Review Section
Dog Stories Reconsidered

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The Critic-Dog Bond

Very few of the reviewers of The Story of Edgar Sawtelle seem to have caught its point, taken its lead, largely because, as one letter to the editor of the New York Times Book Review put it, they overlook the dogs! The Shakespearean tales that underlie Edgar's story are so familiar that, once we recognize them, we relax into comfortable inattention. In contrast, although dogs themselves have long been our familiars, the dogs' stories in the novel are, for most of us, "new stories.

Bruce Olds makes the point in his Chicago Tribune review of the novel that "stories in which dogs (or for that matter, any nonhuman) feature as significant characters" have been denied a serious reading, that the academy insists on giving dog stories a "taxonomic classification as either juvenilia, divertissement, memoir, or genre work." As if to prove Olds's point, Mike Peed, a New Yorker editor who reviewed the novel for the New York Times Book Review, titles his article "The Dog Whisperer" and refers to the novel's "slobbering, tail-wagging dogs" as a "near categorically twee subject."

The Animal-Centric Dog Story

Olds goes on to show why Wroblewski's artistic choices make it difficult to treat The Story of Edgar Sawtelle so flippantly. First, there is Edgar's muteness, which allows him to attend to voices other than his own—in particular, at the opening of the novel, to Almondine's. He channels

...Almondine without condescending to, sentimentalizing, or, most impressively, anthropomorphizing her. And this is the book's major accomplishment. Almondine never utters a word, yet Wroblewski endows her with an evocatively rich interior life
with thoughts and dreams and emotions that lend felt meaning to her every gesture. In the end, she not only graces the page as an entirely credible, fully realized, autonomous character but as the emotional pivot and fulcrum of the story. (Olds)

It is Almondine’s telepathic summons, whether she is dead or alive at the time, that draws Edgar and Essay, the dog who remains with him, back to the farm. There, Edgar falls to his human fate, releasing Essay to her dog fate. Readers respond to the story not because it echoes old tragedies that we’ve been taught to read anthropocentrically and to venerate, but because it offers a “new story,” directed to the parts of our brains we’ve learned to mute. Wroblewski himself writes that this is “a novel about a boy and his dog, one that integrate[s] our contemporary knowledge of canine behavior, cognition, and origins with my experience of living dogs.” He describes the novel as “a daydream machine,” which he hopes will allow his readers “a long slow read (more dogtime than our rushed and scheduled time), a two-week daydream. A double life with dogs” (Double life with dogs: An Amazon exclusive essay).

Canine evolutionary success, the story of “how a group of cursorial predators evolved through speed and intelligence, to catch a changing prey in a changing landscape,” is examined in scientific terms in Wang and Tedford’s “How Dogs Came to Run the World” (p. 19), and it lends strength to Wroblewski’s tale of the evolution of the Sawtelle dogs. The Sawtelle breeding experiment has, by the time Edgar is born, succeeded in returning domestic dogs to that heritage without diminishing their bond to humans. Essay is the epitome of that effort. To make it clear that humans cannot totally control the evolution of even domestic animals, Wroblewski only allows Essay’s story to end after she leaves the farm and joins the feral dog the Sawtelles call Forte. He is the missing link that will take her offspring safely beyond human plotting.

Our culture’s story assumes that science calls upon reason and intellect rather than empathy and the metaphoric or narrative imagination, yet Wang and Tedford’s canines, like Wroblewski’s, become characters, not subjects. The difference lies in the authors’ respective focus on the canine story—Wang and Tedford on species and Wroblewski on individual dogs and the challenges they face in a changing landscape. The coevolution of their species and ours, over eons, once an advantage, has become a detriment for the Sawtelle dogs, and they are forced to leave us behind in the ashes of our anthropocentric tragedy if they are to survive. But if we do not turn our backs on Almondine, as Edgar does, the story does not have to end this way.

The Sawtelle Pedigree

Wroblewski’s great-books references are obvious, his dog-story references less so. The bibliography of dog stories and novels is prohibitively voluminous. Most of them, examined from an animal-centric perspective, contain fragments of the DNA that produced the Sawtelle dogs, in the stories of exceptional individuals. But in general, the dog stories that precede Wroblewski’s are flawed by anthropocentrism, emphasizing the human drama in the human-dog bond rather than the dog drama. Some few, however, survive animal-centric scrutiny and emerge as true ancestors to the Sawtelle dogs’ story.