

Mountain Men

Shann Ray

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In Montana the rocky mountain front runs like a huge spine through the state. Often the mountains hold a brooding temperament, filled with ferocity and storm. The eastern side of the state is massive and largely empty, a land of grass, horses, deer, and antelope. A silent, contemplative landscape. A state nearly 700 miles across that takes 10 hours to drive, Montana is gigantic, haunting in splendor. The state contains no less than 100 mountain ranges: the Beartooths, the Crazies, the Absarokas, the Sapphires, the Beaverheads, the Sawtooths, and many more. Much of the landscape is made up of crags and ridges, cirques, spurs, and escarpments that touch the sky at 8,000 to 13,000 feet. All of Pennsylvania and much of the eastern seaboard of the United States can fit within Montana. Montana is home to elk, deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, wolves, wolverines, grizzlies, black bear, mountain lions, mountain goats, meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, red-tailed hawks, blue-capped tree swallows, gray owls, golden eagles. A mountain lion can leap as high as 15 feet and as far as 40. A wolverine can cross nine mountain ranges in 30 days. When I think of the mountains of Montana, I think of gratitude, affection, and humility. Yet Montana also hosts a history of Native American and Euro-American contact inscribed as much by atrocity and distance as dignity and desire.

I grew up fishing, climbing the mountains, walking the rivers, playing basketball year round, jumping off bridges and diving into cold clear water. And hunting as well. A man has rifles, his favorite rifles. For me, my father's old .22, the stock worn and darkened, good feel of wood in the hand, and a true line from gun to bird. Grouse, pheasants, sage hens, and wild turkeys end up fried hot or in a bubbling stew with potatoes and carrots and celery. For bigger animals, the Remington .243, again a gun of my father's, one he's had for 40 years, lighter than most and with good range. Atop the rifle a wide angle Redfield four-plex scope with a 2 to 7 power variable. The bullet travels 2900 to 3000 feet per second. Dinners of deer or elk steak, deer or elk hamburger, sausage made from the meat of the animal, along with excellent deer or elk jerky. Recently my father switched to a Smith and Wesson .22-250. The gun is lighter than the .243 but fires farther and faster, the bullet at 4000 feet per second. The gun is mounted with a Simmons 50 millimeter 3 to 9 power open face scope for wider field of vision. We shoot at 4 power. The mind and ear experience a reverse echo. You see the animal go down before you hear the report. The hide and rack of an elk are often sold to a fur buyer: the hide for 15 or 20 dollars, the complete skull and rack, raw, uncleaned, and frozen, for 60 or 70 dollars depending on size. The ivory teeth of a mature bull elk sell for 40 dollars a pair, and the ivory teeth of a mature cow elk sell for 10 dollars a pair.



Shann Ray's collection of short stories, *American Masculine*, received the American Book Award, the High Plains Book Award, and the Bakless Prize. He is also the author of *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity*, a work of creative nonfiction political theory, and *Balefire*, a poetry collection. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Montana Quarterly*, *Narrative*, *Northwest Review*, and *Poetry*. He spent part of his childhood on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeast Montana and has lived in Alaska, Canada, and Germany. A systems psychologist focusing on the psychology of men, he now lives in Spokane, Washington, with his wife and three daughters where he teaches leadership and forgiveness studies at Gonzaga University.

