

## A New Breed of Millennial Woman

by Sarah Hoeynck

These days, Facebook has become an obituaries page for pets—especially dogs. It’s the official place for my female friends, classmates, and colleagues to announce their fur babies’ death notices. It’s an epidemic! I can’t get on my feed without seeing a post about Fiona flying over the rainbow bridge or for Pepper to rest in peace. There’s always an accompanying photo that makes me cry even if I barely knew the animal—shots of lumpy, gray-muzzled, bleary-eyed buddies or video callbacks to the romping, butt-licking days of puppyhood.

The comments that follow are heartfelt and plentiful. I even see follow-up posts about memorial gardens planted in a pet’s honor or mini-funerals held to celebrate a dog’s life. If you don’t have a pet or have one but prefer to call yourself a pet “owner,” then such commemorations might seem ridiculous. It’s just a dog, right?

Wrong. To pet PARENTS, it’s like losing a family member.

The grief is real, so why shouldn’t we make memorial gardens or have funerals? And if someone needs to take a few days off work to cope with the immense sorrow that comes with losing a pet, I say go for it. In fact, this trend is growing more and more mainstream with each dollar that Millennials inject into the economy in the name of their pets. In 2016, Americans spent roughly \$63 million dollars on their pets. That’s a lot of Fresh Step Litter, Kong Hide-A-Treat Balls, and Cuddler Beds. Plus, some businesses are now offering pet bereavement leave to mourn a departed dog or sick leave to take care of an ailing cat. You can agree or not, but pets as family members is the new normal of America.

My normal leans decidedly towards dogs. I love cats but wholeheartedly identify as a dog person, as do the majority of my friends and acquaintances. Like me, they are middle-class,

Millennial women who, around the age of twenty, got their dogs. I belong to that special breed of female human whose cars are plastered with bumper stickers like “My Corgi is my Child” and “Who Saved Who?” We are dog moms who love fiercely and live independently.

My woman friends are single, in committed partnerships, and legally married. Some have children and others have none, whether due to circumstance or choice. Many are career or working women while others are still going to school. Most are rooted to a home or house, but a few are still nomads wandering the country. The common denominator among us all is a dog—usually one that we got before all these big life choices and moments.

After graduating college, my first adult decision was to adopt Maggie, a raw sienna and white Basenji/Akita mix with soulful gold eyes and an adorably short snout. My baby girl has been with me through all my milestones: working my first grown-up job, going to grad school, slogging through relationships, choosing my career, meeting and marrying my husband, and buying a house. Our story is unique to us but also familiar to any other woman who decided to become a dog parent around the same age.

The bond between a dog mom and her pup is powerful and unique, especially for those women who got their dogs when they were on the precipice of adulthood. Maggie was with me through my twenties and thirties, and as she nuzzled her way into my heart, we grew and changed together. Fuck that ridiculous, limiting idea of “man’s best friend.” Every dog mom knows dogs are so much more than that. They are our teachers, champions, and children.

Most dog moms of my generation decided to get our dogs around that critical time when, according to American standards, we were becoming adults. For most, it happened around the transition from teenager to twenty-something or college to the work force. Great time to take on a

big responsibility, right? Well, it was for us. Although we were sponging off our parents, barely able to afford rent, or working way too much, sharing our time and space with a dog was a must.

How and where we found them varied depending on the person, but a lot of young dog moms tend to opt for the cheaper or easier routes. I know very few women who got their dogs from breeders or paid a lot of money. That seems reserved for families or people who want a *very* specific and designer specimen. Most dog moms go into their searches with a size in mind or a feeling in their hearts and not much else. We find them through rescue organizations, city shelters, foster homes, and friends with surprise litters. Heck, some of us even stumble upon a brown box on the side of the street with a sign reading “free puppies”—it’s not just something that happens in books and movies. I’ve lived it.

In the fall of 1999, when my sister Rachel was a senior in high school, her boyfriend Levi plopped a six-week-old beagle/border collie mix on my parents’ kitchen counter. He had been out delivering pizzas and decided to cut through a park. Along the way, he encountered a woman with one of those “free puppies” boxes. That day my sister met Peanut, the best friend of her life. Rachel fell in love instantly.

For others, though, the process is more mundane. I adopted Maggie from the Humane Society and knew from her catlike, less-than-thrilled reaction to my presence that she was the dog for me. I’m not into vigorous butt wiggles and jumping around. I like thoughtful eyes and studied movements.

My hairdresser Catie found Great Dane mix Rolen at the city pound. My best friend Sarah found her little guy Sleepy at the APA, where he was recovering from a previously abusive owner. Various rescue organizations paired my colleague Annelise with Winston and Lucy in 2014 and Penny and Paco in 2017. Fellow writer Laura ended up adopting her foster dog Ruby after having

her for a few months. And my good friend Megan scoured the internet for adoptable rat terriers after her previous terrier Zeppy died in her arms following a tragic motorcycle accident. Upon meeting Fitzgerald, the runt of the litter, Megan found the “family dog” that would become hers exclusively.

Whether it was by choice or by chance, meeting and taking care of our dogs was both thrilling and comforting—like getting into a soothing yet effervescent hot tub. Or, if they were particularly difficult—eating retainers, peeing in the house, attacking smaller dogs—it was more like being thrown into the deep end of the pool—and we didn’t know how to swim. But no matter how calm or chaotic the waters, we were up for the experience.

That’s because freshly minted dog moms are yearning for something to love and care for. And if it has a soft pink tummy and wet nose, well, that’s ideal. Sure, every young dog mom is still figuring out how to navigate the world, despite her designation as an “adult,” but with a dog at her side, that adulting doesn’t seem so daunting. In fact, dogs offer us that first big step into responsibility while providing loyal and amazing companions along the way.

What woman wouldn’t want something cute and cuddly that sticks by her side but also comes with an air of protection? Even today, young women have to constantly be aware of their surroundings and the space they occupy. Fortunately, dogs are trotting, barking ADT signs. When I’m walking at night, I feel much safer with Maggie by my side. She’s a total marshmallow that would sooner kiss potential attackers than kill them, but they don’t know that. Her very presence provides a warning: back off my mom!

The mere idea of a dog’s presence calms other people’s anxiety about a woman being on her own. When I was twenty-six, I took a summer road trip to meet up with my then boyfriend (now husband) who was playing a gig at Mandalay Bay in Vegas. The drive from St. Louis was

going to take a few days, so I planned some stops along the way—Denver to see an old friend and Zion National Park to hike among the red cliffs. When I told my parents about my itinerary, they got so worried. I was going that far *by myself*? Was this really a good idea? But the minute I told them Maggie would be with me, their worries ceased. She wouldn't actually defend me physically, but most of the time dogs are about helping us to *feel* safe—or others feeling safe for us. And her warm heater body was a total bonus in the desert canyon at night!

Of course, this physical intimidation doesn't really apply to a five-pound Chihuahua or any other small dog, but what those little guys lack in size they make up for in bark and bite. I've seen a Dachshund rip a hole in someone's arm and a Yorkie mess up an irritating person's face. They have no fear—small dog syndrome. Sarah calls Sleepy her guardian. At twenty-five pounds, this button-eared mutt can't *do* anything, but he sure can *hear* everything. Ever vigilant at the front door and window, Sleepy alerts Sarah whenever anyone is within fifty feet of her house. His bark can be heard up and down her street. Admittedly, the mailman poses very little threat, but Sleepy makes Sarah feel safer in her home.

The instability of women's immediate physical surroundings totally applies to their life choices. Our dogs are so loyal at a time when we don't really have a lot of constants in our lives. Leases expire, roommates steal your toothpaste, jobs shift, friends are caught in the post-college diaspora, and relationships implode—except the one with our dog, who is with us through all the heartbreak, disappointment, and change.

Maggie has lived in three different houses with me, met four different potential male suitors, and sent me off to five different places of employment. Without her, I never would have survived moving back in with my folks. It felt socially and developmentally regressive to go from free-wheeling college life to mom and dad's basement, but Maggie made it bearable. While I

worked a series of shitty temporary office jobs with graduate school sandwiched between them, Maggie always greeted me at the door with her tail wagging and nose nuzzling. This comfort was especially needed during my first teaching job. Those kids made me cry, and lesson planning kept me up until late hours, but Maggie licked away my tears and kept me company while I graded.

That wasn't the only stressful thing in my life. I don't care if you are online dating, meeting people through friends, or simply going for it at a random bar, dating in your twenties *sucks*. But having a dog makes all the breakups, bad dates, and bullshit worth it. Even if you just spent two hours pretending to like basketball or awkwardly talking about how many siblings you have, at least there's a dog waiting at home for you to cuddle up to and confide in.

When navigating the path to what we want to be when we grow up, women have to dodge a lot of dating, housing, and professional pitfalls. All the changes are *stressful*! I miss my friends who have moved to different cities and countries. Sometimes teaching makes me want to tear my hair out. Owning a house comes with a million headaches. And even though I love my husband, he still doesn't know how to load the dishwasher correctly. But I can always depend on Maggie's excited leaps toward the front door when I shake her collar or the gentle rise and fall of her stomach as I lie next to her. Her absolute joy and simultaneous predictability make all the hard parts of life a little less nerve-wracking.

Sometimes, dogs even save our lives. Not literally, like Lassie, but emotionally. It was that way for my sister and Peanut. Rachel was a troubled teen—prone to depression and running with the wrong crowd. Her bad decisions and risky behavior had her on a dangerous path. But once Peanut came into her life, my sister had something stable and special to care for. Without her little monster at home, she doesn't know if she would have made it past her teenage years. Peanut was her rock. That dog calmed Rachel when her crazy hormones went wild, forgave her when she

lashed out in anger, and loved her unconditionally. If Rachel messed up at school or got caught in a lie, Peanut didn't judge her or yell at her like my parents did. And if Rachel got drunk or embarrassed herself at a party, Peanut didn't make her feel bad about herself like her friends did. Even though Rachel gave Peanut food, chew toys, and warm beds, Peanut gave Rachel the greatest gift possible. She taught my sister to truly love herself.

In fact, when interviewing my peers about their dogs, the word “teach” ran through every response. Dogs shape how we function with other humans and act as our professors of empathy and trust. For Laura and Catie, the unconditional love of their dogs taught them to advocate for themselves and others—becoming extensions of their hearts as well as their families in the process. Because of her dog Lucy, Annelise has learned to be a silent observer and active listener. She explains, “Knowing what dogs want requires interpretation of body language and noises that do not form words.” So when Lucy lifts her paw a certain way, tilts her head, or lets out a groan, Annelise notices. This certainly applies to how Annelise interacts with humans, especially the students she teaches, because, let's be honest—a teenager is a lot like a dog!

As a young person taking care of Peanut, my sister Rachel developed a keen sense of empathy and learned to avoid selfish tendencies. She says, “I became self-aware to the point that I was hard on myself. A lot of that stems from having a dog depend on you for all of their needs.” Without Peanut at home waiting desperately to be fed her daily meal or to be taken on her three-mile run, Rachel might not be the remarkable, selfless person I know today.

This empathy can even be vital for our jobs. Megan is an art therapist and counselor who works with clients of all ages. During their attempts to build trust with her and discover her capacity to empathize with others, they usually ask two questions: “Are you married?” and “Do you have kids?” When she responds “no” to both questions, clients often display a sense of

disappointment. However, once she whips out a photo of Fitz looking like an adorable stuffed animal and tells them her dog is like her child, clients always relax. It's amazing how dogs provide us with opportunities for human connection, even when they aren't present!

Although there are exceptions, most dog moms I know are huggers. And why not? All that petting, brushing, cuddling, and handling of our dogs make us keenly aware of the importance of physical touch. Even though she is a counselor, Megan wasn't totally comfortable with physical contact as a young person because her family never used touch as a love language. But with all the picking up and petting that teacup-sized Zeppy and Fitz demanded, Megan learned the importance of communicating through touch and has been more willing to explore it in relationships with friends and partners.

This deep bond comes especially through grooming and bathing, which is when Annelise can literally pinpoint the moment that she became Lucy's soulmate. Although Lucy was motherly toward other dogs due to her having a previous litter, she wasn't as trustful of humans. But that changed with the first time Annelise bathed and groomed her dog. While carefully cutting the hair on Lucy's face and tail, Lucy chose Annelise to be "her person." Through this intimate act of touch and trust, Lucy's perception of Annelise changed and became more familial.

Our dogs touch our hands and our hearts, which is why we are so willing to make sacrifices for them. Sarah lives on her own but works long hours and loves to travel. Unfortunately, unlike those of us who inherited the dog-loving gene from our parents, her family is not amenable to watching Sleepy. Therefore, she often has to get creative when it comes to finding dog-sitters, whether it's bribing a friend to stay at her house, paying a boarding service, or arranging drop-bys from a multitude of neighbors. And if she can't find anyone, she changes her plans—perhaps begrudgingly, but always willingly. It's difficult to resent a dog when they're gazing at you with



those wide brown eyes and perky ears. I feel that way every time I have to come home on my lunch break or leave a particularly amusing happy hour early in order to let Maggie out. Yeah, it sucks for five seconds, but the minute I walk in the door, her tail whips back and forth like hummingbird wings and she covers me with kisses. All that body language saying “Oh my God, I’m so glad you’re home” reminds me that I hate being away from her for long periods of time anyway.

It’s not just about sacrificing time. Dog moms must also be willing to amend their living situations to meet their dogs’ needs. Catie and Laura both required a yard when they bought their houses. Laura even had to upgrade the fence at her home to a taller privacy model because Ruby is a jumper. When Kevin and I were looking for a rental house, a fenced in yard was an absolute must, but we hadn’t considered other ways Maggie would factor into our search. Akitas are on a list of restricted breeds—meaning, some landlords would not rent to us because of Maggie. And when we finally did find a house, we had to pay a non-refundable pet deposit. It stung at the time, but it was certainly a small price to pay to have our first home and a HUGE yard for our epic games of fetch.

If we didn’t have to be home every six to eight hours or could spend our income on rent rather than vet visits, our lives would probably be a lot easier. But they would also be a lot emptier. That’s because our dogs fill vital emotional spaces. In a way, they are our children, whether in place of or in training for the human versions. Why do you think we call ourselves dog  *moms*? For a woman in her twenties who isn’t quite ready to have kids, having a dog teaches her about the responsibilities of being a parent. With that comes lessons about motherhood and what it means to love something more than oneself, which some of us need and others do not.

American women of my generation have so many more choices when it comes to our personal lives. We are choosing to settle down much later in life, and what that looks like varies

wildly, depending on the person. A lot of us eventually give in to some version of domestic stability, but every situation is different—single with or without kids, committed partnership but unmarried, married with or without kids. But just because our social choices have opened up and changed drastically throughout the twentieth century doesn't mean that our biological instincts (which have been around for millennia) suddenly go away. There's still that desire to care for, to nurture something weaker than ourselves, that we want to indulge. As recently as forty years ago, that would have come in the form of a baby, but today, that can also be a dog.

When it comes to human children, dog moms usually fall into three categories—they have kids, are planning to have kids, or straight up choose not to have kids. Catie falls into the first group. Her beautiful, energetic son Seamus came into the picture after Rolen had been around many years. Unfortunately, Rolen was not socialized with children and was never really fond of Seamus. When Catie gets another dog, she plans to make Seamus and the new arrival best friends. Because they are *all* part of the family.

The second category often uses a dog as a stepping stone toward the much harder and intimidating task of becoming a biological mom. Due to her strained relationship with her own mother, Megan often questioned her capacity to become a nurturing protector. She wondered how she could provide for a child and thus often declared that she did not want children. However, raising Zeppy and Fitz from puppies and watching them grow, develop, and seek her guidance has changed her. Being a dog mom has encouraged her to become a human mom.

The last and most subversive group of dog moms have no children and want no children. We are the misfits, at least according to our mothers, grandmothers, and random women who ask us when we're having kids. I'm part of this group, but thankfully, I don't have to face the disapproval alone. My own sister, Annelise, and Laura feel the same way. Annelise speaks for us

all when she says, “Our dogs fill the space in our lives where a child would be.” Rather than push a stroller, Rachel takes her dogs on ten-mile runs with her. Laura’s yearly Christmas cards feature her dogs, not kids. Instead of reading mom-blogs, Annelise reads dog articles. I’m proud to be in the company of such fascinating, unconventional women—ultramarathon runners, martial arts masters, professional writers, amateur chefs, visual artists, and world travelers. Like me, they think of their dogs as their children, so why would we need something or someone else?

It’s not that we think having kids is beneath us. I *love* kids, especially my friends’ children and my nieces and nephews. It’s just that I want to focus my time, money, and love on a variety of people and things rather than spending everything on one or a two (or many, depending on your preferred family size) people. Plus, I don’t want the pressure of parenting an actual human child. But that love’s gotta go somewhere, and that’s why I have dogs. And I am *blissfully* aware that having a dog is a lot easier than having a kid. I can’t chain a child up outside a restaurant while I have brunch. No matter how sticky they get, children can’t be kept off the furniture. And social services would be called on me immediately if I forced my son or daughter to sleep in a cage.

But at the same time, I love Maggie as much as I can and would love a child at this time in my life. She is my world, and I treat her like a person, especially as she’s gotten older. Ever since she hit the elderly dog mark, she’s actually a lot like a baby. Her digestive system is very sensitive, arthritis has riddled her joints so that she wobbles when she walks, and she leaks when she doesn’t go outside every three to four hours. This might seem like a lot, but think about it: what do we do for our babies? We give them special food, carry them everywhere, and slap diapers on their asses. That’s pretty much what I’ve done with Maggie, although pee-pads on dog beds are more effective than diapers. Sure, these remedies are crazy expensive. Each can of her lab-engineered, low-fat diet runs about \$3 to \$4, and liquid Meloxidyl for her arthritis costs way more than Advil or

Tylenol. But because she is my child and I have no other dependents to worry about, I can happily spend that money on her. As a result, she is loved, comfortable, and content. And so am I.

Overall, money and time are probably the top things that dog moms sacrifice for our pets. But we constantly give up other aspects of our lives. We surrender secondary pets, food, houses, trips, and even relationships. Sometimes your dog eats your parakeet—which Peanut actually did to Rachel’s bird Snicklefritz. You might lose that freshly baked frozen pizza to your mozzarella-covered dog who made a heroic jump for the counter. That perfect house might not be so perfect if putting a fence in would be too expensive. And that gorgeous man or woman might look a little less gorgeous if he or she can’t get along with your dog.

And then there is the ultimate sacrifice that every dog mom makes—a sacrifice that many moms do not have to worry about with their human children. With luck and biology on their side, those moms don’t usually have to consider the possibility of outliving their kids. But every dog mom knows she is going to lose her furry child after a short time—a much too short time.

Shit. Just thinking about it makes me cry.

A few of the beloved dogs I’ve been writing about are no longer alive. Catie had to put Rolen down the night before she responded to my interview questions. A fast-growing tumor on his gums ruptured, so she rushed him to the vet, his frail body swaddled in a towel as she sobbed. Even as Rolen was bleeding, he licked her hands gently and tried to comfort her. No matter how much pain he was in, he still took care of his mom. Now, Catie’s heart feels empty, just like the house she comes home to. She has her son and husband to comfort her, but she cannot help looking for Rolen and hoping to hear him plodding around the house. But he isn’t there, and that’s a reality all dog moms must cope with. Every day.

I've seen the deaths of several family dogs. When I was six, I was in the room when we put our Yorkshire Terrier Brandy down. I watched the life fade from her cloudy, blind eyes. It's one of my first childhood memories. And my parents chose to put our next Yorkie Becky down when I was away at college. But the most difficult passing I've witnessed was also the most difficult for my sister. When Peanut was fifteen and no longer able to walk or eat, Rachel decided to have her put to sleep. Even though I've lost countless aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents throughout my life and buried best friends before they turned thirty, saying good-bye to Peanut was one of the hardest farewells I've ever experienced. Rachel wasn't the only one who grew up with that cantankerous little Nut. She belonged to me a little bit as well.

As I write this, Maggie is nestled at my feet—her favorite place to be. But I know in a less than a year, she'll be gone. At fourteen-and-a-half years old and forty pounds, Maggie is the definition of geriatric, and I know I have precious little time left with her. I try to prepare myself for that reality by constantly saying “when Maggie is dead” in reference to the future. When Maggie is dead, I'm going on several road trips. When Maggie is dead, I'll take more graduate classes. When Maggie is dead, I'll start another book.

When Maggie is dead, my heart will be forever broken.

I didn't feel this way when I lost my childhood dogs. Even though I love our second dog Ryder, who came to live with me and my husband about five years ago, I know his death will not be as painful as Maggie's. And I will welcome new dogs into our home and give them all my love—but it will never match the love I have for Maggie. She is my canine soulmate who shared the most pivotal years of my life. No other bond will ever measure up.

As dog moms go from single to married, childless to three kids, living with parents to buying a house, working a menial job to having a career, or moving from a familiar place to a

foreign city, our dogs are our constants. We provide them with food, shelter, and fun, but they offer us so much more in return. Kisses, nuzzles, empathy, understanding, safety, and trust—a million moments of love and devotion. We give them our hearts because that's what they give us. The depth of our bond makes the shortness of their lives that much harder to bear. But still, we adopt them, house them, and care for them. Dog moms have no choice in the matter.

We were bred for it.