



Stella

McCall Hoyle

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In McCall Hoyle's endearing novel *Stella*, a beagle searches for redemption—and her human being.

Stella is a service dog who failed to sniff out an explosive at an airport. She feels guilt because her handler suffered in the incident. After several in-home placements prove to be poor fits, Esperanza, an expert dog trainer, brings Stella to her sheep farm in hopes of rehabilitating her, with her daughter Cloe's help.

The story is told from Stella's sometimes cautious, sometimes eager, and frustrated canine perspective. From Esperanza's farm and its other dogs, to foods, objects, and even the scent of emotions, her sensory approach to interpreting environments is fascinating. When Stella detects a metallic scent that signals that Cloe is about to have an epileptic seizure, she grows determined to stick by her new friend's side.

Mild tension is generated over the question of whether Stella can become a house pet, propelling the novel's tender exploration of human-animal bonding. Background information about how trainers teach and communicate with animals is provided, though the book's well-meaning humans are often too distracted to notice Stella's cues. Cloe is a lonely, sweet, and peripheral character, known only through what she says and her signature scents; Stella's ties to her are instinctive.

The book's suspenseful final third focuses on Cloe's interactions with bullies, forcing Stella to relive her own traumatic memories, and to act brave despite them. This is a circular but satisfying means for Stella to resolve her fears. As Stella realizes that it is okay to have made mistakes in the past, and that love doesn't require working for approval, Esperanza develops renewed respect for Stella's loyalty, and Cloe's original beliefs are affirmed.

In the memorable novel *Stella*, a dog looks to heal—and find a home.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2021)

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