



## Laika

By Nick Abadzis

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Laika was the abandoned puppy destined to become Earth's first space traveler. This is her journey.

Nick Abadzis masterfully blends fiction and fact in the intertwined stories of three compelling lives. Along with Laika there is Korolev, once a political prisoner and now a driven engineer at the top of the Soviet space program, and Yelena, the lab technician responsible for Laika's health and life. This intense triangle is rendered with the pitch-perfect emotionality of classics like *Because of Winn Dixie*, *Shiloh*, and *Old Yeller*.

Abadzis gives life to a pivotal moment in modern history, casting light on the hidden moments of deep humanity behind history. Laika's story will speak straight to your heart.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

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Nick Abadzis masterfully blends fiction and fact in the intertwined stories of three compelling lives. Along with Laika, there is Korolev, once a political prisoner, now a driven engineer at the top of the Soviet space program, and Yelena, the lab technician responsible for Laika's health and life. This intense triangle is rendered with the pitch-perfect emotionality of classics like *Because of Winn Dixie*, *Shiloh*, and *Old Yeller*. Abadzis gives life to a pivotal moment in modern history, casting light on the hidden moments of deep humanity behind history. Laika's story will speak straight to your heart.

### Questions for Nick Abadzis

**Jeff VanderMeer for Amazon.com:** What inspired you to pick this particular topic for a graphic novel? And why, for example, a graphic novel as opposed to a strictly written account?

**Abadzis:** I'd known it was a good story since I was about six years old. It had always been at the back of my mind as a story to tell. In 2002, new information came to light about the Sputnik II mission and specifically Laika's death. That was the spark, although back then I envisaged something much shorter. It, uh, grew. Why a graphic novel? Well, comics are my language. It's the medium that I'm most familiar and comfortable...so it was first choice.

**Amazon.com:** What most surprised you while researching Laika?

**Abadzis:** There were a few things. I had no idea there were so few Soviet engineers and scientists involved in the nascent space program--not to trivialize their incredible achievement but, in many senses, they just winged it, borne along in great part by Korolev's force of will and political maneuvering. Also it was interesting to find out how much the Soviet scientists cared for their cosmodogs. Events conspired to make Laika a sacrificial passenger on board Sputnik II, but they really did honor their canine cosmonauts. There's even a statue of Laika in Moscow. Perhaps this book will go some small way to re-establishing her position in history: whatever the circumstances, and whether you agree with what they did or not, she was the first earthling in orbit around this planet.

**Amazon.com:** Was there anything that didn't make it into the graphic novel because it just didn't fit?

**Abadzis:** There was quite a bit, actually. I could have done with another hundred pages. But I'd taken a bit of time to write and thumbnail it (which I do at the same time) and when that stage was finished, the publisher and I realized that the 50th anniversary of the Sputnik launches was fast approaching. When I first pitched the idea to Mark Siegel at First Second, neither of us realized that it was so close. It felt like we needed to be a part of that, so I drew it extremely fast--two hundred pages in a little over eight months. It's an understatement to say that it was extremely hard work. What got left out was a longer explication of Laika's origins; the scenes with Mikhail, her first owner were much longer.... Originally, I did have an idea of doing three books: Laika would be the first, Gagarin the second, and a full-on comic strip biography of Korolev [the driven engineer on the project] would be the final part that would bind together events seen in the first two. Maybe one day. Certainly, elements of Korolev's life that I felt were important to the story made it into the final version of the book.

**Amazon.com:** Did you worry about the sentimentality inherent in the situation? How did that affect your decisions in creating the graphic novel?

**Abadzis:** I suppose it would have been easy to make it another cutesy, twee, and overly saccharine dead-dog story but that wouldn't have been true either to my taste or to the socio-political system and culture I was attempting to portray. Laika--the real Laika--was a cute dog, as photographs attest. There's no getting away from it, and there's plenty of evidence to suggest her owners thought so, too. I didn't want to anthropomorphize her, at least not to the extent that she was spouting speech/thought balloons like, say Tintin's Snowy (which works just fine for those books). Having made that decision--which I didn't really feel was an option, in any case--I knew that to really do it justice, I'd have to do a lot of research. The sentiment of the story, such as it is, would take care of itself and be implicit in certain character's actions or words (or not, as the case may be).... All that said, it'd be disingenuous to suggest that, in dealing with a true story that involves dogs and their owners (even if they happen to be scientists in a Soviet cosmodog program), there wouldn't be a bit of emotion. There's plenty (and I hope the reader feels it). But there's also the harsh reality of the time, the place and the confluence of events that put Laika into space.

**Amazon.com:** What are you currently working on?

**Abadzis:** I'm currently working on a new graphic novel for older readers called *Skin Trouble*, which is also for First Second. I'll leave it to your imagination as to what that's all about, suffice to say it'll be an ensemble piece, character-wise. I've also got a children's graphic novel in the works. Can't say anything about that at all, but I'm looking forward to drawing it.

#### From [Booklist](#)

Classic dog-story themes such as loyalty serve as a backdrop for this fictionalized account of Laika, the first living creature launched into outer space. A charming and scruffy little dog, Laika survives an uncaring master and life as a stray before becoming part of the Russian space program circa 1956, just as the Soviet Union had achieved a huge victory over American competition. With a stilted romanticism that doesn't fit the story's tone, Laika is established as "a very special dog," but soon the focus of the complex tale turns away from the dog to Yelena Dubrovsky, the trainer responsible for preparing Laika and the other dogs for the rigors of testing. Through Dubrovsky, the progress of the program and the incredible pressure on the scientists are given effective form. The rough-hewn art, similar to the Joann Sfar's work on the *Dungeon* books, makes the characters appear constantly nervous and uncertain, lending immediacy to the all-pervasive atmosphere of strict formality and enforced patriotism. An extensive bibliography of sources is appended.

Karp, Jesse

#### Review

"Following the story of plucky Laika -- the first dog in space -- the reader experiences her entire life from a mongrel living in the streets to the tragic loss of her canine companion, her captivity in the government lab, her endearing relationship with the unwavering caretaker Yelena and her tragic fatal mission. The strong ties between Laika (renamed after her breed type) are exceptionally well defined; in fact, Laika has the ability to touch every character's life, even the most emotionally indifferent social-climbing Russian politicians. Evincing the cruelty and sadness of her life, Laika's striving to be loved echoes, and the strong bond between man -- or woman -- and his best friend resound off every page of her journey. The striking palette of earth tones works in concert with the compelling historically fictive prose a luminous masterpiece filled with pathos and poignancy. (afterword, bibliography, author's note) (Graphic novel. YA)" ?*Kirkus, Starred Review*

"Dead dog books used to be a dime a dozen. Time was a kid couldn't walk into a bookstore without getting

whacked over the head with "Old Yeller", creamed in the kisser by "Sounder", and roughed up royally by "Where the Red Fern Grows". Recently, however, dogs don't die as often as all that. You could probably concoct some magnificent sociological explanation for this, citing changes in the political and emotional landscape of our great nation leading to the decrease in deceased literary pups, but as I see it, a good dead dog story is as hard to write as an original paper on Moby Dick. What else is there to say? Man's best friend dies and everyone feels bad. In this jaded culture it would take a pretty steady hand to find a way to write a dead dog tale that touches us deeply. Not a dog person myself, I direct your attention today to Nick Abadzis. I don't know how he did it. Laika, the world's most famous real dead dog (a close second: the dead pooch of Pompeii), is now presented to us in a graphic novel format. Though I prefer cats through and through, Laika the novel grabs your heart from your chest and proceeds to dance a tarantella on the remains. The best graphic novels are those books whose stories couldn't have been told any other way. Laika has that honor.

Her story was more than just her own. It encapsulated a vast range of people, many of whom you may have never heard of. As the book begins we see a man named Korolev leaving a Russian gulag in a freezing night. Eighteen years later, he is the Chief Designer of Sputnik and his success is without measure. Buoyed by the success of the successful launch, Khruschev demands that his space program launch a second orbital vehicle within a single month. Enter Laika. An unwanted pup, abused and abandoned on the street, she's eventually caught and taken to the Institute of Aviation Medicine. There she is one of many dogs, trained for flight travel. Laika bonds immediately with her caretaker Yelena Alexandrovna Dubrovsky and endears herself to the other scientists as well. As it stands, however, no dog is better suited for space travel and Laika is slated to make a trip from which she will never return. Abadzis deftly describes the people who care for the little dog and the process by which she was ultimately abandoned and killed by both science and Cold War mechanics.

I admit it. You'd think that at this point I'd have learned to trust the First Second imprint of Roaring Brook Press. In the past two years they've managed to churn out consistently engaging, entertaining, fascinating graphic novels. But when I heard that they were doing Laika I was incredulous. You work as a children's librarian long enough and you see far too many complex issues simplified and sad stories made light, all in the name of the kiddies. I looked at Laika and wondered whether or not the book would even touch on her death. I thought to myself that maybe the author would put it in an Afterword or something. I mean, what child/YA GN is going to actually show a dog die? After finally finishing Laika, you will be pleased to hear that I gave myself a rousing series of slaps to the face. The death of the dog is practically the point of the entire enterprise from the book's start.

Laika's entire story, as conceived by Abadzis, is heartbreakingly sad but there are certain moments towards the end that I found particularly easy to identify with. When Comrade Yelena visits Laika for one last time she can hear the dog saying her name with every bark, even when Yelena is too far away to hear them. She dreams that Laika is calling out to her for help. That she's scared and uncomfortable and just wants to get out and play. Anyone who has ever owned a pet will be familiar with this feeling. When the pet is missing or in pain, it's difficult to keep from emphasizing with it. How much worse then when the dog in question is imprisoned in a capsule and shot into the sky? Abadzis doesn't just show Laika's plight. He makes you feel it in the core of your being.

The art is interesting as well. For the most part Abadzis chooses to maintain a simplified cartoony style. At moment of great importance, however, he will make the figure of Laika more three-dimensional. In terms of visual storytelling this is a remarkably interesting choice. As Laika sits in the red light of her capsule, mere moments before takeoff, she becomes vastly realistic. Other portions of the book were just as interesting. Sometimes scenes will be black and white, like stills from a movie. Other times they're vast two page spreads that drill home the wonder or the horror of a given moment. And in dreams the lines that make up a panel will grow soft and colorful. There are all kinds of interesting stylistic choices taken in this book if you're just

willing to look for them. As with any good graphic novel, these choices make up a significant portion of the storytelling as well.

I am happy to report that at the end of this book you will find an extensive Bibliography, replete with book, video, and Internet sources. Abadzis obviously took a great deal of time researching his subject, a fact mentioned in an after word by Alexis Siegel. He has gone from, "the stacks of the British Library to Korolev's house in Moscow." These facts are then combined with fictional details and the result is this book. To what extent does he hold himself accountable for accuracy? To my delight, Abadzis includes a final Author's Note that I've seen in children's books before, but that always amuses me when I spot it again. To quote: "In this book, all phases of the moon depicted on specific dates are accurate to the day - although I may have erred on the side of drama about the time of moonrises." Beautiful.

The last page of this book contains a quote that offers a 1998 statement from Oleg Georgivitch Gazenko. In it, he laments the way that Laika was misused. "We did not learn enough from the mission to justify the death of the dog." It's a dead dog book. Anyone who knows the story of Laika will be aware of that. But above and beyond the obvious this is an ode to dogs themselves. To the animals that we befriend and love and, ultimately, destroy. It's also about history, humanity, and the price of being extraordinary. No one can walk away from this book and not be touched. Consider Nick Abadzis a name to watch from here on in."

*?School Library Journal Blog*

"When most people think of the space program, it's images of stalwart, clear-eyed astronauts roaring into the skies on rockets of destiny that come to mind -- not Laika the dog. A Samoyed-Husky mutt caught off the streets and impressed into the Russian space program, Laika became in November of 1957 the first sentient being to leave Earth's orbit, inside the Sputnik 2 satellite. The plan was only to monitor her in her few hours of life, though, not to bring her home -- a sacrifice for which one of the scientists later expressed deep regret. Abadzis's tear-inducing and solidly researched graphic novel treatment of Laika's surpassingly tragic story is a standout, not just for its sympathetic point of view but for its refusal to Disneyfy or anthropomorphize the undeniably cute dog at its heart. The humans around Laika -- her protectors and tormentors from the fictionalized early sections, as well as the rocket scientists and her doting handler, Yelena all try to imprint their own diverse desires on her eager-seeming face. Although the tightly packed and vividly inked panels of Abadzis's art tell an impressively complex tale (buttressed by a helpful bibliography at the end) where the dog becomes a pawn in larger political and bureaucratic scheming, Laika's palpable spirit is what readers will remember." *?Publisher's Weekly, Starred Review*

"Classic dog-story themes such as loyalty serve as a backdrop for this fictionalized account of Laika, the first living creature launched into outer space. A charming and scruffy little dog, Laika survives an uncaring master and life as a stray before becoming part of the Russian space program circa 1956, just as the Soviet Union had achieved a huge victory over American competition. With a stilted romanticism that doesn't fit the story's tone, Laika is established as "a very special dog," but soon the focus of the complex tale turns away from the dog to Yelena Dubrovsky, the trainer responsible for preparing Laika and other dogs for the rigors of testing. Through Dubrovsky, the progress of the program and the incredible pressure on the scientists are given effective form. The rough-hewn art, similar to the Joann Sfar's work on the *Dungeon* books, makes the characters appear constantly nervous and uncertain, lending immediacy to the all-pervasive atmosphere of strict formality and enforced patriotism. An extensive bibliography of sources is appended." *?Jesse Karp, Booklist*

"Immediately following the collective international gasp that greeted Sputnik 1 in 1957, Premier Khrushchev gave Sergei Korolev and his design team approximately one month to outdo their triumph just in time for the fortieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Sputnik 2 would send a live passenger into orbit, but due to time constraints, the designers were unable to devise a re-entry system, and the canine cosmonaut was

doomed to die in space. Here Abadzis reconstructs the planning, politicking, and flight, following activities of the dog handler, the trainer, the chief designer, and the dog who came to be called Laika (barker). At its best, and particularly when contextualizing the ambitions of the Russian space program that dropped the temperature on the Cold War, this exemplifies how imaginatively and engagingly the graphic novel format can deliver information. However, in his well-intentioned effort to support team member Oleg Gazenko's conclusion that, "we did not learn enough from the mission to justify the death of the dog," Abadzis spins a hanky-wringer of a backstory for *Laika*, tracing an imagined life of neglect, abuse, and dashed hopes that would make the stray dog anxious to please its trainers and willing to undergo any discomfort in experimentation to gain their approbation, and thus elevates the callousness of the program to villainous treachery. Ultimately this authorial decision is as unnecessary as it is emotionally manipulative, since almost any reader with a beating heart will sympathize with *Laika* merely by observing her training ordeal, the affection of her handlers, and her sad destiny. Space enthusiasts will nonetheless appreciate how much of the drama unfolds not only in dialogue bubbles but in the meticulous visual detail within wordless frames that captures the complex emotional responses of human participants pressured to sacrifice a dog they've come to treasure. A bibliography leads readers to up-to-date materials for further research." ?*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"Gr 7 Up -- During the Cold War, Russia and the U.S. were entrenched in a battle to be first in space. Laika tells the tale of one special soldier in that battle, the dog who flew in Sputnik II. Former Gulag prisoner Korolev has ascended to the rank of Chief Designer, and, after the successful launch of Sputnik I, he is called upon to send a live creature into space within one month's time. Laika, also known as Kudryavka (curly tail), is a down-and-out stray caught by local officials and sent to the canine lab at the Institute of Aviation Medicine. Higher-ups notice the dog's special ability to withstand g-force, environments without gravity, and the special gel food given to the test subjects. When the time comes to select a dog to go into space, she is the obvious choice. Abadzis's artwork genuinely captures the Cold War atmosphere, while the youth-friendly textual take on the politically dangerous USSR compares favorably to that of Marjane Satrapi's depiction of unstable *Iran in Persepolis* (Pantheon, 2003). Abadzis provides enough historical content to make *Laika* a valuable teaching tool, but teachers using the graphic novel with middle schoolers may need to explain some of the subtle nuances of politics in the USSR. Those with a special fondness for dogs may wish to have some tissues handy." ?Sarah Krygier, Solano County Library, Fairfield, CA., *School Library Journal*

"With communism's triumph over capitalist science via Sputnik, Soviet Premier Khrushchev wanted an in-your-face sequel: a living creature sent into space.

The lucky gal is Laika, an accommodating street mutt that captured her handlers' affections. The plucky dog survives training, and her story is juxtaposed with a flashback of the space program director's earlier hairbreadth escape from a gulag. Indeed, the director chooses Laika for launch partly because of his feelings of empathy for her. But Laika does not survive her mission, and the unsavory details are hidden initially. The entire account leaks tragedy -- not just Laika's death and the director's harrowing experience but also the tragedy of the other characters and, indeed, all the Russian people struggling to maintain their humanity while enmeshed in suffocating bureaucracies. Drawn in grimy-colored naturalism, Laika is a powerfully emotional reading experience, easily the match of the starred *First in Space*, about chimps in the U.S. space program (Xpress Reviews, 8/1/07). Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik, both well-researched titles fictionalize turning points in the space race. While fine for ages 13+, Laika has more narrative subtlety than *First in Space* and would be appreciated by adults. Highly recommended for public and school libraries. The title needs appropriate nonfiction catalog entries." ?Martha Cornog, *Library Journal*

"Laika (First Second, 205 pp., paperback, \$17.95) is the tale of the Moscow street mutt that served as the first guinea pig of space travel. Strapped into Sputnik II, which the Communists launched 50 years ago to

herald the 40th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Laika died of stress and overheating after mere hours in space. By braiding and embellishing her story and those of chief Sputnik II designer Sergei Pavlovich Korolev and Yelena Dubrosky, the nurse who came to be Laika's chief caretaker, Abadzis conjures the complex, scary period known as the Cold War. His colors are vivid, his pages dense - most are 12 frames deep though varied in verbosity &mdash; and his line is vigorous, if not detailed. Verve and variety, not finesse, are his watchwords. So is the emotional genuineness that makes this kind treatment of an iconic dog so strong." *Boston Globe*

## Users Review

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What do you concerning book? It is not important to you? Or just adding material if you want something to explain what your own problem? How about your time? Or are you busy man? If you don't have spare time to try and do others business, it is make one feel bored faster. And you have free time? What did you do? All people has many questions above. They need to answer that question since just their can do that. It said that about reserve. Book is familiar in each person. Yes, it is proper. Because start from on kindergarten until university need this kind of Laika to read.

#### Bruce Zimmerman:

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