



The Underdogs: Children, Dogs, and the Power of Unconditional Love

Melissa Fay Greene

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From two-time National Book Award nominee Melissa Fay Greene comes a profound and surprising account of dogs on the front lines of rescuing both children and adults from the trenches of grief, emotional, physical, and cognitive disability, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Underdogs tells the story of Karen Shirk, felled at age twenty-four by a neuromuscular disease and facing life as a ventilator-dependent, immobile patient, who was turned down by every service dog agency in the country because she was “too disabled.” Her nurse encouraged her to tone down the suicidal thoughts, find a puppy, and raise her own service dog. Karen did this, and Ben, a German shepherd, dragged her back into life. “How many people are stranded like I was,” she wondered, “who would lead productive lives if only they had a dog?”

A thousand state-of-the-art dogs later, Karen Shirk’s service dog academy, 4 Paws for Ability, is restoring broken children and their families to life. Long shunned by scientists as a manmade, synthetic species, and oft-referred to as “Man’s Best Friend” almost patronizingly, dogs are finally paid respectful attention by a new generation of neuroscientists and animal behaviorists. Melissa Fay Greene weaves the latest scientific discoveries about our co-evolution with dogs with Karen’s story and a few exquisitely rendered stories of suffering children and their heartbroken families.

Written with characteristic insight, humanity, humor, and irrepressible joy, what could have been merely touching is a penetrating, compassionate exploration of larger questions: about our attachment to dogs, what constitutes a productive life, and what can be accomplished with unconditional love.

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