

Interview by Dogs Today Magazine.

This interview of Lony Ruhmann was conducted by Karen Redpath, of Dogs Today Magazine. It appears by permission from Dogs Today Magazine. www.dogstodaymagazine.co.uk/

How do you pronounce Juve?

(Hoo´ vee)

Do you have any other dogs/ pets other than Juve?

Zoey, an American Standard Poodle.

Do you have a background in writing? If not, what is your background?

I was a good writer in high school. Then my touch left me. It has come back now, but it is different, it's more heartfelt and somewhat zany and out there. I have a MBA. I have a background of business, special events, counseling and working with kids.

Did you read to Juve before you started writing your own stories? If so what did you read?

Yes, I read him little booklets called Soul Flight. They are spiritually focused booklets on how to live life.

How does he respond?

The words relax him. One booklet, however, about sharing, he did not like. He would get up and leave the room when I would start reading it to him (which cracked me and my wife up). It is his opinion that all the toys are his, and Zoey can not play with any of them. After about the fourth reading, Juve eventually became still. It took him awhile to accept the material. When I read the Soul Flights to Juve, here is the thing that some may have a hard time understanding, I actually believe he is learning something.

What gave you the idea to write stories specifically for dogs?

I saw how much value Juve and Zoey got from the reading sessions, so I thought why not write something specifically for dogs, something they would like and understand.

But when I sat down with Juve by my side, his thoughts and images kept coming into my head. So, *Bite This Book* became a book about his thoughts and feelings. Through the years, I have gotten the sense that Juve has a mission. My job as his caretaker, friend and partner is to try to understand and support this mission.

How do you know these are really Juve's thoughts?

My wife looked at all the vignettes as I was writing them. She is very intuitive and authentic. Many times, she would say "no" to a word, phrase or concept and I would have to dig deeper. Also, the animal communicator said I had gotten it right.

What color are Juve's eyes?

The left is brown and the right is brown on the top and gray on the bottom which gives him a kind of soulful quality.

Where did his unusual name come from?

From a professional wrestler, Juventud [Hhoo-ven-TOOD] Guerrero. I was sitting with my wife and the animal communicator. I said, "Let's name him after a professional wrestler." I expected an immediate negative response, but instead they were positive. I proposed Juventud who happened to be a cute Mexican lucha libre wrestler and they both said yes. Over time, it has been shortened to Juve.

Juventud in Spanish means youth. To this day, people come up and say what a cute puppy, even though he is almost 10.

It was probably this spunky, professional wrestler side of Juve that inspired the title, Bite This Book.

Bite This Book is an unusual concept – what have been people’s reactions to it?

It runs the gamut. I’ve had friends not answer or return phone calls after receiving the manuscript and there was a friend who was so touched, he cried after reading it. A few editors and agents have responded in a very insulting manner (a lady this week was disgusted by both the concept and the execution). On the other hand there have been professionals who have told me it is, “lovely” or “very touching”.

The most frequent responses are lack of comprehension, laughter and/or joy.

How close are you to getting published?

There is a publisher in India who is interested. There is an agent in South Africa who is looking into representing it. Also, Bite This Book has been translated into French (Croque ce Livre) and query letters have just been sent out to several French publishers. So far the feedback has been mostly very nice, “Bravo pour votre idée très originale.”

Someone said that my path seems to be like that of the American jazz musicians who had to go outside of the States for acknowledgement and support.

Why do you think that is?

Many people here are in a rush. Reading to a dog is the opposite of being in a rush.

Each country has its own unique vision of, attitude toward and relationship to dogs and animals. I have to go to those countries whose vision lines up with mine. Here in the States, animals seem to be often represented in a cartoon-like way. There is a focus on cute, one sees lots of images of the toy-like cuteness of animals.

Did you ever see illustrations that you thought would be right for your book?

Yes, the illustrations of Alexandra Day of *Good Dog, Carl* fame. Her illustrations are warm and inviting and capture the integrity and goodness of Carl.

Have you been published previously?

Yes in magazines, but nothing relating to dogs. The piece that I am most proud of is an interview I did in college with the film director, Joseph H. Lewis, who directed two wonderful film noirs, *Gun Crazy* and *The Big Combo*.

How long was Juve ill with distemper?

Six months.

How did it affect him?

The effects of the disease were very debilitating. He could not stand up on his own; He could not go to the bathroom on his own; He had to be fed via a baby bottle. He was always in his bed. His back legs did not fully develop and he can only run in very short stretches. He has distemper teeth, his teeth are more brittle.

The first year of his life was not easy. Before we got him, he had parvo. A rescue agency took him in and got him proper medical care. They found a home for him, but after a few days the family returned him.

The good news is that we were the right family for Juve. And animals that face big challenges when they are young and overcome them are often endowed (much like people) with special qualities and gifts.

How did your animal communicator friend teach you how to listen to Juve?

She would go around the house saying out loud what her dog was saying and what my dog was saying. They had a lot to say and it was a little like living in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It was charming and humorous to have her around. She showed me that listening was no big deal and that it could be easily done. She just assumed that I could easily do this which helped.

How did you find Juve?

The animal communicator was driving on the Ventura freeway. She decided to take an exit off the freeway that she had never taken before. Once off the freeway, she took a right and a left and there was a pet store. The pet store that afternoon happened to be featuring half a dozen rescue animals. Juve was one of them. Our friend called us from the store and said that she had found the dog that we were looking for.

Why do you think Juve survived with the odds stacked against him?

He decided to stick around because of the love my wife and I showed him during his illness. The communicator told us this. Acupuncture and homeopathy were most helpful.

What effects does reading to a dog have on dogs?

It is great for their self-esteem. When you trust that the dogs will understand the story, they feel the trust. It opens the door for better communication.

Why should we all be reading to our dogs?

I would look at it as a graceful opportunity. It is a terrific way to share. They sense the intimacy. It can show a dog in a new way that we are all connected. As for humans, it can help us to relax.

Are there any particular benefits for children?

In the States, there are, literally hundreds of reading programs where children read to dogs with such names as Reading Fur Fun and Barks and Books. The intention of these programs is to improve the literacy skills of children.

There was a study done in Salt Lake City to examine the benefits of providing a dog assisted reading program. The study consisted of ten children, ranging in age from five to nine years old, who were all reading below their grade level. Each student read once a week for 20 minutes with a dog. At the end of the 13-month study, each child's reading score increased by at least two levels.

Children can get so much from reading to a dog: an appreciation of reading, an encouragement to read out loud, a listener who does not judge them, a connection with an animal, a new way of seeing, physical affection and unconditional love.

Have you ever organized such an event for children?

Yes and it was interesting to watch how distinctively different the children were in their reactions. Some children were earnest in their approach, some laughed the entire time. Some were strong readers, some less assured. Some kids were highly comfortable, some may have never touched a dog in their life. The great thing about such an event is that it meets the child wherever they are in their development and life.

I saw lots of huge smiles that day. It was as if the communion between the kids and the dog allowed the children to relax more deeply and they found a solid, happy place within.

In what ways does writing for a canine audience differ from writing for a human audience?

You have to keep the words and concepts simple. Writing for humans is often mentally based. The best way to write to a dog is to write to their spirit and to their heart. They react to the intention of the words.

Have you written stories other than those in Bite This Book?

Yes, *Just Because I Love Dogs*. It's a longer story for dogs. It's about a dog's heroic adventure in the woods and the communion between man and dog.

The first time I read the story out loud, I was reading it to a guest in my house. When I was close to done, I turned around and Juve was across the room just staring at me, intently. He knew that this was a story both about him and for him. It was the best confirmation that I was on track with the piece.

What makes a good doggie story?

They say that the best food is the food that is cooked with love. The best dog writing is writing written with love.

What are Juve's favourite things to do?

In this order:

1. Be touched and loved by both my wife and I at the same time.
2. Eat crunchy warm chicken skin.
3. A walk.
4. Eat meat. He particularly loves meat sauce.
5. Meet other animals and make friends.
6. Play tug with a toy.
7. A car ride.

His favorite week of the year is when we go on a family vacation together.

Meet other animals?

He gets along very well with animals from different species. We went to an old Spanish Mission here in California that kept farm animals. At one point, Juve had a long discussion with a horse. The horse lowered his face all the way down to Juve's level which was quite a sight. We went on a vacation and he made friends with a cow. It got to be that the cow would see Juve coming and would quickly raise herself up and run to him. She even licked Juve. When we go walking, sometimes we see wild animals like raccoons. One magical and spooky night a wolf appeared.

Do you plan to write other stories for dogs?

I want to write a collection of stories that could be read to all animals.

What are the key elements to include in doggie stories?

Things that make dogs happy and things that make them know they are loved. Also, bear in mind that the dogs are not just responding to the words, but the feeling behind the words.

Does Juve have some stories he prefers to others?

He likes *Happy Walk* a lot more than *Not a Bath!*

What is your website about?

Juve would like to make more animal friends. The goal of the website is to have 1001 different species connected and united via the internet. Juve sees this as a way of creating and supporting harmony and balance in the animal kingdom.

I think Juve's ultimate mission is to help animals progress.

