

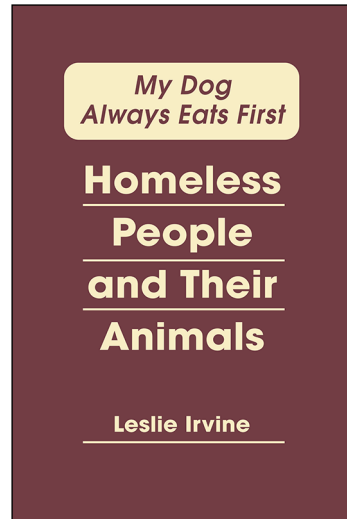
EXCERPTED FROM

**My Dog
Always Eats First:
Homeless People
and Their Animals**

Leslie Irvine

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1

A Good Life for a Dog?

As I drove along a busy, four-lane street in Boulder, Colorado, one summer afternoon over a decade ago, I saw a young man and his dog standing on the median at a traffic light. By the man's age and appearance, I guessed him to be one of the countless people who camp on the National Forest land around Boulder, especially during the summer. They come into the city to panhandle for enough money to buy what supplies they need. They often have dogs with them. This particular man stood facing traffic, and he held a piece of corrugated cardboard with the words "Homeless, Hungry, Anything helps" scrawled on it in crude, black letters written with magic marker. He had two well-worn and overstuffed packs with him. Lying against them was a medium-sized, mixed-breed dog. Each time the stoplight turned red, another round of drivers reached out their windows to hand him money. The young man trotted over to each car in turn, leaving the dog to wait for him. The narrow median did not provide much room to maneuver. If either the dog or the man lost footing, they would fall into traffic. All the while, the summer sun beat down relentlessly on them both.

I saw a combination gas station and convenience store across from where the pair stood. I pulled my car in, parked, and bought a bottle of cold water. Then I went to the trunk of my car and took out a folding water dish that I kept there to use on hikes with my dog. I waited for a break in traffic and crossed over to the median. I stood in front of the man, but in doing so I inadvertently blocked drivers' view of his sign. Without acknowledging me, he shifted to the very edge of the median and held the sign out to the side of me. I offered him the water and the bowl for his dog.

"I don't need it," he said, keeping his eyes on the cars, with their potential donors.

"Your dog looks thirsty," I replied.

"He's okay," he said matter-of-factly. "I got plenty of water." He reached down and lifted the flap on one of the packs to reveal a gallon jug.

"Okay," I said. "Do you have food for him?"

"Yup," he said. Still no eye contact. He tapped his foot on the other bag so that I could hear the crunch of dog food. "Okay," I said, and I crossed back over to my car.

By this time, a woman I knew from my volunteer work at the local humane society had also pulled into the gas station. She was concerned about the dog, too. I told her what I had done, and about the man's response. She thought we could pool our money and buy the dog from him. Together, we came up with nearly sixty dollars, most of it hers. The guy should be happy to get some real money, we reasoned. After all, he was begging for change and we would offer dollars. We crossed over to the median together. My friend attempted some pleasantries and then said, "We'd like to buy your dog."

Without taking his eyes off the cars, he said, "You can't have my dog. Leave me alone."

I explained our logic to him. "You're begging for spare change, and we can give you more than you'll make here all afternoon. Your dog will have a good home."

"Get out of my face," he said. "I'm not selling my dog."

We persisted. We took turns telling him how his dog deserved a better life. *He* might have chosen homelessness, we said, but his dog had not. At this point, he looked straight at us and exploded. "You fuckin' yuppies! Why don't you mind your own fuckin' business? I take good care of my dog. He has a great life. He runs around in the forest all the time. He never has to be on a leash except when we come down here. He's got food. He's got water. He's had his shots. He never leaves my side. He's fine. Now get the hell out of here and leave me alone!"

We crossed back over to the gas station, where we shared our outrage and our frustration. We had one last idea. We would call Animal Control. Cell phones had not yet become ubiquitous, and I used the station's pay phone to make the call. When I reached the dispatcher, I told her about the homeless man and the dog on the median and gave the location. "Is he harming the animal?" she asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Is the dog in distress?” she asked.

“No,” I answered again.

“Does the owner have food and water for him?”

“Yes,” I responded.

“Well, then, there’s nothing the officers can do,” she said. “He’s not doing anything wrong.”

I was not convinced. I thought he *was* doing something wrong. It was nothing I could put my finger on, no mistake that he could correct. Instead, the whole picture looked all wrong to me. My friend thought so, too. It troubled us that such a man had a dog. We felt sure that he could not provide proper care. We believed that the dog could have, *should* have, a better life. For us, that life would have meant four walls, a roof, and even a yard. It would have involved toys, crate training, and doggie daycare. For the young man on the median, a good life for a dog meant freedom, the outdoors, and constant companionship.

Over time, through my research on people’s relationships with animals in other contexts and my volunteer work at an animal shelter, I realized that having a house did not imply that the dog—or cat—who lived there would have a good life. Long before I began the research for this book, I had begun thinking about the issues that animate it, such as what it means to care for and be in relationship with an animal, and the role of the animal in one’s sense of self.

Another story; a pair of stories, really. In the course of volunteering at an animal shelter, I have seen many stray animals come and go. Most of the dogs’ owners come to claim them; this is not so for cats, but that is yet another story. In this one, an animal control officer brought in a young, stray Shiba Inu. The breed originated in Japan. Shibas have small, compact, muscular bodies, pointy ears, and an upright, often curled tail. To my eye, they have a foxy look. Pure-bred puppies cost upwards of six hundred dollars, and a potential owner could easily pay over a thousand dollars. Originally bred for hunting, this particular dog had the alertness and independent streak expected of the breed. Fortunately, he also had a microchip, which allowed a staff member to contact the owner to notify him that he could pick up his dog at the shelter, and indeed had to do so within five days (after this, animals become the property of the shelter, potentially available for adoption). The owner explained that, during a fierce storm on the previous day, the wind had blown his fence gate open and the dog had run out of the yard.

The owner lived nearby, but it took him four days to arrive to claim his dog. A few weeks later, the dog reappeared at the shelter, having taken advantage of the freedom offered by the unreliable fence gate once again. Another phone call let the owner know his dog had arrived at the shelter. Another few days passed, and still the dog went unclaimed. The staff made follow-up phone calls, but no owner appeared. Finally, he relinquished the dog, saying that he found the dog's repeated escapes inconvenient.

Meanwhile, another man had also lost his dog. This man, the dog, and a second dog were camping in the mountains west of Boulder. The man had no address and no phone. During the same violent storm, thunder had startled the dog and she had run off. He had searched and searched to no avail. He came to the shelter every day to see if anyone had brought her in. He had no vehicle, so he walked. The walk took several hours. He made the trip both ways, daily, for weeks. More than one staff member saw him crying. He made signs about the lost dog and posted them, asking anyone who found her to bring her to the shelter. The staff eventually gave him a new pair of shoes because he had worn his only pair out trying to find his dog.

Which man provided better care? The one who lived in a house and who, by all signs, had plenty of money, or the one who wore holes in his shoes searching for his dog? Which dog would you say had the better life? Was it the one purchased for hundreds of dollars, whose urge to explore became inconvenient, or the one whose absence drove her owner to walk miles and break down in tears? When the question of whether homeless people can care for pets comes up, I think of these stories.

A Commitment to Stories

By beginning with these stories, I intend to call attention to the issues of relationships and care that remain salient throughout this book. But I also begin with stories to honor my commitment to the process that Art Frank calls "letting stories breathe." Stories breathe, Frank writes, like "the breath of a god in creation stories" (2010:3). They give life to people by establishing identities and situating experience within time. They endow us with a sense of self and give meaning to the relationships that surround it. They give us a way of experiencing what Jerome Bruner (1987) calls "lived time," which is to say that stories allow us

to recount that first this happened, and then that happened. Stories also connect people. They make them characters in a mutual narrative and call out to them as members of a group who share a telling of the world. Stories are also resources, helping us understand and share what we find meaningful and what gives us purpose.

In this book I will explore the stories told by people who live, or have lived, on the streets with companion animals. I use both “stories” and “personal narratives” interchangeably to refer to “retrospective first-person accounts of individual lives” (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:1). I gained these accounts through interviews with seventy-five homeless and formerly homeless pet owners. My interest centers on understanding how the stories that homeless people tell of their relationships with their animals enable the tellers to “be who they are” (Frank 2010:14). As I discuss more fully throughout the book, keeping a pet while being homeless involves an intense level of commitment and more than a little hardship. In surveys, homeless people report levels of attachment to their animals that may surpass those found among the domiciled public. They frequently refuse offers of shelter or housing that require them to give up or separate from their animals. Their circumstances shape unique relationships with their animals and unique stories of the self within those relationships.

The literature on human-animal relationships, including some of my own work, has demonstrated that close relationships with pets involve intersubjectivity and the mutual construction of identity (Alger and Alger 1997; Irvine 2004a, 2004b; Sanders 1999, 2003). Scholars have come to understand a great deal about the dynamics of human-animal relationships, but thus far the research has focused mostly on how they occur in middle-class contexts. We know little about how these relationships occur at the margins of society, among those who live not in houses but on the streets. In some ways, we might anticipate finding no differences. Regardless of setting, animals do not judge us by the same yardsticks used by our human friends. As Clinton Sanders has written:

In an important way, the distinction between relationships with humans and with animal-persons is central to the special character of the human-animal bond. Because they are not human relationships, those with companion animals are constant rather than contingent. The animal’s response to his or her companion does not depend on the latter’s appearance, age, economic fortunes, abilities, or the other vagaries that, for good or ill, constrain human-to-human relationships. (2003:418)

Animals, unlike humans, cannot be “fair-weather friends,” and so we would expect to see many similarities among these relationships, regardless of the social status of the owner. Indeed, some of what I offer in the following pages will sound familiar. Yet some of it occurs in what will seem like another world. In this world, people must protect their dogs from being confiscated and even shot. They must sleep with their dogs tied to their legs at night. They face numerous risks and confront fears with only their animals as company. In this world, the roles animals play often differ from those they play in the lives of the domiciled. Therefore, the stories homeless people tell of those relationships—and of the selves embedded in those relationships—differ from those the literature already documents. These stories from the margins of society can provide a fuller, more critical insight into the lived experiences of homelessness, relationships with animals, and selfhood.

This combination of interests led me to draw on various literatures. The social scientific research on the narrative shaping of identity and the self has had an obvious influence on my thinking (e.g., Berger 2008; Berger and Quinney 2005; Bruner 1987, 1994; Goetting 1995; McAdams 1993, 2006a, 2006b; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992).¹ Since approximately the 1980s, this growing body of work has examined narrative identity from various disciplinary perspectives.² The field has been so prolific that even a cursory review would fill an entire volume. Instead of attempting a summary, I will call attention to two key features of the research on narrative identity that figure heavily in this book, beginning with a definition. As Dan McAdams explains, “Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life. The story is a selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going” (2011:99). As I have written elsewhere, the narrative concept of the self “is not so much a matter of people making up stories as it is of stories making up people” (Irvine 1999:2). Consistent with this understanding, I have made an effort to honor how the people I interviewed construct the stories they tell about themselves and their relationships with their animals. In other words, I let the tellers have their say. Because narrative research provides “a methodologically privileged location from which to comprehend human agency,” it has the unique ability to cap-

ture subjective experience (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:3). To tap into this advantage, a narrative researcher must allow tellers to tell authentic stories—those they hold as true—without insisting on verifiability. To give an example of what I mean, I present in Chapter 7 the story of a formerly homeless woman I call Donna who tells about how her deceased dog Athena sent her a new dog from the afterlife. For Donna, this explains why her new dog shares a similar disposition and many other characteristics with her deceased dog. It also explains why, according to Donna, the new dog has a mission: to keep her clean, sober, and alive. If you ask Donna how she quit a lifetime habit of using drugs, she will say, “Because of Athena.” As Donna tells it, after Athena died, Athena sent the new dog to continue her work in Donna’s life. I honored Donna’s telling by listening to this story without saying, “Oh, come on now. You don’t really believe that.” I let Donna have her say, and I listened for how the story connects her to her dogs and to her past, present, and future. I kept Frank’s words in mind: “The stories we tell ourselves about our lives are not necessarily those lives as they were lived, but these stories become our experience of those lives” (1995:22). For Donna, and others, I wanted to understand the dog’s role in how the story became her experience.

I let the tellers have their say, but at the same time, as a sociologist, I also wanted to understand the influence of social structure, institutions, and culture on their narratives (Irvine 1999, 2000). People may engage in what McAdams (2011) calls “selective reconstruction,” but they do not simply make up stories out of thin air. They anchor them in time and circumstance. As Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, and Barbara Laslett put it, “The stories that people tell about their lives are never simply individual, but are told in historically specific times and settings and draw on the rules and models in circulation that govern how story elements link together in narrative logics” (2008:3). In this light, I focused my analysis on realizing how stories reveal the social embeddedness of subjectivity. A story such as Donna’s, for example, like most others in the book, could circulate only in a time and place that honors stories about closeness between humans and dogs. It could exist only when and where narrative models grant dogs supernatural powers, or at least do not rule them out. And, as I discuss at length later, Donna’s story depends on the discourse of redemption, through which even a life that seems hopelessly out of control can change for the better.

In addition to the literature on narrative, I draw on the research on homelessness. I have sought guidance from the vast and interdisciplinary research on the subject, but have relied heavily on ethnographies of the lived experience of those on the streets. In particular, I have drawn inspiration from David Snow and Leon Anderson's *Down on Their Luck* (1993), which examines the strategies that street people use to survive materially and make sense of their situations psychologically; Jason Wasserman and Jeffrey Clair's *At Home on the Street* (2010), which investigates community among street people; and Teresa Gowan's *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders* (2010), which focuses on the homeless subculture built around recycling.³ My book shares with these titles an interest in the creation of meaning and self-worth among those on the margins. It differs from these other works in methodological approach. I did not eat at soup kitchens or sleep in shelters or encampments, as Snow, Anderson, Wasserman, and Clair did. Nor did I work alongside the homeless or become friends with anyone on the streets, as Gowan did. My contact with people on the streets took place through interviews and observation.

Within the literature on homelessness, in general, animals are mentioned only occasionally, in the context of pet ownership. An exception to this is Lars Eighner's autobiographical *Travels with Lizbeth* (1993), which details over two years of homelessness and hitchhiking with a dog. This richly chronicled book provides a vivid personal narrative, but Eighner did not intend it as a study of pet ownership among the homeless. Within the research literature on homelessness, animals have not yet entered the analysis. I can suggest two reasons for this. First, one could argue that pet owners constitute a small portion of a population that already has highly diverse needs. Although no precise figures on the number of homeless pet owners exist, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates it at around 10 percent of the total homeless population. In some areas, social service providers put the figure closer to 24 percent. The estimates vary because pet owners constitute a hidden population among the homeless. Some pet owners remain secretive about their animals out of fear that the animals will be taken away from them. In addition, homeless pet owners do not appear on counts taken at shelters because most shelters do not allow pets. Even getting a meal at a soup kitchen requires having a dependable pet sitter, if only for a few minutes. As Eighner said of the predicament of pet ownership among the homeless, speaking about his own dog, "Lizbeth had her disad-

vantages. I could not go some places with her. Usually I had no safe place to leave her. Individuals and institutions who might have helped me alone could not consider the two of us" (1993:xiii). Viewing homeless pet owners in this way—as people whose needs go unaddressed—gives their numbers significance in a practical sense, if not a statistical one.

A second reason for the invisibility of animals in the research on homelessness has to do with the historical failure of the social sciences to recognize the importance of animals in human society. Scholars who study human-animal relationships find this puzzling because much of what constitutes "society" includes or depends on animals. For example, what we think of as a "household" includes more than just people. Over 70 percent of US households include dogs, cats, and birds, and nearly half consider these animals family members (AVMA 2007). The presence of animals also challenges our definition of "family," as more children grow up with pets than with siblings or fathers (Melson 2001). Animal products—including meat, eggs, and dairy products; leather, wool, and silk; and ingredients for cosmetics, toiletries, and medications—play important roles in our economy. We live surrounded by products that contain substances obtained from animals, such as drywall, linoleum, paint, and adhesive for wallpaper and carpet. Our language contains countless animal references, such as "pony tail," "lame duck," and "barking up the wrong tree" (see Bryant 1979; Smith-Harris 2004). Throughout history, animals have plowed our fields, served as transportation, and helped us wage war. They help people see and hear, alert them to impending seizures, and even detect undiagnosed cancer. Finally, animals figure heavily in many of our social problems, including hoarding and abuse (Arluke 2006), illegal activities such as dog fighting (Kalof and Taylor 2007), natural disasters (Irvine 2009), and debates over endangered species and conflicts between humans and wildlife (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2005).

Animals also provide companionship, which leads back to the issue of homelessness. Although animals are largely absent from the major works on the topic, there is a body of literature that examines pet ownership among this population. Scholars have explored various issues, but most have assessed the bond that homeless people have with their animals. Beginning with the first published study of homeless pet owners (Kidd and Kidd 1994), researchers have consistently found very high levels of attachment to pets among the homeless

(Baker 2001; Labreque and Walsh 2011; Rew 2000; Singer, Hart, and Zasloff 1995; Taylor, Williams, and Gray 2004). In the first study, Aline Kidd and Robert Kidd established “attachment” qualitatively, inferring it from phrases such as “best friend,” “only thing I love,” and “only thing that loves me.” A majority of those interviewed identified their pets as “their only relationships with other living beings” (1994:720). Later, Randall Singer, Lynette Hart, and Lee Zasloff (1995) expanded on these efforts by administering the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale, in addition to the use of qualitative assessments (see Johnson, Garrity, and Stallones 1992). This allowed them to compare measures of attachment found among the homeless with those in other populations. Homeless men and women had significantly higher attachment scores than did those in the standardization group (the domiciled), with homeless men scoring higher than women. A later study by Heidi Taylor, Pauline Williams, and David Gray (2004), using the Companion Animal Bonding Scale developed by Robert Poresky and colleagues (1987), also found significant differences in attachment scores when comparing the homeless with the domiciled.

Some research examines the benefits homeless people claim to receive from their companion animals. Lynn Rew (2000) focused on the emotional and health benefits that homeless youth attribute to their pets, including suicide prevention. The majority of the youth interviewed identified canine companionship as one of two main coping strategies for loneliness, along with the company of friends. Two studies found lower levels of criminal activity among homeless pet owners (Rew 2000; Taylor, Williams, and Gray 2004). Oswin Baker (2001) found a lower rate of drug use among dog-owning homeless people than among their non-owning counterparts, although Taylor, Williams, and Gray (2004) found no statistically significant differences.

Despite the common belief that animals are good for people, which I examine in Chapter 5, some research has found a downside to pet ownership among the homeless.⁴ For example, Baker (2001) found that more homeless pet owners than non-owners admitted to having an alcohol problem. He also found that twice as many owners as non-owners suffered from mental health and social issues, such as anxiety, aggressive behavior, and isolation. Homeless pet owners also reported experiencing more loneliness and more frequent panic attacks than did their non-pet-owning counterparts. Taylor, Williams,

and Gray (2004) found that fewer homeless dog owners than non-owners used medical care facilities. They also found lower health scores among the dog owners, indicating that the lower rates of use stemmed not from better health but from lack of access to facilities, most likely because of the dogs' presence.

Research has also examined the obstacles pets pose for homeless people seeking permanent housing. Baker (2001) found, as I did, that very few people had lost their housing because of pets. Once people become homeless, however, pets present a significant barrier to rehousing. Singer, Hart, and Zasloff (1995) found that although a majority of those they interviewed wanted to get off the streets, most had been refused housing because of their pets. Baker found similar results, with a majority having been denied accommodation in a wide range of housing options, including hostels, shelters, and private and public rentals. Singer, Hart, and Zasloff then considered whether pet ownership prolongs homelessness, but concluded that the emotional benefits outweigh the hardships. Along these lines, Jennifer Labreque and Christine Walsh (2011) found that a majority of the homeless women they interviewed in six Canadian cities had had to relinquish pets because of their circumstances. Some women found homes for the animals with friends or family, but many had surrendered them to animal shelters, even knowing that the animals would be euthanized. Labreque and Walsh write that "those who had given up pets in exchange for shelter spoke of the pain, trauma, and negative effects that relinquishing a pet had on themselves and their children" (2011:90). The authors emphasize the need to design homeless shelters to accommodate pets.

These studies of the homeless have included approximately equal numbers of men and women in their samples of pet owners. Using another approach, Courtney Cronley and colleagues (2009) analyzed data from 4,100 clients of a network of Tennessee agencies that provide services to the homeless. Between November 2004 and January 2007, the agencies' intake forms included a question about animal caretaking. This allowed Cronley and colleagues to assess the demographic differences between pet-owning and non-owning homeless clients. Their analysis revealed that 5.5 percent of the homeless population in the area was caring for animals. Euro-American, married women who were homeless for the first time were more likely than their male, non-Euro-American, unmarried counterparts to have pets. In addition, pet owners reported histories of domestic violence in



Photograph by Mark Rodgers, courtesy of San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium's VET SOS project.

*No matter where this homeless San Franciscan goes,
her dogs go with her.*

their prior living situations more often than non-owners did. The authors suggest that intake measures incorporating questions about animal caretaking can help providers meet the unique needs of these homeless clients.

In sum, the extant research literature on pet ownership among the homeless has documented that people claim to feel an intense bond with their animals, exceeding in measure the scores reported by the domiciled. The research has also acknowledged that people claim to benefit from relationships with animals. In addition, the research has noted the obstacles and restrictions faced by those who have pets while homeless and in their efforts to reenter housing. In this book, I

will reintroduce some of these themes, building on them to provide deeper portrayals rather than reproducing established results. For example, although variations on the theme of attachment run through several chapters, I examine the concept through the roles homeless people assign to their animals, rather than through a numerical assessment. But I also introduce much that readers will find new and perhaps even surprising, learned through listening to voices that typically go unheard.

Organization of the Book

In Chapter 2, I discuss the methods I used in this study. In many ways, homelessness constitutes a subculture, a world to which most of us lack access. Pet owners make up a hidden population within that world. Although it sometimes seems that homeless people appear on every street corner, in terms of research one cannot access them through the means typically used to study homelessness. Through organizations that provide veterinary services to the pets of the homeless, such as Veterinary Street Outreach Services (VET SOS), in San Francisco, and the Mercer Clinic, in Sacramento, I gained access to far more homeless pet owners than I ever could have approached on my own. Also in Chapter 2, I outline the typology of homelessness that I use throughout the book and expand on my approach to the analysis of narrative. The term “narrative” has different meanings for scholars from different camps, and the methods they use to analyze narratives as sources of data vary as well. As Frank has written, “any book on narrative that seeks to deploy all the definitional distinctions that fill the literature on narrative will find itself unable to get out of the thicket in which it has embedded itself” (2010:17). In Chapter 2, I try to clarify my approach without falling into this trap.

In Chapter 3, I return to the issue raised in the stories that open this chapter—namely, what it means to take care of an animal and whether a homeless person can do so. I examine how homeless pet owners provide for their animals, as well as how they respond to criticism about not being able to do so.

Beginning with Chapter 4, I explore how the experience a person has with homelessness, among other factors, matters for the kinds of stories she or he tells. Each chapter focuses on a particular role narratively assigned to a companion animal and on the self that emerges

from that story. This provides critical insight into the relationship between social structure and narrative. I analyze four aspects of this storytelling (see Frank 1995:76): plots or themes; the affinity that particular types of stories have for particular types of homelessness or other circumstance; how stories of relationships with animals also serves as self-stories; and the power and limitations, strengths and pitfalls, of each type of story.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by highlighting what the study of homeless people and their pets can tell us about social phenomena beyond the realm of pet ownership and homelessness, such as identity and stigma management. I suggest avenues for further investigation and discuss the implications my conclusions have for the literature and policy on homelessness.

On Writing About Animals

Stories about animals often face criticism based on what Marc Bekoff (2002) calls “the dreaded A-word”: anthropomorphism. The term, which refers to attributing characteristics considered human to nonhuman animals (and inanimate objects), usually suggests sentimental and inaccurate projection. Critics often use the charge of anthropomorphism to dismiss claims about animals’ capacities. But the charge has two related flaws. First, we do not anthropomorphize *only* when we talk about animals. We do it all the time. As Kenneth Shapiro points out, “all understanding is anthropomorphic (from *anthropo*, meaning ‘man’ and *morphe*, ‘form’ or ‘shape’) for it is partly shaped by the human investigator as subject. However, since this is a perspective or ‘bias’ inherent in all experience, it is not an occasional attributional error to which we are particularly prone when we cross species’ lines” (1997:294). In short, we cannot escape our human perspective. By recognizing this, we can dodge the second flaw, which involves overcorrection by avoiding anthropomorphism altogether. Instead, we can take a middle ground between its “unconstrained use” and its “total elimination” (Bekoff 2002:49–50). Scholars have called this middle ground “critical” or “interpretive” anthropomorphism (Burghardt 1998; Fisher 1991; see also Mitchell, Thompson, and Miles 1997; Sanders 1999).⁵ These types of anthropomorphism respect the “natural history, perceptual and learning capabilities, physiology, nervous system, and previous individual his-

tory” of animals (Burghardt 1998:72). For example, using critical or interpretive anthropomorphism, I have no qualms about describing a dog’s alertness or a cat’s interest, or attempts by either species to solicit attention. These fall within the range of canine and feline capacities, and using phrases such as “the cat wants attention” describes an action well. Attempting to avoid anthropomorphism altogether would require a tedious detailing of the movements of muscles in the face and ears, rather than simply explaining, “the cat wants attention.” Throughout this book, when I have written phrases such as “Tommy’s dog did a little dance,” I do so because it conveys a sense of an action better than saying the dog “lifted his front paws alternately.”

In some cases, language that appears anthropomorphic might involve a process known as “speaking for” animals, or giving voice to animals’ thoughts or feelings (Arluke and Sanders 1996:51–61). In numerous instances throughout this book, I allow pet owners to “speak for” their animals. Doing so is a common aspect of pet ownership, often undertaken to promote an animal’s best interests. “Speaking for” also helps establish the identity of the animal, without which there can be little interaction, much less a relationship. In “speaking for” a dog or a cat, the guardian “gives voice to what he or she understands to be the [animal’s] thoughts or perspective” (Arluke and Sanders 1996:67). The guardian thus actively constructs the animal’s identity. This phenomenon of “interlocution” also appears in interactions between caregivers and Alzheimer’s patients (Gubrium 1986), people with cognitive disabilities (Bogdan and Taylor 1989; Goode 1984; Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 1985), and babies (Brazelton 1984). These studies reveal how caregivers give voice to the subjective experience of the other and thereby construct him or her as having preferences and a self-conscious sense of intention, and thus construct them as persons.⁶ Characterizing the accomplishment of personhood in this way allows for the admission of companion animals into its ranks, if in a virtual sense. Rather than dismissing interactions with animals as “just” anthropomorphism, the act of “speaking for” animals represents a way of making them minded coactors in social situations (Irvine 2004a, 2004b; Sanders 1993).

Finally, I use the terms “pet” and “owner” interchangeably with “companion animal” and “guardian” or “caretaker.” I use the former set of terms despite their subtext of human power over animals—and despite having taken a stance against their use in previous work (Irvine

2004a). I use all four terms for either convenience or consistency with their use in interviews. I found that, even in Boulder and San Francisco, where legislatures adopted “companion animal” and “guardian” in official city language, “pet” and “owner” remain in wide use. In addition, I sometimes found it cumbersome to write “the companion animal of a homeless person” when just “pet” would suffice.

Notes

1. Additional works that have influenced my approach include Josselson 1996; Josselson and Lieblich 1993, 1995; Neisser and Fivush 1994; Polkinghorne 1988, 1991; and Plummer 1983, 1995.

2. See Maines 1993 and Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008 for discussions of the factors that influenced both the interest in narrative analysis and some of the directions narrative research has taken.

3. Other works I have found influential include Dordick 1997; Liebow 1993; Pippert 2007; Wagner 1993; and Wright 1997.

4. See Harold Herzog’s (2011) research on the hypothesis that pets are good for people.

5. I have used the term “sentimental” anthropomorphism to indicate a type that verges on silliness and insults animals’ dignity (Irvine 2004a:68–76).

6. This contrasts with the dehumanizing treatment the disabled often receive in other circumstances (Bogdan et al. 1974; Taylor 1987).