

Books

The Ninemile Wolves

by Rick Bass

Okay, it's a book about wolves. I know what you're thinking. It's going to be either a sentiment-dripping, tear-jerking personal story trying to be the next *Never Cry Wolf*, or it's going to be a photo album with poetic captions using words like "graceful" and "wild". Or it might be a textbook.

It's none of those things.

In fact, the single biggest challenge to reviewing *The Ninemile Wolves* is trying to figure out what it is, because it's certainly not your usual cuddly wolf/nasty human story.

The easiest way to review it is to summarize the story, and see where I can go with it from there. It is the true story of a pack of wolves that just kind of appeared in Montana's Ninemile Valley during the spring of 1989, told from the detached perspective of the author, Rick Bass. The pack begins with a radio-collared black female, who was the sole survivor of a disastrous relocation attempt badly bungled by the state of Montana. This prologue is included in the book, but is too complex to go into here. She hooks up with a big gray male who appears out of nowhere. The two seem to click, and have a litter of six pups. These pups are later orphaned, when the mother vanishes in June of 1990 and is presumed killed by a hunter. Her radio collar is retrieved from the Ninemile River, which supports the hunter theory. The pups and their father get by until September, when a speeding car on I-90 kills the father.

The rest of the story centres around the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's desperate attempts to feed the pups without interfering in their growth. The hope is that when the hunting season on deer opens, the pups will learn to hunt on their own by practicing on hunter-wounded deer instead of easy to catch cattle. As the deer season looms closer, the nervous state authorities make the task of keeping the pups alive difficult. The state continually adds complications to the mix. The wolves, of course, don't know or care about the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

The pack of pups is eventually broken up, its members either killed or captured or simply vanished into thin air and thick woods. Don't get upset about me spoiling the ending, you

knew it wouldn't be a happy one.

The whole sad story is told in a verselike, poetic style that somehow manages to avoid false sentimentality. The most important part of this story, it seems to say, is not what happened to the wolves, but the way people reacted to having the wolves there. For the most part, people are glad to have them back. The wolves were almost celebrities, albeit unapproachable ones. The local paper had a daily update on them. Responsible hunters welcome the return, and even enjoy having them around. The ranchers are afraid for their cows, of course, but even they seem to want at least some wolves back.

But Rick Bass saves his wickedly sharp wit for cutting apart the anti-wolf factions, as small as they may be. The state was merely incompetent, the rancher who dropped their cattle carcasses in the woods to rot were only irresponsible. The chapters about the wolf-killers, though, are sharp, angry, and biting. The almost systematic way in which Bass presents their point of view and then carefully lets them hang themselves with it is almost scary. A good example is on page 5: "The wolves preyed upon these new intruders [cattle], without question, but the ranchers and government overreacted just a tad. Until very recently, the score stood at Cows, 99,200,000; Wolves, 0." Or when he quotes a letter the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association have sent him, on pages 83-86. He just reprints the letter, spelling errors intact, and describes the twenty minute video they send him. Sure, his sarcasm occasionally distracts you from the description of the video, but they bring it on themselves by not properly presenting themselves. And as any wolf knows, when you spot the weak, sickly straggler, you take him down. It strengthens you both.

The book does seem a bit one-sided, but this is to be expected. Bass has weighed all the evidence from a non-partisan point of view, and in the end has decided to support the only side his conscience will allow: the wolves. As he puts it:

"I can say what I want to say. I gave up my science badge a long time ago. I've interviewed

maybe a hundred people for or against wolves. The ones who are "for" wolves, they have an agenda: wilderness, and freedom for predators, for prey, for everything. The ones who are "against" have an agenda: they've got vested financial interests. It's about money-- more and more money-- for them. They perceive the wolves to be an obstacle to frictionless cash flow.

The story's so rich. I can begin anywhere."

But the basic motivations of the anti-wolf factions and the fallibility of the state wildlife authorities are not the focus of the book. Neither are the wolves, really. The focus of the book is on the noble, almost heroic efforts of Mike Jimenez, Ed Bangs and the other members of the USF&WS to save the wolfpack and ease the fears of those who might harm them-or themselves- by overreacting. They're heroes, these men, and their tragedy is that to get better at their jobs, they have to lose wolves to gain the

"But Rick Bass saves his wickedly sharp wit for cutting apart the anti-wolf factions..."

experience and foresight needed to help the next generation of wolves and men. And when they finally get good enough at their work to bring the wolves and the men back to good terms, they get promoted to a "better" position more removed from the ones they want to work with.

In short, *The Ninemile Wolves* is about people, and how the eventual return of the wolves will require us to deal with them on a personal level. The gripping prose and uncanny storytelling ability of the author show us that we can allow them back; that even if the wondrous balance of the old ecosystem is gone forever, we- the humans, the deer, and the wolves- can create a new balance of nature as good as the old, with a place for every species we still have left. All it takes is time, and a small, personal change in our own souls: to serve nature as well as we serve ourselves.

And that's the real message, folks. The rest is parable. What follows... is up to you.

The Ninemile Wolves is published in a trade paperback edition by Ballantine book. It is priced at \$13.00 Canadian. Buy it. Read it. Even if you hate wolves, you will get something out of it.

TRENT DRAKE