



# Lives of the Monster Dogs

*Kirsten Bakis*

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## **Lives of the Monster Dogs** Kirsten Bakis

Here is a first novel like no other: a spellbinding tale that both creates its own fully realized world perspective and provides an incisive look at the ways that humans and animals resemble each other. A group of elegant monster dogs in top hats, tails, and bustle skirts become instant celebrities when they come to New York in 2008. Refugees from a town whose residents had been utterly isolated for a hundred years, the dogs retain the nineteenth-century Germanic culture of the humans who created them. They are wealthy and glamorous and seem to lead charmed lives - but they find adjusting to the modern world difficult, and when a young woman, Cleo Pira, befriends them, she discovers that a strange, incurable illness threatens them all with extinction. When the dogs construct their dream home, a fantastic castle on the Lower East Side, and barricade themselves inside, Cleo finds herself one of the few human witnesses to a mad, lavish party that may prove to be the final act in the drama of the lives of the monster dogs.

## **Lives of the Monster Dogs Details**

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Author : Kirsten Bakis

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# From Reader Review *Lives of the Monster Dogs* for online ebook

## Michelle says

Quite magnificent. 150 dogs arrive in NYC with prosthetic hands, voice boxes and high intelligence. It's about them struggling with cultural difference, their history in 19th century Germany and the Canadian north, and the meaning of their existence. It's beautifully written, thoroughly touching, and embodies something fundamental for me about what makes New York so important.

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## Kirsten says

This is a curious and haunting novel. In the year 2010, the Monster Dogs, man-size dogs with prosthetic hands and voiceboxes, arrive in New York City. They are genteel and wealthy, and they are quickly welcomed into polite society, but their origins remain shrouded in mystery. One woman, a young journalism student, is given unique access to the Monster Dogs and begins to piece together their story, even as she is drawn deeper and deeper into their world.

As one of the Monster Dogs notes, "It is a terrible thing to be a dog and know it." Bakis does a masterful job of evoking the non-human qualities in the Dogs; they are sentient beings, but they still possess all the urges and characteristics of dogs, and Bakis doesn't let the reader forget this. The result is a story that is simultaneously eerie, grotesque, and gorgeous. There were certain flaws in the execution of the story, I thought, but it's a truly marvelous book and I loved it.

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## Elise says

I definitely went outside of my comfort zone when I decided to read this book, and I'm glad I did. While I am not a science fiction fan, *The Lives of the Monster Dogs* was so much more than sci-fi. In it, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* meets Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" as Bakis tackles some philosophical issues of what it means to be human in a way that is quite fresh and original, and her writing is startlingly beautiful at times. When Burkhardt, one of the monster dogs, says of human culture in the 21st century, "There's no smell of blood...And that's something I miss in your culture. No blood. Everything is so sanitized. There are hardly any butchers' shops. And yet slaughterhouses that supply your meat...they're really appalling, hellish. It's not natural at all. You don't have the chase or the fight or the smells that make everything worthwhile, and yet the most abominable suffering is created. And what do you do all day, you sit in offices and think. It's a very bad way to live" (163). That passage stood out to me and highlighted how Bakis created a world where dogs are dressed up in 19th century finery with human hands and voice boxes to hold a mirror up to society, to people who do feral and beastly things in the name of civility. In viewing this race of monster dogs, we are faced with viewing the monster in all of us. Mortality is pain, as protagonist monster dog, Ludwig, says: "Anyone who lives is consuming himself, rushing avidly toward the sword, the disease, the accident, toward the day on which life will end" (276). In those words is where I hear Poe, which was heartbreakingly beautiful in its nihilism, especially after considering the great effort it took Dr. Rank to create this race of monster dogs. Since I don't believe spoilers have any place in a book review, I will say no more. You will have to read this one yourself.

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## Colleen says

I read this book when it first came out and it's been one that has stuck with me over the decades (yikes! has it almost been 20 years?!)--and I periodically still check to see if Kirsten Bakis has written anything else, and it's a shame she hasn't. So it's been a very long time since I revisited this book and within a few pages the whole thing came flooding back to me. Even with its weaker parts, it's definitely an original and spellbinding story.

Mad scientist Augustus Rank teams up with Kaiser Wilhelm in the late 1870s, bound together by mutual loathing of their mothers and a crazy dream to use the ultimate loyal soldier--a dog--to conquer the world. Unfortunately for the Kaiser, Rank, grown even more crazy with cocaine and his failure and some heavy embezzling, packs up his followers and absconds in the night to the wilds of Canada, where they live in a secret remote town, still dutifully doing dog experiments. After Rank's death, the townsmen, still frozen in the 1880s, perfect the dog soldier--but treat them like slaves, and in the early 2000s the dogs revolt, slaughter all the humans, collect the jewels and precious old coins lying around the town, and head to NYC, to live it up in a castle they construct a la King Ludwig.

Here the dogs meet young indecisive grad student, Cleo, moping around after a break up, and through a series of coincidences, she becomes their media liaison. Really, her parts were the weakest--I didn't care for the Julia/Julie/Devil Wears Prada plucky ingenue bit, and if this book was ever made into a movie, Anne Hathaway should have bought the rights to this years ago. But even though Cleo was annoying in many of the parts, the dogs more than make up for it.

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## Danger says

A strange and sad allegory (both in the fairytale and biblical sense) that explores, usually tacitly, the blurred lines that define humanity. The imagery in this is striking, and the backstory sections and first 2/3rds are engaging. The ending is weighed down by being overstuffed with philosophy, so even while the last section is building towards a cataclysmic conclusion, it almost moves glacially for the last 20 pages. STILL, that's not to say it was bad, because it was still very good. Deep characterization makes the monster dogs feel like real entities, and as such, I was on board for the entirety of the story and invested in the eventual resolution. This was a book well worth your time.

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## Nancy says

I picked this up in a junk shop for \$4, and it was a complete surprise for me in every way. I enjoyed much more than I would have guessed from the jacket blurb. It requires total, unwavering suspension of disbelief, but the story is fascinating. A race of genetically and mechanically altered dogs with hands and voice boxes and very high intelligence flee a bizarre, violent, hidden past and move to New York City. A young human female becomes involved in their lives and tells their story.

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## **Laura Morrigan says**

Lives of the Monster Dogs is a book that truly explores the nature of what it is to be human, which may sound strange when I tell you that it is a story about dogs. When told a short version of the plot, people sometimes laugh, but I have to tell you that it is one of the most beautiful, melancholy books that I have ever read.

The book follows the life of character Cleo Pira, a young reporter who one night meets one of the 'monster dogs' and becomes involved in their strange lives. The Monster dogs are all large breeds of dogs, Great Danes, German Shepherds, etc. They have been genetically engineered to have the intelligence of humans, and have prosthetic hands. They were living until recently in a village in a remote region of Canada. After a revolt against their human masters, they come to modern New York City. Rich and strange, they quickly become celebrities and create their own rarefied world. Cleo comes to know and love two of these dogs especially, her friends Ludwig and Lydia.

Reading this story, I, too, found myself deeply loving these eccentric, melancholy creatures, not human, but not quite animal either, doomed by their intelligence to a sad, lonely existence. The sad, twisted history of their tortured creator is also deeply engrossing. This book still remains one of the most beautiful books I have ever read, and I would recommend it to everyone!

There is also a rumoured film in the works. I can only hope that it will still have the beauty and dignity of the book.

Review from my blog, <http://rosesandvillum.blogspot.com/>

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## **John says**

A few months ago I read *Carmen Dog* by Carol Emshwiller, and obviously I was reminded of this -- since both are New York novels featuring intelligent talking canines -- when I picked up Bakis's book. In reality, the two are quite different creations: Emshwiller's is a feminist surrealist satire while Bakis, a significantly more disciplined writer, has produced a very moving book that, while not without its own satirical and surrealist moments, approaches its subject matter almost reverentially.

Back at the end of the 19th century and first part of the 20th, mitteleuropean sociopath Augustus Rank had a dream of creating, by use of prosthetics, dogs that could walk and talk. Fleeing eventually to Canada where he founded a remote settlement to further his project, he was still never to see the success he craved. Those who survived him, however, did manage to bring into being the monster dogs of the book's title -- dogs who, in our present (the book's near future), massacre their human creators and come to New York in hope of finding their place in human society . . . and also of rediscovering their own past. By happenstance, a young woman called Cleo becomes their chronicler. You might expect that those chronicles of hers would comprise the novel's text, but no: here we have Cleo's own informal reminiscences of her encounters and interactions with some of the canine leaders and intellectuals, plus various documents -- even including an opera libretto! -- depicting the dogs' past. Far too soon, though, the dogs realize they can have no future -- that their construction includes irreparable flaws -- and they prepare the way for their species to have a dignified exit.

To say this book is odd would be trite -- and also misleading, because one of the wonderful things about it is that it's almost *not* odd: before very long I found myself accepting its narrative, which avoids all temptations to lurch into Dr Moreau territory, as something quite naturalistic, as if there were nothing outrageous at all about a community of talking dogs having implausible adventures in NYC. This is a haunting, marginally disquieting book that I suspect I'll be remembering for a very long time to come.

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### **Linda Branham Greenwell says**

This book is the intriguing story of an artificially created race of super-intelligent, slow-maturing dogs with prosthetic hands and voice boxes who descend upon a bemused New York City in the early 21st century. Created by the disciples and descendents of a disturbed and driven 19th century Prussian scientist, the dogs revolt against their human masters in 1999, leave their Canadian wilderness encampment and eventually arrive in the Big Apple. As a group, the dogs are both recluses and publicity hounds (pun intended), lovers of life yet driven by a sense of impending doom. They befriend and are befriended by a young female writer, and they change each others' lives.

I saw this description of the book... and it was so perfect... I pasted it here

I loved the idea of dogs as people. There was more of their history than I would have liked.. but still a thoroughly good read... one to stretch your imagination

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### **Bark says**

I'm a huge dog lover and found this story of walking, talking, intelligent dogs very interesting. There is a sad undertone to the whole story and an underlying thread of darkness, cruelty and the grotesque (the cow, the cow!). Very original and imaginative. The only small complaint I have, and it is because of the way the story is being told (in journal entries and by several different points of view) I was unable to connect to any one character or know any of them on an intimate level. I do wish it hadn't ended with so many questions left unanswered.

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### **Lauren says**

I like the idea of this book, but I am very confused by several of the author's decisions in writing it. It seems as if the novel takes place in (almost) present day, in a world exactly like our own except that the Monster Dogs exist. And then for some inexplicable reason, the main character Cleo owns a laser pistol. The single idea of that laser pistol seems more absurd than the Monster Dogs themselves and that small detail just keeps on bothering me. As for the rest of the book, I find Cleo very uninteresting and most of the conversations incredibly wooden (so much so that I don't understand how the friendship with the dogs formed at all). The writing is also incredibly passive and caused me to skim a lot of the pages.

I am also bothered by how unrealistic people's reactions in the book are. Cleo is not disturbed by the massacre at Rankstadt and she barely bats an eye that it even happened. She isn't bothered by the idea of murder, massive weapon arsenals, or anything of that sort. It's one of the most confusing things about this book.

In fact, no one seems bothered by anything. Augustus Rank dismembers animals? His guardians don't care. Augustus performs weird, sadistic surgery on a cow? Guardians don't care, the cow's owner doesn't care, and a local surgeon doesn't just not care about the sadism, he thinks Augustus has a talent that must be encouraged!

All in all, I wanted to like this book. I like the idea. But the fact that no one acts or reacts in a manner that makes sense with humans has just left me perplexed.

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## **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

One of the sincerely biggest pleasures for me of being a book critic is to hear from the authors of the books I review, letting me know of the various ways they feel I got my analyses of their manuscripts right (and sometimes...er, not); so you can imagine my delighted surprise, then, when hearing out of the blue earlier this year from novelist Kirsten Bakis, thanking me for a long and detailed look I did back in the 1990s of her first and so far only book, the exquisite modern goth fever-dream tale *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, which turned out to be one of my favorite reads of that entire decade. But see, I'm embarrassed now of that write-up -- I did it long before opening CCLaP, back when I was a creative writer myself and only penned a handful of nonfiction pieces a year, and like many artists in their twenties in the 1990s I was going at the time through a bad David Foster Wallace, Insert Your Personal Life Too Much Into Your Critical Essays, And Make Sure To Include Lots Of Superfluous Postmodernist Footnotes phase, and while Bakis's lovely email inspired me to want to talk about her remarkable book again, I cringed every time I thought of dragging that old terrible '90s review I did back into public sunlight.

So I decided to do something a lot more sensible instead, which was simply read the novel again, for the fourth time total and the first time in years, and do a brand-new write-up based on how it struck me this time; and I have to say, I'm glad I did, because this almost perfect genre tale still holds up as the mindblowing industry changer it was greeted as when first coming out in 1997, and it was a real pleasure to get lost again in Bakis's deeply strange and proto-steampunk world. Because for those who don't know, the title is rather a literal one; the novel is in fact about a race of super-dogs that are created from the original work of a mad scientist from Victorian-Age Bavaria, only with his work never perfected until the early 2000s, long after his death. And so this makes the story a fussy Victorian fantastical tale and a modern urban fantasy at the same time, a look at what happens when this race of talking, intelligent, surgically enhanced oversized dogs actually move to New York and announce themselves to the world, while also being an epistolary look back at this mad scientist, one Augustus Rank, and all the steps in the late 1800s that led to him coming up with this idea in the first place.

Or, well, the book's actually a lot more than this as well, which is what got it so much attention in the first place, right in the same years that Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* was exploring the same general territory; written by an award-winning academic author during her years at the Iowa Writers Workshop (and indeed, this novel won several awards too, including the Stoker Award for Best First Novel, plus made the short list of that year's Orange Prize), *Monster Dogs* is also a look at the century Rank and his followers hid themselves away in a secret closed-off community in rural Canada, modeling themselves after the turn-of-the-century Prussian society they came from and then promptly cutting off contact with the outside world, which is why these dogs in the 2000s all speak in heavy High German accents and dress in tight-collared

military uniforms and the like. And it's also about the terrible night that these successful test specimens, after years of growing into maturity, realize that it's time to overtake their former masters and violently slaughter all the humans in their hidden community, led by a Bible-quoting cur who claimed to be the reincarnated spirit of Rank himself. And it's also about the neo-classical opera that the dogs write in the 2000s to commemorate and explain this violent coup and the years of chaos that came afterwards, a 25-page libretto of which Bakis has faithfully recreated within the novel; and it's also about the elaborate Bavarian castle the dogs decide to build literally at the intersection of Houston and B on Manhattan's Lower East Side, paid for with the bundles of jewels that Rank and his followers slowly embezzled from Kaiser Wilhelm II a century previous, back when this entire project was under imperial supervision in the hopes of creating an army of unstoppable canine soldiers.

Whew, yeah, I know! And in another person's hands, such a ridiculously high level of fancifulness would fall apart very quickly; but that's the remarkable thing about Bakis, is that her natural talent plus years of honing this story makes it all tightly hold together no matter how ludicrous the details get, even when the last third dips into the legitimately disturbing (after the dogs come to realize that they are all slowly going insane, so decide to hold a month-long bacchanal in their Manhattan castle to celebrate their coming mass suicide), even when this last third turns boldly experimental (as we read the tone-poem rantings of one of these semi-insane dog's personal journal). It's really for all these reasons that the novel was treated as a mainstream, general-interest book when it first came out, despite it sounding at first like a story only a fanboy could love; it's because Bakis really is that good a storyteller, that she can manage to make this engaging to professors, suburban moms, and all kinds of other types who never in a million years thought they'd ever get caught up in the machinations of six-foot-tall monocle-sporting Great Danes who have had their front paws surgically replaced with prosthetic human hands.

These days, of course, post-*Buffy* and post-*Lost* and post-steampunk, the utter originality of this story doesn't have quite the same impact; but believe me when I say that when it first came out in the '90s, it rather literally blew off the tops of the heads of all my circle of friends and myself, and in fact I think it's fair to say that neither the urban fantasy nor steampunk genres would be quite as rich today without groundbreakers like this one that paved the way. Bakis intimated in her email to me that she might never write another novel again, so let me be the first to bemoan in public what a profound shame this would be; reading it again this month for the first time in half a decade, I was reminded all over again of what a nearly perfect novel it in fact is, and that the literary arts in general could really benefit from another tale with this level of sophistication and sheer beauty again. Here's hoping that Bakis will indeed pull up those bootstraps and crank out another modern classic again; but in the meanwhile, we still have this magnificent first volume, which I highly encourage all my fellow genre fans to devour soon if they never have before.

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## **Jennie says**

Leant to me by a student. Hmm.

So, this lady really has a way with words. And she has quite the imagination. But her ability to develop the relationships between her characters is sorely lacking. Bakis has fabulous descriptive skills, but she doesn't use any of them to describe the way the relationships between her characters grow. One chapter, the main character gets superficially introduced to people, and then there are a few pages glancing over how she had repeated meetings with these people, and then bam! Suddenly, she loves these people, or she's best friends with these people, and when you contrast this with the amount of detail spent of describing the historical background of the dogs, or the minutiae of certain rather unimportant experiences, it leave the book feeling



rather soulless and empty. So, if you enjoy language (or monster dogs), you might enjoy this book, but other than that, it's not really worth it. (The good writing bumps the rating up a star.)

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### **Ted says**

An interesting conceit, an okay read, but overall pretty forgettable.

**Ha! I've just noticed Jeffrey Keeten rates this at 5 stars!**

**Well, Jeffrey's a better reader than I am, so I'll nudge it up to 2 1/2. 8 )**

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### **Logophile says**

This book had been on my wish list for so long that it's probably a bigger disappointment to me than it would have been if I'd just picked it up without knowing anything about it other than its intriguing title.

The plot, a synopsis of which was what interested me originally in this book, involves a group of artificially enhanced, intelligent dogs of mysterious origins who have moved to the New York City of the near future. A graduate student, Cleo, is one of the few humans admitted into their social circle. There are so many interesting ideas that are raised and could have been explored, but instead we are told way too much about Cleo's none-too-interesting personal angst and are ultimately treated to metaphysical babble that sheds no light on—in fact, seems to have nothing to do with—the very interesting moral, philosophical, and even medical issues that these monstrous dogs (and they are monstrous in some ways) would have, or with the enigma of their grisly creator, Augustus Rank. The story of the dogs' origin is presented early on, and its titillatingly gruesome details are rather a red herring, since the dogs' own feelings about their creator is never really revealed.

Rarely has such a good premise, full of so many ideas ripe for exploration, been utilized so poorly. Even Cleo, the dogs' human spokesperson, is underdrawn. We learn far more about her taste in clothes than about the reason for her fascination with the dogs. Ultimately, while this book isn't monstrous, it is a dog. I wonder why it was short-listed for the Orange Prize.

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### **Jess ✨Harbinger of Blood-Soaked Rainbows✨ says**

This may very well be the hardest review I've ever had to write. Maybe that's why I've put off writing it for so long. I read the book two months ago and find myself still thinking about it.

I decided to revisit this one because it reminded me so much of this historical gothic tale I just read and I wanted to compare it to my thoughts of this one.

I really liked this book, but I'm not quite sure why. The plot is confusing and disturbing, but at the same time magical and captivating. This book could actually be referenced as a literary conundrum--the emotions it conjures contradict each other, most of the characters are grotesque and awful but on the same token

sympathetic, and the ending left me with such a horrible feeling. Melancholy, unease, disturbing imagery, but overall, it was just *sad*. I think I literally read the last sentence, closed my book, and just stared at the cover for 10 minutes or so, just to take in everything that I'd read.

I have no idea where Kirsten Bakis got the idea for this novel, and as she hasn't (to my knowledge) published anything else, I have nothing else to reference as I ponder over this unusual plot. The novel takes place mostly in New York City in a time unknown when "Monster Dogs"--gargantuan dogs that can walk upright, talk, dress, and otherwise act like humans--mysteriously immigrate to the city and take up residence in a hotel. The dogs are adorned in early 20th century Prussian dress and seem to be very well-mannered and old-fashioned and have become celebrities of sorts. We see the action through the eyes of Cleo, a young writer living in the city who becomes swept up in the dogs' mysterious and attractive world. The present action, written from Cleo's POV, is interspersed with journal entries from Ludwig, the German Shepherd historian of the Monster Dogs, and that of Augustus Rank, the German scientist, a la Dr. Frankenstein, who made the dogs, and is thus their God and Creator.

Like Cleo, I was completely swept up in the dogs' saga, even though the concept is completely absurd and disturbing. Some of the dogs are lovely characters, but a lot of them are snobbish, vulgar, rude, and unfriendly, and I'm quite convinced that had they been human, the reader would immediately hate them. However, that could not be farther from the case. I hurt for these dogs, wanted to ease their pain and loneliness, and dreaded their descent into madness. (view spoiler)

Cleo has no idea why she is so drawn to these dogs, who have become her true friends and comrades, and just like Cleo, I had no idea why I was so wrapped up in this story or cared at all about it. But oh how I did! In the weirdest way possible, I was so affected by it that it left me sad and depressed for nearly a week after I finished, but in a totally good way. I was so happy that she included the back story of the Monster Dogs' creator, Augustus, and though he is quite literally a madman, I ached for his broken heart, and cheered for him as he (quite morbidly) conquered those who had forced cruelty on him. He is the quintessential antihero, just like his Monster Dog counterpart, Klaus who is the dogs' leader. I found the total lack of a protagonist refreshing, and enjoyed reading a novel that was not only well-written, but also well executed. Each character has both strengths and shortcomings, and is neither overly good or overly bad, but his or her own unique combination of the two.

I'm not quite sure what point Bakis was trying to make with her debut novel. There are some definite Hannibal Lecter-like parallels when she writes about Augustus Rank's young life, there are various allusions made to *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and I definitely got glimpses of *Animal Farm* within these pages. The theme is very political, as she has definitely penned a Domsday character study about the problems that occur when men play God, but I think she has also written a beautiful commentary on human nature and what motivates us to feel, behave, and think the way that we do. Sometimes the way we feel defies all logic, and even the most reasonable of human beings can become trapped and stumped by their emotions. This book taught me, that all actions, even ones done with the best of intentions can have dramatic repercussions; and that friendships can come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and forms. Sometimes friendship can be the most irrational thing that can happen to us.

I'd be lying if I said this book is for everyone. The plot is very loose at times, and it definitely has its slower moments. I know that probably 50% of people who read it will find themselves lost or confused, and I think that's normal. But those of you who are looking for something out of the box, a little jarring, or feel like having your emotions manipulated, go ahead and pick this up. You will be so glad you did.

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## **David Yoon says**

The Monster Dogs in question walk upright, speak through electronic voice boxes, possess prosthetic hands and dress in the fashions of 19th century Prussia - naturally. Incredibly smart they are also fabulously wealthy and descend on New York in our near future after spending a century hiding out in the wilds of Northern Canada. They leave this town called Rankstadt after murdering their former masters, along with every man, women and child and burning the city to the ground - which we find out in an operatic libretto later in the book.

Yeah this is quirky to put it mildly. The dogs straight up murdered an entire city and are now feted in New York. Their creator Augustus Rank is Victor Frankenstein's sociopathic veterinarian brother. It has this gothic feel with shades of Stoker and there is a pervasive sense of wistful melancholy throughout. I'm just not exactly sure what I was supposed to take away from this all.

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## **Kerfe says**

If you're squeamish about animal cruelty, the story of Augustus Rank's childhood at the beginning of this novel is a tough read. Yet, based on other things I've read about the childhood behavior of some types of murderers, it is certainly not out of line.

And, of course, who are the real monsters here? A human plays God, attempts to create a being to serve his own monstrous desires--always an echo, a mirroring of the many and universal creation stories, complete with growing self-knowledge, rebellion, and exile from the first home.

The dog historian Ludwig speaks as he is dying of the thin balance of desire. Of both the need for, and impossibility of, interaction and identification between individuals and species. Of memory and living, of incorporating the past without killing the future.

"In the space between desire and despair...between holding and letting go, between clinging and release...in this space is the unspoken thing, the thing that lives."

The story itself is excellent, weaving the thoughts of dog and human into a completely believable world.

The disintegration of this world is propelled by both good intentions and the human and monstrous folly that is so much a part of our imperfect behavior. It is to Bakis' credit that the dogs become as human as the human characters, that we identify with Cleo's attachment and love for them not as a separate species, but as equals.

After all, the monsters we create in our stories are only reflections of those we know best--ourselves.

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## **Maribel says**

The journalist Cleo was the least interesting part of *Lives of the Monster Dogs* (great title), for me. She goes on and on about "getting" them, how sad their plight is and yet how tragic it is that it is going to end. Okay, it's not the birth of rock and roll out of slaves forced to the USA, or classic Hollywood benefiting from geniuses forced out by the Nazis. They had dress up parties in a big mansion and she gets to come for the one last time party like the kids in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It was sad that Willy Wonka wasn't going to make candy anymore. But he didn't need to, he'd done all he wanted to for himself. Public consumption was never the idea, anyway. These dogs had to survive in spite of their whole physical beings, with not even a grasping at straws sense of purpose (they have paws!). And they are dying. I felt bad for them as fellow animals, not that there was inherent beauty in their fucked up situations. What is the point of creating art and sharing it with anyone else? Do you HAVE to share it? Does someone need religion to carry on, or building society, starting a family? The dogs don't even have the luxury of pretending to work it all out. They were created by a mad scientist who wanted to use them as war dogs for his mad, mad schemes. Why would they care what the world thought of them and send their big message with the final party? All Ludwig wanted was what most anybody else struggling with those questions would want. The end result of impending death wasn't his tragedy, it was having to live with it at all.

Cleo and the dogs relationship never took on the same meaning for me as that with their creator. He was sick, yes, but he made them. They felt about him the complicated love of a parent (who fucked you over by bringing you about in the first place). Being a pet and being a child were ideas that never really took shape in Bakis' book. Cleo reads like a gushing musical review from another famous person who oh so badly wants their old favorite to validate them (I'm thinking of pretty much any celebrity who writes about Morrissey, for example). "But I understand!" I understand feeling like a freak out of place. It's not hard to, if you live in this world (or the fictionalized world of 'Monster Dogs'). Patting yourself on the back for it, though? Feel free to stroke my dog's head because he does have to live with a freak like me. It was a pain in the ass reading the parts of the stories from Cleo's perspective. Wish someone had told Bakis that while she was writing the book so she'd have gotten down to the real biz of writing her story. Sigh.

\*Sidenote: As a person fixated on Russia and Canada, I did find that atmosphere of the journals interesting. Wish the dogs would take over for realz...

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## **Sara Batkie says**

A captivating idea ("monster" dogs that walk upright and have surgically attached hands and voice boxes come to New York and nobody finds it weird) but the plotting is haphazard and the modern day portions don't end up going anywhere that interesting. Still it's well worth reading if the description intrigues you; Bakis has a steady, clear prose style that keeps the surrealism afloat even if it sometimes feels like she gave more energy to the concept than the execution. A shame that this appears to be her only book so far, would love to see what else an imagination like this can cook up.

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