

By Timothy Foote

'That is not a bad dog—that's a splendid dog'

The one who saved Bandit from death and the coils of the law is a gifted writer and trainer named Vicki Hearne

Not since Mark Twain remarked that the difference between a dog and a man is that a dog never bites the hand that feeds him has the domestic dog, including the much maligned pit bull, had so provocative a champion as the fierce, fortyish animal trainer named Victoria Elizabeth Hearne.

Besides being a celebrated trainer, Hearne is a critically admired poet, novelist and (a few years back) author of a remarkable book called *Adam's Task*. In it, despite a tendency toward literary digression (at the drop of a hat she cites Xenophon, Plato or Ludwig Wittgenstein), Hearne bore enchanting witness to the intelligence, character and loyalty of dogs, and the possibilities of two-way communication between dogs and humans through formal training. Presented with considerable intellectual armor, these views put her at odds with all sorts of people: those who hold that dogs are mere creatures of stimulus and response, as well as legions of others (Hearne refers to them as "humaniacs") who have convinced themselves that animal training is cruel, that exercising physical authority over a dog or horse is the moral equivalent of fascism.

It is Hearne's dedication to the plight of pit bulls, however, that has made her anathema to enforcers of animal-control laws. After being called in as an expert at many dog (and owner) hearings, after reading lurid newspaper accounts of dog attacks and checking up on the actual facts, she found herself defending pit bulls, deploring both their condemnation as a breed and the overkill of canine-control laws being put in place to

deal with "dangerous" dogs generally. Most of the charges against pit bulls and other dogs that are indiscriminately lumped with them she found false, and said so in the *New York Times* and *Harper's*. The breed is not afflicted with "Jekyll-Hyde syndrome," which, however gentle the dogs may seem, is supposed to make them a kind of furry time bomb ready to go off in the bosom of the family. The pit bull is not specially endowed with "double jaws" that allow it to bear down with its teeth for a more or less interminable bite at the oft-claimed pressure of 20,000 pounds per square inch.

What really drew Hearne into the pit bull wars was a dog named Bandit, condemned to death in Connecticut as "vicious," and labeled by the local press as "Public Enemy Number One." That battle is the subject of Hearne's latest book, which has launched her on the lecture circuit. Appropriately entitled *Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog*, it describes with partisan zeal how Bandit and Vicki and their friends struggled free, or almost free, from the coils of Connecticut's Canine Control Division.

Since meeting Bandit, Hearne has had telephone threats against her own dogs and has even needed police protection. She has been called an "intellectual redneck" and, a yet unkind cut, the "Camille Paglia of canine politics." Of course Hearne has also become known as the "pit bull lady" and has been described both as the Joan of Arc and the Portia of pit bulls. She vastly prefers the latter: "Saint Joan was burned. Portia won her case with wit, and got to marry the fellow, too."

Dead set against "bribers" and "cooers"

Hearne herself is no slouch at brisk (though sometimes ill-advised) invective. More males than females are bitten by dogs, a fact that she attributes to the male need to dominate, rather than listen, as well as to "damage done by testosterone." She dismisses a canine-control operative as a "despicable little pseudomacho twerp." Plainly, any inquiring male reporter, especially a sentimentalist with a golden retriever, approaches such a subject with some caution.

If you want to see Vicki Hearne these days, you must journey past New Haven, Connecticut, to Westbrook, and turn left till you get to Silver Trails Animal Inn, owned by Vicki's friends and benefactors George and Lillian Bernard. The front office is small, cluttered with useful stuff like combs and flea sprays for sale, and the occasional mat emblazoned with the command "Smooch Your Pooch Today"—although Hearne has made it clear that she cannot abide the "bribers" and "cooers" of the dog-ownership world. Controlling a dog through bribery, she believes, stunts its intellectual and imaginative growth. Instead of concentrating on achievement, "all he thinks about is 'dog biscuit.'"

Vicki Hearne (p. 60)
Bandit: Dossier of a Dangerous Dog by
Vicki Hearne, HarperCollins, 1991
Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name
by Vicki Hearne, Knopf, 1986
The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication by Stephen
Budiansky, Morrow, 1992