



J. R. Ackerley (1896-1967) was for many years the literary editor of the BBC magazine *The Listener*. His works include three memoirs, *Hindoo Holiday*, *My Dog Tulip*, and *My Father and Myself*, and a novel, *We Think the World of You* (all available at NYRB).

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's most recent books are *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, *Certain Poor Shepherds*, and *The Tribe of Tiger: Cats and Their Culture*.

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*My Dog Tulip* is now an animated feature film by Paul and Sandra Fierlinger, featuring the voices of Christopher Plummer, Lynn Redgrave, and Isabella Rossellini.

Visit [mydogtulipfilm.com](http://mydogtulipfilm.com) for details.

## MY DOG TULIP

by **J. R. Ackerley**

Introduction by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

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“One of the greatest books ever written by anybody in the world”

—Truman Capote

“This is one of the greatest masterpieces of animal literature.”

— Christopher Isherwood

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

J. R. Ackerley's *My Dog Tulip* is perhaps the greatest tribute ever paid by man to dog. Tender, witty, ceaselessly observant, and unsentimental in the highest degree, Ackerley recounts his years of cohabitation with Tulip, a boisterous and eccentric German Shepherd to whom he finds himself ardently devoted.

Over the course of Ackerley's extraordinary narrative we learn of the duo's visits to grand country houses (where embarrassing accidents occur), of Tulip's arduous and frustrating efforts to find a suitable mate, of her eventual pregnancy and labor, and much else besides. We also encounter a cast of richly drawn human characters, from the wise and gentle veterinarian Miss Canvey to the odd and beamingly proud dog-owners, Mr. and Mrs. Blandish.

And yet *My Dog Tulip* does more than tell a story, however vivid and engaging. The book is also a profound meditation on the nature of love, friendship, and the struggle to communicate with even those who seem closest to us.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ackerley tells us little about himself directly and yet we come away from the book with a strong sense of his personality. Discuss the ways in which Ackerley reveals his own character—intentionally and unintentionally—through his characterization of Tulip.
2. “Dogs aren't difficult to understand. One has to put oneself in their position” [p. 20]. To what extent does the book endorse or contradict this idea? How much access does it give the reader to Tulip's point of view? Do we come to understand her behavior and does Ackerley? Does Tulip ever become less erratic and mysterious?
3. “Tulip cast herself into my arms and lavished upon me a greeting more suitable in its extravagance to lovers who had been parted for years” [p. 19]. Ackerley frequently speaks about his relationship with Tulip in the terms of romantic love. How seriously does he want us to take such an idea? Is it mainly lighthearted comedy or are deeper matters being suggested? How does the fact that we learn nothing about Ackerley's own romantic life affect the way we read the book?
4. What does Ackerley mean when, towards the end of chapter one, he refers to Miss Canvey as a “romantic” [p. 25]? Is Ackerley also a “romantic”? If so, does he remain one throughout the book? How does his attitude toward Tulip evolve?

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

J. R. Ackerley

**Hindoo Holiday** (Introduction by Eliot Weinberger)

J. R. Ackerley

**My Father and Myself** (Introduction by W. H. Auden)

J. R. Ackerley

**We Think the World of You** (Introduction by P. N. Furbank)

Tibor Déry

**Niki: The Story of a Dog** (Introduction by George Szirtes)

Adolfo Bioy Casares

**Asleep in the Sun** (Introduction by James Sallis)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Virginia Woolf, *Flush*

Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*

Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

John Steinbeck, *Travels With Charley*

5. “A flux of bloody muck was oozing out of her” [p. 189]. Why does Ackerley describe Tulip’s bodily functions in such detail and how do we respond to it? Discuss the combination of bluntness and euphemism he uses to present this material.
6. “Dogs read the world through their noses and write their history in urine” [p. 47]. Discuss the ways in which the book explores the theme of communication. Consider, for example, the episode at Captain Pugh’s house [pp. 50–58]. Why is Ackerley so upset by his inability to understand Tulip’s meaning? Where are there moments of more successful communication in the book? What are Tulip’s means of communicating with Ackerley, and vice versa?
7. “We had been followed for some time by a small dog, one of those smooth, tight-skinned, busy and bouncing little creatures who, if dogs wore hats, would certainly have worn a bowler” [p. 86]. Discuss Ackerley’s use of anthropomorphism, his tendency to describe animals in terms of human behavior. (Elsewhere, for example, Tulip’s face when she is urinating is said to be “business-like, as though she were signing a check” [p. 48]). One of the remarkable qualities about the book is Ackerley’s alertness both to the ways in which dogs may resemble humans and the ways in which dogs are uniquely themselves, irreducibly canine. What are some of the ways in which he conveys the latter?
8. “I perceived, too, or thought I perceived the danger of translating human emotions into beastly breasts” [p. 91]. Is Ackerley rightly worried about this danger in regards to his feelings towards Tulip? Consider, for example, his concern that Tulip’s eventual mate be someone she has known for some time and been “courted” by. Is this a reasonable concern?
9. How does Ackerley use Tulip to help him characterize the other people in the book, such as Miss Canvey, Mr. and Mrs. Blandish, Mr. and Mrs. Plum, and others? Discuss the ways in which the various people he meets respond to Tulip and what this reveals about them as individuals.
10. “...since we are said to get like our pets...” [p. 113]. In what ways do Ackerley and Tulip resemble one another? Are these resemblances that grow throughout the book?
11. Why is Ackerley so explicitly preoccupied, in chapter six and the appendix, with Tulip’s sexuality and indeed the sexuality of dogs in general? Is he making a broader point about attitudes towards sexuality in English society at large? What do you make of Ackerley’s decision at the end of the book to give Tulip “carte blanche” so far as sexual matters are concerned?
12. “I realized clearly, perhaps for the first time, what strained and anxious lives dogs must lead, so emotionally involved in the world of men, whose affections they strive endlessly to secure, whose authority they are expected unquestionably to obey, and whose mind they never can do more than imperfectly reach and comprehend” [p. 187]. Based on your experience of dogs, does this seem true? For all its comedy and high spirits, does Ackerley’s book ultimately present a tragic view of canine life? Does Tulip lead the happy life that her owner so longs for her to have?

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