

LISA GARDNER

Why My Dogs Are Better Book Dogs Than Search Dogs

By Lisa Gardner

I love my dogs. For the past twelve-years, I've been blessed with two Shetland sheepdogs, a bi-black male named Murphy and a blue merle female named Sierra. I will be the first to say they are instrumental to my writing process. There's no book problem to date a long walk, adoring gaze or quick tail wag can't fix.

No doubt about it, dogs are good for writers.

Now, my dogs are smart. They're working dogs, meant to herd sheep (or small children, whichever comes first). Like most shelties, they're active, family-friendly, and extremely talented. Then, I learned about Search and Recovery canines for my latest novel, *Love You More* (March 8 Bantam Books). Now here are some dogs that are accomplished, athletic and altruistic. It was enough to make me wonder if maybe I could teach my (admittedly older dogs) some new tricks.



Things went not quite the way I planned.

1. Search and Recovery dogs can be trained to find humans in return for reward; my dogs can be trained to find...Cheerios...in return for...Cheerios.

Remember all those movie scenes, where the handler holds up handkerchief for the search dog to scent, then releases the hound? My first lesson about SAR dogs: No. The team I interviewed with doesn't train their dogs to find Jane Doe's scent. They train their dogs to find human scent. Period. Dogs are brought out, revved up and then released to play their favorite game—find the human! By definition, the dog handlers must work downwind of their canines, and the search area must be devoid of other volunteers, or the dogs will return with the county deputy instead of finding Jimmy in the well.

SAR dogs start by training to find live humans, then graduate to finding bodies. The techniques are basic enough I thought I'd try them at home. We started easy: My daughter stood not far from the dogs, holding a cup of Cheerios. I got the dogs to sit, then uttered the command, Go Find! The dogs turned and stared at me. Eventually, they wandered over to my daughter (probably to get away from the crazy lady), where they were pleasantly surprised to receive Cheerios. They became more interested. Next time out, they went straight to my daughter, got their treat. Phase one accomplished.

Phase two, my daughter moved behind a piece of furniture but in the same room. My dogs (brilliant, I tell you!), figured this out pretty quick. Next up, my daughter hid completely out of sight in a different room. This took them longer, but once they found

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her and earned Cheerios, they became convinced Go Find was the best game ever. I was very pleased. Yes, my dogs are talented.

Then, one day, the dogs caught me getting the Cheerios out of the pantry. You could see the wheels turning in their minds. We like Cheerios. There are the Cheerios. We like Cheerios. There are Cheerios. Sure enough, I told them Go Find, and they obediently ran and sat in front of the pantry. Apparently, the human part never registered for them. They're just looking for crunchy O's, and now that they know where they are...

Apparently, if Jimmy falls in a well in our town, he'd better have his pockets filled with Cheerios. Or, my dogs also enjoy Kix.

2. SAR dogs enjoy long walks in all sorts of terrain; my dogs enjoy Tempur-Pedic.

The secret to a successful search is understanding scent. It originates from the target in an ever expanding vector. For a dog to find the target, he or she must find the opening of the cone, then, in a zigzag pattern, trace it back to point of origin. It's the dog handler's job to enable these efforts by considering a variety of factors. For example, scent pools at barriers. So when working an open field, a good handler will start with the row of bushes in order to best locate the scent. Also, in the morning, scent rises like a mist, meaning search efforts might start from a bluff. Whereas at night, scent cools and dips low, meaning search efforts might move to the gully. Either way, SAR canines and their handlers need to be prepared to scabble over boulders, pick their way through rubble, bound across streams and bushwhack through forests. An experienced dog will work two hours, then take a twenty minute break, then work again.

It's physically demanding endurance work, that five years ago, both my dogs would've loved. Now, entering the golden years, their standards have changed. For example, my dogs' idea of a walk is to their food bowls and back. Scrabbling over boulders...mmm, more like flopping onto a sofa. Like a lot of aging athletes, they have moments of youthful glory—a chattering squirrel that simply demands a good chasing. Then they come limping back, eager for their joint supplements, and of course, Cheerios.

3. SAR dogs don't mind boats; my dogs don't mind puking on boats.

Search and Recovery teams are trained for three kinds of searches: Live, cadaver and water. The water part caught me off guard. Dogs working in boats, searching open bodies of water? Seriously? Yes. Turns out, a current of water carries scent just like a current of wind. The handler's job then, becomes to understand the nature of water, relying on topographical maps, changing temperatures and local knowledge (consults with area fishermen). Handler and dog then goes out in a small boat, where the dog, sniffing and sometimes even snapping at the water, can find cadavers in depths of up to 100 feet.

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As for my adorable pooches. We had the bright idea to take them out in a speed boat last year. The fluffy white female who is highly noise sensitive (a Sheltie trait), shuddered, quaked and prayed for deliverance. The male, who is afraid of nothing, bounded around good naturedly for the first five minutes. Then his sweet black face turned green and he started doing things on that boat, you don't want to read about in this article. We haven't taken them boating since.

I loved my time with the SAR dogs. Not only did I get great research information for what became one of my favorite scenes in *Love You More*, but I was humbled and amazed by the dedication of the extremely talented canines and their handlers. So much work and devotion, and they're not even paid for their efforts. They do it because it's a calling, a way of giving back, and, in a time of crisis, a way of making a huge difference.

As for my dogs... Maybe SAR work isn't their thing. But I still insist, they're the best book dogs out there, not to mention two extremely well-loved members of our family. They helped me out with *Love You More*. And we hope you enjoy, too.