

Canine Companions

Chair: Julia Wheeler (JW)

Speakers: Jackie Colliss Harvey (JCH), Amit Patel (AP)

JW: Hello and welcome to the Cheltenham Science Festival at home with the support of EDF energy, as many regular festival goers will know this is part of a charity organization, which supports and inspires schools and communities all year round, it's supporting researchers, scientists, doctors, and future engineers. So if you are able to donate and support and would like to find out more about that side of the Cheltenham festivals work, please do go to the web page. And there's more information there. My name is Julia Wheeler and today we are talking canine companions. I'm absolutely delighted to welcome to the events the cultural detective Jackie Hollis Harvey, whose book is the Animal's Companion, and Amit Patel who is a disability activist among many other things, Amit and your book is Kika and Me. So first of all, welcome, and thank you so much for being here and for being part of this wonderful festival that's taking place at the same time as the physical festival would have done. Jackie, let me begin by, well actually I should begin really by knowing what pets you have in the house.

JCH: At the moment, my companions are my two cats, Bird and Daisy. But I should say that I'm very gender neutral where animals are concerned as long as it's got fur or feathers, four legs, beak, wings, then you know, I'm going to try and make a friend of it. And I spent my formative years growing up with a wolf hound. So dogs have been a major thing in my my animal history, as well as cats.

JW: Amit too, I'm guessing that keeper is not too far away.

AP: Kika is literally on my feet right now. Fast asleep, completely fast asleep. But yeah, never far away from me at all.

JW: That's interesting that you say she's on your feet because in your book you talk about her being on your feet when there's danger.

AP: Yes. It's I think for her, it's also a calming thing because it's her way of kind of just saying I'm here. It's literally just telling me she's here and she's always around me anyway. But when she disappears, she will nudge me and then walk away. And then when she gets into a bed to make this really loud noise, just to say that she's in her bed now, but it's her, it's Kika. It's quite funny actually.

JW: Jackie grew up with a wolf hound. Did you grow up with pets in your house?

AP: No, I the closest thing I had to a pet was I had the school hamster over the holiday period.

JW: Did you survive?

AP: No. It didn't survive. I was cleaning out the cage and I put the cage on top of the hamster. So it was a quick run to the vets with my dad, a huge cost later I was told it wasn't going to survive. So we kind of replaced it with something very similar, but it didn't work.

JW: It didn't Goodness me. Yes, I can imagine that that was quite harrowing in the early days. And Jackie, I've been talking about pets, but your book very pointedly is called the animals companion tell. Talk a little bit about the language around animals.

JCH: I chose that title because my book is very much a history of the pet owner, as opposed to the pet. It looks at our responses and relationship with animals and the part that they have played in our lives through history. And when I began researching this subject, I thought I was because there's a

sort of received wisdom that the relationship that we have with our companion animals now is something new and modern and has only come about in the last hundred years or so. Then there's this, this this idea that there's a continuing depth and engagement and understanding of animals that has grown a society has grown. And when I began to look at the experience of historical pet owners and the records that they had left of their interactions and their relationship with their animals, I very soon discovered that that was complete nonsense that this has been an absolute constant all the way through human history. There have been animals that we have selected, or most owners would say they've kind of selected us this is very much a two way thing. And they've been a part of our lives and they've been a vitally important part of our lives as well. And particularly in periods of social or individual stress, I would say such as we're all undergoing at the moment.

JW: So what would those have been historically?

JCH: very similar to the ones that we we have now. There's a the longest the animal that has the longest history with us is the dog and very likely they were the first to be domesticated. And it's argued that initially, they were just attracted to our communities when we began to live in communities, they obviously could sort of smell our trash, they could smell our food. But I think dogs have always been smart enough to be interested in us as a sort of an alternative version of them, as it were, you know, we lived in packs, we obviously had social hierarchies. And it seems to have been a fairly simple thing for their communities to meld in with ours. And of course, there were enormous advantages on both sides. So it was the sort of relationship that sustained itself. Cats came along later. Again, there were advantages on both sides. They have places to sleep and the steady supply of mice from early graneries. Horses probably came along last of all, but that's only what one can glean from the archaeological record there's sort of the emotional record if you like suggests that whenever anything small and cute was encountered by any one of us or by any one of our children in the early communities it was immediately picked up and just taken home

JW: there was actually, as you were talking, one of your cats, I don't know whether it was your bird over your right shoulder

JCH: Yes, they have they have a little ladder to a shelf above the heater but yes.

JW: So I can I see you smiling there as you were listening to Jackie's description. Kika, how would you describe her; a companion, pet, ally, what's what's the best description for her?

AP: All of that plus family member? I think it's with Kika obviously being a guide dog. She's with me all the time. So she's with me the moment I step out the house, all day long even when I come home, she wants to be in the same room as me. Right at the beginning, even when I went into the bathroom, she would sit outside, to the point where I'd have to leave the door open. And she was she was just there all the time. But it's funny how my parents and my wife's parents call Kika the first grandchild. Because they all thought that we would never have kids once I lost my sight because we fell into that, that mindset of 'I barely look after myself, how will we ever get to the kids?' So when Kika came into our lives, I think they were just as surprised that there was there was someone else in our family and she is doted on just like a first grandchild. But with Kiki i think it's it's my companion is my best friend. It's a person I talk to every single day and I think my wife loves her because I I tell her all my worries, Kika doesn't talk back which is fantastic. I get the old kind of shove here and there to tell me to be quiet. But yes, it's so much more. And I don't think I can quite quite describe the feeling that I have when I'm with Kiki. It's it's the fact that Yes, she's my best friend and she's a dog but she looks after me, she brings me home every single day. And it's not just me. She looks off she looks after my kids. She looks after my wife she is she senses Something is wrong before we actually know

it's wrong. You know, it's that it's just her. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't bark. She doesn't make any noise but she's there and I think that's what it is for us. It's a protection she gives us

JW: we'll come back to how you and she built that bond perhaps when we talked about training and being matched with you and but she didn't take to your wife Sema at the beginning, did she?

AP: Not at all she absolutely hated Sima. So can move on. Kiki had a couple of volunteers when she was growing up. And even when she went into kennels for her training, she was the only dog stood in the corner watching all the other dogs. She didn't really interact with them. It was either Kika's way or no way. So when Kika came into that, when I started my training with Kiki, and when she came to the house for the first time, try to stay, Sima actually had to go off to work. She was working in the states for a while. So she's back and forth. So Kika saw Sima come and go for a week at a time and I think she kind of thought, well, there's no point getting used to Sima, she's never here. So the moment he walked into the door into the house Kika would kind of walk into a different room, or she'll move out the way and she seemed more sat next to me. And it got to a point where it makes him really upset and Sima would have a little bit of a cry and say, oh, Kika doesn't love me. How are we going to do this? But things obviously changed and they change very, very quickly.

JW: Yeah, she's so much part of a family that really comes through in the book is what is wonderful. And as you were talking there, you were attributing emotions and thoughts and so on to Kika as we would to another human being or a child. Jackie, how important do you think that anthropomorphism is in our relations? And actually, how accurate is it?

JCH: Oh, well, that that two very, very big and very different questions. I think it's an enormous driver in our relationship with animals. I think we seek out relationships with them for exactly the same reasons we seek out relationships with each other. And we are the social animal. We need those relationships. This is why lockdown is so tough on us, and why thank goodness we have the kind of tech that enables us to be having this conversation today to keep us all going. And we read animals in the same way as we read other people which can be a bit of a mistake, but at the same time the more I have studied my two cats now the more I thought about animals that I knew in the past, the more I have tried to get to know animals belonging to friends and family members, the more I began to think was, in fact, the sort of the basic emotional reactions are something that is in common between, you know, kind of all species really and when we all know when we're happy and secure, and we all have body language and sounds that expresses that, we all know when we're scared or upset or angry. There is all of this language, this physical communication, which is something that animals are extraordinarily good at, letting us know what their feelings are. I mean Kika at the moment lying across your feet Amit, first of all, you know, nothing feels better than a dog asleep across your feet. It's just wonderful. But it's absolute trust. It's complete contentment. It's okay and the entirety of the world is just where I want it to be. And I'm with the person who I wish to be with. And you know the same goes for human relationships as well. When we're relaxed and comfortable with the people that we trust. It's just unmistakable. Every app, every fiber of our being gives off this message.

JW: Amit let me talk to you a little bit about the amount of trust that you have to put in Kika and how that was built up. Because you say in the book that it was quite a difficult thing to put your life in her paws, as it were.

AP: Yeah, absolutely. It's, it was hard enough, leaving the house with a white cane, but with a white cane, wherever I pointed it wherever I touched, it was all down to me. I could start, I could take a

break. You know, I would say sorry, excuse me to maybe 50 lampposts a day and boxes because for me, I couldn't distinguish wherever as a person's feet as tapping or what it was, so for me having white cane meant I was in control. Even the whole process of going down the whole guide dog route I, we did our research. But when we went we kind of we got assessed to see you know whether I would be right for a guide dog and I don't be right for me at the end of the assessment, I was told Amit you'd be perfect for a guide dog. And there's a couple of years before we can match you to the right dog. So in my head, I kind of had that two years to kind of get used to the idea of having a dog take me out and about, but obviously Kika came in six weeks. And that was one of the fastest matches Guide Dogs I've ever done for a new new partnership. So I didn't have time in my head to get me to that stage where I can trust the dog. So when we started our training together and we were in a hotel for 10 days, the first two days, I was very reluctant to kind of let go and let Kika lead. I would push her back, hold her back. I wouldn't move. And I was told I mean you need to you need to get full trust to keep your keep your won't work. I just could not do that because I thought she might walk me down some stairs, or I don't quite know. I've only known this dog for two days. And you know, how can I trust this dog to take me out and about, and it all changed, it all changed in the third morning, woke up very early in the morning, I've got my hands against the wall, trying to find the bathroom door in the hotel room, and I get to the room. I get to the door and I find Kika is standing across the door. So I thought maybe, you know, I can just move around away good 15-20 minutes, I'm asking Kika to move out of the way, not having any of it. She's an 18 month old puppy. And she's tiny and I could physically move her out the way but I wasn't that confident to do so. And I thought I was giving her the wrong command. So I called up the instructor who was also in the hotel. And I said Am I saying something wrong? Kika is refusing to move? Am I doing something wrong? And she said 'Amit, You're just you're bigger than her, pick her up, move out the way' and I couldn't do that I could put I couldn't do that just in case I wasn't sure what her reaction would be. So I've kind of still 'Kika Come on Kika Kika'. Eventually I kind of dragged her out the way, I opened the bathroom door to find the pipe, but it burst overnight and the bathroom was flooded. And there was no handrails in the bathroom. So I would have normally just open the door and walk straight in. And that's when I thought, you know, I've only known this girl for two days, yet she's looking out for me, how silly Am I not to trust her? And that's when it will changed. From that morning. I kind of just let go and let Kika do what she does. And she's never disappointed. And if anything, she's got better and better and our trust is still building. There's there's still some times where she would stop and I think why she stopped What is she doing? But there's always a purpose why she's done something. And for me, it's a hope I've ever ever I'm a control freak, I need to know what's going on. So to let Kika do all of that navigating, you know it is very difficult at times. But now it's a lot easier now. I don't even think about it. I let her do what she does. And she does it amazingly well.

JCH: I love the story in your book Amit about when you and Kika were out on a walk and you found yourself in front of this pavement that was up for repair and obviously you couldn't see it and Kika could.

AP: you know, that was one of the first walks we did solo. And I I kind of knew where we were going. It just happened to be a really windy day. And there was a lot of roadworks going on and a couple of bollards had fallen in front of us couple of bollards had falled behind us so Kika just sat down. But she sat at my feet. Just to say, I'm not moving. I'm not going anywhere. And the funny thing is, when you're when you're working with a white cane, you're I'm walking on my pace. I kind of know where I'm going. I know I've just turned that little corner. So in my head, I've kind of got an idea of where I am, but with Kika I wasn't quite sure. And there was no passers by, and it was a busy road. And the only thing I could do is call the police. And, and it was literally, I think I'm about here. I'm visually impaired. I've got a guide dog and she refuses to move, but the lady on the phone on the operating

center, she was a dog lover. She stayed on the phone with me she, we had a normal conversation until the police came along. And they will want you to describe the scene around me and the fact that there was no safe place for Kika to go. And that's why she sat on my feet, but it happened that my wife was away. So I was in the police car. I kind of called her up and I said, Oh, you know, you went away just yesterday, but we're in the back of a Police car at the moment on the way home.

JW: it's really interesting Amit in your book, you talk about actually how your other senses have become stronger. And that is something that, you know, we've heard before, but that they become stronger to such an extent that you can tell a Burger King from a McDonald's. And that's useful in describing where you all if you get lost,

AP: you know, I think that, I don't think I've got stronger. I think I've got to understand them more, because you can rely on it. One time I was I was making my way through the RNIB, and I asked a member of staff in the stations Take me out to a certain exit because I was meeting someone. And they took me to a different exit out of Kings Cross Station. So obviously, it was nobody there to meet me. So I had to call my wife and say, I think I'm in the wrong exit, but I could smell a Burger King rather than McDonald's, which is where I needed to be. And I suppose it's not like McDonald's. It smells like Burger King, so she exactly knew where I was, which is hilarious. But it's small things like this. It's crazy how much you have to think about where you are what you're doing, and you have to be maybe 15 paces ahead of where actually am I because I'm letting Kika guide me but it doesn't mean I switch off. I'm listening out for dangerous. It's people, people, I think, believe that when we get to a traffic light, it's Kika who tells me when it's safe to cross it isn't. It's the guide or very near who gives the command forwards to the dog. And this is what you know, we're listening out to dangers where we're looking for tactiles. So we're still concentrating. So it's funny that you you're constantly always thinking about things. But the problem with that is, you're tired at the end of the day. You are running on so much energy all day long. that by the time you get home, you're just exhausted. It doesn't help having two kids at home. You know, so, I think forget about sleep. I'm constantly tired, but it seems to work.

JW: Jackie, let's talk about the breeding of animals. In terms of historical documents and evidence that we have. And when did that start? And what were we looking for, particularly in dogs?

JCH: I think it started very early, very early. And we know that there's some archaeological evidence that dogs were being bred for smaller size. Equally, now, you can imagine that dogs are being bred for a larger size as well. And it's something which doesn't have to be undertaken scientifically in order to happen. If you have an animal that you're particularly fond of, and they have a brood of puppies, then you're probably going to keep the one that looks the most like the original dog and pass the others on to your friends. And because we have this sense of companionship and engagement with them. I'm sure there was a certain amount of, you know, sort of matching animal to person going on right from you know, sort of the very very earliest days. We know certainly by the Middle Ages that the business of breeding dogs for specific kinds of hunting was in full swing You know, there were there were what they call sight towns who fairly obviously could see the prey from a long way away and react to it though were nose hounds for tracking quarry through thick bush and undergrowth. There were little ladies dogs, which were rather sweetly were treated as if they were sort of Mother Nature's hot water bottle they were particularly recommended for menstrual cramps, and rather less attractively they were supposed to bear away your fleas. If you had fleas as a human being they would go for the dog. Dogs are sort of living flea furs, but they were very, very clearly these these distinct breeds from a very, very early stage, who were assigned these distinct roles within human society, there is a record of what sounds like a sort of a proto Maltese terrier, a little white dog, and an intelligent little white dog as well. From a poem by Marshall I think it is if my

memory serves from classical Rome. There are also accounts of specific dogs being sought out by fashionable ladies and by fashionable gentlemen. We used with great determination and it wasn't only dogs either. There's a wonderful series of letters from Isabella desk de Vere, renaissance patron trying to track down one called a Syrian kitten, which seems likely that it was what we would know today as a common or garden Tabby, but these were items of great exoticness and luxury in Isabella's time

JW: Amit you described Kika as sometimes more bloodhound than Labrador at tide, she, she has a great sense of smell. And I think lots of us thing called Guide Dogs only being Labradors, but actually, there are different breeds aren't there.

AP: Absolutely. There's, so majority of them are Labradors love. You've got labradoodles for people who have allergies to dogs, you have obsessions you have there's quite a lot of breeding that goes on to kind of get that right dog, but it also depends on what you get, depending on where you live in. So you know, I can't have something that is very ferocious looking. You know, when I'm working in the city, I need a Labrador, just so the kind of calmness is actually a bonus in the city you know when working. But this is quite a few breeds and every time we're kind of out and about so we should have a guide dog and my wife's always describing different breeds out there. And obviously you need different sizes and dogs because you've got different sizes and guide dog owners. So you kind of need to match that right off to the right person.

JW: So tell us about that because Kika you got much more quickly than you were expecting. She was actually quite a difficult dog to place wasn't she?

AP: Kika was one of the naughtiest, kinda headstrong kind of puppies out there. She did what she wanted to do, not what she was told to do. But she did pick up things very, very quickly but it was all on keepers terms. And Kiki was moved on from one family to a second family because there were some circumstances where they cannot keep up so they moved her on, the lady who took Kika on second time around was a dog trainer. But she introduced her to her daily routines, took her to school when she was doing school runs. She was there for family picnics, holidays. So Kiki actually got to experience all of that. But it is when she went into kennels, that's when difficulty I think started. So she was very much on her own. She didn't want to interact with any other adults. She's still very much like that. She's kind of she's absolutely fine on her own. She doesn't really need to have adults around her. But it was when the the training harness came out Kika would drop to the floor. And that was very unusual, but they thought you know, it may be in a couple of days she will get the harness back on, for three weeks she dropped to the floor. She refused to put the harness on for three weeks. And I think if she was in the system now they'll probably turn around say, Well, she's just too much hard work. We will retire her before she even becomes a guide dog. But the trainer's actually saw that she has the potential in her. So what they have to do is take it to the park. Let her actually get over energy out of their system and then she'll easily get into the harness and she would work all day long doing her practices. So I think she kind of felt that if she had her run she would then give you all of her time. But the lovely thing is Kika is still it still, we still see Kika's trainers. And every time we see Kika's trainers, she turns into a little puppy, a big smile on her face. It's so warming to kind of hear the way Kika kind of interacts with the trainer's because she spent so much time with them. And when I got a phone call to say we think we found you a dog. But it was funny but she may not like you is what they told me. So but you know, for me, I thought we were definitely gonna fall in love with whatever dog they send, but we've got you know, we've got 50 50 whether she would like us or not. The moment she walked into the flat she walked into every single room had a look at every single cuboard wardrobe. She kind of opened up with her nose went into the living room where the sun shining on the rock and firstly and that was it. For 20 minutes, she just

fell asleep. But I was told that she's not making for the door. So that's a good sign. And that's where it all started, but I think it was, she has that. I like you. I don't like you temperaments. Even when we have guests around the house, some people really want to kind of interact with Kika and she'll just walk up and walk upstairs. She's like, Nope, not having any of this. Or if she really doesn't like you, she'll turn her back and just kind of face away from you. And we know what me and my wife know what that means. But everybody else thinks it's very cute, but it means please get out my house. I don't like you. She has she has her own kind of personality and we love that we love that, Kika isn't just a dog she is like a kid. She has a naughty step when she's naughty. When she's when she's sniffing too much we're out and about. She will go and say I'm a multi step. But the problem with the naughty step is my son will go and join her. So now it's more of a conversational step. And then we find me my wife about on that step as well and we're just having a discussion on conversation where we're having storytime and this area so it became a naughty step to now like this little one step in our house where everybody just congregates just gets together and we just have fun. It's and this is all Kiki.

JW: Jackie's it feeds into our ego, doesn't it it pets, companions, animals like us, but it's devastating if they don't.

JCH: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. There's nothing worse than being rejected by an animal. Yeah. Yeah, there are a number of the the memoirs that I was using for my book would talk in heartbroken terms about it. One little girl whose she was given a little black kitten and the little black kitten bonded with her sister and not with her. And she still remembered this 30 years afterwards. 30 years of living and looking after animals afterwards, there was this one little animal that wasn't having any of it. I was just going to say you do sometimes wonder about animals as judges of character. I can quite imagine that you're Kika who, I don't know whether there's a sort of a skill swap going on between you and Kiko whether she's becoming more human and you are becoming more dog with your ability to distinguish between Burger King and McDonald's, for example. But yeah there is something that I think pet owners say very often as soon as, you know, he or she likes you, but he or she doesn't like you, as you know, it's the ultimate rejection. It's been used in that way. It's become a sort of mean in art and literature. If you note the at the end of Oliver Twist, where Bill Sykes has killed Nancy, his the final rejection of all kind of emotional contact with anyone or anything in the rest of the world is when his Bulldog turns its back on him and runs away after the murder, it's a very, very powerful moment.

JW: Bullseye gets it right.

JCH: Yeah. bull's eye gets it. Right. Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

JW: Let's talk a little bit about our image when we have an animal and what other people think about that in terms of trust, Jackie. I mean, there's evidence to suggest that people are perceived to be more trustworthy, if they have a pet, are walking a dog, etc. particularly women see that in men, I believe.

JCH: Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yes. Yes. I haven't really realized this. But apparently, dog walking is a wonderful opportunity to strike up relationships of all sorts with new people. And yes, you know, it makes sense. If an animal has given you their trust, then we assume that means that you're obviously you're a good person and if one animal lover meets another animal lover, then they're obviously going to have a great deal in common with each other. And we do accept an animal's judgment on someone when we might be a little bit more hesitant about coming to that judgment ourselves, I think.

JW: And you have experienced that as you met your partner through pets, tell us about that.

JCH: I do in a way. Yes, I do. Yes. What my partner and I met, we were both working in museum publishing. And we met at this great big trade fair for publishers in Frankfurt. And we were having this conversation and we were obviously getting on very, very well. And he mentioned that he had this cat called Milly. And not only did I think well, if he's has a cat, then he's obviously a good fella. And I'm, you know, my instincts are correct and in liking him as much as I do. But I took it a step further, because when I was he lives in New York. I'm in London. And when I was back in London, I sent him this very peremptory request that he should put his cat on CatBook and make her my friend as a means of letting him know that I was interested in continuing the conversation that had started at the book fair. And he initially he refused to do it, but Milly did become a very, very important part of our relationship together. One of the first things that happened after he and I had become an item was that he had to go into hospital for open heart surgery. So I rocked up in New York. Milly had never met me before Mark went into a hospital. It was a long and complicated operation, and I was in the hospital all day, and then arrived back at his apartment in Brooklyn with this cat to whom I had barely been introduced. And she had certainly not been at all friendly to me beforehand. I think there was definitely you know, there's a certain amount of jealousy and rivalry going on there. But when I arrived, I, you know, I figure it was my body language and the fact that I was utterly exhausted and obviously, she had a weird day left on her own all day as well. And we somehow bonded over the fact that this very significant person in both of our lives was not there. And she came on to the bed and she slept with me just as she would normally have slept with Mark. And after that she was as much my cat as she was his.

JW: lovely. That's a lovely story. Amit reading your book, there are some heartbreaking moments in it, and there's a lot of hope in it. And one of the things I found really disturbing was how badly people sometimes treat you both before you have Kika and even since, do you think people's attitudes generally are different when they see you up with Kika.

AP: I think so I pre Kika with a white cane is difficult enough, navigating London is difficult enough and you kind of hope that if someone sees a visually impaired person walking down the road that they'll move out the way or if there's any danger they'll say you know, there's there's something in your way. You don't expect people to barge you, you don't expect people to turn you around and say, Now find your way or take your cane out of your hand and foot onto a train tracks. You don't expect any of that you don't expect people to shout at you, especially after you tell them you're blind. You know, it's that whole, if a white cane doesn't give it away, I don't know what does. And I think that was the difficult part. I think it was the fact that being an A and E doctor I saw, I saw the bad parts of London all the time. But then I saw the amazing, you know, the amazing part where people come together. When there's a time of the need, I see families supporting each other and I just thought that being out and about trying to get my independence back being a visually impaired person, with absolutely no sight whatsoever was difficult enough. But you add in the mix of people being horrible, nasty, and these people probably aren't horrible and nasty, you know, you've probably got on a bad day, but I'm having a bad day every day. You know, it's small knocks like that take on so much of my confidence you know, it takes that confidence away, it will take me days and days just to build that, that kind of positive influence that I need to to actually step out of my house. And then something bad happens. And I don't want to step out of my house again, I don't want I don't want the world to treat me the way it does. You know, and you kind of think, well, it doesn't have to be this hard. Does it really have to be this hard? Because you know, you've got people saying, well, you can get on with life. You just have to get on with it. You go with it. those comments, you know, it takes something inside of me and it just rips me apart. And I think people just don't

understand that. You know, your words have consequences. And that's what people don't understand. When people tell me Well, if I lose my sight tomorrow, I could still get on with my life. I hear people saying, I do the same commute every day. I've done it for 10 years and if I lost my sight, well, it wouldn't bother me. Why are you shouting about it? That's fine. You know, you might, you might be able to do it. But you know, you might use the same exit every single day. But what happens when those exit doors a shut? And you have to then find another way out? What are you going to do? You're going to ask for help, or you're going to just crawl on the floor and try and find your way out. You know, it's funny how people just automatically assume things like that. Or the fact that because I'm blind, they also think I can't hear and being on a train sat on a train and having people talk about me, that's the worst. And then noise level in the train drops because everybody else is now listening to this conversation. And they know they're talking about me. And you know, you get some people say, Well, you know, I just want to stop right there. You know, that's really rude of you. And then they all goes quiet, but then you get other people just keep listening and keep listening. When it comes to how he gets changed in the morning or I want to you know, he lives on so much benefits he must have a really nice house you know, and all of this stuff and that's what really annoys me.

JW: does having Kika make you braver in tackling that or actually have you learn to fight battles that you can fight?

AP: I don't think it's made me brave I think I've learned now that I don't take everything so personally before it used to it used to be a dagger to me it used to feel like you know, it's like negative I've worked so hard to get to where I am and you know, someone just automatically assumes that everything is given to me and I haven't had to work for anything. And it you know, I can step out the house like they can grow and thinking about it. Kika kind of gives me that that comfort bubble around me. I think with Kika I'm more focused on her than I am what someone else is saying. And I think it's a distraction. But you know, it doesn't stop me from coming home, I can come home and my wife will say, someone said something to you, didn't they? Because on the way home from the station to the house, I'm replaying that moment I had in the morning. And it makes me mad because I want to say something, but I don't want to be that angry disabled person because it ruins my day all day long, because I've had to speak up. Um, but it does, you know, I come home and I think a couple of times a month, I'll have a little cry. Because someone said something so personal without even knowing me. It really does and you kind of think, well, it's just how people see me. You know, I work so hard to get out and talk about the issues disabled people have, you know, if it's campaigning, it's talking about motivational speaking. It's, it's showing people that, yes, I am visually impaired. But that hasn't stopped me. You know I forget that I'm visually impaired because I didn't wake up in the morning and think I can't see how am I going to do this? I've learned to get on with it. But it's always in the back of my mind, but you know, I can't see it. I'm just doing things because I know where things are in my house. The moment I step outside, I'm reliant on some help from the public, you know, but I do it because I believe that it being visually impaired shouldn't stop me from being a father from being a husband, you know, from having a job from doing the things I want to do. And I'm very passionate about doing what I want to do. And I want to show people that yes, disability is there, but it doesn't define me. I'm still Amit. If anything, I'm probably a more energized Amit because I have to prove to everybody that I can do this. And I have to prove to myself and I still am proving to myself that it's hard. It really is not. It doesn't come easy.

JCH: I have to say Amit I was just appalled at some of the incidents that you detail in your book. And I'm really, really glad that you had social media available to make some of these people ashamed of themselves and to alert the rest of us to what it is like trying to negotiate your way around London

as visually impaired person. It was, it was very powerful. Very powerful indeed. And it needed saying.

AP: I think I think social media is fantastic. It's a way of kind of sharing your life. But it's the way I see it is social media is a way of educating people as well. It's, 'put yourself in my shoes'. And you know, if this has happened, what would you do? And the lovely thing is when I get a message saying Amit, because of what you said, or how you explain something, I'm more confident in approaching someone to offer help, because the hardest thing is, you're scared of what you don't know. And I want to help disabled people, want to go and offer assistance, but they're not sure whether they're going to offend that person. And for me, I absolutely love the fact that someone comes over to me on a train station or a mountain on the street and say, it's safe to cross now or would you like some help getting on the train? For me it feels like someone's actually noticed me and not just watching me, but they've actually approached me they take that time to come along and say, Are you okay? And even if I don't want help, most of the time I say, Oh, yes, please. And within that two minutes of them being with me, I'll teach him how to approach how to guide and to say goodbye at the end of it because the worst thing is we'll make this appear and I'm talking to a brick wall. Now I'm just that that crazy blind with a dog talking to a brick wall, you know, because I haven't realized I've gone and it's these tiny, tiny things, but it makes my day when someone approaches me. But I also know it makes their day as well, because they feel they've helped someone. It's a win win.

JW: There's a lovely section at the back of your book, which I thought was fantastic, 'Ask Amit', ask questions, you know, so that people aren't embarrassed by doing that. We've got some questions that have come in, actually, for you. And this links to what you were just saying, and is there an activity that you thought you wouldn't be able to do again, but that Kika has made possible?

Probably not an activity. I think she's given me the freedom of traveling the world again, independently. Just a couple of months ago, I was in New York with Kika and my three year old son, and people told me I was crazy. And the only reason I took him is because I said I was I'd be crazy to take him, I'm like, let's go. But the funny thing is I think she's um she's broadened my horizon. There's a lot of activities I do where she may take me to the activity but she won't participate in that obviously. But she gives me that confidence. I think with Kika I think her confidence kind of rubs off on me and my confidence kind of rubs off on Kika and it's at 5050. But I think she's just, she's a ball of energy. When I'm tired. She will, she knows I'm tired. She'll come and lay with me and guide dogs or talk right from the beginning not to lay on furniture, not the sit on furniture because you can't tell them off if they're out in public and they'll on furniture if they do that in the house because they don't know the difference. So when Kiki came into our lives, she just she lays on the floor which means we sit on the floor of our backs against the sofa, so our sofas never get used. But the nice this is she keeps that kind of comfort. And sometimes I need the comfort sometimes kick in these the comfort, the amount of times I have my head, just literally on her belly. And I could feel her breathing up and down for a minute sleep many times like that. And my son does it. My daughter does it now. My wife does it. You know, my brother does it. My sister in law does it, it's a thing that Kika just oozes that kind of positivity. And I think it's just a confidence factor.

JW: Okay, Jackie's question for you. How did we discover that dogs could detect medical episodes before they even happen or that sort of link and we'll come to you to talk about this as well Amit? Is that something that documented early on? That gives an indication Jackie?

JCH: It's an absolutely fascinating question. And in a way it's strange that it's taken as long as it has for medical science to realize quite how useful dogs noses can be to us in this way as well. Certainly animals pick up on mood. They pick up on fear, they're reading that not just from our body language

but from the, the center of our skin of our sweat. I assume that it was, I think this was something that the dogs themselves started and I have a friend who had very bad epilepsy as a child it's it's more under control now. But her dog would start barking when she was about to have a fit before she was even beginning to get the first mental or physical signs herself that she was going to have a fit and her parents certainly notice this and they built this into their their understanding of condition on their care of her. I'm absolutely fascinated particularly by visibility of dogs to detect cancer myself. I mean I had cancer but didn't have a dog, tell me at the time, something was amiss. But you know, it makes perfect sense. I mean, these noses are just such extraordinary bits of apparatus they have, if they can detect these changes in the sort of the chemical balance the, chemical makeup of our bodies, then there's no reason why they should be able to detect just one condition or one state of mind. Why shouldn't they be able to detect all of them, the world for animals of all sorts, is you know, they access it through their noses. I think we have to imagine this sort of shifting rainbow of colors coming at them in the form of different aromas from everywhere and they they do seem to build up this understanding of what they mean, astonishingly quickly.

JW: But you have a very specific syndrome, don't you that Kika is able to anticipate tell us about Charles bonnets syndrome.

AP: So Charles Bonnet syndrome is a visual hallucination that visually impaired people will will have effects if they've had sight before and then gradually lose it or suddenly lose it. It's where the brain might pick up on a couple of colors or something and then put a picture together. But the visual hallucinations are very much that it's either a mosaic kind of picture in front of you, or it's something not very nice. People will experience dragons, dinosaurs or something, worms and snakes. So it's the things that you don't really like and for me, it's the character from the film Ring, the girl in the white cloth, with the hair dragging down and I don't know why because I love that film, absolutely love that film. I used to love horror films when I was young and always watched them, but that's who appears for me. And it's a syndrome that they say that it would probably last for a few years and then kind of disappear. For me. I've had it ever since I've lost my sight. Um, so what would happen with me is I can be walking down the street with a white cane, and this girl will just suddenly appear. And it's crazy that I know she's not there. But yet I didn't see anything all day. So what I tend to do is when I'm out and about I, I put photos of what what's nice for me, you know, I could I could be walking down the street, but you know, it could be it could be walking through London, but in my head, I'm walking down the streets where I when I grew up, just so it's comfortable. It's a nice environment. And then suddenly, this girl just appears and she's in my face and she's got blood running down her face and her hair's all over the place. And they say you can't sense her, but for me, I can feel her I can smell her, I can feel her breathing on me, I can hear her screaming at me. So it's your mind just playing all these tricks. So when it used to happen to me, I used to just kind of back up into a wall kind of stand there. I could be in front of people doing a talk, and it'll just happen. I just have to stop with Kika somehow she's realized that when this happens, my body chemistry changes completely, you know, and she will pick it up maybe 10/15 seconds before it happens. So if we're on a busy train, she would stand up and she would rest ahead of my knee. So there's lots of photos of me on my on on social media where she's got her head resting on my knee. That's because I'm experiencing an episode of Charles Bonnet syndrome. That girl is just literally in my face. And I can't do anything about it because sometimes if I'm at home, I'll tell her to go away. I'll scream out I'll tell her to go away. You can't do that when you're out and about because you will be locked up very very quickly. So how people tend to use it you know, they will move their arms out of the way, they will turn around and think about something else. It's whatever works. Sometimes the episodes can last 5 10 15 seconds. Sometimes it could be 15 minutes long. And I'm still expected to carry on like there's nothing going on. So with Kika, she's at comfort, and she's never been trained. She's

never ever been trained to do this. And I think again, that's just the bond. That's her being with me all of the time. There's an amazing charity called Esme's Umbrella. And it's run by a lady called Judith Potts. She's an ex reporter, newspaper journalist. And her mum actually experienced this. And there was nobody researching it at all. So she set up this charity called Esme's Umbrella to actually help people with Charles Bonnet syndrome. And it's absolutely fantastic. You hear so many stories of people going through this, and they've kind of catalogued a few dogs are actually picking up on the symptoms of this and the fact that you know, their owners are going through this, and I think it is because of that one that dog is with them all the time. It's like dogs that pick up epilepsy, dogs pick up cancer and going back how Kika actually started loving Sima is that she picked up that Sima was expecting before we even knew, a good week before we found out and ever since then Sima and Kika have been together forever. It's as I kind of bond. But it's amazing. I don't know how she does it and we could be anywhere, I remember in the book, I actually write that I was doing a talk on Charles Bonnet Syndrome and I kind of got hallucinations. Kika was fast asleep while I was talking. And she suddenly stood up actually distracted the audience just so I could get myself together again and carry off. And that's the beauty. That's amazing. You know,

JW: it's an absolutely, it's a magical bond. I can see Jackie the tail of one of your cats there.

JCH: This is bird.

JW: How much Jackie is it making a difference to you at this time to have those two cats there with you in isolated circumstances?

JCH: Oh, an enormous difference. I think any animal owner would say that any animals companion, you know, there's this joke that you know sort of it you can talk to the walls, you need to worry if the walls start to talk back to you and Bird is just rubbing her head lovingly against the corner of my laptop screen here. So that's very helpful. Thank you very much. But the thing with animals is that they you know, you can talk to them and it's absolutely fine. It's regarded as completely socially acceptable. And if they talk back, that's kind of what it's all about. It's what do you want them to do? I'm fascinated by this business of animal communication. It's one of the things that I hunted down stories about in my book, because it's a you know, it's really it's an act of such faith and trust. So I don't understand really what my cats are saying when they make a noise at me, although I do understand the particular wine that bird was making a couple of minutes ago, which is I want some attention and fast, but they equally they don't understand what I'm saying when I respond, but nonetheless, some kind of communication is taking place here. And the bond between me and my cats in the same way as between Amit and Kika. It's something that is continually renewed 24 seven, every little bit of contact, every little bit of communication deepens it in a way.

JW: There's something that you that you wrote towards the end of your book, which if I may, I'd love to read out because I just think it's so appropriate for these for these times. It's the final few words and I hope it is comfort for people. It certainly really struck me as it really resonated with me. As you say, I hope that my story has shown you that even in the darkest of times, there's always a ray of light to be found. It may not come easy, but regardless of what you might be going through, I hope my journey inspires you to be brave, be strong, and to ask for help. Remember, you don't have to do it alone. Jackie and Amit, thank you so much for being here today and for being part of Cheltenham Science @ Home. Thank you to everybody who's been watching and supporting the festival in this way. Do please check back to the web page for more conversations. If you'd like to get involved make a donation we'd be absolutely delighted if you felt that you were able to support schools and communities and the work that Cheltenham Festivals does all year round, that would be wonderful. And there is a link to these two books in the event description. So if you'd like to buy them, I would

thoroughly recommend them, perfect for these times. And we'll look forward to seeing you Jackie and you Amit everybody else, back at Cheltenham Festivals in the flesh, physical very soon. Thank you.

JCH: Here Here, It's been an absolute pleasure, lovely to meet you Amit and to speak with you. Thank you Julia. Thank you