

And she called it puppy love

THE PUPPY DIARIES: Raising a Dog Named Scout, by Jill Abramson. Times Books, 242 pp., \$22.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

One night before bed, I checked the headlines on The New York Times home page. The top story was “Mission Unfinished,” an in-depth look at the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan by the paper’s executive editor, Jill Abramson. It looked interesting, but I had another Abramson work waiting on my nightstand.

It was “The Puppy Diaries: Raising a Dog Named Scout.” That title, and the adorable baby retriever on the cover, caught my 10-year-old daughter’s eye.

“Is that book . . . for grown-ups?” she asked delicately.

Well, sort of. Just as dogs give us a break from our complicated human lives, dog books give us a break from our complicated adult reading material. And some are really great, too — like E.B. White’s dachshund essays, Ted Kerasote’s “Merle’s Door” and Elizabeth Marshall’s “The Hidden Life of Dogs.”

But a dog book doesn’t have to be really great to please dog lovers. It just has to be about dogs. To be coldly realistic, this is



THE NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO / JAMES ESTRIN

New York Times executive editor Jill Abramson and her dog, Scout

probably why, when Abramson introduced her puppy diaries to Times readers as an online column in 2009, it rocketed to No. 1 most emailed within the hour.

Abramson’s story is not quite as funny or as moving as another canine classic, John Grogan’s “Marley and Me,” but it’s along the same lines, entwining the travails and joys of raising a golden retriever with the rest of the author’s life — in Abramson’s case, her job at the Times; her long, peaceful marriage; and two really bad accidents, one with a truck in Times Square and the other on a slippery slope in Yellowstone National Park.

Yet “The Puppy Diaries” is not much of a diary; Abramson is a journalist, not a memoirist. About as intimate as the book gets is a sentence such as this: “After the departure of our children, Buddy’s death, and my accident, our home lives had become a little narrow and thin.” By the next paragraph, “Thanks to Scout, Henry and I were doing more together as a couple.” While Abramson is not big on personal revelations, she does love to get a quote. Experts, and their informative views on everything from pet health insurance to pet training to the role of pets in filling an empty

nest, probably worked better in the column than they do here.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading about Scout, and about the Abramsons’ previous dogs, both West Highland white terriers, Buddy and Dinah. And in addition to the simple, sweet pleasure of reading about the love between people and dogs, “The Puppy Diaries” offers a few more sophisticated treats. Though there’s not a snarky word in the book, there are some backstage goings-on at the Times. For example, Abramson goes into detail about the dog-related gifts she’s received from her colleagues. In the Buddy era, “Michiko Kakutani, the Times’ chief book critic, was particularly generous: not only had she given me dozens of pairs of socks emblazoned with Westies, she had also given me an antique desk lamp with a bronze terrier perched on its base.”

Unfortunately, since many people didn’t know when Buddy died, the Westie-ana just kept on coming until Maureen Dowd, bless her heart, came through with the first golden retriever gift, a puppy painted on a plate. I relished the picture of these imposing, often scathing columnists shopping for dog tchotchkes.

I just hope they run a big picture of a golden retriever next to this review, so I can rocket to No. 1, too.

this week

Readings & events on LI

Monday

Jeff Hirsch talks about his young-adult novel “The Eleventh Plague” (Scholastic). At 2 p.m., Barnes & Noble, Country Glen Center, 91 Old Country Rd., Carle Place; 516-741-9850



Tuesday

David Stokes reads from “The Shooting Salvationist: J. Frank Norris and the Murder Trial That Captivated America” (Steerforth). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

Wednesday

National Book Award finalist **John Edgar Wideman**, author of “Philadelphia Fire,” “Father-along” and other titles, discusses his work. At 11:15 a.m., Joan and Donald E. Axinn Library, South Campus of Hofstra University, Hempstead; 516-463-5410, hofstra.edu/gwgr



Thursday

Actress **Julianne Moore** signs copies of her new children’s book, “Freckleface Strawberry: Best Friends Forever” (Bloomsbury). At 10:30 a.m., Barnes & Noble, Country Glen Center, 91 Old Country Rd., Carle Place; 516-741-9850



Saturday

Francis Levy reads from his new novel, “Seven Days in Rio” (Two Dollar Radio). Reservations required. At 3 p.m., East Hampton Library, 159 Main St., East Hampton; 631-324-0222, easthamptonlibrary.org

This killer crept out the Nazis

DEATH IN THE CITY OF LIGHT: The Serial Killer of Nazi-Occupied Paris, by David King. Crown, 416 pp., \$26.

BY MANUELA HOELTERHOFF
Bloomberg News

As a youngster, Marcel Petiot tried to boil the family cat and, when thwarted by his horrified mother, succeeded in smothering the beast later that night.

Worse was to come. Before he was guillotined in 1946, Petiot may have murdered more than 100 people in the four years the Nazis occupied France. The number is vague because so little was left of his victims once the bits and pieces were shoved into an oven or tossed into a lime pit.

Petiot was ultimately charged with butchering 27 men and women — most of them Jews, though he was

hardly encouraged, it seems, by any Nazi overlords.

“Death in the City of Light: The Serial Killer of Nazi-Occupied Paris” is David King’s oddly absorbing caper through a sinister city darkened by a 10 p.m. curfew and festooned with Third Reich bunting.

King starts off with the grisly findings at a smoke-belching mansion in the rue Le Sueur on March 11, 1944. A charred hand is still cooking in the coal stove; body parts litter the basement.

The owner of the mansion was, of course, little Marcel. He’d grown up into a mad doctor with a pretty wife and a normal son. “It’s unbelievable. He’s a man so sweet, so calm,” said a woman who worked with the homicide department.

Even more unbelievably, the officer she called Capt. Henri-Jean Valeri was, in fact, Petiot, who had sprouted new facial hair and inserted himself into the ongoing investigation.

The police spent seven months hunting him, unearthing a string of aliases, suspicious disappearances and 49 suitcases. Hidden in the attic of a shop in the Burgundy region, the suitcases were stuffed with handbags, gowns, jackets, socks, slippers, belts, eyeglasses and hairpins once worn by the frightened people who had come to Petiot believing he could smuggle them to safety. In fact, he took their money, killed them and hoarded their belongings.

Petiot seems to have been that rarest of creatures, a mass murderer even the Gestapo found creepy. About a year before the startling discovery in the rue Le Sueur, Gestapo agents had hauled him into a small room and tortured him with dental equipment, apparently thinking he was helping Jews get out of France.

But then they let him go.

Why? Even King, who had access to restricted police dossiers, finds the Gestapo connection puzzling.

Neither is he sure just how Petiot killed so many people with such ease. As a doctor, he had easy access to cyanide and could have injected his victims with a syringe. Or maybe he gassed them, creating his own mini-Auschwitz.

Petiot stood trial in the fall of 1944. He loved it, preening until the end, joshing with spectators and generally besting the prosecutors.

Some stories would have benefited from a scalpel; King’s cast of characters can get confusing. Still, his descriptions of the underworld are fascinating, and I appreciated his eye for detail.

That jar of genitals really lingers in the mind.

