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Joyce's Journal

A monthly dispatch from Joyce A. Miller, Writer



HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME AND MY LATEST BOOK BABY!

A GLIMPSE OF
WHAT'S INCLUDED:

Chapter 1 of **Look! You're Dancing**

After much back and forth on technical issues, I am finally ready for **Look! You're Dancing** to be out in the world! I'm going to have a book launch/birthday party on June 5th from 2 till 4 at Jardin RVA, a little French wine bar in the Fan section of Richmond. As my birthday is June 6th, on a Monday when everything is closed, this seems like the perfect opportunity to celebrate! Of course, you are invited to join me as I toast this milestone! The book is available in print and ebook form from anywhere you buy books but unfortunately won't be shipped until after June 8. If you're coming to the event at Jardin and want to pre-order a signed copy for \$15, please bring cash or check; or I can also take Venmo but have no way to take credit cards at this time. Amazon link: https://www.amazon.com/dp/1735496324/ref=cm_sw_em_r_mt_dp_6RGQFCRRQN4FJBGYKT8F

This is a deeply personal book, but I wanted to share my thoughts and feelings about my relationships with hounds and humans. I think sometimes it will make you laugh and sometimes cry. For you empaths, beware that there are some animal deaths in this book. I'm sharing some secrets that I've never told before. My hope is that you will find it honest and genuine, and you can share my experience.

On May 24th I recorded a session of the podcast **Drinking with Authors**. The premise of the podcast is that you're having a drink at your preferred bar and your favorite author walks through the door. He or she sits next to you and an inspirational and entertaining conversation ensues. When my session is live for you to listen to, I will post the link! Or you can watch for it here: <http://www.drinkingwithauthors.com/>

As a bonus for June's newsletter and to celebrate the release of **Look! You're Dancing**, I'm including the first chapter for you to read. Maybe it will entice you to buy the rest of the book!

Let me know if you enjoy it by dropping me an email joycemiller1959@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you!

I live in the Church Hill section of Richmond, VA with my husband and my retired racing greyhound. Before I started writing, I worked for 30 years at a nuclear physics research laboratory.

Show up and shine!



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Chapter 1

How It All Started

This is a story about companionship, trust, and love—about how many times a woman gives her heart away to her dog.

It all starts innocently enough. When my daughter Jade was seven years old, she was invited to a friend's birthday party at the Peninsula SPCA Petting Zoo. The Petting Zoo was a fenced-in enclosure with several picnic tables, a big red wooden barn, and a variety of barnyard animals for the children to feed and pet.

Cleverly, the shelter was set up so that one had to walk past the kennels of adoptable dogs to enter the barnyard area. We were a little early, so to use up some time, we looked at the puppies along the way.

Jade's long brown hair, tied up in a ponytail with a pink scrunchy, bobbed up and down as she skipped through the kennels. She suddenly stopped short in front of one newspaper-lined cage. In the back of the cage was one dark brown, furry puppy with one blue eye and one brown eye, slouched over on its side.

"Mom! Look at this puppy! Look at his eyes! Isn't he cute?" She knelt and, before I could stop her, stuck her fingers into the crate. The puppy was very friendly and licked her fingers instead of biting her.

"Yes, he's very cute," I replied absent-mindedly as I glanced through the doorway to see if the birthday party was finished setting up.

"Can I have him? Please, please, please, Mom?" Jade begged.

“We’re here for a birthday party. Not to adopt a puppy,” I said.

“Please, Mom?”

“Look, you go home and ask Mr. Al if you can have a puppy. If he says yes, then we’ll come back and get the puppy,” I told her while thinking to myself that Alan, my husband and Jade’s stepfather, for sure would say no. My kids called their stepfather Mr. Al. It was something we picked up when we moved to the south where kids called adults Mr. or Mrs. along with their first name. It became a term of endearment.

Jade seemed to have forgotten about the puppy as she enjoyed feeding the goats and chickens with the other kids.

But when we got home, the first thing she did was run to her stepfather.

“How was the birthday party?” Alan asked her.

“Mr. Al, Mom said I can have a puppy if you say it’s all right,” she said immediately. He looked over her head to me expectantly for some explanation of what answer he was supposed to give her.

“She saw a cute puppy with one blue eye and one brown eye. I told her if you said it was all right, she could have the puppy.”

“If you get up with your mother every day for a week and help her walk her dog, you can have the puppy,” he said to Jade. We already had an older bull terrier named Dottie. I walked Dottie every day at 5:30 a.m. before I went to work.

“A week?” I said to him later when we were alone. “Dogs live for ten to fifteen years! Of course, she can do it for a week!”

And she did. She got up every day for a week and went on the walk with me in the early morning darkness just as the sun was coming up. She helped me put Dottie’s kibble in her food bowl.

Jade was so excited when we returned to the shelter the following week to pick up her puppy.

We searched through all the kennels, but the puppy with the unusual eyes had disappeared. She hung her head. I told her to look through the rest of the kennel. Maybe there was another puppy she would like to have.

“No,” she said stubbornly. “That was the puppy I really wanted.” I heaved a sigh of relief as we prepared to walk out the door. A lucky escape for me.

Someone from the staff saw us leaving and yelled out to us, “Have you two seen Daisy?”

I turned around and said, “Thanks, but I think we’ve seen every puppy in the kennels.”

Undeterred, the kennel worker said, “Come with me,” and guided us into a back room. I’m sure this puppy was the next in line to be euthanized. She introduced us to a small black puppy with white markings, maybe a combination of black lab and border collie--it was anyone’s guess. I noticed her puffed-up belly full of worms and connected to her crooked, little back legs. Her eyes were a little runny. The woman handed the puppy to my daughter.

Jade hugged Daisy to her chest. Daisy whimpered and snuggled up to her neck. Jade looked up at me and said, “Mom, I love her.”

While we were at the desk filling out the paperwork for the adoption, the kennel worker took me aside and whispered to me, “If there’s something seriously wrong with her, you can bring her back.” I knew what that meant.

Daisy went home with us. That afternoon I took her to the vet, and indeed she had many of the problems I envisioned. She was full of worms and had bad hips. The vet said, “If you wanted a puppy, why didn’t you tell me? I could have gotten you a healthy puppy.”

For about a month, Jade took care of Daisy. She got up, walked with me, and fed her. Then one day she said, “Daisy can be the family dog now, Mom. I don’t want her to be just my dog anymore,” which I translated to mean, “You can walk her and feed her, Mom.”

Now I had Dottie and Daisy to walk together each morning before work. Dottie didn’t have the same feelings of affection for Daisy as the rest of the family. Daisy hid from Dottie in the laundry room since Dottie growled and snapped at her at every encounter. We discovered that Dottie had some health issues specific to the bull terrier breed and we returned her to her breeder.

Because Daisy was a rambunctious, energetic six-month-old puppy, I started taking her to classes at a local facility called Merrimac Dog Training Club. I took her through the basic training. She learned to sit, lie down, stay, and come when called. She graduated with the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) designation. The CGC program was designed by the American Kennel Club to bring a consistent set of basic behaviors to be taught and tested to ensure a dog was trained to a level of good companionship.

Despite her health problems, she became a splendid companion, and I enjoyed training her. But because she was a mixed breed dog, in the 1990s there weren’t many opportunities for me to compete with her in any dog sports. To compete in Obedience or Agility with the American

Kennel Club (AKC) she had to be a full-bred dog. (That has since changed, and many mixed breeds now compete in multiple sports that the AKC offers.)

I met a woman at the dog training club, Marilyn, one of the best dog trainers. She had strong problem-solving skills when it came to dogs. She could read the subtleties of dog and human body language and knew what the dog was going to do before anyone else. To me, she was the dog whisperer. She owned pugs and a Doberman but knew much about many other breeds. In her day job, she was a primary school reading specialist, and that must have been where she got her patience and resilience. Her hair was always dyed in some crazy color combination and cut in a quirky style, sometimes black on the underside and white on top. She bought her clothes at thrift shops and then adorned them with paintings or sewing to make them her own style. I immediately wanted to be friends with her.

One day at the dog club, she asked me to watch a video with her. It was called *Getting Started with Sandra Davis, Pepper and Jabba: Dancing with Your Dog*. Jabba was a black giant schnauzer, and Pepper was a border collie. Sandra Davis was a petite woman with short black hair who trained her dogs to do freestyle moves in the dining room of her home. The instructional video showed how to perform twenty different freestyle moves.

“They call this canine freestyle or dog dancing,” Marilyn said. “We can do this. This is something anyone can do because the dogs don’t have to be purebred. The dog dancers have their own organizations like the Canine Freestyle Federation and the World Canine Freestyle Organization. It’s very popular in the UK and Europe. You should try this with Daisy.”

Marilyn explained further. “Compare it to pairs ice skating. You teach the dog to do a series of tricks and behaviors. You find a piece of music that matches the dog’s gait. You choreograph the

dog to do the behaviors along with the music, and it looks like you and the dog are dancing. If you compete, you get both a technical score for doing the behaviors properly and an artistic score for how well the dog and your costume fit the music. And there are different levels of competition that get progressively more challenging, requiring more advanced dog tricks and behaviors, and are longer in duration.”

At the end of the video, Sandra Davis had videotaped two of her performances. The first was with Pepper to “Achy, Breaky Heart”. Sandra wore a fringed, sequined western shirt and a cowboy hat. Pepper had a matching bandanna. I loved their line dance performance with lots of two-stepping. But the best part of her whole training video for me was that in most of the training exercises, she used the giant schnauzer, Jabba. He was big and slow enough that I could follow the demonstrations. Jabba’s final performance on the tape was to “New York, New York.” He wore a bowtie, while Sandra had a white, blousy tunic, black bowtie, top hat, and black leggings.

So, I started training Daisy to dance with me. I was hooked. Over a few months, I taught her to spin, to circle me, to weave through my legs as I walked, to circle a cane as Sandra Davis demonstrated, and other fun skills. Once she knew some different behaviors, it was time to add some music. A song was picked to match the dog’s gait. Daisy had a lilting gait due to her bad hips, but we picked a snappy instrumental song for her, “Swing Time,” from an old Fred Astaire movie.

Because Marilyn was a primary school teacher, we had many opportunities to take the dogs to schools where we performed for children. I wore a tuxedo shirt with a black bow tie and black pants, and Daisy wore a white tuxedo collar with a red bow.

On the stage in front of the audience of rapt, up-turned little faces, I felt butterflies in my stomach. Daisy looked up at my outstretched hand, and my spirits brightened. I could barely conceal my delight when she did all the tricks in the right order, and we moved across the stage like soldiers doing the jitterbug before heading off to war. At the end, the kids crowded around to pet the dancing dogs. Daisy soaked up all the attention.

In addition to Daisy, I had also rescued a Walker hound mix named Willow. Because everyone I met at the dog training club had multiple dogs, I got caught up in the culture and thought I should have another dog too. Willow had severe hip dysplasia and kept her back feet together when she walked. Her gait was more of a step, step, hop, so Willow was not a candidate for dog dancing. I just enjoyed listening to her happy baying welcome when I returned home from work.

Dogs don't live as long as we would like, and probably due to her poor health at the beginning of her life, Daisy passed away at age six after a bout of pancreatitis. I kept her alive much longer than I should have. It was selfish of me, but I couldn't bear the thought of letting her go.

I truly loved the feeling of connection while performing with Daisy. I enjoyed the flow of our movement through the music and felt such joy, but when she was gone, I also felt so much grief.

I wanted to continue doing dog dancing. I thought about what kind of dog partner I would like to have. I'm a tall, plus-size woman, five feet ten inches tall and over 200 pounds, so I decided I wanted a big dog. But I wasn't sure what breed I wanted.

So, I had just lost Daisy, and I had really been bitten by the canine freestyle bug. I wanted a dog to train, and I had none. Sometimes it's best to step away from a problem to get some perspective. I went to France.