Humans and dogs have travelled a long road together. Their story began thousands of years ago as two species living parallel lives in the same habitat. But with every generation, the gap between them has narrowed. For many westerners today, life without a dog to share it with is, emotionally, a barren prospect.

The drive toward inter-species intimacy has always been entirely one-sided. Dogs need people for one reason only. Whether it’s leftovers at the city dump or the finest kibble money can buy, dogs survive and multiply because humans feed them. For dogs, tummy rubs and cushioned beds are welcome, but unnecessary perks of the association.

The dog population in the U.S. has doubled since the 1970s. No urbanites need dogs for labor, let alone survival needs. Dogs are serving purposes in our times – social, emotional, philosophical – that were not asked of them in previous eras.

Dogs as “persons”

Before the 1970s, dog owners sought books on how to train dogs to obedience. Nowadays, such a simplistic notion – implying, as it does, a master-servant paradigm – seems rather quaint and even politically incorrect.

Today, most dog owners (am I still allowed to say that, or must it be “guardians”?) consider their dogs a “family member,” who is not quite a human being, but in existential ways something very much like a human being: with his own special personality, sensibilities, opinions, needs, and above all, rights. The modern dog is, in John Homans’s words, an “honorary person.”

And here the trouble begins. As Homans announces very early in this entertaining and frequently insightful, but flawed book, “the fact that the dog is a dog and not a person but is treated like a person is a recipe for misunderstanding, miscommunication and interspecies neurotic exchange.”

Homans, executive editor of New York magazine 1994-2014, and now with Politico, represents a trend in canine-focused writing: journalists with no particular background or expertise in canine studies, like Malcolm Gladwell and Tom Judon, who have taken up commentary on canine-human relations with vigor, their interest piqued by the strong political vibes emanating from this “interspecies neurotic exchange.”

“I learned,” Homans writes, “that a dog’s honorary personhood was a kind of battleground.” A battleground indeed – or, in the parlance of the academy, where canine studies have blossomed, a “contested site” dominated by tropes of race, rights and (human) righteousness.

And battlegrounds, literal or cultural, are catnip to opinion journalists. They become immersed in the issues, first in a disinterested way, and almost invariably, as they sift through the arguments, and as growing indignation of one sort or another begins to seethe within, in a partisan way.

I speak from experience. I stumbled upon the pit bull wars some years ago in a casual search for an offbeat topic. In the vitriolic blowback that followed my first anti-pit bull column, I found myself peering down into the fever swamps of the pit bull advocacy movement (PBAM).
My instinct, from my first exposure to the statistics pointing to the overwhelming disparity between the animal and human depredations wrought by pit bull type dogs as compared with all other breeds, was to side with the victims. I see pit bulls as a public safety issue, not an owners-rights or canine-rights issue.

When I learned that the U.S. pit bull population had escalated from 200,000 to about three million in a mere four decades, and that pit bulls were now the second most popular breed of dogs (after Labrador retrievers), I recognized I was dealing with something more culturally significant, something darker and deeper than the weird fringe group I had at first supposed it to be. I’m atypical, though. Most journalists who get into the dog wars in a big way (like Arianna Huffington who runs pit bull awareness weeks in the HuffPo) become advocates for the dogs.

Class issues & breeding

In What’s a Dog for?, Homan sets out to remain above the political fray. His book, he firmly avers, is to be “as much as anything, the history of an evolving discipline: canine studies,” which certainly suggests that he has no ideological axe to grind.

As it turns out, though, he ends up by giving the reader good reason to believe he is not as nearly so impartial as he implicitly claims to be. The rather peculiar turn the book takes when the subject of pit bulls arises is fascinating, and not in a good way. But I enjoyed the 218 pages leading up to that turn.

An enthusiastic and ambitious sleuth, who has read and travelled widely to satisfy his reportorial curiosity, Homans’s research fruits are holistically dispersed in the book’s 16 chapters amongst the ‘cool,’ objective issues of evolution, cognition and genetics, and the ‘hot’ political debates in the dog-show world, the no-kill movement and breed-specific legislation (BSL) activism targeting dangerous dogs.

Where Homans brings his reportorial skills into play, which is throughout most of the book, the reader will enjoy a solid learning experience about the changing perception of dogs in the West.

From chattel to be exploited for what they can offer humans in terms of labor, protection, entertainment or prestige, dogs have emerged as companions who are to be understood, accommodated and protected: not only against physical abuse (including, for those in the “no-kill” movement, euthanizing), but against political “racism” in the form of breed-specific legislation (BSL), a trope that has become a third rail of canine-centred discourse.

These changes in perception did not happen in a vacuum, but as projections of social and cultural developments in human society.

Empire-building in the nineteenth century fomented an especially transformative shift in human-canine relations. In a particularly illuminating chapter Homans describes this emerging dynamic, illustrated by the trajectory of the Labrador retriever, from its curly-haired origins in 18th century Newfoundland to its eventual pinnacle of popularity in the late 20th century and beyond.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Homans informs us, dog breeding was in no way a formal or regulated process; it was a “gentleman’s art,” as the evolution of the Lab illustrates. But slowly the idea of the systematically bred dog took hold as the objective correlative of the upper classes, in their own eyes morally and culturally superior to the classes beneath them.

The fundamental reality of empire – continuous connection between British elites and “inferior” races, nurturing anxiety over racial hybridization – translated into a revulsion from canine mongrels (a tautology in those days). One’s dog, it was felt, should reflect one’s station in life. Human vocational stratification – cobbler, mill worker, coal miner, pub owner, landed gentry – was reflected in dogs designed and bred for specific jobs: guarding, herding, retrieving, fighting and sitting on laps. From preoccupation with caste and status arose the full panoply of purity-driven canine organizations: breed associations, the Kennel Club and dog shows, which by the 1870s were a “national craze.”
From then on, “increasingly powerful institutions controlled the definition of the dog.” Canine form (perceived standards of beauty) increasingly trumped function in the awarding of ribbons that, ipso facto, led to immediate financial rewards for breeders, and by trickle-down effect, to kennel clubs and other industry stakeholders.

Labrador retrievers

The Labrador retriever was a special case in the breeding world, which is why Homans singles it out for in-depth treatment. The Lab was purpose-bred by and for a few extremely wealthy aristocrats consumed by a passion for hunting. Its breeding line was controlled by a single Scottish family (indeed, every Labrador today can be traced back to the original studbook presently overseen by the 10th Duke of Buccleuch of Drumlanrig Castle, which Homans visited in his research peregrinations).

What saved the Lab from over-production and inbreeding under the tyranny of the show circuit was its aristocratic owners’ disinclination to “show” their working dogs at circuses they regarded as common, quite beneath their own and their dogs’ dignity. Happily for Lab owners everywhere (myself included), function and disposition rather than form ruled the breeding lines.

By the 1920s, the Lab was the most popular dog in Britain. In America, the Lab took off in popularity in the post-World War Two housing boom, as, “with its cheerful, child-friendly temperament,” it completed the portrait of the era’s defining contented suburban family circle.

The humane movement had long been underway, with a focus on putting an end to animal abuse when the politically convulsive 1970s shattered social and political consensus, producing a new culturally driven paradigm for human-canine relations. Just as imperial Britain’s obsession with caste translated into a fetish with breeding lines, the counter-culture in America, dominated by tropes of liberation, morality, anti-racism and civil rights, fetishized dogs as rights-deprived victims for whom merely humane treatment was not good enough.

According to the new rights-driven rubric, the dog must be thought of as a moral equal to humans, and – though in fact eugenically bred as a “racial” stereotype – accorded the same individual rights as the constitution guarantees human citizens. Out of this misguided cross-species projection arose PETA, the no-kill movement and PBAM.

Homans deals competently with the schisms between PETA (whom he candidly disapproves of, for good reasons), and the no-kill advocates, who believe every physically healthy dog has the right to life, rehabilitation if necessary and a home.

Pit bull advocacy

But when he finally arrives at the pit bull debate, Homans wanders off the journalistic reservation. By which I mean that instead of imposing the same disinterested scrutiny onto PBAM and its leading proponents that he has accorded the theories and leaders of other debate factions, a veil of PBAM-deferential credulity descends.

Throughout his previous fourteen chapters, discussing dog matters in general, Homans has exuberantly scattered like rose petals down a wedding aisle the supportive names and theories of peer-reviewed animal-studies experts on evolution, cognition, behavior and animal-human relations: Charles Darwin, James Serpell, Konrad Lorenz, Alexandra Horowitz, Marc Bekoff, John Bradshaw, John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller (who wrote “the bible of canine science” proving the heritability of breed traits), Brian Hare, Dmitri Belyaev (whose Siberian fox experiments demonstrated that changing function results in changing form), Ray Coppinger, Clive Wynne, C. Lloyd Morgan, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, Jane Goodall.

In the pages devoted to the pit bull controversy, though, all appeal to science-based authority skids to an abrupt halt. Homans makes many declarations of faith regarding the nature of the pit bull, but adduces as evidence for them no more than a single supportive voice from the world of canine studies – and that voice one that is not only based in emotion...
rather than science, but is not, upon examination, even supportive of Homans’s views.

Having acknowledged that “the proliferation of pit bulls is the most complicated problem facing the shelter system (since they can represent up to 70% of shelter populations), in spite of “heroic efforts” to rehome them, Homans follows up with the contextual non sequitur, “Pit bulls are wonderful dogs.”

This statement is not a fact; it is an opinion that does nothing to explain the wildly disproportionate presence of pit bulls in shelters, nor the fact that half of dogbite-related fatalities involve a family member and as often as not a home in which the dog has been raised with love since puppyhood; nor the fact that so many dogs of other breeds, surely badly raised in numerous cases, have never once been implicated in a human mauling or death.

Vicki Hearne

But I’ll bite anyway: In what way, according to Homans, are pit bulls wonderful – or at least more so than any other dog? Homans offers only one suggestion. According to animal trainer and Yale academic Vicki Hearne, whose books he recommends as “crucial to anyone who thinks about animals,” Homans says pit bulls’ unique endowment is their “gameness” – which Homans interprets as “ready for anything.”

This is a vague and disingenuous reading of the redoubtable Vicki Hearne. Hearne was certainly a strong influence in rebranding pit bulls, always regarded as dangerous dogs before the 1970s, as “wonderful.” But she was by no means naïve about their properties. A writer would have to be deliberately misleading his readers or, to be more charitable, quite wet behind the ears in the dog world to understand Hearne’s use of the word “gameness” to mean playful, as Homans implies.

Hearne did not only mean that pit bulls are unusually keen to chase balls, leap over and under obstacles, or play tug of war with a rope. “Game” is specific dog-fighter code for enthusiastic, pain-indifferent and pertinacious aggression. Hearne was herself highly tolerant, one might even say a fan, of dog fighting. So by “game,” she meant – unequivocally – game to fight. Hearne well understood that this is what pit bulls were bred for and what, in dog behaviorist Ray Coppinger’s words, makes them “feel good.”

(Curiously – an elephant-sized lacuna in the canine-studies room – in his discussion of pit bulls Homans makes mention of dog fighting at all, a disgusting blood “sport” he must surely disapprove of, yet which is to pit bulls, breeding and history-wise, what hunting is to Labs.)

Nor did Hearne endorse pit bulls as pets unreservedly. In her 1986 book, Adam’s Task, she writes: “It is now time for me to say emphatically that my praise of this breed should not be construed as advice to rush out and get a Pit. They do like to fight other dogs, and they are in many ways a tremendous spiritual responsibility.” She also recommended that if people must have a pit bull, they should engage a professional trainer to learn to handle it. What other ‘man’s best friend’ comes laden with such warnings?

So when Homans writes that gameness is “the pit’s strength, just as retrieving is the strength for a Lab…” he is guilty of anthropomorphism. “Gameness” and “retrieving” have no particular value when applied to a dog outside the context of his relationship with human beings. It would be more appropriate to say that gameness is the pit bull’s dominant quality, retrieving the Lab’s.

In the context of human-canine relations, however, the Lab’s biddable temperament and instinct for retrieval may legitimately be labeled “strengths,” for they serve human purposes and pleasures, while the pit bull’s gameness is more properly identified as a “weakness” in the human-canine context.

Gameness not only serves no ethical human purpose that other breeds cannot perform equally well, it creates elevated risk to animals and humans, therefore working against the reliability – the “tameness,” in Homans’s word – that he himself has earlier identified as the sine qua non of human-dog intimacy.
Apologies for belaboring the Hearne allusion. But Homans opened the door to it by singling her out as a sole source for his claim that pit bulls are wonderful. Homans does concede in his “Note on Sources” that his bibliography is “incomplete and selective,” but the reader is entitled to the governing principle of such selectivity, when downright incendiary opinions, such as what follows, are offered on the dog world’s most controversial subject.

Myths

Homans writes that “a heavy tangle of myth has grown up around the pit bull – that they have locking jaws that can hold on and chew at the same time, they can suddenly ‘snap’ and become violent. But these abilities are entirely imaginary, as the fierce legions of pit bull defenders will tell you.”

Oh yes, the fierce legions of pit bull defenders will certainly tell us many things are myths, but that does not mean that they are telling the truth, just as they are not telling us the truth when they also claim that pit bulls have always been America’s favorite pet, or that pit bulls used to be known as “nanny dogs,” both demonstrably myths themselves.

As for “entirely imaginary,” had he researched the issue with objectivity, Homans would know:

that pit bull type dogs, often referred to as “gripping” dogs, are graced with that adjective for a reason; the hold-shake-and-rend pattern peculiar to pit bull attacks is common knowledge, no myth (as surgeons who must deal with these horrific wounds could have told him, and certainly far from imaginary, as numerous published gruesome photographs of pit bull predations attest);

He would understand that whether pit bulls’ jaws lock automatically or the dogs decide not to let go is immaterial to victims; and whether or not other breeds can exert more pressure than pit bulls – as Homans writes elsewhere – is also irrelevant in the face of the evidence that other breeds choose not, unprovoked, to apply that pressure;

And he would be aware that suddenness and unpredictability are the well-known, undisputed hallmarks of pit bull attacks.

Where exactly is Homans getting his misinformation on pit bulls? No source is provided, not even the unannotated PBAM blogs churning out these canards that anti-pit bull partisans like myself are, perforce, constantly exposed to. If the “fierce legions” are his sources, Homans is violating the first rule of journalism: never trust the word of stakeholders in any dispute unless their version of events and facts aligns with statements provided by objective observers.

Homans is plainly conflicted, perhaps more than he realizes, in his feelings about pit bulls. On one hand he recognizes that they “can have a relentlessness and dog-on-dog aggressiveness that is alarming.” On the other, he cannot bring himself to admit that the same instinct can translate into aggression against humans without environmental causes.

While acknowledging the overwhelmingly type-specific and damning statistics, Homans insists that “[s]uch accidents have more to do with how the dogs’ owners raised them than with anything instinctive to the dogs.” Once again, an opinion based more in wishful thinking than epidemiological evidence or readily available rebuttals of this claim in heritable-traits research.

Like so many other canine observers nowadays, Homans has no problem in recognizing positive instincts, like retrieving and herding, as heritable traits (he at one point expresses the wistful hope that his own dog, Stella, may one day demonstrate that she has inherited more genetic Lab “excellence” than she has so far exhibited), but he shrinks from ascribing any negative instincts to nature.

One cannot help but see in Homans’s no-breed-left-behind reflex an almost comical inversion of the imperial Brits who believed mongrels lacked their line-bred dogs’ inherent nobility. As Homans has noted earlier, “[Dogs] are surrogates for our own conflicts…all trying desperately to put their own ideological stamp on the future of dog (sic).”
Just so. For ideologically-inclined bien pensants, multiculturalist to the core in self-absolving reaction to their Eurocentric forebears’ racial and social imperialism, all human cultures must be held to be equal in value. One may praise benign cultural customs, but one may not criticize those customs that are repellent to our own traditional values. For that would be racist. Likewise, dog breeds. Admire their virtues as inherited, but not their vices, for that too would be racist.

“Pits are a race-class battleground,” Homans says. That is true. But the assumption that because innocent black youths are often unfairly stereotyped – racialized – the pit bulls they tend to favor must also be racialized is logically absurd. As George Orwell would doubtless have observed, it’s an idea “so stupid that only intellectuals believe [it].”

Dogs, happily, are incapable of political correctness. They only know what they know. And what they know is that there is a canine social code, strictly observed amongst normal dogs, which allows them to congregate and enjoy – or ignore – each others’ presence without fear of anything more than ritual confrontation. There are “rules” normal dogs obey intuitively.

Stella

So let us give the last word to Stella, Homans’ own mixed-breed Lab, adopted from a shelter in Tennessee.

Homans tells us that Stella was once chased down by three pit bulls at a dog run. After the incident, “Stella seemed to develop a breed-specific aversion…She gave almost all pit bulls a wide berth. This kind of impression drives pit bull owners nuts. To them, it’s a form of stereotyping, akin to racial policing.”

Who is the rational actor in this morality play? The dog, who is more interested in her physical security than demonstrating her era’s idea of righteousness, and who has cannily intuited that the pit bull is not a normal dog because instead of playing ritually, it meant business? Or the intellectually confused humans who would prefer other dogs (and in many cases people) suffer bodily harm rather than “discriminate” against their beloved ‘pibble’?

Here, if ever, was the opportunity for Homans to show his hand on where he stands in this debate. But Homans does not comment. As Sherlock Holmes might have put it, Homans is the journalist who didn’t bark at the benighted.

Perhaps he is honestly unsure about where he stands on the issue. Perhaps he considers the race canard a form of cultural lunacy as I do, but flinches at the thought of appearing politically incorrect or, God forbid, racist. Whatever his problem, Homans’s uninterrogated descent into the pit bull rabbit hole is a stain on his professional copybook, and a serious shortcoming in an otherwise instructive contribution to this burgeoning genre in journalism.