

The Puparazzi

When a person acquires a nameless pet, it's natural to hang a handle on it based on your own whim. Be it imaginative or otherwise, these names are often cute (Sweetums, for a kitten whose owner hopes she will be just that) or descriptive (Rusty, for a red puppy). As a longtime pet owner, I find it best to name a new animal companion something that'll sound sharp and clear shouted. (Mitzi, stop that! Dammit, Moxie! Chance, get your butt in here! Stel-la....!)

But sometimes what you name your pet can turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

After my friend Elwood and I brought two little Border collie puppies home to my place, we sat around with them and pondered names. One of them sported the most common coloration, mostly black with white markings. The other was white with black markings. Being of a literary bent myself, I was going for names of favorite authors. We experimented with contemporary writers first, starting with Irving (after John Irving). But that didn't pass the shout test. So we went historical, finally settling on Dickens (for the mostly black one) and Twain (for the mostly white one).

It quickly became apparent that Dickens was, in fact, a little dickens, so he was aptly named in that sense. And Twain, with a bushy head of white hair like his namesake, was the other one. It wasn't long before my circle of friends began referring to the puppies collectively as "the literary greats," or "the greats," for short.

The greats thrived and grew, as well cared-for puppies will, though they've recently reached that troublesome teething phase. To minimize damage to the household when I have to be away, I took to locking Dickens and Twain in the kitchen, supplied with an assortment of inviting chew toys. They did work the chew toys over, but developed an even greater enthusiasm for items they could shred, like paper bags and cardboard boxes. And, unfortunately, books.

The first book the greats took on was a novel by Larry Watson, a novelist I greatly admire. So Dickens and Twain demonstrated that they have very good taste in literature; they just ate it up. I had not, however, finished reading this book, which I'd checked out from the library. I had to pay twenty-some dollars for a replacement. Bad literary critics, no biscuit!

Dickens' and Twain's next book was—I kid you not—"Dewey," the story about the Spencer library cat (another great book). This was at the time when the puppies and my Russian Blue kittens were still jockeying for status in the animal-gluttled household. Luckily, this was a book I'd read and owned, so I didn't have to pay for it again. Again, the greats exhibited good taste. If they were able to write book reviews, I'm sure they'd say, "I just couldn't put it down—until my human told me to DROP IT!" By then, of course, it was too late.

I guess I should count my blessings, though. These dogs do have another way to mark objects with their opinion. At least they didn't do *that*.

So, being wise to the greats' literary ways by the time my own book, *The Last Best Thing*, came out, you can bet I guarded the first precious galley proof with extreme care. And I certainly didn't submit the story to my in-house critics for their review.

Now, a couple months shy of their first birthday, Dickens and Twain have branched out into the field of aggressive journalism. Maybe I shouldn't have paddled their puppy butts with rolled-up newspapers and magazines (whatever was handy that would get their vagrant attention without hurting them). In retrospect, this may have given them a distorted view of the press. Perhaps the greats are getting even with the printed matter they've formed a poor association with.

It's interesting to note the parallelism of the greats' mannerisms and those of members of the sensational press. Like the paparazzi, Dickens and Twain have been known to hound me and dog my steps. They, too, travel in packs, stalking and hunting their prey, often laying in wait (though this mostly goes for squirrels). Neither do they always respond well or quickly to verbal demands to cease and desist uncivil behaviors. They're big-time opportunists who are never shy of invading personal space. And they also require restraint at times when they go over the top. The Chinese must be familiar with the phenomenon, since their slang word for paparazzi is "dog team."

Which brings us to the etymology of the term "paparazzi." The word's origin precedes film director Federico Fellini's 1960 introduction of it into popular culture. "Paparazzo" was an eponym intended to imitate the sound of an annoying insect, like a buzzing mosquito, a pest that people feel compelled to swat at.

The term has since evolved, so that "pap" is the singular form. Similarly, "paps" is an alternate plural form. And the sting of these pests can be more than just a little annoying; witness the Princess Diana tragedy.

Having abandoned the print-matter method, I've found a flyswatter to be effective at driving off the pups when they get too pesky. Woody Harrelson used his fists on their human counterparts, the paps. While the pups don't always respond to verbal demands to cease and desist any better than paps do, at least they're not blowing out anyone's retinas with point-blank barrages of camera flashes. I'm sure that's what happened with Harrelson. Zombies, paparazzi... it must be hard to tell them apart when you're blinded by too-bright light.

The pups always know what's what, though. Their noses tell them. Here is the difference between the literal and figurative meanings of the phrase "nose up your butt." Talk about

invasion of privacy and disrespect for personal boundaries! If the paps have gone as far as the pups in pushing the envelope of bad manners, I haven't heard about it. But I'm sure the pups could sort the humans from the zombies with an intrusive yet foolproof crotch check.

My Border collie pups are the real deal, not artificially concocting prey that has anything remotely resembling a whiff of fame, like the Kardashians. They're going for serious meat: squirrels, postal carriers, kids running or playing with balls, bicyclists and cars driving by on the street that they try to herd through the fence. This is not to say the pups won't go for moles or snakes (Kardashian equivalents), or even pine cones or rocks, in the prolonged absence of major prey. But their efforts in this direction are lackluster and rather gratuitous, just messing with something for the sake of messing with *something*.

The Border collie is an energetic and excitable breed, to put it mildly. The pups can go from zero to manic in less time than it takes to yell NO! They're hyper-alert and hyper-focused, though they're also easily distracted. It's like they suffer from both OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) at the same time.

Paps exhibit similar characteristics in hot pursuit of a target when another desirable victim unexpectedly presents itself, such as a case of multiple squirrels for the pups. Then it's just a frenzy of high-speed colliding bodies and bad tempers for all parties concerned, humans and canines alike. Under such conditions, the prey often suffers unintended consequences: fatal car accidents at the hands of the paps, bruises or bent glasses at the paws of the pups.

So the take-away here is that you should be careful what you name your pets, lest they grow into an undesirable spinoff of their monikers. But, in my case, it could be worse. The pups could act even more like their human counterparts, the paps. And I do still harbor *some* small hope that my crew might someday actually master the command "DOWN"!