

# Canine Companions

## Overview

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

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## Merle's Door by Wyoming author Ted Kerasote

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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

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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

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Luke Stricker

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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

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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.

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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

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We didn't have as large a group as usual in Story to begin the Canine Companion series; however, several of the 'regulars' were there as well as a few new people this time. Interestingly, in response to my contention that most dog owners don't have the opportunity to allow their dogs the freedom to "let dogs be dogs" that Kerasote had, this group assured me that in Story dogs have the benefit of enjoying the same freedom and communal relationships that Merle had in Wilson, Wyoming.

They were interested in information about Kerasote, so I gave them what I could find. No one had read any of Kerasote's other books. I briefly described the themes of the other books he has written (the wilderness, ecology, fishing, hunting, wild life, self discovery, etc) and we related these to Merle's Door. As Maggie Garner mentioned, no one was at all bothered by the anthromorphism; they objected when I asked if they thought it possible that Kerasote was interpreting Merle's responses through his own personality and perspective. The one aspect of the relationship between Ted and Merle that they were strong differing views about was his keeping Merle alive as long as he did at the end. Some felt Kerasote was thinking more of himself than of Merle. Everyone was offended by how long Allison kept her poor dog alive considering his condition.

We talked about some of the larger lessons the reader can derive from the book: human's need to control. what can be learned from "letting go", the problems with translation, and the value of good sound research to go along with intuition.

Of course, throughout the discussion we heard lots of personal dog (and cat) stories, but the book does lend itself to good, varied discussion points otherwise. Several people left saying they intended to read others of Kerasote's books.

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Nineteen gathered for the first discussion of the Canine Companions series. Everyone seemed to like Merle's Door, and we had a good discussion. Merle's Door is a wonderful book with which to start the series.

We discussed the meanings of Merle's door in addition to the literal one. The door certainly gave Merle freedom but also provided Kerasote a way to discover giving and loving and the understanding of what it means to give freedom out of love. The door helped Merle and Kerasote develop a partnership. And, of course, Kerasote's relationship with Allison showed another side of what it means to give a being freedom.

The discussion of the door led us to talk about the freedom of choice and how that influenced the way that Kerasote raised Merle. We talked about Kerasote's beliefs about dog raising and the fact that he was in the perfect location to raise him as he believes is correct. We talked about adaptations that need to be done in other locations.

No one seemed bothered by the anthromorphism, and we looked at what Kerasote says about it (page 112). Most of the group members--most of whom are dog owners--believe that people can figure out a lot about dogs from their body language and expressions.

We talked a bit about the research data presented in the book (in this group, the readers appreciated the information). We also discussed what dogs, Merle as an example, can teach us, and, of course, people had stories about their own dogs to share!

Kerasote is currently writing two more dog books--Pukka: the Dog after Merle, due to be out fall 2010, and Why Dogs Die Young and What We Can Do About It, due to be out fall 2011. Information about these books as well as Merle's Door can be found on Kerasote's website: [kerasote.com](http://kerasote.com)

Maggie Garner

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The Newcastle group met on March 10, 2010, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Ten members gathered to discuss Merle's Door: Lessons from a Free-Thinking Dog, by Ted Kerasote. All members in attendance expressed both positive and negative reactions toward reading the book, although everyone seemed glad they had read it.

We started with an audio interview of the author, available at [media/barnesandnoble.com](http://media/barnesandnoble.com). It was interesting to hear the author talk about his life and writing career in general, and also specifically about the book. One point made was how metaphorical the Merle's Door title was: he showed how a door gave Merle freedom to "be himself," but he also showed how the communication between Merle and Kerasote created a "door" of understanding.

Next, we discussed the book, starting with one member describing her familiarity with the Kelly, WY area. Her parents owned a cabin right next to Scott Lansdale's home, and she knows the Lansdale family well. She is also confident that she met Merle at some time when she visited her folks; she remembers lots of dogs at that home and spoke highly of the Lansdale family. She has fond memories of the relaxed atmosphere of Kelly, yet she shared the "constant tension" between Kelly (where dogs run loose) and the Park, which surrounds Kelly and has different rules.

As we discussed the book we talked about how interesting it was to "hear" Kerasote translate for Merle, and we all enjoyed the description of Merle as Mayor of Kelly. But, we also expressed frustration with how much background information there was on wolves, and on scientific research. Most of us agreed that it was hard to read the

ending; we all know the dogs we love are going to die, but we thought that part of the book was "over the top." I had a list of all of Kerasote's books, including the upcoming story of Pukka, the dog that follows Merle.

After discussing this book, we also discussed the Iditarod a bit; having read Winterdance in February, we were interested to see that the race had started last week-end. One member brought an article from the Casper Star Tribune, who has entered the race this year, for the third time.

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Six participants met and discussed Ted Kerasote's *Merle's Door* at the Cokeville Library on January 28, 2010. Several others said they didn't attend because they couldn't finish the book. Their major complaint was that author spent too much time presenting his vast knowledge and research about wolves, dog behavior, and animal health issues. As the group who attended discussed this, some found the extra information helpful and important to understanding the author's desire to allow his dog to experience more freedom than most city dwellers can with their pets. Some suggest that they just "read through" or skipped over the research paper extras to get back to the dog-owner story which they enjoyed more.

Easily, this story lends itself to a discussion of our own personal pet experiences, and our group jumped on that wagon. We heard both stories of trials in having pets as well as humorous anecdotes about them. It was interesting that when we discussed the ending where Merle dies of old age in a long draw-out process, we found differing opinions on whether an animal (or human) should be "put to sleep." Some suggested that euphonizing is mostly done for the dog owners to spare themselves, not for helping the pet depart this world. To change the discussion's mood which began to generate some tears and emotions, we re-read several of the comical passages. Among those discussed or re-read, we enjoyed these: the moose charging the cabin, Merle's willingness to go hunting elk but not birds, the dog-door training, the cat that would not go to the new house, etc.

Our group found it quite natural to see how Kerasote often spoke for the dog's thoughts, feeling, and emotions. I am not so sure that this is fully anthromorphism. Most of us who have had pets fully understand how well we become schooled in reading their needs and wants. This author may have colored his interpretation by his own thinking and personality, but we felt it was real and authentic for him.

By the end of our session, most said that they really enjoyed our strong discussion from this book. To be fair most still didn't care for the extensive research content thread. Personally, I started out resisting the research because as a high school and adjunct college English teacher, I read so many research papers. However, as my wife and I read this book together, we sometimes found ourselves enjoying the extra information just as much as the main plot.

by Steve Beck

On August 24<sup>th</sup> fifteen lively and talkative ladies met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library to discuss *Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog* by Ted Kerasote. Although I believe all the ladies already knew each other, (it's a small town and a well established book group) I had everyone introduce themselves and explain their prior experience with dogs. I thought it would be helpful to know if we had any dog trainers, breeders or people with veterinarian or shelter experience in the group before we began. We had one woman whose two dogs are trained as therapy dogs and many with multiple dog households but no other "experts" in the group. Not everyone in the group currently had dogs but everyone at least had a dog as a child and most of those without dogs had cats at home. It's a rural community and many also had experience with free-ranging dogs like Merle.

I started out by asking for everyone's general impressions of the book. Did they like the book and the author's writing style? The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Everyone loved the book and everyone managed to finish it, which is no small feat since it is 361 pages long. Many recalled certain passages that they thought were particularly funny or touching and related them to things that their own animals had done. The only complaint was the author's frequent diversions into his detailed research into canine behavior, psychology and genealogy. Many said they basically skimmed over these parts to get back to Merle's story. A small subset of the group (3 or 4) said that they enjoyed the background research and thought it added depth and interest to the story.

The response to the book was so universally glowing that I found myself purposely bringing up subjects that had been mentioned negatively in other Canine Companions groups or in reader reviews on Amazon.com. I asked if anyone thought that Kerasote over-anthropomorphized Merle's actions and views? Since Kerasote actually gives Merle a voice in the book, this could be a major concern. They said that "But you always do that with your dogs." and "I have conversations with my dogs all the time." In fact this seemed to be a major reason given for liking the books, since Merle's barks, whines, growls, and glances were translated into English he became more of a fully realized character. It made the book as much Merle's story as Ted's. I also asked about Kerasote's controversial views on dog training, neutering, euthanasia, kenneling, and leash laws. Not everyone agreed with all his views but most thought his choices, for example letting Merle roam free, made sense in his particular circumstances.

The largest part of our discussion was focused on Merle's sickness, aging and eventual death. Again the group related on a personal level and recalled their own experiences, either putting a dog or cat to sleep or watching a beloved animal die naturally. A few questioned Kerasote motives in keeping the dog alive after he was unable to move on his own, but others chimed in with the defense that as long as the dog is not in pain that it more humane to let the dog choose when to die. One woman recalled their pet dog who waited until a beloved grown child returned from college to get one last goodbye hug and then to die in her arms. I then brought up the more

extreme situation with Ted's girlfriend Alison's dog Brower. The group supported Alison's decision to have radical surgery that removed nearly half the dog's snout because he was not in pain afterwards and lived a couple more happy years. Yes, Brower was no longer beautiful (in fact the results of the surgery were described as hideous) but that was a problem for the human's that saw him and not for Brower. We discussed the criteria for animal euthanasia that Kerasote quotes on page 343-344 and felt that it covered the appropriate issues to consider before putting a pet to sleep. They also thought that it mirrored the thought process that most loving owners go through when an animal is very ill anyway.

Despite the heart-rending ending to the book, it was loved and appreciated by the group. They are looking forward to a completely different tone in the next book in the series which is *Winterdance: The fine madness of running the Iditarod* by Gary Paulsen.

Elaine Hayes

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Book: *Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog*,  
Ted Kerasote  
Location: Basin Library  
Leader: Claire Dunne  
March 9, 2011  
Participants: 15

The first question we all wanted to ask: Did Ted get a new dog? From Kerasote.com I learned that Ted spent two years writing Merle's life, a year on book tour, then finally adopted a golden Labrador puppy he named Pukka, which means "good quality" in Hindi. Is Pukka like Merle? He likes to ski and hunt and swim. But he doesn't sing. He comes and goes through his own dog door and stays much closer to the house. Pukka loves to bird hunt and keeps his eyes on the sky, watching jets and the moon in addition to ravens and pheasants. Merle loved big mammals and watched the ground ahead.

An easy first question is: What is the meaning of Merle's door? The door certainly gave Merle freedom but is also a metaphor, to give freedom to another person out of love. Merle and Kerasote develop a partnership, and communication between Merle and Kerasote created a door of understanding. Ted had to wrestle with our human need to control, to be master over the dog. Ted's relationship with Allison showed the human side of what it means to give someone freedom.

Ted talked about the criticism of anthropomorphism, giving voice to Merle, on page 112, and the problems with translation, especially from one species by another. In general, our group felt they have had dogs they could "read," and didn't mind Kerasote telling us what Merle was "saying."

As far as I could tell our group valued the research the author presented to help us understand about wolves, dog behavior, and animal health issues.

The question of euthanasia loomed large for us; some felt

it is mostly done for the dog owners to spare themselves, not for the sake of the pet. Most felt Ted let Merle go too long, without helping him depart this world.

Of course, we all had our favorite comical passages: the moose charging the cabin, Merle's willingness to hunt elk but not birds, and how the dog-door became the revolving door for the neighborhood pooches.

Ted's next book, *Why Dogs Die Young: And What We Can Do About It* is due out Spring 2012.

Lastly, we pondered the humanities question: How do the four dog books elucidate our idea of being human? We ended this series with a party with one canine joining us at the library.

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MERLE'S DOOR - Ted Kerasote  
10 participants  
Leader: Elouise Rossler

A lively discussion of Merle and Ted as companions touched on the senses of dog and man, abstract thinking abilities, relationships of dog to dog, dog to humans, and some human to human arenas.

Merle's zest for life enhanced Ted's outdoorsy lifestyle as they shared a free thinking philosophy. The group enjoyed Merle's antics, his education about larger-than-himself animals, maneuvering life's obstacles, playing with one's friends and intense loyalty.

Discussion of the anthropological information on the wolf, dogs and other Canids gave understanding of Merle, our own dogs, and some what ourselves, as in "What is my relationship to my dog?" and "WHY?"

Real emotion was drawn from everyone at the death of Brower and later of Merle.

Merle's unknown young history made us speculate about his actions as he matured. Was he fearful of losing his companion? Did he "think" and therefore saw no reason to bird hunt as opposed to elk hunting which benefitted him?

Everyone enjoyed Merle -- he was loving, adventuresome and free thinking. Maybe we even envied him a bit?

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13 people gathered for the first discussion in the Canine Companions series. They all liked the book and were anxious to talk about it. I started with some background on Ted Kerasote and a brief summary of his other books to show the scope of his interests. Because the group was so interested in him personally (for example, they were relieved to hear he had married, even after his disappointing relationship with Allison in our book!), I noted that the website he has is quite comprehensive and with lots of pictures.

The group did not find the anthromorphism at all bothersome, not even in Kerasote's insistence that Merle

was often embarrassed, chagrined, and capable of calculated lying. Many brought up examples of dogs they knew who had similar traits and more. Only a few allowed somewhat reluctantly that it was possible that Kerasote was interpreting more than might have been there in Merle's responses. Most agreed with the author that dog's behavior can be as complex as ours.

We had an interesting discussion about Kerasote's basic premise that dogs need freedom to fully develop and about how difficult it is for most to provide the kind of freedom that Merle enjoyed. We had some ranchers in the group who noted that total freedom to "be a dog" implied chasing cattle and hunting in packs. Even Merle had to be trained to not follow his natural instincts sometimes. "Loosening the lease" and allowing Merle to make some decisions did not mean there wasn't need for some training and positive and negative reinforcement.

We talked about the scientific and naturalistic information in the book and felt it enhanced the story of Kerasote and his dog considerably. All the information about wolves was particularly interesting to the group which was comprised of both sides in the reintroduction of wolves issue in Wyoming.

I thought we would have a more heated discussion than we did about all the measures Kerasote took to prolong Merle's life and his decision to let him die naturally. Everyone agreed that Kerasote had resources above and beyond what most would have in that regard, but no one seemed to think that Kerasote might have gone too far.

Actually, throughout the discussion, it was very hard for me to provoke criticism of anything in the book. This group loved Merle and Ted Kerasote! - Norleen Healy

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

**by Gary Paulsen**

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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

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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

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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!

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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

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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](#).

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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

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Among the enthusiastic group gathered to discuss this book were two who had lived for many years in Alaska

and who offered insights about Alaska and the Iditarod. One even brought one of the dog "booties" to show us. The wonderful Story librarian provided us with maps of the route of the Iditarod as well as some interesting facts about it gleaned from the website.

I began with background about Gary Paulsen. His struggles to get to where he is now are daunting and confirmed for the people in the group their assertion that his current wife Ruth (the one who saw him through the Iditarod) "is a saint!" Much of the interest about his life and lifestyle stems from the fact that he lived for a period several years ago in Story, and some in the group remembered him and confirmed his tendency to be self sufficient, able to live with few, if any, amenities, and somewhat reclusive. Jo (the librarian) brought a stack of books by him from the library to illustrate how prolific and varied his writing is.

When we stated the discussion of the book itself, I certainly didn't need to do much 'facilitating'. People were so anxious to talk that I mostly just had to make sure everyone who wanted to talk was able to do so. Toward the end we compared this book to the previous one (Merle's Door), especially in terms of how the two authors related to the dogs in their lives. We agreed that both emphasized how much they learned from their dogs but felt that they learned different things in different ways. We felt that Paulsen almost becomes one of them, totally immersing himself in their world, where-as Ted Kerasote and Merle develop more of a symbiotic relationship. Both did illustrate that it's necessary to "let go" to really learn about another.

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There were 15 participants in the discussion of *Winterdance* at the Albany County Library.

We had a lively and enjoyable discussion of this book. A woman who has until recently been a musher joined us and added much to the discussion. She mentioned that the regulations for the Iditarod are much greater now so someone with as little knowledge as Paulsen had would no longer be able to get into the race. She confirmed that most of the dogs are taken care of well in the race, and racing is what the dogs want to do.

We discussed the reasons Paulsen ran the race and his relationship with the dogs (Cookie in particular). We also compared and contrasted his views and experiences with dogs to Ted Kerasote's. People are interested in his wife (probably wondering how she put up with it all) so I'm going to do a little research on her.

Maggie Garner

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The Newcastle group met on Feb. 10, 2010, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Eleven members gathered to discuss *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod*, by Gary Paulsen. All members in attendance expressed sincere enjoyment in reading the book, although a few had visited with group members not present who hadn't been as fond of it.

We started with a general discussion of the series theme, sharing lots of details and memories of special dogs in our

lives. From the family dog who helped to raise our children, to the current lap dog who now sleeps on the bed when that wasn't allowed ten or twenty years ago, nearly all had stories to share. I also read chapter one from Gary Paulsen's *My Life in Dog Years*, which is a children's book that includes a chapter on each of the special dogs in Paulsen's life. The opening chapter is the story of how Cookie saved his life in 1980, and was a nice elaboration of that dog's bond with Paulsen.

Next, we discussed Gary Paulsen as an author; it's hard to believe that such a good writer left school at 14. I also shared a question/answer event that Scholastic.com set up during the 2000 Iditarod. Elementary students across the country were able to send questions to him, and he answered many of them. It was interesting to see what the kids asked (such as whether he'd ever been inside an igloo), but also clear how much Paulsen values the sled dogs. He really stressed how much the Race is all about them.

As we started talking about *Winterdance*, we all agreed that we couldn't believe that Paulsen stuck with the project...and we had trouble believing that he made so many errors in planning and judgment. He certainly is an adventurer with stamina, and a high tolerance for physical discomfort. Of course, imbedded in all the trials he had while preparing for and running the Iditarod, are indications that he had a lot of mushing and outdoor skills that he chose not to highlight. One group member read some of Paulsen's description of AK. Having visited the area herself, she was very impressed with how well Paulsen could capture the vistas and the feeling of remoteness.

After discussing the book, we went on to discuss the Iditarod itself; I had brought a current, detailed map of the routes it now takes—a northern route in even years and a southern route in odd years. I also summarized its history and shared lots of trivia. The Race will be starting in March, and we agreed we'd be following it a bit differently this year, having read *Winterdance*.

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Eight participants met to discuss Gary Paulsen's *Winterdance* at the Cokeville Library on February 25, 2010. The initial reaction was that they liked this book more than *Merle's Door*. While the profanity may have added to the authenticity and realism of the story, most didn't like so much of that sort of language. After some background about Paulsen, his prolific works, and the Alaskan Iditarod, we found out that a few from our community have lived in Alaska and that one of our elementary teachers does an annual unit on this event. When Gale, our librarian, and I told them how much young people enjoy reading this author, our discussion evolved into a group consideration of several other Paulsen books that were appropriate for elementary and junior high students; however, some thought the profanity of *Winterdance* was too much for lower grades in public school.

This quickly moved into a conversation reflecting questions and some admiration of Paulsen's wife. Some

suggested she was some kind of saint to put up with him and his passion for running sled dogs. We also noted her strong sense of humor at the events her husband encountered. Others thought that the periodic separation of the couple actually helped the relationship. Next, we talked about how much of a dog the narrator became. During the reading of the story, some wondered how well he could or would assimilate back into society after so much time alone and with the dogs. Most felt the book followed a theme of perseverance, grit, and determination so typical of some of Paulsen's other stories.

While we did see some serious aspects or themes and some even anticipated that he might not finish the race, the sharing of favorite pieces of humor and recalled story action dominated our discussion. I tried to approach this chronologically, but that didn't work. When we started to recognize the specific humor of the events, we engaged in fast-paced recollections of our favorite anecdotes—the gathering of the dogs, the variety of sleds the author tried out accompanied by the painful efforts to stay with them, the multiple skunk encounters, the naïveté of thinking his wife would allow him to stay indoors smelling as he did, the decision to become one of the dogs, the moose encounter, the whirlwind exit from Anchorage, the waking up in the snow-covered bowl and finding so many other teams there, etc. Some passages were re-read but most parts were quickly mentioned with a variety of fast-paced reactions from the group. I found it interesting to see the level of laughter and enjoyment they showed, often jumping in to finish someone's beginning of one of the tales. All enjoyed the vicarious experience with dog sledding and the wilderness seen through a variety of memorable settings and events.

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Ten ladies met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library to discuss *Winterdance: the fine madness of running the Iditarod* by Gary Paulsen. Most of the women are regulars and have been attending Wyoming Council for the Humanities Reading Wyoming discussions for years but we did have two brand new members attend this session.

I started the discussion by sharing some books about the Iditarod and sled dogs that I'd found at the Laramie County Library along with some information about the same that I found on the Internet. We passed these books and print-outs around while we talked. I read some biographical information about Gary Paulsen that I'd found on the *Literature Resource Center* database and at his website at [www.randomhouse.com/features/garypaulsen](http://www.randomhouse.com/features/garypaulsen). I wanted to explain the libel lawsuit over his young adult novel *Winterkill* which led him to move back to Minnesota and give up writing for a time in favor of running hunting trap lines with a sled dog team. I also thought his difficult early life explained his self-sufficiency and tendency towards stubbornness which is seen clearly in *Winterdance*. It was also not clear exactly which Iditarod year is discussed in *Winterdance*, so I provided the race archives from the 1983 Iditarod on the official Iditarod website at [www.iditarod.com/archives](http://www.iditarod.com/archives).

Everyone enjoyed the book and enjoyed the fast paced adventurous aspects of the story. One group member mentioned how much she enjoyed the author's detailed descriptions of the Alaskan wilderness and read a segment aloud where she particularly appreciated his writing style. Everyone thought his adventures in training the dog team were hilarious and a bit outrageous. A few thought it must have been exaggerated because no one would put up with that much physical abuse on their body. Many thought that Paulsen was more than eccentric, he was a little nuts or lacking in any common sense. Most liked *Winterdance* better than *Merle's Door* because it was more exciting, more like an adventure story and there was no hard research about dog behavior included. The few that preferred *Merle's Door* preferred it because the focus was more on the dog's rather than the human's adventures. We also remarked on the patience and understanding of his wife Ruth to put up with his, undoubtedly expensive and dangerous, dream of running the Iditarod.

We discussed our favorite scenes in the book which included the 'skunk runs', the disastrous start to the Iditarod in Anchorage, the 'cheating' musher he meets and has fresh pizza with along the trail during the Iditarod, the huge blizzard that partially buried 11 dog teams, his concussion and series of hallucinations in 'The Burn' area, and the buffalos sliding across the ice in play. After the scene where one of his fellow Iditarod mushers kicks one of his dogs to death, we talked about the issues of animal cruelty in the Iditarod and other sled dog races. I shared some of the information I'd found about this issue and we were all glad to see that the Iditarod race rules are very strict about the treatment of the dogs.

We discussed the ending and how it seemed a bit jarring and 'tacked on' to the story. One minute we are in Nome at the end of the race and then we're in the hospital several years later. They were surprised to hear that Paulsen tried again to run the Iditarod in 2000 (at the age of 61). He dropped out of the race in 1985 and 2000 according to the Iditarod archives. The 1983 race was the only one he finished.

We had a very fun, wide-ranging discussion which was closed with a short introduction to next month's book, *Travels with Lizbeth* by Lars Eighner.

Elaine Hayes

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Series: Canine Companions  
Book: *Winterdance: the Fine Madness of running the Iditarod* by Gary Paulsen  
Location: Basin Library  
Leader: Claire Dunne  
January 26, 2011  
Attendance: 12

One of our members called ahead to say she wouldn't read to book nor attend because she knows the Iditarod is cruel, killing over 200 dogs to date, not counting those injured or culled during the breeding of sled dogs in remote areas of Alaska and other northern states.

<http://www.helpsleddogs.org/faq.htm>.

The rest of us plowed ahead and mentioned the beautiful scenery, the fearsome storms, and the deprivation for man and dog alike. We were all relieved when he gave up all his dogs except Cookie and moved to New Mexico with his patient wife, Ruth, who writes and illustrates books, including some of her husband's. We read aloud some humorous parts and were grateful for the laughter to temper the dire circumstances.

One of our members is a middle school librarian who had met the author at book events, and verified he "looks like a truck driver," though he behaves like a kindly uncle. She has taught and recommended many of his young adult books, which are popular with the young set, stories such as *Hatchet* and *Dogsong*.

Our third book will be Feb 16, *Travels with Lizbeth: Three Years on the Road and on the Streets*.

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Ten Sleep Discussion Group  
10 attendees  
January 28, 2013  
Elouise Rossler, leader

Everyone in attendance had really enjoyed the book. This meant we were all eager to share our impressions and thoughts.

We all laughed as we recalled the many calamities that occurred during the book. The utter naivete of Paulsen, his ability to overcome obstacles, and his complete enjoyment of the dogs and the race were very contagious.

The lessons learned by Paulsen and others were clear and distinct, such as "Do not ignore any change, be on high alert at all times, little things make a difference." He learned, as did we his readers, about wolves such as Marge, beavers, and the passions man and dog share once they have been bitten by the running bug.

The mountains, the cold, the barren interior are so greatly described as to become a part of the story bringing the reader along for a marvelous experience. Alaska, ah Alaska! The marvel of dogs running in the coldness, the way men survived, the absolute focus without rest that was necessary.

Paulsen, the character, was intriguing. His energy, his desire to become "dog", his willingness to take risk, were all so much a factor in the running of the Iditarod (about which we talked and learned). We all agreed that Ruth was a saint for putting up with all his "smelly" phases, with his determination to run the race, though money was short, and just the fear and worry that went into the process.

The dogs were amazing. They had hearts for running

as big as imaginable, they had their distinct personalities, and they had their jobs to do.

These are all things we discussed as we retold the stories, laughed and talked about Nature's ways. The pure enjoyment of the book was evident by the complete participation of each group member. This was a very positive and wonderful discussion of man and beast in a working and loving relationship. The diagnosis of heart disease for Paulsen was a sad way to end his dream of going "one more time" to run the Iditarod.

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This discussion took off with no prompting from me. One of the group had lived in Alaska and followed the Iditarod. She brought maps and pictures and told about some of the places along the way that Paulsen describes in his narrative. To a person, the group loved the book. I asked what qualities made it so engaging and they talked about the writing style - - injecting humor into what could have been really dire situations and the self deprecating tone. They were intrigued with the idea that Paulsen was clearly an underdog having never been to Alaska or met anyone who ran the Iditarod, and how he gave the effort everything he had, financially and physically. Every example someone would point out to illustrate these things would bring on a series of others from around the table. In discussing how Paulsen describes becoming "one with the dogs...part of the dogs" I asked what qualities in a person would take him to this level of engagement. I pointed out that these dogs (with the possible exception of Cookie) don't sound like pets. They are vicious and driven. They have only one purpose and that's what they live for. We agreed that the latter seemed to be the same for Paulsen in the race. He had to become "one with the dogs" because, as he keeps saying, the race isn't about the driver (er...musher), its about the dogs. We talked about how people who become obsessed with a goal like Paulsen did have to "shuck off" other concerns and responsibilities in order to focus to that extent. We did note, however, that his basic sense of ethics and morality stayed intact. We noted that no matter what else, he always took care of the dogs and was appalled at those mushers who didn't.

It seemed relevant here to talk about Paulsen's bio. His youth was tumultuous; his mother was a severe alcoholic and his father was nominally absent. He ran away from home at age 14 and pretty much fought for himself from then on, going through periods where he was destitute, surviving by hunting and living off the land in Minnesota. In the end he overcame his own alcoholism and failed marriages (finally finding Ruth whom we agreed was an amazing, tolerant woman) and became the prolific and successful writer that he is, most notably of young adult fiction. We agreed that the same drive and willingness to give it his "all" that he exhibited in *Winterdance* is characteristic of his whole life.

The group has thoroughly enjoyed the first two books of this Canine series (*Merle's Door* and *Winterdance*.) They have found it a nice change after working through the *Living with Violence* series (that I talked them into doing)

last year. I did warn them that the next book, *Travels with Lizbeth*, would be less of a "dog" book though.

Totally off subject, we ended our evening with conversation about the PBS series on the Roosevelts which most of us had been watching. This group had read the biography of Eleanor a few years ago in the Icons series, so they were able to bring that perspective into their appreciation of the PBS series. We owe so much to NEH! –Norleen Healy

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## **Travels with Lizbeth**

### **By Lars Eighner**

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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

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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

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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.

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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*.

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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

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I admit to being a little nervous after reading some of the previous reports from groups on this book. However, I was pretty sure the Story group wouldn't worry too much about the sexual content, and they didn't. We agreed that much of that was distasteful and unnecessary to the narrative, but part of Eighner's experience. There were, however, a few 'regulars' who turned in the book and chose not to finish it or attend (for whatever reason).

We began with some background on Eighner. Everyone wanted to know about Lizbeth. I explained that she died (of natural causes!) in 1998 and that Eighner adopted a new puppy, Wilma, in 2000. It appears that Eighner has been in and out of a homeless state even since the book was published, which indicates to most of us that he is not a person who functions in a traditionally responsible way. He himself acknowledges that he has been "different" all his life and has had problems with keeping jobs and handling money. Someone in the group pointed out that he says that he had been dumpster diving off and on before becoming homeless, and that he sort of takes pride in his system. Some felt that, with his education and abilities, it was his "choice" to live the way he did. However, we talked at length about how difficult it is, once becoming homeless, to break out of it.

We talked about his personal sense of ethics (no panhandling, no stealing, taking responsibility always for Lizbeth, and staying away from drugs and alcohol).

I find most of us have a tendency to feel impatient with homeless people, so I asked the group if any of the stereotypical thinking they had about the homeless was disrupted by reading this book and/or what they learned. We talked a lot about this. Some felt that Eighner was not typical and others disagreed. The key is that in the world of the homeless, there is a huge range just like in any other societal group. Stereotyping is dangerous.

Although most of the group didn't like Eighner, they found his ideas and observations provocative. One lady said that her brother, who is a social worker, often expresses the same sentiments as Eighner about the social system and how it fails those who are most in need. Another participant with a lot of background in social work said that it's much easier for women and girls to get help for various reasons especially when children are involved. Someone else pointed out that, statistically, a huge percentage of the homeless men are veterans. I can't remember now what the percentage is, but it is impressive. Several in the group talked about various encounters they've had with homeless people, and, of course, there was discussion about what resources are available in our communities.

Of course, there was discussion about the fact that the book didn't seem much of a 'dog' story, especially

compared to the previous two books we read in the series. I pointed out that the series was titled "Canine Companions" and that Lizbeth was certainly a companion to Eighner and an influence. Although some in the group said they 'liked' the book once they got into it, most didn't. Someone did allude to the humor. In all, in spite of the negativity about the book, the discussion was lively and thoughtful, characteristic of the Story group.

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The Newcastle group met on April 14, 2010, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Thirteen members gathered to discuss *Travels with Lizbeth* by Lars Eighner. Only two members thought the book had any business being a Humanities Council selection, and those two did not think it had enough human-dog interaction to be included in a Canine Companions series. The rest of the members thought the book was a very poor choice for any Humanities Council series, and most were not only offended by it but also felt cheated out of a selection for our spring discussion group.

While I had prepared a hand-out, as I always do, few participants were interested in learning more about the author's life or discussing various themes and sections of the book. We did discuss how much we'd learned about the homeless, and how poorly served homeless people like the author are by hospitals and federal programs. We also discussed the fact that, once homeless, it is difficult to find a job without having a physical address. We discussed how much we waste in our society and found examples in addition to those the author included. And, those of us who had finished the book noted that the author tried to take care of Lizbeth the best he could, often putting her needs first when food and water were limited. One of the two positive responses toward the book put it this way: "I joined the group to read books that I wouldn't otherwise read...and this does fit that category."

Ultimately, though, the author being a pornographer and the specific sexual content included got in the way of most participants actually reading the book, let alone being able to gain from it. Rather, the participants want to express their frustration, which I will do below through their words:

"I won't contribute one cent to the Humanities Council again after having this book included in a series."

"Why waste our time on this book when there are so many good dog books out there."

"Why was this book chosen? Was it selected by the Humanities Council or by a local group? Did the Humanities Council give it its stamp of approval?"

"This is the first time in 19 years of being a participant that I haven't finished a book."

"I feel cheated; I want another book to read."

"Why this crap? Why not something uplifting about dog companionship?"

"I felt like this was an 'in your face' attempt to make us accept this as good literature."

As the group leader, I read the book because that's part of my responsibility. I did not enjoy it, nor would I recommend it. I was not as offended by it as some of the participants, but I did not grow up in Wyoming. I would never think it appropriate to be included as a book group selection. Like so many others in the group, I feel there are thousands of good dog books available. One of our members chose to stop reading the book after the first chapter and read *A Friend Like Henry* instead...the story of an autistic boy whose world opened up with the help of his golden retriever companion dog.

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Eleven persons came to discuss *Travels with Lizbeth*. Everyone liked the book (although all think that it doesn't belong in the series), and we had a really good, positive discussion about it.

We focused a lot of our discussion on figuring out Lars—his interactions (of lack of) with people, his lack of common sense at times, his ability to write a book. Of course with talked about his relationship with Lizbeth and the fact he obviously cared about her but didn't seem to have much person-to-dog interaction. We discussed the various reasons that he might be the way he is. (People were disappointed that he hasn't done well since the publication of his book.) Despite his frequent inability to help himself and make good choices, he has written a successful book—something that most people don't do.

We also discussed some of the issues that are brought up in the book, focusing especially on what the Dumpster Diving chapter tells us about ourselves, our culture. Living in a university town, we could relate to the wastefulness of students but could also relate ourselves to the throw-away culture. Participants found the other inner chapters interesting as well. The phlebitis chapter is especially noteworthy now with our health care debates going on.

No one criticized Lars or the book. Everyone seemed to appreciate him for who he is—a bit unbalanced but someone who has contributed to our lives.

Maggie Garner

P.S. As I promised the Laramie group, I looked up more about Ruth Paulsen (Gary's wife). Her artwork is in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch tradition, which surprised me.

A participant who has met Gary Paulsen said that he says Ruth and he spend a lot of time apart. She lives in New Mexico, where he lives part of the time.

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On March 25 five gathered in the Cokeville Library to discuss the novel *Travels with Elizabeth* by Lars Eighner. At least three others stayed away from the discussion because they strongly objected to its content. Of those five attending, only two of us had actually finished the book. Two others had sampled or started it but found it too offensive to read further. None of this group liked this

book nor thought it fit into the dog series. None would recommend it to another. Several voiced displeasure not at the homelessness or the gay issues but at the explicit and pornographic content woven into its pages.

As the paid discussion leader but against my better judgment, I felt obligated to read it and to try to put some discussable slant on its content. In fact, before I started my reading, I optimistically reasoned that this book might give us a unique perspective on the homeless, our treatment of those outside the main stream, and the relationship of a man and his dog. I was wrong. By the time I had read about one third of this book, I realized that this man wasn't just a gay, homeless person who still would deserve reader respect but a gay pornographer. Knowing our reading group as I do, I anticipated that some parts would offend our local ladies. This wasn't a religious thing either, filth is filth. Whoever put this book in the humanity's collection about dogs has poorly served us readers.

After a phone call the day of our meeting warning me that one of our group has a grown gay child, I decided to try to skirt the whole issue of the gays to keep her from being embarrassed or a target. I started off with a few of the glowing reviews and an author's biography. Then using the dumpster diving chapter as our basis, we had a nice discussion on the book's themes, our society's wastefulness, and attitudes on the treatment of the poor and destitute. Several discussed how little home-prepared food is used by our children's families and how much food is wasted in homes, restaurants, and school lunch. Also, issues of healthcare based on the phlebitis chapter, hitch hiking dangers and hardships, giving to the poor, etc. were considered. Some saw Lars as a self-serving social critic who looked out for himself, took advantage of the system whenever he could, and seemingly appreciated little others did for him. Others saw in him a person unwilling to change or adapt for his own good and using his dog as the scapegoat. We all agreed that he did care for his dog.

The author's ability to write so well yet make such unfortunate decisions that created much of his own bad luck was explored. One read a few favorite passages and asked some relevant questions about why people do and don't help the homeless. We also admired how well Lars kept himself away from the alcohol and drugs much of the time when these were so available in this culture. Despite the fact that there was very little dog-owner interaction as one would expect in a canine series, most admitted that we did learn something about the homeless and evaluated our attitudes about helping them. Nevertheless, our group deplored the explicit nature of several passages in this book. In spite of my efforts to keep away from it, this criticism didn't lessen.

Because of this book and the rumors that will inevitably circulate about it, I fear we have driven off several who might otherwise participate with us in our reading group. One previous attendee called and asked to meet with me and my wife about this book. From what I've heard, she is more than a little ticked off about its choice and wants out of the reading group or to form one on our own. For myself, I understand that the purpose of this Reading

Wyoming effort was to promote local reading and discussion of quality literature that entertains, informs, and builds discussion. Don't judge us as prudes, but pornography is legally based on a local standard. Lars' book crossed that line here. I currently teach 7-12 high school and college English classes where we deal with a wide diversity of controversial topics, but I cannot and would not recommend this book to anyone.

Our group completely disagrees with another group's assessment that this was a great book. I'm all about supporting freedom of speech and looking at a variety of topics, including some outside my comfort zone and lifestyle. However, when a book under the cover of a dog story masquerades as a place for pornography, I question my association with this organization. Yes, we should look at and understand better the plight of the homeless, impoverished, and disadvantaged, but not at the expense of being force-fed filth and degradation. If this is the start of some new focus, I can only imagine upcoming series of book choices. If this continues, I will choose to no longer be a part of you. In the millions of good literary books, we can do better than this.

by Steve Beck

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Thirteen ladies met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library to discuss *Travels with Lizbeth* by Lars Eighner. Knowing this group and the reception the book had received from previous *Canine Companions* groups, I started out by talking about Eighner's biography, his education and the fact that his grandparents were well known Texas poets. I mentioned that Eighner had made \$100,000 from the sale of this memoir but was homeless again a few years later. I was not able to find much about him in recent years but he appears to still be writing, is not currently homeless, operates his own website and has accounts on MySpace, Twitter and Facebook.

I then asked the group about the good and bad aspects of the book (hoping to get a balance of the two). Most people didn't like the book and several refused to finish it because of the content or just because "it wasn't about the dog". I acknowledged that it really wasn't about the dog Lizbeth, but that it was an interesting story of homelessness and unlike anything I had ever read or experienced. We also acknowledged that Eighner did seem to take better care of Lizbeth than he did himself; Lizbeth always had food and medicine even when Lars went without. One woman in the group has a brother who is or was homeless and she said it helped her understand her brother's experience of homelessness. A couple of other members of the group agreed with some of his criticisms of public assistance (food stamps, etc.) and remarked that "but for the grace of God" we might also be in the same circumstance. Most did not think the details about his sexual encounters were necessary for the story and, I believe, it's why some of the group stopped reading and/or didn't come to the discussion.

We also talked about the hazards and difficulties of hitchhiking and panhandling, the surprising generosity of some people and the stark cruelty of others that Eighner

encountered. After I asked about 'favorite' parts of the book, we talked about the chapters about Institutional Parasitism, Dumpster Diving and the rather ingenious camp he built in the bamboo. We then discussed some of the strange characters he met along the way, both friends and enemies. I pointed out that several chapters in the book were published originally as independent essays in various magazines, which may explain why the book doesn't flow in a chronological manner like most memoirs.

I asked if they thought this book should be in the *Canine Companions* series. Most said "no", but one woman noted that we'd had a lively and entertaining discussion about a wide range of social issues, homelessness, homosexuality, substance abuse, materialism, etc. and isn't that the ultimate purpose of WCH book discussion groups? She revealed that she hadn't actually read more than 15 pages of the book but that she'd enjoyed taking part in the discussion because very little of our discussion had to do with the book or the characters themselves but more was focused on the controversial issues involved.

I ended the discussion by reading aloud a poem written by Eighner's grandmother, Alice Ewing Vail, called *Coons in the Corn* which I found on Google Books. I did this partly to emphasize his literary background but also to lighten the mood because the poem is quite funny and upbeat.

Elaine Jones Hayes

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Series: Canine Companions  
Book: *Travels with Lizbeth: Three Years on the Road and on the Streets*, by Lars Eighner  
Location: Basin Library  
Leader: Claire Dunne  
February 16, 2011  
Participants: 9

Feeling I needed to set the stage for this controversial book, I told our group: Be forewarned; Lars is gay and though he isn't descriptive about his activities, he mentions some. I think the book is worthwhile and am gaining an appreciation for the difficulty of life on the street. For example, how do you apply for a job unless you have clean clothes, and without an address? Also, in order to get help, Texas requires he proves he has no income. How does one prove a negative? And in order to get food stamps he has to have a kitchen, so those who need the food the most do not qualify. Molly Ivins writes about Texas under Gov George Bush reducing their welfare rolls by making it almost impossible to qualify, and to run applicants (often with no car or bus money) from one office to another until they are confused and discouraged. Lars takes along a social worker who can't believe it is so hard to get help, and after a day trudging from office to office, the state employee wonders about his own part in the system. Lars writes in an interesting way and with some humor to lighten the travelogue.

The discussion went pretty well, and though one had only skimmed the book, the others had read it carefully. People were okay with the gay part and focused on homeless issues. One rancher said they often have

people show up asking for work; if they can do the job they are kept on and given a cabin, but if not, they need to go on down the road. Our youngest member didn't say much, so I asked her afterward, and she was impatient with Lars; she thought he made some bad choices and didn't try hard enough. Five called in sick, but nine showed up, which I felt was a good showing for an off-putting book. No one complained that Lars wrote pornography, but most felt the book really didn't reveal much about Lars' relationship, on an emotional level, with Lizbeth the dog.

We had among us those who knew a homeless person. One sent a link her relative made to a YouTube short documentary about a group of homeless veterans in LA called "The Choir," and another has a cousin who pulled himself from the brink and now owns a successful plumbing company. I recommended the *Cats of Mirikitani*, a documentary that brings together two humanities themes: a young artist whose family was forced into a Japanese internment camp who became homeless as an old man.

One asked if there is a possible culture of homelessness. Another replied she just started reading *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, a memoir in which she describes her homeless parents. Walls is a successful professional in New York, and she occasionally sees her mom and dad on the street, picking through trash, and when she offers help, as she does repeatedly, they can't understand why she thinks they *need* help. They enjoy their homeless state; they have chosen it as a lifestyle. Our member went on to say, "Right now, from where I sit, it seems to me that the percent of homeless people who have chosen homelessness in a clear-minded sane manner must be a small minority. But I must admit that is based on my values, and I am assuming that all humans share what I believe to be mammalian, instinctual, and survival-driven desires for home and family." I have read elsewhere that her parents chose not to accept public or family assistance, that her mother has unaddressed mental health problems, and says she is an "excitement addict," and that life on the streets with her husband is never boring.

Another couldn't attend so she sent her comments, saying she didn't really care for *Travels with Lizbeth*, but appreciated the questions it brought to her. "One of them surprised me--I had to really think about it. I do not consider myself anti-gay in the least. But I found that I was really bothered by Lars' descriptions of a sexual encounter, the one where he is picked up on the ramp in LA, taken home by a man, and then dropped off afterward in the same place. I had to take a break in reading. I was really put off. I thought I would not bother to finish the book. And, I was *very* surprised and not a little embarrassed by my reaction. I like to think of myself as an unprejudiced, compassionate person. I have a cousin who is gay, and I love him! My best girlhood friend almost left her husband for a woman! So what was going on with me? After lots of thought, and some re-reading of the offending text, I think I figured out that it wasn't the fact that the sexual activities were between two men, it was the desperate quality of how these two people came together. The inherent danger. The anonymity. It felt it was

emotional violence that I found unsettling. So, here are questions that remain: Was I disturbed by an artifact of the homeless culture? Or the casual anonymous sex culture? Or the gay culture? Or all three rolled into one? Whew. Any book that can make me stop and take a long look at these things, and my thoughts about them, deserves my respect, albeit uncomfortable."

We talked about the circumstances that lead to homelessness: poverty, poor health, eviction, alcohol, drugs, mental illness, unemployment.

Several had personal experiences with homeless people. One said "There is a tendency to think that we lack compassion, but few people I know can relate to such a situation on a personal level. I had a neighbor in the 70s who took it on to help some people she'd met through her church, a couple of families with no jobs, no money, no stability. She brought them into her own family setting with the intention of helping, but they reacted in ways her own family could not tolerate, so she found out her efforts were no help to anyone. I don't know what became of them. I know the woman who wanted to help became estranged from her own family, who were basically trying to make a living the best they could and keep the oxygen mask on themselves. So what is "helping" in the greatest sense? Helping without expectation is the tricky part, I have found."

I told the group about an interview with Lars on his website in which he explains his use of stilted language [http://larseighner.com/works/memoir/about\\_travels.html](http://larseighner.com/works/memoir/about_travels.html). He writes: "I deliberately chose to write the most elevated style of English that I thought modern readers would tolerate. My purpose was to draw an ironic contrast between the dignity of my language and the indignity of my circumstances. Some readers, however, think *Travels with Lizbeth* is written the only way I know how to write. I suppose I am confused with a common character: the street drunkard who expresses himself grandiloquently." I also learned he may be a high functioning autistic person, which may explain his aloofness some noticed in his writing.

On the specter of returning to homelessness he says, "Yet, having been to the bottom, the absolute bottom, I do not think I will ever really escape it. Now however high I rise, it is as if I stand on a glass staircase. I can feel the support under my feet, I may be sure enough of it to move about. But I can never look down without a little gasp, because it is a glass staircase, and I always see right to the bottom, right to the very bottom. "

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Ten Sleep Session 4  
TRAVELS WITH LIZBETH, Lars Eighner  
7 participants  
Leader: Elouise Rossler

It should be noted that for for sessions one Lucas, an English shepard, attended and was most friendly. In session two Cody, a mix of golden retriever and Australian shepard attended and acted as greeter to all who

attended.

We began our discussion of TRAVELS WITH LIZBETH by looking at the reviews of the book. . We did not agree with most of them. We then discussed Lizbeth and how she adapted and how Lars cared for her beginning with the part he wrote about her in the introduction. I had looked up Eighner's website and found the memorial he had there for her and learned she had died peacefully five years after the book's last record of her.

We discussed homelessness and its possible causes and consequences. We did not feel Eighner was a typical homeless person; one participant wondered if he had done this just so he could write about it. We did find his description of dumpster diving and assessing the food derived as interesting, even though it is not a desirable way to live. The sexual life style he described for himself was where many people stopped reading, therefore the few of us who had read the entire book had to tell some parts of the story to continue discussion. The reasons for Eighner's lack of employment was also a rather contentious discussion; some feeling he did not really try to get a job, instead pinning his hopes on being an editor, though he was not educated for that profession. His "whiny" attitude about the Texas assistance systems and government programs in general became tiresome also.

The group appreciated Eighner's feelings for Lizbeth, his willingness to suffer rather than part with her was commendable.. It appears he gave her a good life after they had "a roof over their heads."

The consensus of the group was that the book did not belong in a grouping of books about dogs, as its intent did not seem to be to examine the relationship of the dog and owner as was the theme of the previous books.

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This group has been so enthusiastic about the two former books we've done in this series (Merle's Door and Winterdance) that I sort of expected they would feel differently about Travels with Lizbeth and they sure did.

As they were coming in, they were already complaining to each other about the book and about Lars Eighner. These complaints ran along the same lines I noted when I looked over some of the previous leader's reports about their experiences with the book: "It wasn't a DOG book!" "I couldn't have any sympathy or respect for the author."

"Why would the Humanities Council have put this book in this series?" and so on. And also, there were a few defenders who argued that they "leaned something" from the book and that it made them "think."

I suggested we take each one of these attitudes and discuss it, so we did and it turned into a discussion even more lively than on the two previous books that they liked so much.

I thought it important to establish that the author didn't set out to BE homeless, that it wasn't a choice but a series of events that led him to that state. But still there were those

"but he COULD have got some kind of a job" which lead us to look at all the factors working against that (not the least of which was his dog!). We talked about his observations on the state on being homeless -- how impossible it was for a homeless person to get help from welfare (food stamps etc), the work being homeless involved just on a daily basis, his discussion of the "hopelessness of homelessness", what people want to believe about the cause of being homeless and how this also works against their chances for change, and so on. This lead to lots of discussion and observations way beyond the book about homelessness and poverty.

We had an interesting discussion about Eighner's character. From what details we talked about his background, some in the group felt he was probably autistic (as he describes himself) and clearly had trouble connecting with people (well except for his random sexual encounters which we would have preferred not hearing about!). I pointed out that he had his own set of ethics and morals - outside the norm perhaps, but definitive, and we talked about sense of honor and personal rules that he maintained. I felt the group grudgingly warming up to him as the discussion went on! They agreed that he was a "good writer" and all fifteen in the group, even those who were most put off by it, admitted that they had read it in its entirety, which isn't always the case. We looked at favorite sections in the book that people had....not surprisingly the "Dumpster Diving" chapter especially.

During a lot of the discussion, I had to work to keep some control because people had so much to say and were talking at once. So, in the end I think it became more clear why this book might have been chosen even though it maybe isn't a true "dog" book. - Norleen Healy

## **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

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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.

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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.

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We gathered at the wonderful Story Library for our final in the series, *My Dog Skip*. We agreed that the book was a nostalgic look at a past era in America. Most of us could relate to his Morris's description of life in a small town in the mid 20th century, dog or no dog, and everyone seemed to rather enjoy the book even though noted that it was idyllic. Only one person objected to what she termed Morris's lack of sensitivity to the racial issues surrounding him in Yazoo at the time. The others in the group felt that a young boy then wouldn't really take much notice of that, it just was what was, and most people of his class and race didn't think much about it then. It did help to note that Willie Morris, as an adult, was considered "overly liberal" both while serving as editor of the University of Texas newspaper and, later, of Harper Magazine. The thing that makes the book seem so limited in terms of material for a humanities discussion is the lack of tension or conflict. Jo Elliot, the librarian, and I had decided ahead of time to extend the discussion by showing the movie version, which did have plot and conflict and some areas for discussion accordingly. Most of the participants decided they liked the movie more than the book for that reason.

In wrapping up the evening, since it was our last meeting, we talked a bit about the series as a whole. Everyone agreed that Merle's Door and *Winterdance* seemed more appropriate to the series than did *Travels with Lizbeth* and *My Dog Skip*. In truth, I found it a more difficult than most series to flesh out productive discussion of humanities issues.

We had a pleasant discussion of *My Dog Skip*. However, as I've found before, there really is very little to discuss in this book.

We talked about the era that Morris depicts so well, Morris' views of southerners, his own disclaimer to being a southern writer, and, of course, the various antics of him and his dog. We also discussed the canine connection in this book in comparison and contrast with the others. We agreed that it is very different in this book because the book is about a child and his dog.

One of the participants who was a child during WWII talked about how well Morris depicts that era. She remembers many of the same aspects that he did.

The book naturally leads to people telling their own dog stories, which works well with this book because it is a compilation of dog stories.

I forgot to write down the number of participants, but I think it was 12.

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The Newcastle group met on May 12, 2010, in the Weston County Library meeting room. Ten members gathered to discuss *My Dog Skip*, by Willie Morris. The members attending enjoyed reading the author's memoir about growing up with Skip as his best friend.

We enjoyed reminiscing about childhood in small town America; many members were about the age of the author during the years he described and grew up in towns similar to Yazoo. Several of us likened the story to aspects of *To Kill A Mockingbird* with descriptions of childhood, neighborhoods and downtown areas.

The handout I prepared had interesting facts about the author, as well as Jack Russell Terriers. I had also previewed the movie based on the book. Although it differs quite a lot, the group members enjoyed watching two clips from it which showed the children training Skip to be an Army dog and the movie's ending.

Four participated in the Cokeville Library discussion of *My Dog Skip* by Willie Morris on April 22. While we expected more to attend, the first part of the discussion involved some rehashing of the previous book and the waves and harm it did to our group. We also spent a few minutes picking study selections for next year. Initially, I asked if anyone in our group had seen the recent movie by the same title. No one had seen it, but some reported that they heard that it was well done and fairly close to the original story.

The group split about in half over the appeal of this book. Some found it less engaging than say *Winterdance*; others thoroughly enjoyed the humor and anecdotes in this novel. Recognizing the story was autobiographical, we took the time to reread (with broken chuckles) several of the group's favorite parts. All enjoyed the colorful, engaging and well-written way the author told of the driving dog in the car moving through town, the dog's runs to town for bologna (we wondered who was really trained here), the dog competition where despite not following any of his owner's commands the dog earned second place, the remarkable fishing success story, the dog's football and baseball adventures, and the embarrassing moment when Morris had to remove his dog from the field of a ball game.

Next, we found ourselves reliving personal stories of our pets, particularly dogs. Discussion topics ranged widely, including dogs as confidants or counselors to how they help people through difficult times and trials. Some mentioned how sometimes dogs replace children in some people's lives; others saw dogs as opponents as well as

companions and friends. One wondered why as the author grew up and left home, the dog lost a bit of place in the author's life. We recognized that this is how many of us are with our pets as they age and our own lives change us. The mention of how the writer had written part of the story for an English course seemed to answer a question of why the first part of the book was more strongly written and vivid in its language compared to the last few chapters. Morris apparently had just added a few chapters to make it a mini-novel. We are open to and exploring suggestions to rekindle greater participation in our reading group. Some concerns are scheduling the right times, picking the right books, and drawing in a younger, more diverse reading group.

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Our discussion was postponed for one week due to a snowstorm on our original meeting date. Unfortunately, last night's weather wasn't much better. We only had six ladies at the discussion, which is half our usual number, due to the timing. In addition to the bad weather, I was told that we were competing with a popular women's group meeting, church activities and a high school basketball game.

Everyone liked *My Dog Skip* and thought it was an enjoyable and simple read. One of the first comments was that there wasn't much to discuss but that didn't keep us from talking about the book for over an hour. The upbeat and pleasant nature of the memoir was welcome after the much more serious and not always pleasant *Travels with Lizbeth*. Many noticed that there wasn't much of a storyline or conflict, just a bunch of disjointed memories. We discussed how he began the book as a college assignment, subsequently adding the later chapters for publication and speculated that maybe that was why. I asked if *My Dog Skip* reminded them of other books they had read. They mentioned books like *Lassie* and *Incredible Journey* and other stories of good dogs that were enjoyable but maybe didn't have a lot of literary substance, perhaps because they were written for children. Some thought that Morris tried to write the book from a 10 year old boy's perspective but the vocabulary was sometimes beyond most 10 year olds.

I asked if the group thought that the book was more of a story of a dog and his boy or more the story of a boy's childhood in a certain place and time (the deep south of the USA, namely Yazoo, Mississippi in the 1940s). They thought it was definitely more of a story about a childhood as remembered by a grown man but told through the eyes of a little boy. A couple of the members could remember the 1940's and believed that the book was a true depiction about what it was like then. I asked if it bothered anyone that Morris never mentions the racial inequalities that must have been present in 1940's era Mississippi. I specifically asked this question because this was a frequent topic of Morris' later writings. We speculated that a 10 year old white boy would probably not have noticed these things because they were normal to him and since he was writing the story from the point of view of his young self he did not include racial strife and inequalities. We wondered if all the incidents he relates really happened the way he

describes or if they were embellished over time. We also spent a bit of time reminiscing about our own childhoods and the freedom that we had, that kids today no longer have because of fears of abduction, etc.

We also compared the dog Skip to the dog Merle in *Merle's Door*. Both dogs were intelligent but not perfect, had freedom to roam the town and ate unconventional diets, Merle eating moose and elk and Skip eating bologna and cotton candy. Both dogs were also beloved by most of the townspeople whom they visited on their "rounds". We got off on a tangent of our own dogs, which has also happened in all three previous discussions, and talked about the heartbreak you suffer when your childhood dog dies and how far we'd go to save our dogs' lives. I passed around the new book *Pukka: the pup after Merle* by the author Merle's Door Ted Kerasote for everyone to see. The first thing we noticed was how much Pukka resembled Merle, which led to a discussion about the common human desire to replace a dog with another dog that looks just like it and how two dogs, even of the same breed are just not the same.

We discussed the movie *My Dog Skip*, which is really cute but very different from the book. The movie has more of a plot, more conflict, more romance, and manages to discuss racial inequities in a way that's accessible to kids. We didn't have time to view any of the movie due to bad weather. Mary Cushing of the Pine Bluffs Library said that the library might sponsor a viewing of the movie at the library in January or February as a good way to get this fun group back together.

Elaine Hayes

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Twelve souls braved icy roads to discuss a story about a boy and his dog in the South, Yazoo, Mississippi, through the Forties and Fifties. We ventured from the simple descriptions to the questions barely hinted at in the boy's worldview, that of race relations and the personal toll of the war. Some of our members had lived in the South decades ago and were able to remember segregation in their towns. In the book, Willie Morris recalled war was just a game in the lives of his friends; no one came home broken or wounded. The word "innocent" or "simpler time" cropped up in our discussion; we have all lived through several decades of turbulence and recalled wistfully such carefree summer times.

Several were surprised to learn the author, Willie Morris, wrote scathing editorials for the University of Texas student newspaper, excoriating segregation, censorship and officials of Texas and their collusion with oil and gas companies. He irritated the Board of Regents to the point the University ignored his award as Rhodes Scholar. Times have changed: in 1997 the Daily Texan began honoring each year's best editorial writer with "The Willie Morris Award for Editorial Excellence."

Morris became the youngest-ever editor-in-chief of an influential literary magazine and helped to launch the careers of notable writers such William Styron, publishing

a long excerpt of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. But the owners of *Harper's Magazine*, felt that the content Morris published, longer articles of overtly liberal sentiment, offended more cautious advertisers, and forced him out.

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Ten Sleep Session 3  
MY DOG, SKIP Willie Morris  
6 participants  
Leader: Elouise Rossler

The classic story of a boy and his dog did not bring lots of discussion as most of the attendees had been raised with dogs and had raised their kids with dogs. The comfort level of having a dog was discussed, the fact that Willie was an only child made some difference in the relationship of boy and dog. Even though we found the book relatively unexciting, we all professed to liking it and appreciating the story.

We talked about Yazoo City, MS, then and now. The deeply Southern atmosphere was present in 1940s and is still present. It was interesting to note the eccentric aunts and the grandparents. We discussed the freedom that he had as a child and how children in most places are so much more restricted in their movement today. The idea of a youngster taking a train to Jackson to visit grandparents was novel to those who have lived most of their life here. We talked about the "simplicity" of life then and how it has changed everywhere.

We discussed Morris' career and the difference in this book of a gentle story of his dog and his life as a child and young man and the type of reputation he had as an editor and journalistic writer. He had been unafraid to take risks to stand up for his beliefs during his career. Perhaps this book, which probably was started when he had to write about his life in college, was a way of returning to a simpler part of his life and take some of the stress and hard work out of his life.

## **Letters from Wolfie** **by Patti Sherlock**

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Eleven people gathered on this cold and snowy night in Ranchester to discuss the final book of the Canine Companion series, *Letters from Wolfie*, a new book replacing *My Dog Skip*. Thank you, Leslie, for the replacement because, although *Letters from Wolfie* also comes under the "juvenile fiction" category, it allowed for much richer humanities discussion.

Most in the group came of age themselves during the Viet Nam war era so we spent much of the discussion talking about the serious issues brought about by that war and relating our own experiences from that time. We agreed that the book effectively illustrated the various attitudes of the war. We noted that initially the attitudes of many of the characters in the book about the war were supportive, but, as the reality set in and the sacrifices were made, a sense of confusion and, often, cynicism set in. It was not hard to see this pattern emerging in many of the

more recent "engagements" in which the United States has been involved.

We talked about the complex meanings of patriotism, loyalty, and sacrifice illustrated on many different levels in the novel. We had quite a lively discussion on the role of protest in a democracy. I asked about the groups' sense of the gender roles as depicted in the novel and how/if that has changed significantly.

We did, in and out of all this, talk about poor Wolfie and the whole issue of dogs in war. Fortunately, the government has become more sensitive to the issue and changes have occurred such as the Military War Dog Resolution (2000) which, among other effects, stopped the practice of euthanizing dogs at the end of service, but many in the group were still indignant at how difficult it is to bring the dogs back appropriately after their service.

I think the book is a good addition to the series. - Norleen Healy