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Your Pet Isn't Sick: He Just Wants You to Think So

Herb Tanzer
Wharton Publishing (September 1998)
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Veterinarian Herb Tanzer's clients have called him a quack. "Some people leave," he writes, "others flay me with insults." All because he's exposing what he dubs "The Pet Game."

Tanzer's approach to doctoring pets involves a St. Bernard-sized dog of pup psychology, in addition to routine medicine. He theorizes that many dogs and cats aren't really ill, but that they're creating symptoms to gain attention, which is necessary for survival. This case study-laden book includes dogs that starved themselves or cultivated hacking coughs to win their owners' time and attention.

After ruling out physical causes for maladies, Tanzer turns to detective work, looking for major or slight changes in an animal's environment. Prompts for the faux illness that make up The Pet Game could be as innocent as moving Fido's bed, which may, to the pet, threaten security. Vacations or adding or losing family members also can be seen as threats to survival and may provoke pets to begin acting strangely.

The book also travels through human psychology. "Pets are a metaphor for understanding human behavior," Tanzer writes, explaining that part of his job in healing animals is becoming a "sleuth" to uncover the drama between people and pets. The book looks at how owners may encourage symptoms of illness or plain old bad behavior in dogs and cats by supplying rewards—attention—for misdeeds and ailments.

Tanzer's description of clients and their pets is occasionally condescending, and his analysis is sometimes questionable, such as when a bald man brought in a shedding dog: "Only when he could say 'It's all right for the animal to lose its hair,' would his animal stop the excessive shedding."

Overall, this book's premise—that pet owners often create problems in their animals, and that "you are the toy the pet plays with and manipulates," often causing diseases—seems reasonable. Reading it may preclude visits to the veterinarian, something Tanzer doesn't mind at all.
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