Writer's Digest, October 1944

Writing the Animal Story

By Harold F. Cruickshank

Several years ago, with my father and a brother, I moved out to the hinterland of our Canadian northwest where Dad filed on a homestead. We were among the first settlers in that district—a beautiful, untamed wilderness zone abounding with fur-bearing and game animals.

One of my first thrills came one morning at sun-up when I saw, stretched to his full magnificent height on the slope of a nearby hill, a handsome silver-gray timber wolf. Little did I think at that time, that many years later he was to become the lead character in a successful series of animal stories sold to Popular Publications. This series was known as the "Keko" series, Keko being the name of the lead wolf character.

How did I come to write of Keko, so many years after my first meeting? Across the street from my city home lived a beautiful gold-and-white collie dog—a great pal of mine. I happened to glance out of my window one morning during a blizzard and saw Mac, the collie, come bounding out of his gate. Glancing through the blizzard, up the street a way, I glimpsed a magnificent female police dog. The two immediately palled up and began to play. Instantly, I conceived the idea of a short animal-wilderness story. In the north country, Husky females are bred to wild wolf males for the production of good, hardy sled stock. I wanted a wolf to be my lead, but Mac's pal which looked for all the world like a wolf in the blizzard, was a female collie.

I dreamed my way into the wilderness, where a she-wolf, with one whelping left, died in a trap. The whelp lay snuggled down under his dead mother's form. The trapper found him and took him home. At the home there was a collie bitch and her litter of pups. One of these pups, a beautiful female, became friendly with the whelp, now christened Keko. In time, the trapper put them together in an outside compound, where they grew to maturity.

One day, while hunting for small rodents in the early spring, Keko accidentally dug himself out of the compound. He lured "Iskwa," the collie, to his side. They made a handsome pair as they trotted off together. I mated them and set them out on their first adventures.

Rogers Terrill asked me to consider a series on the same characters and, of course, I did so, running Keko and Iskwa through many thrilling adventures in the wilds.

Use Contrasting Characters

Why did I mate Keko with a collie? For the purpose of a strong contrast in types—a good thing in any story. Keko's natural instincts compelled him to mate for life. With Iskwa, it was different. She was of domestic dog blood entirely and fickle. Thus, she was always leading Keko into trouble by the constant desire to be back with her kind.

I feel sure you see the necessity for a knowledge of the creatures about which you are going to write. I was and am most fortunate, having had my years of experience in the wilds, among many of its creatures. Some of you might not enjoy such privilege. But you may study the animals at the national parks, at the zoos; or the domestic animals. Never forget that there is good copy in the dogs and horses you are fond of, and know. But be sure you do know their lives and habits. Read up the works of the best-known naturalists. Because I shall be writing chiefly of the wild animal types in this article, don't lose sight of the possibilities with domestic animals. Think of *Lassie Come Home*, *My Friend Flicka*, and *Home in Indiana*.

It is a favorite practice of mine to have some human character bring a domesticated stallion to the wilds. At once the stage is set for some real conflict when we hear the wild stallion and the tame challenging back and forth in the nights.

It was my good fortune, one time, to watch an incursion to our district of beavers. From the very beginning of their amazing survey work, until the amazing completion of their engineering work, when dam and lodge were finished, I had the good luck to note almost every detail of operations.

Is that enough for your short story requirements? It is not. Enough, indeed, for a fact article, but to click with fiction something more purposeful than the interesting account of tree-cutting and dam building is required in the fiction story. So what would you do about it?

This is what I did: Downstream from the beaver dam live an otter family, great fish eaters. They suddenly discover that their source of fish supply has been cut off, at a time when they are rearing their young. Something must be done about it, so old "Notwe," the father of otters, sets off upstream to scout. Both otters and beavers are powerful swimmers; both, when the occasion demands it, are great fighters. So you see, we have a good conflict foundation up in the beaver waters, where the dam has trapped the fish run.

This particular story, "Riverfolk," sold to *Boy's Life*. Notwe, my lead character, was old. He was fond of sleep, but his young mate, with her added responsibilities was very alert. She is obliged to leave her young to seek out Notwe and send him out hunting. At this particular season it is her prerogative to assume the role of dictator. Her teeth are sharp and Notwe knew better than to ignore her clacking and chattering.

Since Notwe is about to go to battle, we must first build him up, or the reader doesn't care if he wins or loses. For this purpose I planted a bit of drama right at his mate's lair. The otter mother had had to leave her young for a few moments, and in that brief time, a lurking marauder of another species has almost succeeded in attacking and killing one of the whelps. Notwe and his mate go into thrilling action, fighting the bigger creature off.

Later on, old Notwe finally won out, but only after many a tough battle up at the beaver waters when, at times, the readers wouldn't have given ten cents for his chances of survival against the heavier, strong-jawed king beaver.

In staging your battles you must first know if and how your creatures fight, and what is their best armament, and which their most vulnerable spots.

Moreover, you must know approximately the dates of the borning of these wild young, and how many to a litter.

Justify By Planting

When I built up Notwe's character and fighting ability in the fight near his den I did so in order that whatever great feat he accomplished in the future it would have been planted in advance.

Color and Atmosphere

In an adventure short story, you must be careful not to overwork your descriptive and to have it harmonize with mood and with the situation in hand. The note that your description strikes should be in the general mood of your story.

I often include a gentle, pastel touch: A young whelping litter of wolves emerges for the first time to the sunlight, outside their den. A pretty picture can be made of a swaggering, though awkward young whelp, bathed in sunlight, attempting, as his first adventure to capture a gaudy butterfly. Try to find contrasting bits of action for your readers.

Where do game animals go during the heavy snows? The moose *yard* up in the heavy willow swamps, and so do the deer hit for the shelter of the woods. Thus famine strikes the open range, here the wolves prefer to hunt. The wolves become bolder in such conditions.

Has a late spring frost killed the blossoms of the fruit bushes, forcing the bears, in late summer, to look for some other diet?

When a bear finds his favorite berry larder empty, he sets off in search of another favorite food—fish, for example. But this is the time of the year when the fish are not running in the creeks. There are, however, some nice spring lambs in the pasture of a homesteader. But also in this pasture, there is a young bull.

Do you see the means of getting off the horns of your dilemma? Throw the bear on to the horns of the bull, and if he happens to be a grizzly bear, you're going to be treated to some real action.

But that isn't enough. The homesteader, whom we shall characterize as the villain of the piece, since we want our old grizzly to have most of the reader's sympathy, has been waiting for such an opportunity as this for some time. He enters the picture and fires, wounding the grizzly in the shoulder.

The bear limps into the shadows, followed by the man creature carrying a rifle. Make the going tough for our friend, the grizzly, in order to build up more and more reader sympathy. But never make the mistake, unless in special cases—one which I shall point out to you in a later chapter—of having the death of the man brought about by a direct attack by your lead wild character; nor have your man, unless he is an out-and-out criminal, wanted by law, too badly injured, or mauled. It is enough for all general purposes of good story

denouement to have your bear beat him in a battle of wits.

The man is closing in on the wounded grizzly who is suddenly bayed. In order to avoid actual contact between them I have, earlier on, called upon my weather for help: I have built up to an approaching thunderstorm.

Now, when it seems likely that either the man or bear might be killed, the storm breaks. Vicious lightning slashes a nearby tree. The bear is frightened off. The man, too, is afraid of the storm here in the timber and turns for home. Old grizzly has beaten him. (Have in mind at all times when you are satisfied with the creation of a good lead animal character, the possibilities for a series, with such character as your permanent lead; thus you must watch that although each short is complete in itself, you leave a door wide for future possibilities, if the editor is of the same mind.)

An animal I employ in my wildlife stories is the cougar. You no doubt have read stories of cougar hunts, in which a small dog has treed a cougar, or lion. And yet I have had some good success in putting the cougar through some amazing conflict against human characters and creatures of the hinterland.

Wild creatures fear man above all other animals. Yet I have seen even the smallest of wildlife turn and stand against me—the mother field mouse for example. I am one of the school which believes that in extraordinary circumstances, there is no telling what a wild creature might do, or not do—even though ordinarily they are supposed to run.

The deer is supposed to be one of the most timid creatures of all the wilds. Yet one of my closest calls of attacks by a wild creature occurred one hot day when, on going for a drink at a small spring in the wilds, I was surprised by a huge full-antlered buck, who leaped a willow bush and planted himself in most awe-inspiring fashion not ten feet from my trembling form.

It took me some forty minutes to get clear of that trap. I accomplished the feat by carefully backing away, a foot at a time, until I reached the timber, when I set up a hell of a hullabaloo, and caused the buck to stand his ground, while I beat it. (That winter he paid for the scare he gave me, because needing meat, I dropped him one morning just at dawn.)

A favorite wildlife action of mine is between wild stallion and cougar factions. The cougar, or mountain lion, is fond of horse meat. The wild stallion is a powerful and proficient fighter. He has a battery of four terrific, lightning hoofs, and savage teeth. Turn them loose in the wild places and let the grim shadows be your audience.

Have you by this time acquired the desire to begin a bear story? If so, take a trip out to the national park, or to the zoo, pick out your character and then read up on his habits.

Never at any time have your bear come out of his long period of hibernation a savage, fighting creature—starved so that he immediately goes and kills and eats a fully-grown mountain goat all at once. The grizzly comes out of hibernation very cautiously indeed. His first act of feeding, usually, it to find some medicinal herb or root for, first off, he likes to purge his system of any or all poisonous matter he accumulated during the hibernation. From then on, he feeds wisely and cautiously.

But it is not for me to write a treatise on the lives and habits of the wild creatures for you. I leave that to the more competent naturalists. What I should like to do, is show you briefly, for space will not permit of too much detail, how one of a successful animal series of mine found its birth and was developed. In passing, though, I would like to state that you would be at fault to attempt to cram your story with the technical, scientific details of the lives and habits of your wild characters, simply because you know such detail well. Plant your knowledge in the stories subtly, to give the reader the feel that you have written about your animals with an ease born of complete knowledge of them.

One of the most successful series of animal wilderness stories I have done is the “White Phantom” series for Standard Magazines. I shall take one of these stories and briefly run through its development for you. (Incidentally, at this point, I think I shall be in order if I tell you that if you can show Mr. Margulies an animal story of promise, you won’t have to look much farther afield for a sympathetic editorial reading of such story.)

In introducing my White Phantom to you, I shall describe him as an extraordinary wolf. He is large, handsome and is an albino. (Such color freaks do occur in the wilderness.)

Because of his unusual coloring, the superstitious natives, Indians, think of him as allied with the spirit world and such belief has been most useful to me in the creation of suitable atmosphere at times. The Indians believe that Olak, the White Phantom, influences their hunting, the weather elements, famine conditions and so forth.

Olak mates with a black she-wolf. The pair make a striking picture as one glimpses them, now and then, poised on a hogback ridge.

Now let us dip down and bring out a White Phantom story at random:

"Valley of Forgotten Men"

The above title appeared in the October 1942, issue of *Thrilling Adventures*, and was selected in that same year for review by a well-known anthologist. The story begins:

> The very attitude of Olak, White Phantom wolf king of Nahanni, was itself foreboding. He stood like a piece of statuary—a handsome wolf creature with every muscle, every nerve charged with alertness. Save for the wrinkling of his nose and the occasional ruffling of his fur by the breeze, he might easily have been a carved part of the flat-topped boulder on which he was poised.
>
> Once again famine had struck the range of the White Phantom and his kindred, a famine which wrought ruthless havoc among the wild creatures.
>
> First to feel its might was Wapoos, the rabbit. With the passing of Wapoos and his kindred, Acheeta, the lynx began to haunt the wilds like a gaunt shadow shape . . .

Thus far we have met Olak and I have presented his problem. There is an ominous note: famine has struck! What is Olak going to do about it? To go a bit further:

> Neighbor hunted neighbor. Young whelps and cubs fell to the onslaught of fang and talon. Two of Olak's whelps had been cut down . . .

(Watch now for the motivation of the entrance of human characters—the shift I have written so much about.)

> Now the big wolf's hackles raised. Then as quickly lowered, for the man scent he tanged was not unfriendly. It came from the cabin at the springs—the home of Tuk Cramer and his lovely young Indian wife, Netan; Netan's young stripling brother Tan, and Lal, the white girl. None of these human creatures had ever molested Olak or his black mate, Mayek, or their young.
>
> To Tuk Cramer and his kinfolk, the White Phantom was the physical being of a god. Tuk was part Indian; his wife a full-blooded Indian. Together they looked to Olak for signs, for portents, warning.
>
> In this strange country of Nahanni, where near tragedy had more than once stalked them, their superstitions mounted, especially at a time of death such as this. . . .

So far, in 200 words you have been introduced to most of the important lead characters of the White Phantom series. You get their problem and the reader begins to wonder what is Olak, the lead character, going to do to solve it.

The man creatures take their sign from Olak, who moves off with his kindred. The Cramers follow in his trail.

Olak leads them to a strange valley, the Valley of Forgotten Men, a place about which many strange legends have filtered to the cabins of the trappers, white and Indian alike. Tuk Cramer has heard them spoken in whispers. Lal, the white member of the Cramer camp, shudders at the thought of this weird valley of hot springs and sulfur gulches, for it was to this spot, in her early childhood that her father came in search of ancient relics in his scientific explorations. He had brought with him, his wife, and Lal. . . . Lal's parents had mysteriously disappeared and Lal taken to live with the strange cliff-dweller Indians far to the northwest.

> In one of the sulfur gulches of the valley a huge grizzly, silver-tipped shape rolled. He was Pamek, grizzly king of the valley.
>
> A freshening breeze had sprung out of the northwest, bringing the hated scent of wolf—a scent Pamek hated almost as much as that of man.
>
> For twelve years Pamek had roamed these wilds in majesty. With power and with arrogance he feared no creature. He respected none.
>
> His sides were scored with hard scar tissue, the edges of which were streaked with bright silver hair. These were the battle marks of talon, fang, and antler. . . .
>
> He dropped to all fours and resumed his digging for rodents. It was a strange quirk of his makeup that he would often spend hours of his time furiously digging after a few mouthfuls of marmots and mice. . . ."

In this introduction of Pamek, I have shown the character of this particular grizzly. You can see at a glance that he is going to be quite a problem—something to be feared. (That is exactly how we want him—tough: a real old devil.) As well, I have shown one of his feeding habits—his hunting for small rodents, tidbits he likes and which he spares no amount of effort to obtain.

Although I have already motivated the presence of the wolf creature, or creatures, I suddenly bring about a shifting of the wind to give Pamek the direct and close-in scent of Olak, the White Phantom. Pamek at once charges. . . .

But Olak is in no physical condition to fight. He outwits the old grizzly. The shift to Olak again has been accomplished and we take the reader for a peek at Mayek and the whelplings and show Mayek's agitation.

For the purpose of making the trek down to the weird valley worthwhile, I have to introduce other animal characters to interest Tuk Cramer and his kindred as well as interest the wolf creatures. The first added creature is Manya, the bull elk chieftain of the wilds.

Manya bugles and his cries are simultaneously heard by both the man creatures and the wolves. Manya's call gives promise of food. It helps brighten up this ominous valley.

But with the call of Manya comes also the booming roar of Pamek which Tuk Cramer and his folk hear. Tuk suggests that the grizzly is just a bombastic oldster sounding off—but a creature which must, at the earliest opportunity be put out of the way. The reappearance of Pamek is planned because I want him back in the picture in order to step up the tempo of my story's development.

As he lumbers up a gulch in fading light, he tangs man scent. The man, almost completely overcome by sulfur fumes, is ex-Inspector Stone, of the Mounted Police—an amateur scientist who has been searching, in vain, for the relics of an ancient tribe of Indians. The sulfur fumes have at last nearly done for him. He is very weak when, unknowingly, he stumbled almost directly over the very thing he has so long sought—an old cairn of stones. As he falls, clattering the stones, he startles the grizzly who whirls to attack. Stone feebly and foolishly fires a shot which grazes Pamek's right shoulder. And—

> Before Stone could even turn, or rise, the great silver-tip was at him, slashing with his merciless tusks and long after life had gone from the man, those mighty teeth continued to bite . . .

You will note that I have the grizzly slash at the man with his teeth, bite him. That, usually, is the common method of attack by the grizzly, whose sight is never of the best and he will stand erect the better to see, and to hear.

As a little sidelight, as the story progresses, I have Lal, the white girl, move off alone. Tuk has discovered the bones and relics in the gulch and the girl hopes that in some way she can discover some clue as to her father's disappearance and his work, findings. But in the rough country, she turns an ankle.

Tan sets out to find Lal and does locate her, but both become menaced by Pamek, the silver tip.

Up to this point it had been made plain that the bones and relics can mean nothing to Tuk Cramer, but since they are a direct link with my title, we must attach some importance to them. Or the title becomes misrepresentation.

While Tan is searching for Lal, a plane carrying a professor of biological research, accompanied by a sergeant of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police lands on a nearby lake. At the moment of Tan and Lal's predicament up in the wild gorges the party enters the cabin of the Cramers.

> . . . Tuk Cramer was in rapid-fire conversation with Sergeant Jules, who had been sent north to search for the long overdue ex-Inspector Stone.
>
> "It is like this," Tuk said sharply. "I fin' the remains of your frien'. I can guide you there, but I mus' firs' fin' the girl, the white girl who live with us, an' Tan, my wife's brother. I mus' firs' fin'. . . Ayaie; listen."

Out of the night there comes the long cry of Olak, instantly identified by Tuk, and then another cry, higher pitched, commented on and passed over by Sergeant Jules. But Tuk knows what these two distinctive wolf calls mean. The one is Olak's, the other, that of Sa, son of Olak now in with the pack. The White Phantom has called in his pack for a very specific reason.

Sergeant Jules attempts to steer the excited Tuk off, but Tuk is convinced that there will be action, deadly action, at the gulches. To Jules casual mention of the wolf calls he replies:

> "Ayaie! But yes, oui!" Tuk cut in. "But not the ordinaire wolf, m'sieu. That is Olak, the White Phantom an'—listen! Tonnerre d' bleu! There is Sa, hees son. The pack is 'ere!"
>
> Excitedly Tuk leaped across the cabin to his gun rack.
>
> "You will wait, Netan," he called to his wife. "Wait, for the plane's pilot will want hees supper. I go—"
>
> "Go where? See here, Cramer, why all the excitement?" Sergeant Jules boomed. "We're hungry and need grub."
>
> Tuk's dark eyes now glowed with live coals.
>
> "Olak, the white one, an' Sa, an' the pack—they are on the trail of Pamek, the king silver-tip. You come—I show you something. You come—or you stay. I . . ."

Of course, the professor and sergeant follow Tuk and now, for the climatic scene I turn on the brilliant floodlights of those northern latitudes, the Northern Lights which . . .

> . . . drenched the broad gulch bottom, in which loomed the form of Pamek: Pamek, the horrible, yet magnificent devil king was at bay.

When you hit the climax let the reader know. Tell him so by pointing to all the elements present. In the terrible, gloriously lighted amphitheater all set for the closing scene, the man creatures watch.

There follows dramatic action as the White Phantom and black she-wolf harass the big silver tip with lightning attacks.

At last . . .

> With lightning speed, the big grizzly struck forward. He was within a few feet of Mayek when she flashed to one side, causing him to swerve. In that split second, at no audible signal, Olak and Sa leaped for his hamstrings. . . .
>
> With a strangely piteous roar, Pamek subsided and flopped to a flank . . .
>
> Mayek and three of the pack rushed to slash at his throat. In his death gasps Pamek caught and held on to the soft throat of a young wolf. Blood squirted into his eyes, now flashing, piggish eyes—now eyes which had become glassy. . .

You will have observed that Pamek died a death befitting one so majestic. He was glorious in death. There's a point: Never underrate your antagonist. Build him up and in so doing you characterize your lead so much more profoundly.

The story is done, save for the tying up of a few loose ends.

Professor Emerson is very pleased with the discovery of the relics. He also discovers, before he leaves, evidence of good work done by Lal's father and promises the girl that due, posthumous, credit will be given her father.

So the story closes on a happier note at the cabin of the Cramers.

Stories of this type are usually written around lead characters. Select such a character, give him something to do. Have him suffer a lot in his advancement toward his goal.

You might elect to write your stories of domestic animals. Many really good yarns have been written of such animals. Paul Annixter has done some good ones, and there have been others. Get some of their works if you can, and study them.

For young writers, not quite sure of their ground, I always recommend the following additional method of study:

Select a magazine you wish to write for; single out a story that appeals to you. Type out a copy of it. Take one of mine if you wish. In the process of typing and studying, you might find something with which you can't agree. So much the better. Improve on it, and build up to a style of your own.

When you are finished typing the other man's story, throw it away at once. Try this once a day, changing sentences, phrases, punctuation as you please. Soon you'll write a little better, a little more professionally after the manner of the man whose work you have studied. This is the same method that the painter and the composer follow. In your case be sure to throw away what you type. Don't stay with just one model but switch around electrically to improve your style.

I think any of the pulp westerns and adventure magazines have room for a well-written animal yarn, and I have a feeling that no smooth-paper editor is going to pass up a good one. I have sold to dozens such magazines: *Short Stories*, *Boy's Life*, *Argosy*, *Doc Savage*, and many of the westerns, apart from the two series I have mentioned. Perhaps western magazines would be your best first bet.