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Assignment 10, "The Reader's Shelf" Column"

Our Furry Beasts

Those of us who are dog people know unequivocally that we are just that – people who shape our lives for and around our four-legged, furry companions. We may have an idea of why we personally connect with canines, but do we know much about the larger human to dog relationship? Readers of the dog loving variety are gifted with a plethora of titles describing and explaining this relationship. Readers who may be baffled by why some humans tolerate fur on furniture, barking, chewed on couch arms, and fresh holes dug in our gardens may also be intrigued by these tellings of humans and dogs choosing each other. Whichever side of the stick you fall on, these titles are beautiful love stories that transcend the mundane and common human detailing how cute their pet is.

W. Bruce Cameron presents a light-hearted tale of a dog's life, and his next life, and the one after that. *A Dog's Purpose* seeks to answer a question known to plague humans for centuries: "What is our purpose?" Cameron places this question in the mind of a dog, however, and a dog that remembers its experiences in past lives as a different dog paired with different people. In his fiction, Cameron touches upon something that shows up often in the memoirs and essays. Dog's ability to teach us lessons, help us heal, stick by our sides, and provide us joy suggest a high level of cognition that we can identify with.

Few dog breeds can touch the collective heart like a Golden Retriever, and Trixie is no exception. In *A Big Little Life: A Memoir of a Joyful Dog Named Trixie* Dean Koontz describes his thoughtful decision to adopt a retired service dog and everything he learns through her company. For example, he learns early on that her "mistakes" are mostly likely his own and in order to own a dog, one must listen. His descriptions of her boundless joy exemplify but one reason we gravitate towards these magnificent animals. Her intelligence and compassion are others. Trixie truly teaches us all not only to play harder but to also question our assumptions about what animals might think, feel, and realize.

Ted Kerasote had a stray dog claim him as he embarked on a river trip. Kerasote accepted this challenge and in *Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog* he entertainingly, educationally, and touchingly shares Merle's life with the reader. Being a sort of mountain man himself, Kerasote tells the story of respecting a dog's wilder side while still taming it enough to avoid getting itself killed. Merle travels alongside Kerasote through love and loss and provides the ultimate companionship. Not only does Kerasote do a superb job of describing the symbiotic relationship between dogs and humans through his relationship with Merle, he supplements his story with fascinating trivia about pack behavior, wolf and dog evolution, and canine cognition.

In *Dog Years: A Memoir*, poet Mark Doty gracefully recounts his partner's end-of-life suffering at the hands of AIDS. Doty's prose portrays a profound respect for the dogs' teachings on grief, loss, growth, pain and life as he tells the story of his partner, his older dog, and a younger dog brought home in order to insert joy and life into a home in need. As is the case for all of us who choose to have pets, Doty must grapple with the heartbreaking fact that he will not only outlive his partner, but also his beasts that undoubtedly help him live a fuller and happier life. With a poet's touch, Doty is able to beautifully describe the dog human relationship, and in particular how therapeutic dogs can be for us.

Ceiridwen Terrill's *Part Wild: Caught Between the Worlds of Wolves and Dogs* is a uniquely female voice in a genre of dog literature dominated by men. Terrill's adoption of a puppy comes from desire for companionship, but also from need of protection from an abusive ex-boyfriend. This need leads her into ownership of a wolfdog, or a dog and wolf hybrid. The author seamlessly inserts the science of canine

evolution and behavior into her memoir as she enunciates the beauty and difficulty of domesticating what is wild.

In *Dogs Make us Human: A Global Family Album* photographer Art Wolfe and writer Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson use words sparingly and rely on the power of pictures to portray the universal bond between dogs and humans. The book is divided into six categories which begin with brief text introductions and are followed by full page displays of dog and human interactions. Categories such as *Love*, *Play*, and *Work* exhibit the varying kinds of relationships that we have with our canines and support the author's claim that there is no other animal to human relationship that is as interdependent and loving as the dog to human relationship.