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Where Challenges Become Opportunities

Breanna Norris reviews *Pepper Becoming: The Journey of an Unwanted Dog and the Man Who Wanted Her* by John D. Visconti

Some people love dog memoirs. Any and all dog stories are good to them, without doubt or hesitation. I am not usually one of those people. Having said that, reading *Pepper Becoming* was an excellent decision and I found this particular memoir to be a highly worthwhile read that deserved both my time and full attention.

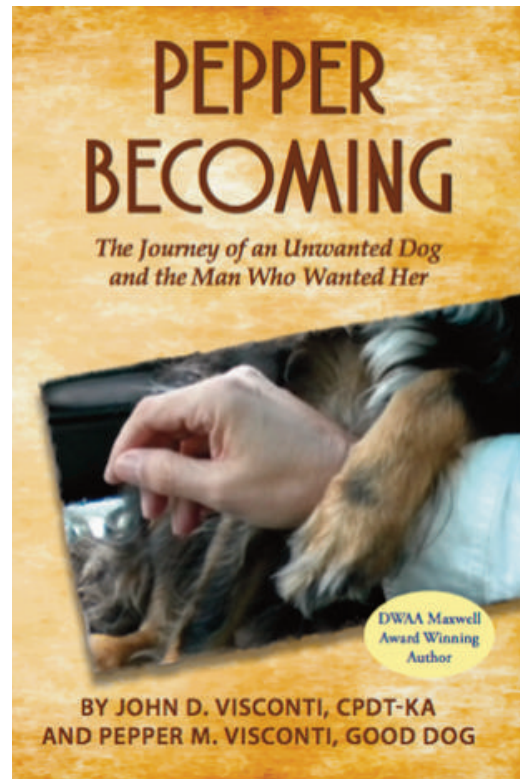
Through humor, author John D. Visconti humbly introduces himself and his previous companion animals, Jeffrey, a betta fish and Buddi, the cat. Together, they set the stage for Pepper's arrival. Visconti, meanwhile, is a professional dog trainer whose journey begins, like many do, as a volunteer dog walker at his local animal shelter, Great Tails. It is here that he meets Pepper. Her kennel card lists her as a "Border Collie X." On arrival at the shelter, Pepper was heartworm positive and weighed just 26 pounds. Later, it was discovered that she has hepatitis.

In his introduction to the book, Visconti writes, "During a horribly dark first five years of life, Pepper had been cast aside by nearly all who knew her. She struggled mightily to navigate a world that at times caused her debilitating anxiety. And despite a terribly arduous final 18 months, which she met with heroic grace, her spirit and zest for life never dampened."

At the shelter, Pepper was considered behaviorally "difficult" for a variety of reasons and Visconti is not quick to adopt her by any means. Clearly, however, the adoption is going to happen sooner or later. I found myself wanting to jump ahead, cheering on, "Adopt her! Adopt her!" Pepper was five years old when Visconti finally took the plunge. Heading out on a business trip, he writes: "The second I boarded the plane, I was broadsided by regret. I visualized Pepper sitting in her kennel looking toward the parking lot for my car, feeling that yet another person had abandoned her. From Las Vegas, I called the shelter to inform them that I would be adopting her upon my return. The meetings with the publishers were no longer important."

Visconti expertly brings Pepper to life in the text and she lives on with every read. Tales of the shelter dog that loves Mexican food, or her antics escaping through a small hole in the fence the day she comes home are totally relatable for anyone who has ever taken care of a dog. The hilarious stories of a protective, nesting goose that chases Visconti and a leashed Pepper away in front of an audience of onlookers, or the run-ins with the elderly neighbor who believes all dogs love him are vivid and, again, totally relatable. I often thought of my own dog, quirky and complicated Nina, who came to me after several other people returned her to

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Pepper Becoming is not just the story of an exceptional dog — it is also the story of a human and the human-animal bond

the shelter. Indeed, it would be difficult to read *Becoming Pepper* and not lovingly think of a dog you know or have known. Visconti writes, "During our first months together, the training schedule with Pepper continued to be a busy one. Several behaviors, all fear-based, needed to be addressed for her to enjoy life more fully. Separation anxiety, resource guarding, reactivity, aggression toward dogs during our walks and more were on that list."

Human-Animal Bond

Visconti certainly had a lot on his plate, but in turn, Pepper was a great teacher, not just to Visconti himself, but to the many others who knew her and now those who read about her. And she has clearly helped guide Visconti's path as a trainer and honed his skills. In the book, Visconti shares emails from his mentor, Mira, shelter staff and veterinarians, again showcasing how just one dog can impact so many lives. Visconti's story of a difficult dog plus newbie trainer may not be unusual, but it is his dedication, his love for the dog, and his commitment to the art and science of training that provide the unique combination to capture the reader's interest.

For example, Visconti shares his behavior modification protocol for Pepper's thunderstorm phobia. He also shares how he worked with Pepper's separation anxiety as well as a serious issue with UPS trucks, among other things. Scenarios many would see as challenges were turned into training opportunities by Visconti: "UPS trucks arriving at our home pre-



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Pepper Becoming is an incredibly honest work of art. It is a story that deserved to be written and now deserves to be read.

sented a vastly different challenge," he writes. "With an eye toward increasing training opportunities, I began ordering home deliveries of every imaginable item from Amazon."

Pepper Becoming is not just the story of an exceptional dog. It is also the story of a human and the human-animal bond. It is an understatement to say that Visconti cared deeply for Pepper. He lived and breathed Pepper, this is obvious. While he provides brief and digestible nuggets about the art and science of training throughout the book, he also explains how this factors into his everyday life. In my opinion, this is something seen far too little in dog training books. The reality is that training can be messy and take a long time. It is also a lot of work, but Visconti lovingly explains why it is all worth it. I laughed out loud many times and I also cried to the point where my dogs came running to me. I profoundly enjoyed this beautiful memoir of a relationship between a fellow trainer and his incredible companion, Pepper. "Directly and indirectly [Pepper] touched the lives of countless people and, even in her absence, continues to do so," writes Visconti in his opening act. Indeed, *Pepper Becoming* is an incredibly honest work of art. It is a story that deserved to be written and now deserves to be read. ■

*Pepper Becoming: The Journey of an Unwanted
Dog and the Man Who Wanted Her*

John D. Visconti (2018)

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