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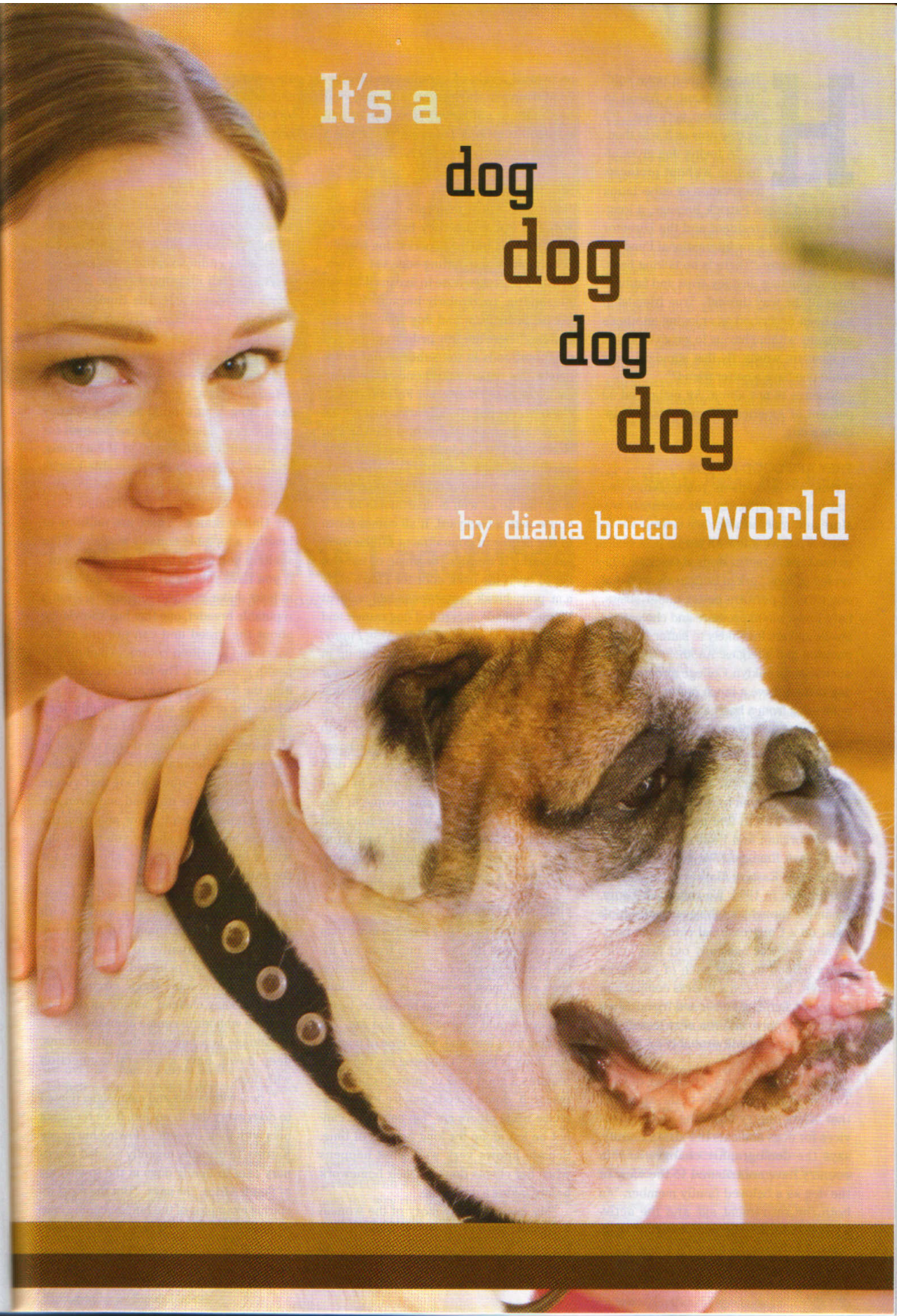
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by diana bocco **world**



Harry Truman once said: "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog." It's as true now as it was then.

"A loving dog gives affection without pretense, reservation or expectation of reward," says Patrick Ramage, a long-time Arlington resident and the Director of Public Affairs for International Fund for Animal Welfare. "There is no talking back, no complaining. Just joy, trust and faithfulness all the way through. True friendship has been described as enjoying another's company without having to weigh thoughts or measure words. By that standard, how could one have a better friend?"

Ramage is not alone. An estimated 39 percent of American households now include a dog.

THEY ARE GOOD FOR US

Having a dog keeps us young. While you may not be surprised by this, scientists are. More and more studies are setting out to prove what we knew all along: pets make us healthier. A recent study at the State University of New York in Buffalo showed that dog owners perform better under stress, have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and are less likely to suffer from depression and allergies. Another study conducted at Brooklyn College showed that dog owners have a much better chance of recovering from a heart attack than people who do not own pets (a whopping 30 percent against six).

Dogs also make great therapists and teachers. Caring for a pet provides a chance for children to learn responsibility and for seniors to feel useful again. "My wife Georgann and I married in Alexandria," says Ramage. "We got our golden retriever at Eastern Market in downtown Washington in 1993. We called her Glory, a name I thought might eventually look great on a Congressional campaign poster, and she was basically our first child. Glory helped us raise each of our three children. She's been a tireless companion, protector, family member and friend. She's an old lady now, and the next lesson she teaches our kids will probably be how to deal with death."

Leah Fried Sedwick, co-owner of Olde Towne Pet Resort, a state-of-the-art resort that offers luxury boarding and spa services for dogs and cats in Fairfax County, says the demographic changes in this country have contributed to the view of the dog as a beloved family member. "As both the retirement age and the activity level of the baby boomers rise, dogs often fill the empty nester's home. Also,

as overall levels of community involvement decrease, such as not knowing your neighbors or not having free time to join community groups, the dog gives people a needed sense of connection."

SETTING UP HOUSE

Northern Virginia residents have it good. Within a few miles, they have access to great walking trails and parks, dog-friendly communities and cutting-edge vet clinics. Sedwick says she chose to live in Old Town Alexandria, particularly because it is an urban, pedestrian and dog friendly community. "There are few pedestrian-focused neighborhoods in the suburbs, but fortunately, this region enjoys one of the greatest systems of county and Federal parks." Great nearby dog-friendly areas include the neighborhoods of McLean, Bethesda and Northwest D.C., including Carderock, Riverbend and Rock Creek.

As for the choice of dwelling, experts say dogs can do as well in apartments as in a house with a backyard. It all comes down to the degree of commitment on the owner's part. "It's easier for those of us who get to open the back door for Fido's early a.m. potty break," says Annandale resident Victoria Schade, a certified dog trainer and creator of the training DVD, *New Puppy! Now What?* "It's not so easy to suit up in jacket, hat and boots, ride in the elevator down to the lobby, then outside for the first walk of the day." (Especially when you've got a puppy with a small bladder who needs twice the trips!) Schade emphasizes that apartment-dwelling dogs have to deal with some special circumstances in their everyday lives, like passing people in narrow corridors, dealing with elevators and frequent noises right outside their front door. "Skittish dogs and apartments typically aren't a good match."

FINDING YOUR SOULMATE

Selecting the "right" dog requires more than just choosing the cutest pup from the litter. Schade says the cocktail party question she's asked most frequently is, "I'm thinking about getting a dog. What breeds are best?" "No one would approach me and say, 'I'm looking for a husband, what type of man do you think is best?'" Choosing the right dog requires a good deal of introspection and research. Some breeds require lots of exercise while others are "lap pets" that cannot be left alone for long periods of time. Schade knows very well what happens when her clients don't do their homework before taking a dog home.

"My favorite is the story of the woman who selected her breed on looks alone, because 'she had beautiful children, so

she wanted a beautiful dog.' Of course, she didn't anticipate that the dog she selected had exercise requirements that far surpassed what she could provide," Schade says. Sadly, mismatches like this usually end up with the dog being re-homed or turned in to a shelter.

There is also the question of ethics. Many purebred puppies come from puppy mills, mass-breeding facilities that act as a never-ending supplier to small pet stores, or sell directly over the internet or via newspaper ads. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has long been a leader in the battle against puppy mills, citing frequent cases of animal cruelty, including over breeding, minimal veterinary care, overcrowded cages and the killing of unwanted animals. "Puppy mills create misery for dogs and pain for the unwitting purchasers of the animals, and they indirectly deny suitable homes for animals in need," says Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The Humane Society United States. "There are millions of healthy, adoptable animals available from shelters and breed rescue organizations." If you have your heart set on a purebred, at least make sure you're adopting from a reputable breeder, one that has knowledge about the breed and can provide references and a written contract (including a health guarantee). The HSUS suggests visiting the breeder's home and asking to see where the animals are kept. Ideally, they should be spending most of their time in an indoor, well-maintained area and not in a kennel run. Reputable breeders will also ask questions, require proof that you're able to care for the dog, and may even ask for references. Despite how annoying the process may be, it shows you're dealing with a responsible breeder who cares for the animal's well being.

"I'm a huge fan of mixed breed and shelter dogs," says Schade. "I've worked with many gorgeous, brilliant 'All-American' dogs (a nice alternative to the derogatory 'mutt' label!), so I'm biased. Many of these dogs have overcome tragic circumstances—like being chained outside all day—to become wonderful canine ambassadors."

Ramage is a believer that all humans, deep down, have a visceral connection with dogs.

"I deal with issues and campaigns related to dogs every day in my job, from reuniting pets with their owners following hurricane Katrina, to bringing urgently needed veterinary care to family dogs in the townships of South Africa," he says. "But the most inspiring examples of the human/canine connection I've witnessed have been the ones between Glory and my own kids." **NV**