Clarion Review

Pets

Learning to Live with Fritz: Disgruntled Angel in a Hairy Disguise
E. Rawlins
iUniverse
978-1-4759-3236-2
Three Stars (out of Five)

Dogs can be so much more than, well, dogs. Best friends and companions, too, they are often the subject of delightful stories that make for fun reads and entertaining, tear-jerking, films. *Learning to Live with Fritz: Disgruntled Angel in a Hairy Disguise* is one of those stories. Starring Fritz, a rascal of a Maltese terrier, the engaging, endearing story that lies at the core of E. Rawlins' memoir doesn't make its way to the pages of her book in a successful manner.

Fritz is a curious curmudgeon—equal parts devoted friend and devil. Unfortunately, the heart of his relationship with Rawlins, an opera singer, never fully emerges. This is partly due to wordy prose weighed down by repetitive and complex sentence structure, as well as the author's inability—or unwillingness—to draw the reader into her life. Often neglecting valuable sensory and descriptive information, the book reads like a summarized journal. Rawlins writes, for example, that "I was pressed for time. I am sure this was the reason I chose to accept, in spite of my inner warning system, this inappropriate and obviously ill-suited person as a trainer. This was a huge mistake."

Yet parts of the book are genuinely hilarious. Fritz performs a particular dance only when fresh whipped cream is nearby, and he snarls at people who laugh insincerely. Other parts are heartachingly tender, as when he sleeps sweetly on his owner's lap—but only in a moving car. And still other moments are otherwordly: After Fritz dies at age fifteen, Rawlins claims that he never really leaves, and reading about the first time Rawlins "hears" from the dog's spirit is better than watching an episode of *The Sopranos.*

As Rawlins writes, Fritz may not be a dog at all, but instead a spirit sent to preside over his owner's life for fifteen years, during which time the author revives and then cuts back on her opera career, marries a fellow opera singer, relocates, and travels. Dealing with her demanding, opinionated, and often spiteful little dog, Rawlins learns lessons about love, compromise, and

open-mindedness. Fritz causes her just enough trouble, and brings her just enough joy, to be alternately despised and prized by his continually flabbergasted mistress.

Rawlins' book could have benefited from more lively scenes and fewer words. The real disappointment, however, is that, despite a dozen or so photographs of the adorable Fritz and dozens of delightfully shocking, riotously funny, and sweetly surprising anecdotes, the dog never fully leaps off the pages as an independent character. He remains a character the author struggles to construct.

Lisa Romeo