



remembering TRIXIE



In an exclusive interview, best-selling author Dean Koontz talks about the **bright spirit** who transformed his life.

Author Dean Koontz is known for weaving paranormal tales that enthrall his readers. But to many of his fans, he is also known as a devoted dog lover—and, with his wife, Gerda, the proud owner of a former service dog, Golden Retriever Trixie. In June 2007, Dean and Gerda lost the dog they called their “Golden daughter” to cancer.

Visiting Dean at his home in Newport Beach, California, months after Trixie’s passing, it was clear that his grief was still fresh. Dean dropped to his knees to embrace Prada, the service-dog-in-training who accompanied us to the interview, and often became emotional as he talked about

the ways Trixie transformed his and Gerda’s lives. But telling his favorite Trixie stories also made him smile and laugh—and he continues to pay tribute to her vibrant, playful personality with a new book, *Bliss to You: Trixie’s Guide to a Happy Life*, by Trixie Koontz, Dog, as told to Dean Koontz (Hyperion, \$16.95).

The book, according to Trixie herself, is about bliss—what it is and how you find it. “Road to bliss is paved with dog wisdom,” she writes. The following story is excerpted from Dean’s foreword to the book. AKC FAMILY DOG’s exclusive interview with Koontz follows.

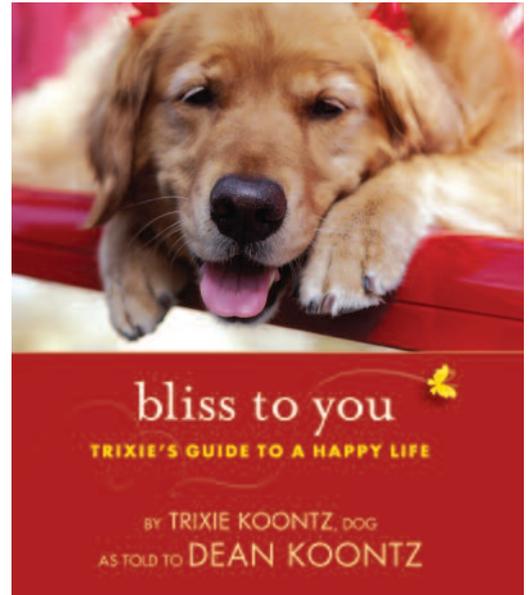
MONIQUE STAUBER

Our Trixie, a beautiful Golden Retriever with the temperament of an angel, who was a child to us, passed from this world three months before her twelfth birthday, shortly after 2:00 on a Saturday afternoon. She resides now with many other good dogs in the meadows at Rainbow Bridge, where she waits for us to leave this world and join her.

For months after my wife, Gerda, and I lost our wonderful girl, our grief was acute. In the weeks immediately after her passing, when 2:00 Saturday afternoon approached, the memory of her became so sharp that we could not bear to do anything mundane. We walked together, hand in hand, around these two and a half acres that Trixie had loved, visiting all her favorite places.

Three weeks to the minute after Trixie died, as we were walking the larger lawn, a brilliant golden butterfly swooped down out of a pepper tree. This was no butterfly like we had ever seen before—or since. It was big, bigger than my hand, and a bright gold, not yellow. It flew around our heads three or four times, brushing our faces, our hair, as no butterfly, in our experience, had ever done before. Then it swooped back up past the pepper tree and vanished into the sky. Gerda, who is the most levelheaded person I have ever known, said at once, “Was that Trixie?” and without hesitation, I said, “Yeah. It was.”

Skeptics will wince, and I feel sorry for them. I will always believe that our girl wanted to let us know that the intensity of our grief was not appropriate, that she was all right.



When my books had just begun appearing on the hardcover best-seller list, I wrote a novel called *Midnight*, in which there was a wheelchair-bound character who had a service dog. I had heard of Canine Companions for Independence, so it was a CCI dog [in the book]. When the novel was published, somebody at CCI got in touch with us and said, “Gee, when the paperback comes out, would you mind putting CCI’s address in the back?” And I said, I’d be happy to. After that, we developed a relationship with CCI and became contributors. They kept offering us a release dog. And we said, “We know how much time this is going to take,”—because you really have to give a dog time—“We’re so busy that we can’t do it yet—but one day we will.” Finally, I said to Gerda, “You know, we’re going to be 90, still saying we’re too busy. We just have to do this now.” And it changed our lives.

It was love at first sight. After 18 months with a puppy raiser, Trixie spent six months in training [at CCI’s Oceanside campus] and then she was in service with a girl who had lost her legs in a traffic accident. When she had elbow surgery and had to be taken out of service, Trixie was recovering with yet somebody else. So by the time she came to us, she must have thought, “Home number five, and I’m only 3 years old.” She was nevertheless instantly at ease and happy. She was such a people-oriented dog—the breed is, of course. She had a great personality, and was a very calm dog.

As a child, I’d [briefly] had two dogs, but we were very poor. So we adopted whatever stray came around. As an adult, I never had a dog again until Trixie.

When she came into the house, I thought, “Now ... how does this work?” I wasn’t accustomed to picking up poop in a blue bag, and wasn’t sure it was going to be easy. But in one day—you’re in love. So the poop doesn’t matter at all!

I didn’t expect that I would be writing books from Trixie’s per-

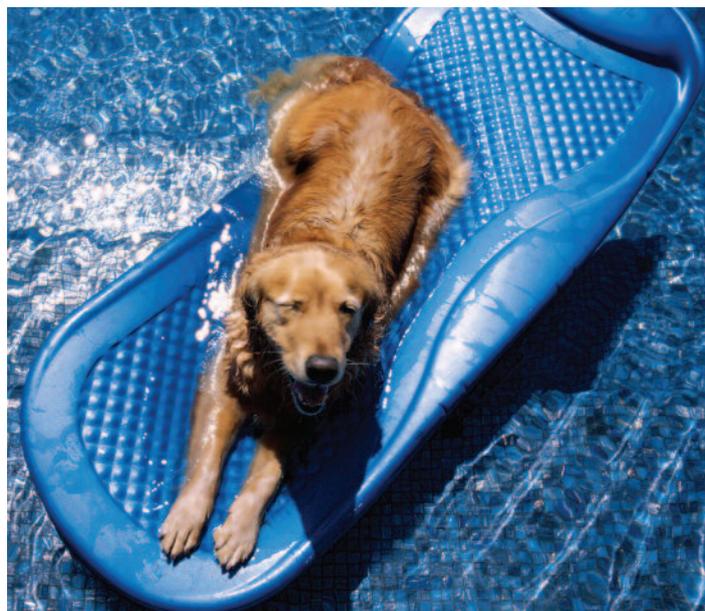
Koontz and Trixie share a moment of bliss.

As told to Rebecca Wallwork

spective. These books grew out of my attempt to interpret her attitude about things. She was a very expressive dog, in spite of being calm. You always knew what she was feeling. And that fascinated me. Gerda swears—I do, too—that certain dogs, maybe all dogs, want to talk. They yearn to talk to us.

When I started writing from Trixie's point of view, it was for the snail-mail newsletter that we send out to about 20,000 people. Trixie reviewed my forthcoming novels, and this became the thing people most liked about the newsletter. It ended up being a Trixie newsletter. My pictures faded out of it, as more Trixie pieces appeared. Kate [Hartson, of Yorkville Press] was reading these and said, "You know, this material would be wonderful as a book." So we did *Life Is Good*. Part of what's in that book had appeared in the newsletter.

When I sit down to write from Trixie's point of view, the words just flow. I know when it sounds right and when it doesn't. When you're creating, if you're really opening your heart to it, you're in touch with a higher creative power. I don't plot my books. I start with characters, give them free will as God gave it to us, and if they come alive in the first chapter or two, the book will almost write itself. It's still hard work, but the characters start speaking, and you hear their unique voices. They take the story places I never imagine it will go. In a way, it's the same with the Trixie titles.



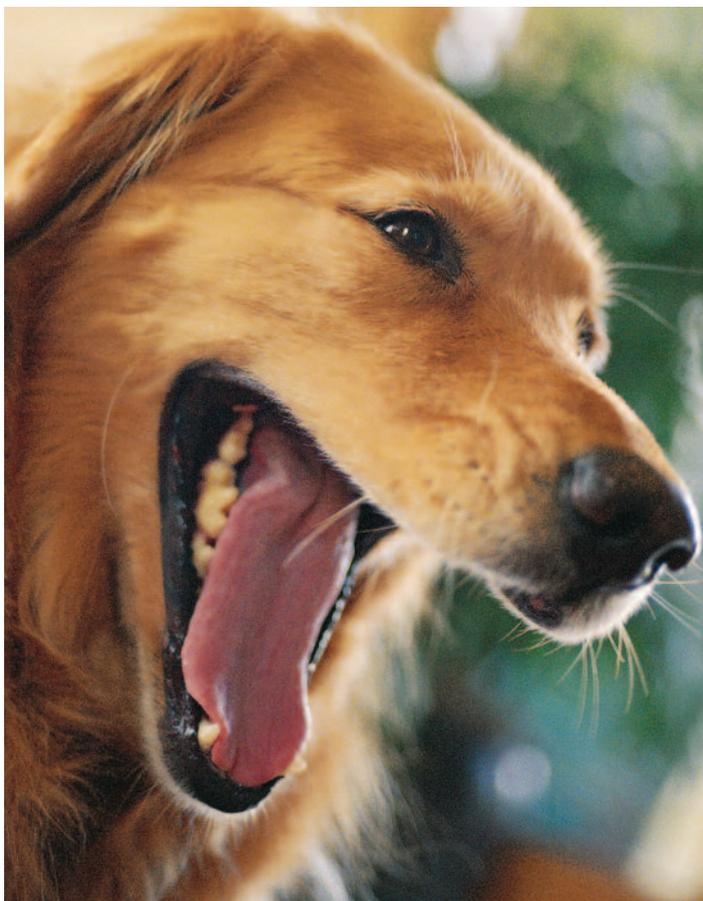
Sometimes Trixie would get fed up with how much of the day I had to work on a book. When we first got her, Gerda and I were workaholics. We'd spend playtime with Trixie, but we'd work till 7 o'clock at night. After a couple of weeks, Trixie decided this wasn't acceptable. She had a clock in her head. I'm always amused when people who are supposedly canine experts tell us that dogs have no sense of time. *Ha*. Dogs have an *incredible* sense of time. For instance, Trixie knew what 3:30 meant. That was when she got her second little dish of kibble. At 3:30 sharp, she'd come to me and look at me as if to say, "Hey, Dad, it's time." She knew the whole schedule of the day.

After we had her for a couple of weeks, I would be sitting at my desk, working, and I'd hear this heavy sigh. I'd look around and see her big beautiful Golden head on the far side of my desk. She'd be looking at me with what Gerda called "the Ross look." Gerda's father's name was Ross and he had this singular look of disapproval. Trixie had that look down pat. So I would say, "OK. I'll quit early, but I've just gotta finish this page." She'd sit looking at me, those eyes boring into the back of my head. She'd wait until about 5:30 and then come around the desk to my side. I'd say, "Just a few minutes more." A quarter of six was the latest she'd allow. She would put her head under the arm of the chair, put her chin on my lap, and roll her eyes up. She was irresistible. So ... we stopped work at five o'clock. She forced us to make more time for leisure. She changed our lives.

Every morning, Trixie got a 45-minute comb-out. She loved it. She considered it spa time. She would lie there and raise one leg at a time, so you could get to her feathers better. I found it so calming. While grooming her, I was not thinking about anything else. Then when I went to work, I achieved more, because my mind was rested.

I saw so much intelligence in Trixie. One of our favorite things, both of us, was lying on the floor, face to face, staring into each other's eyes while I stroked her side. Trixie would never look away first—30, 40 minutes, an hour, she would stare into my eyes.

One night, we'd been lying on the floor for about 20 minutes, eye-to-eye. And I said to her, "I *know* what you really are. I know



ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD MONIQUE STAUDER

“I wasn’t accustomed to picking up poop in a blue bag, and wasn’t sure it was going to be easy.

But in one day—you’re in love.
So the poop doesn’t matter at all!”

you’re not just a dog.” She lifted her head and gave me the Ross look, very serious. I said, “I know you’re an angel.” She leaped to her feet and ran 30 feet down the hall. She stopped and stared at me, still very serious. The hair went up the back of my neck because it seemed as if Trixie was saying, “You saw through my disguise!”

In all my years of writing, I had never had writer’s block. I persevere like the Energizer Bunny. As hard as it is when I’m on draft 25 of a page, I still love doing this work. But when we lost Trixie, I hit a wall, and I could not write. I’d sit down at the keyboard for seven or eight hours and get *nothing*. I’d never before had that experience. I didn’t want to write. And I had a deadline coming. I was a little more than halfway through *The Darkest Evening of the Year*. The deadline approached, then passed, and we were coming to a drop-dead date. Finally, writing the book became therapeutic, because the story was full of Golden retrievers.

Writing in Trixie’s voice is funny, and it’s fun to do. I’m more confident about something I write in her voice than anything I write. I always have enormous self-doubt when writing. That’s why I rewrite pages over and over again, because I get past my doubt by polishing the page 30 times before moving to the next—whereupon doubt starts all over. That’s healthy, actually!

We’re doing at least two children’s books for 4–8-year-old readers, which will be about Trixie *by* Trixie. We’re also developing a line of products related to the Trixie image. People seem charmed by her personality. And now that she gets unlimited free treats in heaven, Trixie is happy to continue donating all of her book royalties and other income to CCI.

After Trixie passed, people encouraged us to get a new dog immediately. But we needed more time. Ten months after losing our girl, we accepted a 2-year-old Golden named Anna, another CCI release dog. She is not Trixie. She has her own personality. But in her own way, she is a blessing. A wonderful grace.

Trixie made us better peo-

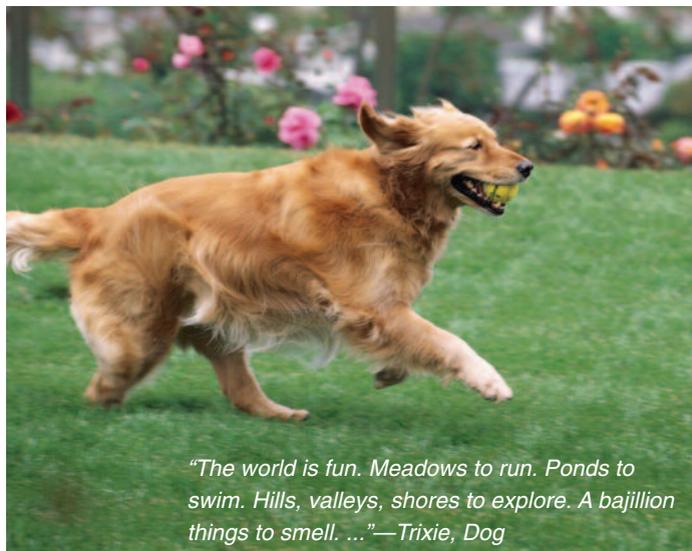
ple and so will Anna. Dogs really take you out of yourself. Because they have no ego, they force you to recognize the bloated condition of your own!

From Trixie, I learned to be more confident—because dogs *are* confident. They know where they belong in life—as long as they’re well treated. Because of Trixie, I recognized that although I had thought I had put my bad childhood behind me, I really hadn’t, not entirely. I was driven by memories of poverty and violence in some ways that were healthy, and some ways that weren’t. Just by watching dogs and seeing how natural they are, how relaxed they are in the world, you start to notice how relaxed in the world you *aren’t*.

Dogs make you pay attention to little things. Walking the same walk a hundred times, Trixie always found new wonders—and so did I. Sights that would enchant her would make me shrug. But then, as she taught me to be patient and to look more closely, I would see what enchanted her. This grove of trees, this flower, this beetle with an iridescent shell—these things were beautiful and amazing.

Because of Trixie, I developed the philosophy that any one square mile of the earth has everything in it you need to know about life. You merely have to focus on it, to *see*. Yes, there are lots of wonderful things to see in the world, but you’re never going to learn more in Tahiti than you can learn by opening

your eyes to what’s here around you, right now, in even the most humble place. We have friends who have traveled the world, seeking happiness, seeking it out there somewhere. But happiness comes from within, not from without. Trixie knew this. Every dog knows it. Because of Trixie’s example, a lot of things that used to matter to me suddenly didn’t matter anymore. I became calmer. Not that I’m so calm now—but I’m much calmer than if you had met me before Trixie! 🐕



“The world is fun. Meadows to run. Ponds to swim. Hills, valleys, shores to explore. A bajillion things to smell. ...”—Trixie, Dog