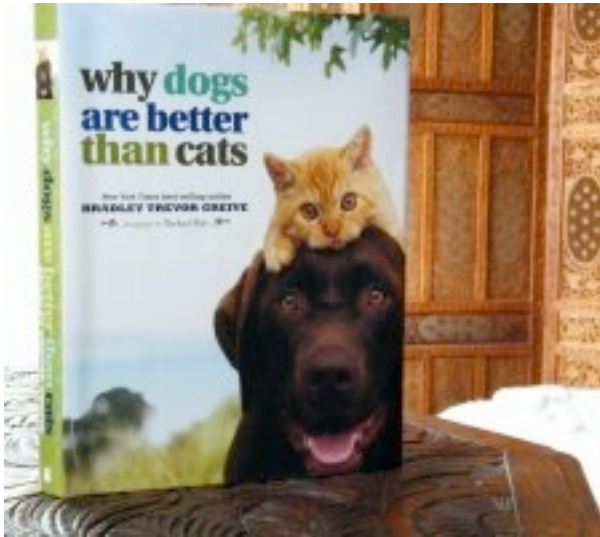


From the start, this book was anything but ordinary”

I had anticipated a lovely book of photographs of dogs with a simple narrative of the many reasons why dogs are better than cats, the photos explaining the text and vice versa. And then I got my review copy.



His effect is immediate, compelling, completely unexpected. Readers will delight in the witty prose weighing the merits of dogs over cats, the artfully crafted, sometimes laugh-out-loud comparisons—“dogs are social; cats are sociopaths” and “to dogs, you are the great love of their lives; to cats, you are the courtesan of the moment” all beautifully illustrated by the arresting photography of Rachael Hale, one of the world’s most popular photographers.

But what will follow readers long after the book is finished is the intricate way in which Bradley Trevor Greive weaves the history of the human connection to dogs and how they got to be “man’s best friend” together with human nature’s predisposition to take things for granted. He presents us with an opportunity to stop for a moment and see the wonders of the dogs we love through fresh eyes.

As this selection process of what would be “man’s best friend” took thousands of years, Greive takes us through the discarded possibilities over time. For example: “...parrots said only what they thought we wanted to hear...Platypuses were simply too weird and thus impossible to introduce at parties. Chameleons are not nearly as adaptable as everyone says... And beavers, well, what can I say? No one wants to live with a workaholic.”

Greive lends a surprising dimension to the fabric of his argument for dogs by using threads of the global conversation on the state of the state of dogs and cats: From shelters and euthanasia concerns to stray and feral populations and the narcissism of cultures that perpetuate these problems. There are many insights of this nature, useful, informative brought together with a singular style that sometimes hits you like his “frozen halibut” in the face riff, and then the photography softens the blow.

He cites literati and political luminaries on their connection to dogs, even back to Will Shakespeare’s habit of including his dog in many of his plays. He blames our computer-centered impersonal life for the loss of connection to that essential bond, paraphrasing Greive, to what was once wild, and chose us.

On a more concrete level, Greive relates that there are many types of dogs, one to fit every human personality—“the intrepid adventurer, fitness fanatic, glamorous jet setters, no-nonsense tough guys, charismatic couch potatoes, Zen masters, party

animals, even timid little wallflowers.” And the photographs are wonderfully funny, tender, hysterical, kind, and filled with love for the subject.

He also gives space to cats, noting they are not without their charms. “The cat’s unwavering predilection for self-absorption allows his owner to indulge in similarly vainglorious preening. A perfect companion for the budget diva and the modern metrosexual man.” Ouch! His section describing contrasts between cat people and dog people held nothing back, either. It wasn’t pretty.

Exploring working dogs was another call to appreciate and revere our best friends. “They help us hunt, gather, care for flocks, explore the world (sled dogs), protect us, our families, and our homes, they look out for us, are there for those in need (service dogs), save you from drowning, drag you from a burning building, free you from an icy avalanche.” He does remark that cats don’t rescue anybody, they just get rescued. But we know that’s not true and that cats have wakened families during house fires. Greive might retort they do this only to get out of the building, but I wouldn’t want to put words in his mouth.

Greive confronts the downside of dogs: more expensive vet care, the associated costs of daycare or walkers, training, food and the fact that they need a lot of your time for exercise and general camaraderie. And after investing all that, they don’t live as long as cats. But then who can imagine a life without dogs...except maybe cats?

His epilogue holds a thorough cautionary note about not adopting or buying on impulse after reading his book. Greive is also sensitive to the concept of purchasing a dog versus adopting, and that you should check at your local shelter before you make the move to go to a small family breeder that has both mother and father to the litter for your observation of temperament. He also talks about reporting cruelty. The writer is very thorough and the man, obviously dedicated.

The endnotes were a riot of nuance, something the author said was included (as a kind of homage?) to a favorite author, David Foster Wallace, who died while Greive was writing the book.

I found “why dogs are better than cats” to be a gift to readers who have been looking for something out of the ordinary. It’s no surprise this writer has a strong worldwide following; he has a global view informed by extensive travel that makes his style unique. Greive has given us the gift of seeing the place dogs have in our lives anew, and has wrapped it up in a stunning collection of more than 100 very special Rachael Hale photographs.

Funny, but by the time I reached the acknowledgments page, and read the first line, it reflected precisely what I had been thinking as I neared the end of the book: “From the start, this book was anything but ordinary.” Although Greive meant it in a very different context, I could not have ended this review with a more appropriate comment.

By Mary Haight November 9, 2009