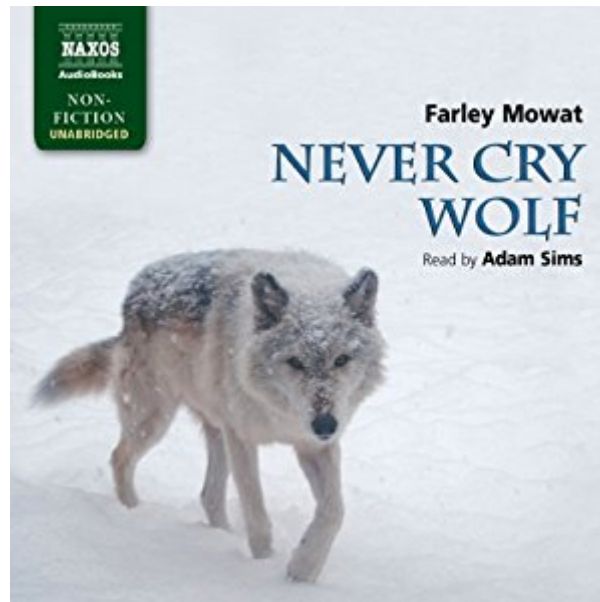


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Mowat: Never Cry Wolf



Synopsis

More than half a century ago, the naturalist Farley Mowat accepted an assignment to investigate why wolves were killing Arctic caribou. Mowat's account of the summer he lived in the frozen tundra alone - studying the wolf population and developing a deep affection for these wild creatures (who were no threat to caribou or man) - is today celebrated as a classic of nature writing, at once a tale of remarkable adventure and an indelible record of the myths and magic of wolves. *Never Cry Wolf* was made into a major motion picture by Walt Disney Productions.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

NEVER CRY WOLF is Farley Mowat's first-person reminiscence of his time spent studying wolves in the Canadian arctic. NEVER CRY WOLF, first published in 1963, was one of the earliest, most widely-read, and most effective conservation narratives ever penned. It's Russian edition (the title of which, literally translated back into English, is *WOLVES, PLEASE DON'T CRY*) was responsible for a Soviet ban on wolf hunting that spared the animals in their natural habitat and gained Mr. Mowat a notorious reputation at the U.S. State Department, which banned his subsequent entry into the United States. NEVER CRY WOLF has been attacked as being more fable than fact, and this may be true. Mowat has often said that he prefers not to let facts get in the way of the truth, and there is no question that he wanted his readers to come to love these generally benighted creatures. If one doubts the low esteem in which wolves are held one only needs to consider representative northern European fairy tales: Peter and the Wolf, Little Red Riding Hood, and others present the wolf as a

four-legged homicidal maniac. Unfortunately, this age-long prejudice has nearly exterminated the wolf in most of its range, courtesy of a certain two-legged homicidal maniac. Like our primordial fear of the dark, and the very common terror of cats, lukophobia derives from the lost years of the cave. Mowat tells a good story. As a young Game Warden he is sent to remote northernmost Canada to evaluate the effect of wolf depredations on the caribou herds. What he finds is that the wolves eat only sick, aged, or weak caribou, thus contributing to natural selection (while human beings are actively destroying whole herds of caribou).

I picked this book up recently for the first time since high-school, some 15-plus (!) years ago. Maybe it was Steve Irwin's death, or a viewing of the documentary *Grizzly Man*, that got me to thinking about it- either way, I'm glad I did. I'd forgotten what a wacky character Farley Mowat was, and how much more there is to this quick read than dry scientific reporting. Mowat's communing with the wolves (circa 1950) was partially borne of pure, scientific curiosity; in his own words, he "took the word biology- which means the study of life- at its face value," and sought to immerse himself outdoors and away from an aseptic laboratory. The other thing engendering his research was the vagary of the Canadian government, which set him to studying wolves in Ottawa with a throw of the dice (not to mention next to no itinerary, instructions, or training). Mowat dispelled major myths of wolf as bloodthirsty, marauding monsters, and showed them to be gentle, caring, and family-oriented (in fact, mostly monogamous) creatures. He never felt threatened by his lupine companions, despite keeping quarters very close to- and at one point, entering- the den. He witnessed "George, Angeline, and Uncle Albert" engage in compassionate acts like nurturing and training young pups and serving as hosts for traveling packs of non-native wolves. The chapter at the narrative's end ("To Kill A Wolf") describing the indiscriminate and government-promoted wolf hunting practices is made sadder by the way the wolves have by then won the reader's heart. What made this nature tale really shine, however, was Mowat's plucky attitude and unconventional scientific methodology. He alternately horrified Eskimo locals and won them over with alcohol.

My problem with Farley Mowat's (non-autobiographical) books is that they play extremely loose with the facts and the persons described, and in some cases just lie. In the case of *Never Cry Wolf*, Mowat plagiarizes substantially. Mowat's misinformation undercuts the credibility of real scientists at a time scientists are routinely disregarded by our policy makers, reinforces the public misconception that researchers find only what they want to find, and misleads people badly about the true nature of wolves and our environmental issues. The basic plot of *Never Cry Wolf* is of Mowat as a young field

biologist during summers in Canada who had to fight incompetent, unsympathetic bureaucratic supervisors whose only interest was in finding excuses to kill wolves. Mowat claims he discovered that the wolves ate mainly mice, not endangering the caribou, deer or other large prey species, but that the bureaucracy fought to suppress these findings. In fact, Mowat's field experience was nothing like what he describes in *Never Cry Wolf*, and far less extensive or valuable. Mowat has never published any scientific reports supporting his claims. The head of his scientific field project was Doug Pimlott, one of the top wolf scientists in North America, and a man with enormous integrity, sympathy for, and understanding of wolves. The actual facts of Mowat's very limited field experience have been described in several scientific journals. Folks interested in the true story should search out the reviews of *Never Cry Wolf* published by Pimlott in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* 30:236-37 (1966) and Banfield, A.W.F. in the *Can. Field Naturalist* 78:52-52 (1964). Even more troubling is Mowat's apparent plagiarism.

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