

Do Dogs Have Ghosts?

Two books chase down the idea of a dog's life beyond the grave.

Paul Hughes

Do you believe in ghosts? Canine ghosts? You are not alone: two books now chase down the idea that the bond between humans and dogs knows no earthly bounds.

Consider the books the Mulder and Scully of dog ghost phenomena. Like the partners from "The X-Files" one is more interested in personal experience and the other wants cold, hard proof.

The storyteller's flair breathes through "Ghost Dogs of the South" by Randy Russell and Janet Barnett (John F. Blair Publisher, 2003). The Mulder of the duo, this book uses anecdotes of Southern ghost stories to bring its dogs to life. The authors don't just follow the folklore of the South — they revel in it, and the people involved.

"Janet and I are far more interested in the person who has the ghost experience," Russell says. "We collect experiences."

And he knows the stories as just that — personal events in the lives of folks who love their dogs. Following stories from the Revolutionary War to the present, the book is more keen on listening to dog owners tell stories than in proving a point.

He and Barnett themselves had such an experience when they heard their late Great Dane Desdemona scramble down the stairs to meet the duo at the door.

"I'm willing to suggest it's a trick of the heart," he says of the sound of their big dog's nails on the wooden floor. "It may be our willingness to remember her" that caused them to hear the ghost of their beloved pet.

But Russell and Barnett assert they heard something, as do many people in the tales included in "Ghost Dogs of the South." Some accounts even include pet ghost sightings, giving a legend-like quality to parts of the book.

"The gist of the book is not trying to convince anyone the stories are more real than others," Russell says. "We're trying to tell good stories."

Meanwhile, "Pet Ghosts: Animal Encounters from Beyond the Grave," (New Page Books, 2006) by Joshua P. Warren, takes an analytic approach to the question of whether pets have ghosts. Warren tries to apply the scientific method to an area rarely thought able to handle it — paranormal pet presences.

He methodically describes what he sees on his search for evidence of his departed Dachshund. Like Scully, the other partner of "The X-Files" fame, Warren uses high-tech instruments to seek out the truth about pet ghosts. The introduction cites a "barrage of gear" such as electromagnetic field meters and infrared cameras to find proof of his pet's ghost. Offering as much proof as possible, Warren documents everything from the history of spectral dogs to present-day appearances.

"Pictures taken ... where ghostly activity is reported often show balls or circles of light." Often, he writes, such photos are the result of natural elements — reflections, dust, moisture, or insects.

"But not all of them," he adds.

Back at the Mulder camp, Russell and Barnett are content to let people speak, and Warren knows instruments can't always prove what a dog owner would love to believe.

So whether you'd like to entertain the believer, the skeptic, or the dog lover in you, one of these books is bound to satisfy.

Paul Hughes is a freelance writer from California.