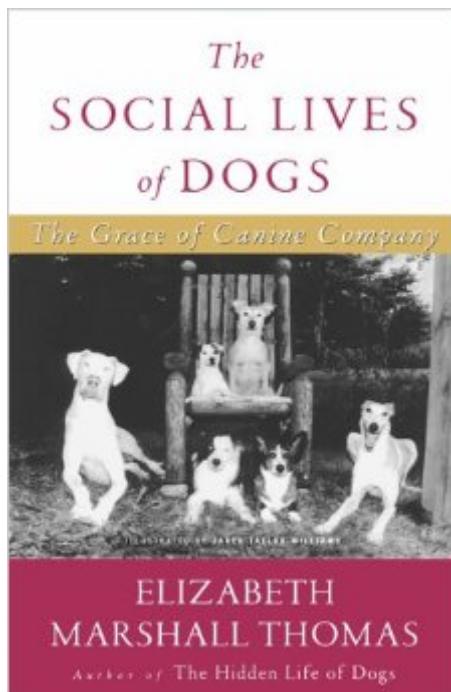


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# The Social Lives Of Dogs



## Synopsis

In her absorbing bestseller, *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas provided fascinating answers to the question "What do dogs want?" It turns out that more than anything, they want the company of other dogs. Now, in this frank and moving sequel, she explores how, despite this desire, they have beautifully adapted to life with their human owners. If they can't belong to a group with similar dogs, they will establish or join one with other members of the household, whether those members are men, women, children, other dogs of different ages and breeds, cats, or birds. And, contrary to our assumptions that we wield the power in our relationships with our dogs, it is they who are teaching us new behaviors -- even settling disputes in ways we are unaware of. No one writing today about dogs and people has Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's skills as a classically trained anthropologist and popularizer. What she has observed and analyzed will be illuminating to all of us who have wondered about our pets' behavior. Do dogs have different barks that mean different things? How does Snoopy recognize as family people he sees only once a year? And why does Misty bark at strangers she sees every day? What factors contribute to making a dog difficult to house-train? Why do certain dogs and cats get along so well? How do animals train each other? Thomas explores these questions by taking us into the mixed-species groups of her own household, particularly the lives of her remarkable dogs, with their differences in breeding, early training, and personality. Misty, a purebred, had been kept in a crate, alone, for most of her first year; lonely and insecure, she was afraid of grass and stairs, which she had never seen. Ruby was abandoned, having been pronounced untrainable. Pearl had lived with Thomas's son in his large household, and on her arrival at Thomas's house, she behaved like the well-mannered, self-possessed being she was. And Sundog, the most loyal, self-confident, courageous of all, accepted the arrival of each of these new dogs, but had made a group consisting of himself and Thomas's husband, so the others sorted themselves out without him. Each of these dogs, like any other, wanted more than anything to belong to a group, and how they organized themselves into felicitous relationships without any input from their owners is the most compelling of Elizabeth Thomas's many findings. Few dogs get to live with their chosen loved ones; they are slaves to our desires. We convince ourselves, however wrongly, that we know what's best for them. *The Social Lives of Dogs* presents marvelous evidence of the power of the group. And those of us fortunate enough to be given the trust of any honorable dog will have our lives enlarged.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A savvy TV producer once invited New Hampshire author Elizabeth Marshall Thomas to host a local cable show for the Humane Society. Her job was to introduce four animals in need of homes; an unruly dog with an incontinence problem, two feral kittens and one normal cat. Thomas adopted all four of them. Anthropologist, novelist, and animal lover, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas writes of dog behavior with sympathy, insight and considerable humor. Following her bestseller, "The Hidden Life of Dogs" (which explored dog-with-dog culture), "The Social Life of Dogs," examines dog adaptation to human households, or, in the Thomas case, a multiple-species household. At the time the book opens, Thomas and her husband, Steve, had three old dogs left from "The Hidden Life of Dogs" pack and didn't want any more. Steve "didn't want another animal of any description" and Elizabeth, while "always open to another dog," plans to wait until the old dogs died before getting an adult dog she can learn from, an Indian dog from Northern Canada, say, or a pariah dog from a Third World village. What she doesn't want is the white dog who quietly appears and won't leave - an American purebred cross. Thomas does not approve of purebreds. "The important features of a dog are his brains and his persona," not looks. Still, unable to find the dog's owners, after a few days Thomas begins to ask herself, "what, after all, is really so wrong with a few purebred strains?" And so begins her relationship with Sundog, the animal whose ashes will someday be mingled with her and Steve's. Her descriptions of Sundog's adoption of human mannerisms (the three old dogs rejected him totally) - his sharing of food, for instance, are touching and fascinating. Although Sundog did not like popcorn, the ritual of sharing was important to him - a kernel for Sundog, a kernel for Steve - until the bowl was empty. One evening Steve wanted to read without interruption. When Sundog

took his usual chair at the table, Steve said "no" and put a handful of popcorn on the floor. Sundog, hurt, left the room. Although they swiftly followed him with the bowl, entreating him to return, Sundog never touched popcorn again and never returned to the table to share. The next dog was a purebred (for what reason Marshall does not explain) purchased as a companion for Sundog. Having spent her first year of life without stimulation in a crate, the dog is a mess and Thomas buys her out of pity. Sundog rejects her. Misty's difficulties teach Marshall a great deal about the importance of early learning and Misty's insecurities about keeping "place two" lead to behavioral difficulties with visitors (canine or human), incoming cats and, especially, incoming dogs. The third dog, Pearl, came from Marshall's son in Colorado and furnishes much of the book's hilarity and color. Protective, kindly and dignified, she disarms aggressive Misty by respectfully ignoring her furious antics. Over a period of four months she trains Marshall to rise at 4:30 am. She barks at everything and on a trip to the city barks herself hoarse at the strange cars until forced to take refuge on the floor. Distracted by the barking, late for a book signing, Marshall parks on an unfamiliar street and dashes to the bookstore, asking directions on the way. Only afterwards does she realize she has no idea whatsoever where the car might be. Marshall's description of Pearl's quick grasp of the situation and her take-charge solution is second only to the story of Pearl's knocking her headlong down a flight of stairs which ends, "Who could resist such a dog?" When Marshall uses radio collars to find out what the cats are hunting (one is hurrying each morning to harrass a housebound cat through a window), Pearl accompanies her. When a radio collar fails, Pearl somehow deduces the problem and leads Marshall to the unappreciative feline. The fourth dog is the incontinent, cat-chasing, chicken-killing Ruby, rescued from the Humane Society. Since her behavior is primarily unbearable to the other animals, Rajah the alpha cat and Rima the macaw train her swiftly, with none of Marshall's inexhaustible patience. But Marshall delivers more than a collection of fascinating, poignant, hilarious anecdotes (though there is the rabbit who hunts squirrels with its dog companion, the birds who scold the dogs and summon the cats in Marshall's voice). A thoughtful, meticulous observer, she shares compelling insights into animal behavior, the social workings of groups (her own menage breaks down into smaller, multi-species units), and common difficulties with training. So who is this book for? Dog lovers, obviously. But even dog fascists (her term) will appreciate the scope and grace of Marshall's writing, her abundant personality and forceful, controversial opinions. While focused primarily on dog behavior, the book is a delightful memoir of a very large, multi-species family, complete with belly laughs and tears.

Who could be better qualified to write about the hearts, minds and souls of dogs than Elizabeth

Marshall Thomas? Not only is she the celebrated anthropologist who was the first to chronicle the lives of the Bushmen; not only has she studied and published scientific and popular articles on animals from African elephants to Arctic wolves; but she quite literally grew up among dogs. As we learn in the first captivating sentences of this splendid, surprising book, one of her most attentive caretakers as a child was a Newfoundland dog, whose job, as the dog saw it, was to keep the helpless human child from drowning in the sea while the dog's group, her family, lived at the beach. The dog was actually her nanny, writes Thomas--the sort of insight that at once makes perfect sense and yet takes one's breath away, and the sort of insight that characterizes this book. The Social Lives of Dogs is as wide-ranging and as deep as Thomas' best-selling *The Hidden Life of Dogs*. That book asked the simple and profound question: What do dogs want? The answer: other dogs. But the social grace of dogs is such that they are capable of forming deep, lasting, complex and highly individualized relationships with many species other than their own (including birds, who are, as Thomas points out, more closely related to dinosaurs than to dogs), and this is the fertile ground explored in this riveting new book. In it, we meet a great new cast of characters: brave, stoic, soldierly Sundog, a former stray; Misty, a victim of AKC breeding who grew up in a crate and didn't understand grass; curly-tailed Pearl, who made an art of barking. The Thomas household is, as she writes, a "churning cauldron" of (at its high point) five dogs, a dozen cats, five parrots and a varying number of people. There's a dog-chasing cat named Rajah and a cat-biting cockatoo named Carmen. These animals don't always behave in the ways we think they "should"--they are far too creative, inventive and individual. And that's the delight of their keenly-observed stories--stories which collectively form a rich biography of their relationships with one another. Although *The Hidden Life of Dogs* was highly praised by some of the world's top animal behaviorists, including George Schaller, in some circles the book was controversial, as *The Social Lives of Dogs* will surely be. A few scientists still consider the mere suggestion that animals think is "anthropomorphic." But for the rest of us, who know that non-human as well as human animals may enjoy rich inner lives, this book offers profound evidence that our closest animal friends still surprise us--and have much to teach us about social graces.

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