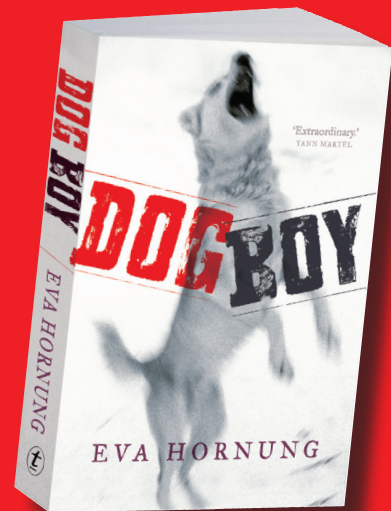


Dog Boy

Eva Hornung

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Praise for *Dog Boy*

'In exploring what it might be like to be a dog from a human perspective, *Dog Boy* sheds much light on what it is like to be human. Utterly compelling and believable.'
Yann Martel

About Eva Hornung

Eva Hornung (writing as Eva Sallis) won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award and the Nita May Dobbie Award for her first novel, *Hiam*. Her most recent novel, *The Marsh Birds*, won the Asher Literary Award 2005 and was shortlisted for numerous awards including the Age Book of the Year 2005, the NSW Premier's Literary Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

A reader's introduction to *Dog Boy*

'The first night was the worst...The building was buzzing, strange. It was filled with curses and screams, as if all the residents were awake, drunk and angry.'

Deserted in a chilly Moscow apartment, four-year-old Romochka is eventually driven by hunger to brave the streets outside. There he follows a stray dog to her lair in a deserted basement and joins four puppies suckling at their mother's teats. The dog that Romochka will call Mamochka cleans his face. Her tongue is *'warm and wet, sweet and sour.'*

Eva Hornung draws the reader into Romochka's dog life with vivid descriptions - the warmth of the puppies, the milk of Mamochka, the cold streets of Moscow where *'...children who stank were erased.'* Hornung writes of the dog clan with such detail and imagination that Romochka's final anguish echoes off the page.

The feral dogs are a tightly regulated unit, providing food and protection for one another. It's tempting to see the humans as heartless by comparison. But both human and dog are motivated by survival. Romochka's uncle leaves him to starve. Mamochka bites through

the soft heads of her puppies when there is no hope of food. Hornung raises some haunting questions through her comparisons and contrasts. Perhaps the most interesting arise when Romochka's instincts for survival collide with his emotion.

The book explores what it is to be human. What happens when we do not belong to clan, to family and to community? What happens when we do? The question that will not go away after reading this book is not what makes us human but what makes us animal in nature?

Questions for Discussion

1. Dmitry comments in *Dog Boy* that *'...the human was an animal at heart.'* Discuss the idea that humans like other animals, are driven by a savage will to survive and, at times, a blinding need to nurture. Mamochka, Natalya, Dmitry, Romochka, Laurentia, the gangs and the militia show us that dogs and humans are not so very far from each other.
2. *'But what I really, really wanted was to unsettle the notion that dogs are aliens,'* Eva Hornung comments about *Dog Boy*. Discuss how she does this in the novel. What idea is she trying to explore by unsettling this notion?
3. Romochka's uncle leaves him to starve. Mamochka and the clan protect him. Romochka is better off with the dogs than on the streets with humans. In what ways is this view of the novel too simplistic?
4. *'...feral children have always thrown up a question about the divide between human and other species. What makes us human? What part of us is animal, what part of us is above or beyond the animal?'* Discuss Eva Hornung's comments. What, if any, answers does the text suggest? What do you believe makes us human?

5. Eva Hornung has commented that the fascination with feral children is seeing the result of a life stripped of human nurture. This theme is explored in *Dog Boy* and many other texts. It's the subject of scientific experiments. Why does this fascination persist?
6. Eva Hornung has referred to the story of Romulus and Remus in many of her interviews. Discuss the myth. What aspect of human nature does it attempt to explain?
7. Romochka communicates with the dogs and with humans. Puppy barks. Is Puppy less human than Romochka? What questions does the text raise about the importance of language?
8. Discuss the significance of Romochka's collecting. Why is Puppy drawn to his collection?
9. *'When Romochka saw forest people in the city... he felt a pull. A feeling that they, alone among the others passing by, were of his kind.'* (p.101) Discuss how Romochka is caught between two worlds. Where is he placed in the last scene? His final choice is human but his final act is animal. Is Romochka *'...a walking human tragedy'* (p.214)
10. The world of the dogs is completely believable. How does the author sink the reader into Moscow and the clan of the feral dogs? Discuss the importance of setting in the novel.
11. On page 95 Romochka comments that *'...he liked eating brave and beautiful things best.'* On page 180 Puppy eats the crown *'...for its beauty.'* So many beautiful things are lost in the novel. So many ugly things become beautiful. Discuss the ideas that Hornung raises through the beautiful and the brutal in the novel.
12. The dogs do not understand Romochka's hunt of his uncle. Discuss the idea that in this scene Romochka is disturbingly human.
13. Discuss Romochka's fear of vulnerability and his anger at this emotion when it arises in others.
14. *'People moved with practised blindness through the streets...In the city...children who stank were erased.'* (p.100) Discuss the idea that the novel is about societal breakdown and the plight of the outsider. It's about what happens when we abandon our young. Or are the children a symbol of something else?
15. Natalya and Dmitry are by far the most brutal animals in the book. Do you agree? In what ways is the scene with the peacock symbolic? What other things are dissected and kept?
16. What is the significance of Romochka catching sight of his reflection? Discuss the importance of the scene on pages 168-174. Why contrast this scene with Romochka seeing Pievitza? (p.174)
17. I don't eat dog, I don't eat human, I don't eat cat. Why is Romochka pleased with himself for thinking this? What themes of the novel are highlighted in his comment?
18. *'He had just wanted Marko to be purely what he was instead of partially this, slightly that – and all he rest murky.'* (p.211) Dmitry wants the impossible. We're all murky, aren't we?