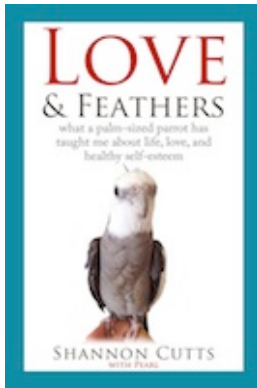


LOVE & FEATHERS

what a palm-sized parrot has
taught me about life, love, and
healthy self-esteem



SHANNON CUTTS
WITH PEARL



*When people and pets choose to share life together, great personal transformation becomes possible. In *Love & Feathers*, Shannon (a person) and Pearl (a parrot) learn from each other how to love and be loved, enjoy life to the fullest, face challenges with humor and courage, and see the best in themselves, each other, and all beings.*

Love & Feathers: what a palm-sized parrot has taught me about life, love, and healthy self-esteem

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Praise for *Love & Feathers*

I have always loved all animals, but birds have become my heart. And that is why I like your book so much. You touch the bird in me.

—**Ellen Cook**, DVM

Love & Feathers is filled with compelling stories about how Shannon's parrot helps her to see aspects of her life from a different view, which fuels her self-growth. It serves as an incredible reminder that many of life's most powerful lessons can be found in the simplest of places.

—**Amy Morin**, LCSW, author of *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*

A refreshingly unique and beautiful love story, *Love & Feathers* is a laugh-out-loud page-turner. Even if you aren't enthusiastic about birds, you will be about this book!

—**Jenni Schaefer**, Author of *Almost Anorexic; Goodbye Ed, Hello Me; and Life Without Ed*

I started to read your book—I had no idea what to expect.... It's delightful. I'm not really a bird person, but find myself sucked in. I really like that it's both this personal conversation and really factual, instructional. It made me think about how a loving pet companion might plug up some of the holes in my life.

—**Marcelyn McNeil**, artist and animal lover

Love & Feathers is a joyful journey filled with compassion and wisdom. Shannon shares how a pet, Pearl (who happens to be an avian), can teach us the skills we need to overcome adversity and live our lives to the fullest. Life with Pearl is full of humor, insight and inspiration. A must read for all pet lovers!

—**Maisen Mosley**, parront to **Pongo** (green cheek conure), **Purdy** (Quaker parrot), and three canine "kids"

Dear Shannon, not only is Pearl beautiful, but he is great at teaching others lessons in recovery and acceptance!

—Love, **Megan** (featherless being) & **Dermott** (parrot)

I have followed the exploits of Pearl for some time now, watching with well-deserved admiration as he trains his human Shannon in the ways of cockatiel service. It's all here, from how to feed a cockatiel to those all-important veterinarian visits, all while projecting a semblance of sanity.

—**Marguerite Floyd**, author of *Cockatiel Lessons* and *The Parrot Reckonings*

I 'flew' through *Love & Feathers*—I loved it! Thank you, Shannon and Pearl, for sharing lessons on what really matters in life—love, and living in the moment. For evermore, when I see a parrot, or indeed any bird (or human), I will look beyond the feathers and seek to connect with the love within.

—**June Alexander**, grandmother, mum to two kitties, author of *Hope at Every Age – Developing an Appetite for Recovery* and *A Girl Called Tim*

Love and Feathers is a delightful account of love in its most pure and literal form. It is a story about finding your destiny just when you least expect it. With flawless and comical prose, Shannon allows her readers to see how life can be deeply enriched when you can love someone and be loved in return. Pearl and Shannon are soulmates who share six wondrous things: trust, surrender, sufficiency, peace and endless potential. I adored this book.

—**Emi Berger**, DVM

Love & Feathers took me on a heart-warming journey into the intricacies of avian-human companionship. I was especially intrigued with how Pearl's life was shown to be an example of how we could also enjoy our own life. Those who truly treasure their avian family members will surely grin, giggle and even sigh as they relate to the antics of Pearl. Trust me, you will relate.

—**Sherri Inskeep Lewis**, Past President of the National Cockatiel Society and owner of Tame Tiels Aviary

Near the end of *Love & Feathers*, Shannon writes, "If I want to have a relationship with God, I must seek first and only this: a relationship with love." I cannot possibly find a better way to describe this book. Buy two copies; you are going to want to give it to someone immediately.

—**Thom Rutledge**, author of *The Power of Self-Forgiveness* and *Embracing Fear*

Love & Feathers

*what a palm-sized parrot has taught me about
life, love, and healthy self-esteem*

*Shannon Cutts
with Pearl*

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Part One

Introduction to Love & Feathers



Our Story

I see feeeeeeeet. And a cute cockatiel beeeeeeeeeeeak...

I wait. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three...I can just make out the tip of a diminutive curved grey beak slowly descending from behind the bathroom vanity mirror. Pearl and I are playing “Now You See Me” and Pearl is in charge.

As usual.

When I first met Pearl, I was still mourning the loss of my first cockatiel, a yellow and white bird named Jacob. Jacob was only three years old when he died of congenital kidney failure. His death is still one of the most painful memories of my life. I did not—I repeat NOT—want another cockatiel after Jacob passed.

But my parents knew how much I love birds, and they staunchly believed that a new avian companion could heal me in a way that even time likely would not. Attempting to broach the subject with me was like suggesting I consider enrolling in advanced math classes or taking up soccer—I simply wouldn’t hear of it. So unbeknownst to me, they took matters into their own hands, donned their trench coats and dark sunglasses, and started sleuthing for cockatiel babies at nearby pet stores.

One day I was at work as usual when I got an urgent call from my mom. She insisted I had to meet them at a nearby PetSmart during my lunch hour that very day. I as vigorously insisted I didn’t want to go. But as moms go, mine can be quite persistent, so at noon on the dot I dutifully pulled into the parking lot. I walked inside and saw both of my folks bending over a large, open-air cage in the

center of the store. The cage held at least a dozen exceptionally cute cockatiel babies. The closer I got to the cage, the more reluctant I felt. I wasn't ready. My mom was too pushy. How could she? She should realize I couldn't stand to lose another bird, especially so soon after Jacob's death. As I watched the energetic yellow and white fledglings climbing all over each other to compete for treats and attention, I almost turned on my heel and walked back out the front door.

But then I saw him.

He was huddled in a tiny ball, clearly trying to make himself as invisible as possible. He was a very small grey cockatiel, the obvious runt of the litter, his eyes droopy with fatigue and his downy chest feathers still matted with baby bird formula. He saw me at about the same moment I saw him, and we moved towards each other instinctively.

As I gently lifted him up in my hand—he was so tiny he barely filled my palm—I saw he was missing claws from each foot. The bird department manager softly informed me that this baby's left wing was badly damaged as well and he would probably never fly. The staff suspected his siblings were to blame. I observed how the older, stronger birds totally ignored him unless he happened to get in their way. If this happened they barreled right over him as if he wasn't even there.

Different species aside, I knew EXACTLY how he felt—the runt of the litter, the ugly duckling, the one who looked and felt so different, the one who, try as he might, just didn't fit in.

I looked at him and whispered softly, "You are love with wings, aren't you?" The baby pivoted his tiny grey head, huge round black eyes gazing up into mine. He started to try to climb up my arm but his weak and mostly clawless toes wouldn't oblige. I scooped him up onto my shoulder and he promptly burrowed into my hair, clinging with his soft baby beak to a few wayward strands for balance. We walked around the store like this together until the manager got worried, assumed he had been stolen, and mounted a full-scale search (which, predictably, culminated in my general direction). Determined to keep him, I named him "Pearl."* I then reluctantly

handed him back to the bird manager, who said he had not been weaned yet and could not possibly leave the store until he could eat seed like his older brothers and sisters.

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered rather too violently to myself under my breath as I walked away.

My mom was firmly set against me taking Pearl home. I get my love of animals honestly, and she, too, was still mourning Jacob. Mom wanted me to select one of the older and stronger yellow and white cockatiels instead. I conceded her point and returned to the store the very next day. I picked out a strong yellow male cockatiel and let him sit on my shoulder for a while. He was sweet, but where I had felt a sudden flood of maternal love when I first held his baby brother, I didn’t feel much of anything this time. Telling myself it was probably just due to mourning, I went ahead and put the yellow bird on hold. I promised to return the following day at lunch to select a cage and accessories so I could take him home.

Then something very odd happened. Later that night, the scratches on my shoulder from where the strong yellow bird had gripped my bare skin with his eight perfect sharp claws became red and inflamed. Itchy and irritable, I stayed awake all night long. I used the time to try to think of a name for him, but by morning I was still drawing a blank. I returned to the pet store that day at lunch to complete my purchase, hoping his name would come to me once I saw him again. As my folks watched approvingly, I bundled the big yellow baby up in his new cage, complete with food and water bowls, new perches and toys, giant bags of fresh seed, crunchy millet, and assorted deluxe avian accessories. I was standing in line at the cash register, and as I watched cage and bird roll gently down the conveyor belt towards the cashier, from deep within a voice simply said, “I can’t.”

It was audible. I heard it, my parents heard it, and the cashier heard it. She paused mid-sale and looked at me. I lifted the cage with its big, bold, feathery yellow occupant off the conveyor, walked back to the bird department, and told the manager I had chosen Pearl instead. With a determined look in my eye, I informed her I would feed Pearl the baby bird formula myself until he was fully weaned.

Shannon Cutts with Pearl

The manager nodded and confided quietly, “If you hadn’t taken him I was going to take him home myself.” Then she gently lifted little Pearl out of the open-air cage and placed him into my cupped hands.

Love and Feathers is our story.

** The bird department manager initially informed me Pearl was a female bird. Read on to learn just how wrong she was.*



Must Love Birds

When my family and I were vacationing on Cape Cod this past fall, the weather was so beautiful that Mom and I went out walking nearly every day.

One afternoon we were attempting to take J.P. Morgan, my folks' couch-loving standard dachshund, for his afternoon drag when we met a neighbor who was also out walking her pets. She had with her two dogs and one...cat. The woman was rather advanced in years but her trio was young and spry. The cat in particular, leash-less next to the two hapless constrained canines, was practicing an escalating series of evasive maneuvers in between the legs of its housemates. In appearance, it was lithe and lean with keen green eyes and reddish-brown fur interspersed with white stripes.

Initially the woman stopped to talk with us about the weather, but the conversation quickly turned to pets. When we praised the youth and sleek attractiveness of hers, she lamented, "Yes, but unfortunately my cat is a turning into a serial killer. Yesterday he caught and nearly killed a gopher and brought it into the house. It got free. I tried to catch it, but it ran up my pajama leg and then out onto my head. As I was sprinting outside to shake it off, my cat brought in a second near-dead gopher and released it in the house."

Charming.

Yet cats continue to outrank birds on the "most popular pet list" year after year. Perhaps this is because, as one is cunning predator and the other delicious and unsuspecting prey, cats keep offing their competition. As a parront, I have been the unwilling recipient of all too many of what I call the "I had a bird once..." stories. These are the stories that start out well enough, where the happy interspecies

family is peacefully cohabitating together, at least until one of its furrier members falls prey to instinct or an empty cat food dish. Next thing you know, the family member with the feathers is MIA and a full scale FBI investigation has been launched, leading to the discovery of telltale incriminating clues like flight feathers near the litter box. Case closed.

This issue is not particularly relevant to Pearl and myself since “felines” routinely makes our annual list of top-ten-perils-to-avoid. Where it becomes a bit more challenging is in the world of online dating, when a potential match neglects to mention a critical lifestyle preference—for instance, owning a cat.

Don’t get me wrong. As of the moment I’m penning this chapter, I have not yet met a “potential match” (this is what most online dating sites call their victims) for coffee or otherwise where the sole clear disqualifying factor has been the presence of a household feline. The one who used methamphetamines was an easy no in my book, as was the one who confessed on our first (and only) date to a raging case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, after which he proceeded to scientifically measure and then cross-check the portions of wine he poured for each of us. Similarly, the one who arrived an hour late and then spent the rest of our date explaining in great detail why any woman should be grateful to wait for him and the one who scratched his balls for a solid hour while consuming multiple martinis were both out.

As of this moment, actually, online dating itself has been out for quite some years now, and has already been pre-added to future years’ top-ten-perils-to-avoid list. This preventative safety measure was instituted after my (hopefully very) last online dating date, when my date shared over twin steaming pots of custom-blended organic tea how much he loved his two indoor cats, and how, as he watched them eyeing the songbirds in the trees outside, he worried that by not letting them out to chase and kill the birds he was depriving them of “quality of life.”

I thought briefly of depriving him of quality of life before I decided I would miss Pearl too much while in prison.

So instead, I cancelled my online dating membership and used the refund money to buy my small feathery guy a few crunchy new birdie chew toys and a delicious pack of fresh “original” flavor millet stalks.

After all, Pearl and I found each other—at a moment where the very last goal on my mind was to fall in love with a new baby parrot.

If it can happen once, it can happen again—as long as I am willing to trust in the timing of all good things....and good people who must love birds.

Lessons with Wings: *Love never lies. As it turns out, Pearl's presence in my life is an excellent litmus test for the people I invite into my life. Pets, like kids, are transparent—they like you, or they don't like you. If I catch myself thinking, “my bird wouldn't like such-and-so,” or if Pearl hisses and pecks at a visitor instead of his more customary single-bound leap forward onto even the rankest stranger's outstretched finger, that is a sign I should pay attention to—and do.*



The Littlest Pterodactyl

I'll just go ahead and say it.

Dinosaurs. Are. Cool.

As proof (on the off chance you actually need any) I submit for your inspection the following.

Exhibit A: Two nephews, ages six and two, who are even now industriously exchanging their parents' cash for a museum-worthy assortment of all things prehistoric. The current pooled collection includes pajamas, t-shirts, backpacks, digging kits, 3-D goggles, picture books, mechanized action figures with moveable limbs and real roars, glow-in-the-dark wall art, and of course underwear and/or diapers (depending on which nephew you are and how well potty training is going that particular week).

Exhibit B: One writer-auntie, age 42, who regularly attends her local natural science museum's annual Halloween extravaganza featuring several hundred incognito adult revelers and one exact to-scale skeletal replica of *T. rex*.

Halloween just isn't Halloween without *T. rex*.

But since much of the dinosaurs' enduring allure centers around the whole sucks-to-be-you giant comet extinction issue, the question on the table today then becomes: if the dinosaurs had survived the Ice Age, would we still find them so fascinating?

Since I just so happen to cohabit with one of their many tiny descendants, I can help with this: “Yup.” In fact, the way I see it, the dinosaurs of our generation are cooler than ever. For starters, modern dinosaurs are fun-size and feathery. Add to this that today’s dinosaurs prove you don’t have to be fanged to be fierce (as an example: macaw beaks can supposedly crush up to 700 pounds of weight per square inch—think voracious slobbering Doberman attached to your leg and you’ll have a fairly accurate visual.)

Best of all, today’s dinosaurs have groovy ancestors. For instance, paleontologists recently unearthed what they like to call *Pegomastax africanus* and I like to call the vulture-headed, parrot-beaked, cat-bodied, porcupine-quilled mini-dinosaur. As well, archeologists and others skilled in such things can now definitively link today’s diminutive grey tufted Titmouse to the giant Velociraptor, common garden chickens to none other than *T. rex*, and Archaeopteryx (aka the “First Bird”) to, well, pretty much everything else with feathers.

Or, as *Birdology* author Sy Montgomery writes:

...birds are living dinosaurs. To the nimble likes of predatory Velociraptors, birds owe their speed and their smarts. To dinosaurs, they owe their otherworldly appeal—and as well, surely, some of their transcendent mystery and beauty. For this is one of the great miracles of birds, greater, perhaps, than that of flight: when the chickens in my backyard come to my call, or when I look into the sparkling eye of a chickadee, we are communing across a gap of more than 300 million years.

Lessons with Wings: *When some people look at a book, they just see a book. As a writer and avid reader, when I look at a book I see the author’s story, the book’s story, interesting cover art, an opportunity to learn, and so much more. In the same way, when some people look at a bird, they just see a bird. When I look at a bird, I see millions of years’ worth of fascinating history and a bird. A very cute bird. A very very cute bird. A very very very cute...*



Aaaaargh

I would never make it as a pirate.

For starters, I hate conflict. As for carrying around a long pointed metal object in my sash, well, that's just an accident waiting to happen. Also, I don't do eye patches or bandanas—they don't work with my face shape. If I needed any more proof, sailing makes me seasick and I'm a vegetarian. Finally, bathing is not a personal grooming task I think can wait until the ship gets back to port.

Yet—oddly—pirates and I do have one lifestyle preference in common. When it comes to choosing an animal sidekick, we both pick parrots whenever possible. If all it took to become a pirate was the ability to perform nearly any task with a diminutive winged hookbill clinging to your flowing shirtsleeves, I'd be a first draft pick. I often (well not often, but occasionally) think that if I ever did get captured by pirates, I could convince them to spare my life by offering to manage the ship's aviary. I imagine in my mind this would be a lot like working as a babysitter, except with screaming parrots instead of screaming two-year-olds.

I also find it intriguing that the words “parrot” and “pirate” look and sound almost identical. For my writing business, I recently wrote an article about Parrot Cay, a private island in the Caribbean. While researching I learned this particular island happens to be a place where many celebrities like to keep vacation homes (this on account of the fact that only the richest of folks can afford to get there, let alone stay). Even more interesting, the original name of this island was apparently “Pirate Cay,” but the locals changed it so as not to scare off the celebrities and their loaded visitors. From a pirate's perspective, I can't help but assume the author of this rebranding

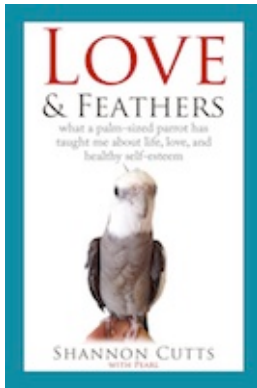
gem was instantly promoted. Why deal with the leaky boat, the grumpy prisoners, that hideous plank business, when you can be a land-bound pirate instead? It just makes logistical sense—especially if in the process you score stable housing that doesn't sink, plenty of clean water to bathe in, and your victims come sailing right up to you while you sip citrusy scurvy-repelling margaritas on a sunny beach.

From the parrot's perspective as well, shifting the whole enterprise to land solves a number of otherwise challenging conundrums. For instance, no more worrying the big tasty wooden play toy you just chewed a hole in will then sink you to the bottom of the ocean. No exhausting time-sucks as you are forced to compete again and again with the neighboring pirate ship's parrot flock for who can shriek the loudest or execute the most complex aerial display. And no risk that your parront (and you) will kick the bucket thanks to the bigger, stronger pirate bully and his bigger, stronger winged sidekick from one cove over.

That aside, I have several 40-something friends who still spend all year planning for the next annual "Talk Like a Pirate Day." On this joyful occasion, they look forward to once again donning their plastic eye patches and spending the evening yelling "Aaaargh!" at the other pretend-pirates parked on neighboring barstools.

While they are otherwise engaged, you will find me where I always am during this dubious holiday—drinking all their rum and practicing my parronting skills.

Lessons with Wings: *I have lots of preferences. For instance, I prefer central air conditioning to windows units, summer to winter, and classical to county music. And I prefer parrots to—well, practically everything else. I may frequently get the other choices I make wrong and have to go back and course-correct. But I've been making the choice to share my life with parrots perfectly since I was eight years old and I have no plans to stop now!*



When people and pets choose to share life together, great personal transformation becomes possible. In Love & Feathers, Shannon (a person) and Pearl (a parrot) learn from each other how to love and be loved, enjoy life to the fullest, face challenges with humor and courage, and see the best in themselves, each other, and all beings.

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