

HEALTH

# If You're Worried About Vaccinating Your Dog, Please Reread 'Old Yeller'

Several puppies in a litter transported from Texas to Colorado had rabies, which has no cure and a massive fatality rate in humans.



By Dan Solomon

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Rabies is preventable if your pet is vaccinated.

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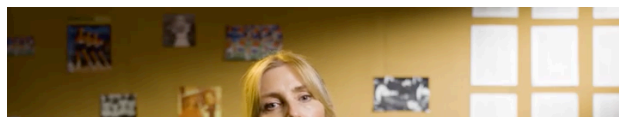
There is no sadder story than *Old Yeller*. That's true of both the 1956 novel,

written by Fred Gipson—a Hill Country native who was born in 1908 on a farm in an unincorporated part of the area about a hundred miles northwest of San Antonio—and of the Disney film adaptation released a year after the book, which has been a cultural touchstone for many baby boomers since their childhoods.

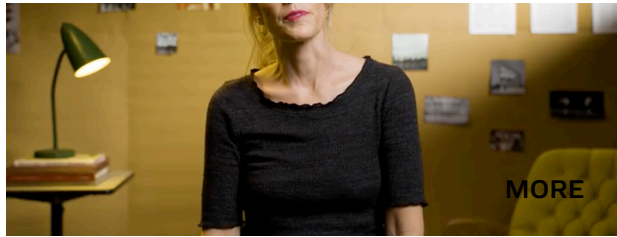
Today, only **24 percent** of dog owners are baby boomers; millennials, on the other hand, make up 33 percent, the largest share among any generation—and they probably didn't have *Old Yeller* on their fourth grade syllabus. This isn't just a shame for a piece of enduring fiction—as we've learned in a few ways in recent years, it apparently has real health implications for Americans and their pets.

Here's a brief overview of the story of *Old Yeller*, which, in either of its fuller forms, has brought generations of readers and viewers to tears: A pair of young brothers in the 1860s are left home with their mother while their father goes off to Kansas to sell some of the family's cattle. While working in the cornfield, the elder of the two brothers, Travis, finds a yellow hunting dog with a notable bark and with whom Arliss, the younger of the two, becomes enamored. As happens with boys and dogs, Travis and Old Yeller form a close relationship, with the dog proving both his courage and his loyalty by scaring off a bear. Travis comes to love Old Yeller's mischievous spirit—the black mouth cur is a noted food thief—and his dedication (he makes for a good cow dog). The dog's original owner, realizing that the boys love the lil' guy, agrees to let them keep Old Yeller after sharing a warning with Travis about the dangers of rabies. And, well, you might be able to guess how the story proceeds from there. The dog becomes infected while protecting the family from a rabid wolf, and Travis is forced to offer his beloved companion the only treatment, both then and now, for a dog with rabies: a quick and merciful death.

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If you think that sounds like a sad story, please trust that the film version is positively devastating. And if you're among the **40 percent of American dog owners** who are skeptical of the safety, efficacy, or necessity of vaccinating your pet against rabies and other diseases, you should watch it. Tonight. It's on Disney+.

The story's warning proved more urgent this month, as at least one in a litter of unvaccinated puppies transported from North Texas to a Denver-area dog rescue **was found to have rabies**. (The shelter did not respond to requests from *Texas Monthly* for more information about the dogs' origins.) Colorado public health officials then **began the heartbreaking process** of tracking the other dogs, which had already been adopted, to tell them that their new pets were likely to be rabid too. Rabies is transmitted through the saliva of an infected dog—in the form of bites, as in *Old Yeller*, but also in more innocuous licking and scratching that dogs are wont to do. Because of how easily rabies spreads, the entire litter was put down to ensure that their exposure didn't lead to a wider outbreak among humans and other animals.

This was necessary because rabies is a downright brutal disease. There are common symptoms and tests that can be done to help determine if an animal has the disease. But it's recommended that animals exposed to the disease be **quarantined for 120 days** and observed for symptoms; the only way to fully diagnose rabies is posthumously, by examining the brain.

Because of common vaccine practices, rabies is rare in dogs. (Most transmission of the disease in the U.S. is from bats.) But if the skepticism

professed by that 40 percent of dog owners translates to a refusal to vaccinate their pets—a legal requirement in Texas and 39 other states—that risk could increase, according to Gabriella Motta, a coauthor of the study on vaccine hesitancy among dog owners. “If non-vaccination were to become more common, our pets, vets, and even our friends and family risk coming into contact with vaccine-preventable diseases,” **Motta said in a press release from Boston University** announcing the study results. One notable reason cited by those pet owners was a fear of a dog’s developing autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder that presents with signs such as an aversion to sustained eye contact and delayed language skills, and which **there is no evidence exists in dogs**. (Some dog behavioral experts consider certain similar traits to be evidence of “canine dysfunctional behavior,” though there’s no official recognition of this condition; there’s also **no evidence that those behaviors have any relationship to vaccines**, which is **also true of autism in humans**.)

As tragic as rabies is in dogs, however, it’s even more devastating in humans. There is no treatment once symptoms present, though it’s easily preventable if treated upon exposure. The recommended course of action is to immediately begin a course of vaccinations if a person is suspected of rabies exposure; this has been found to be **100 percent effective** if given before symptoms begin. If given after the patient exhibits symptoms, however, the survival rate is abysmal; while the disease infects an estimated 59,000 people each year—the vast majority of them in Africa and Asia—the number of patients who’ve survived after an infection that’s resulted in symptoms is **fewer than twenty**. (That’s total, not 20 percent.) This overwhelming lethality, combined with the inability to confirm whether an animal has been infected while it’s still alive, is why even the possibility that a dog may be rabid creates the sort of emergency that led Colorado officials to put down the entire litter.

All of that’s very frightening, but it doesn’t need to be. Rabies is still entirely preventable, so long as pets are vaccinated. If you’re still not reassured that vaccines won’t cause your dog to develop autism, consider reading or watching *Old Yeller*. It’s a little traumatizing, but it beats living through the

real thing.

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