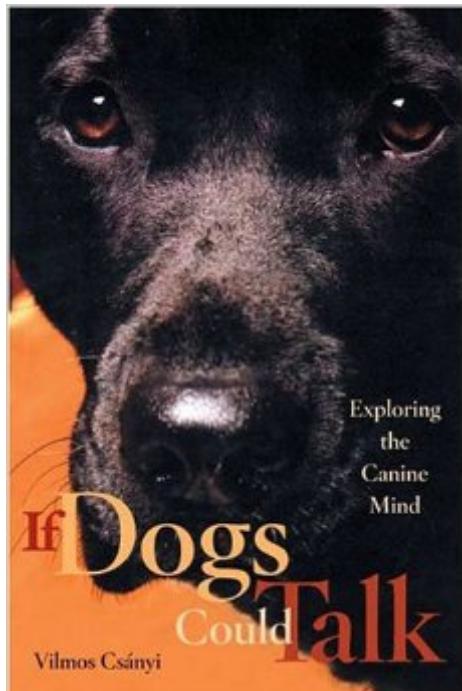


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If Dogs Could Talk: Exploring The Canine Mind



Synopsis

Every dog owner knows intuitively that there's something special about the high degree of mutual understanding and empathy that exists between humans and their proverbial best friends. Now, an internationally renowned Hungarian ethologist (a specialist in the scientific study of animal behavior) traces the roots of this unique relationship back to the unusual circumstances in which the two species co-evolved over many millennia. Drawing in part on close observations of his own two pet dogs, Flip and Jerry, the author argues that the longstanding alliance of dogs and humans arose from behavioral traits present in the original wolves from which all modern dogs are descended. Wolves, like humans, are highly intelligent social predators, with well-developed cooperative problem-solving and communications skills, giving them distinct advantages in their developing relations with humans. These basic intellectual skills were refined and enhanced over tens of thousands of years, resulting in the enormously varied "artificial animals" we see today. Although the book's specific focus is on dogs, it ranges far afield to discuss in an easy-going, accessible style recent experimental and theoretical work on the behavior of other animals, and especially on their interactions with humans. A highly personal work, *If Dogs Could Talk* makes the case that the social and emotional bonds between dogs and humans are indeed special, and that they ought to form the basis for our treatment of dogs. Moreover, the author concludes, by closely observing the cognitive behavior of dogs, we can also learn a good deal about how the human mind works.

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Customer Reviews

Mostly, "If Dogs Could Talk" is book which explores many aspects of how to approach the complex

issues that surround studying what dogs might be thinking and feeling. Csanyi is Hungarian, and one of the world's foremost ethologists studying canine behavior. The book is well-translated, in that it is quite readable, in spite of its many challenges. By far, the most exciting aspect of the book concerns the examples of his own and other dogs he has known. I found that I learned to think about dogs and their behavior in wholly new ways: what they might be trying to "say" to me through their physical indications -- this was the most valuable aspect of the book for me. On the flip side, Csanyi is dismissive in his discussion of some of the most famous ethology work done with primates and birds. I suspect that this negativity, though it is not overtly stated, seems to stem from the time that the study of individual animals takes in these cases, and that only many trials with many subjects yields real data. However, he might have explored his bias rather than diminishing the work of others and had a much better outcome. One of the other reviewers said that even with its problems, he learned so much more than from reading anything else he had to give this book a high rating, and after all my reservations, I agree with him.

I'm a certified applied animal behaviorist with many (far too many) years experience in my field. I've seen literally hundreds of dogs with problem behaviors (and the majority with active aggression, since that is my specialty). Almost every single dog suffered from the result of poor or inappropriate training, lack of socialization, poor breed or breed type choice by owner, careless or mindless supervision and just your basic seat of the pants ignorance on the part of the owner(s). A basic understanding of the origins of the domestic dog and its more than obvious ability to think, problem solve, plan, feel and communicate, is absolutely necessary if a person is to have the sort of relationship and experience with the dog that s/he hopes to obtain. This isn't a textbook. It's filled with extremely interesting information much in the same way an undergraduate class in Ethology might be, but it's also useful. If you have an interest in training and dog behavior, this book belongs in your reference pile. Your dogs will thank you, your clients will thank you, and a whole new world of seeing and understanding the dog at your side will present itself.

This book encouraged me to reflect upon my own actions, reactions, and assumed knowledge in a very personal way. It has changed the relationship that I have with my animals. For instance, previously when one of my dogs would whine and pester me when I was busy writing I might absentmindedly toss a toy or throw a handful of treats to "occupy" for a while. However, now I find that I pause, even if it is only for a few seconds, and ask myself whether or not I can identify what she really needs or wants rather than jumping to something "I" want her to do like distraction training

such sitting, down, etc. This helps me to remember that she is a thinking and reasoning entity even if it is only to the level of a 3 yr old human. I see her as more of a sentient creature to be respected and perhaps not ordered to perform some obedience stance or amuse herself every time I don't want to be bothered. Maybe she just needs a 2 minute cuddle or a drink or a kind word. Maybe, like me, she sometimes likes to hear the sound of her own voice and prattles on to much. So now rather than react out of "obedience training mode" reflex to stop an unwanted behavior (read a behavior "I" don't want her to do at that exact time) I am more conscious of what she might desire. This doesn't mean she gets to be obnoxious, act dangerously, hunt the neighbors cats to extinction, or infringe on the rights of others to walk down the street in peace. However, if I really respect her as a thinking entity then shouldn't I pause and reflect and try in my incompetent way to understand what might be going on in her brain? I believe this is a worthy undertaking even if her thinking is very foreign to my human mind. In fact, this book has left such a strong impression that I am now preparing my PhD application to the Dept of Ethology at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Vilmos Csanyi is Emeritus professor and founder of the Ethology Dept there. I do admit that a few ideas made me raise my eyebrow every now and again. However, I have to say that more often than not my eyes were opened to novel ways of thinking about the canine-human relationship. Read it, it might change how you relate to your furry and non-furry companion(s) as well.

One of the few behaviorists who REALLY likes dogs. Genius because he did the same study on dogs, children, and grad students and each group had members who did something that appeared stupid, until he talked to the grad students. So dogs aren't so dumb after all.

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