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## Old soul inside a good dog in "Racing in the Rain"

By Florangela Davila  
Special to The Seattle Times

"The Art of Racing in the Rain"

by Garth Stein

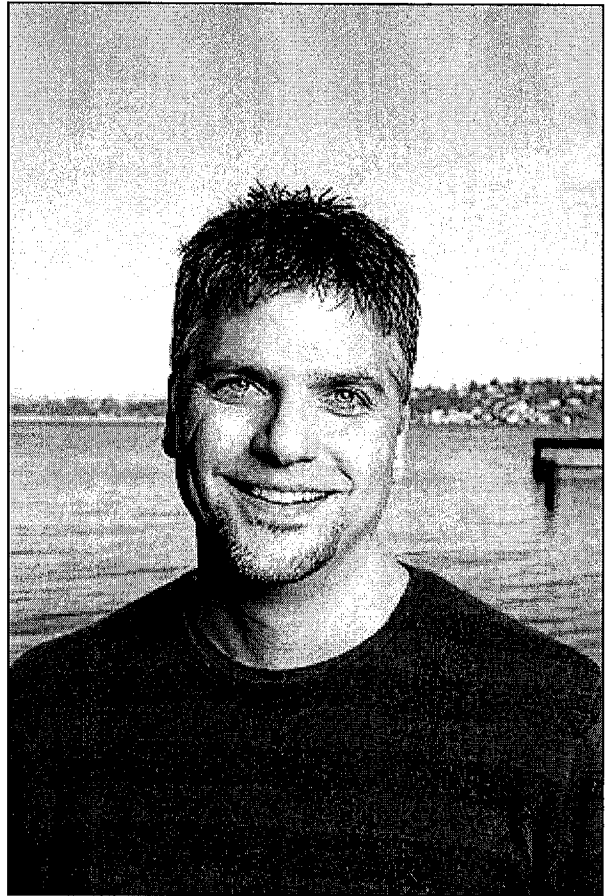
Harper, 321 pp., \$23.95

Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows one universal truth: Dogs are good people. Smart, compassionate, intuitive, seemingly knowing when it's best to wag tail or simply nudge nose. Oh yes, I'm anthropomorphizing here, and if you've got a problem with this Go! Out! Now!

The rest of you ought to curl up with "The Art of Racing in the Rain," the latest novel by Seattle author Garth Stein. Joyful in its language, creative in its narration and affecting in its story, this is a terrific book that speaks to our fundamental desire to commune and communicate with animals.

On the eve of his death, Enzo, a dog certain that he's part terrier (because terriers are problem-solvers), recounts his life's story, from a pup plucked by Denny Swift, aspiring race-car driver stuck selling auto parts, through Denny's marriage to Eve; the birth of their daughter, Zoe; Eve's battle with terminal brain cancer; a brutal custody fight with a pair of in-laws dubbed The Evil Twins; and finally the deterioration of his own body due to hip dysplasia and old age.

"I'm old. And while I'm very capable of getting older that's not the way I want to go out," Enzo says on page 2. "Shot full of pain medication and steroids to reduce the swelling of my joints. Vision fogged with cataracts. Puffy, plasticky packages of Doggie Depends stocked in the pantry. I'm sure Denny would get me one of those little wagons I've seen on the streets, the ones that cradle the hindquarters so a dog can drag his ass behind him when things start to fail. ... I'm not sure if it's worse than dressing up a dog for Halloween, but it's close."



FRANK HUSTER

### Author appearance Garth Stein

The author of "The Art of Racing in the Rain" will appear at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Starbucks' Madison

Park location, 4000 East Madison (206-329-3736; "Art" is the new Starbucks book selection). He will appear at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Barnes & Noble's University Village location in Seattle (206-517-4107).

Stein's Enzo is the perfect narrator, wickedly observant of the world around him, even if limited in his ability to interact with humans. Oh, how he yearns for a proper tongue and vocal chords so he can string a sentence together. And opposable thumbs!

But Enzo has gestures, plenty of them, and he finds a way to get his feelings across — anxiety, humiliation, jealousy, rage, concern, loyalty. Stein fleshes out the character Enzo so incredibly well, it's impossible not to regard this dog as anything but marvelous companion.

A good portion of Enzo's intellect comes from watching (responsibly) TV. One particular documentary speaks about a belief in Mongolia that dogs reincarnate into humans. Enzo adopts this as truth. It explains why he's already felt so human, and why he doesn't entirely fear death. And thus his life's journey is a struggle to hone his humanness, to make sense of the good, the bad and the unthinkable.

Stein, a husband, father of three, dog owner and former documentary filmmaker, consulted on the U.S. distribution of a Mongolian film, "State of Dogs" some 10 years ago, according to the book's publicity materials. And that's where the idea for "The Art of Racing in the Rain" first took root.

Stein also credits a 2004 Seattle Arts & Lectures reading by poet Billy Collins, in which he read the poem "The Revenant." A euthanized dog addresses his former master from heaven. Stein knew then he had his narrator.

The plot arrived in part from the travails of a close friend, a semiprofessional race-car driver. Enzo, steeped in race-car driving from countless watchings of race-car videos as well as driving-technique musings imparted by Denny, is a four-footed philosopher. The racetrack — even and bumpy, full of risk and reward — is life. "We are creators of our own destiny," Enzo says, absorbing the thinking of driver Ayrton Senna and his strategy for navigating a track in the rain. Thus, the novel's title (and Enzo's naming after car builder Enzo Ferrari).

Stein, who lives in Mount Baker, sets his story in Seattle and its environs. A tiny Craftsman house in the Central District where Enzo worries about the bees in a bush that could sting Zoe. Mercer Island with its Lake Washington views. The Bauhaus cafe on Capitol Hill. The fertile Cascades during a summer hike.

Other marvelous Enzo moments: The respect he learns to have for a pregnant Eve. "It must be amazing to have a body that can carry an entire creature inside. (I mean, other than a tapeworm, which I've had ... )"

Enzo wishing the baby would look like him.

"Sometimes I think you actually understand me," Denny says to Enzo, one especially significant evening in a relationship that will endure tragedy and yet also endure in happiness. "It's like there's a person inside there. Like you know everything."

I do, Enzo says.

Stein's book makes it so easy to believe.