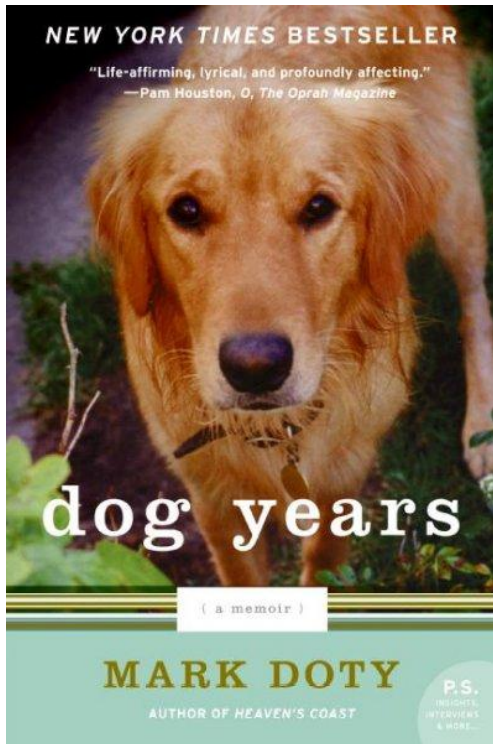


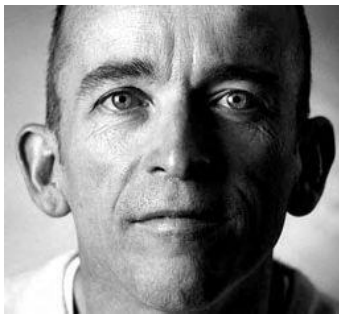
## About the Book...



Why do dogs speak so profoundly to our inner lives? When Mark Doty decides to adopt a dog as a companion for his dying partner, he finds himself bringing home Beau, a large golden retriever, malnourished and in need of loving care. Beau joins Arden, the black retriever, to complete their family. As Beau bounds back into life, the two dogs become Mark Doty's intimate companions, his solace, and eventually the very life force that keeps him from abandoning all hope during the darkest days. Their tenacity, loyalty, and love inspire him when all else fails.

*Dog Years* is a remarkable work: a moving and intimate memoir interwoven with profound reflections on our feelings for animals and the lessons they teach us about life, love, and loss. Mark Doty writes about the heart-wrenching vulnerability of dogs, the positive energy and joy they bring, and the gift they bear us of unconditional love. A book unlike any other, Mark Doty's surprising meditation is radiantly unsentimental yet profoundly affecting. Beautifully written, *Dog Years* is a classic in the making.

## About the Author...



Since the publication of his first volume of verse, *Turtle, Swan*, in 1987, Mark Doty has become recognized as one of the most accomplished poets in America. Like the work of James Merrill, Doty's writings transcend the category of "gay poetry" to appeal to a diverse cross-section of readers; fittingly, Doty has won a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Whiting Writer's Award, the T.S. Eliot Prize (of which he was the first U.S. winner), the National Poetry Series publication, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, and the National Book Critics' Circle Award.

In addition, Doty has published a number of critically acclaimed life stories, including *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir* and *Firebird: A Memoir*. "I do, decidedly, see myself as a student, and my work as one of inquiry into the nature of experience," Doty told *Lambda Book Report* contributor Christopher Hennessy.

"Making art is a discipline of paying attention. That's what poetry and nonfiction have in common for me, that work of attending to what we see, attempting to know it in a more profound way--through saying what we see--than can be done simply by experiencing."

Doty, the son of an army engineer, grew up in a succession of suburbs in Tennessee, Florida, southern California, and Arizona. Doty described himself, in *Publishers Weekly*, as having been "a sissy" in childhood; frightened by his emerging sexual identity, he married hastily at age eighteen. After completing his undergraduate studies at Drake University in Iowa, he got a divorce and moved to Manhattan, where he paid his dues as a temporary office worker. He earned a master's degree in creative writing from Goddard College during part-time semesters; during the same period, he met his lasting love, Wally Roberts, a window-dresser at a department store. The couple lived together for twelve years in Manhattan and in Provincetown, Massachusetts; Wally's illness and death from AIDS, with which he was diagnosed in 1989 and to which he finally succumbed in January 1994, was to be the central event of Doty's maturation as a person and a poet. (Doty himself tested negative for HIV.) In the interim, however, Doty was publishing his early work.

Doty has taught at numerous universities, including the University of Houston, Columbia University, Goddard College, Drake University, Sarah Lawrence College, and University of Utah. He taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and served as a judge for the National Poetry Prize in 1995.

## **Awards**

*Dog Days* was a *New York Times* Bestseller, a *Washington Post Book World* Best Book of the Year, and winner of the 2008 American Library Association Israel Fishman-Stonewall Book Award for Nonfiction. The American Library Association writes, "The first and most enduring award for GLBT books is the Stonewall Book Awards, sponsored by the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table."

## **Reviews**

*Publishers' Weekly*, *\*Starred Review\**

Award-winning memoirist (*Firebird*) and poet (*School of the Arts*) Doty explores, with compassion and intelligence, the complicated, loving territory inhabited by devoted dogs and their loyal humans. In 1994, when the author's longtime lover was dying of AIDS, beloved pet Arden kept the surviving partner afloat. A new adoptee, the rambunctious Beau, in his "sloppy dog way," becomes a part of the tribe and carries some of the burden of grief. Doty says Beau "carried something else for me too, which was my will to live." In a time of devastating pain, as well

as in happier times, Doty's two dogs are the "secret heroes of my own vitality." The dog characters in the book are irresistible, and the arcs of their lives are delineated with the tenderness and passion of the truly smitten. Arden's quiet nobility and slow decline breaks the heart, while Beau's goofy enthusiasm peaks with youth and mellows in illness. With a marvelous ability to present the pain of mourning with a poet's delicate hand, and an irrepressible instinct for joy, Doty delivers a soulful love story which illuminates no less than the big human mysteries: attachment, death, grief, loyalty, happiness. The book nimbly sidesteps sentimentality and lands squarely on a philosophical, inquisitive tone as intellectually evocative as it is emotionally resonant.

### *Booklist*

To be loved by Doty, as a human or a canine, is to be elevated into a realm of utter glory, where one is cherished and cradled, sheltered and supported, and, most of all, where one's very essence is acknowledged and appreciated in a manner both simple and sublime. In his latest elegant and elegiac memoir, poet Doty recounts how the love of two dogs, Arden and Beau, sustained him during times of his most grievous losses, and how he, in turn, came to nurse them through their inevitable years of failing health. On the brink of a life-threatening depression, Doty recognized the necessity of caring for his beloved dogs, which then metamorphosed into a life-affirming realization that he was, in fact, the one being attended. Sprinkled among poignant and merry anecdotes about typical and peculiar doggie behavior are Doty's tender yet cogent reflections on the underlying truths such conduct reveals about the canine species, observations that transcendently celebrate the essential connection between man and pet.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Doty observes that American culture does not allow people to express grief about their pets' deaths. "One of the unspoken truths of American life is how deeply people grieve over the animals who live and die with them, how real that emptiness is, how profound the silence is these creatures leave in their wake. Our culture expects us not only to bear these losses alone, but to be ashamed of how deeply we feel them" (p. 9). Do you agree or disagree? What examples does Doty provide to support, or contrast, his claim?
2. Emily Dickinson plays an important role in *Dog Years*. Why does Doty include her poetry in the book? What does it help to deepen or clarify about the story? Was there a particular poem of Dickinson's that you felt added the most to your experience of the book?
3. Doty describes a Tibetan Buddhist approach called the sky funeral, in which bodies of the deceased are placed outside for vultures to consume. He

writes, "Where there was the physical fact of a person, now there are wings, air, flight, the noise and hurry of passage.... That body returns to the world, given back" (p. 131). He asks, "Could we import such an attitude to loss?" Do you think Doty could have taken such an approach to Wally's death? What about Arden's or Beau's death? Could he have benefited from such an approach?

4. In *Dog Years*, Doty explores many approaches to making sense of death and loss. In Chapter Thirteen, what perspective does Doty explore in his description of Judy Garland and the people who celebrate Garland's life? How much of this approach does Doty adopt in his experiences with Wally, Arden, and Beau?
5. How does Doty's work as a poet shape *Dog Years*? How do you see poetry influencing the writing style, imagery, or other elements of the book? Did you enjoy these influences?
6. At the end of his book, Doty quotes Robinson Jeffers's poem, "The Housedog's Grave," and observes, "Wouldn't you know that the most misanthropic of poets would write the warmest of elegies for his dog?" (p. 215). However, Doty starts his book by arguing that "it seems that compassion for animals is an excellent predictor of one's ability to care for one's fellow human beings" (p. 8). Are the beginning and end of his book in conflict? If so, which side of this debate do you feel Doty agrees with most strongly?
7. In addition to his experiences with Arden and Beau, Doty interacts with many other animals who help him to gain perspective on his struggles. Some of these animals we do not get a chance to meet (for example, his cats), but others we have a better chance to understand. One of the most poignant and significant examples is Doty's interactions with the unnamed street dog from Calle Canal (p. 190-196). What new perspective on loss and hope does this dog help Doty to develop? Is it an impact that either Arden or Beau could have had?
8. Doty reflects at length on his experiences on and after September 11th. What would be Doty's idea of the most appropriate memorial for 9/11? Would it be a physical memorial, an event, or some other form of commemoration?
9. As Wally becomes progressively more physically and mentally limited by his illness, he desires a small dog to keep him company. However, on his trip to the animal shelter, Doty meets Beau, a golden retriever, whom he brings home instead. Doty writes, "My friends think I've lost my mind: *You're taking care of a man who can't get out of bed and you're adopting a golden retriever?*" (p. 76). Do you think Doty made the right decision to adopt a

second dog? Do you think he made the right decision to adopt Beau, as opposed to the smaller dog Wally had imagined?

10. Doty shares his experiences living in several different geographic locations, including New York City, Provincetown, and Iowa City. How do the cultures and people of these unique places impact Doty, his pets, and his perspectives on life and loss?

## Further Reading

Works of poetry and prose by Mark Doty

### Poetry

- *Turtle, Swan*, 1987
- *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, 1991
- *My Alexandria*, 1993 (Call number: 811 Do)
- *Atlantis*, 1995 (Call number: 811 Do)
- *Sweet Machine*, 1998 (Call number: 811 Do)
- *Island Sheaf*, 1998
- *Source*, 2001 (Call number: 811 Do)
- *School of the Arts*, 2005 (Call number: 811 Do)
- *Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems*, 2008 (Call number: 811 Do)

### Prose

- *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir*, 1996 (Call number: 616.979 Do)
- *Firebird: A Memoir*, 1999
- *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, 2001 (Call number: 921 Doty, Mark)

## Read-Alikes

*Marley & Me* by John Grogan (Call number: 636.752 Gr)

When journalist John Grogan and his wife, Jenny, were first married, they decided to get a dog, partly to practice their "parenting" skills. They were totally unprepared for their sweet and cuddly little puppy to turn into 97 pounds of undisciplined exuberance.

*A Three Dog Life* by Abigail Thomas (Call number: 921 Thomas, Abigail)

After an accident leaves her husband brain damaged, a wife struggles to rebuild her life with three dogs and the comfort of friends.

*Chosen by a Horse* by Susan Richards (Call number: 636.1 Ri)

The lessons of love come in many different forms. For Richards, adopting a maltreated horse impacted her life in ways she could not have foreseen. Richards adopts an emaciated mare and her foal, overriding the small voice telling her that she already has three horses to care for and a herniated disk. Her experience with her new charges proves profoundly instructive in terms of how love can foster growth of the human spirit and help in overcoming pain and loss.

*The Dog Who Rescues Cats* by Philip Gonzalez (Call number: Large Print 636.7 Go)

This poignant canine memoir recounts the story of Ginny, a Long Island dog with a remarkable ability to seek out and rescue homeless cats. Simple but delightful, the story is narrated from the perspective of Ginny's owner, Philip Gonzalez. Badly disabled in an industrial accident, Gonzalez quickly fell into a downward spiral of despair. His saving grace arrived in the form of a small, scruffy grey dog. Ginny quickly provided Philip with a focus: cats--hundreds of them.

*Just Gus* by Laurie Williams

Gus was a lucky dog. Injured and abandoned, he could have become another of the 7 million animals euthanized every year. Then Stephanie Williams entered the picture. A successful journalist, she had been diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer at the age of 30. On medical leave and living alone, she wanted a warm four-legged companion. When she saw Gus's soulful eyes and goofy grin, it was love at first sight.

Further Watching

You can watch Mark Doty reading from his work at the University of Houston-Victoria American Book Review 2008 Reading Series! This series consists of five video clips with a description of Doty's work, playable instantly on YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=A351EDD5E84F980A](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=A351EDD5E84F980A).