

“I Chose a Child’s Face Over My Dog”

Jon Katz, author of *A Good Dog*, talks about aggression and the difficult choices faced by dog owners and shelters

If you’ve ever tried to take a bone away from a typically placid, sweet dog, you may have found out the truth: All dogs can bite. It’s based in pure instinct—a natural, age-old response of protection and self-defense—but it’s unacceptable behavior to people. Most pet dogs learn that biting is a no-no in the human world, and good training can help a nippy dog figure out safer ways to relate to the people and pets he lives with.

But there are some dogs who never quite learn the rules.

Dogs who bite become the subjects of lawsuits, cause battles between neighbors, drive up insurance premiums, and sometimes turn individual victims and their families against dogs for life. A single bite by a dog of a reputedly dangerous breed—such as the pit bull—can carry an even deeper sting, driving legislation aimed at punishing the breed as a whole rather than curtailing the activities of the individual animal and his owner.

In the midst of all the arguments about whether to blame the breed or the deed, the dog or the owner, individual stories about the struggles of people and their pets get lost.

Author Jon Katz told one of those stories in his book *A Good Dog*, which detailed his relationship with his loving but increasingly aggressive border collie Orson. In this excerpted e-mail interview with Adam Goldfarb, an issues specialist at The Humane Society of the United States, he writes about Orson, the problem of dog aggression, and the difficult choices that some owners and shelter workers face.

AS: Regarding your latest book, some of the reader comments on Amazon.com express a lot of anger about your decision to euthanize Orson. Why do you think people are so emotional about this topic?



Jon Katz: Because they love dogs, and I understand that. Also because they are increasingly humanizing dogs and equating them with children or humans. When you do that, of course euthanasia becomes unacceptable. People loved Orson, as did I, and were upset at my decision to kill him. (I should point out that *A Good Dog* has been my most popular book by far, and I received more praise for it than any other book, including online.)

But there are undoubtedly many people who feel it is wrong to kill a dog for any reason. They are entitled to their opinions. My own notion is that the person I have to please is me, and I respect the decision I made. It was painful and sad, but I believe it was the right decision for me and for my dog. Millions of people are bitten by dogs every year, many tens of thousands of children. I didn’t want to add to that grisly statistic. Animals are

important in our society and in my life, but I don’t wish to make them quasi-religious objects of veneration. They are animals and need to be seen that way and understood in that context.

Orson saw behaviorists, vets, trainers, holistic vets and shamans, and breeders. I exhausted every resource in trying to help him, and when he hurt three people, I felt I could not stomach being responsible for him hurting another. The e-mail I’ve received that is the most powerful to me [has been] from parents and kids who have suffered awful bites and who thanked me profusely and emotionally for writing the book.

I find it interesting and sad that nobody who expressed anger at me or my decision—not one—asked about any of the people Orson hurt. To me, that suggests our priorities are somewhat skewed. But I don’t blame anybody for

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being upset, although they didn't love Orson more than I did.

AS: In your book, you talk a lot about Orson's failures or fear of failing. What impact do you think failure has on a dog? What can dog owners and shelter workers do to set their dogs up for success?

JK: Dogs ought not be given the chance to fail. Their odds are better when people choose them deliberately, train them lovingly and patiently, and understand that it is often good practice to crate or confine a dog. Training goes on for the entire life of a dog and isn't just a matter of hours or weeks or of simple obedience. We project so many of our thoughts and emotions onto dogs that we fail to appreciate them as the wonderful animals they are. It's tough to show a dog how to live in our world, which is often hostile to dogs. It takes enormous thought, commitment, and a sense of responsibility.

AS: In earlier times, it wasn't unusual for dog owners to euthanize dogs who bit people. Today, while dangerous dogs are still euthanized, there's more resistance to the idea. Do you think that every dog should have a chance to be rehabilitated?

JK: I agree that every dog can and should have a chance to be rehabilitated through evaluation, training, love, and attention. But it is important, I believe, to also realize that the issue is complex. Dogs are animals, and some animals have problems—no fault of theirs—beyond our ability to fix, or beyond the resources and conventions of society. Almost everyone who spends time with animals knows that there are social, behavioral, and financial limits to what we can do with some animals.

Some dogs are damaged by reckless breeding. Others by trauma in the litter or by abuse or medical and behavioral problems. Some can be fixed. Some can't. We have a new urban political ethic in America that holds that no animal should ever be euthanized for any reason, no matter what the cost. I do not share this

view, speaking as a person with three rescue cows, a rescue donkey, two rescue dogs, and a rescue rooster. We have limited resources in our society, and we have to make careful choices about what we do for people as well as for animals.

Animal lovers need to be aware that some animals hurt people. Millions of Americans seek medical attention every year for animal bites or attacks. Any pediatrician will tell you many of the injuries to children are horrific, and I wish I would hear more awareness from animal and dog lovers about this issue. A dog I loved very much bit three people, including a child, and this was not acceptable to me. I chose a child's face over my dog and would do it again.

Also, for every troubled or aggressive animal kept alive for months or years, healthy and adoptable animals go wanting for homes and often lose their lives. I have real problems with saying no animal should be killed for any reason. I question whether it is really moral or even humane, and whether it stretches the boundaries of what a society can or should afford, as well as the allocation of precious funds for public welfare. Neither is it always the most loving choice for animals, who may languish for years in crates and cages so that humans can feel good.

Each time, it should be a choice. Whenever possible, the animal should live. When it is not appropriate, then euthanasia is an appropriate tool.

AS: What do you think of shelters and rescue groups that try to place "nippy" dogs?

JK: I think it's wrong. Dogs should not hurt people and should not be put in a position where people can get hurt. Nobody can absolutely control the movements of a dog 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We can talk all we want about educating children around dogs and other animals, but anybody who has a small child knows that is sometimes difficult, even impossible.

If someone gets hurt, the shelter or rescue group is responsible and ought to be held responsible, and given the rash of dog-bite lawsuits in America, it will be. I think some dog advocates miss the point

that the welfare of animals is not enhanced when aggressive dogs are allowed to live among humans. Few societies will tolerate this for long, and the movement and well-being of all dogs ends up adversely affected. Sometimes our ideas about abuse and ethics get inverted.

Insurance companies are paying out billions of dollars to people bitten by dogs, and this trend will, sadly, continue. I hate to see lawyers injected into the human-animal relationship—just look at what has happened to human health care—but people who push the notion that no dog should ever be euthanized are bringing them in.

AS: Dangerous-dog legislation is a hot topic these days. What are your thoughts on this?

JK: It's an almost impossible civic quandary. You can't generalize about breeds or behaviors, but it is not good for any animal anywhere when a human is grievously injured. Fighting breeds can do great harm to people, and we need an open dialogue between dog lovers and public authorities—and non-dog-owners too—about the role of government and law when it comes to companion animals. Sadly, there is nothing like a reasoned dialogue going on, only people taking rigid and sometimes extreme positions on both sides. The animal world is infected with the same kind of one-side-or-the-other absolutism that infects politics and makes consensus difficult if not impossible.

All sorts of things can contribute to aggressive dog behavior—genetics, the [pecking order of the] litter, abuse, and other environmental factors. Few people understand this. They think there are good dogs and bad dogs. There is no such thing as a good dog or a bad dog, only an animal influenced by many factors beyond his or her control.

The idea that every dog can be rehabilitated by love and concern and training is, I think, demonstrably false. Many can, but not all. We often have no idea why a dog behaves aggressively and will never know.

AS: What's your take on pit bulls?

JK: I don't have a single take on them. These dogs are loving and trainable, but they often fall into the wrong hands and sometimes are badly bred. They can do a lot of damage when something goes wrong, and even though they are far less likely to bite than a Lab, they do more harm when they do. Insurance and liability issues are making it difficult for these dogs to find good homes. And people are so afraid of them, often beyond reason, that it can be challenging to take them places. People need to understand the difficulties they face when they get this breed. And others are right to be wary around the breed, not because they are evil, but because the people who own them often don't take the care to train them properly. It's a tough issue, and the poor pit bulls are caught in the middle, as animals tend to be.

AS: Having lived with a variety of dogs, what do you think is the most important thing for potential adopters to consider before adding a new animal to the family?

JK: Getting a dog is a major decision that will greatly impact your life and that of your family. Dogs are not the Disney creatures we often see in the movies. They are expensive, and can be time-consuming and difficult. They need training and can bite, smell, bark, chew and have accidents. Think about whether you really want or need one, and if so, what kind and why? What do you want to do with a dog? What breed or type fits that need? What issues from your own life—impatience, anger, frustration—are you bringing to the relationship, and what do you need to do to be able to train a dog and live with one happily? Ask a lot of questions of yourself, and of the shelter or rescue worker or breeder who is giving or selling you the dog.

A dog is an awesome responsibility. Millions are acquired impulsively, foolishly, or emotionally. Be cautious. Be careful. Be thoughtful. **AS**

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