

# WESTWORD



CURTIS GILLESPIE

## FIGHTING THE UNENLIGHTENMENT

*Longform nonfiction in the age of the shortform lie*

Writers' Guild  
of Alberta 



JANET GURTLER

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# DOGS AND WRITERS WHO PANDEMIC TOGETHER

*Things are a mess, but dogs lighten the stress*

**D**ogs don't care about the pandemic. Rather, if their humans stay in good health, dogs are in favour of living in a world that limits their owner's absence.

My two dogs benefit from their walk being one of the highlights of my day. We look forward to an extended jaunt and bonding with other dogs and maybe a human or two. My dogs no longer remember what it's like to be alone, and that equals four paws up. Or maybe eight.

Writers aren't dealing with COVID-19 with as much good cheer as our canine friends. We have more to worry about, or at least we're more aware of what we must worry about. The struggle to create during a pandemic is real. No matter how much your dog loves you, they're not concerned about your word count or productivity.

March 2020 was in a mood. Do you remember when you heard about the first case of COVID-19 in Alberta, and then the creeping shock and domino effect as we shut down? For writers, that meant conferences, workshops, book launches. And for many, their creativity. We experienced the first lockdown of our lifetime. Grocery stores became one of the

few places people could go, but chatting and positive exchanges weren't happening there. People eyeballed each other with suspicion and worried about getting sick and flattening the curve. Uncertainty ruled.



STEENA HOLMES

"Writing hasn't been easy," said Alberta's *New York Times* bestselling author, Steena Holmes. "Getting novel words onto a page has been a huge struggle. I've started three different projects, hoping that maybe one of them will spark that passion for

words. I need to be gentle with myself while dealing with the stress of living in a COVID-19 world."

That's where dogs come in. Writers' best friends (no offence to cat lovers everywhere) have helped their owners adapt to writing in times of uncertainty. Holmes found respite by getting out with her dog, Charlie, for walk breaks as did *New York Times* bestselling author, Ellen Hopkins, who said taking her dog, Wyn, for walks has kept her sane during COVID-19. Wyn will bark at her if he thinks she's been in front of the computer too long.

Elena Aitken, another bestselling Alberta author, agrees. "For many months, walking Bear was the only time I got out of the house. It helped to clear my head and get the blood moving," she said. "A walk gets me into the right frame for writing."

Our four-legged friends make sure we get out with them, and they often give us something to laugh about, too. Hopkins credits Wyn's goofiness with helping her cope. "Wyn makes me laugh, and that also kept me sane during the early days."



ELENA AITKEN

Sanity can be a struggle and a rollercoaster ride during the pandemic. Dogs can help. “The simple joy of seeing Bear so happy makes me happy,” said Aitken. “You can’t help but smile when you spend time with a dog.”

And while we can’t shake hands or hug our human friends, we can still hug our dogs, at least while we’re healthy. According to the WHO (World Health Organization), “It is still recommended that people who are sick with COVID-19 and people who are at risk, limit contact with companion [animals] and other animals. When handling and caring for animals, basic hygiene measures should always be implemented. This includes hand washing after handling animals, their food or supplies, as well as avoiding kissing, licking, or sharing food.”

Not that I’m sharing food with my dogs—or kissing or licking it.

As time passes and COVID-19 restrictions fluctuate, writers and everyone else struggle and adapt. We’ve gotten used to Zoom book launches or Microsoft Team writing workshops and virtual writing conferences. But for many, the writing itself has remained challenging. Never mind the financial uncertainty. Things are a mess. Luckily, our dogs can lighten our stress.

They say dogs love unconditionally, and we can use unconditional love right now. That and the vaccine. Meanwhile, our

dogs force us to get out, and they give unexpected gifts that encourage us to get back to work.

Edmonton author Natasha Deen sums up how her dog has helped her during the pandemic. “I feel like her existence makes my life easier and better and full of joy. I love how she loves to sleep on my legs at night and wants to spend time with me playing. I love how her quiet presence—knowing she’s in the same house as me—makes me feel like no matter what, I can hold to hope that the world is a good and loving place, and as long as we choose love—family, friends, pets, fellow humans—we can get through anything.”



NATASHA DEEN

We *can* get through forced isolation. The *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* emphasizes the importance of social connection during the pandemic and says dogs encourage getting out of the house and walking. Dogs offer opportunities to socialize with other people doing the same thing.

Deen combines dog walks with staying in touch with writing friends. “I have a few writer friends with dogs, and we now take socially distant walks together and enjoy the day. Any time spent with writing colleagues is a good time. Any time spent with dogs is a good time. Combine the two, and it’s a DANG GOOD TIME!” she says.

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Unfortunately, we won’t wake one day soon and find COVID-19 gone. Writers can help us remember these days through fiction, nonfiction, poetry and plays. Our creating can help us and others cope. And we can do that better with the love and companionship of our canine friends. ■

*Janet Gurtler is a multi-published author, and recent editor of YOU TOO?—an anthology about teen sexual harassment with Harper Collins. Currently publishing personalized books for pets and kids under Eman Books, she is walked daily by her Golden Retriever, Betty White, and joined by her Chihuahua, Bruce, weather permitting.*