

Julianna Head

Title of Collection: *Adventures with Animals: Through Emotional Landscapes and Actual Ones*

There are some people who can live their lives in one house on one street in one city, perfectly content with their good job and their good life. I'm not that person. Even now, sitting in Goucher's library with good grades, great friends, and a family who regularly checks up on me, there is nothing I'd rather do more than drop everything and leave. There's an itch that sinks into my bones, a voice in the back of my mind always whispering *go go go*.

I grew up in Alabama on the outskirts of two large-for-Alabama cities. I ran through cotton fields and explored thorn-infested patches of forest. My dog, Sandi, joined me in my adventures, alternately protecting me and leading me astray. Through the years we wandered swaths of land, ranging from soft, dewy mornings spent near creeks to nights spent ducking between the crumbling walls of abandoned buildings. There was only ever one thought between us: *how far can we go until we're satisfied?*

I sought escape in every faucet of my life, but never quite thought books were the solution until *White Fang*. The book was wrinkled and bent, wedged forgotten between the bookshelf and the wall. Instead of listening to my teacher's math lesson, I read. I never managed to return the copy to the teacher. Next was Erin Hunter's Warrior Cats Saga, still in it's first prophecy. Then it was *The Call of the Wild*, *The Last Dog on Earth*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and *Summer of the Monkeys*. I wanted stories that were as unbelievable as they were plausible, stories that made me rethink the mundane. I was enthralled. Did my cat have a double life as a warrior? Was he thinking about leaving us to live in the woods? Could my dog ever help cure a dangerous, dog-killing disease? If I were trapped alone on an island, how far would I go for companionship? Would I befriend one of the very dogs that helped slaughter my own brother? If I walked a little further into the woods, would there be moneys lounging in the trees just around the bend? If Sandi was ever stolen, would she return to me or not, preferring to revert back to her primordial self? I kept myself awake countless nights pondering these questions, thinking of a thousand different scenarios. In the end, I never quite reached the conclusions I wanted, but the seed had been planted. I wanted adventures. I wanted to go on quests with my dog as my sole companion. I wanted to experience every emotion as fully as I could. I wanted to know just what made an adventure an adventure.

I came into middle school armed with nothing more than stories of animals and people working in tandem to escape stifling circumstances. As the children grew colder and more vicious at school and at home, libraries became a refuge. For some astounding reason, those who didn't like me never stepped more than a few feet into the library. It was baffling but comforting. I read *Life of Pi* the first week of school and from then on I was glued to the Other Cultures Section, desperate to know more about the lands I'd yet to see. I started reading more non-fiction and, as I made my way through the medieval ages, the librarian suggested *The Princess and the Hound*. From there I read *Eva*, *Black Beauty*, and *Tiger, Tiger*. I didn't know quite what I was searching for, but the medieval world of *The Princess and the Hound* made me wonder what would happen if Sandi and I were to ever switch bodies. The dystopian world of *Eva* opened my eyes to how an overpopulation of humans could affect the world. *Eva* led me to post-apocalyptic and dystopian books, forging the path to new stories. Before *Eva*, I never tried to write dystopia, but suddenly I was wondering what would happen if crops died out, or if a plague ran rampant, or if humans became too overpopulated. Suddenly, I was writing more than I ever had before. *Black Beauty* endeared me to horses and forged my horse-riding career. *Tiger, Tiger* shook me with it's fairly common theme of reuniting with family, a theme that I have forever since been weak against. All

of these stories, though different, are the same in that they are adventures, whether through a myriad of emotion or complete with a quest.

Forbidden places were never forbidden during high school. The typical recklessness caught me in its grip and I went with it, Sandi constantly by my side. Believe it or not, she was the voice of reason. There wasn't a lot we wouldn't do, but the thought of her getting hurt because of me probably saved my life more than once. It was during one such wayward adventure that I came across a tattered copy of *Watership Down*, left alone in an abandoned farmhouse tucked into a copse of pine trees. I read it during the summer with Sandi by my side, lounging on the house's decrepit porch and catching glimpses of rabbits through the dense foliage. From there I read *Homer's Odyssey*, seeking solace after the death of my cat and marveling at the way Gwin Cooper made the mundane exciting. That same summer I read *East* and wished for cold weather. *East* led me to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, and though not included in this particular collection, they remain favorites. Thus began a true dabbling in all things fantasy.

Three days before my high school graduation, Sandi died. Never before had I wanted to read more than I did then, and the weekend after graduation I read *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. I savored each word, reading it with the intensity I saved for school's required readings. Afterward I read two childhood books, *A Dog's Life* and *Everything for a Dog*, wanting nothing more than to feel Sandi curled up by my side again. That Monday I went to the library and picked up *The Incredible Journey*, *A Dog's Purpose*, *A Dog's Journey*, and *The Dog Stars*. Yes, I longed for Sandi to be by my side again but if I couldn't have her I'd settle for other dogs, for their stories and their human's stories. The staunch loyalty of all of the characters, paired with the ideas of reincarnation soothed Sandi's loss, and by the end of my read-a-thon I felt more able to comprehend her death. I topped it off with *White Fang*, taking the old book from its place of honor and reading it with a hollow ache in my chest.

Amidst the myriad of papers and classes, there hasn't been much time to read for pleasure, let alone get lost in Baltimore or the woods. I read *The Bees* in my first few months at Goucher, first in the hopes of conquering my fear of bees and to expand my Animal Adventures collection. I have many dog books, of course, but not nearly enough other animal books or real-life books. Adventures come in all forms and who am I to decide what is an adventure or what isn't?

This is by no means an academic collection. This is a collection of books that got me to where I am today. The Warrior Cats Saga stayed with me from elementary school to high school, encouraging my first flimsy writing attempts. *Life of Pi* made me more aware of stories with different religions and cultures, and I began seeking out books that focused less on European fairytales and beliefs. It helped me branch out. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* made me think about the connection between animals and humans, and *The Dog Stars* let me dream of flying planes with Sandi by my side. *White Fang* was the book that got me into reading and was one of my best friends. I can't tell you how many times I've reread this book; how many times it's comforted me when no one else could.

I'm still not satisfied. After all of the road trips, after all of the books I've read and experienced, the itch is still there. Dulled since Sandi's death, it came back with a powerful vengeance after moving to Goucher. For now, however, I will be content with my lot and read more about humans and their pets, pets and their humans, and animals with no humans just trying to get along.