

## **You Animal! – And Why We Need Them in Our Stories**

By Lynne Marshall

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One balmy September evening many moons ago I met my first husband. (He's my only husband. I just get a kick out of calling him that.) After dating Mr. Tough Young Street Cop for several weeks, I still wasn't sure what I thought about him. Then on Halloween, someone left a kitten on his doorstep. Well guess what; he kept it ... so I kept him.

Now, think back to the last novel you read. Did the hero or heroine have any contact with an animal? Did the interactions between man and beast give you added insight into their character?

I attended a Deb Dixon workshop on Goal, Motivation, and Conflict a few years back, which was so fantastic it fired me up. I read every single book on her recommendation list. And in doing so, I discovered the most wonderful "how-to" book on writing: *Fiction Is Folks*, by Robert Newton Peck.

Peck, as he rather annoyingly refers to himself in third person over and over again, (Lynne didn't like that) wrote the book in 1983. But his advice still rings true today. And none rings truer than the chapter entitled, "Animal Talk." Why? Because, and I quote Peck, "Readers get to know a character by observing his relationship to an animal." And he broadens the scope to include any living thing: "The tended animal does not have to be of epic proportions. All you have to do is show a person, tired from work, pausing to stoop and lift a bug out of a puddle."

That one, small act saves pages of writing for the author. Peck insists that, “animal presence is a useful spice when you are cooking up a character.”

I couldn't agree more.

The way your hero treats animals and waitresses tells worlds about him, too. (No, I'm not implying waitresses are animals. Remember Peck broadened the scope to include any living thing?) Show how your character treats public servants and the reader will find out if he's a decent human being without ever having to read tedious backstory about his philosophy of life.

Your heroine may only speak about matters of the heart, her truest feelings, to her favorite feline. (It saves the reader from a heck of a lot of heavy retrospection.) A tough, alpha male may crumble at the sight of a wayward dog, or injured bird. What could be a more revealing character study than that? It can be as simple as the name given to your hero's horse ... Jezebel ... Mr.Ed ... Eat My Dust?

Mr. Peck also suggests a trick he uses to populate a well-balanced scene in his novels: An older person, a younger person, and an animal. This technique helps reveal a lot about a character. In my work in progress, my next medical romance, I convince a skeptical heroine that the hero, the man she thinks is a cad, is actually a decent guy. I do this by giving him two well cared-for dogs and a way with kids—her nephew to be exact.

*China thought she'd thrown Eric off track by insisting on bringing Timmy on their date, but so far, he'd devoted one hundred percent of his attention to her knobby-kneed, redheaded nephew. She had to admit, it delighted her. It also touched her heart that he kept letting Timmy win at checkers. Who would have guessed he'd be so terrific with kids?*

And later, while China kept company with Eric's two black Labrador retrievers while she barbequed hamburgers out back:

*Timmy made another triumphant outburst. "Woo hoo! I beat you again."*

*The back door swung open with Eric carrying Timmy over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She'd rarely seen her nephew laugh so hard. He kicked and squirmed, pretending to fight, but clearly loved every second of hanging upside down with drool pouring out of his mouth.*

*"Stop. Stop," he squealed.*

*Eric gently flopped her nephew onto the grass. "Get him, girls." Chloe and Jezebel romped over and licked Timmy. The boy twisted into a ball and dissolved into laughter.*

*China smiled so wide her cheeks hurt. When was the last time that had happened? The big hunk from the ER never let on there was a human side to him before. Seeing him in a new light both pleased and perplexed her.*

This new insight softens the heroine's outlook enough to open the door for the first kiss later in the chapter.

How many of us learned reams about Jennifer Crusie's character, Nell, from *Fast Women*, when she rescued—actually kidnapped is the correct term—the mistreated dachshund and named her Marlene. That hilarious, bumbling abduction scene, told me far more about the character than Crusie's metaphor of a woman that compulsively collected odd English tea sets. It told me that Nell was willing to break the law for something she believed in. That she wished someone would rescue her, but since no one was about to do that, she had to rescue herself. Before that plot point in the novel my empathy was tepid, at best, for the heroine.

In Linda O. Johnston's, Kendra Ballantyne, Pet-Sitter Mystery series from Berkley Prime Crime, *Sit, Stay, Slay; Nothing to Fear but Ferrets; Fine Feathered Death; and, Meow is for Murder*, she buddies up her protagonist with a tricolored Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

“I love having Lexie, a loving and loyal dog, appear in my Kendra stories. Kendra tends to be a loner with a heart, and after some disastrous past relationships she doubts her ability to choose good guys. Lexie sticks by her despite the reversals in her professional life. Lexie is always there for her to talk to, and to tell her when things aren't quite right in her home.”

And who can't respect a woman who pet sits, even if she has lost her lawyer's license and seems to stumble onto an inordinate number of murders?

In *Dogs of Babel* by Caroline Parkhurst, the main character, a widower named Paul, attempts to teach his dog, a Rhodesian Ridgeback named Lorelei, who is the only witness to his wife's murder, to communicate in order to help reveal the truth about his wife's fall to her death. The relationship that develops between dog and man is so touching, I wanted to take both Paul and Lorelei home and care for them until they reckoned with their grief. The fact that I own a Rhodesian Ridgeback may have influenced me a tad.

And Tami Hoag uses raccoons to soften her dark, tough hero, Lucky Doucet, in *Lucky's Lady*. He had few redeeming qualities other than a great “bod” until she showed him feeding the scavengers from his back door. I couldn't see what the heroine saw in him until that side of his character got revealed.

In my first medical romance, *Her Baby's Secret Father*, (UK release September 2006), Jaynie waits in her car while Terrance walks the redbrick path toward his front porch. *At the*

*halfway point, a large, worse for the wear gray cat strolled up to meet him. He bent to scratch the tabby's ears and let the pet stretch and press against his calf until the animal lost interest. Only then did he go inside.*

Over dinner, Terrance explains to the cautious Jaynie how he came by his pet cat.

*Terrance wiped the corner of his mouth with a paper napkin. "His name is Papa Gino. I found him several months ago, eating from a pizza carton by one of the dumpsters at work. He was the sorriest-looking cat I'd ever seen. So I stuck him inside my windbreaker, zipped it up, and rode him home on my bike."*

That bit of information, coupled with the gentle way Terrance cares for Jaynie's preemie as a respiratory therapist in the neonatal ICU, convinces her that he has a good heart, that she can trust him, and eventually helps her realize he is a man worth loving.

Robert Newton Peck cautions aspiring authors not to *anthropomorphize*. What the heck does that mean? It means: don't humanize your animals, but naturalize them. I know, I loved *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, too, but Peck says to let a cat kill a mouse, a mule work the field. Don't give him the gift of gab, unless you're writing paranormal. When you capture an animal in its natural state, you'll capture your hero or heroine in their most natural state, too. "Do so and you will succeed in stroking the long, silky fur of your reader. He'll purr," Peck says.

I'm all for humans purring, but isn't that *humanopomorphism*? Just checking.

Who didn't love Sugar Beth Carey's antagonistic relationship with a manipulative dog in Susan Elizabeth Phillips' wonderful novel, *Ain't She Sweet*?

After fifteen years and three marriages, the once rich and spoiled bad girl from Parrish, Mississippi, comes limping home. Now stripped of her youthful looks, all of her money, and most of her hope, she's dressed in dime store designer clothes, and accompanied by a manipulative basset hound.

By page three, SEP has convinced the reader how scornful Gordon the dog is of Sugar Beth's fall from grace by using a bit of anthropomorphism. She imagines him sneering and laughing at her, and proclaims he thinks she's trash.

So why does she keep him? Out of devotion to her deceased third husband. Hmm. It tells us a bit about the world-weary woman and her character change doesn't it?

Peck also suggests, if you want to be a writer, to go take a walk in the country, and ask yourself, how long has it been since you've touched a cow? How does it feel? How does it smell? How can you tell your readers about that experience? To which I add, watch your step and be sure to wash your hands before you touch the computer keyboard.

In closing I suggest, along with Robert Newton Peck, to go touch a cow. If that's not an option, go touch a big chested, brown-eyed beauty, like a dog. Now think how much that experience can add to your work in progress, and have your hero or heroine tell us all about it in your next story.

*To see a picture of my Rhodesian Ridgeback, Rogan, check out my photos! Best wishes, Lynne*