

DOG TALES

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle's Storyteller

In January 2009 The Central Barker had the distinct pleasure of interviewing David Wroblewski, author of the New York Times bestseller and Oprah's Book Club pick, The Story of Edgar Sawtelle. This fascinating author's ideas about dog training, behavior, and human-dog relations are indeed thought-provoking and compelling.

The Central Barker (CB): In the book you write of a series of letters between Edgar's grandfather and Brooks, the animal behaviorist. Brooks said "it would be better to imagine how men might become more suitable for dogs and not the other way around." Is that your personal belief? How might we become more suitable?

David Wroblewski (DW): Yes, this is my personal belief. When I look at the world of dogs, the first thing I notice is the tremendous variation in form and size. I am astonished at how we have taken the wolf genome and changed it to suit our purposes. Humans as a species have certainly not changed that much over the centuries. It doesn't seem like a fair equation. Maybe we have changed dogs too much.

But more than their physical appearance, we can change our dogs' behavior, and training is a cornerstone to that. Training a dog is, or at its best, can be, a revelatory experience. It ought not to be a unilateral or unidirectional experience where a dog is only trained to obey. I think the arc of the novel illustrates this. There's an enormous difference between the kind of training work Edgar does before he goes into the woods and after he is

alone with the dogs. By the end of the book he is saying, in effect, no more commands. What I meant by that was, no more of one half of a partnership choosing what is right and what is wrong. From now on we – the humans and the dogs – choose what's right together.

For me and my dog, training is a never-ending process. We are continually refining what even the simplest commands mean. The world changes around us and we have to adapt. We have to agree, for example, that it's not cool to growl at the new white poodle in our neighborhood. We have to go through that exercise all over again because training is really a way to discuss, to jointly consider, the meaning of things. I have to understand what it is my dog doesn't like about this new dog. For me, at least, this expands my world.

CB: Were you always in tune with every dog you've had?

DW: Because my parents ran a breeding kennel in rural Wisconsin, I grew up around a lot of dogs. I think a person imprints early on their "ideal" for dogs, or at least I did.

I haven't always thought about training the way I do now, as a mutual exchange. For a long time after graduating from college I felt I was too busy to be a responsible owner, and so it was almost ten years before I got a pup. We went to a puppy training class and I discovered I was really bad at training. I'd forgotten so much, or more likely I had never actually been good at it in the first place. It was embarrassing; I had prided myself on knowing all about

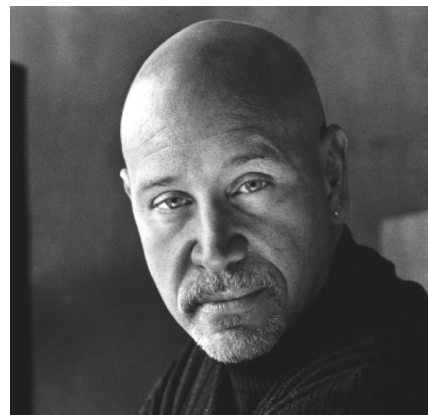


Photo: Marion Etlinger

David Wroblewski

dogs. So I sent myself back to school, in a sense. I read every book on dog behavior and training I could lay my hands on, and among those books was Vicky Hearne's book, *Adam's Task*. Her chapter on "How to Say 'Fetch'" is simply brilliant. Everyone who buys a puppy ought to read it. The entire twenty-some page chapter is devoted to exploring the "meaning" of just one command, but by extension it illustrates everything important about training.

CB: You said in a previous interview that "there were no stories that reflected a true understanding of how dogs think and act." How did you come to know how dogs think and act?

DW: I may have overstated the case if I said there were no stories. But certainly in contemporary fiction, assigning thoughts and emotions to an animal instantly marked that work as children's literature. In "serious" fiction animals were allowed to have no more life than a 1950's behavioral psychologist would assign to them. There were exceptions of course, but they were older books like *Black Beauty*, *The Jungle Book*, the Terhune stories. And for Edgar's story, an especially important reference point was *The Call of the Wild*. But by and large, the middle half of the twentieth century is a wasteland when it comes to the portrayal of animals in literary fiction.

Then around 1975, things began to change. Two books come to mind. The first, *So Long See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell, published in 1979, has been practically canonized as a masterpiece of 20th century literature, and includes a beautiful portrayal of a dog named Trixie, a secondary but very memorable character. Trixie had to survive a lot of editorial criticism, though. Maxwell's editor objected to, among other things, the portrayal of a dog dreaming! Nowadays, one of the things readers most often mention about the book is Trixie. Thank goodness Maxwell stuck to his guns.

Another touchstone work was *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams, which has an amazing publication history. After a long search for publishers, the book was finally accepted by a small, specialist publisher. Only a few thousand copies were originally printed and they sold out very quickly. Of course, it was labeled as children's literature at first, but it has become one of the most beloved books of all time for children or adults.

What I'm getting at is that when I looked for contemporary stories about dogs, there seemed to be only children's books or nonfiction. And isn't it striking that this species with whom we have lived for tens of thousands of years has little or no footprint in literary fiction?

CB: In writing from the dogs' perspective how did you get inside their heads without anthropomorphizing?

DW: In writing about dogs – in living with dogs – you can't avoid anthropomorphizing to some degree. Dogs lead a life unmediated by language. This is a fundamental difference between them and us. To use human language to describe a dog's thoughts or emotions means you are already anthropomorphizing. Almondine is certainly rendered anthropomorphically – all I could do was give her a different kind

of language, more evocative of the way I imagine dogs experience the world — based in sensory impressions rather than linear thought.

What is interesting about living with dogs is watching how they address a situation that you are in jointly— discovering what is attractive to them, what is frightening to them. Trying to understand that makes me feel that I am living a fuller life. I get the benefit of their perception. When writing from a dog's point of view, conveying that sense of an expanded experience may be the best you can hope for.

CB: Some people believe it's just instinct that takes over in dogs. What do you think?

DW: More interesting questions are: Do dogs have imaginations? How do they solve problems? All animals have instincts. How far can dogs go beyond instinct?

In part, I look to basic research to answer those questions, and so much has changed in the last ten or fifteen years in academia. Our understanding of animal cognition has grown tremendously, both through the application of neuroscience and neuropsychology and through ethological studies of animals. It takes time, but those results do eventually filter out to dog owners. I can remember a time when "the department of dog science" was a joke in a cartoon I read. Today there are well-established university labs devoted to exactly that. I am a big fan of Temple Grandin, who wrote *Animals in Translation*, and more recently, *Animals Make Us Human*, and Patricia McConnell who wrote *The Other End of the Leash* and *For the Love of a Dog*. Both are outstanding at translating academic research into layman's terms.

CB: Is there anything you would like to see changed about dogs?

DW: Make them live longer! And, again, we need to understand more

about animal behavior and how to integrate that knowledge into breeding and training. By now there should have been a revolution in how dogs are bred and pedigreed. Pedigrees as a tool for evaluating dogs are essentially obsolete. Pedigrees are based on conformation in the show ring. But with today's technology it should be possible to develop software to evaluate and track dogs based on their behavior over the full course of their lives, not their height at their withers or whether they have a black spot on their tongues.

CB: You have said the Sawtelle dogs are a behavioral breed. Please talk about that.

DW: The basis for that came from reflecting back on my childhood, when my parents were raising dogs. I think of it as one of the best periods of my life. My parents were absolutely conscientious about their dogs. Our kennel was spotlessly clean, and they did everything they did with real care. In fact, I grew up with a lot of rescued dogs in the house because my parents would visit other kennels and bring home dogs they thought were being mistreated.

If I could go back in time and give my parents whatever was needed to help them continue the kennel, I believe they would have concentrated more on the training and the behavior of the dogs. It's a bit of revisionist history, giving Gar Sawtelle and his father, John, the chance to raise dogs the way my parents would have liked to.

CB: In the book you never stated specifically what breed of dog the Sawtelles raised. Was that omission on purpose?

DW: Yes, that was absolutely by design. I wanted readers to, in a sense, invent the dogs for themselves, out of their own experience. I had to learn this the hard way, though. Early on, when I workshopped drafts of the book, the dogs were a specific, well-known

breed. The responses to those workshopped pages were obviously limited by readers' experiences with, or preconceptions of, that particular breed of dog, which bothered me. Finally, I switched the Sawtelles to an imaginary breed, and the responses were entirely different. In retrospect it was an obvious move to make, but I stumbled upon it by accident.

CB: Can you expand on your ideas about wildness and domestication in dogs and in humans?

DW: That's a theme that arose gradually out of the writing. As the characters developed on the page, and as I thought about their relationship with the dogs and with one another, what interested me was how we think about ourselves as the ultimate domesticated animal. Yet this is a fallacy. Tenderness, caretaking, and nurturing behavior, which we identify as hallmarks of domesticity, all occur in the wild. And domestic behavior can sometimes be ferocious. The result of musing on this was a lot of duality in the book. Almondine is utterly domestic, but Forte cannot be brought in from the wild no matter what Edgar tries. Claude is practically as feral a human being as one can imagine, while his brother Gar loves order above all else. Even Edgar has two sides to his character. Part of his experience is reconciling what is wild in him with what is domestic.

This is why the Kipling Mowgli stories surface so often in Edgar's story. In *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli is forced to answer the question, "Am I an animal or am I a human being?" This balance, this dialectic, between what is domestic and what is wild exists in us all. We are both, at different moments in our lives. In *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, I was playing out that idea on a particular canvas.

CB: We understand that you are

working on another book about the Sawtelle family.

DW: Yes. As with Edgar I have a character I am in love with. He's John Sawtelle, and I am happily exploring his world. His is quite a different story than Edgar's, of course, but there's no better news for a writer than to find himself fascinated with a character he is going to be spending years with.

CB: Our final question: is there a dog in your life and what breed is it?

DW: Lola —she's a 90-pound lap dog! ■

David Wroblewski will be the featured author at Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway, on June 20th.

