

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

How Much is He Costing You?: A Pit Bull mothers a pig, a Rottweiler practices cardiology, and a Mutt gets rich quick, from the pages of Ken Foster's new book, "Dogs I Have Met."

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody, this is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. [sound of far-end telephone ringing]

Ken Foster:

Hello?

Tony Kahn:

That's Ken Foster. In his first book, *The Dogs Who Found Me* he wrote about the people and the dogs who helped each other through the catastrophe called Katrina in New Orleans. I called him up the other day to congratulate him on his latest book, *Dogs I Have Met*.

Do you really believe that dogs have minds?

Ken Foster:

Perhaps an expert would disagree with me but, but I think it's true, and I think maybe that because I started out writing fiction and publishing short stories, I, maybe that is why my dogs seem more like characters to people, you know I'm not writing simply about dogs but I'm writing about dogs in sort of this more complicated human landscape that we all live in. One of the amazing things about dogs is that they rarely act without reason and the problem sometimes is that we, we aren't observant enough to figure out what it is they're responding to.

Tony Kahn:

It was your dogs who were aware that you were sicker than you thought.

Ken Foster:

It's true. My Rottweiler, the one who is incredibly well behaved, had been climbing on top of me and sitting on my chest to wake me up in the morning, and I realized then

that what she was doing was trying to essentially revive me, because my heart rate was going so low when I slept. When I came home with a pacemaker she jumped on the couch next to me and placed her ear to my chest and wouldn't move it. One of the amazing things I think about making the decision to have an animal is that you know you're going to see it from infancy to senior citizenship and then you are going to have to move on without it. And then you start sort of reconsidering everything around you yet again. It's one of the things that makes having any kind of companion animal a, a unique kind of relationship.

Tony Kahn:

Do you think that makes somebody dig a little deeper?

Ken Foster:

That's what I think happened to me. I had been one of those people who looked strangely at dog people: What are these people thinking? It's one of the things I write about in the new book that there's some level of connection that can't be articulated, so there's a lot of maybe trust that is involved, a lot of compassion that isn't reciprocated in a human sort of way. I started feeling compassion and paying attention to things that I'd ignored for a long time – not just dogs but my community as well. Most of the people I know who do volunteer work at animal shelters do volunteer work at all kinds of other organizations because they recognise that, that all these things are really connected.

Tony Kahn:

What I love about your stories about dogs is that the relationships are complicated and they're not always smooth sailing.

Ken Foster:

A woman had a pit bull that raised a piglet. You know, she'd gone to pick up eggs at the farm and there was this runt piglet. Her pit bull essentially raised this pig and it became a 700 pound hog that would sit and beg for treats! [laughter] They would wander around together and occasionally the woman would come home to find a "stray pig" notice on her door.

Tony Kahn:

They crossed off 'Dog' and put in 'Hog'?

Ken Foster:

They did in fact! [laughter]

Tony Kahn:

What do you think your writing about and thinking about and living with dogs has made you an expert in?

Ken Foster:

Looking at situations individually, maybe? We, we always want to categorize things as being, you know, a dog is a dog, or the way to solve this situation is X, Y and then Z. And yet I think we're all far more complicated than that [Tony murmurs assent], and, you know, every dog and every person you encounter is – you're starting from zero.

Tony Kahn:

That was Ken Foster, and with Ken's permission I've lifted an excerpt from his latest book, a whiff if you will, of the complicated life of a dog named 'Tigre'. We call today's *Morning Story How Much Is He Costing You?*

[Story begins with background sound of a park or woodland]

Tigre was a funny-looking dog – all body with short little legs. It was as if he'd been assembled from spare parts. "Hey Brando, look at him," I said each day, and my dog Brando would look anywhere but at the dog who wanted his attention. It was very snooty of him, so I continued to walk him over every day to say "Hello." Brando continued staring at the sky, while Tigre whined and stuck his nose through the chain link fence at the junkyard where he lived, to get some of the treats I was carrying in my pocket. Then Brando and I were on our way down the street, where another empty lot contained a flock of chickens. These stops became part of our afternoon routine: the chickens, the hot-dog store, the park and Tigre in his junkyard on the way home.

One day Tigre slipped out from behind the fence to get Brando's attention. He yipped and bowed and rolled over in front of us and Brando continued to pretend that he was invisible. I opened the gate and put Tigre back in the yard again. "He wants to fight," the junkman said. "He is a fighter," his owner insisted again. I didn't have the heart to mention that his dog had already come after us and that all he wanted to do was play. One day, I realized with a start, that they were gone. The lot was being emptied of all its debris. One of the neighbors told me that the man had been arrested. "For what?" I asked. "I think he stabbed someone," he said.

A few weeks later, as we walked north toward the pet shop, I spotted Tigre walking on the other side of the street. "Hey, look who it is!" I said, but of course Brando didn't care. My eyes followed Tigre's leash to the hand that held it, which was attached to a tall blonde woman in her late 20's. She was kind of fancy, one of the many newcomers moving in to the neighborhood in boxy new apartment complexes that had replaced our community gardens. She didn't seem like his type at all. She explained, "I was walking by when they started cleaning out all that stuff and they said I could take the dog." In the mornings we'd see them together, playing fetch in the ball fields along the river – and Brando suddenly was interested, now that Tigre had a proper owner. This was a context Brando understood and frankly, he was probably thinking he might be able to get some attention from the blonde as well. The next time we ran into them, Tigre was sporting a big heavy cast that ran along the length of his rear legs. He was hobbling quite contentedly along the blonde woman's side. She said, "I went to work one morning and he wanted to come along, so he jumped out of the window." Tigre was an old dog; you could see it in the grey hair that had settled around his mouth. "How much is he costing you?" I asked. "So far, maybe \$6000 – I didn't really ask," she admitted, as if reading my mind.

[Background sound of passing traffic]

Tigre was a junkyard dog, but now, she was his.

[Sound of footsteps and a dog whining, fading to classical background music]

Tony Kahn:

Today's morning story, "*How Much Is He Costing You?*" I'm here in the studio with man's best friend, Gary Mott. If you follow the career of a dog and its relationships with other people, you find that they should really be given a salary and Social Security benefits.

Gary Mott:

You know it's absolutely true, and New York dogs are a special breed.

Tony Kahn:

Dogs have learned how to adjust their turf in New York City; they don't feel the least bit threatened by another dog until they're three inches away, which is amazing to me. I mean, I think that is about as far as you can go in denying your own nature. [Gary

murmurs in agreement.] If you want to have a healthy sense of turf, you know, you might try Wyoming.

Gary Mott:

I prefer to view dogs as creatures who just love their owners, you know, regardless of the number of warts you have on your chin. All the human failings that color who we are [Tony laughs] and how people judge us and define us, out the window with the dog!

Tony Kahn:

Oh, in all honesty, my relationship with my beloved Golden Retriever Ben, was more of a one-sided relationship. I adored him; he adored retrieving. It was like his calling, that was his passion, and if intelligence is a sign of your ability to get what you want, then Ben was a genius. He managed to manipulate people into playing retrieving games with him all the time. And I had to come to terms with the fact that, you know, Ben really cared more about balls, than he did about me. And my friends have tried to comfort me, you know, they formed a support group and they said "Tony, that's not true, , you, you're overlooking it..." but in my heart, I think part of growing up for me has been realizing that: No, no it was one-sided -- [laughs heartily].

Gary Mott:

... Ben never liked you...

Tony Kahn:

Oh, he liked me well enough.

Gary Mott:

Here's a *Morning Stories* archive quiz, for you Tony.

Tony Kahn:

Yes, OK.

Gary Mott:

What was the name of the story that Monica Collins did about this very thing?

Tony Kahn:

Was that *Love 101*?

Gary Mott:

You got it! That was the story of her dating life,

Tony Kahn:

That's right . . .

Gary Mott:

and how her boyfriend fell in love with her dog,

Tony Kahn:

Right . . .

Gary Mott:

but they went on a date – her boyfriend and her dog –

Tony Kahn:

Yes, that's right . . .

Gary Mott:

and the dog totally 'dissed' him. And, shortly thereafter, her boyfriend broke up with Monica.

Tony Kahn:

Right, that's right; it was sort of providing her with a little insight that she might otherwise not have had. You can go, and you can retrieve that story, which is one of the nice things about the Web. On our website, check out Monica's story, *Love 101*. I don't think we've begun to scratch the surface of people's relationships to dogs and the stories that people have to tell about dogs, which, as Ken says, are stories that we also have to tell about ourselves. So any of you out there who are interested in sharing some of those stories, we guarantee a place of honor for them, here on the podcast.

Gary Mott:

<morningstories@wgbh.org>, our website <wgbh.org/morningstories> just lots of stuff.

Tony Kahn:

With links to our Flickr site?

Gary Mott:

Sure, our Flickr site.

Tony Kahn:

... to our new project which is the transcript project, which we have been getting just some of the most wonderful help from our listeners from ...

Gary Mott:

Absolutely!

Tony Kahn:

... turning our podcasts into transcripts for people who cannot hear them or who are, as it --many of our listeners are, using this podcast to help learning English as a second language. [background classical music starts] One of them for our show about Oliver Sachs called *Ah, My Brother*

Gary Mott:

Thanksgiving and Getting.

Tony Kahn:

The Julie Nardone story. And you can find both of those by clicking on the picture of either Oliver Sachs or Julie Nardone in our Flickr site.

Gary Mott:

<[flickr.com/wgbhmorningstories](https://www.flickr.com/photos/wgbhmorningstories/)>

Tony Kahn:

Take care, and we'll see you next time. Bye-bye.

[Classical quartet music continues for a few seconds]

Gary Mott:

By the way Tony,

Tony Kahn:

Yeah?

Gary Mott:

how come you put that cat in at the end of the story?

Tony Kahn:

Oh, I don't know. I just figured that maybe it would just be fair to hear from a dissenting opinion about dogs.

Gary Mott:

Fair, balanced...

Tony Kahn:

... and feline.

[Classical quartet music continues for a few seconds, then fades]

End of Recording

Transcribed by David Keight