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My Dog Tulip, adapted from J.R. Ackerley's 1956 memoir, showcases animator Paul Fierlinger's expressive drawing/painting style which melds perfectly with the first-rate cast and soundtrack to bring the characters to life. The film is a refreshing break from the hyper realism that dominates today's animated features, with the artist's hand visible in every frame. Different levels of reality are depicted with distinct drawings styles, with delightfully bawdy sketches (bottom left) representing Tulip's natural acts.

My Dog TULIP

J.R. Ackerley's classic is adapted brilliantly to the screen

By Edward Guthmann

Creating animated dogs is a delicate business, and few do it with distinction. *Wallace and Gromit* creator Nick Park does minimalist wonders with the puzzled frowning of a canine brow, and French filmmaker Sylvain Chomet gave us the chunky, heroic Bruno in *The Triplets of Belleville*.

And then there's Paul Fierlinger, the director/animator whose *Still Life with Dogs* (2001) is a cinematic memoir of his relationship to his dogs, told with insight, tenderness and probity. No one is more observant, more loving toward dogs and at the same time less sentimental about them than Paul Fierlinger.

His newest feature, *My Dog Tulip*, is adapted from J.R. Ackerley's 1956 memoir of the same name. A writer, poet and memoirist, Ackerley (1896–1967) was the literary editor of *The Listener*, a weekly BBC program, and the author of *Hindoo Holiday*. He never liked dogs until, in middle age, he adopted Queenie, a high-strung, overly barksy, wildly possessive German Shepherd.

My Dog Tulip was shocking in 1956, primarily for its detailed descriptions of Queenie's bodily functions and sex life, Ackerley's frustrated efforts at mating her, and Queenie's unfortunate habit of pooping at times and in places that

embarrassed her owner. “Meaningless filth about a dog,” Dame Edith Sitwell called the book on its release. “Disgusting,” added Harold Nicholson.

“There is no doubt,” his biographer Peter Parker wrote, “that Ackerley thoroughly enjoyed shocking people.” To his friend, the poet Stephen Spender, Ackerley once said, “I am not anxious to spare the feelings of the philistines.”

But *Tulip* at the same time is an eloquent, carefully structured study in love and adaptation: Queenie's slow process of domestication, and Ackerley's simultaneous, latent awakening to joy. Queenie, he wrote, possessed “the art of life” and met each day “with the utmost eagerness and anticipation of pleasure.” Years later, when Queenie died, he said, “I would have immolated myself as a suttee. For no human would I ever have done such a thing.”

Ackerley was gay, openly so at a time when most homosexuals lived furtive lives and the simple expression of their love was still illegal in England (it was decriminalized in 1967). He spent his life seeking out his elusive “Ideal Friend,” but never found true companionship until he adopted a dog. Odd aside: Because Queenie's name takes on a second meaning in gay culture, and

was “likely to arouse titters among the literati,” said his friend Henry Reed, Ackerley renamed her Tulip for the book.

In his film, Paul Fierlinger, 74, repeats the long passages about poop, pee and doggie sex—and delivers them with the same thoroughness and matter-of-factness as Ackerley. He co-directed *Tulip* with his wife of 18 years, painter and landscaper Sandra Schuette Fierlinger, 56. Paul drew the illustrations and collaborated on the script with Ackerley biographer Peter Parker; Sandra colored the drawings and backgrounds. Christopher Plummer is the voice of Ackerley, Isabella Rossellini is a wise veterinarian and Lynn Redgrave is Ackerley's meddlesome sister Nancy.

The son of Czechoslovakian diplomats, Paul was born in 1936 in Ashyia, Japan, and lived in foster homes in the United States between the ages of three and 10. The next 20 years were spent in Prague—at 12, he made his first animated film by shooting drawings from a flipbook with a 16 mm Bolex—and in 1968 he returned to the United States for good. In addition to *Still Life with Dogs*, he directed the one-hour animated autobiography, *Drawn from Memory* (1995) and a film about drug and alcohol abuse, *And Then I'll Stop...* (1989).

All imagery courtesy of My Dog Tulip Company

An Interview with animators Paul and Sandra Fierlinger



I spoke with the Fierlingers by telephone at their home in Wynnewood, Pa., and they answered follow-up questions by email. Paul, who still speaks with a slight Czech accent, did most of the talking. They share their lives with Gracie, a Corgi/German Shepherd mix, and Oscar, a Jack Russell Terrier.

Bark: Were you familiar with J.R. Ackerley before you started the film?

Paul: Oh yeah, mostly with the book *My Dog Tulip*. Once we decided to make the film, I got in touch with Peter Parker, the British writer who wrote a very extensive biography of J.R. Ackerley [*The Life of J.R. Ackerley*, 1989]. And then I read everything Ackerley ever wrote, including his letters.

Bark: When you were reading *My Dog Tulip* did you see yourself in J.R. Ackerley and the way he related to and described his dog?

Paul: Not in the least. Ackerley typifies the most common dog owner on the hill—whom he himself learned to detest in due course—a man in complete adulation for his dog's size, shape and breed and totally oblivious of the animal's true nature and needs.

Ackerley, on top of being vain, was at times very lonely—which were fortunate circumstances for Tulip. This set of circumstances, including her being rescued by Ackerley from the grips of a very abusive previous owner, led to this ideal relationship of mutual tolerance and neediness.

Bark: Ackerley's book, I would guess, has a resonance with dog people, which is an intensity that non-dog people don't understand. Were you able to appreciate Ackerley's obsession because you feel the same about dogs?

Paul: I chose *My Dog Tulip* to become our movie exactly for the book's endearing (to me) quirkiness. When you look at Amazon.com under *My Dog Tulip* you'll see that half the readers who wrote reviews hate it and half of them

love it. I assume the same thing will happen to the film. In hindsight, I think it might have been a mistake. We got ourselves into dangerous waters: If I had picked another book we could've perhaps had an easier time finding the- atrical distribution.

Bark: What appealed to you about the way Ackerley describes his relationship with this dog?

Paul: What was appealing to me was that he didn't know dogs at all [before Tulip]. And then I found out, reading his other material, he actually disliked dogs. He was annoyed by them. He was very intolerant of dogs barking in the neighborhood. And then here he got, in Tulip, the worst kind of neurotic barker.

Bark: Is there a large percentage of your script that's taken verbatim from the book?

Paul: I would say 80 percent, actually.

Bark: What was there in Ackerley's writing that made you want to make this film?

Paul: What appealed to me was his King's English and the way he spoke it. You don't have to actually listen to Ackerley speak it; you can hear it in his writing. It's beautiful prose. And he's talking about dog shit.

Bark: A lot!

Paul: Yes, and the contrast of the two I always found amusing. When you say "a lot," I think I know what you mean by that. You probably wish there were less, right? You know how this happened to me? I was so fixated on getting everything right. I always believed that film directors should be faithful to the book. So I needed to know everything about Ackerley. That's how it happened that I had too much of the scatological stuff.

Bark: I found it odd and a bit unnerving to see Ackerley walking Tulip without a leash.

Paul: Ackerley was very proud of her for that—he always carried a leash but used it only when he could expect trouble from authorities, though even in those cases it wasn't really necessary. Our dogs are like that, too. Also, in those days, there weren't any leash laws.

Bark: ...and then often not picking up after Tulip when she "fouls the footway." People had different standards in the 1950s, but I'm wondering if it was difficult for you to illustrate irresponsible dog-owner behaviors without commenting on them?

Paul: Poop-picking laws only began in the late 1970s here, and even later in Europe. But [Tulip] was out on the farm or the woods when she pooped without him picking it up. Not on the street.

Back in the '50s and '60s in Europe responsible dog owners trained their dogs to poop on the street, next to the sidewalks, what was considered the gutter. Streets were swept early, every morning, even in Communist countries.

Bark: Christopher Plummer was close to 80 when he recorded the voice of Ackerley, even though Ackerley was in his fifties during his Tulip years.

Paul: I had a different type of personality in mind. Specifically, Jeremy Irons, because I had met him briefly in London, through a friend, many years ago. I spent the whole afternoon with him. He came with his dog and his wife; he's a great dog lover. So I really wanted him, and when I read Ackerley I heard Jeremy's voice, his delivery and personality—which is so different from Christopher Plummer's.

After we were told Jeremy Irons couldn't do it, we decided on Christopher Plummer, which made things easier anyway because we didn't have to go to London to record him. All the other British speaking parts then turned out to be available in New York—and very good ones, too. To tell you the truth, and you might find this hard to believe, I had no idea who Christopher Plummer was. I still haven't seen *The Sound of Music*.

Bark: The way you portray dogs in your films is never sentimental, and yet there's great affection and love. Where do you think that restraint comes from?

Paul: I love and am in awe of nature. So I understand nature, I understand that

dogs don't think like humans and are nothing like humans at all. And it's what I respect in dogs. I think from a very early age I was in awe of the strangeness of the relationship between dogs and humans—that it can at all exist. It has been important to me throughout my career to portray nature accurately.

From a very young age, I disliked Disney and loved *The Little Prince* because the fox explains to the boy [in *The Little Prince*] what he must do to tame him, the fox. If the fox would know this, wasn't he already tame? But instinctively—I was seven or eight at the time—I understood that it shows Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's understanding of nature. He wasn't violating any rules, whereas Disney violated all the rules of nature.

That's what I want our film to be: the opposite of *101 Dalmatians*. So that people would *not* want to buy a dog after they saw *Tulip*. Like too many people do who watch Disney movies.

Bark: This is your second animated dog movie, following the wonderful *Still Life with Dogs*. Which dog behaviors and movements are the most difficult to draw and animate?

Paul: The subtle facial expressions—for instance when the ears drop down to signal submission; or fold back, signaling aggression; or somewhere in between those two, to signal fear. How do you get the precise shape and motion just right in a succession of 12 two-dimensional pen-and-ink drawings?

And just think of what goes into the body and four legs of a lying-down dog when he suddenly stands up and turns 180° at the same time. Consider even the wagging of a tail, viewed in direct profile. Think of a Jack Russell's stubby tail wagging left and right while watching it from the height of another dog, in profile. Many animators will avoid that view altogether, or end up drawing the tail pumping in and out of the dog's rectum.

Sandra: The painting of their coats [is the most difficult]. I don't use flat colors. Each frame is a small painting by itself and Tulip was made of six colors, painted with texture and blended together. The coat patterns and spots had to be kept, frame to frame, consistent with her body actions.

Bark: Did you spend a lot of time studying your dogs, Gracie or Oscar, while working on Tulip?

Paul: Both, but mostly Gracie. Sandra found her on the side of Highway 95 in the Carolinas. She was emaciated and still very young: a Corgi/German Shepherd mix with a big dog's head on a small dog's body. She looked like a Photoshop dog.

Bark: You seem to be an old-school traditionalist in your animation style. Do you use any current technology?

Paul: It's all drawn within the computer. And Sandra paints that way, too. We do this through special software using the Wacom tablet. You draw on this tablet

equipped with thousands of tiny pressure points using an electronic stylus, which is shaped like a pen so that the drawing appears on the computer screen in front of your face instead of the surface of your tablet. So you're not looking at your drawing hand while drawing; you're looking at the screen where the drawing is appearing, unobstructed by your hand. It's called paperless 2-D animation, or computer-assisted drawing.

Bark: How long have you been using that?

Paul: Since the software came out in 1992 or '93. It makes drawing much faster. It speeds up my production by fourfold at least. It took us two-and-a-half years to make the film. For a fully animated 80-minute film, it's about the same that it takes the big studios to make their films with a staff of hundreds.

Bark: What are you working on now?

Paul: We're working on the story of Joshua Slocum. He lived at the end of the 19th century. He was a New Englander and he was the first man to circumnavigate the globe solo in a sailboat. No one had ever done that before.

Sandra: Now we're making six commercials for the Humane Society. It's all dogs and a few cats, too.

Bark: Has your own relationship with dogs changed as a result of making these last two films?

Paul: No, not really. I've lived with dogs my entire life and I'm at home with them. But I also like to sail. Sandra sails, too, and up until recently we had a sailboat. I always believed animators and writers should draw and write about the things they know well. So the next natural thing was to do a sailing story. It's just as difficult to animate large bodies of water as it is to draw bodies of dogs. **B**

My Dog Tulip is scheduled for theatrical release in fall 2010.

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