# In Search of Pedigrees: Why Do We Harm the Dogs We Love?

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(Review)

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# In Search of Pedigrees: Why Do We Harm the Dogs We Love?

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*A Matter of Breeding*. By Michael Brandow. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015. 275 + xii pp. Paper. US $18.00. ISBN 978–0–8070–3343–2.)

*Abstract: Michael Brandow provides a unique analysis of the rise of the "dog fancy" in the United States and the United Kingdom. He attributes much of the motivation to acquire, breed, and show prestigious pure-bred dogs to a human need for status at the cost of serious detriment to the health and welfare of the many breeds developed to meet these needs. Although the many problems associated with the production of such dogs have been increasingly recognized by the veterinary and animal welfare communities, such concerns have had relatively little impact on the popularity of these dogs. It is hoped that greater awareness of the harm to dogs caused by human vanity and greed may help foster a more humane human-canine relationship.*

Key words: dogs, breeding, genetics, domestication, animal-human relations, animal health, animal welfare

Many of the hundreds of books devoted to dogs trace the history of the human-canine relationship and its impact on both species. Often these tomes catalog the remarkable diversity of dogs with specific attention to the structure and abilities of particular breeds. Humans have manipulated the diverse genetic potential of the dog's progenitors to produce animals of various size, shape, temperament, and talent to satisfy every human whim—for profit, for status, for ego, or for simple pleasure. Much of the recent scientific and animal welfare literature has paid particular attention to the negative impact this history has had on dogs (Asher, Diesel, Summers, McGreevy, & Collins, 2009; Collins, Asher, Summers, McGreevy, 2011; Donner et al., 2018; Farrell, Schoenebeck, Wiener, Clements, & Summers, 2015; King, Marston, & Bennett, 2012; Rooney & Sargan, 2009; Smith, 2013). Michael Brandow's *A Matter of Breeding* tackles the intersection of these two lines of inquiry. He not only reviews the considerable evidence for the harm that has been done to dogs in general and many breeds in particular—but also explores *why* this happened. Why have people

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who claim to admire and respect dogs been responsible for imposing so much suffering? He does not shy away from placing much of the blame for this harm on the industries and organizations that benefit most by promoting the appeal of purebred dogs—kennel clubs and breeders, in a process that began generations ago—but he implicates dog lovers themselves for their misplaced devotion to the trappings of status.

Brandow is not the first, most informed, or most articulate of the many critics of the "dog fancy," but he presents the material in an approachable and entertaining way. He notes, "This does not pretend to be a scientific study," and this warning is supported by the fact that the majority of citations in the bibliography are to blogs, newspaper stories, magazine articles, and secondary sources rather than scientific, veterinary, or historical studies that he asserts "are waiting just keystrokes away from anyone who *really* wants to know" (p. 7)

His expertise comes, he notes, from "pounding the pavement as a dog walker for ten years" (p. 1). This provides a special opportunity to relate personal experiences to global issues of canine welfare. He begins with an account of caring for a client's bulldog who exhibited the many skeletal disorders prized by breeders, which have resulted in dogs that are unfit for walking, much less running. The bulldog is quite literally the "poster child" for the excesses of maladaptive breed standards, adorning the cover of a detailed *New York Times Magazine* exposé entitled "Can the Bulldog Be Saved?" (Denizet-Lewis, 2011).

This account allows him to begin to explore the main themes of the book. Much of the damage that has been inflicted on dogs comes from a misplaced reverence for the trappings of the past and an idealized concept of what constitutes "good breeding." He notes that the transformation of the bulldog from a working animal to the modern-day mascot and status symbol is partly due to a desire to recreate the appearance of the "Olde English Bulldogge" seen in paintings of the past. Ultimately, many of the "standards" put forth by breed groups are completely arbitrary. He details a protracted battle between American and British kennel clubs over the appropriate shape for the French bulldog's ears—"rose" vs. "bat"—with the American preference for the latter winning out.

Another theme carried throughout the book is the reality that most of the claims of long-standing breed history and tradition are largely false, as demonstrated by contemporary DNA studies. The majority of recognized breeds, including those considered "ancient" like the pharaoh hound, are recent recreations. The "doggy elite," as Brandow terms fanciers, depend on two dimensions—looks and lineage—both of which have serious flaws, noting "never has there been such a thing as pure blood" (p. 46). A good example is the wolfhound, which became extinct once wolves had been eradicated from the United Kingdom. Fanciers "resuscitated" a breed resembling the working dogs of old by crossing at least three different breeds in the 19th century until the resulting animals were uniform enough to pass as "purebreds."

Brandow's history of dog shows provides insight into the origins of the almost pathological devotion to form and standards over function and well-being, The first English dog show held in 1859 at Newcastle on Tyne was actually a side attraction to a large show of "ornamental fowl," which were judged on the exactness of color and marking. He notes that the future path of the dog fancy could be seen in the status accorded to those who

could lavish time and money on producing birds that were useless as farmed animals. Starting in the 1860s, this philosophy took hold among dog fanciers who

> spun meaningless distinctions from thin air, and even hunting and sporting breeds were subjected to demands that had nothing to do with utility or health, and everything to do with making show dogs jump through conceptual hoops on stage and giving their owners more reasons to feel special. (p. 72)

There was a second, even darker trend taking hold at about the same time as the first dog shows—the expansion of animal baiting and dogfighting as popular although already illegal pastimes. These interests went beyond breeding dogs according to largely meaningless standards and actually focused on exaggerating characteristics that clearly ran counter to the constraints of natural selection and welfare (Lockwood, 2018).

Brandow repeatedly calls out dog fancy for holding to elitist 19th-century views of eugenics, continuing to maintain breed standards that use terms like "degenerate coat color" and identify other "impure" characteristics. This trend was slower to develop in the United States, due to the interruption in dog shows by the Civil War, but he observes that by the 20th century the American Kennel Club and Westminster "were purveying widespread snootiness almost as well as the [U.K.] Kennel Club or Crufts" (p. 87).

This trend has not gone unopposed. Brandow briefly describes the acrimonious battle between the U.S. Border Collie Club and the American Kennel Club (AKC), which recognized the breed in 1994. All the existing border collie registries were opposed to recognition since they were dedicated to preserving the border collie as a working stock dog. None of them furnished their studbooks to AKC, seeking to keep the working dogs out of the AKC gene pool. Consequently, AKC has been registering border collies based on papers sent in by their carers.[1]

As the title suggests, *A Matter of Breeding* refers to both the process of producing dogs with pedigrees of questionable biological value and the motivation behind those who are deeply involved in the process, who Brandow sees as driven by social insecurity and a desire to "extend their own stumpy family trees" (p. 217). To Brandow, status has always been the main attraction of purebred dogs.

There has been increasing public response to the glorification of purebred dogs, most notably reaction in the United Kingdom to the prestigious Crufts dog show. Following the showing of a landmark documentary "Pedigree Dogs Exposed," the British Broadcasting Corporation withdrew its coverage of the show in 2009 until breed clubs reset their priorities, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) has boycotted the event. So far, major shows in the United States, such as Westminster, have not attracted this scale of protest. The cachet associated with winning Westminster does not seem to impact breed popularity in the United States. Herzog and Elias (2004) tracked puppy registrations with the AKC for breeds that won best in show for a period of 5 years before and 5 years after winning shows between 1946 and 2002. Results do not support the view that being named best in show at Westminster results in a surge in popularity of winning breeds.

Brandow's final chapter, "Frankenstein's Lab," summarizes some of the veterinary literature on congenital problems of pedigree dogs, including that of Asher et al. (2009)

who identified 322 inherited disorders characteristic of individual breeds, 84 of which were reported to be caused, directly or indirectly, by conforming to the breed standards. Brandow'scoverage of a large-scale University of California Davis survey of health records of more than 2,700 purebred and mix-breed dogs (Bellumori, Famula, Bannasch, Belanger, & Oberbauer, 2013) shows some of his bias. That study compared the incidence of 24 genetic disorders in mixed versus purebred dogs. The incidence of 10 genetic disorders (42%) was significantly greater in purebred dogs. The incidence of one disorder (ruptured cranial cruciate ligament, 4%) was greater in mixed-breed dogs. For the rest of the disorders examined, the researchers found no difference in incidence between mixed and purebred dogs. Brandow correctly takes issue with the official university news release about the research, which carried the headline "Purebred Dogs Not Always at Higher Risk for Genetic Disorders." However, he suggests—incorrectly—that the media was given this slant "for some strange reason—AKC funding, perhaps?" (p. 282), when in fact all publications in this journal must identify any outside support, and no such relationship is mentioned.

Documentation of the deleterious effects of inbreeding is not new. As Brandow notes, more than half a century ago, the pioneering work on canine genetics by Fuller and Scott (1965) warned that "purebreds usually contain genes which produce physical defects" and "current dog breeding practices can be described as an ideal system for the spread and preservation of injurious recessive genes" (pp. 389, 405). Brandow's book adds new insights to this long-standing concern and puts it in a clearer cultural perspective.

For all its strengths, there are a few important oversights in the book. It makes only passing reference to puppy mills (puppy farms) and the long-standing efforts against them. There is no mention of "pet" stores as a major source of ill-bred pedigree dogs and the target of considerable regulation in the United States (Kenny, 2011). More than half of U.S. states have chosen to legislate higher standards of care for commercially bred animals beyond the bare minimums required by the Animal Welfare Act. Such facilities are a cause of significant physical and behavioral harm to dogs (McMillan, Duffy, & Serpell, 2011). Nor does he mention the growing problem of virtually unregulated Internet sales of dogs or growing issues of importation of foreign "purebred" dogs with dubious genetic or medical credentials. He makes little mention of the growth in popularity of "designer dogs," hybrids like labradoodles, jack-a-poos and puggles sporting their own kennel clubs and purported to be less prone to the problems of their inbred parents, but at risk of combining the problems of both parent breeds. Finally, he misses an opportunity to critique the most egregious example of spending excessive amounts of money on the most extreme form of inbreeding, cloned dogs.

While it is unlikely that the snob appeal of pedigree dogs so well documented by Brandow will ever significantly fade, there are some promising new developments in the issues raised in this book. The study of genetic defects in dogs continues to expand, with some of that work funded by breed clubs, although Brandow characterizes their involvement as limited and self-serving. In fact the Golden Retriever Lifetime Study, the largest, most comprehensive prospective canine health study in the United States, is funded by the Morris Animal Foundation, an animal health-related nonprofit with no ties to breeders. The study's purpose is to identify the nutritional, environmental, lifestyle,

and genetic risk factors for cancer and other diseases in high-risk dogs. Each year, with the help of veterinarians and dog keepers, the foundation collects health, environmental, and behavioral data on 3,000-plus enrolled golden retrievers (Guy et al., 2015). Similarly, the RSPCA funded a VetCompass research project with the Royal Veterinary College and the University of Sydney to look at disorders in dogs and cats (O'Neill, Church, McGreevy, Thomson, & Brodbelt, 2014).

Since the release of Brandow's book and other coverage of the issues, there has been growing concern about pedigree dog health by organized veterinary medicine. In early 2017, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) passed a new policy on "Inherited Disorders in Responsible Breeding of Companion Animals" (Burns, 2017). The policy supports research on genetic disorders and better education of the profession, breeders, and the public on minimizing such disorders in breeding programs. The AKC opposed the adoption of this policy.

The AVMA noted that this policy was consistent with that of the American Animal Hospital Association, which states, "Breeders should ensure their breeding programs strive to eliminate hereditary disorders and minimize genetic defects," and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, which "supports the responsible breeding of dogs such that only animals with good temperament, sound structure and no known health or other deleterious inherited disorders are selected for breeding." Thus far the British Veterinary Association and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association have been more conservative in their admonitions, noting only that animals that show extremes of conformation that negatively affect their health and welfare, such as brachycephalic dogs and cats, should not be used for breeding (Burns, 2017).

Brandow's central thesis that dog breed popularity is, and has always been, primarily a matter of fashion and idealized self-image of dog keepers continues to be supported by contemporary research. Ghirlanda, Acerbi, Herzog, and Serpell (2013) examined fluctuations in breed popularity between 1926 and 2005 as it related to health, longevity, aggressiveness, trainability, and fearfulness. Fluctuations in popularity showed no relation to these characteristics, but popular breeds tended to suffer more from inherited disorders. They concluded that breed popularity is determined by fashion rather than function.

We can hope that more contributions like this book can help change this story and establish the human-canine relationship as something that is truly mutually beneficial.

### *Notes*

1. For more details of this battle, see http://www.bordercollie.org/culture/culture.html

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