

Amazing Gracie

A journalist tracks a rescued puppy mill dog, exposing the breeding industry along the way

How do you put a face on the immense suffering caused by puppy mills—the thousands of commercial dog-breeding operations that produce and sell millions of puppies each year—for unsuspecting people who have no idea of the cruel conditions in which these animals are raised?

In *Saving Gracie: How One Dog Escaped the Shadowy World of American Puppy Mills*, Carol Bradley met that challenge by describing the journey of one Cavalier King Charles spaniel rescued from years living in a cage as a breeding dog.

The dog who would become Gracie—she was initially known only as “No. 132”—was one of 337 puppies and breeding dogs rescued in a 2006 raid on Mike-Mar Kennel in Lower Oxford, Pa., by the Chester County SPCA and local law enforcement. The partners who operated the kennel were found guilty of multiple counts of animal cruelty and fined, and their operation was shut down. Bradley recounts the raid, the ensuing legal wrangling, and the happy ending for Gracie, who found her way to a loving owner and slowly transformed from a terrified creature who didn’t know how to interact with humans into a cherished pet.

This is the first book for Bradley, a longtime dog-lover and former full-time newspaper reporter who became aware of the huge problems with the dog-breeding industry when she covered a major puppy mill case in Montana in 2002. She went on to study animal law as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University.

In this edited interview with writer Jim Baker, Bradley talks about the genesis of her book and what she hopes readers will learn from it.

Animal Sheltering: I really got into the opening of the story, where you depicted all the teamwork that was required to organize the raid, introducing the people, agencies, and shelters. Why was it so important to reconstruct this event in such detail?



Journalist Carol Bradley—seen here with her dogs, Chachi and Jillian—uses the story of Gracie, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel who was rescued from Pennsylvania puppy mill, to explore the abuses of the commercial dog-breeding industry.

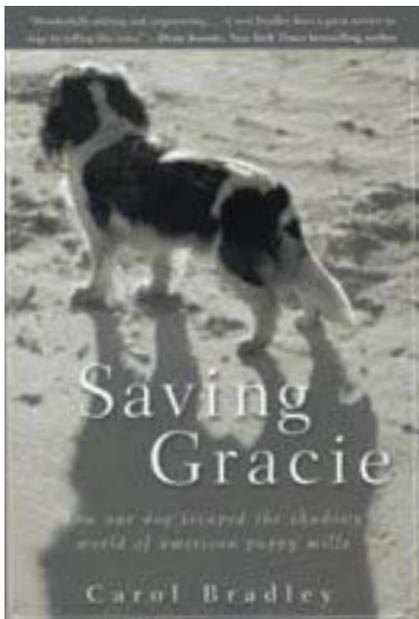
Carol Bradley: I wanted the book to read almost like an episode of *Law & Order* where you start at the beginning of the case, and go all the way through. I wanted to show people that puppy mills and puppy mill busts don’t just affect the dogs; they land on an entire community. Whole towns are sometimes stuck with 300 dogs. What are they going to do with them? I’ve always admired animal control officers, the people who really have to get in there and do the hard work. I wanted to show how difficult it was for them, because I think we sometimes forget. I was just looking for any possible way to tell the story in a way that would not make people want to throw the book across the room.

What would make them want to do that?

I think too much graphic detail. I waited until the second half of the book to get into other instances of puppy mills. I hope by the end of the book, people have a real sense of how awful these places are, and how *prolific* they are. But I didn’t want to hit them over the head with that too early on, because I didn’t want to lose readers, to be honest.

It’s interesting that you mention that you wanted to structure it like a *Law & Order* episode, because it reads like a procedural in the early chapters, showing all the moving parts of a raid, who did what, and how that raid

[q&a]



was carried out, even down to details like when the husband of one of your subjects brings her pizza, and she gets in her car and eats a few bites, and then she goes home and sleeps for two hours, fully clothed, and she can't get the smell of the puppy mill out of her hair. And the same care and level of detail went into your depiction of the legal case against the puppy mill's operators.

I lucked out. In a lot of these puppy mill cases, the court hearing lasts all of about 15 minutes. In this case, there was a two-day trial, and the prosecutors were willing to hand me the transcript of the trial, and that helped enormously, because then I didn't have to piece together what was said. It was all there in black and white.

What did you learn during the course of your research and writing that surprised you?

I was real surprised to learn how big the Amish are into puppy mills. When people find that out, they're just shocked. But it's a cultural thing, I guess. [Many Amish] just can't imagine why anyone would have a dog in their house. But that was a big surprise. And just how many puppy mills there are. I guess I shouldn't be surprised how easily some breeders get off, because the community doesn't want to have to take in 400 dogs.

How did you find Gracie and her adopter, Linda Jackson?

I decided to take my agent's advice and focus on a single case. I liked the idea of finding a story in Pennsylvania, because so much was going on there, and it was a great setting to look at all sides of the puppy mill issue. When I started the book in 2006, they had not passed the Dog Law [the state's historic reform of the puppy mill industry, signed by Gov. Ed Rendell in October 2008]. But the rules are still being promulgated.

I had set the book in Pennsylvania, and then I started looking for a case that would exemplify the problem. The case of Mike Wolf was a great one to focus on, because it was big, and he was colorful. Then I went to the Chester County SPCA, the organization that had conducted the raid, and asked them for names of people to talk to who had adopted the dogs. I wound up finding Linda—thank goodness for Google—because I just stumbled upon a letter she had written to the Lebanon, Pa., newspaper. She said, 'I adopted one of the Chester dogs,' and she's expressing her fury at puppy mills, but this is all very new for her. And then I thought, "How much more interesting would it be to have a book about not just a dog that gets changed, but a person who gets changed because of the dog?" And so, I called her up, and she turned out to be a single mother of three, and as you've read, she had given away the last family dog [due to behavioral issues], which is kind of a big no-no in dog circles. But I thought, "You know, here's someone who's fallible." It's tempting when you're writing something like this to preach to the choir, but I wanted this book to appeal to people who like dogs, but maybe didn't know about puppy mills.

What do you hope readers come away with?

The best thing someone can say to me when they read the book is that they finished it, they read it. And they will often say, "I had no idea." I want them to be astonished, and galvanized. To say, "I'm never going get a dog at a pet store again. I'm going tell everyone I know never to do that." One person said to me, "I thought it wasn't a problem anymore, because I read a story about it 15 years ago, and I had no idea it's still a problem." And

people are shocked when they know it's as big a problem as it is. I often tell people, "Write your state legislators, and tell them they need to pass a law." I wanted to get to people who like a good story and like one where there's a happy ending. I thought it needed to have a happy ending, at least for Gracie.

Gracie's story certainly ends on an optimistic note. Are you equally optimistic about the progress being made to regulate these cruel operations?

I'm glad to see that people are starting to get galvanized. These things never happen quickly enough, and there's a difference between passing a bill and enforcing it, and putting the money behind it. Ideally, in this country we wouldn't have such a patchwork approach. I guess I wouldn't really be satisfied until the federal government passed a law and funded it and took the whole issue of commercial dog breeding out from under the [U.S.] Department of Agriculture, which always has a bias toward producers.

You're obviously a dog lover yourself.

My husband and I got our first dog ... about 13 years ago, and I knew nothing, I didn't know what a Lab was, I didn't know breeds at all, I didn't know anything about dogs. And we wound up with a sheltie puppy, so then I fell in love with shelties. But we went through a friend who was a breeder. I had no idea where you would find a dog. I had no idea that there were so many layers of complications about why you would not go to a pet store. But in the course of covering this case in Montana, I became aware of the overbreeding of dogs, the overpopulation of dogs, and we just decided it makes no sense to go to a breeder. If somebody wants to go to a breeder, they have in mind what they want, I'm not going to tell them that they shouldn't do that. But I'm not gonna do it myself anymore. **AS**