

# *American Copper* by Shann Ray (an excerpt)

Juniper here at the base of "Nipple Mountain" First Day of Autumn, September 23, 2015. Photo by John Simpkins

An excerpt from Shann Ray's *American Copper*

*(a full review appears on our book review page)*

## Zion and the old Blackfeet woman:

AN EMPTINESS in him he could not be rid of, Zion went forth and bludgeoned the men who challenged him and was sometimes bludgeoned by the steers he challenged. When the day was done he lay on his bedroll in summer, or in the tenement shacks of small towns in winter. Thoughts of death accompanied him often. North across the Highline the rippled flash of the aurora borealis made him wonder at the nature of God and men. When he dove onto a large white brute of a steer at the Indian rodeo in Poplar, the animal pierced his side and nearly accordioned his spine. Three Sioux bullfighters, a Cree, and an Assiniboine were needed to drag him to where he lay in the shade of a tree. The rodeo doctor took a brief look and said he'd be fine. But Zion didn't agree. Toward evening, feeling worse, he gathered himself and mounted his horse.

He went back west along the Highline in a fever of days, hearing the bloodcurdling anthem of coyotes in the night. Massive herds of wild horses roamed the land, and he saw the black vein of their number out over the steppes in the darkness. In daylight he passed a man on horseback with a long dog greyhound and two wolfhound runners, big and lank, their narrow faces muted by eyes that sought the terrain and ran closemouthed until the long dog overtook a lone wolf or coyote and brought the animal down, the two running dogs following to make the kill.

Half a morning further he saw a small barn around Sunburst near Marias Pass. Coyote pelts and wolf skins were tacked to the wood by the nose. The furs covered the entire surface of the south-facing wall, even to the tip of the arch. He sat astride his horse, holding his side. He looked at the barn a long time before he clicked his tongue and moved south. At last, at the edge of consciousness he made his way into the hills, where he entered the mouth of a cave above the bluffs outside Heart Butte.

Here an old Blackfeet woman watched him pass through the opening. She had been out gathering bulbs when she heard the step of the horse and looked up to see him in the distance. She saw how he held himself hunched over with his arms wrapped at his middle. She came to him the next morning and touched his shoulder where he lay, making sure his eyes opened before she left again. When she returned she brought him some jerked deer meat, which she chewed first to soften, an old potato, and water from a leather flask. The food smelled like earth. He'd be dead without her, he thought, and contemplated his will to live, where it came from, and who shepherds the living and the dead.

Winter set in like the teeth of a badger.

His life seemed to walk away from him. He saw the old woman's ancient loose-skinned face in his dreams and woke to her crouched over his chest, her fingers on his lips. Months passed. He fell far into darkness and did not return until the air took on warmth as the land burnished itself again to green and gold. The sound of birdsong a clarion in his ears, meadowlark and pine grosbeak, Steller's jay and black-capped chickadee. The strength slowly returned to his fists and legs. At last his whole body rose up. He went outside, where he found his horse eating from a thatch of fresh hay a short distance below the cave.

Before he left he tracked the old woman's steps to a small village where tipis clung to the north edge of the reservation at a bend in the creek the people there called Bone Whistle. He sat astride his horse and looked down from a low ridge.

From his place among aspen and some few tamarack he saw her far below as she entered through the opening of one of the dwellings. He made note and took the snare traps from his saddlebag. He set the line near a game trail, slept a final night in the cave, and woke early. When he inspected the line he found a marten, two lynx, and a bobcat. To these he added a deer he managed to shoot. He also took two magpies for their ceremonial feathers and came to her with the deer laid over the haunches of his horse, the marten and cats along with the birds hung by hay twine from the pommel horn.

Shann Ray is a professor at Gonzaga University, and a former professional basketball player. His debut novel, *American Copper*, is set in early 20th century Montana featuring bar fights, forgiveness and love. The book is a love song to Montana, and was called "tough, poetic, and beautiful" by Sherman Alexie, and "expansive and luminous" by Debra Magpie Earling. Shann went to high school in Livingston, MT, and spent part his childhood on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in southeast Montana. He'll be reading at the inimitable Elk River Books in Livingston on Saturday, December 12th. [www.shannray.com](http://www.shannray.com)

Zion was welcomed by the old woman. He presented his gifts as her people gathered around, watching him kiss her cheek. He cut the buttons off his coat, placing them in her hands while he removed his vest and neckerchief to put them on her. Directly she went into the lodge. Returning, she placed a large wolf skin over his shoulders. She wrapped the tail at his neck while others touched his hair and beard. There was a feast then, with dancing.

He thought he might stay, but in the dark he slipped away while the fires were still high. Under the track of stars he went farther west to the Flathead River, where a great blue heron stood in the shallows nearby. Wide moon overhead, a sky almost as light as day, the gray shawl of the heron's first feathers made a line against the blue of the broad feathers. The heron lifted, beating the air loudly before it glided along the river at a speed that carried it wide around a bend of water. The bird grew smaller and smaller before being wholly lost to view. In the coming days Zion rode along the vast body of Flathead Lake all the way to Wild Horse Island. Finally he chose an angle that led him south along the Mission Range.

Near Ronan he broke horses for the Salish, then made his way toward Missoula, where he hoped he might find more work. Through huge river valleys that took more than a day's ride to cross he rode beneath canopies of cloud and cloud towers, uprisen columns of white like strongholds in the sky. Great swaths of cobalt met his eye. Shafts of sunlight slanted like the hand of heaven touched to earth.

Toward Butte a single bald eagle plied the air along the Clark Fork River.



