

# LO, HEAR THE GENTLE PIT BULL!

Real love has teeth

By Vicki Hearne

*Your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

*A disproportionately large number of pit bulls are able to climb trees.*

—Richard Stratton

A few years back, when I was living in California, I happened to be looking for a working dog, by which I mean a dog bred to think and to do a job, not just to look pretty while the cameras snap. So I put the word out among the dog people I know. Poodles, bouviers des Flandres, and the like were pretty low on my list, since I am not fond of grooming (though I should say that Airedales, which need a lot of grooming, are always high on my list). Doberman pinschers and boxers were pretty high on the list, as were English bull terriers. I was really just waiting for a dog with genuine class to show up. I would have looked at a cocker spaniel if someone reliable had told me of a good one.

I heard, eventually, of a litter of puppies in which there was a promising little bitch. They were pit bulls, or what are commonly called pit bulls, though pit bulls are often called by other names, and other breeds are often misidentified as pit bulls—all this a result of newspaper and television and word-of-mouth horror stories about pit bulls, which is what *this* story is about. Anyway, fighting breeds, of which the pit bull is one, were also high on my list, and the pups were within my price range. So I went to take a look. The bitch puppy looked as good in the flesh as she had been made to look in the story I had heard about her. I bought her and named her Belle, a name that may sound fancy to Yankee ears, but a good old down-home name for a nice bitch. In Belle's eyes there was (and is) a certain quiet gleam of mischief and joy; more than that, she had a general air that made it clear that I was going to be dealing with her on *her* terms—and that one of these might be an impulse to make a fool of me.

Belle is mostly white, with some reddish brindle here and there, including, over one eye, a patch that sometimes gives her a raffish air but at other times, when she has her dignity about her (which is about 99 percent of the

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time), makes her look like the queen of an exotic and powerful nation. Except for that gleam in her eye, she is fairly typical of her breed in that she is very serious about whatever she happens to be doing. I've had her going on three years now, and the most violent thing she has done is this: one day, when her pillows were in the wash, she went about the house appropriating everyone else's pillows. Not *all* of the pillows; only the newer, plumper, more expensive ones. She was quite young when she did this. Maturity has brought with it a sense of the importance of respecting the property rights of others.

In James Thurber's day there were a lot of horror stories around about bloodhounds, and he was exercised enough by these stories to write at least two pieces (including "Lo, Hear the Gentle Bloodhound!") defending these creatures. Of course no one these days believes bloodhounds eat up old ladies and nubile maidens. This, or something like it, is what people have come to believe about pit bulls, largely because of horror stories like the ones repeated on ABC's *20/20* one night last winter: "February 1984, Cleveland, Ohio. Police capture a pit bull terrier who attacked a two-year-old child at a bus stop. December 1984, Davie, Florida. This dog attacked a seven-week-old boy in his crib. The child later died. January 1985, Phoenix, Arizona. A fifty-year-old woman was attacked by her son's dogs when she tried to get into her own house."

These stories have a deceptively straightforward look about them; here, at least, it seems that we know what we're talking about. But it isn't at all clear what the stories are about (or *who* they are about), and I am exercised about this, and want to talk about the stories and about pit bulls.

**A** word about names. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida once remarked in a lecture about memory and mourning that we never know—that we die without being quite sure—what our proper names are. This is not always obvious to us, except perhaps in the case of some newlyweds. We do not generally feel puzzled or at a loss for an answer when someone asks, "What's your name?" The uncertainty Derrida spoke of is obvious, though, when we turn to the pit bull. There are a number of breeds that are related to the pit bull and are often confused with it. Among these are:

American pit bull dogs	Jack Russell terriers
English bull terriers	Staffordshire bull terriers
French bulldogs	Colored bull terriers
English bulldogs	

Often, in the horror stories published and broadcast and passed along in conversation, other breeds wholly unrelated to the pit bull are accused of being pit bulls. These include:

Doberman pinschers	Rottweilers
Boxers	Collies
Airedales	

I actually read a story about a "pit bull" who turned out to be a collie. The dog was supposed to have hurt a baby; he had not, though he did snap at the infant. When I protested to the newspaper editor that the dog was plainly a collie, the reply was: "But it could have been a pit bull."

The dog I left off the list of genuine relatives of the pit bull is the American Staffordshire terrier, which some American Staffordshire fanciers say is the same breed as the pit bull, as do some serious pit bull people; other members of both groups argue that the breeds are separate. If you own a pit bull, or something like a pit bull, and are tired (as I am) of people clutching their purses and babies and shying away from you whenever they see your dog, just tell them that what you have is an American Staffordshire terrier. Almost no one, so far as I know, is afraid of American Staffordshire terriers.



As for the names of the actual dog under discussion, the possibilities include:

Pit bull	American (pit) bull terrier
Pit bull terrier	American pit bull terrier
Bull terrier	American bulldog
American bull terrier	Bulldog

As to the history of the pit bull, it seems clear that at some point an Englishman bred a terrier with what is often referred to as an English bulldog. Involved in this history are bear baiting and bull baiting—especially the latter, as bulls were often baited with dogs before being killed as a way of tenderizing the meat for human consumption. Dog fighting, to the death in the pit, also figures in this history. If you were to try to write an actual history of the breed, you would have to find out which if any of the following names is a past name for the pit bull or an ancestor of the pit bull. Some of these are now the names of definite breeds; others are *probably* names for the pit bull that have passed out of use. Among these names are:

Irish pit terrier	Bandog
Catch dog	Hog dog
Bear biter	Southern hound
Boar hound	Neopolitan mastiff
Bull biter	Dogue de Bordeaux
Mastiff	Olde bulldogge
Bull mastiff	Argentine dogo
Molossian	Tosa-inu
Bear dog	Colored bull terrier

The United Kennel Club in Kalamazoo, Michigan, after much debating and many divorces, officially named the breed the American (pit) bull terrier. Affectionate owners call the dog simply pit. What pit bulls actually are, by the way, are bulldogs, though that is not the real name of the breed. And those dogs that *are* called bulldogs (including Handsome Dan, the mascot of the Yale football team) are not in fact bulldogs at all. They couldn't get a bull to behave if heaven depended on it for supper. (Still, I should say that Yale, in welcoming my pit bull, has warmed my heart.)

**I**t was in the early 1970s that the first of the horror stories about pit bulls appeared. I didn't see the original one—a product of the inflamed mind of a Chicago journalist, I am told—but as the story was passed along and picked up and reprinted, polished, and “improved” by every paper in the country, as far as I could tell (I was doing some traveling then), I got to read it often. In its various versions, the tale tended to tell of what natural people-haters pit bulls are—preferring the flesh of elderly women and infants—and of what dog-haters “pit men” are, pit men being those who breed and handle dogs for organized pit fighting. (Staged dogfights are illegal in all fifty states, and moving dogs across state lines for the purpose of fighting is a federal offense. Fights are organized clandestinely throughout the country.)

At first, I was mildly amused and not especially worried by these stories; I have trained dogs professionally, I know many dog people, and at the time my life was in this world, in which there are no horror stories about pit bulls. Indeed, in this world, pit bulls are generally recognized as an amiable, easygoing lot. If pit bulls have a flaw in their relationship to people it is that they sometimes show a tendency toward reserve, a kind of aloofness that is a consequence of their being prone to love above all else reflection and meditation. Pit bulls—not all of them, but some—often hang back in social situations they don't understand.

Pit men, who breed and train their dogs to kill others for sport—the fighting-dog men who know what they are about, anyway—will tell you that a pit bull fighter is not a man-hating animal; in fact, a man-hating animal is not likely to survive in the pit, is apt to be a coward, a fear-

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biter rather than a tough, gamely fighter. In truth, there are very few biters among pit bulls.

You have to know this about fighting dogs, or hunting dogs who take on opponents like mountain lions—any dog in whom the quality called gameness matters: in a true fighting dog there is no ill temper, no petty resentment. I once had an Airedale who was a visionary fighter, a veritable incarnation of the holy Law of the Jaw. (Never let go.) You could tell that Gunner was going into his fight mode by a certain precise and friendly wagging of the tail, a happy pricking of the ears, and a cheerful sparkle in the eye that quickly progressed to an expression of high trance. He was, when he wasn't fighting or thinking about fighting (he didn't think about it all of the time, only when it was appropriate), a dog of enormous charm and wit who never minded playing the fool.

One of the things he liked to do was to climb up the ladders of playground slides and then slide down, with a goofy, droll look in his eyes and his ears flying out. (He looked like a child playing at being an airplane.) His charm was often an annoyance: he always insisted on making an entrance and looking around happily for the cheering section. The only time I knew him to menace a human being happened when he was about a year old. It was late at night, and a man attacked me with a knife, a rather puny sort of knife. That man lost part of his nose and cheek and I don't know what else (it was dark).

**R**ichard Stratton, in *The World of the American Pit Bull Terrier* and elsewhere, writes about the development of the horror stories and their consequences, one of which has been the impounding and in some cases the destruction of pit bulls and other dogs. In San Diego not long ago the good citizens saw to it that an entire line of dogs, on whose development the owner had spent decades, was killed. Later, a court ruled that the killing of the dogs had been illegal, but the corpses of the dogs appear not to have been impressed by this development. Stratton writes of how this peculiar form of "humania" has caught on around the country:

In each case the approach was the same: the same stories as before were told, to which was added that certain states have very effective laws. Each state was assured that it was the center of dog fighting in America, and wasn't that a shameful "honor"? A news-media blitz characteristically preceded attempts at putting through legislation. In some states, penalties as high as ten years in prison were specified.

One of the standard elements in the horror stories is a gleeful account of how pit bull puppies are trained to be killers by starting them off on declawed kittens. The interesting thing here is that an authentic and intelligent admirer of good fighting dogs would find this an insult to the dogs and to the men who train them to fight—partly because most lovers of pit bulls are saps about animals of all sorts (often they hate hunting), and partly because they have a kind of Nietzschean sense of what counts as a worthy opponent (and kittens, declawed or otherwise, clearly are not). Someone like Richard Stratton would have deep contempt for anyone who would set a pit bull against a dog who was not a match. What Stratton and those like him say is roughly this: Look. We're talking about a dog who can stay the round with a porcupine. This dog doesn't need to practice on kittens.

Which is to say, the charge of cruelty to kittens is secondary to a more serious charge: the insult to the nobility and courage of a breed.

**I**t wasn't long after I got Belle, my pit bull, that she began to take an interest in the welfare and development of James, my year-old nephew. James would throw a plaything out of reach, and Belle would bring it back to him. James was entranced by this; soon he was spending most of his time throwing playthings out of reach. Belle, with a worried look about her, continued patiently to fetch them.

I must remind you of the seriousness of mind of this breed. It became clear after a short while that Belle was not just “playing fetch.” Pit bulls are never just doing *anything*. Belle began bringing James her dumbbell, which I use in training her, and which is not a plaything in her mind; more than that, she began attempting to get him to handle it correctly. This was only natural: Belle’s mother had been extremely devoted to the education of Belle and her litter-mates, and Belle takes her responsibilities seriously. She seems to feel that a necessary condition of fully developed humanhood is good dog-training skills; as I watched her trying to get James to hold the dumbbell properly, it dawned on me that she was trying to teach him to train *her*!

Belle’s behavior with James is related to a standard pit bull trait—a trait, for that matter, standard to all gamely dogs. If purity of heart is to will one thing, as Kierkegaard said it was, then these dogs have purity of heart. A less generous way of putting it is to say that they have one-track minds. Bill Koehler, the father of my friend Dick Koehler and one of the grandest animal trainers the world will ever know, warns owners of such dogs not to play ball with them in the house except on the ground floor, because if the ball goes out the window, so does the dog.

I was talking to Dick Koehler one day about how nice it is to have Belle around, but how hard it is to explain *why*. Dick, a dog trainer like his father, said, “Yeah, it’s hard to explain. They are so *aware*.” And that’s it, that’s the quality Belle radiates quietly but unmistakably: awareness of all the shifting gestalts of the spiritual and emotional life around her. She spends a lot of her time just sitting and contemplating people and situations (which is one reason some people are afraid of her). Since in her case this awareness is coupled with a deep gentleness—no bull-in-the-china-shop routines once puppyhood was over—Dick has urged me not to have her spayed, for a while at least.

Dick thinks Belle might be a good “foundation dam” for a line of dogs bred to work with the handicapped. Which brings up another aspect of the horror stories: they tend to be told about just those breeds that are the best prospects for work with, say, the old, or those in wheelchairs. Some readers may remember the stories about German shepherds “turning on their masters”—dogs with whom the safety of the blind can be trusted! I think that the same qualities that make these breeds reliable companions for the more difficult-to-care-for members of our species inspire the horror stories. Belle’s refusal to play with strangers who coo at her, which sometimes causes the strangers to fear her, is the quality that would make her reliable in a distracting situation if her quadriplegic master really needed her attentiveness.

Most dogs have an unusual amount of emotional courage in relationship to humans: they are willing and able to keep coming back; they have the heart to turn our emotional static back to us as clarity. But dogs who work with people with various disabilities, including the sort not always regarded as pathologies, such as an addiction to typewriters, need much more of this quality in order to do a proper job of being a dog. Someone who is, or who perceives himself to be, powerless will be querulous from time to time in his handling of a dog, and may occasionally be downright loony. The dog who can keep her cool and continue to do her job under such circumstances has to be more than just cuddly and agreeable, and certainly mustn’t have any heart-tugging spookiness in her makeup; such a dog must be prepared to *think* and act in the absence of proper guidance from the master and (as in the case of guide dogs) even in the face of wrong guidance. For such a dog, love doesn’t make a whole lot of sense outside the context of a discipline, a discipline in the older, fuller sense of that word, in which the context is the cosmos and not the classroom. What I am trying to say is, Real love has teeth. A dog with such a capacity to love is able to give the moral law to herself when her master (who, of course, runs the universe from the dog’s point of view) fails to act on the law of being.

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Pit bulls will often give themselves the moral law. One afternoon, while I was abstractedly working on something, I was startled into consciousness by Belle suddenly giving out, in place of the wimpy puppy-bark I had so far heard (she was about five months old at the time), a full-fledged, grown-up, I've-got-duties-around-here bark.

Investigation showed that the meter reader was going into the backyard by the side gate *without asking permission*. So I said, "What's up, Pup?" and put her on her leash and followed her outside to check the situation out. (This is part of the handling of a dog like Belle, a procedure designed to show respect for and encourage the dog's instinct to protect while making it clear that she must think and exercise judgment.) When we got outside I said, "Oh. That's just the meter reader, and you don't have to worry about him." Then, putting Belle on a "stand-for-examination"—an exercise in which the dog is not allowed to move toward or away from anyone or anything—I asked the meter reader to pet her.

He refused, saying that he was afraid of her. This worried me a bit, since Belle was only a puppy, and while it wasn't too early in her career for her to be barking at strangers who enter the premises without asking permission, she was too young to be seriously menacing anyone. So I asked if she had ever tried to bite him, or whatever.

He said that Belle had never bothered him, but that he carried liver treats with him on his rounds in order to "make friends" with the dogs, and the only dog who had refused his liver treats had been Belle. No, ma'am, she didn't growl or anything, just turned her head away.

I refrained from telling him how rapidly anyone who offers a bribe to a pit bull sinks in the dog's estimation, really plummets; I simply suggested that in the future he knock on the front door when he came to read the meter and I would make sure the dog was in the house. After that Belle, understanding the situation, announced his arrival with two precise barks and otherwise seemed content to let him do his job—though she did keep an eye on him.

The meter reader incident filled me with dog-owner pride; but it also made me aware of the responsibility I had assumed in taking on a dog who needed no training to know a bribe when she saw one. I don't mean that I am afraid she is going to bite me, but that any unfairness or sloppiness in the way I handle her will be made known to me.

What Belle has is an ability to act with moral clarity, and this is a result of having qualities that have to do with real love, love with teeth. Do we tell horror stories about dogs because it is love that horrifies us?

**T**raining Belle often seems astonishingly easy. This is not unusual with these dogs; I have friends with pit bulls who speak of having the sensation that they aren't so much training the dogs as reminding them of something. And yet there are people in other dog circles who wonder whether it is possible to train pit bulls (and dogs like them) at all. This is because these dogs are unresponsive to anything short of genuine training. Belle is as honest as daylight about her work, and because of that my training technique has had to improve a lot: she does not respond if I do something wrong. She is committed to her training, and she expects me to be; it is easy to mess these dogs up precisely because they know so much about how their training ought to go. Once I picked up Belle's leash and some other equipment, preparing to take her outside. But before I could get out the door, I got involved in a conversation—I got distracted. Belle barked three times, sharply, to remind me of my duties. It was a trivial conversation; she doesn't interrupt me when I'm giving my attention to something important.

When Belle was only a few months old I taught her that before she goes through any door to go outside, she must sit and wait for the release command. This was easy to do, as Belle takes to domestic order. Then I went

out of town for a week, leaving Belle—with her new sit-and-wait discipline—in the care of a friend. My friend is a splendid woman, no two ways about it, but she never has seen the point of training the poor dogs (as she puts it), who would rather be left alone. When I got back I was told that Belle, no matter how full her bladder was, resisted going through the door. My friend would swing open the door and expect Belle to skip through—despite the fact that I had told her about Belle's command. My friend tried coaxing and cooing her through the door. Belle would lie down flat, ears and tail low and immobile—a melancholy imitation of the Rock of Gibraltar being her usual response to coaxing, flattery, and insults.

I didn't travel again until I felt Belle had a little more experience under her belt; maturity makes all of us less vulnerable to the various inconsistencies life brings. While she was still young, it was possible to break her heart—and a broken-hearted pit bull was not something I wanted to have around. My decision to stay home with Belle, by the way, was less a comment on my temperament than on hers—and on the way pit bulls inspire devotion. And this is why the ladies and gentlemen who want to exterminate pit bulls may win some battles but will never win the war.

**B**elle was still a puppy, and not a very big one—three months old, maybe fifteen pounds—the first time I took her to the campus of the University of California at Riverside, where I was teaching. I went into the department office with Belle at heel, and one of the secretaries was so struck with terror that she couldn't speak. It was the horror stories, of course. A friend came in, assessed the situation, and asked the secretary, "What's wrong, Frieda?"

"Tha . . . tha . . . that . . . dog!"

"But it's only a puppy."

"That doesn't matter with these dogs. They're born killers."

Belle was by now looking at the secretary in uneasy puzzlement; just a puppy, she didn't know anything about the horror stories. But now she had had her first lesson. I suspect that some pit bulls, once they come to grips with the horror stories, do start biting people who send out the wrong signals. Belle, as it happens, didn't start biting, and very few pit bulls do, but I wouldn't have blamed her if she had.

Anyway, for months, whenever Frieda's path and mine crossed on campus she would sidle along a wall, as far from Belle as she could get, or duck into the nearest doorway until we were safely past. Frieda would behave, in short, like a guilty woman; and dogs, like people, figure that behavior of this sort is suspicious. So Belle, because of the damned horror stories, is more wary than she would otherwise have been.

Then there are the horror stories about me: Belle is plainly the outward sign of my inner viciousness. Some of the expressions of this get back to me: "Oh, yes. Vicki Hearne. She has a very repressive ideology. She keeps a pit bull, you know." Also: "Vicki is a threat to the collegiate atmosphere, with that dog of hers." This may be true, since I don't know what a collegiate atmosphere is. And of course there is: "She *delights* in harboring vicious animals."

In time, though, Belle herself began effecting changes in these stories. The serenity and sweetness she radiates is so strong that it can't help but be felt by all but the most distant of the tale-tellers. So recently what I have started hearing is, "Vicki, I don't know where you get off thinking that's a vicious dog. That dog wouldn't hurt a butterfly; a real patsy if I ever saw one!" Or: "Vicki likes to think she's tough, but I'll bet she can't bring herself to give a grade lower than B+, and just look at that mushy dog of hers!"

It is this, the way the horror stories can so easily flip over, that suggests that we are on to something. "That dog wouldn't hurt a butterfly" and "born killer" are part of the same logical structure, the same story—an

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insight I owe largely to Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, in which he writes:

The role of Outsider might be played, say in a horror movie, by a dog, mankind's best friend. Then the dog allegorizes the escape from human nature (required in order to know of the existence of others) in such a way that we see the requirement is not necessarily for greater (super-human) intelligence. The dog sniffs something, a difference, something in the air. And it is important that we do not regard the dog as honest; merely as without decision in the matter. He is obeying his nature, as he always does, must.

It is important to tellers of dog horror stories that "we do not regard the dog as honest; merely as without decision in the matter." The dog has no moral dimension: *that* is the hidden and stinging part of the logic of these stories.

Consider the falseness of "wouldn't hurt a butterfly." As it happens, Belle would nail anyone who threatened me seriously, and right now. Notice that I said *seriously*—she wouldn't do anything to a guy who just grabbed my arm and wanted to talk. What I have been saying about this dog is that she has extraordinarily good judgment, which means that I do "regard the dog as honest," and not as "without decision in the matter." So, she is not obeying her nature in the way, say, that a falling stone is obeying its nature. She is not morally inert.

I would like to talk briefly about a painting titled *I'm Neutral, But Not Afraid of Any of Them*, dated 1914 and signed by Wallace Robinson. It depicts the heads of five dogs. From left to right are: English bulldog, German dachshund, American pit bull terrier, French bulldog, Russian wolfhound. Each dog is wearing the uniform of his country, and the pit bull, which not only is in the center but is also larger than the others, has an American flag tied sportively around his neck. It is the pit bull who is saying, "I'm neutral, but not afraid of any of them." This is plainly part of a story America was telling itself about the war in Europe. It was a story *about* Americans. In a tight spot, it was not such a bad story to be telling. The pit bull here, as in many other places (Thurber's tales and drawings, or Pete the Pup of *Our Gang*), is an emblem of what it used to be possible to think of as American virtues: independence, ingenuity, cooperation, a certain rakish humor, the refusal of the aristocratic pseudo-virtues of Europe.

These values and visions have failed; the new stories about pit bulls are also stories about Americans, about an America that seems to have gone out of its mind—about how skittish, and dangerously so, we have become. And it is not only in the "text" of the pit bull that this can be read. I am addicted to dog stories of all sorts—the most awful, sentimental children's tale will do. These stories have changed as radically as the stories about pit bulls. Most of the older dog stories were not written with Thurber's canny intelligence and humor, but in them there were generally children, and a dog, and the children learned from the dog's courage, loyalty, or wit how to clarify their own stances in the world. In the new sort of story, the initial situation is the same—the dog remains for the child the only point of emotional clarity in a shifting world. But today there is the possibility that halfway through the book the dog will be poisoned.

Dick Koehler and his father and hosts of other trainers, including the monks of New Skete, a Franciscan order (see their book, *How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend*), speak contemptuously of the "humaniacs" who babble about "affection training" and the dog "who only needs understanding." These trainers' contempt for kindness is a Nietzschean maneuver; it is not kindness itself that is being refused, but rather the word "kind," because the word has become contaminated.

But "kind" is a good word, and I find myself wanting it back. I don't have room here to do a full job of reclaiming it, but I can at least recall that



the word has a history. C.S. Lewis has more than once discussed the history of "kind"; this is from *The Discarded Image*:

In medieval science the fundamental concept was that of certain sympathies, antipathies, and strivings inherent in matter itself. Everything has its right place, its home, the region that suits it, and, if not forcibly restrained, moves thither by a sort of homing instinct:

*Every kindly thing that is  
Hath a kindly stede there he  
may best in hit conserved be  
Unto which place everything  
Through his kindly enclining  
Moveth for to come to.*

(Chaucer, *Hous of Fame*, II, 730 sq.)

Thus, while every falling body for us illustrates the "law" of gravitation, for them it illustrated the "kindly enclining" of terrestrial bodies to their "kindly stede" the Earth, the center of the Mundus. . . .

What I would like to say is this: to be kind to a creature may mean being what we call harsh (though not cruel), but it always means respecting the *kind* of being the creature is, and the deepest kindness is the natural kind, in which your being is matched to the creature's, perhaps by a kindly inclining.

Understanding kindness in this way leads to an understanding that it is about as cruel to match pit bulls against each other in properly regulated matches as it is to take healthy greyhounds out for runs. In making that remark I do not imagine that I have settled the issue, only gestured at what a complicated matter it would be to raise it properly. And I don't intend to fight Belle, even though I understand that a breeding program managed by

knowledgeable people who breed their fighters only from dogs showing gameness and stamina in properly managed pit fights can be as fine a thing as human beings are capable of.

**P**erhaps it is time for me to say emphatically that my praise of pit bulls should not be construed as advice that anyone should rush out and get one. They do like to fight other dogs, and they are, as you must realize by now, a tremendous spiritual responsibility. For example, once it turned out that I hadn't worked with Belle on retrieving for three days. I was lazing about, reading in bed, on the left side of the bed. Belle brought me her dumbbell and stared at me loudly. (Pit bulls can stare loudly without making a sound.) I said, "Oh, not now Belle. In a few minutes." She dumped the dumbbell on top of the book I was reading, put her paws up on the edge of the bed, and bit my hand, very precisely. She took the trouble to bite my *right* hand, even though my left one hung within easy reach. She bit, that is, the hand with which I throw the dumbbell when we are working. A gentle bite, I should say, but also just. An inherently excellent moment of exactitude: love with teeth.

Pit bulls give you the opportunity to know, should you want so terrible a knowledge, whether your relationships are coherent; whether your notion of love is a truncated, distorted, and free-floating bit of the debris of Romanticism or a discipline that can renew the resources of consciousness.

If you're ready for it, and can find a *real* dog trainer to help you figure out what you're doing, then go to. But be prepared. When these dogs are in motion, they are awesome. Still, for most people, this awesomeness is not the most hazardous trait. There is something more subtle. If, for example, your boss comes over for dinner and coos at your dog or perhaps offers her an hors d'oeuvre, and the dog regards him impassively or turns away, the boss's feelings will be hurt, and your job may be in jeopardy. Moreover, if the boss later gets tipsy and tries to insult your dog, he will get the same treatment. And, be sure your spouse or lover is not the sort of person whose feelings will be so hurt. The dog, remember, has the power to compel your loyalty. ■

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