

Get a grip on Fido's emotions by Denise Flaim



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Animal House

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September 11, 2006

There are some dog writers, like some authors of popular fiction, whose latest works I never miss.

For instance, right up there in Michael Crichton or Anne Tyler territory for me is Jean Donaldson. Anyone who can come up with the "lemonhead" moniker to describe the goofy tractability of *Canis familiaris* is barking up the right tree. And her tart advice and observations make books like "Culture Clash" (James & Kenneth Publishers, \$17.95) and "Dogs Are From Neptune" (Lasar Multimedia, \$16.95) as indispensable as they are a breeze to read.

Another author whose oeuvre on my bookshelf is a foregone conclusion is Patricia McConnell. Her latest effort, "For the Love of a Dog: Understanding Emotion in You and Your Best Friend" (Ballantine, \$24.95), lands in bookstores this month. In it, she tackles that great bugaboo in the world of animal ethology: whether the furry ones among us have emotions.

Whether a St. Bernard is cognitively equipped to experience anger or happiness may not seem like a big deal to you, but it's a subject that can push some scientists to the intellectual equivalent of a food fight. Despite what we know about similarities in the chemistry and structures of the canine and human brains, there is a persistent thread in science that rejects the suggestion that animals feel fear or joy as anthropomorphism. (It's an improvement over four centuries ago, when French philosopher Descartes refused to acknowledge that animals felt pain, much less happiness at the contemplation of crunching a Milk-Bone.)

The implications of this refusal to grant animals an emotional life are deeper than the antiseptic rigors of the scientific method. To inch them that much closer to human consciousness, to suggest they not only feel pain but experience fear in anticipation of it ... well, we're getting into PETA territory there.

In her gentle, self-deprecating way, McConnell nods to the scientific controversy, but refuses to apologize for wanting to know as much as we can know - or reasonably extrapolate - about what goes on in those fuzzy little heads. Pulling from behavioral research on a spectrum of species (including our own), as well as some of her own fascinating case studies, she explores three core emotions and how dogs physically telegraph them.

If you thought a commissure was a company-subsidized cafeteria, McConnell can enlighten you on this small but expressive piece of anatomy - basically, the corner of the mouth, which in dogs clearly spells out fear (pulled back), anger (pulled forward) and happiness (relaxed). And as her photographs illustrate, our faces express those emotions in the exact same way.

For anyone who's ever wondered how to pick out a well-adjusted puppy, McConnell's explanation of the neurology of emotion is a must-read. Rather than obsessing on how sanitary the litterbox conditions, prospective buyers should be equally consumed about how stimulating the environment is. Puppies that stare at the same four walls every day, and never experience any interaction or novelties, do not develop the neural pathways that set the stage for a mature, well-adjusted adult. (McConnell's comparison to a trail in the woods that becomes choked with weeds and bushes is an apt one.)

For this alone, that puppymill-bred dog in your local pet store is as bad a bet as the 2004 Yankees: Raised with wire underfoot and ennui in the air for the first eight weeks of their lives (if they are permitted to stay with mother and siblings that long), such puppies are the canine equivalent of institutionalized orphans, robbed of touch and a tapestry of experience - deprivations that might affect how well they can bond and cope.

It took McConnell to point out to me that the old real-estate ruse of baking brownies right before prospective buyers turn up to tour your for-sale house has its canine equivalent: Like humans, dogs associate certain smells and sounds with pleasure, long after the formative experience is behind them. "Macho" trainers who refuse to use food rewards with young puppies are missing out on an important opportunity to hard-wire a useful equation into those malleable minds: training with my owner equals imported Jarlsberg equals an overall sense of well-being. It's a piece of emotional calculus they will evoke as adults, even if there are no dairy products in the offing.

And no diss to "Dog Whisperer" Cesar Millan - whose exhortations to exercise dogs every day is solid, sensible advice - but McConnell reminds that thinking is hard work, too. Indeed, dogs that are asked to use their brains burn up calories with furious intensity. If the weather outside is frightful, an hour of trick training will leave them just as spent at day's end.

If "For the Love of a Dog" leaves readers with any emotion themselves, it's likely regret - over our obliviousness to the rich emotional lives of our dogs, and all the missed opportunities that go with it.

Write to Denise Flaim, c/o Newsday, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250; or e-mail denise.flaim@newsday.com. Visit her blog at www.newsday.com/animalhouse.