

H-Net Reviews

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Seth Kantner. *Ordinary Wolves: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2004. 324 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57131-044-6.

Reviewed by Marion W. Copeland (independent scholar and writer affiliated with the Center for Animals and Public Policy, Tufts Veterinary School)

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Publisher's Weekly described *Ordinary Wolves* as part of "the small but growing genre of ecological fiction," observing that the novel sets a new standard in the challenge such fiction faces in balancing "political and environmental agendas with engrossing storytelling." Similarly impressed, the American Library *Booklist's* reviewer, Donna Seaman, elaborated: "At every turn, Kantner fearlessly orchestrates dramatic communions between humans and the wild, hilarious incidents of culture shock, and profound inquiries into how one can live a meaningful life and do as little harm as possible to the earth and to others." Seaman compares this first-time novelist's "cultural insight, daring wit, and ecological vision" with that of seasoned novelists like Leslie Marmon Silko and Barbara Kingsolver, both of whom draw on the perspectives of both humans and nonhumans of diverse and often conflicting cultures, as does Kantner. In *Ordinary Wolves* whole chapters tell the wolves' story from the perspective of the wolves themselves.[1]

Kantner's prologue and final chapter (as well as interspersed chapters throughout the novel) are given to the wolves—the prologue to a mother wolf, dying and then being skinned by the hunter pilot who, ironically, also carries away Cutuk's—the novel's human protagonist and narrator—mother. Unlike her husband and three young children, none of whom are natives, she is not at home in the snow and prolonged dark of winter in the Alaskan tundra. The wolf, tracked and shot from the air, has also left behind a family. Cutuk's mother hears "their howls yipping mournful and confused" as they wait like her own children for the mother who will never return. Surprised at her emotional response to these nonhuman orphans, she finds herself humming "to keep [the pilot] from hearing their cries" and adding their tiny skins

to the one he now claims (p. 4). Unlike any Silko or even Kingsolver story, Kantner's story belongs throughout equally to the two litters of motherless cubs, human and wolf, left to deal with and, with luck, survive the natural dangers as well as the incursions of civilization in the habitat they share.[2]

When asked if he feels he is anthropomorphizing because of his inclusion of the wolves as characters Kantner replies, "Oh probably. I like other perspectives—trees standing around rooted while we brush past, ignoring them in their search for place and roots! The wolves were there from the beginning and in my book that way too." [3] Because Kantner does see the wolves as constant characters in the drama of the Alaskan tundra, and therefore in Cutuk's narrative, readers like Barbara Kingsolver find that this novel "sweeps back the material curtain of human contrivance to reveal what lies panting behind it" (jacket blurb).

Readers gain insight to Kantner's choice of title quite late in the novel when its narrator, adrift in Anchorage, has a revelatory exchange with his new girlfriend, Cheryl. "What," he asks his city-wise friend, "should I do with my cigarette butt?" Her reply—"Just throw it out the window. Everyone does"—startles the boy raised among the natives, human and nonhuman, of a virtually pristine tundra. Cutuk's father would see littering as sacrilege. It makes Cutuk realize that, just as he had learned to see himself as an outsider—exactly what makes him so insightful a narrator—from those native cultures, he was equally an outsider, albeit by nurture, here among white humans. Rather than flick his butt, Cutuk pauses to take in the view from the top of O'Malley Mountain where they have parked: "the electric fungus of Anchor-

age spread across the earth below” (p. 205).

He hesitates partly because he doesn't “trust the trees not to have feelings, or friends, or power over luck. The shamans,” he knows, “had left behind taboos that we inhaled with every breath in Kakunak—not even aware of being infiltrated.... How could I explain to Cheryl the ways superstition sprouted when you were drifted under in a sod igloo in a million acres of night?” (p. 205). The passing of a raven at that moment leads him to roll the window down, not to flick out his butt, but to respond—“Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuooooo”—to the bird's “*Kaung-kung*,” a call he knew to be that of a female (p. 205). The exchange seems to suggest a deeper understanding than Cutuk can hope to have with Cheryl, who greets it with a giggle and a question about his familiarity with wolves that Cutuk knows rises from her desire to see him as a romantic wilderness hunter. Embedded in his unspoken response is the theme that lies at the heart of the novel:

“My mouth started to open, ready to flood out the city lights with stories of home. But would telling be bragging? I wondered if I were a name-dropper. A wolf-dropper. Here and everywhere, I realized I walked a slushy path between the battle lines of Cabela's hunters and nature lovers, and if she were half as cynical and judgmental as I, she'd find me a traitor, a double-agent, an assassin of the wolf god, a meat eater and a tree hugger, too.” And so, he avers that he has seen “J-just ordinary wolves ... no Mowgli and Grey Brother stuff” (p. 205).

Again his inner thought privileges the reader, for Cutuk, even as he says this, is picturing the last wolf he had seen before leaving the wilderness, “the wolf ... in the den above the rocks; and downstream in the willows, rabbits chasing each other, mating; wolves hunting rabbits who were not paying as sharp attention as something so anxious to pass on genes should be paying; and possibly Eruk [the Inupiaq hunter Cutuk idolizes] focused, snowshoeing stealthily after the wolves, also focused; and....” (pp. 205-206). Like the wolves, Eruk, the Inupiaq hunter Cutuk has always wished to emulate, is the boy's mentor. The motherless pack of wolves may be, even more, his mirror selves. Like Eruk, Cutuk freely admits he “trusted animals more than people” (p. 37), admits, with a humility rare in Western humans, that “an animal could know infinitely more about something than I could” (p. 42), that “the wind is a thousand times more interesting than basketball,” and that “most caribou are more deserving than most people” (p. 202).

No wonder, then, that the tundra, the setting for most of Cutuk's tale, is richly described and rich in nonhuman

presences. Besides the wolves, there are the sled dogs, invaluable both for service and companionship in this “endless land” who are as the story is told being replaced by snowmobiles, caribou, bear, moose, and the small creatures, many of whom share the sod igloo, especially in the frigid dark months (p. 20). Both wild and domestic neighbors appear, often together, in Cutuk's father's paintings which show wolves as having “a dark, silvery feel, a feeling that the wolves were friends, with each other and with the night.” Cutuk likes “Abe's paintings of wolves ... better than his other paintings” (p. 22). Somehow, it seems right that the paintings demonstrate empathy for the wolves and not right for Cutuk, the hunter, to feel the same empathy. The story gains urgency exactly because he has come to feel he must “learn to stop worrying about wolf [and other animals'] pain” (p. 22), not champion the “mourning moose” he advises his father not to shoot because, having lost her calf to wolves, he senses she has “had enough bad luck.” Anyway, he tells Abe, a barren cow is sure to be fatter (p. 36). How is it Eruk and Abe can hunt, kill, and still feel with and for the animals while Cutuk cannot?

Before he disappeared, Eruk had given Cutuk a “brown bear figurine, carved out of ancient mammoth ivory” which, he tells the boy, is a powerful protector “deserving of eternal respect” (p. 67), a being Eruk himself fears and respects—and hunts. Cutuk guesses that predator and prey are part of a single fabric for Eruk while for him the two have been separated by a dualism harbored so deep in his own memes that he cannot knit them into a harmonious whole. Abe puts it well: cities, the keystone of Western Euro-American culture, are “everything about insulating you from the earth.” For Abe the only answer is to leave the city behind, not for two weeks or a month every year, but permanently, and live a “life close to the earth,” so close one becomes aware that the earth, like the wolves, is “alive” (p. 127). But Abe's son has not yet made that choice for himself. After his experiences in Anchorage, Cutuk is able to fathom his father's wisdom, realizing that Abe, as much as Eruk, is an elder to be emulated. While in the city, he'd realized the degree to which other Eskimos were becoming, like him, “Siamese spirits crawling the crevasse in between worlds,” gone from being “a connection to the land” to being “uncertain of who you were, basketball and booze the only constants. Television, teachers, and tomorrow were white” (p. 178).

Nor is it only human animals who are affected by this change. In Anchorage, the ravens, significant totem animals, have changed as well. Like humans, they have ad-

justed to town living, “addicted to later stages of the same junk, but without free health care” (p. 147). Cutuk is particular struck by this, because he has always “respected ravens more than any other bird, more than most people,” and what he sees of them in the city leaves him wondering, “What was happening?” (p. 147). Is it possible to inhabit the city without becoming, like the people there, strangely oblivious of the animals while remaining eager to “jet around the world burning fuel to spot rare sparrows”, or bag a rare trophy to hang in one’s expensive home (p. 245)? The people there seem to Cutuk to think of Nature as a romantic fantasy. Neither the Inupiaks, nor Abe, nor Cutuk share the accompanying illusion of being the conqueror of the wilderness: “the land might love me,” Cutuk knows, “but not more than one brown bear, one mosquito, one flake of snow. I could starve, get swatted, or melt” (p. 265). Even wolves, he knows, “run out of places to run, make mistakes, and die.” Likely Eruk, too, despite his knowing “something mysterious and powerful from the last vestiges of shaman days,” had made mistakes and failed to return from the hunt. Now Cutuk knows “[t]he chasm between legends around the fire and surround-sound TV, snowshoed dog trails and Yamaha V-Max snowmobiles, was too overwhelming, and no hunting, no tears, no federal dollars could take us back across.” The idea makes him feel “an avalanche of grief” (p. 273).

Not much later, we hear him tell his sister he has come to feel that “something’s missing in me—it feels like being born a wolf and choosing a dog’s life” (p. 286). If Jack London believed, at the opening of the twentieth century, that man and wolf alike could make such transitions successfully, Kantner, at the beginning of the twenty-first, has no such romantic notions. Still, like Cutuk, Kantner wants to accomplish “something for the country”—not ‘the American flag and the president,’ but for “the *country*”—the shrinking, melting tundra that wolf and Eruk and Abe called home. But he doesn’t know what to do. Cutuk cannot, like his father, paint, but Kantner can write. Perhaps the only answer is to persevere and adapt as Cutuk decides to do in Kantner’s novel, returning to the tundra and spending the “Breakup watching caribou and migratory birds return, and snow shoeing between patches of melting-out earth and songbird territories ... with ... Abe-like thoughts talking me into the idea that actions—as small as a bird’s song, as big as nuclear stockpiling—spread love and disturbance through the earth, through all creatures” (p. 293).

Writing a novel like *Ordinary Wolves* qualifies as such an effort. As if to emphasize that, very near the novel’s

end Kantner has Cutuk come upon a white hunting party camped next to their plane, a “moose’s huge head and antlers upside down drying on the sand.” It proved to be a moose Cutuk knew, a bull who had spent the winter sharing the environs of his camp “for company â? | the way moose often did.” They had exchanged daily greetings all that next summer, avoiding each other only as rutting season approached. “Now a harem waited back in the willow, cow moose in love with this stud. Shooting him would have been as challenging and sporting as shooting a sofa.” Hunters, Cutuk explains, should have enough exposure to the animals they hunt to “feel the other 364 days a year the moose has fought to live. How it felt to survive birth in the willows while brown bears waited; winter stands beside his mother against wolves; survive years alone in wading deep snows, the willows buried, the tundra howling wind; survive the spring crust that dropped moose to their ribs while it supported big hungry bears; and the summer insanity of mosquitoes driving him to his eyeballs into water. All for the cool sweet fall and the chance of mating” (p. 308).

Instead, this hunter leaves the moose’s body “big and brown as a wood pile, forlorn beside his guts, a yellow Kodak film wrapper, and no head,” moving Cutuk to a catharsis that is, also, Kantner’s answer to the despair that seems an inevitable response to the dilemma the novel reveals: “I’m not going to be a dog,” he vows, “I’ll take the wolf’s deal” (pp. 309-310). All that follows, like salvaging the remains of the moose to feed his sled dogs, is clean-up, leaving the final notes of the novel to the old wolf who, despite “lead in her shoulder, broken fangs in her jaw ... white as a polar bear,” survives to watch “her offspring scattered below, the human and its companions retreating into the land” (p. 322).

Notes

[1]. For the quotes from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*, see [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/1571310444/ref=dp\protect\unhbox\voidb@x\bgroup\def,{proddesc}\let\futurelet\@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/it/10{\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/n/10}\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/it/10\size@update\enc@updateproddesc\egroup0/103-9611756-6012650?~%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/1571310444/ref=dp\protect\unhbox\voidb@x\bgroup\def,{proddesc}\let\futurelet\@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/it/10{\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/n/10}\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/it/10\size@update\enc@updateproddesc\egroup0/103-9611756-6012650?~%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155)

[2]. Kantner writes with intentional irony, “The man’s sweaty fear” is “a scent sealed into [the old wolf’s] puppy-hood and the loss of his mother” that tells him

to “lead ... the pack away from the danger of the kill... Away into the mountains” (p. 43). It will take Cutuk the entire book to come to this wisdom.

[3]. See <http://www.milkweed.org/4>

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