**A Conversation with Bryce Andrews**

**You encountered Millie, the grizzly bear at the heart of *Down from the Mountain*, while doing conservation work in the Mission Valley in Montana through the nonprofit People and Carnivores. How did you become involved in this sort of work?**

I’ve loved wild creatures and remote places since I was a child. That deep-seated interest drove me east from Seattle, where I was raised, to western Montana where I made my living as a ranch hand for a decade. I saw a lot of wolves and bears on ranches. They caused trouble, but they also intrigued me. Something about predators cuts straight to our center, stripping away distractions and pretense. I value that, and want to make sure that space remains for such animals in the modern geographical and cultural landscape.

Ranching brought me close to wolves and grizzlies, even when I worked against them. That intimacy helped me to recognize the importance of those species. It inspired me to work on their behalf. When I connected with People and Carnivores, a group approaching conservation with a deep respect for the people living in rural, wild places, it was a natural fit. They offered me a job and I took it.

**What drew you to ranching in the first place?**

It started with an art exhibition and a road trip. My father was the director of the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle and he organized a show called The Myth of the West. I was young and the artwork hooked me. I remember looking at images of Montana—of Yellowstone and herds moving under endless skies—and thinking that I had to go and see it. We took a car trip out to Montana in the summer, and the place was bigger, lovelier and rougher than I could have imagined. My parents had friends, Pat and Suzie Zentz, who ranched outside of Billings. Pat was particularly important to me because he was a rancher and an artist. He presented the work of agriculture as a method of looking deeply at land. He led me to believe that the task of making a living from the soil, if approached with the right sort of attention, could be endlessly complex and meaningful. I still think that’s true.

Pat and Suzie were part of what drew me to ranching. The Sun Ranch was equally important. My first book, *Badluck Way*, came from the Sun. I fell into a summer job on that place, which sat at the higher, colder end of the Madison Valley, just outside Yellowstone Park.

There were wild animals everywhere—huge herds of elk, packs of wolves, roaming bears—and I had a rare and intimate view of it all. The job convinced me that ranching would keep my life interesting.

**How does Millie’s story speak to broader issues at play in the American West? How does this particular narrative fit into a larger one in the region?**

Millie’s story opens onto many of the modern West’s essential issues. She’s an entirely wild animal who must make her living at the edge of a domesticated landscape. She encounters rural sprawl, speeding vehicles, herds of untended livestock, and human beings with trigger itch—in other words, the West. She gorges on corn grown from genetically modified seed and digs daybeds in glyphosate-soaked soil. Raiding trash cans, she ends up eating the same processed, overpackaged garbage that we do. Her struggle to survive unfolds against the backdrop of a warming climate, with natural food sources dwindling, residential development fragmenting bear habitat, and irresistible crops being planted on the valley floor.

The particulars of Millie’s life and death show clearly what we’ve done with Montana’s pretty valleys. I hope her story makes an argument for changing things.

**Do you think having worked as both a rancher and in wildlife conservation gives you a unique perspective on the issues running through this book?**

I do. Having spent a good deal of time in the saddle, fixing fence, and otherwise doing the mundane tasks of ranching, I’ve developed a profound respect for agriculture and the people who pursue it. I know the work is hard—harder than most jobs in the modern economy. I understand the ways in which it can be rewarding and devastating, and how the presence of wolves and bears can tip a delicate balance in a painful direction. Put plainly, I understand how tough it is to make a living from the land.

I’m also aware that our approach to agriculture needs to change. Having shipped hundreds of calves to slaughter and grazed cattle on thousands of acres of private and public land, I understand that we’ve come to a point of reckoning in the West. Many ranchers have cast their lot with scale and efficiency, growing their operations by taking on debt and embracing things like genetically modified seed, animal growth hormones, and extensive herbicide use. One look at the number of family ranches going broke, or the staggering acreage lost to subdivision and irresponsible development, is enough to show that this approach isn’t working. We need to do better by the land that sustains us. We all have a right to push for this, as well as a responsibility to check ourselves and others who fall short.

**There’s a lot of tension in this book, and clearly a lot of conflict within this region over whether or not we should be protecting grizzlies. Why do you think this work is important? Are there any efforts here that particularly give you hope?**

Coexisting with big carnivores always generates conflict and tension. It’s a difficult subject because when we argue about our responsibilities and approach to living with grizzlies, we’re really talking about whether humankind should inconvenience itself on behalf of other species. Should we slow down on the highway? Ought we refrain from raising livestock in certain places? Should we require communities to forgo growth or prosperity to preserve habitat for dangerous beasts? These are not simple questions.

Grizzly bears are hard to live with, and getting along with them requires restraint and care. Those two qualities are common enough in individual humans, but they’re rare in groups and societies. Fostering those virtues is a big part of my work for People and Carnivores.

Certain things give me hope. Across Montana and the West, more people are recognizing the cultural, economic, and biological value of species like wolves and grizzlies. We’re beginning to get creative about coexisting with large predators.

That curiosity takes many forms, but livestock guardian dogs are particularly interesting to me right now. Big, tough dogs are used all over the world to protect livestock. They’ve been bred to that purpose for millennia and are very good at their job. I’d like to see a lot more dogs protecting herds and flocks in the West. I’ve been working on several such projects, and will experiment in the future with using dogs to keep grizzlies out of crop fields.

Perhaps most encouraging is the way conservation groups, governmental agencies, and agriculturalists are beginning to look more holistically at landscapes. By asking the right questions and making use of information from collared wildlife, we’re coming to better understand how species move through Montana’s patchwork quilt of wilderness and development. We know, for instance, of a grizzly bear that makes an annual seventy-mile trek, crossing three valleys to arrive at a farmer’s field when the corn is ripe. Understanding such connections allows us to be proactive in our efforts to limit conflict. Right now, we’re maturing into a better understanding of grizzlies and a clearer sense of what they mean to us. The next essential task will be acting on that knowledge.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. In what ways has modernity threatened wildlife in Montana? What are some ways that you’ve observed wildlife affected by humanity where you live?
2. How does Andrews understand the agency and intellect of animals? What wisdom did Andrews gain from observing and working with animals as a rancher, and how does he use his understanding of domesticated animals to help him understand wildlife, in particular carnivores?
3. On page 25, Andrews writes this about ranching: “Of this I can be certain: I recognized a void and a canker, and I was certain that it had something to do with killing. I suspected, too, that making amends would require saving the lives of animals.” Discuss what Andrews means by “a void and a canker,” and the emotional tolls of ranching.
4. What does success look like for animal conservationists like Stacy? Why do we need experts like them, and what are the limitations of their work?
5. On 127, Stacy expresses his frustration for hunters’ “lack of concern” when it comes to grizzly bears, explaining “how easy it was for a grizzly and a hunter to surprise each other—an encounter that often led to a frightened gunshot.” Discuss the relationships and power dynamics between hunters, grizzlies, conservationists, and ranchers. Compare and contrast the ways they each live off the land—what happens when their needs for space or resources conflict with another’s?
6. What is the impact of AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) certified facilities and rehabilitation centers on local wildlife? How does the certification facilitate or impede the rescue of certain animals?
7. Lisa, the WILD Wildlife rehabilitation Center observes: “Zoos aren’t doing too well these days…Attendance and funding have flagged as the public grows less comfortable seeing animals in cages.” How do you feel about the decline in zoo popularity? What are some positive and negative impacts of zoos?
8. What responsibilities does Andrews take on for the animals in his life, and how do they shift throughout the book? How has reading this book changed the way you see animals, and human-animal relationships?
9. Andrews was not raised in Montana—what are some key moments in which he shows us how his passion and respect developed for the place, its inhabitants, and its wildlife?
10. How are organizations like People and Carnivores approaching entire ecosystems holistically? How has technology aided in the restoring the populations of wolves, grizzlies, and other wildlife? What, to you, might true coexistence look like?