

Jan  
Fennell

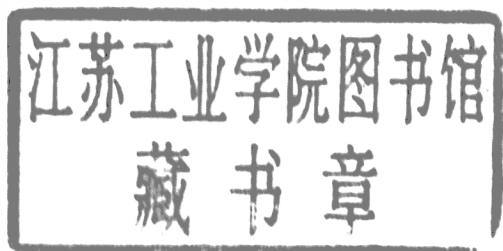
author of the bestselling *The Dog Listener*

Friends  
for Life



JAN FENNELL

*Friends for Life*



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## *Acknowledgements*

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I thought that this would be the most difficult book to write, but putting my life into words helped me to find many answers. I know now how vital every event proved to be on my journey to become *The Dog Listener*.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Teams at Gillon Aitken and HarperCollins for their belief in me; especially my agent Mary Pachnos, who has been there for me every step of the way. She has become very dear to me.

More than ever I wish to acknowledge those who support me on a day to day basis. My partner Glenn Miller, who works tirelessly behind the scenes. Alison Powrie and my son Tony Knight who so proudly carry on my work world-wide, and Charlotte Medley who helps care for our wonderful pack. My family and friend who are always there for me. Together we have a lot of fun.

Jan F

## *Preface*

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The past decade has seen my life transformed in constantly surprising ways. Since I began developing my ideas about understanding the inner language of dogs, I have been granted experiences I would never have imagined possible.

It may sound strange, but as I have travelled around both the UK and other parts of the world, the most striking difference has been the interest people have taken in what I have to say. To appreciate how significant that is, you must understand that for much of my early life, the idea that anyone would be interested in anything I had to say was unthinkable to me. So the fact that people wanted not only to listen to my ideas but to go deeper and to know about the experiences that had led to their development took quite some getting used to, I can tell you.

From the outset, I noticed that a handful of questions re-occurred again and again. When and why did I fall in love with dogs? What made them so special? How did a Londoner like me end up living in rural Lincolnshire? How did I come to look for a better, kinder way of living with our best friends? What gave me the strength and conviction to

persevere with those ideas when the world seemed full of people ready to knock them down? It never ceases to surprise me how curious people are to know these things.

As I began to tell the stories that provided the answers to such questions, new, even more unlikely ones arose. Was I going to turn those stories into a book? When was I going to write my memoirs? My response to these was a hearty, genuinely incredulous laugh. I simply dismissed the idea.

It was during the period I was completing my second book, *The Practical Dog Listener*, when I'd been asked about my early days for what seemed like the thousandth time, that I was forced to think again. I realized that perhaps, after all, I should write something that provided the answers to all these questions.

The result is this memoir, the story of my journey from London to rural Lincolnshire, from girlhood to motherhood, from ignorance to enlightenment – and occasionally, in all three cases, back again.

It has not been an easy undertaking. Subconsciously I know one of the reasons I put off doing this was a fear of awakening the ghosts of the past. On more than one occasion I was taken aback by the power and potency of the memories I revived.

The process of writing this book has confirmed several important things, however. One of them is that – for good or bad – I would not have reached the point I have in my life, without the experiences I have had. Nor would I have got here without the special friendships I have made along the way. There have been friends and family who have played their crucial parts. I have been blessed with two

wonderful – at times inspirational – children. I hope I have done them all justice in the pages that follow.

Yet no one has made a greater contribution than the canine companions who have shared my life. I have known and loved so many of them over the years. They have come in all shapes and sizes, in every shade under the sun and from all manner of breeds and backgrounds. There have been short ones, shaggy ones, pedigree ones and some of deeply dubious parentage.

Since as far back as I can remember, dogs have been a constant in my life. From an early age growing up in the London of the 1950s, I was drawn to them like a magnet. Wherever I went a dog would appear. It was as if some irresistible natural force was pulling us together. Family and friends accepted it as a fact of life. Back then no one stopped to analyse why we formed such deep bonds, least of all me.

As a child, all I knew was that while other children felt wary and afraid of dogs, I somehow felt safer in their company. To me they were the most unthreatening creatures in the world, the most affectionate too, certainly more so than most humans. As my life moved on, I found nothing to alter that view.

Now I believe dogs hear voices we don't hear, possess senses we simply can't understand. They have an emotional sense so highly tuned it is beyond our understanding. Everyone who has ever lived with a dog knows what I mean. What else can explain the way that, at times when you are low emotionally, your dog always seems to be at your side? Dogs sense vulnerability and weakness. They have a gift for knowing when to provide the uncomplicated,

unconditional companionship and love their human friends need.

It wasn't long after I set off on the voyage of self discovery that was the writing of this book, that I began to understand why, from the very start, dogs had played such a prominent role in my story. Now that journey is complete, I can see why they have remained friends for life.

Jan Fennell

Lincolnshire, January 2003



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## *Chapter 1*

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# Beautiful Girl

I was born of a loving relationship. The only problem was that where my mother and father were concerned, they reserved most of that love for each other. I was the only child, the little nuisance who got in the way, the living embodiment of the old saying that ‘two’s company but three’s a crowd’. I often think I spent my childhood as an outsider looking in on their private happiness. I bear no resentment towards my parents. I have tried to understand how hard life was for them, and to a large degree I have succeeded. If I am brutally honest, however, there are still times when I ask myself why they bothered having me.

Until I came along, their story could have come straight off the pages of a slushy romantic novel. My mother, Nona Whitton, met my father, Wally Fennell, in London a year after the end of World War II, in 1946. It was a time of hardships, and the war still cast a long shadow over life in England.

My dad’s war seemed like something out of Spike Milligan’s madcap accounts of life in the Army. Dad always said ‘war was a joke’ and his experiences proved it. During

his six years in the Army he was charged with desertion by one regiment when he was already fighting with another one altogether and reported dead when he was still very much alive.

The desertion charge was laid by the Royal Engineers, his second regiment, who called him up in 1941, two years into the war. They charged him when he failed to reply to his call-up papers, then discovered to their embarrassment that he had volunteered to serve with the Gloucesters when the war had first broken out.

Dad was a practical man and his talents suited the Royal Engineers. He was often sent behind enemy lines to prepare the way for the fighting divisions and it was during a mission somewhere in Europe, in 1943, that he was reported missing in action. The telegram that broke the news had a terrible effect on his father, George Fennell, who had already lost three of his six sons in tragic circumstances. The news that another was missing presumed dead was too much to bear. He died of a heart attack days later. My father never really forgave the Army for that; he had not been killed or captured at all and he turned up safe and well just in time to travel back to England for his father's funeral. What a happy homecoming that was for him.

My dad always believed in what he was fighting for, in serving King and Country. But he also believed war was a series of mishaps. Anybody whose job is to blow things up and then put them back together again doesn't feel very constructive in a war, he used to say. His philosophy seemed to have been that if you didn't laugh you'd go mad.

His nickname in the Army was 'Crash' because of all

the scrapes he got himself into. He was obviously a good soldier, being 'busted' as a sergeant, that is to say promoted then demoted again, seven times. His final promotion came in the field and was given by a Canadian officer who saw that my father was the one organizing everything. The officers didn't know what they were doing, according to my father; it was up to the ordinary enlisted men to sort out the mess the officers made.

The low point of my father's war came at Arnhem. His unit was moving forward with an escort of tanks into an area just recaptured from the Germans. They had been told the area was free of enemy troops and had been sent ahead to clear the path. No sooner had they set off than the German tanks came over the hill again and my dad was fleeing for cover.

It was a close-run thing, shells going off all over the place, men falling to the ground. Most of Dad's unit made it but when they reached safety in the trees someone said: 'Crash, look at your knee.' It was in bits. He had also badly damaged his elbow. But it wasn't the end of his war. The Army surgeons put his knee back together with a piece of silver wire. He went back to Europe and stayed on with the Royal Engineers, building bridges in post-war Holland until early 1946.

My father had been twenty-one when he left home. Six years later he returned from the war with a bad limp and the feeling that he had sacrificed his youth, his health and probably his chances of happiness. He often said the war took the best years of his life.

My mother, on the other hand, looked back on the war with feelings of nostalgia. I think the period between 1939

and 1945 provided her with the best time she ever had. For her life afterwards was an anticlimax.

Like my father, she was from west London. Without knowing the full details until much later I was aware that her childhood and teenage years had been tough. Her father had died relatively young, when her mother was expecting the fourth of their children. So when war broke out my mother, like many other young women, found it a liberating experience. She had a job working in a munitions factory, earned a good income and suddenly found herself part of a group of independent girlfriends who were determined to live every day and night as if it were their last – which in the London of the Blitz it might easily have been.

For Mum life was made all the more exciting by the fact that, at twenty, she was a really beautiful-looking girl. We never talked about that period much, for deeper reasons that would eventually reveal themselves. But I think she was engaged seven times. The one story Mum would recall, ad flippin' nauseam, was of the New Year's Eve party when Stewart Granger danced with her.

At the time he was one of the country's great *matinée* idols and everyone had been excited at the prospect of him coming to the party. He arrived late, close to midnight, and immediately announced he couldn't stay. 'I'm sorry I can't stop, but before I go I must dance with the most beautiful woman in the room,' he announced with a film star's sense of the theatrical. To Mum's delight he fixed his eyes on her, took her by the arm and whisked her around the dance floor. At the end of the dance he plonked a kiss on her – then bade her farewell. Well, that was the highlight of my mother's life, pretty much. Everybody who ever

knew her knew about that. And it reinforced her view of how the world worked.

My mum, bless her, really believed that there was a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. But her problem was that she never found the rainbow. Whenever it appeared it would vanish again abruptly, a little like Stewart Granger. She was one of those people who, having been told she was beautiful, didn't think she had to do anything else in life. She thought being beautiful was enough.

What she needed was someone to worship her. And in my father, she found the man to do it.

It was my father's sister-in-law, Elsie, who brought them together. She had worked with my mother at the munitions factory during the war. At work she had kept telling Nona that she must meet 'our Wally'. At home, she had kept telling my father he had to meet 'my Nona'.

When the war came to an end Elsie and Nona found jobs at a biscuit factory together. Elsie had just given birth to a baby boy and Nona had popped round to see her with a supply of free biscuits. Now my father came from a very musical family. He could play the ukulele, guitar, harmonica and concertina, but the day Nona visited he was playing the mandolin. She always remembered hearing it as she walked up to the door of Elsie and Uncle Bill's house. When she walked into the sitting room she saw my dad stretched out across a chair playing this beautiful instrument.

Violins might have been more appropriate. He said he looked at her and thought, 'I'm going to marry you.' Apparently she thought the same. He serenaded her into marriage.

My father truly believed that the stars had shone on him

when they brought my mother into his life. 'I'm so lucky to have her,' he would always say. She was, he discovered, a demanding woman. But from the outset he would do anything to make her happy.

My father worked as a driver. When I was a little girl he drove the No. 73 and the No. 11 bus through central London. By day he was a pretty ordinary guy, but by night he was transformed. He was a handsome man and in the evening he 'trod the boards', usually with his brother Bill. The brothers had inherited much of their talent from their father's family, who worked in Variety and could count Marie Lloyd as a family friend. In the family tradition they also mixed in a bit of vaudevillian playfulness. Their funniest sketch was something called 'The Ballsup Ballet', a spoof of the Bolshoi Ballet in which they dressed up in tutus. Singing, however, was their strong suit.

Dad had a wonderful voice. He would walk into a pub or a club and the shouts would go up straight away: 'Come on Wally, give us a song.' He used to do Bing Crosby and Maurice Chevalier numbers and had entertained dreams of making it as a professional singer. But when he had gone to see a West End agent he had been knocked back. 'There's already one Bing Crosby and we don't need another one,' he was told. Within a year a British singer called Michael Holliday, who Mum said was nowhere near as good as Dad let alone Bing Crosby, became a huge hit. That hurt Dad badly, I think.

During their courtship, Nona used to go to his concerts and he would sing a song from the musical *Singin' in the Rain* called 'Beautiful Girl'. I think it began: 'You're a gorgeous picture...' Such attention was music to my



mother's ears. She thought she'd finally found the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. She fell hopelessly in love with him.

They were married in 1947. By the following year, I had joined them in the small upstairs flat they rented in Rosaline Road in Fulham, south-west London.

The Fulham I grew up in bears little resemblance to the trendy, cosmopolitan community it is today. One or two Greek shopkeepers apart, the area had few immigrants. The West Indian and Asian influxes of the late 1950s and 1960s had yet to happen.

Times were generally hard. Large parts of the area were rubble-strewn wastelands from the Blitz. We all lived in flats, most of them cramped. Ours consisted of a sitting room, a tiny kitchen, a toilet and one bedroom. It was the same when we moved to a home at the Clyde Flats on Rylston Road when I was three. For the first ten years of my life, my single bed was squeezed into a corner alongside my parents' double divan in a sleeping space ten feet square. Luxurious it wasn't. I understand now that those were difficult times. I also know a lot more about my parents' lives and the pressures they were under than I did then.

The war and its effects dominated everyone's life, of course. Rationing was still in existence, although if I'm honest, I was never aware of any real hardship in that sense. The most vivid reminder of the events of 1939 to 1945 lay out on the streets. You only had to walk outside our front door to see the damage the Blitz had inflicted. There were open bomb sites on almost every street in Fulham, including our own. As a child, of course, I had no concept of how these strange spaces had come to exist in the midst