

A Dog's Life

The Hidden Life of Dogs

by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas.
Houghton Mifflin, 148 pp., \$18.95

Particularly Cats... and Rufus

by Doris Lessing.
Knopf, 129 pp., \$20.00

Cats: Ancient and Modern

by Juliet Clutton-Brock.
Harvard University Press,
96 pp., \$16.95

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Although they may not always be aware of it, pet animals are caught between worlds—members of the family, in an emotional sense, but only in very rare cases having any of the responsibilities or rights of their human companions. However comfortable, or even privileged, their lives may seem, they are always vulnerable—not only to the caprice of their owners, but, if they are allowed to spend part of their time at liberty out of doors, to the random cruelty, spite, and greed of other people. If sold or abandoned, they may find relations with humankind abruptly altered, so that they end their days in a laboratory or a cage in a pound, not on a sofa. And their status is often equivocal. An accountant once advised me (incorrectly, as it turned out) that although the costs of moving books, furniture, and close relatives were tax deductible, the cost of moving cats was not.

Conversely, if pet cats and dogs are not quite human, they are not quite animals either. They have lost their wildness, and the reciprocal intensity of their relationships with people distinguishes them from most farmyard beasts. Of course some pets turn out to be capable of independent lives if their human support system disappears, and both cats and dogs can still interbreed with their nearest wild relatives. But many thousands of years of adaptation

their owners and keepers. This extensive but often unsystematic record of observation has been routinely disparaged or ignored by rival experts, usually biologists or comparative psychologists, whose authority derives from their scientific training. Almost without exception, people who have lived and worked with domestic animals assume that they possess minds and personalities that resemble those of human beings in some general sense, if not in specific detail, and that we can understand much of what they think and feel.

Most but not all scientists have traditionally made the opposite assumption: that pets, along with other non-human animals, lack our intellectual and emotional capacities, and that any claims they may have to intellectual

and animal attributes as an intellectual, if not a moral failing.

Both Elizabeth Marshall Thomas and Doris Lessing confront the challenge implicitly posed by this terminology. Although in *The Hidden Life of Dogs* Thomas writes about herself (sometimes vaguely and misleadingly) as someone who simply happens to have many dogs, as well as the time and inclination to follow them on their rambles through Cambridge, Massachusetts, and neighboring towns, she is also an experienced anthropologist, the author of books about several African peoples as well as two novels of Siberian prehistory. In addition, she is a practiced observer of wild animal behavior, as a chapter on the wolves of Baffin Island, somewhat mysteriously inserted into

avoid the pitfalls of ignorant or sentimental projection; they must use common sense and have a sound knowledge of human and animal behavior. Thomas mentions a psychiatrist neighbor who saw a bird swoop down to carry off another that had flown into a picture window. He assumed that he had seen a loving mate come to the rescue; but, according to Thomas, if he had been better acquainted with bird behavior, he would have recognized this as an act of predation.

Most of *The Hidden Life of Dogs* chronicles the activities of eleven dogs, five males and six females, who lived with Thomas and her family for more than a decade. (None of the dogs was present for the entire period.) Untroubled by the need to provide themselves with food and shelter, they could concentrate on cultivating relationships with one another. Thomas describes their mostly unremarkable day-to-day activities in precise and loving detail, so that, combined with the distinctness with which she evokes each animal's personality, her chronicle assumes some of the interest of a family saga.

On the whole, her engaging and sympathetic account of their loves and losses, triumphs and disappointments, makes a persuasive case for informed anthropomorphism. Near the end of her account Thomas asks, "What do dogs want?" and answers, "They want each other." Their relationships within the group, and to some extent with dogs outside the group, are, she shows, the most important part of her dogs' experience. Thus, after long months spent following one of her dogs, on bicycle and on foot, as he purposefully roamed Cambridge and nearby towns, Thomas concluded that the goal of his wanderings was simply to establish relationships with other dogs—either in person, by sniffing and circling them,

