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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The Love That Dare Not Bark Its Name



Davina (Psamophis) Falcao

The author with her dog Grisby

By *Mikita Brottman* | SEPTEMBER 08, 2014 ✓

PREMIUM

Like most academics, I didn't settle down until I acquired my first permanent position, which, in my case, was in my mid-30s. Only then was I able to acquire what I'd been yearning for all my life—not marriage, children, or a home of my own, but a dog. At the age of 37, I entered into a relationship with a willful

and charismatic creature named Grisby who became, for the eight-and-a-half years of his life, the fixed point of my turning world.

We were immediately inseparable, even in the classroom. My campus has a long history of allowing dogs; like the students, they're registered at the beginning of the academic year, and—unlike the students—wear a bone-shaped ID on their collars. Initially, my alliance with Grisby separated me from other human beings. Since I disliked being apart from him, I stopped taking plane trips and attending conferences. In this sense, Grisby served as a buffer or barrier, preventing me from getting too close to other people, keeping the world at bay. If I couldn't bring him with me to a social function, I'd leave early or skip it altogether. Since I found very few people who could measure up to my engaging, affectionate French bulldog, Grisby turned me into something of a misanthrope.

In this, I was hardly alone. "To anyone who needs lively entertainment for the purpose of banishing the dreariness of solitude," wrote the German philosopher Arthur

Schopenhauer in 1851, "I recommend a dog, in whose moral and intellectual qualities I will almost always experience delight and satisfaction." Schopenhauer spent 27 years of his life living alone, averse to human company, but like other notorious malcontents, he was deeply attached to his dog. According to the few guests who visited his home, Schopenhauer was deeply attentive to a succession of standard poodles; though his daily routine was rigid, he always made sure his dogs got regular walks. He even concerned himself with their daily amusements. One colleague recalls being in the middle of an earnest conversation with the philosopher at his home when they were interrupted by the music of a regimental band passing the window, at which point Schopenhauer got up and moved his poodle's seat closer, to give him a better view of the procession.

Yet if Grisby acted as a buffer, he also acted as a bridge, keeping me connected to the outside world. He gave me a reason to do things I'd have no interest in doing on my own: hanging out at the dog park, Rollerblading, exercising outside rather than in the gym. Sometimes, in the days before Grisby, I wouldn't leave the house for days on end; with Grisby around, I had to be up early every day for his morning constitutional. He connected me with other people, serving as a talking point and an icebreaker. My students loved him; he had far more friends than I did. He even had his own Facebook page.

When I was writing, or grading papers, Grisby was always by my side or at my feet. This is much less of a liability now than before the days of laptops. Small dogs must have been quite a danger in the proximity of inkwells and valuable manuscripts. Isaac Newton's Pomeranian Diamond allegedly knocked over a candle, setting fire to irreplaceable notes on experiments his master had conducted over the course of 20 years. And in his memoir *Bashan and I*, Thomas Mann describes how the wet ink of his manuscripts was often blurred or smeared by the "broad and hairy paws" of his shorthaired pointer. The writer Vita Sackville-West gave Virginia and Leonard Woolf a cocker spaniel named Pinka, whom Leonard allowed to join him in the office of the Woolfs' Hogarth Press, a freedom he may have regretted when Pinka apparently devoured a set of edited proofs.

People like to make fun of those who love their dogs "excessively," but who decides how much love is too much? Why can't we let ourselves take dog love too seriously? (Is it

because, if we did, we'd have to think seriously about other nonhuman animals, including those on our dinner plates?) There's an unstated assumption that this

affection is being "wasted" on an animal, that those who devote themselves to their pets are slightly unhinged. This is especially true of childless women, whose lapdogs are traditionally seen as substitute children. Edith Wharton, who was childless, would keep her little dogs about her at all times, letting them join her at meals and drink from her teacup. By implication, then, lapdog-loving mothers are felt to have ambivalent relationships with their offspring, and in many cases this is true. The French author Colette went nowhere without her French bulldog, but rarely saw her only daughter, whom she left in the care of an English nanny.

It's an unfair stereotype, of course—all kinds of people, including men, dote on their dogs—but rather than debunking it, my first impulse is to distance myself from it. I feel compelled to make it very clear that, although I love my dog to distraction, I'm not one of *those women*, and Grisby wasn't one of *those dogs*. He wasn't a Chihuahua or a shih tzu, he was a tough little bulldog, too heavy to ride in a carrier or snuggle on my lap. I want to deny and disavow, to insist how different my situation is, instead of thinking about why it's so hard for a woman who buys sweaters for her dog to be taken seriously.

In some ways, after all, I *am* one of those women. I'm middle-aged, childless, not officially married, and I doted on Grisby, who was a lapdog in all but size. Instead of distancing myself from it, perhaps I should embrace the stereotype. Loving a dog doesn't mean you stop loving people; in fact, evidence suggests love for animals encourages a broader sense of general empathy. (On the other hand, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that more than 75,000 Americans are injured each year by tripping over their dogs.)

My beloved Grisby died in January after complications from pancreatitis. Spring semester had just begun, and though the loss was painful, teaching gave me something concrete to focus on. The loss was also made easier by the fact that Grisby died a joyful dog in the prime of life, alert and playful, always happy, with little knowledge of pain or suffering. My sadness was also assuaged, in time, by a small sequel named Oliver, who's chewing my toes as I type.



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