

Q&A Laura Schenone

You are a James Beard Award-winning writer who wrote about food for many years. What made you change directions and write about animals?

It started because my son wanted a dog. I met a woman in my town in NJ who was bringing greyhounds over from Ireland in need of homes. This sounded very bizarre to me. I didn't have any interest. But then she sent around an email about a greyhound mix needing a home. There were pictures showing this dog in terrible condition as she'd been found on the side of a road in Ireland—an absolute bloody mess, and then her slow recovery until she'd become the most beautiful dog I'd ever seen. I said yes, and we adopted Lily. I'm a sucker for a good salvation story.

What is this book about?

Most of all, it's the story of Marion Fitzgibbon of Limerick, one of the women responsible for Lily. Fitzgibbon spent decades of her life rescuing all kinds of animals. She also stood up to the greyhound racing industry. In Ireland its big business backed by the government money and nearly impossible to fight. We watch as she rises to lead the ISPCA and we follow her life's arc as someone obsessed with a cause. The book also recounts my slow and very reluctant awakening to animals. So it is partly a conversion tale.

Why do you think this story matters?

I think we are at a cross roads in our world. The wellbeing of animals is the wellbeing of humans and the planet are interconnected and at risk. This book isn't just about greyhounds. It's about how we as humans treat all animals, those we use as pets, racing machines, entertainment, food—and those in the wild. There are some people like Marion are visionaries, leading us in a new direction.

What surprised you the most about and Marion and her motley band of animal rescuers?

I was surprised at how brave they were. Marion and the women of Limerick Animal Welfare went into dangerous places to investigate reports of animal abuse. They found themselves in housing projects amid gunfire and other violence, and they went into camps of Irish itinerant people known as Travellers. Most “normal” people there wouldn't do this. But Marion was not in any way “normal.”

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We have this impression that animal welfare people care about animals and not people. Did you find a lot of that?

Marion was clear that animals were her priority because they are at the bottom of society. They were her preference. But she saw people as a responsibility too and she demonstrated this in some very surprising ways. She went to great lengths to help not just animals but humans who were living at the margins. That's why I found her so interesting.

People have noticed that this book reads quite a lot like a novel. Was that your intention?

Yes it was. The women in the book break a lot of rules to save animals and live the lives they want, and so there is some drama and danger and bad behavior too. I wanted it to be a page-turner as we see how far Marion will go.

What was the hardest thing about writing this book?

The suffering of animals was very difficult for me. I had not been aware. If we look away from abuse, we continue the cycle. So I coped by focusing on the compassion and bravery, and also some of the comic foibles and badass undercover missions that these women undertook.

What are some of your favorite scenes about Marion?

I love the scene when Marion was about six years old on a car ride with her family. She looks out of the window and sees a horse in the pouring rain carrying a very heavily load. He is clearly miserable, and she is overcome by a desire to help. At that moment, as such a young child, she realizes that she is different from everyone else.

What were some important experiences you had researching and writing this book?

The Rhode Island Red hen I held at a farm sanctuary. She was very sweet. She purred in my arms. I had no idea how lovely it would be to hold a hen. I'd been afraid of them.

Your last book was a family memoir told through the search for a long lost ravioli recipe. Are you still eating meat?

No. I don't eat meat. Now I am trying to be vegan, but not 100% successful. I can't seem to give up Parmigiano cheese. But I worry about the cows of Parma. I occasionally eat some small fishes. I admit that I have succumbed to ice cream this summer. It's a work in progress.