

# Dog's Best Friend

Learning on four legs (or three)

**SIGHT HOUND**, fiction by Pam Houston. W.W. Norton, 2005. Hardcover, \$23.95.

In the handful of glowing blurbs on the back cover of Pam Houston's first novel, Maxine Kumin says, "This is a dangerous book. Don't read it unless you have ever loved a dog up close or admired one from afar."

Kumin's not kidding. I'm a cat person probably 75 percent of the time, but that other 25 percent has made room for a host of canines, from my family's first dog, a squat dachshund-spaniel mix cheerily named Killer, to my mother's new companion, an overgrown toddler of a mutt named Cyrus. Before Cyrus, not long ago, was Buster, a German shepherd who turned up one day and adopted my stepfather. There was no questioning it; Buster had come home. He belonged there.

The certainty of dogs, the way they know their humans and their homes, is just one of the things Houston captures beautifully in *Sight Hound*. But her titular dog, Dante, is no ordinary canine. He is, as the story's younger dog, Rose, refers to him, "the evolved one." Dante, when the narrative is in his voice, quotes Buddha and Lao-tzu and expresses an endless patience for the humans with whom he spends his time. He belongs to Rae Rutherford, a successful playwright living in the country outside Denver. While Dante is Rae's constant companion, the rest of her life is hardly empty: She has a testy, pragmatic house-sitter, Darlene; a therapist, Theo; a fellow writer/friend, Jonathan; a new love interest, the appropriately dramatic but also big-hearted actor, Howard; and two veterinarians,

Dr. Evans and Brooklyn Underhill, who treat Dante for the osteosarcoma that's eating away at his bones.

Each of these characters — and several others, including a cat and a young girl who corresponds with Dante — has a say, literally, in Rae's story. From chapter to chapter, the voices alternate, each lighting up a different side of Rae and her relationships. Some of the voices give background: Theo, with his gentle therapist's acceptance, is a means to explore Rae's previous failed relationships, while Jonathan, Rae's writing partner, has the voice of an idealist turned jaded, a dry

observer who's highly skeptical of Rae's blooming romance with Howard.

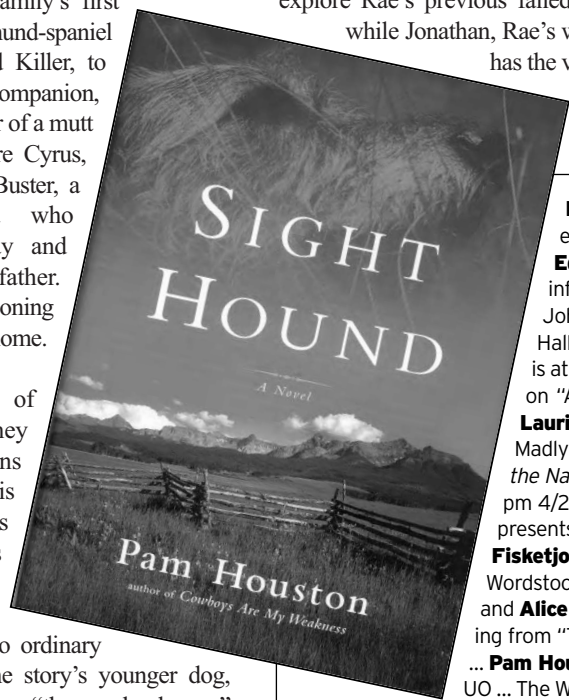
Howard, on the other hand, takes a brighter road, choosing to believe in Rae more than she believes in herself — but not until he's tested her patience backwards and forwards, making overblown pronouncements and throwing dramatic snits in a misguided attempt to express himself.

And then there is Dante, his damp nose nudging all the humans (but especially Rae) into better places. When the book opens, Dante is three-legged but determined, unwilling to let his illness slow down his work with Rae. His own story of diagnosis and treatment comes out slowly, often narrated by his vet, Dr. Evans, whose slow, sympathetic understanding of Dante is key to the story's success.

As *Sight Hound* draws to its heartbreaking, hopeful close, it would have been easy

for the story to turn too sentimental, or too lesson-y, especially when Dante (and, later, Rose) are so forthright about their purpose in Rae's life — each is there to teach her something. But, unexpectedly, it works, even through death, marriage and drought. And it doesn't just work for me because I lost a dog to the same disease. It works because Houston draws a careful line between the viewpoints of animals and humans, and while Dante is wiser and calmer than any of the human characters, his Zen is tempered by boisterous Rose, who tells us repeatedly, "I don't always listen." And who does, really? What Houston gives to her readers is a gentle parallel to what Dante gives to Rae: a reminder to listen, to let go when you have to, and to have a certain kind of faith in what might be next. **EW**

Pam Houston reads at the UO Knight Library at 7 pm, Monday, April 25.



**BOOK NOTES** for April 21 through May 5: Portland's **Wordstock Festival** continues through 4/24 with panels, speakers, reading rooms, music and more. For information go to [www.wordstockfestival.com](http://www.wordstockfestival.com) ... Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction **Edward P. Jones** (*The Known World*) speaks at 7:30 pm 4/21 at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in Portland. For ticket information call 503-227-2583 ... Author, newspaper writer and magazine journalist **Erik Larson** presents the 2005 Johnston Lecture, "Breathing Life into the Dead: Making History Come Alive" at 4 pm 4/21 in Alumni Lounge, Gerlinger Hall, UO ... **Jean Hegland** reads from *Windfalls* at 7 pm 4/21 at Mother Kali's ... SASS's 7th Annual Poetry of Survival Reading is at 7 pm 4/21 at Tsunami Books ... **Ron Takaki**, author of *A Larger Memory: A History of Our Diversity, With Voices*, speaks on "America in a Different Mirror: Re-visioning Our Nation's Past" at 10 am 4/21 at LCC's Performance Hall, Building 6 ... **Laurie Notaro** reads from *We Thought You Would Be Prettier* at 7:30 pm 4/21 at Powell's Books on Hawthorne, Portland ... Madly funny author **David Sedaris** speaks at 8 pm 4/22 at the Hult Center (\$18.50-\$28.50) ... **Andrea Barrett** (*Voyage of the Narwhal*) speaks at 7:30 pm 4/22 at LaSells Stewart Center, OSU, Corvallis ... Eugene Poetry Slam Playoffs take place at 7 pm 4/23 at Territorial Winery (\$5) ... Poet **John Witte** reads from *The Hurling* at 5 pm 4/23 at Tsunami Books ... Wordstock presents an evening with **Norman Mailer** at 7 pm 4/23 in Portland's Keller Auditorium ... **Kent Haruf** and legendary editor **Gary Fisketjon** speak at 11 am and **Phil Lesh** (*Searching for the Sound: My Life in the Grateful Dead*) follows at 1 pm 4/23 at Wordstock's Powell's Stage at the Oregon Convention Center, Portland ... Wordstock presents an afternoon with **Susan Orlean** and **Alice Sebold** at 3 pm and an evening with **Russell Banks** at 5 pm 4/24 at the Oregon Convention Center, Portland ... A reading from "This American Life" commentator and author **Sarah Vowell** is at noon 4/24 on the Wordstock Powell's Stage, Portland ... **Pam Houston** (*Sight Hound*) discusses "Writing, Relationships, Wanderlust" at 7 pm 4/25 in the Knight Library Browsing Room, UO ... The Write Off Tour with local headliners **Marietta Bonaventure & Kitt Jennings** and Write Off performers **Tara Hardy, Lane Stroud, Katinka Kraft, Amy Mahoney & SoulChilde** arrives in town at 8 pm 4/25 at Sam Bond's. (\$4-\$8) ... **Stephanie Kane** (*Seeds of Doubt*) and Portland author **David Farris** (*Lie Still*) read and speak at 7 pm 4/26 at Barnes & Noble ... Poet **August Kleinzahler** speaks at 7:30 pm 4/26 at Portland's Wieden+Kennedy Building Atrium (\$18, \$12 stu., sr.) ... **Victor Navasky**, renowned editor of *The Nation* for more than 30 years, speaks on his new book, *A Matter of Opinion*, at 7:30 pm 4/26 at Powell's Books on Burnside, Portland ... **William Sullivan** gives a slide presentation on *New Hikes in the Central Oregon Cascades* at 7 pm 4/27 in 177 Lawrence, UO ... **Charles Wilkinson** reads from *Blood Struggle* at 7 pm 4/27 in the UO Longhouse ... The Oregon Book Award Author Tour with **Ellen Morris Bishop, David Farris, Henry Hughes** and **Elinor Langer** stops at 7 pm 4/28 at the Douglas County Library, Roseburg ... **George Estreich & Keith Scribner** read at 7 pm 4/29 at the Mountain Writers Center, Portland (\$3) ... **Jarold Ramsey & George Venn** read at 7 pm 4/29 at the Oddfellows Hall in Fossil ... A book release for **Jane Kirkpatrick's** *A Land of Sheltered Promise* is at 1 pm 4/30 at the Mission Mill Museum in Salem ... A book release for **Judith K. Berg's** *The Otter Spirit: A Natural History Story* is at 4 pm 4/30 at Tsunami Books ... The Young Writers' Association's 4th Annual Glitterary Festival is 10 am-12:30 pm 4/30 at the Science Factory ... **Dorianne Laux & George Hitchcock** read poetry in support of the Oregon State Poetry Association and in celebration of May Day and National Poetry Month at 3 pm 5/1 at Tsunami Books (Donations) ... **Deborah Digges** reads from *Poetry* at 7:30 pm 5/5 in 183 Lillis, UO ... **Clemens Stark** discusses "Poetry as Spoken Art" at 6:30 pm 5/5 at the Baker Downtown Center (\$5-\$10 donation) ... **Ted Cox** reads from *The Toledo Incident of 1925* at 7 pm 5/5 at Tsunami Books.

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