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## An Interview with Rick Bass

Claire Cazajous-Augé

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Claire Cazajous-Augé: I would like to begin this interview with a question about taxonomy. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael classifies the different species of whales that exist. As a former scientist, how do you feel about such classifications?

Rick Bass: Just fine. They, the classifications, fit the voice of Ishmael—they establish the voice of Ishmael—and represent his world view, and the necessary logic of the story, which is the pursuit of whales, through the perception, the lens, of the chasers—the pursuers. It's important to remember also the context of the day. Melville's ordering and classification provides a good template for the reader to understand the mysteries

and bounty of the vast sea below, and conveys simultaneously the hunter's fierce desire—obsession and attention. This is good work, when writing can pull double duty.

CCA: I would like to talk about anthropomorphism and its duality. Indeed, anthropomorphism highlights the similarities between men and animals while reasserting their differences. Consequently, there has always been a certain defiance toward this trope. In his article about the metaphor that Thoreau used to refer to animals, "Brute Neighbors," Thomas Pughe writes that anthropomorphism is "a potentially subversive trope," carrying "a symbolic burden." How do you use anthropomorphism in your writing?

RB: I think the goal of any art is to establish a connection with reader/audience/recipient. Specificity can be the sharpest, keenest, most immediate way to do this; but as an increasingly large percentage of the world becomes ever more estranged and disassociated from the natural world, I feel sometimes that some remedial work is required, some basic reminders that the world is still—in a healthy, functioning ecosystem, at least—connected. That—shocker!—living beings are sentient. Anthropomorphism can be redefined, under such value and need. In some ways it is like poetry—if it's done poorly, it's awful, worse than awful. But to not leave room for a subtle gesture or observation that points out shared (or dissimilar) characteristics—to willfully overlook that—strikes me as sterile, even artificial. It's a question of degree. Nothing can ruin an essay more quickly than lax or easy anthropomorphism. It's like rosemary: a tiny bit goes a long way and on some dishes it's not appropriate. It's a question of scale. The best is when you don't even know it's there, and are instead aware of metaphor and desire—the fuel for all great stories. I'm certainly not arguing for anthropomorphism, and try to avoid it myself, unless—as in *The Ninemile Wolves*—it is simply unavoidable, and is part of the story—or part of our part of the story, anyway.

CCA: In *Walden*, Thoreau tries to reproduce and interpret animals' sounds. He thus finds resonances between the night birds' songs and his personal questioning. However, in your stories, nature, along with your characters, is often silent. In order to describe the sounds of nature, you often resort to verbs and onomatopoeias: "coyotes yapping," "owls howling". Is it because human language will inevitably fail in representing and translating these sounds?

RB: I'm not sure I would agree that we will always fail at interpreting sound—more so maybe that they are but one of the five, or if you will six, senses of inhabiting the woods. The sixth being an integration of the other five, keenly felt. Scent, touch, taste, sound, and certainly sight—the verbs of sound are just one more thing to notice in the woods. I think further that in nature, many of my characters are searchers—which is to say, protagonists in a story. All stories are built of desire—someone wants something. It is not always the dominant desire in a story, but when many of my characters go into the woods they are seeking to place themselves more firmly in a tilting world. Again, they use the five senses. I don't think it's so much that nature tends toward silence in their world as they are just as keenly, or even more keenly, aware of the other four senses, mixing in; and as a writer, I try to feather those in without being overbearing. And here your observation about the dangers of anthropomorphizing in literature rings true; for a bird to spend a sentence "calling," for instance, all but shouts, "Listen! Listen up! Here comes metaphor"—a heavy-handed gesture, if not done carefully—or, far worse, "Listen! Here comes symbol!" One wants the reader to inhabit a dream—not a dream of literature or style, but simply a dream.

CCA: In *The Book of Yaak*, you compare art to two animals: wolves and grizzlies. Wolves because of their predatory behavior—"traveling great distances around the edges of [their] wide territory, and chasing and hunting down objects of [their] desire" (BY, 39)<sup>1</sup>—and

grizzlies because of their link with a world that is unattainable to humans and dates back to the beginning of the world: “mining the underground soil, the emotions of magic—the unseen, the unnamable” (BY, 39). Would you say that one approach is predominant in your fiction?

**RB: No—I think both aspects—the vertical and the horizontal—are necessary for satisfying structure, architecture, in a story. In a story like “Fires,” the tension and conflict—unacknowledged attraction/desire—is kept just beneath the surface, almost at the level of shallow grass roots, while the story proceeds above the surface—likewise in “Swans” there is a linear, chronologic, horizontal story of senescence, disintegration, reduction and diminishment through time—while a story like “The History of Rodney,” with its extreme emphasis on time and history, plumbs deeper.**

CCA: It seems that in your stories, you keep some things secret, holding back rather than exposing. You wrote in *The Book of Yaak* that “there are some things in the world that, if touched and measured, disappear” (BY, 58). I would like to know how you work with this dilemma as a creative force in your fiction and your nonfiction. I am thinking of the short story “Two Deer.” The title is misleading, because there are not just two deer but four. The first two are numbered (“The first deer” / “the second deer”) whereas the second two are just named. In *The Book of Yaak*, one of the chapters is entitled “Four Coyotes” but you never speak of the fourth animal: “I will not speak the name of this mountain anymore, nor will I tell you about the fourth coyote in the story” (BY, 29). Is it a way to protect the nonhuman world and keep some natural and narrative spaces free?

**RB: Yes—precisely. The word “space” is very important, a huge concept in my fiction and nonfiction. I like to think of space more than structure. Do the spaces and movements within determine the structure, or vice versa? I think slightly the former: as a river’s energy and content and nature carve the structure, the course, of its passage and riverbanks, rather than so much the other way around. The fire within the story determines the structure. The artist can presuppose a desired architecture or story but it is or should be heavily influenced by the content—and, yes, the spaces between scenes, characters, objects, events, words, sounds, rhythms.**

CCA: Michel Collot wrote that the presence of otherness gives depth to the world. It helps us to have a new perspective on the world. Do you think that animals, like your dog Colter who had the power to “transcribe a new landscape,” can help someone to renew his or her perception of the nonhuman world? In other words, when you go hunting with your dog, do you see nature differently? Do animals act like translators of sorts?

**RB: Without question! A hunter learns quickly to watch the dog’s movements, and in so doing to be more keenly attuned to the wind direction that brings the dog scent, to the escape lanes for birds that might flush—the terrain between hunter and dog, number of steps required to close that distance, should a bird be found, contours—moisture patterns, where birds might be in the heat of the day—overheard hawks circling, which might help pin the bird—and so on, and so forth. All crashing into the brainpan at the speed of life.**

CCA: In *The Black Rhinos of Namibia* and in *In my Home There Is No More Sorrow*, you express your fascination for the way rhinos and mountain gorillas fit in a landscape and belong to it. Would you say that their “creative adaptation” gave you a model to adapt to the Yaak valley when you first settled there?

**RB: Yes and no. I wasn’t aware of such individual attempts at fittedness at the time—did not compare my own efforts, which were conscious, to those of evolution, which are not conscious—a species strives “merely” to survive, prosper, procreate, I think, not to fit a niche. But in retrospect, I recognized the similarities between my social and**

individual attempts to fit a place, learn a place, prosper in a place, and those of species that have likewise become—over generations—fitted to their own landscapes.

CCA: In *The Black Rhinos of Namibia*, you evoke a form of disorientation, often trying to draw parallels between Namibia and Montana. I wonder if this experience changed the way you write about the Yaak valley, and if so, how.

RB: I don't think it changed how I write about the Yaak—the Yaak is the Yaak—but it was wonderful to see the obverse landscape, the flip side of lush and wet, and yet how life strives here also, just as hard, to endure and succeed, and with as much "creativity." The fire-for-life in a green wet rainforest is no different from the same yearning in a red desert. I knew that intellectually, but it was good to see it in tangible, physical manifestation. And as in the Yaak, the keystone species, umbrella species, beneath which almost all others operate, were dramatic—just much more visible in the desert, like a veil lifted.

CCA: Do you consider animals differently when you write fiction and nonfiction? Do you consider that there is a difference in their representation?

RB: Yes and no. I don't consciously assign "parts" or goals for animals in either my fiction or nonfiction—they are not symbol or metaphor as instead simply present, according to truth (artistic or journalistic)—so the answer is yes and no, and maybe more no. I try not to think of them any differently than I do people as characters in fiction or nonfiction—which is to say, observe them closely, represent them so that they are interesting, and a vital part of the story or essay. At some deeper level there probably are differences (fiction/nonfiction)—but not at any conscious level for me.

CCA: I would like to ask you how you consider the interplay between science and poetry in your work. Indeed, if science is a first step toward the understanding of the mysteries of the natural world, it often shows its limits.

RB: I would agree about science showing its limits but would rather argue that it is in the arts and storytelling, and in metaphor, that we learn first and ultimately perhaps more in understanding the natural world.

CCA: In "Two Deer," the autopsies Martha performs on dead deer to understand the reason of their deaths leave many unanswered questions: "It was as if there were something out there that could not be measured: a thing they needed but had run out of" (*HS*, 176). Hypotheses and imagination are then used to fill in the gaps. Do science and poetry complement each other? Can poetry fill in the gaps left by science?

RB: I think the other way around—science can sometimes help fill gaps left in poetry, rather than the other way around. Science is bounded—either by the confines of the laboratory, or, if in the field, by the protocol of the experiment—time of year, temperature, etc.—a finite set of conditions. Life is not that way. Storytelling can cross these arbitrary and somewhat mechanical lines in its reckless pursuit of larger and more hidden truths.

CCA: In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Carlo Ginzburg shows the similarities between hunting and writing. The hunter and the writer both have to pay attention to signs, decipher them and eventually reconstruct a narrative. I wonder if you agree with this analogy and how being a hunter has an influence on the structure of your stories.

RB: Absolutely. A writer searches for hidden things, things at depth—like a geologist. The line that propels a hunter is desire, as with a writer. In a story, a main character wants something, and goes after it. What else is this but the story of the hunt? I've

written about this extensively in my book, *Brown Dog of the Yaak*, and elsewhere, including an essay, “Landscape and Imagination.”

CCA: When you go into the woods to observe or hunt animals, do you adopt a single vision, that of a hunter, that of a scientist, or is it a combination of both?

**RB: It is usually one or the other. In hunting season, it is certainly as a hunter!**

CCA: It seems to me that your writing has changed a lot since your first collection, *The Watch*. Indeed, the relationships between the characters and the nonhuman world show more violence and domination. I would like to focus on two similar scenes that occur in “Mississippi” (W) and in “The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness” (SSW). In the first story, two young men catch a turtle, play with it and insult it. In the second story, Ann and her brother also catch turtles and armadillos but they use a phosphorescent paint to write their names on their shells before observing them walking away in the dark. How do you explain this different approach? Does it have to do with a change of scenery? Is it mainly a chronological evolution?

**RB: It’s not an evolution, tempting as that may be to extrapolate between two points. In many of my stories the animal-human relationship is defined by violence, as bespeaks I think the historical and current condition. Certainly there are scenes and stories of caretaking—the sick and overworked mule in “Wild Horses,” for instance, or the fawn in the Thanksgiving entry in *Winter*; but in general we as a species have proven we can be as cruel to species other than ourselves as we can be to each other. My exploration of these themes—our species’ competing treatments of animals, and any other disadvantaged being—the twin elements of the human condition, gentleness versus disregard or outright cruelty—the human condition in flux—culminates, I think, in “Fish Story.” I am reminded of the Pattiann Rogers poem, “Animals and People.” Our relationship with animals—indeed, with all of the natural world—seems to still be very much a work in progress.**

CCA: I would like to focus on two particular birds. The dead egret in “Pagans” and the dead eagle in “The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness” almost appear as martyrs. They have been wounded by humans and are almost crucified. While you seem to play with a Christian imagery, there is nevertheless an almost pagan dimension to their sacrifices. Indeed, their blood directly nourishes the earth. Would it be right to say that they are a metonymy for the suffering natural world?

**RB: Yes!**

CCA: Just like the elk in “The Distance,” many animals appear to be intermediaries, or emissaries between the human and the nonhuman worlds. Significantly enough, they often appear to men at dusk, and at the edges of the woods. Does this liminal position make them privileged creatures with our world and a world that remains unknown to us?

**RB: There is that poetic aspect, but it comes first and foremost from the fact that most animals, particularly mammals, are most active in crepuscular hours.**

CCA: Do you think that an encounter with an animal can give us access to the mysteries of the nonhuman world?

**RB: I do believe this, in a way that we think of in contemporary thought as mystical—which I use to mean simply that which we do not yet understand fully. I can’t begin to tell you how many times I have had animals, rare animals, present themselves to me when I have been thinking about them. It transcends coincidence.**

CCA: It appears that there is a difference in the way you describe living or dead animals. As living animals are often elusive, they are represented by fragments whereas dead animals

allow a more detailed description, and the eye of the observer can almost dissect their bodies. Does it mean that living animals are always beyond human understanding?

**RB: No, again I think that is simply verisimilitude. It's easier to observe details up close and stationary—though as I think you are intimating, the observations will differ not only from proximity and motion but in other ways, less measurable—the ineffable quality of animus.**

CCA: Indeed, some of the comparisons or images that are used in your short stories can be quite puzzling. In spite of a strong reverence toward the natural world, some images compare animals to trivial objects (a pig the size of a Volkswagen in “The History of Rodney”, a turtle like an operating car wash in “Mississippi”). Could you explain why you sometimes resort to almost incongruous images?

**RB: The artist's/writer's primary responsibility is not to be precious or predictable or to advocate but to reach and move readers. A big pig resembles the shape of a Volkswagen beetle. Good metaphors often surprise. To compare one animal to another can sometimes weaken both, can muddy the waters.**

CCA: It seems to me that in your short stories, the nonhuman world is not a mere background to human stories, it directly influences the lives of the characters and your writing (in terms of structure, rhythm, plot, etc.). Do you think that the interconnectedness of animals with their environment is a source of inspiration in your creative process?

**RB: Yes, but it's not limited to that. I am inspired by all processes—hydrology, geology, evolution, cellular biology—I love the cause-and-effect of functioning systems—natural systems, that is, which seem to me to be infinitely more sophisticated, complicated, and interesting than even the most complex systems devised by humans. The organic and the living is the realm of metaphor, which is the realm of good story.**

CCA: In many of your short stories, almost extra-ordinary events happen. Many of these elements highlight the mysteries of the natural world: in “The History of Rodney,” a river disappears; in “The Hermit's Story,” Ann and Gray Owl fall under a frozen lake where they discover a subterranean world, etc. These elements have been said to belong to “magical realism.” Do you agree with this term or would you use another word? Is it sacred? Is it magic?

**RB: I would not use the term magical realism. I'm not sure what term I'd use. The events in my stories may not be probable but they are always possible.**

CCA: Animals seem to carry a mythical dimension and your stories suggest that they are deeply linked with the origins of the world. In “Swamp Boy,” buffaloes are said to have participated in the creation of the city of Houston and in “The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness,” birds announce the narrator's birth. Could we go as far as to say that animals participate in the elaboration of some myths of creation of America?

**RB: Certainly; the creation story of the earth as Turtle Island is one of the most beautiful there is. Likewise the story of bears descending into the underworld in winter and re-emerging in spring—everywhere one looks in nature, these powerful, beautiful stories have existed long before we began making up our own.**

CCA: It seems to me that the numerous scenes in which characters tell other characters stories with animals help create a bond between individuals living in isolated valleys. Would

you agree that the narratives that emerge from the encounters between humans and animals have the power to reunite men?

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RB: Absolutely. We—humankind—are so young in the world, so lost, so new to the party. The older ways, we long for that security and fit and connection. Almost every other species has been here longer than we have; at a mere 180,000 years of age, we are so very new to the party—a bold and curious experiment, far out on the branch, way out away from the main trunk of the tree of life. In this regard we sense intuitively if not explicitly that almost all other life, all other animals, are our elders, more deeply experienced, and it is therefore right and primal to tell stories of and about them. They connect us with greater attachment to a writhing, spinning world. Their survival is proof that life can succeed.

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## NOTES

1. Abbreviations: *BY*: *The Book of Yaak*; *HS*: *The Hermit's Story*; *SSW*: *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness*; *W*: *The Watch*.

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## ABSTRACTS

This interview was conducted by email from October 9<sup>th</sup> to October 11<sup>th</sup> 2015. The interview focuses on the role and the representation of animals in Bass's work.

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**Subjects:** Reconnaissances

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