

The Niche Issue

ASJA MAGAZINE



MAY/JUNE 2017

03

The Official Publication
of the American Society of
Journalists and Authors

A CAREER UNLEASHED

*Why one ASJA member is
grateful her work has gone
to the dogs*



ALSO INSIDE >> Do You Need a Niche?
Crafting a Compelling Historical Narrative

CONTENTS

MAY / JUNE 2017

»»»» Features

»»»» DO YOU NEED A NICHE?

24

How to decide if you do—and declare one

by Ashley Rodriguez

»»»» NICHE: MEDICINE AND HEALTH

26

How an ASJA member's personal experience informs her work

by Cheryl Alkon

»»»» CRAFTING A COMPELLING HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

28

Tips to strengthen your story—and keep the reader engaged

by Christopher Klein

»»»» Cover story

A CAREER UNLEASHED

Why one ASJA member is grateful her career has gone to the dogs

»»»» 20

by Jen Reeder







JEN REEDER

Freelance Writer



A CAREER *Unleashed*

»» WHY ONE ASJA MEMBER IS GRATEFUL HER CAREER HAS GONE TO THE DOGS

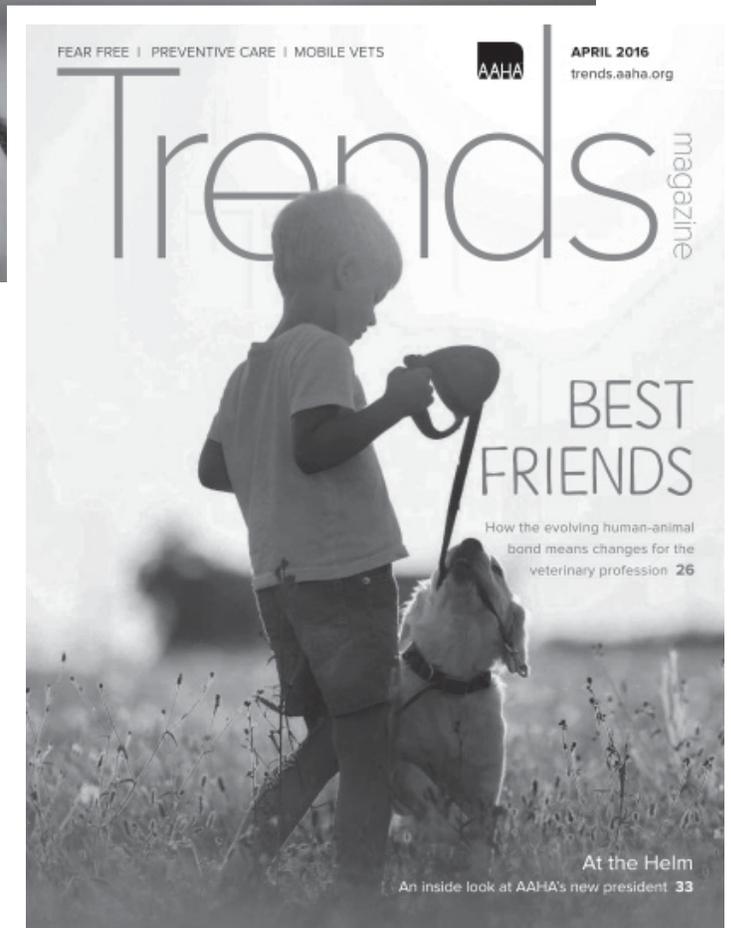
There are typically two responses when I tell someone I'm a freelance journalist who specializes in dogs. If I'm lucky, they'll whip out their phone and show me photos of a beloved pup. But more often than not, I'm met with a look of confusion. Sometimes they'll even scoff, "Surely you don't just write about dogs." To which I'll quip, "Well, sometimes cats. And the occasional horse."



The Healing Power of Pets

Mounting evidence of the human-animal bond creates opportunity—and great responsibility—for the veterinary profession

by Jen Reeder



I found my niche a few years ago when an essay I wrote titled “I’ve Become a Crazy Dog Lady, But I’m Okay With It” went viral, and women around the world shared photos of their dogs and proclaimed, “I’m a crazy dog lady, too!” My beat might not be prestigious, but it’s certainly fun.

I usually write around 50 articles a year, and almost all of them relate to dogs in some way. I’ve written about pet-friendly travel destinations for newspapers and magazines, profiled a woman who rescues wolves and wolf-dogs for an environmental organization, and covered canine pacemaker implantation for a veterinary trade publication. I visited a Colorado prison to meet inmates training rescued dogs for adoption and cuddled Chihuahuas recovering from anesthesia at a spay/neuter clinic on the Navajo Reservation. I’ve interviewed truckers who volunteer to drive at-risk dogs to no-kill animal shelters, and military veterans with PTSD whose service dogs have helped them overcome suicidal thoughts and drug addiction. The story possibilities are endless.

For service pieces, I don’t always need to interview an expert. I can write from experience about tips for hiking and camping with dogs, the benefits of volunteering with a therapy dog, and—I’m hesitant to admit—how to play Pokémon Go with a “PokéDog.”

»» Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Visit her online at JenReeder.com.



“I’ve found being a dog writer also makes my job as a journalist easier. I’m familiar enough with the dog world that during interviews, I know the right follow-up questions to ask (or what to ask in the first place).” JEN REEDER

I frequently interview veterinarians who tell me the human-animal bond has evolved in the past few decades; dogs aren’t animals chained in the backyard, but family members who share our beds. This creates opportunities for pet writers not just in niche publications but general interest magazines. When I met *Family Circle’s* health editor Lynya Floyd at the 2016 ASJA conference, I pitched her a medical story that in retrospect wasn’t the greatest. But after hearing about my background, she leaned in and said, “We’re always on the lookout for stories about pets.” So after the conference, I sent her a pitch about reasons to adopt senior dogs. She forwarded it to the pet editor, and suddenly I had a \$2/word assignment. (Thank you, ASJA!)

I’ve found being a dog writer also makes my job as a journalist easier. I’m familiar enough with the dog world that during interviews, I know the right follow-up questions to ask (or what to ask in the first place). I keep getting raises from anchor clients without requesting them. And interviewing someone about pets leads to more story ideas about pets. For instance, when a receptionist at an animal hospital put me on hold to speak to a veterinarian, a recording played an ad for an in-house pet loss support group. I pitched the idea and landed an \$1,800 assignment.

Awards season for pet writers can be lucrative, too. The Cat Writers’ Association (CWA) and the Dog Writers Association of America (DWAA) both host annual writing contests with big cash prizes. Last year at DWAA, I won the \$1,500 AKC Microchipping Awareness Award for an article I’d written for a health blog—for \$300. (I was the picture of grace when my name was called at the awards banquet and I hollered, “I’m going to Disneyland!”)

One of my favorite aspects of being a pet writer is getting to meet people who love animals. Several years ago at an ASJA conference, I met fellow member Michele Hollow because people kept saying, “Oh, you’re a pet writer? So is she—go talk to her.” I’m so glad I did! Michele has become a terrific friend who has introduced me to other writers, shared editor contacts, and wrangled me a ticket to an invite-only pet summit where I met celebrity dog trainer Victoria Stilwell—a valuable contact that has led to two assignments so far.

I’m hoping to connect with even more pet writers as the new president of the

Dog Writers Association of America. I’ll be representing DWAA on a panel of “content experts” later this year at the 2017 Blog-Paws Conference. Who knows where these opportunities might lead?

Of course, I realize I won’t break news that, say, influences an election or wins a Pulitzer. It’s impossible to take yourself too seriously when you have paw prints on your business card. But I know I’m lucky to spend my time researching and writing about my passion, and most days, I love what I do.

Plus, I get to share my headshot with my dog.

