



Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog

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While on a camping trip, Ted Kerasote met a dog—a Labrador mix—who was living on his own in the wild. They became attached to each other, and Kerasote decided to name the dog Merle and bring him home. There, he realized that Merle's native intelligence would be diminished by living exclusively in the human world. He put a dog door in his house so Merle could live both outside and in. A deeply touching portrait of a remarkable dog and his relationship with the author, *Merle's Door* explores the issues that all animals and their human companions face as their lives intertwine, bringing to bear the latest research into animal consciousness and behavior as well as insights into the origins and evolution of the human-dog partnership. Merle showed Kerasote how dogs might live if they were allowed to make more of their own decisions, and Kerasote suggests how these lessons can be applied universally.

Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog Details

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Gary says

As I was nearing the end of this book the other day in the lunch room at work, I had to stop reading because it was about to bring me to tears. This book is similar to "Marley and Me" in that they're both memoirs of the writer and his experience with his dog. But the difference in this book is that Ted Kerasote is a much more expressive and descriptive writer. And unlike Marley's story which is the urban adventure of a mischievous dog and his family, Merle's story is that of the deep friendship that develops between Merle and Ted after he finds a 10-month-old Merle during a rafting trip on the San Juan River. Kerasote and Merle spend the next 14 years in rural Kelly, Wyoming. They spend their days hiking, skiing, elk hunting, fishing and doing just about everything else the outdoorsmen paradise has to offer. And mixed in with Merle's story is credible scientific and veterinary evidence from the past 150 years of study and research into canine behavior from Pavlov, Darwin, Skinner (the inventor of clicker training), Temple Grandin, and many others. This book is a must-read for anyone who loves dogs and the outdoors. This is one of the most touching and heartwarming stories I've ever read. It literally makes me want to take my dog and move to the mountains and spend all my time hiking, biking, and just being outdoors. I can't recommend this book enough.

Susan says

I felt like I shouldn't have wasted my time on this book. It is the antithesis of "Marley and Me", the story of a much loved but terrible dog. This dog is too good to be true. The narrator/owner supplies the dog's side of the conversation (something I do all the time) but without any sense of irony. He believes it's true!

It takes a lot for me to think a story about a wonderful dog is over the top. This one is. That doesn't mean I wouldn't love to have a dog like Merle. Mighty fine pup.

Kathleen says

Okay, I was suckered in by the cute dog picture on the cover. But I found myself really caring about the players in this extraordinary human-dog relationship. Granted, Merle had such a great life and so much freedom because he lived in a dog-friendly town on the edge of Grand Tetons NP. And he got to do great dog stuff like hunt elk and ski snow-covered slopes. Most dogs don't have those opportunities.

The book dragged when author Kerasote waxed on about scientific research into why dogs act the way they do. I skipped over those parts. The best stuff is about the mutual dependence on and love between Ted and Merle.

Chrissie says

MARVELOUS! I give this book 5 stars without a second thought! You cry, you chuckle, you laugh out

loud, you read again sections of other dog books mentioned in the text that one has^previously read, you search Wikipedia concerning subjects that the text brings to your attention and about which you realize you really have to know more. This book has everything for anyone that truly loves their dog.

OK I have to say one thing and I would really like to discuss this with others..... I don't like how the book ends, in that I really don't agree with how the author deals with the final stage of a dog's life. Quite simply I think he dog suffered too much at the end of his life. The the author should have euthanized the dog. On the other hand, I was not there. I did not see Merle. Ted thinks Merle remained happy. OK, if he was really sure then I agree with his actions. BUT this was a thinking dog. He was intelligent and he had emotions. One must also consider the dog's emotions. How did Merle react emotionally to having to go through what he went through. The degradation of soiling one's self. I do believe that Merle could understand that he could no longer do what he enjoyed doing best in life, that he would have to accept doing a bit less for the sake of being with Ted who he loved. Just maybe the suffering went on too long. Again, I wasn't there so maybe I am completely off mark. Ted was a marvelous dog owner and I in no way criticize him.

I have an old dog. A curly coated retriever of 12.5 years. He too has arthritis. He takes the same medications and he loves his massages. I do not do acupuncture. My dog has not been able to have the independence that Merle has had, but he is damn, damn smart, and my husband and I love him so very, very much. He can no longer do everything with me any more. He doesn't like being left at home so I change my life, as much as I possibly can to accommodate his needs. And who want to play God - I certainly don't. I don't want to end his life. I will continue to help him as long as I can. He will stay with us as long as I believe he can enjoy life.

Giulio says

Amazing tale of a thirteen year relationship between a man and a dog, filled with amusing and hilarious anecdotes mixed with interesting scientific references to animal behaviour.

Loved it

Christen says

After meeting the author (5/12/08) the other night and hearing him read passages from the book, I've decided I want to read the book again. What a neat dog!

I LOVED this book. I still can't figure out who the luckiest character in the book is: the dog or the owner. Ted was so lucky to find such a wonderful dog and Merle was lucky to have such a neat owner who lived in such a neat place, that allowed him to be a free dog! I hate always crying at the end of dog books, but I have to say that this was the best ending out of all the dog books I have read. A MUST for dog lovers!

Jan Rice says

His deep brown eyes looked at me with luminous appreciation and said, "You need a dog, and I'm it."

Unsettled by his uncanny read of me--I had been looking for a dog for over a year--I gave him a cordial pat and replied, "Good dog."

His tail beat steadily, and he didn't move, his eyes still saying, "You need a dog."

After a night together,

...he was still curled in his nest, looking directly at me.

"Hey," I said.

Up went one brow, down went the other.

"I am yours," his eyes said.

So begins this memoir of a man and his dog, found during a river trip to Utah, adopted as a youngster and taken back with the author to become a Wyoming dog living the life of Riley with his owner on the border of a national park.

As the opening quote shows, the author's empathy is acute when it comes to imagining what Merle is saying. For example, when the author comes home to find Merle has gotten into a forty-pound bag of dog food and eaten more than a quarter of it:

He now looked as if he were going to die. He didn't look in the least regretful, though. In fact, he wore a blissful smile.

"Merle." I leaned close to his ear, putting a hand gently on his belly. It was as tight as a drum.

He groaned painfully and opened his eyes. They were glassy. Faintly, he flopped his tail back and forth: "Let me die in peace."

It is not his time, though, and after dragging himself outside to throw up, he heads out, maybe to tell one of his dog friends he's now fulfilled his life's dream to eat as much as he wanted.

Whew! He didn't suffer the fate (at least, in books) of horses who stuff themselves. This book is full of laughs.

It's not empty calories, though. The author works in discussions of dog biology and DNA and the whys and wherefores of domestication very nicely. For example, his rendition of how Merle overcame his fear of guns from an early trauma to become an elk-hunting partner par excellence, followed by:

(W)hat always impressed me about his behavior, especially when he'd lope back through the forest to fetch me, was his absolute sense that we were a team--that it was only through me and the rifle that he'd fulfill one of his greatest desires: to eat an animal as big as an elk.

Observing Merle's "suite of (hunting) skills" led the author to hypothesize (he says "conclude")

that it was the newly domesticated wolves who were the initiators of the dog-human hunting partnership. They were the ones who scented and heard game first. They led the way toward it. They reaped the immediate benefits as the animals were field-dressed. Subsequently, it was the humans who realized, just as I did, that these were pretty handy friends to have around.

I used to feel bad about dogs and other domesticated animals because, I thought, we had bred them into slaves and there was no way out. Certainly not through the means urged by a well-meaning celebrity/activist who thought we shouldn't eat the cows we have now but just open the doors and let them out on the meadow to live free and fend for themselves. I once came across that in some article! But seriously it's both a relief and a lightbulb-over-the-head moment to learn the process of domestication is mutual. Not to mention, we've domesticated ourselves, too, in the process. (I read about that in Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, too.)

Sometimes the author got into some little agendas that put me off for a while. For example, his rendition of having his mitochondrial DNA tested. After he traced his mother's mother's mother's, etc., ancestry back to similar locales in Europe, he used the results to justify his attraction to the mountainous terrain and wildlife of home. Well, biology isn't destiny, and what about all the many tributaries pouring into his line? If he has a sibling, would that sibling love the same lifestyle? We have veered out of science into his making sense of his personal story! Later in the book (p. 137) he talks about his dog defying his Lab blood in some respects. If we can sometimes follow and sometimes defy our bloodlines, then we are just picking and choosing topics for narrative plausibility, not doing science.

Anyway, after that section, the book sat and cooled while my other ongoing reads garnered my attention for a while. Examples of other similar stuff: unattested conclusions about dangerous dog breeds; claiming that "the Jewish faith" sanctioned human dominion over animals; implying that the writings of behavioral psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century contributed to political totalitarianism, and comparing his cat's gifts of rodent tails unfavorably with his dog's gifts of prized beef bones (without considering that the "gifts" could signify something different). In other words, just getting in over his head without recognizing it or making unwanted assumptions; just putting out as factual what may not be.

Well, even scholars who should know better err, and Ted Kerasote is an observer, writer and popularizer, not a scientist. He redeemed himself in my eyes by writing very very honestly and utterly without narcissism about his girlfriend's break-up with him. That's impressive; such a hard thing to do. Incidentally, that was also an example of why I say this book isn't so much a biography of a dog, but a memoir of the author's life with the dog. He wrote his way through any obstacles, grabbed me, and didn't let go.

There are lots of laughter and tears in this book. If you need an interlude with a dog book, this is a good one.

Alicia says

I love books about dogs, I was very excited to read this book and expected to fly through it and finish with a five star rating. Well, I've been reading it for over 2 months and I just can't bring myself to pick it back up and finish it; needless to say I do not love it. I think the thing that bugs me about this book is how much the author relies on anthropomorphizing Merle throughout the story (at least the half of it I've managed to read). I don't like Kerasote speaking for Merele and telling us what Merele is thinking every step of the way. I'm a bit skeptical that Merele is as deep as Kerasote paints him. Do I think Merele was a terrific and unique dog - yep, do I have any doubt that the author loved him dearly and had a wonderful and insightful relationship with him - nope; but I think Kerasote has gone just a little too far in writing. Also, I felt a bit like he was knocking other ways of having a dog as a part of your family - like he felt if all dogs were just given the life of Merele everyone would be happier and there would be no obedience struggles with our pets. Oh well - to each their own. I'm sure Kerasote is a fabulous pet owner and any dog would be happy to have him as their human; however, I'm not so sure he's a great writer and I don't think I'll be jumping to pick up any more of his pieces.

Stephanie *Very Stable Genius* says

I read this book a few years back, before I attempted writing reviews (ones beyond a few lines anyway). It has been on my favorite's shelf ever since then and Merle has drifted into my thoughts now and again, so I thought I would try to add a few more words.

One day Merle, a young yellow lab mix, shows up at a camp where Ted and friends were camping, Ted and Merle hit it off. Ted decides to bring Merle back home with him but soon finds out that Merle would not be content to be locked indoors all day while his new best friend was working. Things did not go well. Merle was used to being his own dog, going where ever he pleased and "going" on whatever he pleased. One day Merle decides to eat a whole bag of dog food, which isn't cute at all since eating that much food could cause a big dog to bloat (stomach twists and prevents the food from moving along) which will kill a dog pretty darn fast. But up came the dog food and all was well, this time.

Ted realizes he has to do something, so he puts a dog door in for Merle to come and go at will, hence the name of the book. Fortunately for the both of them they live in a time and place that is just right for this arrangement, the town is remote and all the other dogs roam free. No leash law in place. This sets up the perfect situation to watch dogs be more themselves then is possible in this day and age. In other words, Merle had it good, and so did Ted.

This book is full of the cute stories you get from dog books. My favorite was how Merle, a dog who likes to eat, would have a routine of going to certain houses in a particular order everyday to obtain treats (my dog would do this in a heartbeat given the chance). Ted noticed one day how chunky his dog was getting and new that it was unhealthy for him, so he put a note on Merle's collar that read "please don't feed my dog." It worked for everyone except one lady who could not resist, "but he is so cute" she told Ted. She would not stop, so Ted had to scare the crap out of poor Merle every time he got near the treat ladies house to keep him away.

Sad parts are defiantly in this book, as you find in most dog books, but what sets this book apart, and makes it great, is how the author mixes in science and helpful information into the book. In it there is a section, a checklist to go over when you need to make the decision to euthanize, or not to euthanize. Yes grim. But a fact of life if you are to have pets in your life, and it is very good. I worked in an animal hospital at the time I read this book and I made copies of the checklist to give to clients during this time. It is helpful because no one can think clearly at the moment you are faced with this decision, so having a guide is very helpful.

Merle, you're a great dog. What a life you had.

Claire Poissoniez says

I'm not quite halfway through this book, but it is positively gripping and right up my alley. Its outdoor setting is reminiscent of good Jim Kjelgaard novels (Big Red, Haunt Fox, etc.) and, on top of that, this author has done his research. Throughout the novel, Kerasote has cited scientific and archaeological research on dog origins and psychology. Having done my honors thesis on this topic, I can vouch that his citations are both accurate and fascinating.

Of course, it might be the kind of book that only dog nerds like me can truly appreciate.

Donna says

This is a humorous, heartfelt book about a wonderful dog named Merle. Although there were sections which became too technical regarding the evolution of the dog, it is easy to scan over those pages and get back to the beautifully written story. If you love dogs, you need to read this book. It covers Merle's entire life with Ted, and yes, it includes his last day. Get the tissues out! If you don't cry, you were absent the day they passed out hearts. If you don't have a dog, you will want to go get one.

Lynn says

I am exhausted from this incredibly sad ending to a book. I think I'm done with dog books for awhile--just too emotional. And I found this especially tough, as it was such a prolonged ending. I appreciate the author's perspective, but I do think euthanasia has its place and is a blessing for animals in many cases. I wondered if it was the right choice to have Merle continue on to a natural end. However, having been through such an awful decision, I recognize it is hard to judge unless you are in the situation. Your heart breaks for the owner as they do have such a unique bond. It is just amazing to imagine the life Merle led.

The book itself is immensely readable and full of fascinating information about dogs in general. It is certainly a most delightful life that Merle leads and makes me feel guilty about my own dog's comparably dull life. It certainly makes you consider dogs' lives in a different way entirely. And Merle absolutely captures your heart. I wish there were more pictures of him.

Manduca Sexta says

I didn't like the tone of this book. There's a smugness about the author's supposed ability to communicate with dogs. The author generally anthropomorphizes his dog and assigns entire conversations to the dog. In my mind, this deeply detracts from the credibility of the science he reports because there is a great deal of crummy research by people who want to believe in various mystical animal attributes. I am not confident that he is rigorous enough to distinguish the wishful results from the rest. I didn't finish the book.

Jessaka says

What a great dog. I had a border collie that was smart and fun like Merle, but that was over 13 years ago. I cried for 3 years until I got another dog. I will cry again.

I love how the author, after telling stories about Merle for a while, changes direction and then gives scientific information on dogs. I recall his believing that dogs think and reason things out. Yes, and while some scientists don't believe this, well, they have never had a smart dog. He shows some good examples, or the fact that they also learn from watching others. I know this to be true as well. My first border collie, Megan, just looked at me when I threw her the Frisbee a few times. Each time I had to go get the Frisbee. Then I told my husband to stand across from me, and we threw the Frisbee back and forth to each other, and I saw a light bulb going off in my dog's head. Then I threw it to her, and she ran to catch it. After that she loved catching Frisbees. What is so hard about that for dumb scientists to understand? I saw a lot of light bulbs going off in her head. Like the time she came to the screen door to want in, and I didn't want to get up, but the side door was open, so I said, "Go around," and she looked at me as if saying, "What?" And then I motioned with my hand to go around, and the light bulb went off. She ran around to the side door and came into the house. The dog we have now learned that as well. Mocha is a very smart border collie.

Merle was found in the desert alone. He attached himself to the author and his friends that were on a canoe trip. Sometimes the best dogs are those that people have left behind. After the canoe trip, with Merle jumping out of the canoe to chase cattle, and my wondering if she would ever find her new owner again, the author took her to Kelly, WY to live.

Merle ran free, just as dogs should, unless they are vicious. All my dogs when I was growing up ran free. I only recall one bad incident when my dog ran up to a man and jumped up on him, getting his clothing dirty. Oh, well. He survived. Well, I remember another: One of my dogs was found dead on the highway that went through town.

But the thing with allowing your dog to run free now-a-days is dogcatchers. Well, we had them where I grew up, and I recall hearing on the news that someone had let all the dogs out one night. I learned that it was my friends Paulette and Ellen who had done the good deed. Paulette said at first they began following them, but then the dogs finally took off in different directions. Well, one day the dog catcher came into Kelly, WY and began collecting dogs, but Merle thought that he was pretty smart. The owners of the dogs would just drive into Jackson and pick them up and let them out again. The dogcatcher gave up for some reason, maybe the person who had complained about the dogs running wild gave up complaining.

I like the day that the author had his new cabin completed, and the floors had just been varnished. He came home and Merle had gone through the dog door, walked around the cabin and then stood on the porch looking at his owner when he came home. His owner had the floors redone, all except where Merle had stood on the balcony.

Well, I could go on and on about this book; I loved it that much.

But then, I promised myself that I would not read the last chapter about Merle's dying. I did not keep that promise, and so last night I read what felt like 50 pages of the last horrible years of Merle's life and then his demise. I cried my heart out. Damn. Why do authors do this? Can't they end a book by saying that the dog lived to a ripe old age and leave it at that? I mean it was blow by blow, and my mind went back to Megan's death and my being glad that it was only a day. I was at my mom's funeral when she had a big seizure, and my husband had to have her put to sleep. Then I worried about the dog we have now because she is getting old, and this will be another blow, but then no more dogs for us.

Cayr says

In this true, honest, and touching novel, Ted Kerasote tells the story of Merle, an intriguing stray dog that chooses Ted as a lifetime companion. The two of them live a wild and adventurous life in the mountains of Wyoming.

Kerasote makes scientific detours during the telling of his story to explain how dogs evolved and why they have certain attributes. The factoids are at times so interesting, and Kerasote's observations so astute, that I realized how little attention I pay to my own dogs' idiosyncrasies, and how shallow my own observations are.

While the recounting of Merle's life is very entertaining, I do take issue with one of Kerasote's tenets. He discusses at great length how whenever possible, dogs should be given as much freedom as possible in order to become all that they can become, and he seems to attribute Merle's personality and intelligence to the fact that Merle had tons of freedom and he never forced his will on Merle. Mr. Kerasote, I have news for you: Merle is an extraordinary dog. He would have been extraordinary even without all that freedom, and whether or not you ever tried to force your will on him. He was, simply, an amazing dog.

Although some readers have taken issue with the "conversations" that Merle and Ted have, and at times it seems somewhat anthropomorphic, I have no doubt that they understood each other that clearly. I have shared my life with more than fifteen dogs, and each one of them was unique. One, in particular, was stellar, like Merle - and that single dog was an astute communicator. He never had the type of freedoms that Merle did, and I did, on occasion, impose my will on him -- yet he was still brilliant and amazing.

This book was a very enjoyable read, but don't try the last couple of chapters without a box of tissue handy.

Marrble says

If you loved Marley & Me you will LOVE Merle's Door. The story follows the life and adventures of the "freethinking" Merle from the time he adopted his human, Ted, until his death 14 years later. Splendidly

written this story made me cry. Anyone who loves dogs and the outdoors will enjoy this book. I now look at my own dogs in a different way.

I ♥ Bookie Nookie (bookienookiereviews.blogspot.com) says

Ok, i love good books about animals and have read quite a few. I was so disappointed with this book I couldn't even finish it :-(--that is rare. The author had some cute back stories about his life with Merle, but all the scientific ramblings about the why behind the what just lost me. Sometimes he would just go on and on about neurons and synaptic cleft and neurotransmitters..blah, blah, blah, blah...

I expected a heartwarming story about a lost dog found and the great adventures he and his new owner encountered...NOT!

Trevor says

I'm a dog person- so you've got to take that into account- but I really enjoyed this book. Like Ted, I take my dog just about everywhere I go, and I'm constantly sorting out how to let him live life to the fullest. Not an easy task since he lives in a small apartment with his grad. student food guy.

Some of the dog psychology sections were more skimworthy than others, but Kerasote's research adds a lot to his story. If you're interested in learning about how to give your dog a more unfettered existence, this book is for you. If you just like a good story about people and their dogs, this book has that too. Probably the best lesson in the whole book: we can learn as much from our dogs as we can from anywhere else- if we're willing to listen.

Bobby says

I am a bit surprised by some of the negative reviews of this book, especially the chap that suggested that you "skip this book." If you skip it you will have missed a gem. It is not a dog training book or a "treatise on animal behavior" as someone suggested. It is the telling of a thirteen year relationship between a man and a dog and the life that they shared together. The author intersperses the narrative with research that support his observations over the years. He makes no attempt to state that his research and conclusions are absolute or scientific findings;just the results of asking questions and having a curious mind. You will laugh, you will cry and you will be left with a special feeling of being allowed to vicariously share the life of Ted and Merle. Anyone who has loved and lost a great, special dog will understand and cherish the book.

Tami says

Yowza. I love my dog, but I also understand the reason for a leash (because I LOVE MY DOG). And there's a little too much canine closeness here, even for me. Altho I will admit, I've attempted to sniff along with my best furry friend into the wind once or twice - some of Teds adventures with Merle are a little too 'grape-nuts' for me. Maybe I need to live in the mountains with the thin air to fully understand . . .

