



## The Year of the Dogs

### BOOK REVIEW



By William Peniston, MD

**What does a stubborn border collie herd when there are no sheep available?**

**A DOG YEAR** by Jon Katz. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 209 pgs., \$12.95.

JON KATZ STARTS THE YEAR WITH TWO relaxed yellow Labs, Stanley and Julius, that are so laid-back they're not even interested in dashing into the surf at the beach, like all good Labs should. He describes his dogs at the beach as "deeply spiritual beings, content to gaze at skittering sandpipers and ponder the state of the universe."

Because he's written books about dogs, he's been in an email discussion with a lady who breeds border collies while she's going to medical school. After she gets to know Jon, she starts telling him about a 2-year-old border collie, Devon, that was well-bred but high-strung and in big trouble.

The breeder had taken him back and was working to find him a home. She phones Jon and before long they are spending "hours on the phone."

She wasn't pushing him, "she kept saying, but she believed this dog belonged to me. She meant to make it happen."

She does make it happen, and therein lies the tale.

Katz describes, often in hilarious and sometimes poignant detail, his battles with this fiercely independent, iron-willed, smart, and erratically behaving dog, who also badly needed love. He also describes his own misgivings, shortcomings, and mistakes and how the two of them somehow managed to overcome all these problems and forge a wonderful relationship.

During this year of conflict several other important events occur. First, Stanley dies, or rather Jon has him euthanized because of fatal heart disease.

Then the breeder has a pup named Homer with "collie eye anomaly," a defect that wasn't serious but negated his being bred or shown. She sends Jon a photo and the resultant conversation between her and Jon is hilarious.

Of course, you know how it ends - the pup, Homer, joins Devon and Julius under Jon's care. Sometime after Homer's arrival Julius develops colon cancer and also has to be put down, so Jon ends the year with two very different dogs than when he started.

During those 12 months of Jon Katz's life, Devon, the proud and willful border collie, was clearly the central character, the most stubborn and dominant creature in the house, except for Jon.

He would herd school buses, knock out fence slats to get out and then replace them, open cupboard doors, run away in the forest, and move wrapped loaves of bread and piles of shoes to different rooms in the house without damaging them.

Most of this changed one day after Jon became infuriated with Devon's apparent insolence after trying to herd two buses.

Jon says, "I'd tried to keep that emotion in check. But that morning I was terrified at the sight of his nearly being run over by a bus. And I was worn down, physically and emotionally, from the miles of walks, the shouting and correcting, the eternal vigilance required to keep Devon from killing himself, driving the other dogs nuts, and wrecking our house."

This is an emotionally moving episode, so read the book to get the full impact.

[peniston@mcn.org](mailto:peniston@mcn.org)

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society  
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819  
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: [info@ssvms.org](mailto:info@ssvms.org)

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved