



A Good Dog: The Story of Orson, Who Changed My Life

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People who love dogs often talk about a "lifetime" dog. I'd heard the phrase a dozen times before I came to recognize its significance. Lifetime dogs are dogs we love in especially powerful, sometimes inexplicable ways.--Jon Katz

In this gripping and deeply touching book, bestselling author Jon Katz tells the story of his lifetime dog, Orson: a beautiful border collie--intense, smart, crazy, and unforgettable.

From the moment Katz and Orson meet, when the dog springs from his traveling crate at Newark airport and panics the baggage claim area, their relationship is deep, stormy, and loving. At two years old, Katz's new companion is a great herder of school buses, a scholar of refrigerators, but a dud at herding sheep. Everything Katz attempts -- obedience training, herding instruction, a new name, acupuncture, herb and alternative therapie -- helps a little but not enough, and not for long. "Like all border collies and many dogs" Katz writes, "he needed work. I didn't realize for some time I was the work Orson would find."

While Katz is trying to help his dog, Orson is helping him, shepherding him toward a new life on a two-hundred-year-old hillside farm in upstate New York. There, aided by good neighbors and a tolerant wife, hip-deep in sheep, chickens, donkeys, and more dogs, the man and his canine companion explore meadows, woods, and even stars, wade through snow, bask by a roaring wood stove, and struggle to keep faith with each other. There, with deep love, each embraces his unfolding destiny.

A Good Dog is a book to savor. Just as Orson was the author's lifetime dog, his story is a lifetime treasure -- poignant, timeless, and powerful.

A Good Dog: The Story of Orson, Who Changed My Life Details

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From Reader Review A Good Dog: The Story of Orson, Who Changed My Life for online ebook

Sherie Weber says

As a person living with a true "animal" I thoroughly enjoyed all of the ups in this book - I even laughed out loud and woke my husband from a sound sleep - The downs brought tears to my eyes and it all evened out eventually - This is a story written from the author's heart and soul and any person who lives with pets will certainly be touched by this life story

Gemma says

When I read the reviews on Amazon, I was horrified. Could the author I'd come to appreciate as a source of insight into canine-human interaction, and a fellow dog lover, really have 'given up' on his beloved Orson? I immediately ordered the book from my local library, and read it within 48 hrs.

So, did Katz give up on Orson? Absolutely not.

A lot of people are claiming that he didn't do all that he could for Orson. I feel as if their emotions made them overlook key details from the book. To begin with, Katz exhausted all standard vet options bar one, which was the option of taking Orson to a specialist for a brain scan that would look for tumours. This specialist would cost \$6000 and would be the final of a long series of tests that had already been performed on the reactive Orson. Expense aside, let us ponder for a moment what would have happened if Katz had gone to this specialist and found a tumour lodged in his beloved dog's brain. That would have left two options: the tumour would be inoperable, or it could be removed and Orson would require brain surgery. I'm not even sure the latter is possible with dogs (due to the intricate musculature all around their skull) and, even if it were, at what cost? Not just financial, but for Orson. What pain would he suffer? What risks would he face? What would his quality of life be like?

I work in greyhound adoption and have seen a number of dogs suffer through major surgery (amputation), and it is never pretty. They live with a great deal of pain following the surgery, and even though they face it stoically, can you imagine what brain surgery would be like for an animal that cannot understand what is happening?

Aside from exhausting standard vet tests (barring this specialist), Katz also tried acupuncture and other holistic methods to no avail. It's important to note, also, that Orson went from being reactive and giving warning before a nip, to biting unannounced, even biting people he knew and liked. This is a serious concern. Maybe he really did have a brain tumour, considering his blood work came back clean. If that was the case, there was no choice here.

I feel as if a lot of readers are mad at Katz because they do not understand what was being asked of him, and of Orson. I love my dog so much, but I would never force him to have more and more painful, invasive tests to soothe my own ego, to deal with my own need for comfort. I would never put him through dangerous surgery if his quality of life wasn't going to be good. There are limits to what I will do for my dog because I love him too much to make him suffer on my account. I also feel that, because Katz spoke frankly about the financial side of his choice, people are judging him harshly. I am immersed in 'dog culture' due to my role in dog adoption and my love for these wonderful animals, and I often hear people claim they would live in a

cardboard box before giving up their dogs. Fine, but does your dog want to live there with you? Is that fair? We treat the subject of money when it comes to our animals as something dirty, but we all have limits on what we can spend. Katz bought a farm for Orson, he took him to shamans, animal communicators, acupuncturists, holistic vets, standard vets; he trained him daily, loved him fiercely, and even then he couldn't discover what had made sweet Orson start to seriously bite people beneath the throat. He dared to speak about the financial cost as part of his decision, and now he's being lambasted for it. I know it's hard to talk about in a world where people claim they 'can't afford' to adopt, or 'can't afford' their dogs shots, food, standard medical needs and/or bills; choosing instead to abandon them, give them to a shelter, or even euthanise them. I have been at the front desk when people turned over their dogs to the shelter I used to volunteer for. I have heard every poor excuse in the book and, even still, I appreciate Katz' honesty on this issue.

I don't agree with all of Katz decisions. In his previous book, where he gives away Clem, I seriously questioned his decision to buy her in the first place. We certainly disagree on breeders and the buying of dogs, as well as a few of his opinions about us crazy dog folk. But I have to agree with his decision to let Orson go. I believe wholeheartedly that he did everything he could for that boy. I know from my volunteer experience that there are some dogs who move beyond our help, no matter how hard we fight. Letting them go is sometimes the kindest thing we can offer; our final act of love.

This book is moving, haunting, riveting. I cried through the final chapters and went to hug my dog. Please read it fully before judging Mr Katz. His love for his dogs shines through in his every word. This is not a man who gave up; this a man who knew when to stop fighting for the good of his beloved pet

Willa says

****Spoiler Alert****

Look into the eyes of the dog in the picture on the cover of this book and you are looking into the eyes of a troubled dog whose adoptive owner (Orson was a rescued dog) gave up on him and was too lazy to do the things that would have truly helped Orson. This is a horrid, horrid book about a horrid, horrid man who prides himself on being an amazingly wonderful dog lover, but who in the end MURDERS his dog because he just can't be bothered to take the time to ensure the dog's safety at the same time as ensuring the safety of those people who might come in contact with him.

Yes, Mr. Katz spent many, many hours working at training with Orson, and yes, he bought a home in the country so that Orson would have land to roam and enjoy, but ultimately those things came across as selfish actions, not selfless as he would have his readers believe.

He took Orson to training as a sheep-herding dog and admits that his goal was for Orson to compete and earn a ribbon. He says he wanted Orson to have a sense of accomplishment instead of the failure he seemed to feel so often, and yes, I do think dogs can feel such a sense of accomplishment and that it is very important to them. However, just think of all the failure Orson had to experience before reaching that goal of a ribbon, which ultimately allowed the author to show off in front of others and praise himself.

Living in the country. Sorry, I just don't believe that was all about the dog either. The author is an author and he wanted a quiet, relaxing place to write. I don't blame him for that, who wouldn't? Just don't try to sell it to me as some purely selfless action designed to help your troubled dog!

Yes, Orson bit three people. Bit them pretty badly. Only one of the incidents would have worried me, and that was when Orson bit the woman who worked in Mr. Katz's garden. However, even she admits that her actions probably spooked Orson, a dog she knew to be easily spooked. It's happened to me with a former dog of my parents. Twice. Led to stitches and everything. And guess what? That dog was kept and was loved just as much as ever before. Safely and happily, too, because we took the time to learn how to make him a safe dog and to properly supervise situations which might frighten him into attacking someone.

The other two people Orson bit reached over the fence into his dog run while he was barking at them. Okay, yeah, a pretty stupid thing to do. Okay, yeah, I agree that it's still the owner's job to make sure that doesn't happen. So, why couldn't Mr. Katz just keep Orson inside unless he was outside with him to supervise his behavior and to keep people from doing stupid things that might endanger themselves. Mr. Katz had stated multiple times that Orson, unlike his other Border Collie Rose, was perfectly happy to hang out in the house b/c he just wanted to be with the owner he loved. Seems like a pretty simple solution to me.

And after he's committed the murder of Orson, he tells us that an animal shaman has contacted Orson, who tells her that he wanted to be 'set free' from the confusing, scary human world and she thinks Orson may have attacked those people as a way to give Mr. Katz an excuse to set him free and that he's now blissfully happy. It's bad enough that Mr. Katz did what he did, but to give us this reasoning to justify it is truly sickening.

Yes, I know this review is interminable, but I don't believe in attacking a book without providing my reasons for speaking so strongly against it. Also, just look at the number of people involved who asked for their names to be changed in the book. Understandably, they did not want to be associated with something this truly awful.

Mr. Katz, you should be truly and thoroughly ashamed of yourself and you should never be allowed to care for an animal again.

Lori says

An almost four. Jon Katz has written many books about the animals he has owned. Especially dogs. this one is mostly about Orson. Orson is a border-collie he got when Orson was about three years old. Orson was a very wild dog. even for a border collie. he had a tendency to chase. buses, trucks, people etc. he also tended to snap at and even bite. he was very anxious dog. Jon Katz tried very hard to tame this out of control dog. took him to Veterenerians, even a vet that specialized in holistic medications. a vet who did accupuncter,.It was clear that Orson's first few years had trauma in it. he did not trust, was very anxious and would lash out when scared. I give Jon Katz credit for spending a lot of money and time giving this "damaged" dog a loving home. Jon had to make a heart breaking decision about what to do for Orson. the dog bit a few people chased others etc. it was not known what happened in Orson's past but he clearly was hurt somehow. I have read a few of Jon Katz's books. he clearly loves animals and goes the extra mile for his pets. {If I were a dog I would want to live with him} a good and sad read.

Kasey Hill says

This one was a doozy, having lost my 'lifetime dog' less than a year ago. I did make it most of the way

through without crying... Although the story of Orson was much different than the story of my Shadow, the lesson is the same. The author brought me to a few realizations that I had a hard time putting into words on my own. Dogs bring us closer to nature which gives us a deeper understanding of all life. And he says 'you gave me so much and I gave you so little back. isn't that the story of humans and dogs?' yes, yes it is. we can never repay them for how much they teach us about life and love. i loved this book and think I needed to read it. Thank you Jon Katz. I feel like maybe it is ok to go on and love another dog again someday.

Bev Sykes says

Katz has taken a lot of flak for his story of Orson, a trouble dog ultimately put to sleep for attacking three people, but I found this the story of a man fiercely devoted to trying to change the behavior of a "broken dog," to the point of buying a farm and spending hundreds of hours doing everything he could to discover how to fill the dog's life so that he would not feel the need to lash out unexpectedly. This is written with great love, and having been in the position of having to make that difficult decision about how far to go to keep a dog alive, I could sympathize and applaud him for his actions throughout his relationship with Orson. This is a good dog story-- but lay in the Kleenex before you get to the end!

Helen says

In another book, Jon Katz states right up front, "No dogs die in this book." So forewarned by the fact that no such disclaimer appeared in *A Good Dog...*, I opened the book with some trepidation. Yet, as soon as I began reading and until I turned the last page, I could hardly put it down. What makes this such a special book is not only its touching and sometimes hilarious descriptions of what it is like to live with a psychologically wounded, behaviorally impossible, and totally engaging dog - but also its honesty about the agonizing choices that we psychologically wounded humans must make when a dog we love with all our heart and soul behaves in such a way that they become a danger to others. I think anyone who has faced or anticipates facing the choice of terminating a beloved animal companions life will feel they have discovered a kindred soul in Jon Katz. I laughed, I cried, and I was very glad to have read this fine book about the richness of the human/animal bond.

Joan Colby says

As usual Jon Katz managed to annoy the hell out of me so why do I persist in reading his dog stories? I guess I hope he'll eventually have some insight on his relationships with canines, and occasionally he makes steps in this direction recognizing that the acquisition of border collies was a springboard to a change in life for a man bored with his suburban existence. Fair enough. Katz' Labs weren't providing that challenge so he obtained a known problem: Devon, on the recommendation of a sheepherding trainer (what was she thinking...and cynically, despite Katz oblivious genuflections to all his mentors, I think the answer is money). Devon is of course a demon, a hyperactive mischief maker and Katz becomes the worst possible master constantly citing how Devon—renamed Orson on the advice of a mentor who says “Devon” has bad vibes for the dog from his previous life—dashes from his yard to “herd” school buses —and schoolchildren, challenges skateboarders, slips his leash, collar, whatever. Katz! Pay attention to the damn dog. But Katz is always in a reverie, falling down due to his “bad leg” which becomes a “bad back”—that the 100 or so extra pounds he carries might have something to do with that never seems to occur to him. So Orson

inspires Katz to purchase an upstate New York farm, a flock of sheep for Orson to terrorize and assorted other critters. Soon Katz acquires Rose, who proves to be an accomplished border collie, a worker not a pet and Orson is retired to the pet category which also is not a success. Katz spends a small fortune on vets, alternative vets, dog whisperers and shamans to no avail, but it all contributes to fodder for the book he's writing. Orson's behavior further deteriorates. Having bitten three people, now Katz determines Orson is "dangerous" and his moral duty, after considering the options of retraining—too much effort—more physical and mental testing—too expensive—confining Orson (Here Katz really irritates me as he posits that to pen Orson in an actual enclosure that he could not escape would be "like imprisonment"—do let's poll human death row inhabitants on which alternative they would prefer). But Katz has made his moral decision. Death is the only solution he says as he babbles on about the wonderful support the vet (who actually sounds somewhat dubious) is providing. Then once Orson is safely dead he can become that "good dog" and Katz compounds this by having visions and spiritual visitations where Orson thanks him for bringing him peace. Katz concludes that Destiny brought him Orson to gift him with his new way of life. Katz is a master of self-regard and self-delusion while posing as genuinely self-critical. He rejects conventional training as "not right for rebellious spirits like him and Orson."

Poor Orson whose fate illustrates the axiom "the only good dog is a dead dog."

Sera says

I read the book based on the fact that the book reviews dealt more with the morality of euthanizing dogs versus the merits of the storytelling.

I really enjoyed A Dog Year (by the same author) but did not enjoy this book. It wasn't because of the very sad and conflicting ending, it was because Jon Katz's storytelling was self consumed and overly self indulgent. This book was not about his dog it was about himself. I really enjoy his other books, but think he missed the mark here.

Wendy says

While I didn't enjoy the writer's style, I related strongly to the story. I cried uncontrollably because it touched me on such a personal level. Anyone who has ever had a "once in a life-time dog" will understand what Jon Katz had to overcome when making such a difficult decision.

Judith says

Moral of the story--don't rescue a troubled dog if you can't do the work, don't take on more than you can handle, and don't quit on your dog like Katz did to Orson. Jerk.

Steffany Cartellone says

After I finished this, I immediately called my friend Dori and told her to read this book. Sometimes I think

my love of animals is strange and then I read a book like Katz's and realize I am not the only one. I cried so hard while reading this book and when my beloved kitty died in September, re-read the ending again and cried all over again. The tears were of pain but also a wonderful realization that something so small had touched your heart and life forever. I also read Dog Days: dispatches from Bedlam Farm and fell in love with his cow! Thank you Jon Katz for your love of animals and for sharing with the rest of us. My life, and many others, are better because of your words.

Jill says

I learned to expect that most books about dogs end badly and I am bound to cry my eyes out...

No, seriously, this book (and others by this amazing man) restores my faith in humanity because I realize that I am not the only one who is touched deeply by things I learn from the experiences I have with my companion animals as well as how they directly express love and psychic, spiritual wisdom through their sweet personalities.

Here is a sample,

"Lifetime dogs intersect with our lives with particular impact; their're dogs we love in especially powerful, sometimes inexplicable, ways. While we may cherish other pets, we may never feel that particular kind of connection with any of the rest. For lack of a better term, they are dogs we fall in love with, and for whom we often invent complex emotional histories."

I don't always agree with Katz but I respect his ability to share his relationship with a difficult Border Collie named Orson.

A must for any dog lover.

Pris robichaud says

The Broken Parts of Me, The Broken Parts of Orson, We Healed, 15 Nov 2006

"Two things fill the mind, with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law with in me". Immanuel Kant

"Owning and loving a dog is a very individual experience. Orson's story was complex, his behavioral problems probably stemming from multiple sources.' Jonathan Katz is a writer and a writer of prose where Orson is concerned. This book is one of the best love stories I have read between a man and his dog. It is so wonderfully amusing and heartbreaking that it is difficult to put into words what this book means to me. This is the third book of Jonathan Katz I have read, and each time I leave the book with regret and tears. With this book, the tears flowed freely and for a long time. This story of love and regret and survival and finding your way and the future.

Orson came to Jonathon Katz as Devon. He was part of a brood of dogs and he was different. He needed a good home and his owner trusted Jonathan and thought this was a good fix. It did not take Jonathan and Devon long to fall in love with each other. A bond formed even though Devon would run out and try and

herd anything in his way: school buses, boys on skateboards and cars, and Jonathan would have to retrieve Devon. This was not the place for Devon, a New Jersey city. Jonathan had a small cabin in upper state New York- they went there while he looked for a farm. And, a farm he did find. He and Devon and Rose, the real sheep herding dog, moved to the farm. Jonathan's wife and daughter would come up for visits but their home and work was in the city. They found their niche and life was wonderful, well almost. Devon's behavior was not changing for the better so a friend suggested his name be changed to see if his behavior would improve. Orson, was the name that was chosen and it worked. Voila, for a while things were better, but the behavior continued and it was not good for anyone. Jonathan must decide what is best. He and Orson are such a team and love each other. Again, there is a bond. This is their story. Jonathan, the man and Orson, the dog. Jonathan used to read this poem to Orson when they would go far into the woods and in the sky would see Sirius, the dog star.

Dream by Boris Levinson

"I, a child
Try to reach the stars
Sirius is no near
I run to the nearest hill
My reach is always too short
Wait til I am a grown man
NOW, I am old and bent with years
No more running to the hill and mountain top
Yet a warm, steady, life giving glow
Reaches me from Sirius...the unattainable
I collect'
White iridescent and evanescent star beams
For my trip home to
Sirius the dog state."

A lifetime treasure to savor, along with the other animals on the farm; the irritable rooster, Winston and his relationship with Orson, and the sheepherder dog, Rose, who makes it her life to herd those sheep. The picture of Orson on the book cover is so beautiful it will draw you in; ahhh you're hooked! So Heartily Recommended. prisrob 10-06-06

Caroline says

I enjoyed the parts of the book dealing with Jon Katz and his life, especially his life on his marvellous farm. I did not enjoy so much the parts of the book covering the story of his beloved border collie Orson. The poor dog just had too many problems. I don't know if anyone could have solved them, and I don't know if the kindest thing to do was try and solve them. But that is easy to say retrospectively. You don't know that until you try, and Katz - in his fairly offbeat way - tried really hard.

(view spoiler)

The book raises issues about taking on a dog whose past isn't known. But Orson came from a breeder, who rang Katz up and warned him that Orson had issues. I don't think he was a regular rescue dog from a major rehoming charity, and I hope this book doesn't put people off adopting rescue dogs, where usually they are given a battery of tests to check they are sociable. Everyone I know who has taken on rescue dogs has found them a delight, and wonderful family members.

I was very touched about what Katz wrote of his childhood, and his description of life on the farm. I felt he had really found his place in the universe when he went to live there, and I wish him well.
