

# REVIEW --- Summer Books: Breeding Contempt

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## ABSTRACT

Yet today the pit bull is largely reviled and specifically outlawed in at least 850 communities in the U.S. Pit bulls are banned from numerous housing projects and from private housing on all major U.S. military bases, despite the fact that they were trained and served as bomb-detecting dogs in Afghanistan. What really solidified the fear of pit bulls was the much-publicized arrest in 2007 of NFL player Michael Vick for running a heinously cruel dog-breeding and fighting operation.

## FULL TEXT

Pit Bull

By Bronwen Dickey

Knopf, 330 pages, \$26.95

This is a very good book. It is about pit bulls. Well, no, actually. It is about pit bulls and their relationships with people. And it is about people and their relationships with other people and the awful power of stereotypes and economic inequality. "Pit Bull" is also the story of how rumor, ignorance and sensationalist press transformed a good-hearted family dog into an (allegedly) vicious killer breed.

The first problem, as Bronwen Dickey shows, is that it is not at all clear what a "pit bull" is. There is no universal breed standard, though the American pit bull terrier is a recognized breed often called a pit bull. Yet the term is also used to include the American Staffordshire terrier, the Staffordshire bull terrier, the American bully, a lot of mutts, and almost any stocky muscular dog with a large head. Tellingly, when the author orders up DNA testing for the "pit bull mix" that she adopted from a shelter, the pup turns out to be 25% American Staffordshire terrier, 25% Staffordshire bull terrier, 25% unknown terrier mix and 25% Australian shepherd. Some pit bull! As Ms. Dickey wisely observes, the term pit bull "has become a slap-dash shorthand for a general shape of dog – a medium-sized, smooth-coated mutt – or for a 'dog not otherwise specified.'"

But the pit bull is not just a dog. It is, as Ms. Dickey's subtitle has it, "an American icon" – and a powerful one whose reputation has altered dramatically, especially in the past 50 years. In the 19th century and most of the 20th, pit bulls were desirable dogs, known to be loyal and patient with children. Helen Keller, Sir Walter Scott, Mark Twain and Theodore Roosevelt, among many others, owned pit bulls and spoke of their generous, gentle nature. Pit bulls were beloved mascots of various sports teams and military units, too.

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that they were trained and served as bomb-detecting dogs in Afghanistan.

What happened to so radically change public opinion about this dog?

Early in the 19th century, dog fighting, rat killing, badger hunting and bull baiting (along with bare-knuckle boxing) were brutal entertainments enjoyed by upper-class British men as well as by working-class toughs. Not all fighting dogs were pit bulls, but they were the sort of stocky, bigheaded mutts that are often perceived to be the breed. When some dog fighters immigrated to the U.S., they brought the practice with them, finding an audience among the urban poor (mostly Irish) and rural white men. Though dog fighting was outlawed in most states in the 1860s, illegal street dog fights never stopped.

In the 1960s and '70s, pit bulls, Doberman pinschers, German shepherds and other large breeds were bred and trained to protect the well-to-do in cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. The impetus was the perceived danger of race riots, which had occurred in Harlem in 1964, Watts in 1965, Newark in 1967 and Baltimore in 1968. People buying guard dogs were mostly white, rioters mostly black. What really solidified the fear of pit bulls was the much-publicized arrest in 2007 of NFL player Michael Vick for running a heinously cruel dog-breeding and fighting operation. Vick's conviction hardened the public's association of pit bulls with black men, poor people, drug dealers, thugs, pimps, hip-hop artists and criminals.

As Ms. Dickey makes clear, hating or outlawing pit bulls is more often about undesirable humans than it is about the dogs themselves. It is more acceptable to express prejudice against dogs than against people of color with limited incomes and perhaps little education, who are assumed to be the owners of such dogs. "If you looked a certain way and came from a certain neighborhood, your dog was assumed to be a pit bull . . . and your relationship to it was assumed to be motivated by greed or machismo," she writes. "'Pit bull' no longer felt like a physical description to me. It felt like a social caste."

Ms. Dickey has earned her reputation as a first-rate reporter. Here she has interviewed more than 350 people in 15 states, including dog rescuers, trainers, breeders, veterinarians, victims of dog bites, police and animal behaviorists. She has also trawled through archives, historic photographs and eyewitness accounts.

Her fundamental argument – persuasively made, in large part thanks to the sheer quantity and quality of her research – is that pit bulls are no more inherently aggressive than any other breed. They are no more likely to bite humans than other breeds, and in any case serious dog bites are relatively rare. Deaths by dog bite in America – regardless of breed – number only about 35 a year.

Nonetheless, many shelters house large numbers of putative pit bulls, and some simply euthanize them immediately because they are seen as unadoptable. And yet, of Vick's 49 surviving pit bulls, the majority have been successfully rehabilitated; most have been placed with families.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should say that for some years I traveled regularly to horse shows with a friend and her Staffordshire bull terrier. The dog was probably considered a "pit bull" by many who saw her. She was 50 pounds of solid muscle with a flamboyantly Roman nose, trained to protect her owner.

I was taught how to handle her and call her off if need be, since we spent a lot of time together. I never saw her attack, though I imagine she would have been fearsome. She put up patiently with horses, ponies, children, peacocks, barn cats, other dogs and loudspeakers. She also had a hilarious sense of humor. At Halloween, she strutted proudly in a fairy-princess outfit complete with diaphanous wings and tiara. She was "just a dog" but much

more than that, too.

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Ms. Shipman is the author of "The Invaders: How Humans and Their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction."

Credit: By Pat Shipman

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