

Barbara Kay on dogs: Man's best friend – and Man's clearest mirror

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Jack London, pictured in 1904, was the author of over 50 books, short stories, novels and travel stories, including *The Call of the Wild*, *Sea Wolf* and *White Fang*.

With dogs lately in my thoughts, I recently reread some beloved childhood stories: *Lad: A Dog*, by Albert Payson Terhune, then Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*.

London's work is celebrated, but few contemporary readers will recognize Terhune's name. Yet in his day — he died in 1941 — Terhune was hailed as “the most famed writer of dog stories who ever lived.”

Collies were Terhune's passion. *Lad: A Dog*, his first and most famous book, is a collection of stories set in bucolic New Jersey, tracing the (highly embellished) adventures of Terhune's own favourite dog. Half a century ago, as a child, my eyes delighted in Lad's exploits.

My adult eyes have elicited a more complex reaction. Ostensibly a paean to Lad's inherited nobility of character — Lad is “thoroughbred in spirit as well as in blood”; “From his earliest days, [Lad] had never forgotten he was an aristocrat among inferiors” — the tales actually embody the old-stock author's own xenophobia. Terhune transferred his distaste for human “mongrels” to his canine alter ego, who has an uncanny ability to distinguish social refinement from “furtive” vulgarity in Master's various “guests.”

There is one particularly discomfiting portrait of an *arriviste* neighbour, self-dubbed the “Wall Street Farmer,” whose name is generically comical — Hamilcar Glure — but whose every characteristic suggests a Jewish stereotype: Glure is loud, vulgar and obese; he had “waxed indecently rich” in finance; deracinated, he knows nothing about breeding livestock, so simply buys prizewinning animals; he spends a fortune on a “Prussian sheep dog” that is in fact a shifty mongrel; his spoiled, vicious, “pasty-faced” child is named — ahem — “Morty.”

One of Terhune's recurring fixations is the collie's uniquely close genetic relationship to wolf forebears. Glowing references to Lad's wolf-like appearance and typically slashing style of attack abound. Here Terhune echoes Jack London's obsession with dog-like wolves and wolf-like dogs, and man's yearning for a collaborative relationship with them.

Unlike Terhune's schlocky anthropomorphized protagonists, though, *Call of the Wild*'s Buck and *White Fang* are fully realized literary creations, indomitable warriors in the most compelling narratives ever written of canine triumph over adversity.

London's writing is so vivid, his descriptions of his dog heroes' cruelly amoral northern wilderness so gripping, it is easy to overlook the myths he perpetuates about dogs and wolves. In *Call of the Wild*, Buck's seamless transition from domestic working dog to wolfish atavism is biologically untenable, while *White Fang*'s evolution from a feral dog/wolf hybrid into a trustworthy domestic companion (who mates with a collie: Terhune's inspiration?) is a dangerous fiction. However trained, wolf/dog hybrids remain semi-wild, as their elevated mauling and killing record tragically attests.

In her 2009 book, *The 100 Silliest Things People Say About Dogs* (a deceptively light title), animal behaviourist Alexandra Semyonova analyzes man's persisting fascination with wolves through the ages, crisply debunking one myth after another. She provides an illuminating cultural history of the domestic dog, from its origins as a scavenger animal to today's many breeds, all as genetically distinct from their distant cousin, the hunter wolf, as man is from the chimpanzee (sure they're smart, but walk with adult chimps at your peril).

Humans always project their own social hierarchies onto animals, Semyonova notes. In the Middle Ages, “noble” animals were beautiful, courageous, chivalrous, wise and loyal, just like their aristocratic owners. Commoners' animals were ugly, clumsy, cowardly and sneaky. This rings true for George R.R. Martin's medieval fantasy, *Game of Thrones*, in which outsized “direwolves” play a similar role to Jack London's imaginary wolf-dogs and Terhune's wolf-like “thoroughbreds”: As Martin's early plot unfolds, the animals pay fealty to their high-born, chivalric masters, often saving the day at crucial moments.

Our received wisdom for training dogs is that we must mimic the mores of their alleged wolf forebears via the “dominance and submission theory”; we must be our pet's “Alpha dog.”

This is nonsense, according to Semyonova, who reveals the source of the canard as 1973 Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz, a never-repentant Nazi who worked at Hitler's Race Policy Bureau, actively shaping eugenics policies. A bird specialist by training, in his 1949 book *Man Meets Dogs*, Lorenz projected his own racist ideology onto dogs and wolves. Lorenz depicted wolves (admirably) as ruthless, rigidly hierarchical and obedient to the implacable laws of blood and race, sycophantically worshipping a godlike Alpha wolf. Sound familiar?

None of Lorenz's fascistic theories were based in evidence. He knew little about dogs, and ignored real experts on wolves. He was in a position to stifle dissent and did. Semyonova says it was not until his death in 1989 that most of Lorenz's theories were abandoned as invalid.

Whether the medium is fiction or non-fiction, romancing wolves is never a culturally innocent pursuit. Civilization is but a membrane over darker impulses; mutinous psyches can displace onto animals with impunity. Our dogs are our social, psychological — and sometimes our ideological — avatars. Consider the dogs you love; then consider yourself.

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