

Comic Relief

Artist's new book is an ode to shelter animals

BY ANGELA MOXLEY

Ten square inches: Most days, that's all the space Patrick McDonnell has to convey the message that animals matter.

In the span of three tiny panels, the MUTTS comic strip author and HSUS board member has opened readers' eyes to the cruelty of factory farms, seal hunts, and dog chaining. When they're not savoring simple pleasures like pink socks and warm beds, MUTTS characters—including dog Earl and cats Mooch and Shtinky Pudding—introduce their fans to fellow creatures who are all but forgotten.

The cartoon's stripped-down quietness and its ability to instill empathy sans preaching are inspired by real-life versions of its subjects, including McDonnell's rescued cat and his Jack Russell terrier, who died last November at almost 19 years of age.

When McDonnell launched MUTTS in 1994, he chose to draw animals because he loves their expressiveness, their beauty, and the innocence that helps them wake up fresh to the world, an essential trait for a character in a daily strip.

"I would take the time to look at my cat and dog and think, 'What are they

doing today?' They usually would be just lying in the sun or playing with a ball or waiting to get fed—fundamental, simple things," he says.

McDonnell's desire to portray animals as themselves, not as humans on four legs, has helped him see through the eyes of other species and inspired him to incorporate animal protection themes into his work. When he first conceptualized Guard Dog in 1995, he intended the tough-looking guy to be the antihero to sweet Earl and Mooch. But with a heavy chain tying him down, "the villain became a tragic character," McDonnell says.

Guard Dog has since become a poster pooch for neglected backyard animals. Heartbroken fans plead with McDonnell to unshackle him, but the artist persists; he still has a message to send.

His tales of other animals less fortunate than Earl and Mooch—those who end up homeless—have resonated with readers since his "Shelter Stories" series first appeared a decade ago, coincidentally around the same time The HSUS invited him to participate in National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week. Born from doodles in a sketchbook, the series appears in newspapers each May and November and forms the basis of McDonnell's 16th collection, *MUTTS Shelter Stories: Love. Guaranteed.*, released by Andrews McMeel Publishing.

At Animal Care Expo 2008 in Orlando in May, he told a crowd of shelter workers and animal control staff how he'd put together one of his most shelter-positive strips. In it, Shtinky explains to Mooch and Earl that he's off to visit his "angels." He explains that once he was lost, alone, hungry, and scared, but then "they" appeared and fed him, washed him, and fixed up his broken leg. In the last panel



of the strip, the home of the "angels" is revealed: an animal shelter.

"I'm so honored to be in a room full of angels," McDonnell told the crowd at Expo.

McDonnell hopes the new book, which pairs strips from the series with photos of adopted pets, inspires other readers to find their best friends at shelters and rescues. Taken by the adopters themselves, the photos have a personal touch, and accompanying descriptions brim with affection, too. "They're almost like little haikus," says McDonnell. Ending the book alongside a photo of a grinning golden retriever is the line "This is happy Yoshi enjoying his new life"—which McDonnell calls "my new favorite poem."

With plans for an animation special in the works, the MUTTS characters are making the leap to new media. In the meantime, McDonnell will keep spreading humane messages in the 700 newspapers in 20 countries where MUTTS appears. "I hope someday all I need do is cat and dog jokes, that someday soon all the animal issues are history," he says.

First, though, Guard Dog has a job to do: soften the hearts of neglectful pet owners. Then McDonnell can fulfill his promise to fans—and finally let one of his most poignant characters come in from the cold. **AS**



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