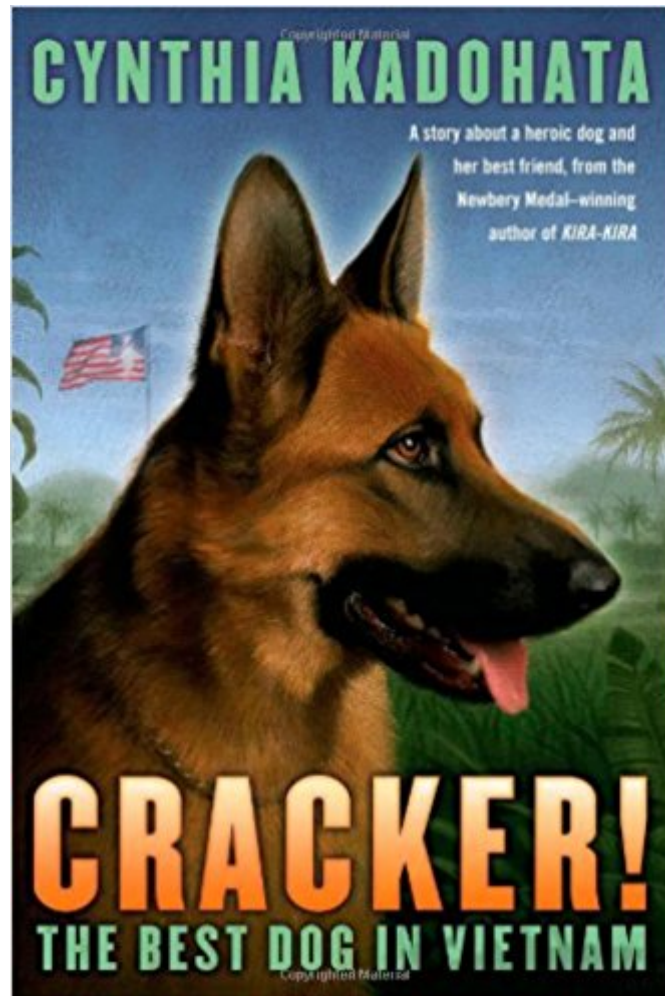




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Cracker!: The Best Dog In Vietnam



Synopsis

CRACKER IS ONE OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY'S MOST VALUABLE WEAPONS: a German shepherd trained to sniff out bombs, traps, and the enemy. The fate of entire platoons rests on her keen sense of smell. She's a Big Deal, and she likes it that way. Sometimes Cracker remembers when she was younger, and her previous owner would feed her hot dogs and let her sleep in his bed. That was nice, too. Rick Hanski is headed to Vietnam. There, he's going to whip the world and prove to his family and his sergeant -- and everyone else who didn't think he was cut out for war -- wrong. But sometimes Rick can't help but wonder that maybe everyone else is right. Maybe he should have just stayed at home and worked in his dad's hardware store. When Cracker is paired with Rick, she isn't so sure about this new owner. He's going to have to prove himself to her before she's going to prove herself to him. They need to be friends before they can be a team, and they have to be a team if they want to get home alive. Told in part through the uncanny point of view of a German shepherd, *Cracker!* is an action-packed glimpse into the Vietnam War as seen through the eyes of a dog and her handler. It's an utterly unique powerhouse of a book by the Newbery Medal-winning author of *Kira-Kira*.

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 0730 (What's this?)

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Atheneum Books for Young Readers; Reprint edition (October 7, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 141690638X

ISBN-13: 978-1416906384

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 169 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #42,546 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #49 in [Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > Military & Wars](#) #303 in [Books > Children's Books > Animals > Dogs](#) #962 in [Books > Children's Books > Growing Up & Facts of Life > Friendship, Social Skills & School Life > Friendship](#)

Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Grade Level: 5 - 9

Customer Reviews

Grade 5
Bred as a show dog, *Magnificent Dawn* of Venus von Braun was a German shepherd destined for greatness until a broken leg took her out of contention and into the arms of a boy named Willie. Reminded of the landlord's no-pet policy, the heartbroken boy answers a newspaper ad and Venus, now "Cracker," is accepted into a military canine unit to help soldiers sniff out booby traps in Vietnam. She and her handler, Rick Hanski, quickly bond and head to the front lines. Cracker and Rick's successful missions lead to more dangerous operations and they are ultimately separated during a siege. Critically wounded, Rick is sent home, not knowing what has become of Cracker, and it is a heart-wrenching wait for word on her whereabouts. Kadohata shifts point of view from Willie to Cracker and Rick. While the dog's thoughts and feelings supply the crucial visceral elements associated with her job and her relationship to Willie and Rick, she competes with Rick for top billing as main character. Willie is the story's casualty, as he realizes that Cracker now belongs to Rick. Divided reader empathy aside, the story is filled with action and accurately re-creates the experience of the military canine program, from aspects of training to the battlefield. It's likely to spark readers' interest in this little-known area of military history.

Vicki Reutter, Cazenovia High School, NY Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review The author of *Kira-Kira* (2004) and *Weedflower* (2006) tells a stirring, realistic story of America's war in Vietnam, using the alternating viewpoints of an army dog named Cracker and her 17-year-old handler, Rick Hanski, who enlists to "whip the world" and avoid a routine job. From their training at a base in the U.S, complete with mean sergeant and close buddies, to their stalking the enemy, the heartfelt tale explores the close bond of the scout-dog team, relating how it detects booby traps and mines, finds the enemy, rescues POWs, and returns home to a heroes' welcome. Throughout the struggle, the dog and the teenager care for one another. There's no background on the conflict ("he didn't and couldn't understand what he was doing here in Vietnam"). Rather, the focus is on how Cracker uses her senses to help the team accomplish its goals, and on her physical bond with Rick, who understands Cracker's every movement. Add this to books in the "Core List: The Vietnam War in Youth Fiction" (2006). Also give it to readers who liked Gary Paulsen's *Woodsong* (1990). Hazel Rochman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Some books the reader opens and drags through a few pages, still uninspired. "Grrr! For I am the

all-powerful Cracker!" First sentence in "Cracker: The Best Dog in Vietnam" hooks older children. This German Shepherd is flipping a dead bird in the air, abandons it when she sees a live mouse! Then Willie calls her and she bounds home. It's an enticing beginning for children, 9-12, but also suitable to draw in adults who work with children and want to find good books for them or adults who have children and want to know what quality of books they are reading. This "Cracker" is a good one: It was nominated for the Louisiana Young Readers Choice in 2010 for Best Book in the grades 6-8 category, although I find it suitable for mature 4th and 5th grade readers. It's a simple story to start: Boy wants Dog, Boy finds Dog, Boy must give up Dog. Now what happens to dog placed in the local pound? It's Vietnam time and the army needs military dogs to sniff out hidden landmines, bombs, and Viet Cong. Some dogs are one-man (or -boy) dogs and resist any new owner. However, the young recruit just out of high school is special, though he is told he is not special by his counselor. His brilliant older sister is "a specialist"--Rick is described as a "generalist." It's a label he fights throughout his duty tour in Nam. He does become Cracker's "owner" by winning her respect. They become as one by the time they are sent to Vietnam, along with the other units in his squad. Rick wants Cracker to be "the best dog in Vietnam." You know in books like this that, if she doesn't become the best dog, then she will one of the best. I'll not spoil it for you. So, that's a short summary of the story, but it's not the story that sold me on this novel. It is the brilliant talent of the author, Cynthia Kadohata, for her uncanny ability to get into that dog's head and convince the reader that she is truly giving Cracker's thoughts and emotions. The one scene in which Cracker is separated from the unit and is lost in the jungle and seemingly cannot find her way back had me sobbing with her dismay and panic and desperation. Not only does Kadohata provide insight into the dog but into Rick and the entire concept of training a dog to become one with the handler and then that team with the other soldiers in the unit. I was so amazed at this incredible sense of being right there in the story with men and dogs. It's this kind of rare story telling that must be put into the hands of children to keep them reading. As a librarian for children ages 3-13, I can tell you that reading desire begins to taper about age 11 and practically dies by grade 7. Only a handful of seventh and eighth graders are still interested in reading. Yes, I know, children that age become part of hives and swarm as one unit and exclude all else from their habitation. Actually, this book is better directed at grades 4 and 5 and maybe 6 instead of 6-8. I think it was placed in 6-8 because of war content. There is a bit of bloody battle carnage, but it's not a Scorsese type of carnage, more Spielberg--mild and tolerable for children. Frankly, I felt joy in reading this book because of the man/dog relationship and the wonderful sensitivity the writer shows in revealing Cracker's feelings. The thought that continued to run in my mind was how Kadohata was able to make Cracker's

feelings so authentic? I didn't find a single thing that Cracker did untrue to the nature of a dog, or, in fact, any details about Vietnam. This is how she did it: hours and hours of interviews, both in person, by email, by telephone, with Vietnam veterans, with dog handlers, both military and civilian, and especially with the handler on whom she based this story. I was duly impressed! In addition to providing authenticity, her research also revealed this history of military dogs. In wars through Vietnam, dogs were thought of as equipment and just left in that country or given to the native population. Today they are commissioned out of service just like their handlers! Now, which book won in 2010 for Grades 6-8 in the LYRC? Wouldn't you just know that "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" did!? And that book is read by the younger children, not so much by that middle school crowd. Go figure.

Dog lovers will revel in this gripping book of a Military War Dog and it's handler. I laughed and cried, both, a multitude of times, while hanging on the edge of my seat the whole time I read the story of Cracker.

When picking out a book for my English project in school I wanted something to read that I could really relate to and being a person who appreciates dogs and the military, I picked this book. Originally I thought that it would be cheesy like most war fiction seems to be, but I soon realized that this was an inspiring and heartwarming book. The plot of the book is about Cracker, a German Shepherd, who was taken away from his home, where he was the pet of a young boy named Willie who loved him very much, to go fight in the Vietnam war with his new handler Rick Hanski. The book is written in the perspective of both Rick and Cracker. The book follows the two from basic training and the battles in which Cracker saves the platoon numerous times to when they get separated during a battle. Cracker gets lost in the wild of Vietnam but he refuses to give up looking for Rick and Rick refuses to give up on Cracker. This is what I believe the theme of the book is about. Never giving up no matter what the consequences. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is into dogs, military, or someone who is just looking for a great, heartwarming book. I am very glad that I picked out this book for my project and it has changed my perception of dogs in warfare. Just like the soldiers, they too are true heroes and it has inspired me to want to adopt an ex military, retired military working dog. Tommy

Amazing Story! A must read for any dog lover! It does a great job of showing the bond between a man and a dog.

Although the outer paper cover is missing, the quality is perfect, like new....very happy

If you love dogs, and especially if you love German Shepherds, then this book is for you! It is a very moving book written from the dog's point of view. Yeah I know this sound hoaky, but it really is good. Being a dog lover and especially a German Shepherd lover/owner, I can tell you, the way the author describes what "Cracker" the German Shepherd is thinking/feeling really seems plausible. The fact is over 11,000 specially trained dogs went to Vietnam to aid our service men during the war, all but 200 of them were left behind, some in their kennels, some tied to trees, post or whatever, and either starved to death or were tortured and killed by the North Vietnamese, who hated these dogs for their role in aiding our men over there. The dog's handlers' pleaded with the Pentagon to allow them to bring the dogs home, but they wouldn't do it... they were expendable and treated like so much discarded equipment. To this day, if you talk to some of the handlers of those dogs, they will break down in tears about the thought of leaving their partner behind. Thousands of military personnel owe their lives to these wonderful, brave and loving dogs, and their reward for this was for all but a handful, starvation, torture and death! It breaks my heart to think about this, and it makes me furious to know that we did this. I love our military, but whoever make the decision to leave those dogs behind, should have been shot! Sorry, back to the book, if you love dogs, get this book, I think you will truly enjoy it.

I am 11 and I thought this book was very good. The plot was interesting and different. In most books the dog dies, but in this book it lived. Although it is a work of fiction it was very informative of the happenings in Vietnam. I learned a lot of history from this book. It was also interesting how the author wrote from the dog's point of view. All in all, this was great book and thats why I'd rate it a 5.

This book is on my 6th grade son's Battle Of The Books reading list. We both liked the book. It is well written and captivating. The author did a fine job of providing historical insight into the nature of the Vietnam War and the impact of the war on our nation and those who fought in the war.

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