

Up until now, the charm offensive by intellectuals in the pit bull advocacy movement (PBAM) has been confined to publications targeting people capable of reading them.

Now Canadian novelist, Huffington Post blogger , and pit bull enthusiast Douglas Anthony Cooper has taken pit bull rescue activism to a brand new level of advocacy hutzpah. Cooper's latest book, *Galunker*, due out in December, will actually peddle pit bulls to preschoolers.

We know a great deal about the book, because its production has been funded with a hugely successful Kickstarter campaign. (Indeed, a tweet July 1 announcing "We did it!!" informed Cooper's supporters that \$62,000 had been raised in record time, more than double the original goal of \$27,500.)

Cooper has taken no pains to disguise the project as anything but child-focused propaganda. Promotional material characterizes *Galunker* as "a children's book to change our perception of pit bulls." It describes *Galunker* as "a rhyming, illustrated children's book, with a nod to Dr. Seuss, about a pit bull rescued from a fighting ring. This dog experiences all manner of prejudice, simply because he looks mean. Of course, *Galunker* has a big ridiculous heart, and is about as dangerous as a marshmallow."

In an accompanying essay directed at parents, Cooper will promote his two core convictions: that "dangerous behavior in a dog is not inherent – it depends entirely on how it is raised," and that "simply by spaying or neutering [your] dog, [you] are making your home a much safer place."

Both statements are demonstrably false.

Since 2010, 24 pit bulls and seven 'mastiffs' (most of which have pit bull blood in them) from U.S. shelters have killed humans. Of these 31 "bully breed" molosser type dogs, 28 were neutered.'

As for the claim that the risk of a dog attack is linked only to environment rather than genetics, hardly a day goes by that an American child is not mauled by a well-socialized, well-trained family pit bull that, in the common parlance of post-attack media reports, "had never showed any sign of aggression before." Yet many other breeds of dog—among whose ranks there are surely numerous badly socialized, badly trained and even abused pets—have never once been implicated in a child's death or mauling.

(For a particularly well-documented case of a child's horrific savaging to death by optimally raised pit bulls, with no possible other explanation than the impulsive aggression, high, unstoppable arousal plus killing bite pattern for which the pit bull type dog was specifically developed, read the precisely-detailed story of Wisconsin victim, 14-month old Daxton Borchardt here.)

Galunker is in any case not a well-socialized, well-trained pit bull. He has been rescued from a dog fighting operation. No pit bull could be a higher risk for unpredictable violence than one already experienced in blood sport. So to imply that a real-life *Galunker* would be "about as dangerous as a marshmallow" is a stunningly—one might reasonably say a dangerously —misleading statement.

Thus I have grave concerns about the possible consequences to children that may result from this book's probable success. For it grieves me to concede that with its clever and convincing packaging, *Galunker* will doubtless be acquired for thousands of children by naïve and ignorant parents who might never before have considered a pit bull as a household pet, but whose children, it is safe to say, will soon be begging for a *Galunker* of their very own.

The slickly-designed promotional website is a triumph of marketing professionalism, dominated by happy-clappy PBAM evangelism. Here we meet the raffishly adorable *Galunker*, his proud creator Cooper, and radiant PBAM

“convert,” graphic artist Dula Yavne. Yavne, dazzled by Cooper’s passion for pit bulls, has quit all her other commitments to work on the project. She enthuses, “Galunker aims to make children fall in love with these dogs.” To anyone who knows the truth about pit bulls—they have killed 30 children and horrifically mauled many more in just the past 18 months—these words send chills down the spine.

We also get a sense of the missionary excitement the project is causing.

Pledge offers to The BFFFL (“Bestest Fursome Friend for Life” – nauseating infantilisms like this are pandemic in the PBAM community) include – for a \$1,200 donation – signatures of the author and artist on a bookplate, a “gorgeous fitted T-shirt or tank top (your choice) and a gorgeous tote bag, both illustrated with the glorious Galunker.” Plus “A FULL-COLOR DRAWING OF YOUR PET!”

For a pledge of \$2500, “DULA WILL INCLUDE ONE SPECIAL APPEARANCE OF YOUR PET, AS AN ILLUSTRATION SOMEWHERE IN THE BOOK! We’re talking about eternal fame here!:)” These donors get the T-shirt and tote bag, of course, and “ON TOP OF THIS you’ll get TWO gorgeous, colorful GALUNKER THROW PILLOWS.”

One rhapsodic acolyte writes on the Kickstart page, “The more we can do to promote our fur babies as being the big softies they are the better. Have you thought about adding a plush Galunker toy to your rewards? Coca [my English Staffordshire Bull Terrier, who wouldn’t hurt a fly] and I would happily increase our pledge to get one of these.”

As I say, this is a slick operation aimed not at evoking interest from the general public, but at cementing commitment to activism on the project in PBAM foot soldiers. It’s clearly working.

Appropriating Dr. Seuss for the narrative format was a stroke of brilliance. Unethical brilliance to be sure, but isn’t this teaser charming?

“But hated he was, and he always had been

For Galunker, though never his fault, Looked real mean.

His name was tattooed on the back of his ear

Which helped him look fierce (didn’t help him to hear).

It was never his fault that the people he met

Upon meeting Galunker became so upset,

That they flinched or they frowned or they scrambled or they screamed –

He was not even slightly the way that he seemed.

And today poor Galunker was really a mess

So it’s time that we started this story, I guess....”

It’s just as well he’s dead, since Dr. Seuss would doubtless have been mortified to see his creative genius exploited in this way. Dr. Seuss’s fabulous animal characters and stories were conceived as an entertaining means to teach children good values and encourage solid character, not to beguile them into complicity with controversial personal obsessions.

Once aware of this project, I initiated an on-the-record email dialogue with Cooper—partly to assess his grasp of the

issues, but also in the admittedly faint hope that I might encourage second thoughts about the project.

It became clear to me over the course of our exchange that Cooper is not actually familiar with—or willfully ignores—basic statistics around pit bull depredations. As well, he seems to have but a passing acquaintance—if that—with the testimonial of people on the ground, so to speak, people dealing not with theories, but with huge numbers of the actual dogs.

Cooper seems not to have consulted the opinions of medical professionals on the front lines of pit bull savagery, or dog geneticists, dog behaviorists, dog trainers, dog fighters (their candor can be a thing of beauty as an antidote to the political correctness amongst PBAM cultural elites), and animal control officers. Had Cooper consulted pit bull expert, breeder and former animal control officer Diane Jessup, an often-cited authority on pit bulls who trains police in surviving dog attacks, for example, she would have told him that “I truly believe that a dog is about 90% genetic.”

And, of course, there are the victims and the families of victims, none of whom Cooper seems ever to have interviewed (a gut-wrenching experience, but de rigeur as part of any serious researcher’s education on the issue).

So I have concluded that Cooper is not nearly so well-versed in pit bullery as one would assume someone putting out a book as problematic as Galunker should be. In fact, I suspect a good many of his assumptions are lifted from unannotated PBAM blogs.

For example, he writes (condescendingly, I might add, here and elsewhere, from which I infer he is accustomed to pontificating to reverent members of the PBAM choir, who never challenge his authority): “If you studied [dog epidemiology], you would be afraid to take any of the following into a home with a small child – these are, apparently, killers: the Dachshund, the Chow Chow, the Jack Russell, the Dalmatian, the Cocker Spaniel, the Bull Terrier, the Shar Pei, the Pekingese, the Beagle, and the Chihuahua.”

Hmm, let’s see. Over the course of 33 years, Jack Russells have killed two people: one victim died as a result of an infection incurred from a garden-variety bite; Dalmatians: zero killings; Cocker Spaniels, ditto; English Bull Terriers, ditto; Sharpeis, ditto; Beagles: one (a strangulation accident, the dog having tugged on a leash wrapped around a child’s neck); Chihuahua: one (a bitten lip aggravated by a bicycle’s momentum). Altogether: three. In the same period, pit bull type dogs have killed 422 humans. Q.E.D.

I didn’t adduce these statistics to Cooper in our exchange, but I anticipate he would have impugned my source—the publisher of *Animal 24-7*, Merritt Clifton—since he had already exhibited contempt for Clifton’s ongoing reports (which he gave no indication of having read). Like many other pit bull aficionados, Cooper is vexed that Clifton amasses data from media reports of dog attacks, as though media reports were not a traditionally well respected, bona fide source for epidemiologists and historians of every subject on earth. He offered no answer to my query as to why, if Clifton and my other sources were inadmissible, other researchers in 39 countries had uncovered the same data Clifton et al have, and arrived at similar conclusions about pit bulls.

Cooper actually believes in the myths his book promotes. His polemical guru is Dr. Jeffrey Sacks, an epidemiologist long opposed to breed bans, and a strong supporter of education and owner responsibility as preventatives of dog attacks.

For Cooper, Sacks is the last word on the subject. But Sacks is not himself immune from evidence-based criticism.

For example, Cooper shares Sacks’ widely contested opinion that breed is irrelevant to risk, and that nurture and training are the paramount factors in all dog behavior that is dangerous to humans.

And yet, puzzlingly, as the lead author in a Special Report written for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, to which Cooper made multiple glowing references, Sacks quietly appends this caveat in his recommendations: “Understanding breed profiles may assist owners in selecting the appropriate dog for their lifestyle and training abilities.” Huh? If love and training are all you need, and if aggression isn’t a heritable trait, why the need for pickiness amongst breeds?

I read this, quite frankly, as – sorry, no other word will do – an ass-covering coded warning. Unpacking it: “breed profile” “breeds do have heritable traits, some negative”; “appropriate” = “some breeds are not suited to certain environments”; “lifestyle” = “certain breeds put children at higher risk than others”; and “training abilities” = “If you aren’t a highly experienced dog handler, you may not be the optimal human companion for a pit bull.”

Moreover, Dr. Sacks holds to a more rigorous—i.e. double—standard when it comes to non-dog related public safety matters. In 1988, considering the relevance of concrete playgroundsto injuries amongst children, for example, Sacks takes a properly conservative approach to safeguards: “If you can crack your skull from a fall from one foot off the ground, why put concrete on the playground? We’re not asking a child to change his behavior. We’re just saying, Make the environment more forgiving.”

In other words, don’t expect that educating children to be careful will prevent injury; you must remove the source of the risk for injury. That’s excellent advice, and I wish Dr. Sacks had later applied it to high-risk dogs, which have caused far more damage to children than concrete playgrounds ever have.

Sacks’ report on dogs was written more than two decades ago. In 2011, medical researchers Bini, Cohn et al arrived at more realistic conclusions in their report for the *Annals of Surgery*, Mortality, mauling, and maiming by vicious dogs, where they state: “Attacks by pit bulls are associated with higher morbidity rates, higher hospital charges, and a higher risk of death than are attacks by other breeds of dogs. Strict regulation of pit bulls may substantially reduce the US mortality rates related to dog bites.” Other recent reports written by surgeons who have hands-on experience dealing with the injuries specifically pit bull type dogs inflict support this conclusion. Cooper seems not to be aware of these reports, or if aware, unwilling to acknowledge their significance.

I am frankly appalled by the fecklessness of the Galunker project. It’s what comes from privileging the “rights” of dogs over the lives of human beings, and from fixating on the goal of reducing euthanization rates in pit bull type dogs over the goal of public health and safety. For no “essay” in the world can trump the human propensity for the kind of carelessness and overconfidence that will inevitably invite a heightened risk for human damage to those little ones I now think of as “Galunker children.”

What Cooper seems not to understand is that the whole point of public safety measures is to protect people from themselves. No public health achievement in history was ever accomplished through “education.” It was accomplished through regulation of the looming risk factor.

As a case in point, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge is finally getting suicide-prevention nets. Since 1937, more than 1,400 people have ended their lives there. Analysis of the factors causing despair, and “education” about dealing with depression will not prevent people from jumping. The nets will.

Of course people bent on suicide will find other means, but some lives will be saved, and that is surely a good thing. Similarly bans on pit bulls do save lives and limbs in those cities that impose and enforce them. We know that. (Too bad Dr. Sacks did not think to interview officials in Miami and Denver where breed bans had resulted in zero deaths and virtually no maulings for many years prior to his report).

It is certainly “discrimination” to single out pit bulls as public safety hazards, but it is wrong to attach the usual moral opprobrium to the term in the case of animals. Humans are all “mutts,” unlike dogs bred to a specific function or look, and therefore cannot be stereotyped. In the case of line-breeding, a process expressly designed to produce a stereotype, stereotyping is appropriate and morally neutral.

Thus discrimination in the selection of even living consumer products in the interest of lowered risk is not only admissible, it is parents’ positive duty where children’s safety is concerned. Just as concrete playgrounds can be replaced by more forgiving surfaces, when a working breed / type’s function has become a felony in all of North America, and when that type’s working traits are turning out to present such an undue risk to human safety (as is the case with the pit bull type dogs), it’s time to phase out that particular human-created dog.

As real-life Galunkers take up residence in the homes of Cooper's sentimental readers, I predict the bad stories will eventually begin to roll in. Whether it's a decapitated family cat or a typical "hold-and-shake" rending wound requiring 60 stitches to a child's arm (or God forbid, worse), the blood of these Galunker pets and children will be on Cooper's hands.

Cooper vehemently resists any such charge, telling me that if parents read his essay and follow the rules enumerated, Galunker will actually "save the lives of children." (He quickly modified this statement to "I expect that Galunker will save a number of families from having to deal with serious dog bites.")

Cooper holds degrees in philosophy, but his curious strain of logic here escapes me. Seems to me that if he really wanted to save lives, Galunker would have been a book warning children to stay away from pit bulls. Or more logical still, a book explaining why breeding out the pit bull line would end pit bull abuse and euthanizings altogether. Unborn dogs don't suffer.

Well, there is one way to find out whose prediction comes true, and that is to track the data in a scientific way. Galunker is not the controlled experiment I would have wanted – obviously it would never pass any academic ethics board, and my preference, as expressed to Cooper, would be that he quietly drop the project altogether. But since Cooper is determined to see it through, he would do both pit bull lovers and pit bull loathers a favor if he asked, in his essay, that every single person who "falls in love" with Galunker to the point of rescuing a pit bull inform him of their acquisition, so that he can inscribe them in a registry.

After three years, let Cooper contact the families to see how it's working out for them. And then let us all know in how many Galunker families who have followed the rules set out in his precious essay:

- i) All members have happily bonded with their pit bull, experiencing no problems whatsoever;
- ii) The decision has been made for whatever reason to return the pit bull to the rescue they got it from;
- iii) There have been difficulties in the socializing process to the point that the parents do not trust the dog around other animals, or they must crate the dog in order to feel comfortable with company in the home;
- iv) There have been attacks on another family pet or a neighbor's pet;
- v) There have been incidents of unprovoked human-directed aggression;
- vi) There have been incidents requiring medical attention to a family member.

This is a challenge that Cooper should leap to accept, since I am the one, according to his passionately held convictions, who would be publicly humiliated by the results. For my part, knowing the real, rather than the politically correct, facts about pit bulls, that's a chance I am more than willing to take.

To add even more human interest to the challenge, I suggest that Cooper himself rescue an abused pit bull (he has several other dogs, but strangely, in one so devoted to the breed, no pit bulls) and inform us of his own adventures in Pit Bull Land (a theme park situated at the crossroads of Denial Lane and Wishful Thinking Boulevard).

In keeping with my own passionately held convictions, I of course will continue to avoid pit bulls like the plague and implore others to do the same.

Deal, Mr. Cooper?