

## Canine Companions

### Overview

---

**C**anine Companions is a reading and discussion series of memoirs about the relationship between man and dog.

---

### Merle's Door by Wyoming author Ted Kerasote

---

SPOILER ALERT: Dude, people, it's a dog book. The ending will not surprise you. But just so you know, I do discuss it near the end of this summary.

Six people met the Wednesday evening before last (I have been sick and running behind) to discuss Ted Kerasote's Merle's Door. This was my first discussion outside my home turf of Meeteetse, so I started by having people introduce themselves and then by introducing a few discussion guidelines. I was very worried that this book series had the potential to spark a lot of "My dog training method is better than your dog training method!" arguments, and so I asked that everyone remember that we were here to talk about the book and that while we could be critical of ideas, we should not criticize people.

My fear--or that fear, at any rate--was unwarranted, as the group turned out to be lively and friendly, and the closest it got to a competition was perhaps just a tiny bit of "my dog story is the cutest!" banter.

Those of you who've read my earlier reports know that I am given to looking to negative Amazon reviews of the book in question to provide discussion fodder, and once again, I was not disappointed in my quest. I started out by noting that one person on Amazon had referred to the book as a "trashy romance." That got us started talking about Ted and how he relates to Merle versus how he relates to other humans, and how we all relate to different dogs in our lives.

The group generally liked the book, and they enjoyed the Wyoming setting. No one seemed bothered by what a few did acknowledge was rather extreme anthropomorphizing of Merle. Since later

books in this series handle that quite differently, I'll be interested to see how the group compares the different styles. People were split on whether the information about dog behavior and dog training added to the story or subtracted from it. Several people noted that Kerasote cited his sources very thoroughly, although others pointed out that he was somewhat prone to presenting only information that supported his beliefs.

Organizer Edie Phillips had a vet tech come to talk to us a bit about dogs and end-of-life issues. Again, what I had expected to be a controversial discussion turned out to be quite mellow, and most of the attendees seemed to agree with Ted's decision to let Merle die naturally.

I look forward to seeing how the next discussion goes!

Laura Crossett  
Meeteetse & Virtual Branch Librarian

---

Although quite late, here is a brief summary of the Cheyenne reading group's discussion of Ted Kerasote's Merle's Door. We met at the Laramie County Library on June 18 with a small group of four. With such a small group, we discussed the book in a fairly informal manner, having more of a continuous conversation than a structured discussion.

It seems that much of our topics were similar to the other groups. We hit upon the subject of anthropomorphism, with most of us concluding that it went too far, even if we thought some degree of it was necessary (or at the very least, difficult to avoid for people who live with dogs). The way the book is written, with all of the research and scientific asides, was also discussed. While some of the information was interesting (we talked about what we most liked or learned), we all agreed that there was entirely too much of it. It disrupted the narrative, encouraged 'skimming' rather than reading, and seemed quite biased. In fact, the perceived bias of the book was a major point of contention in our discussion group (contention with the text, that is - not within our group).

We also discussed the various perspectives the book offers on dog/human coexistence and issues of "training" and "wild instincts." The general consensus of the group was that while Kerastoe may be correct about Merle and that dog's unique situation and context, these ideas do not translate to all dogs in all places. In fact, I feel safe in saying

that we felt as if Merle was the exception, not the rule. Of course, we talked about the decision to not euthanize Merle, as well.

By the end, I think we were all giving the book a "thumbs down" (not that we were necessarily trying to review it) due to the constant interruptions in the text, issues of bias, and the overall attitude of Kerasote. We're looking forward to Winterdance, and hopefully we'll see a few more people tomorrow in Cheyenne.

Luke Stricker

---

Although quite late, here is a brief summary of the Cheyenne reading group's discussion of Ted Kerasote's *Merle's Door*. We met at the Laramie County Library on June 18 with a small group of four. With such a small group, we discussed the book in a fairly informal manner, having more of a continuous conversation than a structured discussion.

It seems that much of our topics were similar to the other groups. We hit upon the subject of anthropomorphism, with most of us concluding that it went too far, even if we thought some degree of it was necessary (or at the very least, difficult to avoid for people who live with dogs). The way the book is written, with all of the research and scientific asides, was also discussed. While some of the information was interesting (we talked about what we most liked or learned), we all agreed that there was entirely too much of it. It disrupted the narrative, encouraged 'skimming' rather than reading, and seemed quite biased. In fact, the perceived bias of the book was a major point of contention in our discussion group (contention with the text, that is - not within our group).

We also discussed the various perspectives the book offers on dog/human coexistence and issues of "training" and "wild instincts." The general consensus of the group was that while Kerasote may be correct about Merle and that dog's unique situation and context, these ideas do not translate to all dogs in all places. In fact, I feel safe in saying that we felt as if Merle was the exception, not the rule. Of course, we talked about the decision to not euthanize Merle, as well.

By the end, I think we were all giving the book a "thumbs down" (not that we were necessarily trying to review it) due to the constant interruptions in the text, issues of bias, and the overall attitude of Kerasote. We're looking forward to Winterdance, and hopefully we'll see a few more people tomorrow in Cheyenne.

Luke Stricker

---

Last night we had a certified veterinary technician attend the reading discussion. She had read the book and had some interesting things to say. She talked about end of life issues for dogs, which I think might have made people a

little uncomfortable, but it was my idea and perhaps it wasn't a good thing to do. We are also having a person from the Humane Society, a reading therapy dog and owner, and a search and rescue person attend in subsequent discussions. Everyone really liked *Merle's Door*, which was our first selection. We didn't have really many negative things to say about it. We only had six people attend but more had signed up. I had sent an email and left phone messages for people, but it's summertime, which is a busy time for people. But, I'm going to try to put up some more signs to try to get people to come in for the other discussions.

Ten persons met together for the first session of this year's Medicine Bow book discussion group.

Everyone liked *Merle's Door*. One person said it got a little maudlin at times, and a few thought there was too much research information incorporated, but even these people thought the book was good overall.

We talked a bit about the reasons the research information is in the book and the fact the book is more than a biography of a dog. The author intended people to look at how dogs are treated and trained. He wants people to realize that trainers have based their ideas on captive wolves and studying captive wolves is like studying humans in a refugee camp. [Listening to the interviews Ted Kerasote has given will give discussion leaders a good idea of his intent. They're available at [kerasote.com](http://kerasote.com).]

I anticipated that readers would be concerned about anthropomorphism, but this group was not. We looked at what Kerasote says about it on page 112. We talked about the ability to read dog's body language, expressions, etc. if we pay attention.

We talked about how Kerasote's treatment of Merle allowed the dog to be the best dog he could be in both the human world and the dog world. I brought up the idea that Kerasote was not trying to be a dog but facilitated Merle's successful life among humans. This aspect will be in contrast to the author of the book about sled racing in Alaska.

This series leads people to talk about their own dogs and experiences with dogs, which I think can work well as long as the topics fit in with the topics in the book.

Maggie Garner

---

Thirteen of us met in the Library in Baggs to discuss *Merle's Door*, by Ted Kerasote. We changed the day and time of meeting to the last Friday afternoon of the month, at 3, and it seems to be working well, because our numbers were definitely improved. And everyone enjoyed and was positive about *Merle's Door*. We were lucky enough to get the new series of books about dogs, and judging from our first one, we will enjoy it, although I can't expect all the books to be as good as *Merle's Door*. We had no problem with getting discussion going. At times, we would get off track a little as we would segue into discussing similar experiences with our own dogs or cats.

We spent time trying to classify the book: was it a memoir, an animal behavioral study, treatise on animal intelligence or wolf lore and behavior? Really, it was all those things, Ted's memoir of his wonderful dog companion combined with accounts of his investigations into animal psychology, wolf behavior, and a thoughtful, reflective account of Merle's actions, motivations and behavior. The door of the title was important, both concretely and symbolically: early in their relationship, Ted decided to install a door in his trailer to allow Merle to come and go at will. He explores the psychological aspects of this: it puts Merle on an equal level and makes him responsible for his own behavior. The "door" also opens into Ted's life and mind, as he learns to love and understand Merle, and figure out their relationship. Merle is a "free" dog, not a subservient pet, and Ted charts his behavior and figures out his reasons. Some might criticize him for anthropomorphizing his dog, but his interpretations of Merle were thoughtful and consistent, supported by Merle's own actions. Merle was clearly a problem-solving dog, capable of thought and planning. He takes the initiative to solve the problem of a llama that refuses to move and can't be moved by all the tactics Ted thinks up. (Merle walks by the llama nonchalantly, then turns and races back in an attack, startling the llama onto its feet). Merle's "rounds" about the town of Kelly are consistent and well-worn, but when a widow starts greeting Merle with lavish meals and overfeeding him, causing him to put on weight until his belly almost drags and his health is threatened, Ted has to take strong action to persuade Merle to leave his fancy dinner stop out of his schedule. The widow refuses to stop feeding Merle, so Ted buys a shock collar to condition Merle to leave the widow's house alone, and finally the problem is solved.

Besides the story of Ted and Merle, a cat, Grey Cat, completes their household in his inimitable feline way. There is also a romantic subplot concerning Ted and Alison, the girl for Ted who can't be convinced that Ted is the man for her. (There are also many romantic, ephemeral subplots concerning Merle as well.) Alison adopts a lab-hound mix, Brower, who becomes one of the family as well. Brower's fate is sad: developing a persistent cancer near his nose at the age of 6. After a horrendous surgery which removes most of his snout, Brower has a happy few more years, until the cancer returns, and Brower eventually must be put down. After that, Merle develops his own problems of aging, and the book chronicles his decline and death in a most affecting way.

I loved how Ted mixed philosophy, psychology, animal behavior studies into his story of his life with Merle. Merle indeed was an exceptional dog, but most dogs are, in their own ways, if we're capable of observing and understanding them with insight. Ted Kerasote is an exceptional observer, thinker and writer as well. We are looking forward to the rest of our dog books: the next one we'll read is Gary Paulsen's *Winterdance*, about Paulsen's experience entering the Iditarod.

---

Eighteen of us met Tuesday evening to discuss *Merle's Door*, the first text in the Canine Companions series for

Lusk. I would reiterate earlier comments that this book was enjoyed by all; in fact, the very first comment from the attendees was that this is a good book. However, the second comment was that most had "skipped all the studies." This was my concern going into this series, that many, if not most, attendees would be looking for a good story about "a boy and his dog." While there is nothing wrong with simply reading for pleasure, escapism does not lend itself to much discussion beyond the ordinary and expected.

We had a pleasant discussion about dogs, especially the dogs of those present. And I would have to say that even that sort of basic discussion had humanistic elements about relationships between humans and animals as pets, and between humans in relation to animals. I am thinking particularly of one woman who talked about her husband choosing not to leave home for more than one day in order to not upset his dogs. Perhaps the reading for escape has some elements for appropriate discussion. I wonder if others have thoughts in this regard.

Additional discussion ensued regarding the wonderful details of the text, the symbolism of the door, and a somewhat extended discussion of euthanasia. I would suggest there is a universality in the relationship between humans and pets, and this led to an enjoyable evening, if not to the sort of discussion often expected of Reading Wyoming. The next book is *Winterdance* and I let the group know that it would not be a book about tender feelings toward pets but a look at working animals in relation to humans. The tears related to Merle's death will be replaced by the tears of laughter at the description of the adventures of the greenhorn musher.

Wayne G. Deahl

---

## **Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod**

**by Gary Paulsen**

---

About eight people met last Wednesday in Cody for a discussion of *Winterdance* by Gary Paulsen. We started by meeting outside the library so that we could hear from a volunteer at the Humane Society of Park County and meet a dog she'd brought along. She also brought some dog sledding equipment that had come with a group of Huskies who were dropped off a few years back. It was just a small sled, designed for only three or four dogs, but it was neat to get even a small sense of what sort of conveyance the mushers in the book were using.

The group reacted very favorably to *Winterdance*, and several people said they liked it much better than *Merle's Door*, in part because it left out the dog

research and in part because while Paulsen was clearly close to his dogs, he did not anthropomorphize them in the way that Kerasote did Merle.

We talked a bit about how Merle's Door is a book about a dog becoming more like a human, whereas Winterdance is in many ways a book about a human becoming a dog.

I gave the group some information about Paulsen's background and his life.

People were not surprised by his hardscrabble background, and they were very impressed with his wife, Ruth, in part for putting up with him in and in part because she seemed like a great character in her own right.

Finally, we talked about the dogs in the book. They were, as people noted, not like pet dogs, but they still had very distinct personalities. We also talked for awhile about dogs and jobs, and how we balance the need for dogs to have work to do with our desire to have them as pets.

I finished by reading this passage on p. 203, in which Paulsen describes crossing the interior:

"I think now that this was my final break with the normal world. Back there somewhere, back in the real world I had a wife and family, a life. But here, now, was everything I needed, everything I was; the sled, food, fifteen good friends--or fourteen good friends and Devil, as it happened--all that I had become. I was complete, and part of that completeness was that we, the team and I, were in some way doing what we were meant to do--heading north into the sweeps."

I asked everyone to think about that idea of dog and person as a "we," and to see how it played out in our next book, *Travels with Lizbeth*.

Laura Crossett  
Meeteetse & Virtual Branch Librarian

---

About eight people met last Wednesday in Cody for a discussion of *Winterdance* by Gary Paulsen. We started by meeting outside the library so that we could hear from a volunteer at the Humane Society of Park County and meet a dog she'd brought along. She also brought some dog sledding equipment that had come with a group of Huskies who were dropped off a few years back.

It was just a small sled, designed for only three or four dogs, but it was neat to get even a small sense of what sort of conveyance the mushers in the book were using.

The group reacted very favorably to *Winterdance*, and several people said they liked it much better than *Merle's*

*Door*, in part because it left out the dog research and in part because while Paulsen was clearly close to his dogs, he did not anthropomorphize them in the way that Kerasote did Merle.

We talked a bit about how *Merle's Door* is a book about a dog becoming more like a human, whereas *Winterdance* is in many ways a book about a human becoming a dog.

I gave the group some information about Paulsen's background and his life.

People were not surprised by his hardscrabble background, and they were very impressed with his wife, Ruth, in part for putting up with him in and in part because she seemed like a great character in her own right.

Finally, we talked about the dogs in the book. They were, as people noted, not like pet dogs, but they still had very distinct personalities. We also talked for awhile about dogs and jobs, and how we balance the need for dogs to have work to do with our desire to have them as pets.

I finished by reading this passage on p. 203, in which Paulsen describes crossing the interior:

"I think now that this was my final break with the normal world. Back there somewhere, back in the real world I had a wife and family, a life. But here, now, was everything I needed, everything I was; the sled, food, fifteen good friends--or fourteen good friends and Devil, as it happened--all that I had become. I was complete, and part of that completeness was that we, the team and I, were in some way doing what we were meant to do--heading north into the sweeps."

I asked everyone to think about that idea of dog and person as a "we," and to see how it played out in our next book, *Travels with Lizbeth*.

Laura Crossett  
Meeteetse & Virtual Branch Librarian

---

Cheyenne Book Discussion Group – Gary Paulsen's *Winterdance*

We began by comparing Paulsen's book to the Kerasote book (*Merle's Door*) from our last discussion. On whole, our group enjoyed this book much more. We enjoyed the persona that Paulsen presented – humorous, helpless, willful yet ignorant of the task at hand, and most of all, willing to laugh at himself. This was a contrast to what many of us perceived about Kerasote's authorial persona, which we mostly found preachy and biased. Also, our group was much more comfortable with the lower levels of anthropomorphism found in *Winterdance*.

Our group was fortunate to have a member who lived formerly lived in Alaska, and also participated in team dog racing (although not the Iditarod). For much of the discussion, we relied on her experience to inform our understanding of the book. She also was more familiar with the author, so we talked briefly about his life after the book, future attempts at racing, etc.

Although we enjoyed the book, there was one aspect that seemed to stick out – the end. We discussed a few aspects of the end of the book, including the symbolic importance of it being titled “An End,” the manner in which it somewhat seems ‘tacked’ on, how it contrasts with the rest of the book (the return to domesticity), and the lack of clarity in the last chapter (how many years had passed, what the current situation is). We also noted how the end differs from most ‘dog books’ because the focus is not on the death of the canine character.

The issue of cruelty in regard to dog racing was raised, but nearly every person in the group felt that it was not a concern. Other issues we discussed included the author’s use of humor, the debate over how dogs learn and think (especially in connection to the scene with Marge and the grouse), and the inability to relate to Alaska from the ‘outside.’ Next week – Travels with Lizbeth!

We had nine persons meet to discuss *Winterdance*, one of them being a man who ran sled dogs for a few years (and he’s now a member of the group!).

Much of our discussion revolved around asking the former musher questions. One of my questions was whether or not racing dogs in the Iditarod is animal cruelty. When I did research on the Iditarod, I found that many people (including every sports writer I found) consider the race extremely cruel to animals. There are groups in opposition to the race. My sense was that some people are cruel and treat their dogs cruelly during the race, and others are kinder and treat their dogs well. The musher agreed. Although he never participated in the race, he has spoken to some of the big names in the Iditarod and is very familiar with the race and racers.

The musher also talked about how much the dogs love to run (as we could gather from the book) and how his would get uncontrollably excited when they saw him getting harnesses. He got books to figure out how to train the dogs and said there isn’t printed information about “how to run the Iditarod.” Several of us, including me, thought that Paulsen should have done a bit more research about dog racing and the race. The musher also talked about his love of running sled dogs and how he understands how it can become an addiction. He gave it up because of the expense of keeping dogs.

We talked about Paulsen’s relationship with the dogs and his desire to become dog-like in his approach towards training and the race. We compared and contrasted his attitude towards dogs with that of Merle’s owner.

As I reported on a previous post, Paulsen was scheduled to race in the Iditarod in 2005 but pulled out at the last minute. We were surprised that he had intended to race considering his health and his older age.

Everyone really liked the book, especially the humor in it, and we had a lively discussion.

Maggie Garner

On Friday, September 25, 15 of us met at the Baggs Library to discuss Gary Paulsen’s *Winterdance*, plus three more members read the book but were unable to come to the discussion group. That’s a good number! There wasn’t a negative voice about *Winterdance* – everyone liked it; no one had any trouble getting involved or finishing the book. We began with a little background on Gary Paulsen. Everyone who finished the book found out that Paulsen developed a heart problem which would prevent him from participating in more Iditarods; however, he wrote an online journal, January and February 2002, about his preparations for a new attempt at the Iditarod. Paulsen completed two Iditarods in the 80s, but I could not find out whether he participated in that later Iditarod. If anyone knows, please share the information!

Everyone shared their favorite parts, and we discussed the culture of the Iditarod as well as Paulsen’s experiences, both in training and in the race itself. Several of us, when we found out what the book was about, worried, because we had no interest in the Iditarod, and so thought we would be bored with the book. Not at all! Everyone loved it. It was hilariously funny and upbeat, depicting a triumph of both human and dog nature. The early part of the book kept several of us laughing out loud at Paulsen’s attempts to train his dogs and prepare. The account of him riding back to Minnesota in the back of his pickup with his three new unkenneled sled dogs, one appropriately named Devil, in a hopeless attempt to bond with them and keep them calm was very funny, although I for one felt guilty at laughing at such a bloody initiation.

The Iditarod itself was amazing. Each new leg held new unimaginable challenges and disasters. Paulsen describes it so vividly that the reader feels the cold, exhaustion, and terror of the race. Then one is prepared to understand the truth of the conclusion of the residents who interact with this race, year after year, that one and all, dog and human, they’re all crazy. But what a craziness!

So far, the dog series has been very popular. We are hoping the last two books will be in the same league as the first two. Next, we will read *Travels with Lisbeth*.

---

Fifteen hardy souls braved the rapidly cooling air and a brisk wind to gather at the Niobrara County Library and discuss *Winterdance*. This was our second discussion in the Canine Companions series, and there was much more discussion of humanistic concerns this time than the personal “dog stories” of our first discussion. It seemed that many did not care about or want to discuss dog behavior related to communication, thinking, etc. which are present in *Merle’s Door*, but *Winterdance* led to a lively, wide-ranging, and group-generated discussion. I simply asked what the group wished to discuss and they were off, discussing the nature of Paulsen. Was he crazy or simply stupid to jump into dog racing without seeking advice or help? What would motivate a person to persevere through the many misadventures of learning to be a musher and the trials of the Iditarod to actually complete the event? Human endeavor and the sense of challenge was a major theme. Costs, both real and

emotional, were discussed. Some expressed disappointment at the ending, wanting to know more about what happened and why, after so much effort, he would give his dogs away and quit cold turkey. We also had a member who had lived in Anchorage and had first-hand experience with the start of the race and other, related events. A fine and interesting discussion.

Wayne G. Deahl

## **Travels with Lizbeth** **By Lars Eighner**

Nine met to discuss *Travels with Lizbeth* in Medicine Bow.

The discussion began with one of the long-standing members placing her book firmly on the table and saying, "I liked this book because it made me think about things." That statement started us off on a positive note, although clearly some people wanted to grumble about the book and/or the author. From this beginning statement, we took the discussion to the various issues that are addressed in the middle chapters and agreed that the book brings up important matters and considering them might make us stretch a bit.

The complaints about the book itself feel into two categories. The first is that the book doesn't really fit into the series. Although a dog and a man are in the book, their relationship isn't central to the book. The second is that the sexual encounters had nothing to do with the ideas and the storyline of the book and were, thus, offensive. Included in this second complaint was dislike of the author.

As we talked about Lars' relationship with Lizbeth, we realized that we didn't really know a lot about it. The author doesn't really talk about it. He talks about his care of Lizbeth, her protection of him, and his loyalty to her. One person mentioned that the dog kept him honest because he didn't want to be arrested and have Lizbeth taken from him.

The author talks about what the dog and he do but very little about how they relate.

As I asked the group about his relationships with people, everyone said that he didn't seem to relate well with people. People come and go, and he doesn't seem to care or even relate to the people in a significant way.

I mentioned some information I gathered when preparing for the discussion. Eighner has a blog, and I read some of it. (He also is on Facebook; I don't have an account, but I could see that he does have friends on Facebook.) In a very long blog entry, he recounts that people thought there was something mentally wrong with him when he was young. He speculates that if the diagnosis existed, he might have been diagnosed as a high functioning autistic. He says he probably "had" Asperger's Syndrome, not realizing, I guess, that people don't get over that syndrome. In addition, an article from an Austin friend of his, a more successful writer, mentions that when taking Lars in a grocery store a couple of years after publication

of the book, Lars got lost looking for pickles and mentioned that grocery stores confuse him now.

Putting those articles together (and other comments from the friend that I'll mention below) made us think that perhaps mental malfunctioning accounted for his difficulty with social interactions and limited his relationship with his dog.

The article by the friend also mentioned that two years after Eighner published the book, he had only \$10 in his pocket (and would eventually be homeless again). He had no idea where the \$100,000 plus royalties from the book had gone. Clint was still with him and working sporadically. Moreover, he really hadn't done anything since publishing the book. The article also mentions Eighner's frequent comments about how he would die soon (as he made comments in the book), his poor health, and the fact that Eighner's Austin friends were very tired of helping him out all the time when he (Eighner) didn't seem capable of helping himself. From all of the above, we surmised that Eighner just doesn't seem capable of helping himself and that could be part of the reason that he never figures out how to support himself.

In addition, we talked about the effects of being ostracized for being gay (as Eighner was from his own family) and the difficulty of being gay in the era when he was growing up (he was born in 1948). One member remembered a gay Medicine Bow young man who was outstanding in many ways but totally ostracized by his own family.

Although this book had mixed reviews (some really disliked it and disliked the author; others recognized that the book got them to think) and the book doesn't fit into the series well, it does generate discussion as is evident from the long postings humanities scholars have posted about this book.

Maggie Garner

---

If you are doing the dog book series and if you felt that the first couple of discussions were a wee bit lackluster, and if your group is anything like mine, you will hit book discussion pay dirt with *Travels with Lizbeth*.

For those of you who prefer to skim my overly long descriptions, here's the short version:

Homeless people : bad  
Gay people not in committed relationships : bad  
Homeless people with dogs : not as bad as we originally thought

These, at any rate, were the opinions of one particularly outspoken discussion group member. While not all the members were quite so insistent on these points, all but a couple of them felt that Lars Eighner had chosen his homeless life and that if he had really wanted a job, he could have gotten one. What varied was whether they thought his joblessness made him a bad person.

One member brought in a book called *Scratch Beginnings: Me, \$25, And the Search for the American Dream*

(<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/232720301>), by a young man who sets out with \$25 in his pocket and the clothes on his back to see if he can make it (since this is a book about the American Dream, of course he does make it). I mentioned that the NY Times review of *Travels with Lizbeth* (<http://icanhaz.com/lizbeth>) differentiates it from a lot of other books about poverty because its character starts out in poverty, where as a lot of similar books start out with someone who has a home and a job but attempts to live as one of the poor for awhile. I felt this was a brilliant point, but the group seemed underwhelmed by it.

As for the homeless people with dogs thing: everyone said their initial reaction was along the lines of "OMG HOW COULD YOU DO THAT TO A DOG?!" As they read the book, though, they saw that people gave Lizbeth food and that she seemed pretty okay (although a lot of them thought she did not receive enough coverage in the book). One member also brought in an article about vets who provide care for the dogs of homeless people, and the vet spokesperson said that really, the dogs were in good shape. I pointed out that Cesar Millan (of *The Dog Whisperer*) also says in his book that the happiest dogs in America are those who belong to homeless people, and, after some consideration (aided and abetted by tales of my previous life as a dog walker), people mostly seemed to be okay with that sentiment.

And now for the part I know you've all secretly been waiting for: how did the gay part go over? Opinions ranged from, "Well, that's certainly not a lifestyle I really understand, but I guess it's okay" to "If my child lived that way, I'd disinherit him too!" There were also a couple of discussion members who were notably silent on the topic, which makes me suspect that they had opinions that they did not feel comfortable sharing. While I do my best to make the space feel safe for everyone, the vehemence that some people brought to this book made that difficult.

Some other tidbits: I asked the group to compare Lars Eighner to Gary Paulsen from *Winterdance*, and, for that matter, to Ted Kerasote from *Merle's Door*. They agreed that while none of these men live an entirely normal life, they felt that Eighner's was far more abnormal than those of the other two.

(Perhaps they were forgetting the skunk incidents in *Winterdance*?)

Several people complained that we have not yet read a book about a dog, and so for next time I asked them to think about what "a book about a dog" might be like and whether that is even possible. Ironically, while many people found the anthropomorphism in *Merle's Door* irksome, they felt that we didn't learn enough about the personalities of the dogs in *Winterdance* and *Travels with Lizbeth*, which are both notable for their lack of anthropomorphism.

Finally, we had some interesting conflicts that resulted from people's sometimes very different readings of Eighner's prose. Sometimes the different readings were valid, but in some instances, I think, people's attitude toward Eighner ended up dictating how they read

something. It's an interesting discussion when you can't even get people to agree on what happened.

I'll stop now. It was a good discussion.

Laura Crossett

---

So, last Thursday, our book discussion group met in Cheyenne to talk about Eighner's *Travels With Lizbeth*. On this particular occasion, our discussion group included myself, one other regular, and a library employee (who had not had a chance to read the book) who was sitting in for the vacationing Karen. That's right - three of us, two of whom had read the book.

Regardless, we had an interesting conversation and discussion about the book. First, we compared it to the previous two books and agreed that the dog had a less significant role in the book. In fact, is this a 'dog' book? (I know, I know, I'm the one who pushed for it to be included, so I must think it IS a 'dog' book.) We also compared the authorial style of the three writers, determining that all are divergent but still share the same trait of difference. Which is to say, as I believe was pointed out in the Cody discussion, that none of these authors wrote about experiences that we could latch onto as relatable or 'normal'.

We spent some time discussing Eighner's view of dogs - his refusal to anthropomorphize, his statement in the intro about fulfilling the dog/man relationship simply by not abandoning or having Lizbeth put down, and his genuine care and concern. We also discussed the issue of cruelty, but neither of us felt that Lizbeth was mistreated in any way. She was taken care of, often before Eighner was, and she seemed to be fulfilled by her lifestyle.

Of course, homosexuality and homelessness came up (not necessarily joined like that), and the consensus seemed to be that Eighner wrote very ambiguously about sexuality for the majority of the book, and that the few sections of graphic sexuality seem somewhat out of place with the rest of the text. The group regular described Eighner as 'self-destructive' and exhibited what I found to be real concern for him. We discussed homelessness as a choice, and how all it takes is a different perspective on the world. I referred to the chapter on dumpster diving, and Eighner's sense that he was fortunate to be out there, knowing what he was looking for, while the unlucky ones were stuck inside, not even knowing what they were searching for on cable TV. This discussion did not go as in depth as I would have liked.

We also discussed the inclusion of so much sociological and political material in the book. Unlike the Kerasote book, where we found the inclusion of mass peripheral information to become somewhat distracting, we agreed that Eighner's tendency to go on tangents was informative and entertaining. These tangents also contribute to why this may not be thought of as a 'dog' book. One of the tangents that we discussed at length was my personal favorite in the book, the chapter on institutional parasitism.

So, the discussion group was at a bare minimum, but we still talked about the book for an hour, and I actually thought it was a quality discussion (for two people). I am anticipating more people at the last discussion, and I am wondering if perhaps the drop-off in participation had anything to do with the apparently objectionable content of the book. Personally, I think there's nothing in Eighner's book more objectionable than the dog that gets murdered in *Winterdance*, and it's a shame that some readers couldn't get past the issue of homosexuality (especially since *Travels With Lizbeth* is not even close to what would be considered 'gay literature') to discuss what is an interesting book.

---

On Oct. 30, Friday afternoon eight people got together in Baggs to discuss Lars Eighner's *Travels with Lizbeth*. Unfortunately, I was not one of them: we had tried to hold our discussion on Friday, Oct. 23<sup>rd</sup>, but I came down with flu on Thursday night, so we had postponed the meeting until Friday, Oct. 30, which turned out to be a day of cold weather and snow, which turned into ice and slush on the highways, making travel very difficult. One lady slid off the road between Craig and Baggs, rolling her car three times but luckily not getting hurt. So I decided I had better not try the drive, and Linda Fleming, our coordinator, conducted the meeting. We talked beforehand, and I gave her some of my notes and suggestions. She did a fine job and it sounds like it was a fascinating discussion, which I'm very sorry to have missed. Fifteen people had checked out the book, although only eight made it to the discussion. It was bad weather, though.

Linda first shared some biographical information on Lars Eighner, then moved on to the book's episodic structure, with hitchhiked trips to California forming the beginning and ending, and other topics of homelessness forming the central chapters. "On Dumpster Diving" is probably Eighner's most famous work, having been reproduced in several anthologies. The group examined three middle chapters that had interesting topics and messages: "Institutional Parasitism," which was my favorite chapter of the book, concerns how homeless people can exploit some institutions to fulfill their needs. Eighner's example was a former janitor, who passed himself off as a professor at the university, living in offices, eating well and washing in bathrooms. The group discussed the story and movie about the young lady who was dropped off at a WalMart and lived there for months. Concerning the chapter, "On Dumpster Diving," the group discussed different types of life, what we throw away, and what that means about us and our lifestyles. The third chapter discussed was the medical chapter, "On Phlebitis," when Eighner ends up in a hospital. Having worked in hospitals before, Eighner was savvy, knowing what to watch for and interpreting signs and conversations. The group discussed the stereotypes of persons needing care, and hospital personnel's assumptions of drug use among the homeless.

The group then discussed their positive and negative impressions, concerning Eighner's travel experiences and his views of cities we know, in particular Tucson and L.A., how his experiences differ. Others stole his possessions so often, that the group wondered how he was able to hold

on to the journals he used to write the books. His experiences were different from ours; he is a different kind of person, outside most of our usual circles, which made his experiences and observations interesting. In the book, it is quite clear that Eighner takes pride in his writing ability; his vocabulary and skills were commented on and wondered about by participants.

Participants felt that parts of the book were very informative, and several felt that it had increased their understanding of and compassion for the homeless. Eighner had no weakness for alcohol, and combined with his writing abilities, it struck many of us as strange that he fell into homelessness. The group related the needs of the homeless to a discussion of the soup kitchens in Laramie. Also, in the past week, a barefoot man travelling with a donkey had spent several days in the valley, and, since he was homeless, Baggs and Dixon residents took care of him. High school and college kids, even in our communities, have been known to be kicked out of their homes and had to continue school homeless, while living on friends' couches. The effects on their grades and psyches were discussed.

Finally, the discussion got to Lizbeth and our feelings for the dog in this book. There was a lot of sympathy for Lizbeth. Many felt that her owner used her to get sympathy and food and to protect his belongings. It was disturbing that he walked her so far one day that the pads were worn from her feet; he didn't notice this until too late to help her. On the other hand, he carried heartworm medicine for her and was concerned about how he would replace it, when it was stolen. So some people felt he did care for her, although others felt she was not an important part of his life or of the book. Comparing Eighner and Lizbeth with the main characters and dogs in the other two books, the group agreed that the dogs in *Merle's Door* and *Winterdance* were much better cared for, not used as Lizbeth was. The other dogs seemed loved for themselves and more central to the main character's feelings and lives.

The group also discussed where this book fit into the series. Nobody felt this one was their favorite book: *Merle's Door* and *Winterdance* both generated more enthusiasm. However, Linda pointed out that the books sponsored by the Humanities Council are meant to "stretch us," to introduce us to new situations, new material, that is not our normal reading. Everyone agreed that *Travels with Lizbeth*, while a stretch, was a letdown after the other two books; also, we were a little surprised by its presence in the series because it really is not about Lizbeth; the dog is not central to the action or the issues. Nevertheless, reading it gave many of us valuable compassion and information. Next to read is the last book in the series, *My Dog, Skip*.

---

Sixteen of us took the opportunity to discuss *Travels with Lizbeth* last night at the Niobrara County Library, and the discussion had already started before my arrival. Eighner's book apparently had become a topic of discussion throughout the community, whether folks were book discussion participants or not. I began the formal discussion with some brief background material on the

author, pictures of Lizbeth from his website, and some comments on the choosing of texts for discussion—that they may be outside of our norms, perhaps challenging of assumptions, but certainly about the human condition. As soon as I finished, it became very apparent that this text evoked visceral reactions.

At least two participants were vocal about their dislike of the text. Concerns seemed to be that this is not a story about the relationship between a man and a dog nor is it well-written. The opinion was expressed that Eighner is self-centered and was concerned only about himself. The text begins with the man and dog, but most of the body of the work is devoted to Eighner's exploration of himself, written in such a way as to be self-aggrandizing and obviously for money. There was even a suggestion that he made a conscious choice to live this way to create something to sell and support himself, with one side result that Lizbeth was exposed to problems and situations less than ideal for the raising and care of a pet. Many agreed that, with the author's education and ability with language, that he chose to be so limiting in what he was willing to do was more the reason for his homelessness, and those choices were in his control.

We did move on to other topics, but the idea of choice and fate in being homeless was a recurrent theme. Stories of people who literally chose to be "panhandlers" or homeless instead of taking or holding jobs were related. Participants agreed that the author's homosexuality was not a problem for them, but the seemingly gratuitous depictions of gay sexual activity did not seem necessary to the moving forward of the story. As has been suggested with other groups, the section on dumpster diving was interesting. Our group discussed this activity, and many were shocked to learn how frequently this occurs even in their community. An extension of this was the wastefulness of our society.

And I should make it clear that there were also staunch supporters of the text as a choice. It, after all, does involve a man and his dog. One participant suggested that even though Eighner does not relate the conversations between himself and Lizbeth, they obviously occurred during the frequent occasions when the two were alone. Also, the level of discussion and the amount generated would seem to be exactly what this kind of activity should generate.

So is the book a pretentious, self-centered paean to its author, or is it a provocative look at what it means to be homeless and outside of the greater societal norms? Many ideas were thrown around, and as this is a veteran group, they led themselves through an incredible number of ideas. No consensus was reached, but this was a most provocative and interesting discussion. And I probably poisoned the well for next month when I suggested that I think Travels with Lizbeth has much more to discuss than My Dog Skip. I am concerned that our final book is more of "a boy and his dog," and that there is not much substantial discussion content. I will be happy to be proven wrong.

Wayne G. Deahl

## **My Dog Skip** by Willie Morris

---

On a cold, clear night, twelve humans and six canine companions (Germ, Bogey, Molly, and Skip of the living and breathing type and two of the furry, stuffed type) gathered at the Niobrara County Library to discuss *My Dog Skip*, complete evaluations, and share a cookie or two (Thanks to Debbie Sturman for the delicious cookies). This group has a core of participants so the social aspect of our meetings is always important, as it was on this evening.

However, once socializing was done, I asked what folks wanted to discuss. Usually, this group has many ideas and just needs some direction, but last night the first comment was that the book is "undiscussable...there really aren't any big ideas here." All were in agreement that this is a "cute book," a "comfortable read," and "filled with nostalgia." There were some comments about Morris' style—that he is very readable but uses mature language in somewhat surprising ways. One participant suggested that the book read like a collection of essays, and it is, indeed, an episodic work. That Skip lived as long as he did was amazing. His misadventures with the refrigerator and poison were almost beyond belief. Some discussion of the freedom which the boys experienced occurred, with most agreeing that children certainly don't have that sort of freedom today. Discipline has changed and, as a result, children seem to be more restricted in their activities.

While the discussion was brief, and while the text led more to discussion of personal dog stories rather than the text itself, it was a pleasant evening. All agreed that *My Dog Skip*, while a fine story about a boy and his dog, did not hold up as a discussion text in comparison to the others in the series.

Wayne G. Deahl

---

While all participants like *My Dog Skip*, all agreed that there wasn't much to discuss about the book. In fact, when preparing for the discussion, I had a difficult time creating the list of questions that I usually prepare.

As others have mentioned, the book is an enjoyable read, a pleasant book, but not one that engenders discussion.

We did compare and contrast this book with the others in the series. Then we talked about how it captures an era. Then we talked about how it well describes a place. We talked a bit about Willie Morris and the fact he wanted to be known as an American writer, not a southern writer.

The participants who were growing up during World War II greatly appreciated Morris' representation of that era. Consequently, much of the discussion was about the "good old days" rather than about dogs.

---

Hello Everyone,

Ten of us, including Jenny Ingram, met on Friday afternoon, 11/20, to discuss My Dog Skip, the final book in our dog series. It had been a tough week, but we all enjoyed the discussion and everyone got involved. Because Jenny was visiting, the discussion was particularly wide-ranging, as we talked about programs and opportunities as well as the books. My Dog Skip was universally admired, it seemed, a memoir of childhood, of more innocent times. Skip did sound like a wonderful dog, almost as good as Willie Morris's stories about him playing baseball, taking a quarter to the store to buy a sausage, playing hiding games with Willie and his friends, rescuing and befriending a small sick kitten, and hiding out with Willie all night in the graveyard (to win a bet) and facing down the no-goodniks who appeared at night to steal bodies and Willie's tent and gear. The book is beautifully written and the memories charming.

It was very nice having Jenny at the discussion, because she explained a little about selecting the books and what she and the humanities council had been looking for in them. Several members felt that Travels with Lizbeth, by Lars Eighner, wasn't up to the level of the rest of the books, but others of us felt that it was important to the series as an contrast and for introducing social issues. As Jenny pointed out, all of the books were about a man and his dog(s); we tried to think of books about a woman and her dog, but not many came to mind. Although all the protagonists were male (or canine), they were very different: Ted Kerasote seemed the ideal dog companion-philosopher; Gary Paulsen was in love with Iditarod and his dogs; he didn't anthropomorphize his dogs, he tried to caninize himself. Lars Eighner's homelessness and homosexuality were issues that permeated his book; Lizbeth was his traveling companion, but the book was certainly not about her. And My Dog Skip presents the idyllic dog and his boy growing up. The contrasts and parallels of the four books were interesting to examine and discuss.

We are always sad when the series draw to a close; personally, I just bought Alexandra Horowitz's Inside of a Dog: What a Dog Sees, Smells, and Knows. It's *almost* a girl and her dog. I'm not quite ready to leave the canine world yet.

---