

# Digging at the AKC library

Michael Brandow ponders the social and psychological motivations behind the cult of showing and breeding purebred dogs and takes a swipe at the questionable science behind matching breeds to personalities and lifestyles...

Writing a history of pedigree dogs, I spent many months buried with dusty old books, paintings and assorted artifacts in the American Kennel Club's opulent library and art collection on Madison Avenue. Privileged to be in the company of vintage classics handsomely bound and gilded, giant porcelain Great Danes, and JP Morgan's silver cups from pageants past, after long stretches of reading and note-taking from rare editions that were sometimes more valuable as objects than as source material, I paused to contemplate one of the most recherché relics of all.

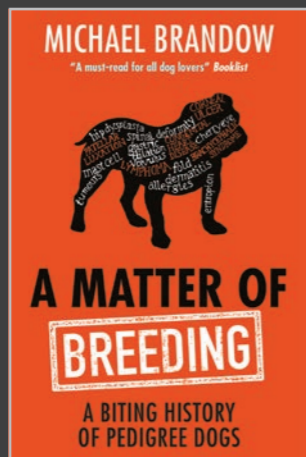
Truly one-of-a-kind was the intact skeleton of a famous Fox Terrier, encased in a glass sarcophagus at the end of the oblong table where I sat studying for hours on end. A morbid artifact typical of Victorian England, the mortal frame of Belgrave Joe stood testament to his line's path to show ring perfection – the ultimate reason for the AKC having this treasure trove in the first place.

Oddly enough, before Joe was put on permanent display in a cabinet of curiosities, apart from one brief public appearance while still kicking, he was not a show dog at all. Well born to another English tradition of the highest calibre – the illustrious Belvoir Hunt attended by generations of aristocracy and hangers-on – Joe was extracted from his pack, retired from the lowly purpose of going to ground and ferreting foxes from their dens.

Chaperoned by a fashionable breeder of standardised types for winners' circles and socialites' front parlours, Joe was set upon the nobler pursuit of breeding for



Michael Brandow's most recent book is *A Matter of Breeding: A Biting History of Pedigree Dogs and How the Quest for Status Has Harmed Man's Best Friend*



an idealised nose length. A closer look at his profile reveals this mutation just beginning to emerge, a trait superfluous and unneeded for earth work, or anything else a dog might do, other than give the judges something more to measure, the AKC another random standard to uphold, and at-home collectors another reason to think they owned something special.

One day, deep in digging, I released a page that crumbled in my hand, raised my eyes from a musty tome, and turned to Joe for inspiration. An important looking gentleman entered the library with two guests, who were apparently receiving the royal tour of the corporate collection. Some master connoisseur of canine artifacts, he directed his visitors' attention, first to Joe forever begging for attention, then to the opposite wall and a painting of another momentous Fox Terrier, Ch Normay Saddler.

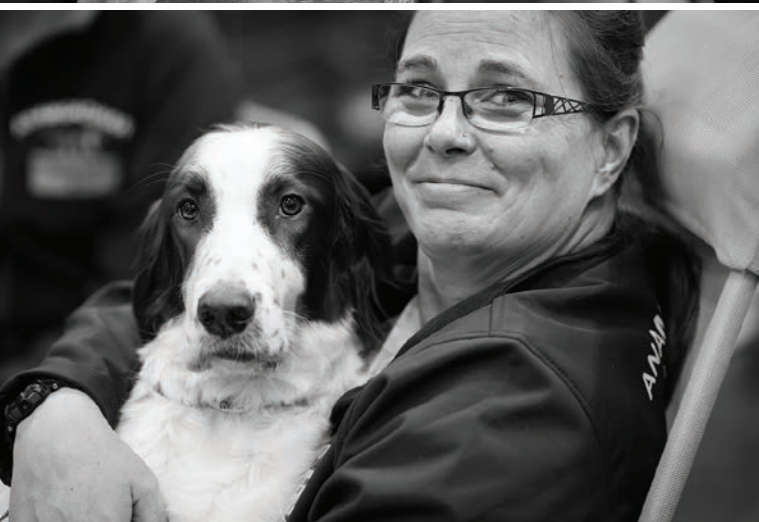
Standing there, in two dimensions, was the fruit of Joe's heroic humping and all the good breeding that ensued. Fifty-two years and x generations after progenitor Dog Adam had bitten the dust, Saddler posed proudly at the end of a path to perfection initiated the day ancestral Joe was relieved of active field work. A striking profile displayed a beak

that had grown remarkably long, a whim pursued to its fullest expression, the pinnacle of surplus snout snootiness – never a functional anatomy, lest we forget, or needed for anything other than being 'essential', as the judges say.

Saddler, the two-time prize winner, stood against an illustrated English country landscape of lush grass where foxes might be chased, a milieu that Saddler, being a



Penelope Malby's photography from Crufts quietly catalogues the human-canine bond at the biggest dog show in the world, where everyone thinks their dog is Best in Show, despite what the judge may say.



fully refined and 'improved' show version, certainly never frequented. Nor did this fancy fellow ever dirty his paws digging the partially exposed foxhole seen in the distance.

The tour ended, the people dispersed, and I went on to learn that Belgrave Joe and Nornay Saddler weren't the only dogs preserved for posterity. The earliest New York dog shows actually featured stuffed canine carcasses, even pickled pups in jars, to edify the public on 'correct' conformation.

Back in England, where this hair-splitting fussbudgetry began, and many of the modern commercial breeds to which we've grown attached were first packaged, Charles Cruft added to his competitions separate categories for taxidermy dogs. Animals could be entered as mere husks of their former selves and win prizes, like the live versions in the ring, just by standing and looking as they should. It didn't matter if entries were breathing or not, so long as they lived up to formal expectations.

Straining to keep my thoughts outside the box, or the frame, I had another revelation. Not only were dogs sometimes valued more as objects than companions – or sentient creatures with basic needs and rights – Nornay Saddler's cartoon schnoz wasn't the first, or last, feature to be imposed with no benefit to the dogs themselves. The codex of 'allowable' traits, guarded by the AKC and Kennel Club as though handed down from heaven, has grown to include a mind-boggling list of cosmetic concerns against which entries are weighed each year at Westminster and Crufts.

Standardised breeds, no longer bred to perform useful tasks, have arbitrary coat styles; matching eye shades and nose coloration; ear, tail and foot specifications – enough to frustrate all but the most patient scholar. Ears have been abridged or extended to bizarre extremes. Faces are flattened before our eyes. Heads swell like balloons and eyes pop out. Backs are stretched like rubber bands. Hips are crushed to new lows. Legs are dwarfed and twisted like bonsai branches. All of this to keep pushing the envelope, give contestants more ways to win, and sell people more styles for sidewalk display.

#### BRAVE NEW DOG WORLD

Nearly a century and a half since this business of showing and showing off began, the catalogue selection of breeds has grown to such voluminous length that anyone hoping to buy a dog is easily confused. Consumers ready to walk that fine line between standing out on the pavement and blending in with the crowd are advised to do research to find the brand that best suits their personality and lifestyle (assuming theirs are as unique and special as breeds are uniformly supposed to be). An 'essential' or 'predictable' trait often translates into something as simple as coat colour, or some odd behavioural tic fans have come to identify with their brand of choice. Making the right selection in dogs, the experts say, is not that simple.

So we're offered another selection, not of breeds, but of 'how to find the perfect breed to match your personality and lifestyle' books. Part hobby guides for people in need of an activity, part Victorian etiquette manuals for the socially insecure, these range from lists of fashion tips on the latest dogs du jour, to more 'scientific' texts, claiming to eliminate guesswork by matching an

entire breed of dogs to an exacting customer, the way dating services claim to match people for compatibility.

As dear old desiccated Joe the Fox Terrier in his glass case might be confused with a display in a natural history museum, the serious-sounding title of *Encyclopedia of the Dog* by vet Bruce Fogle would have us believe simple commercial products with random and superficial distinctions are natural. Standard coat colours (anything less being substandard) are shown in small rectangles, like fabric swatches in a clothing catalogue.

#### COAT OF MANY CULLERS

A more extensive AKC 'encyclopedia' would show that French Bulldogs come in one of nine varieties of coat colour including fawn, brindle, and white – but never fawn, brindle and white – to be worthy of walking. Proper Pugs are limited to fawn and basic black. Correct Dachshies are restricted to three coat types and 12 colour combos including wheaten, blue and tan, chocolate and cream, wild boar, and Isabella (which sounds like a designer paint colour). Chesapeake Bay Retrievers must fall within a spectrum of eight values based on tan, brown, sedge and deadgrass (no markings allowed), while the Shar Pei should be coated in chocolate dilute, apricot dilute, five point red dilute, cream, or 14 other flavours. Labs must be upholstered in yellow, black or chocolate. Bruce Fogle's personal favourite, the Golden Retriever, must be dipped in gold.

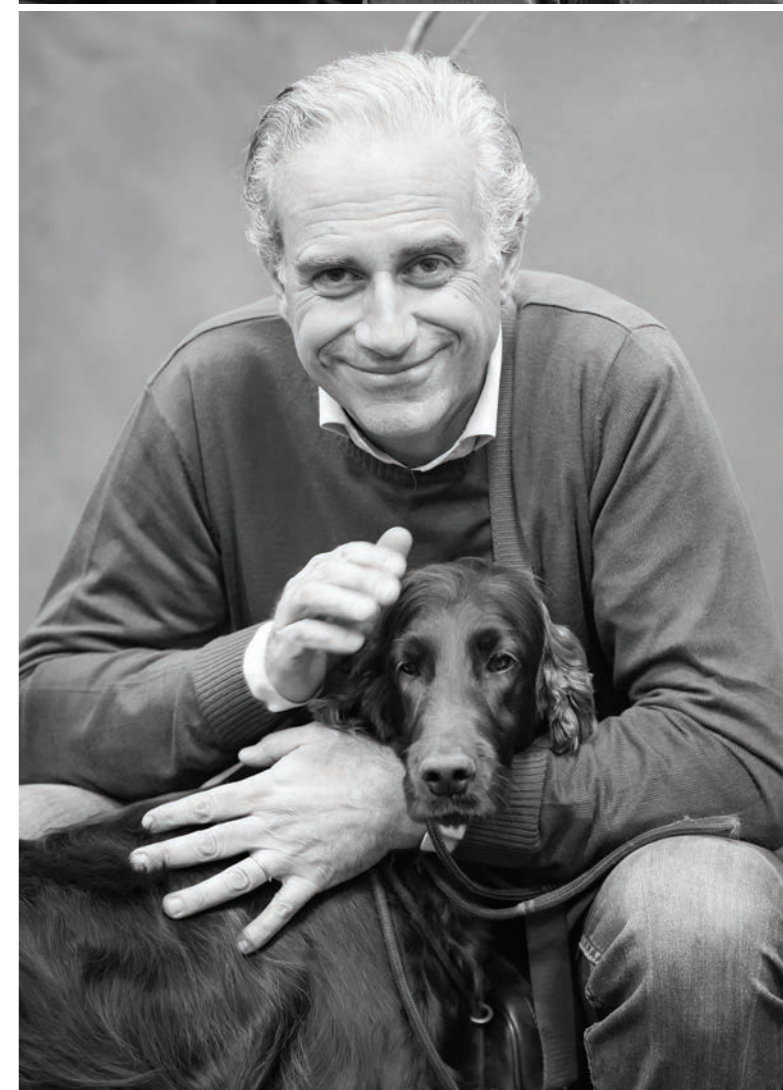
Psychologist Stanley Coren's *Why We Love the Dogs We Do: How to Find the Dog That Matches Your Personality* tries to start consumers thinking beyond the narrow types as defined by kennel clubs and the distinctions created for no reason other than to have distinctions. The goal, a laudable one, is to have us see dogs in groups of related breeds that can sometimes share certain behavioural traits that may or may not agree with us personally.

Consumers have long been misled to believe standardised types are unique and indispensable with outward features corresponding to the inner qualities of the dogs (and ourselves). As we know from the so-called Fox Terrier's decorative muzzle, this takes a stretch of the imagination many are eager to take when seeking something unique with which they can identify.

Inasmuch as psychology can be called a science, Coren uses it to match shoppers' self-defined personality types to dogs with complementary (and complimentary) traits. This is the 'foolproof' way of finding the right dog for you. As for the 'personalities' of the dogs listed in Coren's book, surveys are supplied from a sampling of 'experts' – including the show ring folk so attentive to matters of form, not function, like that needless nose in the Nornay Saddler portrait.

As often happens in psychology, consensus becomes data. In fact, Coren was at the time of writing this book also the proud owner of a fake historical replica breed called a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, created only recently and based on court paintings from the time of Charles II. He calls the Cau 'Queen Victoria's favourite dog' in a caption to a painting made a century before the breed – or rather, the brand – even existed.

Despite several chapters on why we *should* love a particular type of dog, and a lengthy statistical model in the appendix, science seems to go out the window





when ‘Coren illustrates his findings with tales of famous humans and their dogs, including royalty, celebrities, presidents, artists and writers’. If all else fails, shoppers can select a famous personality already mythologised beyond recognition, then buy that public figure’s pet favourite as a demonstration of their own individuality. John F Kennedy liked Welsh Terriers, and if you identify with JFK then you, too, will like that breed. Steinbeck had a thing for Poodles. Freud favoured the Chow Chow. If you think Corgis are the cutest, chances are you share something intimate with the Queen of England.

#### SCENT OF A PUPPY

After ‘personality’, the other consideration when using dogs for self-expression is ‘lifestyle’, and Ted Kerasote recounts the process of finding the perfect pooch to fit his own. Having loved, and lost, a wonderful mongrel named Merle with no pre-approved features, the author of *Pukka’s Promise* hopes to help us, and himself, use science to maximise the chances of finding a healthy dog with a hefty lifespan. He turns, not to animals available at his local shelter, but to standard breeds produced by society’s ‘reputable’ breeders at great distances. Assuming that buying a dog near or far is the ethical or even rational choice for consumers to make, Kerasote provides advice to those who still believe that every step in selecting a best friend must be carefully mapped out.

Kerasote criticises the AKC’s ‘dysfunctional breed standards’, and for this he should be commended. But like the methods of Coren and Fogle, his is coloured with subjective, and superficial, concerns about dogs. A close reading reveals that well before Kerasote set out upon his months-long investigation into coefficients of inbreeding, vertical and horizontal pedigrees, and puppy aptitude tests, he had already decided to accept nothing less than a purebred Labrador in the precise shade of reddish-brown, or ‘rufous’, that his heart and mind were firmly set upon.

Kerasote’s ‘test’ of littermates to find the perfect pup for his lifestyle is both educational and chilling. At the tail end of his painstaking research, he selects his dog from a small circle of finalists, and writes:

I made one more test. Lying on the grass with my two leading candidates – the rufous puppy and his slightly lighter brother – I put my nose into their ruffs. The darker puppy smelled rich – like lanolin with a hint of nuts – a faint remembrance of Merle, of hounds, of Golden Retrievers. The lighter pup smelled clean and white, bordering on scentlessness. I wondered if on some unconscious level, some pheromonal level, I had been drawn to the darker pup for this very reason. I’ve always trusted my nose when it comes to decisions of the heart, and it’s one of the reasons I so admire dogs and the shameless priority they put upon smell, among all our senses the most difficult to fool.

Not unlike bestseller Gregory Berns (another fan of Golden Retrievers), who claims to know just what dogs are feeling with an MRI machine, or Konstantin Korotkov, the Russian scientist who said he captured the human soul on camera, Kerasote’s test of hopeful candidates doesn’t sound very scientific. It reads more like a wine-tasting event. The connoisseur who once held Merle the mutt holds up purebred puppies, like glasses of Merlot,

one by one to examine their scent and colour, and then waxes poetic on their qualities. The lighter sample runs back into his kennel, which Kerasote takes as a sign that the richer shade snuggled close against his chest – the one he’d wanted all along – is, indeed, the best for him.

Is it conceivable that the undesirable pup, having been dissected under harsh light, sensed, perhaps even smelled, he was disliked from the onset of this ordeal and decided to call it a day? And how much of Kerasote’s ‘research’ might amount to self-fulfilling prophecy? Whether Pukka lives up to his promise of health, longevity or anything other than coat colour, we may never know. The same press that gives feel-good reviews of dog books doesn’t follow up with sad news that would upset our preconceptions about dogs.

A less uppity realm of dog lovers can be found far below the towering offices on Madison Avenue where the AKC guards its paintings, statuary and Olympian ideals on coat colour and blood purity. Living, not showing off, on the sidewalk, homeless people also have dogs, but don’t have the luxury of consulting art or science when finding the perfect companion to fit their personalities and lifestyles. Unlike connoisseurs with educated palates, they must be satisfied with whatever castaways come their way. And satisfied customers they are.

#### WHEREVER I LAY MY CAT...

Polled is this other panel of ‘experts’, as they’re called in *My Dog Is My Home*, an online exhibit of the National Museum of Animals & Society. Stripped of all the symbols of status, of almost every comfort and necessity, these authorities seem to appreciate some of the basics dogs provided us for aeons before pet shops, registries, and blue ribbons.

“I’m always with my animals and I feel like something’s wrong when I don’t have them with me,” says a man named Spirit of his scruffy terrier mix, Miniaga, and his Pit-perhaps-Lab blend, Kyua.

“My dog *is* my home,” another man is not afraid to say. “He keeps me warm when it’s cold and gives me somebody to talk to when I’m walking down the highway.”

“You can have my backpack,” says a woman named Maggie with a Labbish mix called Dixie. “You can have all my money. You can have whatever I have. But it doesn’t matter what you take from me. I’ll always have my dog.”

A man known as Jedd is seen with Alice, a mix only distantly related to the fully perfected Fox Terrier seen in pet shop windows. “She’s my heart,” he testifies. “She’s there for me.”

Brigitte, who lost her home after she developed mental health problems following the death of her son, has a little rescue dog who can safely be labelled a Maltese, which comes in any colour so long as it’s white. “She makes me feel like I have a reason to be here,” Brigitte says in praise of her friend, Nubian.

Months later, we see Brigitte and Nubian with a new lease of life in their own studio apartment provided by assisted housing.

“Less is more,” Brigitte says, reflecting upon her lifestyle before and after tragedy. “I got my girl and we go for walks and we eat – that’s it. You know, I don’t need all that stuff any more.” 🐾

