

Interview with Russell A. Vassallo
Author of Tears and Tales: Stories of Animal and Human Rescue

Reader Views is happy to be talking with Russell A. Vassallo, author of “Tears and Tales: Stories of Animal and Human Rescue.” Russell is talking with Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Russell: Hi Juanita, thank you for your interest in “Tears and Tales.”

Juanita: Would you please tell your readers what your book “Tears and Tales: Stories of Animal and Human Rescue” is all about?

“Tears and Tales” is a collection of true-to-life stories about the animals I love and have loved and how they nurtured me when I was suffering depression from a near-fatal bout with colon cancer. They’re really stories about the animal/human connection. The stories are true, incidentally.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your book?

Russell: I’ve always been interested in writing. I found sitting through hour-long chemotherapy sessions unproductive and started drawing notes for future stories. When I started telling these stories to other patients, I noticed they brightened and looked forward to chemo sessions without the fear and sense of trepidation they felt. Once I knew I could help people by writing, I started literally pounding out story after story and when my wife, who is a pretty tough reader, loved them, I didn’t need any more encouragement.

Juanita: What animal has had the most profound effect on you?

Russell: I’d have to say dogs. My first encounter occurred with a farm dog named Rusty. I was four. My grandfather had a large farm where he kept hunting dogs. We were eating under the vineyard arbor and I went to feed Rusty some scraps. Poor dog thought I was coming to take its food and it nipped me on the right ear. Afterwards, he bowed his head and licked my hand. I knew he was saying he was sorry, but my grandfather was so angered he wanted to shoot the dog. I clung to Rusty’s neck and cried for my grandfather not to hurt him. I knew then I’d always have animals in my life.

Juanita: How have animals helped you through your emotional struggles?

Russell: Animals are perceptive. I had a Doberman pinscher, Taurus, who sensed I was having a bad time going through my divorce. I'd be at my office desk crying and he'd come over and lay his head on my leg. One look at those eyes told me he was there to comfort me, as if he were saying: "Hey, I'm here. Everything will be all right." Animals have a way of connecting with us if we just listen.

With Nikki, my female Dobe, she suffered from lymphoma cancer. On the very day I was scheduled for surgery, Nikki, after living for nearly two and one-half she came out of the pantry where she slept and dropped down dead. I always said it was because we couldn't care for her any more. I didn't even have to bury her. I had to lay her in the blanket and drag her out onto the front porch. The anger I felt against cancer for having deprived me of spending a final few moments with my friend and mourning her death caused a rage in me that I believe kept the cancer from recurring. I am now eight years past my surgery and still cancer free. I got over the cancer. I never got over Nikki.

Juanita: What have they taught you about love?

Russell: That love is unselfish. That love is giving. That love is sacrificing beyond what you believe is possible. That love is loyal. I once saw a Doberman crash through a screen door to stop a little infant from walking out into the street. That animal held on to her dress until her parent came to the rescue. I had a horse -accident where my horse spooked and threw me, then turned and came back, put his nose on me as I lay on the ground and waited for me to remount.

Animals seldom fail to show appreciation or understanding; they are always ready to be with you; they fill the quiet moments when a spouse cannot be near; they share their joy and enthusiasm for life. You can hurt them, abuse them, taunt them, starve them and they still love you. And I am not saying I believe in animal abuse, just that animals are that forgiving and that loyal.

Juanita: Do you have a special gift for talking with animals, or is this available to everyone?

Russell: I don't believe I have a special gift for talking with animals, but I do believe they understand. They don't speak in human terms. They understand thoughts, feelings, concepts. They can be trained to understand words. But they communicate through thought. My little dog, Sweet Pea, can tell when I am ready to get playful with the water hose and she is long gone. Or I can sense that something is calling me and see one of my horses staring at me. And he is usually sending the same message: *I'd like a carrot, please.*

If you want to see someone with a special gift with animals, read "To Love a Crooked Horse" in "Tears and Tales." My wife has that special gift with animals.

Juanita: What can animals give us that people can't?

Russell: Animals teach us if we are willing to learn. They are totally giving. They love with true devotion. Books are legion with examples about their loyalty and protectiveness. What they give us is the lesson of unadulterated love, love with no conditions, love without parallel, love without restraint, love with total fulfillment, and love that is honest. Animals are simplistic; people complex. We not only have to understand a person's words, but we have to assess their body language because people say one thing and do another sometimes. So some are honest and some are not. But animals are honest one-hundred per-cent of the time.

Juanita: Have you found any differences between what varying species of animals can teach us?

Russell: Absolutely! Dogs teach us patience, understanding, kindness, love, loyalty.

With horses, it's a question of respect and trust. If they trust you, they follow you anywhere and do whatever you ask. But, they must trust you. Cats, on the other hand, teach us independence, courage, and the right to be selective in relationships. They are independent in every aspect. My cat, Boots, won't drink except from a dripping faucet. I guess you could say he has taught me how to follow. So he doesn't just "give" his love. You have to "earn" it. And, when you do, it is so rewarding to have that autonomous little feline cuddle up in a display of affection.

Like people, animals vary. Some teach us kindness. Some resilience. Some courage. Some fortitude. Some patience. Some loyalty. I have a pit bull/shar pei mix who cowers when we have thunder storms so he curls around me on the couch, and from that fear, I fathom the depths of my own fallibility because he is not the only one who experiences fear.

Juanita: You had a very hard challenge of recovering from cancer. How did animals help you through this process?

Russell: It was a difficult battle but I literally "willed" myself to heal. Animals were the driving force.

I was distraught and angered over the death of Nikki. I literally hated the cancer that killed her and struck me and I wasn't going to let her death be in vain. Every night I reminded myself that I was fighting the same enemy that prevented me from saying goodbye to her. When the cardinal appeared on my window sill and wanted to come into the house, when it flew right to the bed and settled in the place where Nikki slept, I knew it was a message from her to fortify my will to live. Not to live would have rendered her death meaningless because I truly believe she picked that time to die so my wife could devote her full time to me.

In the second instance, we foster care a standardbred race horse named Red Leader. I wanted very much to train Red to be a trail horse. It was my dream to get him on the trail. All the time I was recovering I thrived on the thought that one day I would mount and ride Red and that he'd trust me to do that. As an abused horse he came to us unsettled, frightened, rowdy and difficult to handle. Today, he follows me around the paddock with no lead line. The only way to accomplish my goal with him was to get well. We all have that drive within us.

Juanita: Could you ever imagine your life without animals?

Russell: I can't. Not really. They were my first friends. As a child I was ill with pneumonia for many years. Every winter I was confined to bed with bronchial pneumonia triggered by asthma and allergies. I had no friends because I was never outside long enough to have any. By the time I was eight, I was somewhat recovered, but the kids on the block had already formed their relationships and I was the odd man out. With animals I could always be myself. I could lavish praise and affection on them, have companionship, enjoy laughter and fun or just spend a quiet moment being together. They didn't taunt me, hurt me or desert me when others came along. They were just my friends.

I don't know how many times I said I didn't want another dog. It was too painful when they died. Still, other dogs have come into my life to ease that pain and I have never been able to say "no." Just read "Git" for an example of my soft-heartedness. My Dobe had died and I did not want another

dog. But she was so ragged, starved and alone I had to take her in because I sensed she had that will to survive. Going back to what they teach us, they teach us to survive.

No, I can never imagine myself without animals in my life.

Juanita: I have read many reviews for your book “Tears and Tales,” and the one word that keeps coming up is “cathartic.” Why do you think reading your book creates such a strong experience for readers?

Russell: I am a very emotional person and I can express that emotion in concepts that touch people. I would have made a perfect Don Quixote because I believe in protecting women, in nobility, in tears of joy and pain, in the impossible dream. I am not afraid to cry, not afraid to voice my emotions, not afraid to feel my emotions, not ashamed of my emotions.

There are too many people who feel alone and friendless. They struggle to find companionship. People die of loneliness all the time. “Tears and Tales” compels them to conclude that there is hope, there is a way. One look from a pet with all that gushy love in its eyes and the desolation is banished. Even those who already have pets are encouraged to view them with new understanding after reading “Tears and Tales.” I wanted to touch people, to put them in tune with their own emotions.

I also think it’s sad that so many people constrain their emotions. With animals, I can be whomever I please. If I want to talk or sing in a funny voice, I can do it. If I want to cry because I am hurt, the animal will understand and cuddle next to me. I think that’s why “Tears and Tales” is receiving such rave reviews. It lets people give vent to their own emotions, come to grip with themselves, feel something special within them. And they know someone else out there feels the same way. It’s no accident that seniors with pets live longer than their lonely counterparts.

Juanita: Russell, what do you want your readers to ultimately understand by reading “Tears and Tales”?

Russell: Russell: Juanita, I want them to believe as I do. Life is a road to another place and in that place are all the people and the animals we have loved in a universal bond where everything is merged in happiness. I want them to understand my emotions and I want to touch them in a way that fulfills them as human beings.

Juanita: Russell, do you have plans for any other books?

Russell: The fact is my editor/distributor is slowing me down because she wants me to take time to market “Tears and Tales.” I have a second book completed, “The Horse With the Golden Mane”, which is a collection of three novelettes also based on true events. I also have four other books sitting on computer disks. Two of them involve animals. I also have a number of short stories completed, but haven’t decided yet what I’ll do with them.

I am elated that “Tears and Tales” is resonating well with readers. Fans are asking when my next book will be published. One eighty-six year old man hadn’t read a book in forty years, but he has read “Tears and Tales” three times. A church-goer remarked that my book helped her out of a depressed mood. Not only am I writing about animals but how they interact with humans. One reviewer said I confirm that the “rainbow connection” really exists. I believe that. My animal friends are just over the horizon, waiting for me to walk them into the light.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Russell: Well, our website is www.krazyduck.com and that is pretty comprehensive, but they can also place their names on our free newsletter list by contacting me at Russ@krazyduck.com. There is also a lot of information in the book itself, personal items about myself that aren't revealed on my website. We also try to answer anyone who e-mails us. Anyone who purchases the book directly from us is automatically included on our newsletter list...e-mail or snail mail.

So they can purchase the book, "Tears and Tales", or tap our website www.krazyduck.com or e-mail us at Russ@krazyduck.com because all of these sources will reveal something about me and my work. We do blog at <http://mykrazyduck.blogspot.com> but I am new at this so please don't expect miracles. If people are not on the Internet, they can request a copy of my biography and other information by writing me at Krazy Duck, Box 105, Danville, KY 40423.

What I want to stress is that I am not concerned about making money, but I do want my writing to help people and to do that, I need the support of readers because writing and publishing is a very competitive world.

Juanita: Russell, thank you for this open-hearted interview. It has been a pleasure talking with you and I encourage readers not to miss your inspiring new book "Tears and Tales." Do you have any last thoughts for your readers?

Russell: Juanita, thank you for your insightful and challenging interview. I truly, truly enjoyed talking with you too.

Yes, I have thoughts for my readers. I thank them for having faith in me to share their private worlds with them and I thank them for their interest in "Tears and Tales." If they laughed with me, if they cried with me, then I am not alone and neither are they. Yes, I hope they read my book, share my thoughts, my challenges, my conquests, my sorrows and my dreams. I hope they do that because my hopes and dreams are theirs as well. It's what John Donne, the poet, wrote so many, many years ago: *And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls... it tolls for thee.*

Thank you again Juanita for the opportunity to express my feelings and sentiments.