

Animals I Have Loved: What's wrong with another shaggy dog story?

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I have always been a reader. Even before I really knew how to read, I ‘read’ the pictures. I knew every book by heart that my mom and Grama read over and over again. Little Golden Books’ characters like *The Pokey Little Puppy*, *The Tawny-Scrawny Lion*, and *The Saggy-Baggy Elephant* were my childhood friends as much as the kids I played with in the neighborhood. Other than being laughingly referred to as a pokey puppy, though, I really can’t remember them being life changing. They did, however, set a pattern that I still have to this day – I love to read animal stories.

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As I entered school, another animal was there to guide my reading along. I learned to read in the days of Dick and Jane. For those of you too young to remember this famous pair, these reading text books were entirely constructed of simple, phonetic, rhyming words. Nat the fat cat who sat on his mat were standards of the time, and I remember him well. Top readers in the class got to wear a Nat the Fat Cat button as a reward. They were probably just cheap trinkets, but I was devastated when I lost mine at recess. It was probably one of the greatest tragedies of the first grade (aside from the classroom pet rabbit dying right in class shortly before Easter, but that’s another story).

Over the years, my reading choices became more sophisticated, but still firmly stuck in the animal world. I read the classics: *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Lassie Come-Home*, and others. I was *Black Beauty* in my mind for several weeks the first time I read that book, and each time I renewed our acquaintance. I discovered the works of Albert Payson Terhune, Jim Kjelgaard,

and Margret Henry – all famous for their animal stories. I never paid much attention to “girl” books, but instead devoured the action and adventure that so vividly came alive in the works of these authors and others like them.

Rereading these books now, as an adult, I am struck by one similarity aside from the main characters all being animals; these books are often bleak and violent. There is a theme running through them that very much harkens to the time period in which they were written. They are very naturalistic and reflect human dominance of the wild; hunters shot down dangerous animals, prey didn't always get away, and often times the hero died in the end. I am surprised now at my choices, but I guess they were filling some kind of need for me at the time.

Then I found the ultimate writer of this genre, Jack London. The stark reality of his stories *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* depicted the brutality of life in the Arctic wilderness. His characters lived by natural law, “the law of club and fang.” It was kill or be killed, eat or be eaten – literally! During these years, I was also being seriously bullied, and I really believe that reading these stories helped me to survive. The main characters were often the victim of circumstance; they were controlled and mistreated by others and I felt a real connection with their plight.

During these lonely, troubled times, these animals were often my closest friends. I identified and sympathized with their plights. I saw them survive and triumph over adversity, tear their enemies to bits, and live to fight another day. Brutal as it was, it made my life seem soft and easy by comparison. Every child should have such good friends growing up.

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