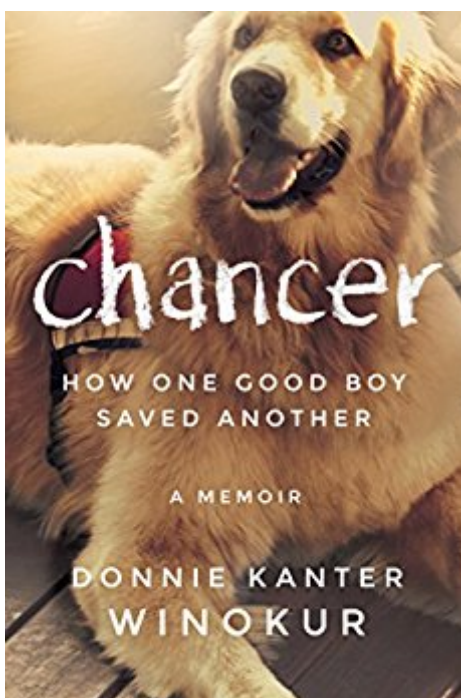


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Chancer: How One Good Boy Saved Another



Synopsis

When a devastating diagnosis tears author Donnie Kanter Winokur's family apart, a service dog may be their best hope to stay together. Donnie Kanter Winokur and her husband, Harvey, never could have imagined the heart-wrenching struggle that becomes their new reality after they decide to adopt two infants from Russia. As Iyal and Morasha grow, it becomes clear that Iyal's development is drastically lagging behind his sister's. By age four, he has a devastating diagnosis: fetal alcohol syndrome. But naming their battle provides little relief as Iyal and his family try to cope with the lifelong impact of his invisible disability. As the Winokurs' marriage is unraveling, Donnie and Harvey hang on to the last shreds of their own promise. Desperate to alleviate her son's constant rages and their crushing toll on the family, Donnie comes up with an innovative, untested, four-pawed solution: a golden retriever service dog named Chancer. Chancer is specially trained to give Iyal a unique love he desperately needs. But in this true-life tale infused with moments of despair, tenderness, and humor, Chancer turns out to be what the entire family has needed to stay—and grow—together.

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Customer Reviews

I laughed, I cried, and learned so much about the amount of heart and fight, it really takes for Donnie to be a champion warrior, that she is, and guarantee the survival of her family. The memoir is a rollercoaster ride of emotions, from the joy of Iyal's and Morasha's adoption, through the trials and tribulations of the eventual FASD diagnosis, to the sigh of relief felt, as Chancer worked his wet nose into the hearts and home of the Winokur family. Chancer was the hero to a boy and his family, who needed a special friend to help him grow into an amazing young man. A life story so compelling, it is hard to put the book down.

I initially found this book in the new release section at our local library branch while on a public therapy outing with our son. I was trying to test his ability and patience for being in a setting where small bits of waiting could be practiced without disrupting a line or him pushing a cart into someone. Initially I grabbed it because of the dog on the cover, and I thought "oh, maybe this was something our animal loving daughter would enjoy reading with me!" As I skimmed the back, I had an inkling, that would prove to be true, that there are a few things the author and I have in common. After I read the first chapter, I knew I would want a copy of the book for myself and purchased it for my kindle. The author and I are both the proud parents of two amazing children, the second of which in our family we adopted because of my fertility and pregnancy struggles...a beautiful little boy. But unlike the author, we knew the birth mother had been drinking throughout her pregnancy...heavily, as it was described to us. And our son, who is only five, also has gone on to be diagnosed with other things, one for each year of his life, and while it is painful for me to dwell on it, our list is likely going to lengthen at some point in the future. And while our sons may have a diagnosis in common, based on the descriptions given in the book, our son at age 5 has a lower level of overall functioning than her kiddo did at that age. This is not said to in any way minimize the challenges their family went through...that is hallowed ground that I am in no way trying to step on, because there are many, many paths to parental heartbreak...it just happens mine is a little bit different. It is merely given so that you can understand my frame of reference as I write this review. So right off the bat I'm going to give a few overall statements, and then I would like to add a few thoughts of my own to the author's that I would want other parents or readers to be aware of. Her writing style was a joy to read, and she wrote this in a way that broke up experiences that if given sequentially could become dark, oppressive, and overwhelming and interspersed them with narratives of joy and a smattering of education about some of the sobering realities that face children with this type of disability. Truthfully, it is a book I am going to recommend to all my friends

and loved ones, and it is filled with things I wish every single person who came in contact with my son or who worked with him in any capacity understood. As a note for the more straight laced, there is a bit of swearing in this book, and generally, that's not my favorite. But I think the conversation this book is capable of starting is essential, her insights are spot on, and to be perfectly honest, when you're a parent of a child facing these types of challenges, no matter how devout you try to be to the tenets of your faith when it comes to swearing (for the religiously minded anyways), sometimes a bad word or two is just going to pop out. Hello Costco poop painting incident...I'm talking about you. I only noticed one of the swear words that popped out at the time, but my daughter assures me there was more. While I regret that it is true, I am sure she can be trusted on the matter ;) Also, as a note to the author: I am blowing you kisses in my head. I have been every so often bringing up the topic of "what about a service dog?" with my own sweet hubby for a little over a year now, and while he didn't dig his heels in exactly, he wasn't really super receptive either. I mentioned some stuff from the book, and he's now much more on board for that a few years in the future. Thank you for using your gifts and abilities to so eloquently put this story out there. I would like to take a moment to amplify some thoughts the author had about the need to support children with FASD's and their families. Often when I am by myself, I only reference Autism as one of my son's diagnoses in public (that and the fact that many people haven't even heard of 3 of the 5 on his current list of conditions), because despite the fact that he has beautiful brown skin and I'm pasty as a ghost, unless my husband is with me people just assume I'm married to the person responsible for my son's skin tone...and there's only so long a discussion we can be having in the middle of a public problem. And I've seen the judgment that can cross a person's demeanor and behavior when they think you are the person responsible for causing an FASD, and it's not pretty, and it doesn't give the impression of support or comfort. And it's the only reason I ever feel the need to tell people he's adopted, because my heart can't tell the difference between "born to me" and "made mine by order of a judge". He's my son. Period. But it sure makes a difference in how supportive other people are willing to be for me when it comes to his FASD diagnosis. So let me share something with you. I am certain, and I mean certain, his birth mom had no idea this would happen to him from her drinking, and I don't want people judging her any more than I want them judging me or my son for things he can't control. In our society, we spend a great deal of time educating about the dangers of drinking and driving, but much less is spent on informing sexually active women what the dangers and risks are for her unborn child. And I think this needs to change. I used to bartend for parties when I was younger before I decided sober was the life I wanted to lead, and nobody batted an

eyelash if I wrestled someone to the ground who'd had a few too many of my mixed drinks and thought they were headed out the door with their car keys. Yah, I've always had the potential for being a wet blanket. But very few people there would have felt like it was ok if I asked any of the ladies, "So, hey. Any chance you could be pregnant?" But the effects of drinking alcohol during pregnancy can shatter lives, leading to lifelong impairments and disabilities that can require total care for the rest of the individual's life. Not just the lives of the children involved are impacted, but the families who are caring for them. And the difficulties can be more intense than anything most people with typically developing children can even begin to imagine. So those women and those families, whether biologically or court created, need all of the love, support, and understanding they can get. People often speak about how it's the needs of the individual with disabilities that matters, and they are the ones who people should feel compassion and understanding for, and that what the family and caregivers are going through pales on comparison. What I would say, absolutely, we as a society need to have a greater understanding and compassion for these individuals with "invisible disabilities" as the author puts it, and that starts with honest discussions about what they are struggling with and why. But it can be every bit as traumatic but in a different way for the family members providing the support, safety, and care for those individuals and that requires every bit of love, compassion, and support that society can muster as well. Because at the end of the day, these families and these caregivers are the front line of support for these amazing and beautiful children, and if they don't have enough support to keep their castles standing, what happens to the individuals with the disability? Even if a person feels like they can't provide assistance for watching or caring for the person with disabilities, the very next best thing that can be done is be a friend to the parents. I've had people who offered to help with my son back out when they found out what was involved, which was fine, I understand and respected their right to do that without judgement. But the knife came when many of those people started avoiding me, probably because they were embarrassed. It is a tender subject, and I mean to wound no one, so I'm going to limit this by saying while I understood what was happening and why, I could not have been more devastated by feeling isolated in that manner, and it made it that much harder for me to do the very essential things I needed for the love and support of my family and son. And I remain more grateful than I can ever say to the ones who felt they couldn't help with our little man in other ways (I'm talking to you, my sweet Brazilian friend), but still stood by me as a friend to the best of their abilities. There are many times a parent of a child with significant disability can walk alone, and it can be a hard path to be on. So I would say, the family and what they are going through is just as important, and needs love and understanding also. Some of the challenges the author describes

in this book might seem out of the park for someone who's not experienced or witnessed this, and as a reader, you may be wanting to know if she's exaggerating. I'm here to add my voice to hers and say she's not, and it can actually be much worse. If anything, I think she's understating, and I think I can understand why. At one point in here she talks about feeling as if she was constantly walking through broken glass. It is similar to a thought I've had about my own situation, about how my heart has frequently been made to walk barefoot through broken glass over the past 5 years, and my heart is far more tender than my feet. She has brought enough reality to this to get a glimpse into the fathomless universe of hurt and grief that can well up within the heart and soul of a parent of these amazing, beautiful children as we help them on their journeys, but has only dipped enough of your toes in so that you will see what can be there without being sucked into a black hole of negativity. And I think it is a beautiful thing, and a beautifully written book, that I highly recommend it.

What starts out as a feel good story of growing a family through adoption, rapidly escalates into chaos as the diagnosis of FASD is finally made. But neither pharmacology nor love alone can fix what's broken until Chancer enters the picture. Chancer can't "fix" it, but he brings a life preserver to a family in desperate need, and opens up a world of love to those whose lives he touches.

Assistance dogs are more present in all of our worlds, but Donnie's persistence broke through into a place where no dog had helped before and tells the story of their family's experience with candor and a level of emotional honesty that's both startling and effective. This is a real family, not a fairy tale so the happy endings are nuanced and changeable, but the journey is one you'll want to go on.

This story will take you through an emotional roller coaster ride - the sheer joy of adding to the family via international adoption to the gut-wrenching diagnosis of FASD. Donnie shares her journey with rawness and humor as she navigates the reader through the story of her family, ultimately in crisis, and the hero who brought them back from the brink and gave her son an ally and helper like no other, a golden retriever named Chancer..

Interesting book that speaks to the trials and tribulations of raising an adopted Russian child with FASD more than service dogs. The families lives greatly improved with the first FASD Service Dog. Might also be pertinent to those dealing with any type of severe Invisible Disability.

I have worked with differently abled folks for 45 years. I have had dogs who were my best friends.

This wonderful story brought back heart warming memories of my, old soul, canine companions complete with tears and laughter. I also found a portrait of my tribe. People with great authenticity who encourage the best self in all they meet. Written with affection, courage and grace, thank you Donnie, this is a treasure.

Chancer is a poignant, heart-rending story that describes the Winokur family's emotional seesaw in a way that is palpable to the reader. This passionate and inspiring book demonstrates, in a very personal way, the power of hope, love, and determination in the face of intense frustration and pain. The author tells her story with complete transparency, which speaks volumes to other parents whose children are suffering and whose lives are in turmoil. She writes candidly about her family's disappointments, heartaches, doubts, joys, and triumphs, as well as the unconditional love they found with Chancer, and ultimately found for themselves. Chancer was their family's hero and their son's best friend, and he didn't come to them a moment too soon. I am inspired by the author's courage and tenacity to find help for her son and bring healing to her family.

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