

The Dogs Have Eyes -- And the Nose Knows

By Michael Schaffer
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INSIDE OF A DOG

What Dogs See,
Smell, and Know

By Alexandra Horowitz

Scribner. 353 pp. \$27

Americans this year will spend \$45 billion on veterinary antidepressants, canine hip replacements and doggie spa days. Pet spending has nearly tripled in 15 years, with dogs taking up the lion's share. As the animals have made the physical move from backyard doghouses to ergonomic indoor puppy beds, they've undergone an even more significant philosophical evolution: Man's best friend has become what marketing types now call America's "fur baby."

But what do we really know about the creatures we've promoted to full-fledged family members? To judge from the proliferation of books, classes and celebrity trainers offering their own elaborate theories of the beast, the answer is "Not as much as we'd like." It's a central irony of our pet-obsessed era: As retail-driven humanization of pets reaches increasingly improbable levels -- 56 percent of dog owners report buying Christmas presents for their animals -- we're more eager than ever to understand their essential dogginess.

Alexandra Horowitz's smart new book fills a niche in this field. Most authors seeking to explain canine minds are pushing a trendy training style or a worthy humane-treatment goal. Horowitz sets out to study dogs for their own fascinating sake. As it turns out, that's an unusual interest inside academia, too. She writes that fellow cognitive scientists see dogs as simple creatures, unworthy of scholarly attention. Her PhD adviser suggested she research a more professionally prestigious animal, such as the baboon.

It's a good thing she didn't. "Inside of a Dog" offers a thoughtful take on the interior life of the dog, a topic often left to poets and philosophers and "Marley & Me." A Barnard psychologist, Horowitz doesn't deliver an academic monograph based on, say, freshly unearthed details about the wild dogs of the Siberian steppe. Rather, she mixes observations of her own dog with a breezy survey of animal-science literature as she ponders more basic questions about the pet dogs of the American living room: What's with the sniffing? Why do they bark? Oh, and do they actually like us?

The result is a work long on insight and short on jargon. An early chapter on smell nicely explains how dogs' supercharged noses -- they can detect a spoonful of sugar dissolved in two Olympic pools' worth of water -- make smell their most important sense. One real-world implication: Many of the things humans do in the name of sanitation make a dog's world significantly less interesting. "We deprive dogs of an important part of their identity, temporarily, to bathe them in coconut-lavender shampoo," she writes.

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More interesting is Horowitz's description of what dogs take in through their other senses. Dogs, she writes, "are the anthropologists among us," making up in close observation what they couldn't otherwise know. For instance, time: They can't read clocks, of course, but these "consummate eavesdroppers and peeping Toms" watch us closely enough to be able to tell, from something as obscure as the speed with which we get up from our desks, whether it's afternoon-walk time. Human observers would find such watching endlessly boring. The fact that pet dogs do not, she says, helps explain our affection for them.

That same love, for many humans, gets in the way of understanding pets. One academic term Horowitz repeats is *umwelt*, the idea of

understanding an animal from its own perspective -- no easy task in a world where people routinely call themselves "pet parents." Horowitz's study of her own dog, described from a dog's-eye-view of a neighborhood walk, serves as a how-to guide for watching your beloved pet as an animal, not an ersatz child. (One sign of how awkward this is in our pet-smitten society: In describing life with her own Pumpernickel, Horowitz's crisp prose veers towards the schmaltzy, as if convention demands that she prove her puppy-loving bona fides to readers uncomfortable with all that *umwelt*.)

In fact, the Pumpernickel sequences demonstrate why it's so important -- for dog-lovers, not just scholars who would otherwise be studying baboons -- to steer clear of anthropomorphism. Horowitz logs hours of videotape of her pup's play sessions in the park. In frame-by-frame slow-motion, she describes dogs' intricate social dance. To ordinary human observers, all that barking and mounting and biting might look like dangerous roughhousing, something to break up. But what's going on in canine terms is fun for the dogs. Once humans are clued in to the details, they should enjoy the game, too.

Michael Schaffer is the author of "One Nation Under Dog: Adventures in the New World of Prozac-Popping Puppies, Dog-Park Politics, and Organic Pet Food."

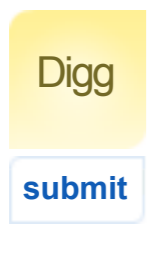
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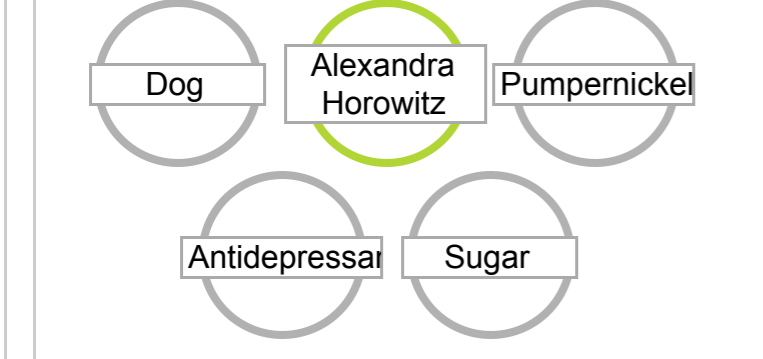
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