

Review Section

My Dog, My Self; or Dogs-r-us

Hotel for Dogs. 2009. Dreamworks Pictures and Nickelodeon Movies. Directed by Thor Freudenthal; *Marley & Me*. 2008. Fox 2000 Pictures. Directed by David Frankel.

Abstract

The live-action comedies *Hotel for Dogs* and *Marley and Me* illustrate the prominent American stereotypes of canines as surrogate children and models of human behavior. Both adopt a human perspective on nonhuman animals, particularly dogs. An ethic of caring goes awry, to become pampering and permissiveness, and precludes empathetic training that would help dogs to prosper as canines in a human world.

Keywords

adoption, canine, dog, education, family, training

Hotel for Dogs and *Marley and Me* are live-action comedies that feature dogs who accompany and promote the personal growth of humans. In *Hotel*, the need to hide the terrier mix Friday from their humorously malevolent foster parents leads the adolescents Andi and Bruce to rehabilitate an abandoned hotel to house stray dogs. A new, more permanent, family and a reborn society emerge from the recovery of the formerly abandoned teenagers, dogs, and hotel. In *Marley*, newlywed John follows the advice of his bachelor friend and adopts a golden retriever puppy as a way to delay the next item on his wife Jen's to do list: have kids. Marley becomes first child and witness to the transformations of John and his family, as well as the career-defining subject of John's newspaper column. Above all, what *Hotel* and *Marley* represent is a triumph of the ordinary, both in ways of life and ways of imagining dogs. For example, the nuclear family dominates. In *Hotel*, family serves as the wish that is fulfilled, while in *Marley* family life is questioned in passing, only to be confirmed more emphatically. Dogs are part of these families as surrogate children, as companions, and as mirrors of human characters. Unfortunately, *Hotel* and *Marley* also suggest the ways in which a human ethic of care can go awry: *Hotel* ends with extreme pampering that infantilizes canines, and *Marley* condones tolerating behaviors that call for intervention and training.

Hotel and *Marley* are both adaptations of books that take place in a world much like our own (events in *Hotel* stretch credulity, but they are never impossible). Accordingly, canine characters express themselves in ordinary ways, and human characters must rely on nonverbal cues and behavior rather than wait for dogs to speak to them in human language. Although they sometimes adopt the perceptual point of view of canine characters,

neither *Hotel* nor *Marley* ever imagines a parallel world where nonhuman characters express themselves in human speech, as do the recent *Bolt* and *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* (both 2008). The distortions of canine life in *Hotel* and *Marley* are thus subtler and include prosaic anthropomorphisms such as cultural stereotypes that limit how humans interact with dogs. Not incidentally, *Hotel* and *Marley* turn on the limited perception of human characters; neither Andi and Bruce nor John and Jen foresee the changes that having dogs in their lives will bring. A mood of humorous irony pervades *Marley* from the opening sequence, which features an idyllic scene of a boy frolicking with a puppy. In voice-over, John waxes nostalgic about raising one's first dog until he explains, "But that's not me and that's not my dog." The theme of life exceeding human expectations continues throughout and is made explicit when John's editor tells him, "Surprise yourself." In *Hotel*, limited perception is the result of Andi's and Bruce's youth but also of the sort of juvenile literature that imagines adult society as both simple and benevolent; such stories border on naïve wish fulfillment by insisting that complex problems will magically resolve if we view them through the eyes of children.

Hotel for Dogs

The very loose film adaptation of the novel *Hotel for Dogs* turns on developing the theme of rescuing the abandoned and repairing the broken. For example, the film makes orphans of its adolescent sibling heroes, currently in foster care and threatened with separation, who act out their wish for a permanent home by adapting an abandoned and decrepit hotel to house orphaned dogs. The filmmakers also replace the small-town setting of the book with a city to suggest urban renewal and to include a greater diversity of citizens, both canine and human, in its final society. Perhaps most importantly for human-animal studies, the setting change motivates the inclusion of a variety of canine breeds and mixtures, all of which one might find at a local shelter. Hypothetically, this strategy would tend to avoid encouraging viewers to patronize a particular breed. Furthermore, the film itself explicitly guides its presumably teen audience to adopt, rather than buy, a companion animal. Although *Hotel* largely avoids fetishizing any dog for appearance alone, many dogs do play roles based on their breed—e.g., a poodle is dainty and aloof. Excepting a handful of scenes, such as Friday's theft of a hot dog after begging fails, canines play supporting roles throughout. Dogs also provide minor asides and parallels, as when the dog Romeo courts a poodle—a direct complement to the human adolescent love story (perhaps a pun on "puppy love"), in which Dave woos Andi by supplying her with dog food from the pet store where he works.

Hotel opens with credits in the shape of gears, levers, and pulleys that foreshadow the machines that Bruce invents throughout the film, first to hide Friday and later to care for the dogs at the hotel. What further defines the running motif of Bruce's Rube Goldbergesque inventions is that they sustain the dogs when the kids make daytime orphans of them. Quite significantly, all the contraptions obviate the human component of the human-nonhuman relationship. Thanks to these inventions, playing fetch, going for a walk, having a potty break, eating, and riding in cars are all done without benefit of human companionship. But the gears in the credits also represent an interest in cause and effect and systems (such as the foster care system) that the orphan siblings Andi and Bruce

wish to transcend. Of course the narrative will redeem their desire to be part of a familial rather than a foster care system, to transition from a system of institutional treatment governed by law to a family governed by love. The visuals accompanying the credits finally settle on a nuclear family having a barbecue, but this is an unsettling image of Americana in the style of a natural history museum diorama. The image is alluring despite its obvious falseness; it is both nostalgic and skeptical.

The themes of systems and fraud continue in the opening scene when Andi and Bruce run afoul of the law for weighting empty cell phone boxes with rocks, sealing them in shrink-wrap, and selling them to a pawn shop. In some ways, these themes parallel their caseworker Bernie's insistence that they are good kids who behave badly because of their circumstances and the rundown hotel that only appears beyond repair. But in other ways, these themes are germane because, perhaps ironically, *Hotel* tends to conceal, rather than reveal, how things work.

From a human-animal studies perspective, the most distressing deception in *Hotel for Dogs* lies in its characterization of orphaned canine companions. Although the setting seems to be a city, Andi and Bruce solve the orphan dog problem by collecting fewer than a hundred dogs. To emphasize the completeness of their success, a scene shows animal control officers lounging around with nothing to do. Once they discover the hotel for dogs, of course, the animal control officers move all the canine residents to the prisonlike shelter. The disdain for animal control officers traces at least to *Pete the Pup* (1938), an Our Gang short in which Stymie must raise money to buy a dog license or lose Pete to the gas chamber. Although the 1938 "dog catcher" is more openly sadistic, in 2009 the animal control officers remain villains. Such a naïve perspective fails to appreciate that wicked civil servants are scarcely the cause of the euthanasia of healthy canines; this is a widespread social failure rather than a limited personal one. To believe otherwise is as much wish fulfillment as the escape and chase scene that closes the main plot of *Hotel*. An epilogue redefines the human-canine relationship, not in terms of family, as might be expected, but in terms of commerce; the hotel has been transformed into an upscale resort that indulges dogs in the extreme (as if this compensates for their earlier neglect). Many of the former canine tenants now work at the hotel. Tellingly, this final society excludes the animal control officers. Their services are presumably no longer needed in a culture that pampers, rather than confines, canines. The overwhelming presence of the city and the complete absence of nature raise questions about whether this human fantasy of leisure is even remotely close to what dogs would imagine as attractive. As in much of *Hotel*, the human perspective dominates.

Marley and Me

Unlike *Hotel for Dogs*, *Marley* is largely faithful to its source: the best-selling nonfiction book *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog* by John Grogan. The narrative follows the broad contours of the book by tracing the lives of a couple in suburban Florida as they adopt Marley, "the clearance puppy," deal with his outlaw puppy years, fail to train him (it is suggested that he is untrainable), raise a human family, move to Pennsylvania, and euthanize him after his stomach twists a second time. Many critics compared the tearjerker ending to that of *Old Yeller* (1957), another adaptation from a book, which

was released on Christmas day some fifty-one years earlier. Significantly, *Old Yeller* marks the coming of age of a boy with the death of his beloved golden retriever, while the canine death in *Marley* suggests the transition of its central male human character from naïve newlywed to seasoned father.

Marley & Me is about stages of life through both a human and canine prism. Because of unequal life spans, however, John's human life stretches from midtwenties marriage to bucolic family life while Marley's canine life covers adoption to memorial. While the book balances stories about Marley and stories about John, the movie makes Marley less central, as the narrative follows John and adopts his point of view. A more appropriate title might have been *Marley & Me & Me & Marley*. Their parallel growth invites comparisons and Marley largely symbolizes John's resistance to restrictions of his freedom, be they marital responsibilities or social restraints. Figures of control, such as a man who tells the Grogans to get a leash and people at the dog beach who admonish John to keep an eye on Marley, are lightly mocked. *Marley*, however, reserves its most vigorous ridicule for a dog trainer who tells John to take control of his dog. When John proves incapable, she confidently takes the leash and attempts to make Marley heel. The training session ends with Marley's expulsion from the class for knocking her down and humping her. Ironically, trainers had to encourage bad behavior in the dogs who played Marley. The stern trainer who talks about alpha status and claims that a dog can only have one "master" is viewed even more harshly than *Hotel* views its animal control officers. Such disparagement of figures of control condones failure to educate, i.e., train, dogs so that they may thrive in a human-dominated world.

In addition to serving as a parallel to John, Marley often functions as comic relief, since his various high jinks add levity; the overall impression is the humorous highlights of a dog's life as seen through human eyes. A significant example is a sequence that alternates between John and Jen on a romantic getaway in Ireland and Marley terrorizing a dog sitter in Florida. A voice-over by Jen recites instructions that humorously fail to appreciate the magnitude of Marley's capacity for destruction. Although this scene and others are played for laughs, many of them depict Marley's likely separation anxiety and terrified reaction to storms. As dog trainer Cesar Millan remarks, "When a dog has a fear, or an obsession, or any of the many other problems I am called in to solve, most of the time we're not talking about a 'personality quirk.' We're talking about an unfulfilled and sometimes unhappy dog" (Millan, p. 27). Unfortunately, such insights remain outside the narrative of the film. The final scenes, in which the Grogans recognize the dying Marley as an exceptional companion, are certainly moving, and sniffles and tears were the rule in the cinema when I saw the film. One wonders, however, whether the Grogans might have enjoyed the life of Marley had they taken an earlier and more active role in his instruction.

Conclusion

Whatever their shortcomings, *Hotel for Dogs* and *Marley and Me* both deserve credit for animal welfare basics such as encouraging viewers to adopt, rather than buy, a dog. In the book, the Grogans adopt Marley from a breeder described as a "hobbyist, motivated more by love of the breed than by profit" (p. 7). This probably explains why the adoption scene in the movie takes place at an ostensible rescue that looks much like a hobbyist breeder.

Hotel takes this commitment to adoption further, which is understandable given the centrality of animal rescue to its themes; DreamWorks Pictures, Nickelodeon Movies, and Paramount Pictures partnered with Pedigree dog food to sponsor adoption drives at shelters and rescues across the United States. Perhaps such drives will eventually increase adoptions from shelters, where five in ten dogs are euthanized (ASPCA). An alarming number of those who are adopted return, mainly because of behavioral issues. At the root of such issues lies a limited human ability to empathize with the emotional and psychological existence of our canine companions. *Hotel for Dogs* and *Marley and Me*, entertaining as they might be, do less than they might to instruct us in these abilities. Viewing dogs as members of the family, a dominant American view reflected in both *Marley* and *Hotel*, undoubtedly reduces the most egregious forms of neglect, but it can also lead us to neglect central aspects of who dogs are. It is only through acknowledging them as dogs that we can be the best possible companions—companions who educate them how to thrive as dogs in a human world.

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