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26 Things You Probably Didn't Know About Our Love for Pets

A controversial new book explains how pets make us human.

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John Bradshaw's new book [The Animals Among Us: How Pets Make Us Human](#) is going to make the suits in the front offices of the pet food corporations squirm. But while it is certain to ruffle some feathers, it's also the most important treatment of our relationships with [pets](#) in 30 years. Bradshaw is one of the founders of anthrozoology, the study of human-animal interactions, and he is well-qualified to unpack the latest developments in our [understanding](#) of the human-animal bond.

This book is coming out at a good time. The number of research articles published on human-animal relationships has jumped from a handful in 1987 to more than 1,000 a year today. Nearly two dozen academic journals are now devoted to the topic, and university centers for the study of human-animal interactions are cropping up worldwide. The media is certainly paying attention: *The Washington Post*, for example, has a [full-time reporter](#) on the animal beat.

Scads of animal books are published every year, but this one is unique. First, it provides an accessible overview of the current state of knowledge in anthrozoology by a pioneer in the field. Second, Bradshaw develops a comprehensive theory to account for why pet-keeping evolved in our species — and [only in our species](#). Finally, he takes on sacred cows that will even raise the hackles of other researchers. For example, Bradshaw discounts the [industry and media hype](#) extolling the [health](#) benefits of pet ownership. He writes, "Reliable studies have generally failed to find convincing proof that living with animals makes their owners healthier."

Here are 26 more tidbits I picked up from *The Animals Among Us*:

Pets, Culture, and History

- In many cultures, women breastfed young animals — puppies, pigs, deer, and even bear cubs. But suckling, say, a baby monkey does not always lead to deep emotional [attachment](#); in some societies, suckled animals were eaten once they grew up.
- While our ancestors probably began keeping pets roughly 50,000 years ago, widespread pet-keeping in the West only dates back to the 17th century.
- Styles of pet-keeping vary widely, even among neighboring cultures. The Ache people of the Amazon make pets of small mammals called coatis. Yet the nearby Atawete believe coatis feed on human corpses, so they never keep them as pets.
- The expression "hangdog look" dates back to the Renaissance, when old and sick dogs were routinely killed by hanging. Cats had it even worse: They were burned alive.

- People began keeping pets tens of thousands of years before the first animals were domesticated. Indeed, pet-keeping may have been an “essential precursor” to the domestication of other species.
- Cats only became widely accepted as human companions in the last 150 years.
- Nearly all pet hamsters descended from a single female that was captured in Syria in 1930.

Pets, Health, and Human [Happiness](#)

- Initial research findings that living with pets improves human health have generally not been borne out by recent studies. Yet despite the lack of solid evidence, a recent survey reported that 74 percent of doctors indicated they would “prescribe” a pet to improve their patients’ overall health.
- With one exception, there is little credible evidence that animals make good “therapists” for the treatment of mental illnesses. (The exception is [childhood autism](#).)
- The medical profession is divided on whether childhood exposure to animals makes kids more or less susceptible to asthma and allergies.
- Adolph Hitler was so devoted to his dog Blondie that he risked his life by taking her for daily walks toward the end of World War II. (But he also used Blondie to test the effectiveness of his cyanide capsules. She died.)
- The average dog triggers 150 family arguments a year.

How We Think About Animals

- Worldwide, Hello Kitty has replaced Mickey Mouse as the exemplar of animal cuteness.
- The extent to which we attribute mental states to other species of animals depends on how fast the creatures move.
- The psychological benefits of interacting with dolphins and horses are the result of wishful thinking by therapists and their clients.
- The legend that a small terrier in Scotland named Greyfriars Bobby refused to leave the grave of his master for 14 years is a myth. The story was likely concocted to encourage local tourism.
- You might think your cat is playing with you, but in its head, it probably thinks it is hunting.

The Bond Between People and Pets

- When asked, “Who listens to you best?” 45 percent of adults said “my dog,” while only 30 percent said “my spouse.”
- Women are not necessarily closer to pets than men. Indeed, individuals’ [personality](#) traits are more important than [gender](#) when it comes to the human-animal bond.
- While people often say their dogs are their children, different parts of our brains light up when we respond to dogs and to kids.

- Children raised in orphanages who never had any contact with an animal instinctively treated cats like babies.
- There is no “pet [love](#)” gene. Our affection for animals is influenced by the interaction of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of [genes](#).
- [Oxytocin](#), the so-called “love hormone,” has been oversold as the glue that cements the human-animal bond. In reality, oxytocin studies have produced mixed results, and other neurochemicals such as endorphins and [dopamine](#) also play a role in our attachment to pets.
- The roughly 3,000 animal hoarders in the United States do tend to fit a “crazy cat lady” [stereotype](#).
- An instinctive desire to stroke fur probably played a major role in the evolution of pet-keeping.
- Finally, if you are looking for a pet, steer clear of pugs. Sometimes their eyeballs fall out.

"So, why then, do we keep animals as companions?" asks Dr. Bradshaw. You may be surprised by his answers.

References

[Bradshaw, J. \(2017\). *The Animals Among Us: How pets make us human*. New York: Basic Books.](#)