that went beyond the cliched, me-and-my-dog cutesy route. Instead, our goal was to compile a range of well-written stories about the many ways in which dogs affect our lives, both good and bad and somewhere in between."

For the most part, McMorris is successful. The 26 essays, plus an introduction by Pam Houston, offer up the full panorama of dog-woman relationships. One of the best of the bunch is by Rebecca Skloot. "The Truth About Cops and Dogs" deftly details the byzantine battle she waged against a moribund city bureaucracy after her dog was viciously attacked by a pack of homeless dogs.

Tish Hamilton, executive editor of Runner's World, nails the dog-as-test-baby phenomena in "Surviving Grete":

"But the deeper, more idealistic answer was that we saw promise in the big, calm dog lying on the floor of a modest-but-respectable home in a nice neighborhood with good schools and low taxes, tolerating all that modern life throws at dogs, including babies scampering over her." In "Little Dog, Big Heart," Susan Cheever acknowledges being groomed to believe that the world was divided into two groups, big-dog people and little-dog people. "Big-dog people were smart, classy, generous, whiskey drinkers. ... Small-dog people lived in over-decorated apartments, where they talked about their needs in screechy voices and drank only sherry."

Her witty chronicle of how she ended up with a miniature dachshund named Cutie who "doesn't just love unconditionally, he positively vibrates with enthusiasm" shows, like Foster's story, that dogs are the abettors of personal evolution:

"I have become increasingly haunted by our treatment of the animals in our lives, from



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Julie Foster is a writer in Sacramento and a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

This article appeared on page M - 6 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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