



The Dogs Buried Over the Bridge: A Memoir in Dog Years

Rheta Grimsley Johnson

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In *The Dogs Buried Over the Bridge*, nationally syndicated columnist Rheta Grimsley Johnson uses a parade of beloved dogs to take readers on a colorful journey. It's not really a dog book in the Old Yeller sense; it's a personal story that uses dogs as metaphors for love, loss, and life.

"Working for newspapers ages you exponentially; it's like dog years," Rheta says. Readers follow her as a starry-eyed newlywed starting a weekly newspaper on Georgia's exotic St. Simons Island, through stints at various other Southern newspapers, and finally to her writing life in remote and dog-friendly Fishtrap Hollow, MS. That's the dateline for her long-running column and the place Rheta has called home for almost 30 years, despite growing up "a girl of curbs and gutters, not creeks and critters."

Along the way, readers meet Rheta's eccentric neighbors, her friends, her three husbands, and—best of all—her dogs. She introduces Monster, "a big galoot of a mutt, the variegated color of a hand-knitted sweater a dour aunt might give you for Christmas"; Humphrey, who spent much of one night in an apartment complex "patiently lining stolen shoes up at our back door like a clearance rack at Payless"; Mabel (pronounced May-Belle), the first of the dogs to be buried "over the bridge" in Rheta's sad little dog cemetery, who was "so beautiful that it never really mattered how much toilet paper she shredded, whose hairbrush she destroyed, where she sat or slept....Scolding Mabel would have been stomping a rose"; and Pogo and Albert, who taught Rheta that "grief can kill you, whatever your species. It isn't pretty, and it's a walk you must take alone." There are other dogs as well, for hers has been a life that measures its quality in canines.

Rheta claims that she finds it "harder and harder to separate the humans from the dogs. That would be like separating the past from the present, or memory from reality. Certain dogs are so much a part of life with certain people at certain places that I cannot make a distinction. Why bother, anyway? Maybe all we are is an amalgamation of the animals we have loved, the things they have taught us. Certainly, we learn more from them than they do from us."

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