

INTRODUCTION

We Dog

Before anything else, I need to introduce you to my canine companion Bella. She has been my collaborator on the research and writing of this book, and more than any other dog I've lived with, she's challenged me to think differently about good dogs and how I can be a good human in relation to a dog. You'll learn more about Bella as we go, but here are a few starters.

When she's curled up asleep, Bella looks like a black bean. But when she gets up, she unfurls the distinctive tricolor markings of her Australian shepherd genes (37.5 percent, according to results of her doggie DNA test)—white paw-shoes with brown socks, a white chest and belly, and a white-tipped tail. Her large velvety ears point out sideways from her head when she's relaxed, giving her a striking resemblance to Yoda from *Star Wars*. These past couple of years, her muzzle has become speckled with gray, as have the tips of her ears and the edges of her hind legs. She'll be nearly thirteen by the time this book is published, a fact that sends cold spikes of terror through me. I cannot imagine a post-Bella life.

Bella occupies my heart and soul.

When Bella meets another dog—and she enjoys meeting most new dogs—a patch of hair on her lower back, right at the base of her tail, stands on end. We call this her shark fin.

Bella's best canine friend is Poppy.

Bella has an ear-piercing bark, which, when I'm not expecting it, makes me jump and sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins. Thankfully, she employs the bark sparingly—when a magpie or jay is on the porch, when the UPS delivery truck comes down the driveway, or when someone enters the house. She also always barks immediately and very insistently after breakfast as she is on the way to the door for morning pee time. She has a special yodel that she reserves for the excitement of “bed.” When she wants something, she growls her request.

For as long as we've known her, Bella has had a slight limp in her left leg. When we took Bella to the veterinarian for a wellness check soon after we brought her home from the shelter, we asked about the limp. The vet said she thought the leg had been injured in the past and had healed poorly. Maybe Bella had been hit by a car, she wondered. Or a human? Bella's serious mobility challenges started in July of 2020, when she tore her right cranial cruciate ligament. Although the ligament had likely been deteriorating for some time, it finally ruptured one day after Bella unexpectedly leapt off the back of our all-terrain vehicle to investigate a dog walking past the driveway.

We knew immediately that something was wrong: she wouldn't put any weight on her right rear foot. We took her to the vet for x-rays and got the stomach-punch news that Bella had a complete ligament rupture and that we should strongly consider surgery. The surgery would involve cutting her tibia, rotating it, and inserting a plate to hold it in place. We decided to go ahead. About two months after tibial plateau leveling osteotomy (TPLO) surgery, when Bella was finally liberated from the cone and we thought everything was going well, she walked out into the front yard to pee and her kneecap popped out of place.

We were urged to try corrective surgery for the kneecap. After another grueling month of painful recovery, Bella's cast came off, and we saw that the kneecap was still dislocated. The surgeon offered to try again, at a discounted rate, but we ran for the hills.

Bella's "bad" left leg is now her good leg; her right leg bows out and then collapses, and with each step her body lists to one side and then the other like a ship in a storm. Although she is on no less than four different pain medications, walking is still painful. And yet she gets around. Her capacity for adaptation amazes me.

Bella hates it when I sneeze. She droops to the ground, as if covering her head with her hands and readying for a blow. I have no explanation for this sneeze phobia.

Every thirty minutes or so when I'm at my desk and Bella is at her desk (her blue dog bed), she'll flip onto her back and lie belly up. My eye always catches on the little green line tattooed on her stomach, identifying that she was spayed during her time at the shelter.

We know very little about her first year of life, only that she was picked up off the street as a stray by Animal Control in Longmont, Colorado, and taken to the Longmont Humane Society. We were at the shelter looking for a dog to adopt on the day Bella was first put out on the floor. Perhaps because she was especially cute—with her huge ears, white socks, and deep brown eyes with little brown "eyebrow" patches—she was in a free-standing kennel right by the adoption desk and we saw her as we walked in. I sat down on the floor next to the kennel and started talking softly to Bella, trying to make friends. She looked at me sideways and growled. That's how it has been.

In the medical notes taken during home hospice care for our dog Maya, Bella was described as "busy." "Busy," in vet lingo, seems to be a euphemism for "needs careful management," which in turn is a euphemistic way of describing dogs

who cannot or choose not to follow the normal expectations of human society and may bite or otherwise act “inappropriately” in certain situations. Bella is not a huge fan of humans, unless they belong to her very small inner circle, which currently consists of seven people. If an unfamiliar person approaches or tries to touch her head, she will lift her lip and, if they keep coming, she’ll give a warning nip. We rarely have people over to our house because we worry about Bella’s behavior. When guests come inside, she barks for several long minutes, during which time we awkwardly try to talk over the noise, all the while feeling slightly embarrassed. Bella then settles into an uneasy watchfulness, staying close to me or my husband and eyeing our company suspiciously, jumping to her feet and resuming her barking if anyone gets up and moves around. I never feel completely relaxed when other people are within Bella’s orbit. Yet going to other people’s houses or going out and about are also hard because I don’t like to leave Bella behind. I feel anxious and at loose ends when separated from Bella, like a piece of me is missing.

Bella is a hardcore micromanager, carefully tracking all activity within the house. We are always under surveillance. She shadows me from room to room. If I go outside, she waits at one of three stations (front door, sliding glass door, sofa) until I safely return. When my husband and I are both home but doing different things, she divides her time, moving back and forth at regular intervals between where he is and where I am.

Bella has a deep appreciation for toys. She brings a stuffed toy with her on our short little walks and when we go places in the car. Mostly she just carries her toy, but every so often she performs what I imagine to be a genetically encoded bite-kill sequence, vigorously shaking the toy while growling and making little hopping movements. She rotates her toy affections according to a schedule that I don’t understand. At some point,

a given toy will be de-stuffed, shredded, and abandoned once the pieces become too small for tug-of-war. In the current rotation is a fuzzy blue yeti, a flea with bulging yellow eyes and neon green antennae, a Chuckit! cube that is bigger than Bella's head, a pink squeaky alligator, and a purple dinosaur skin (a scrap of fabric is all that remains).

Bella would be described by dog trainers as “highly food motivated.” She will eat almost anything and is particularly fond of peanut butter, bananas, watermelon, and frozen green beans. Lettuce is one of the rare foods she doesn't seem to like, although she will manage if it is coated in salad dressing. She also loves to eat snow and will dip her head as she walks in the wintertime, scooping in mouthfuls like a mini-excavator.

Bella, like me, is a creature with strong commitments to habit and ritual.

Bella is a dog who some would say needs to be fixed. She is damaged, reactive. One (ex-)friend, when I told her that Bella bites my feet in the bed if I accidentally kick her, exclaimed, “I can't believe you put up with that. If she were my dog, she'd be on her way straight back to the shelter!”

Bella has challenged my thinking about dogs, especially my thinking about what it means to be a good dog. Because Bella is not, by outside standards, a good dog. She is noncompliant, intractable. She is cranky and has limited tolerance for human beings. She steals food from the counter and knocks over the trash cans. She doesn't do what I ask, unless it aligns with her own agenda or I have offered adequate compensation.

Bella is perfect just as she is, *and* she could use a little improvement.

Katie the vet, in explaining Bella's “issues,” said she just has a small circle of trust and sees it as her lifework to keep this circle together and safe. “She's just a We dog.” I, in turn, am a We human when it comes to Bella.