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Stumpy Versus Lucille: The Great Pet Debate

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This week, I want to pick a fight over cats and dogs. Cats versus dogs. O.K., it's a bit of a departure from the high seriousness of my recent columns on Shakespearean exceptionalism. But I believe, in at least a half-serious way, that there are important truths that need to be examined, some myths about the question that need to be re-examined. The myth about the love of dogs, for instance, and the truth about the higher love cats are capable of. You could think of this as an exceptionalist argument as well: Is the elusive, often unattainable love of cats an exception to the, let's say, dogged devotion of lesser domestic breeds? And what about my cat Stumpy? Could it be that he is exceptional, even among cats?

Now this could be seen as a relatively self-absorbed thesis, but I'd defend it as a response to an intriguing new phenomenon on the literary horizon: the smash success of the sensitive, well-written I-really-really-really-love-my-dog book *Pack of Two: The Intimate Bond Between People and Dogs*, by Caroline Knapp, author of the widely praised memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*. O.K., maybe I'm jealous. I was talking with my friend Susan Kamil, the editorial director of Dial Press, which published Ms. Knapp's memoir. Ms. Kamil asked after the health of my beloved cat Stumpy (who suffers from a chronic heart condition) and then spoke glowingly about Ms. Knapp's new book, which chronicles the way she traded her obsessive love of intoxicating spirits for the intoxicating love of her spirited new dog Lucille.

Listening to this praise, I found myself growing indignant. What makes her dog more special than my cat and our relationship? How could she even compare the love of a mere dog to that of a cat (to that of my cat)? Don't dog owners realize how deluded they are in thinking that the love of their dogs is meaningful, that it really says something beautiful about them, that it says anything about them?

Now I don't mean for this to devolve into a "My cat is better than her dog" thing. Not right away, anyway. Before getting to that level, I feel it's important to address the more general delusion dog lovers suffer from, one that is evident from a quick glance at Ms. Knapp's book. It's a lively and affecting personal memoir which I urge all impassioned dog lovers to buy. But it's a lively and affecting chronicle of a delusion.

Ms. Knapp spends enormous amounts of time wondering if her dog loves her, how much her dog loves her, obsessing over all the little signs of love and affection, explaining to us how much it means to her own sense of self-worth, self-esteem and self-respect that her dog really, really,

really loves her.

Her dog, she says at one point, "became an emblem of my wish for an emotional sure thing ... This is why I was so profoundly possessive of her, so jealous of her affection. She was the one creature on the planet I loved without reservation, and I had to have all of her love in return, for the alternative, I believed, was to be left with nothing."

It's an interesting notion of love: "an emotional sure thing." (Cats are never a sure thing.) Is "sure thing" love a higher love or just a surer, more comforting one? It suggests a longing for a creature who will love you regardless of who you are, what you do, what you become, how you act. But can the love of the dog really do that for you? Is the love of a dog a sure thing, a real thing, in the first place? Is the love of a dog really about a searching affirmation of your soul, or is it more about a steady supply of dog food?

I hate to break the news to Ms. Knapp and her fellow dog-love junkies, I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but the "love" of dogs means nothing. Zero. Dogs are the slavering sycophants, the slobbering indiscriminate flatterers, the bootlickers, the pathetic transparent brown-nosers of the domestic animal kingdom. Dogs are skilled at sucking up, creating the pathetic illusion of love, but it has nothing to do with how lovable you actually are. Dogs will slaver over anyone who gives them food and security. Dogs will suck up to serial killers, dogs will make goo-goo eyes at child molesters, dogs will fawn and whimper over mass murderers. (I cite a certain German shepherd named Blondi who shamelessly sucked up to Hitler himself. The Führer rewarded Blondi's ignorant devotion by testing out his cyanide death pills on the doomed sycophant dog.)

In one of the only great cat books ever written, *The Cat Inside* by William Burroughs (yes, that Burroughs, it's the only work of his I really admire aside from *Junky*), Burroughs went into a brilliant anti-dog rant which culminated in his characterization of dogs as "the grinning slavering rednecks of the animal kingdom." They are that inside (and to all humans they don't feel the need to suck up to for food) but the public face of dogs is even worse: grinning, grovelling little con artists scamming their love-starved masters and mistresses into believing that it's really about them, how special they are rather than about Ken-L Ration tender beef chunks and how special that is.

Don't tell me I'm speaking as someone who doesn't know dogs. I grew up with dogs, loved dogs, but never was deluded enough to think that my dogs loved me because of my great personality or any special attainment of heart and soul as some dogs have conned some masters into believing.

This is the key difference between dogs and cats. A dog, as someone said, always acts like he's afraid he's going to lose his job. A cat acts like the employer, you're the ranch hand-and you're always in danger of losing your job. A cat's vast sense of entitlement may be delusive, but at least it's honest: A cat does not fake orgasms of affection the way dogs do, a cat is not an easy lay emotionally. If you win the love of a cat you have something meaningful, you have something that can genuinely increase your self-respect.

This is not written out of boastfulness: After 11 years, I'm still not sure if I have the love or respect of my cat Stumpy. I'd like to have it, I'd like to be assured of it, but I'm not going to found my entire sense of self-worth on its presence or absence. What's more important-and more

selfless, I'd suggest, than the needy, greedy Fido-loves-me rapture of dog lovers-is that I love and respect him .

That old saying, "Want a friend, buy a dog" could have been invented by a cat. You can buy a dog's friendship, but with a cat a lifetime of devotion might, only might qualify you for some visible signs of affection. And then again, it might not. But it seems to me that even the slightest intimation of affection from a cat like Stumpy means far, far more than the slobbering flattery of some brown-nosing dog.

O.K., this may be true of cats in general versus dogs in general, you might say, but what makes your cat Stumpy so special, so exceptional? I should note at this point that I am not alone in this view, that I have a number of sophisticated and otherwise world-weary witnesses-including some extremely intelligent, critical and discriminating Manhattan women-to testify to this. How is Stumpy special? Let me begin to count the ways:

(1) The still shadowy, deeply mysterious circumstances under which he lost his tail . All we know for sure is that Stumpy, an orange marmalade-colored alley cat about a year old was found on a street near the Brooklyn waterfront with a severe injury of unknown origin: His tail had been half bitten, torn, or cut off by parties unknown. After he was taken to a local vet by a good Samaritan cat-rescuer, it was found necessary to amputate most of the tail, leaving the eponymous Stump. Put up for adoption in the window of a Brooklyn Heights pet store, he was brought to my attention by Liz Hecht, the fiery red-haired animal rights activist and founder of Citizens for Alternatives to Animal Labs (96 Henry Street, 6B, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11201). Few people know cats the way Liz does and she assured me that Stumpy was special.

But Stumpy's never spoken of the circumstances of his waterfront injury. True, he's dropped occasional hints that it was mob-related-although at other times he's indicated "national security" was involved. (I believe he's holding out for a movie option before he'll tell the full story.) But it has been suggested that there was a woman involved. I'm inclined to believe the latter because

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(2) Stumpy's Skill With the Ladies is a key aspect of his exceptionalism. Women are fascinated with him. I still get calls from some who have no interest any longer in me, but want to know how Stumpy is. Someday, I feel I could write about Stumpy's Rules for winning over chicks. One chapter would have to do with ...

(3) The Wink . He never does this for me, but he will walk right up to a woman visitor he considers worthy and give her a frank, confidential, one-eyed wink. Most of them profess they've never seen a cat do this, and they find it both unnerving and stunningly seductive. But it's just one of the repertoire of guilefully charming behaviors he displays only for women he fancies. Including ...

(4) Direct Conversation . Again, he never does this for me, however much I implore, imitate cat sounds, make little meows until I'm hoarse. But he will talk to certain women. One special favorite just has to start making cat language sounds and he becomes a regular chattering Noel Coward, answering back with alacrity and responsiveness. When I try to join in, he gives me a disdainful glance and a wall of silence goes up; it's like, "Dude, don't try to cut into my time."

(5) Competitive Massage . Sometimes I wonder if he cares about me at all, but he has at least displayed signs of jealousy. There have been occasions when someone's been rubbing my back, say, and he comes over and starts doing that kneading thing cats do with their paws while giving me-and her-disdainful looks as if to say, "Oh, all right, if this is the sort of thing you go for I'm perfectly capable of handling it without any outside assistance, just keep the Fancy Feast coming, buddy."

But I don't want to leave the impression that Stumpy is uncaring or heartless, in fact I have proof he has a heart because of the other affliction (aside from his amputated tail) he suffers from ...

(6) Stumpy's Heart Condition . I don't want to turn this section of the column into too much of a tear-jerker, but you have to admire the courage and pluckiness of this marmalade-coated little guy. Shortly after he arrived at my place, not long after his tail stitches had finally dissolved, he displayed panting and respiratory symptoms that were quickly diagnosed (with the help of thousands of dollars' worth of high-tech, state-of-the-art echocardiography) as cardiomyopathy, a valve defect that had caused his valiant little stray cat heart to enlarge and overstrain itself. Fortunately, the condition has been controllable with twice-daily doses of Inderal (a beta blocker) or relatively controllable, considering Stumpy's predisposition to climb to great heights in whatever apartment he occupies. Once he ascended an extremely tall ladder that some workmen had left behind and was in the process of making a risky leap to the top of a bookshelf when he caused the ladder to collapse, causing himself to fall and suffer a mild "cardiac decompensation," as the vet called it, a cat heart attack.

He recovered, yes, but the fact that he has stared death in the face and can still wag his stump at life's little pleasures-a catnip mouse, a fresh can of Fancy Feast (a.k.a. crack for cats)-is a clue to his most touching and soulful asset ...

(7) Stumpy's Zen-Like Tragic Sense of Life . This is what you see in his eyes, the tragic awareness one finds in the final poems of William Butler Yeats: "Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death./ Horseman, pass by!" The flicker of a smile on that ancient Chinese jade mask of tragedy. Stumpy has looked at life from both sides now, very little impresses him, few of the ordinary urgencies, the little disturbances of man so many of us use to distract ourselves from the contemplation of the Big Questions have any charms for him. (Although Whisker Lickin's tuna flavor cat treats will occasionally return him to more earthly concerns. That and the occasional pigeon that zooms past our window and arouses his primitive hunting instincts.) But otherwise he sees through the petty, needy concerns that preoccupy human beings. He has a job to do, patrolling the apartment, supervising me, and making sure that he gets his daily 20 or so hours of sleep so that he can maintain maximum alertness for these taxing tasks. It is the aura of grave seriousness with which he carries out his patrol duty responsibilities that might be the source of his most distinctive quality ...

(8) His Comic Genius . It has something to do with the way he walks around with the air of a guy who's got Everything Figured Out. I think he must be doing a deliberate parody of that human tendency to act as if we know what's really going on-that we have things under control-when we don't have the slightest clue about the Larger Mysteries of Existence. I mean, Stumpy's a guy who doesn't have much of a clue about what goes on right outside our apartment. He'll fight like a crazed maniac, virtually give himself a heart attack resisting a trip outside because his medical experiences have led him to believe that the entire world outside our door is the vast waiting

room of a sadistic catheter-wielding veterinarian. (Come to think of it, there's a kind of metaphoric truth to this vision.) But despite his ignorance, he stalks around like he's king of the jungle with an invincible sense of entitlement and self-importance and a secure sense of his pre-eminent place in the order of the universe. It's a hilarious sendup of the comic pretensions of human beings to believe they've got things figured out-or that they ever could. It's endlessly hilarious.

So there's that, and there's the way he wags his stump when he's happy. Also hilarious, just like a dog in a way. But better.

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