

KATIE UP AND DOWN THE HALL

The True Story of How One Dog Turned
Five Neighbors Into a Family

(Center Street; September 2010; Hardcover)



An Interview With Glenn Plaskin

Q: Having written books about celebrities, and a biography of the legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz, what led you to write about a dog?

A: Katie was a *great* subject—intelligent and such a good listener too! In truth, this book isn't just about a precocious dog; it's about how that dog had the power to bring five unrelated neighbors together and turn them into a real family.

Q: How did she do it?

A: It all started when I adopted a blonde-haired puppy, the runt of the litter that nobody wanted. Katie was a bit homely—really kind of pitiful-looking—but I loved her from the minute she crawled into my arms. The problem was that I didn't know how to train a dog. So I went down the hallway and impulsively knocked on my neighbor's door. What happened next changed my life.

Q: Who was behind that door?

A: When it opened, there was Pearl, a sturdy woman in her late 70's with a passion for dogs (and baking). My puppy plopped right into Pearl's lap—and that was that! For the next fifteen years, Katie was up and down our hallway, constantly visiting Pearl and her husband Arthur.

Then a three-year-old boy named Ryan moved into our hallway with his Dad, John. With no mother, Ryan found a grandmother in Pearl and a playmate in Katie. I'll never forget Pearl and Ryan laughing for hours—playing cards, dancing to Frank Sinatra records, working on art projects and homework, assembling model airplanes, and gobbling up Pearl's chocolate pie, with Katie snooping into everything. She watched cartoons with Ryan, ate bagels in bed with him, took bubble baths, and fell asleep each night in his arms.

Q: How did your life change with Katie in it?

A: Before Katie, I was admittedly consumed with my work, which can take you only so far. But my priorities completely shifted. Katie, Pearl, Arthur, John, and Ryan became the center of my world—the source of contentment. In fact, one day, it struck me that the emotional comfort I'd always been searching for was right down my hallway. And through it all, Katie glued us together.

Q: How did one dog do that?

A: She owned our hallway and her greatest pleasure was running up and down it, chasing soccer and tennis balls and trotting from one apartment to another, pushing open doors with her paws. At mealtime, she would daintily put her paws up on the table, following conversation. She was a full participant in the family—her nose into everything.

Q: How smart was she?

A: You don't want to know! She sat at my desk tapping her paws on the keyboard, "typing" as she watched the monitor; she learned that pressing down on the remote control changed TV channels; and in wintertime, because she liked having her paws washed off after a walk, she'd grab a roll of towel from the bathroom and bring it to me, dropping it at my feet. Who said dogs can't talk?



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Q: For someone who had been a non-dog person, what did you learn about dogs?

A: They calm you down! I was more high-strung before Katie. But it's been proven that caring for a pet lowers your blood pressure and lessens anxiety—so Katie was better than any therapist. She expressed unconditional love with those wise, soulful eyes that understood everything important. She had an almost mystical connection to Pearl and was especially empathetic and sensitive to seniors. The older you were, the more she liked you.

Q: What kinds of adventures did you have with Katie?

A: I shamelessly took her on interviews, figuring it would distract and relax the conversation, which it usually did. Katie met people like Katharine Hepburn, Peter Jennings, Bette Midler, Farrah Fawcett, Ivana Trump, and Leona Helmsley (who told her she'd make a nice fur coat!)

Q: There comes a point in the story, though, when the happy times began to fade.

A: Sadly, yes, our family began to unravel. First John and Ryan moved out of our building—and this was a profound loss for all of us. Without Ryan, Katie was despondent, sitting outside Ryan's door, just waiting for him.

Then 9/11 happened. This tragedy, of course, changed the world. And for us, it decimated what had been an idyllic waterside neighborhood. Pearl, Katie, and I were caught outside as the Twin Towers collapsed and we were trapped in a cloud of thick black dust before escaping to New Jersey. These chapters in the book are graphic.

Things were never really the same. As time passed, Katie became nearly blind and deaf and could barely walk. My incredibly intelligent dog was bumping into walls, looking dazed or indignant. This broke my heart. And Pearl, nearly ninety, began a serious decline.

Q: Was it difficult writing such a personal story?

A: It was cathartic—healing and somehow comforting to relive it all again. Although I never kept notes, a journal, or a diary, the entire story came flashing back to me in great detail—the action, conversations, visual pictures, all of it.

Q: What lessons can anyone—even non-dog-owners—take away from this book?

A: I learned that family, in whatever form you find it, is what really matters in life. It's the only thing. It's the love and connection to people, and to animals, that brings the greatest happiness.

I know it sounds strange, but even though I lost what I valued most, the lesson of my book is that love remains. It always does. It always will. It's greater than any loss. So although my little family, in a physical sense, could not survive the inevitability of death and changing circumstances, our bond can never be broken.



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Q: Your book takes place in Manhattan, where almost everyone lives in apartment buildings and can make connections with their neighbors pretty easily. Are there parallels in your story for people who live in the rest of America? How will your story resonate with them?

A: You may not live just down the hallway from someone who needs a friend—but there's always somebody down the block or across the street or somewhere in your community just waiting to open up their door to you. Maybe it's a child who could use a coach, or a senior who needs a helping hand, or, of course, a dog who needs a walk! It's amazing what can happen when that door opens. So I'm hoping this book will remind people that we're surrounded by those whose lives we can enhance immeasurably, and vice-versa.

Q: What is your most vivid or cherished memory of your years with Katie, and what does it say about your relationship with her?

A: More than anything, it's the sensation of Katie cradled in my arms, her blond paws hanging over my wrist, and those big brown eyes looking up at me with such curiosity—and infinite love. Smart as she was, like all dogs, Katie needed protection, and her vulnerability always touched me. Just read the chapter I've titled *Nocturne*. The bond between us, maybe not so different from the one between parent and child, was something that never ended, not even in death.

Q: There have been several recent memoirs written about special dogs—what makes Katie the leader of the pack?

A: Katie, who weighed 28 pounds, was fearless and used to march right up to huge dogs and playfully whack them on the face with her paw! Seriously, there's no top dog here—because each of these books brings to life the intelligence and sensitivity of our canine buddies—and how their hearts bring the best out of us humans. But Katie is about a neighborhood dog with a giant heart. Her instinct was to create a family, a pack. And she did this intentionally, and did it for a lifetime—giving her family a gift we'll never forget.

Q: What advice would you offer to someone considering getting a dog for the first time? Are there things you wish you had known ahead of time that took you by surprise?

A: Don't expect much sleep! It's not much different than having a baby—with all the attendant pleasures and perils. First, there are the sleepless nights and six walks a day. And unlike a baby, your dog never grows up. But it's all worth it. I was surprised how effectively a dog can communicate without words—and at times I wasn't sure who the master was. Also, I would never recommend getting a dog if you're going to leave him or her alone most of the day. They are such social, dependent creatures—and they get depressed if they're not allowed to be active and engaged. Thanks to me and our gang, Katie was literally never alone for the entire fifteen years (yet another argument for making friends with the neighbors!)



To schedule an interview with Glenn Plaskin, please contact
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