



The Wolves of Currumpaw

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5

I love this book for so many reasons, some of which are more personal than critical. First, its bold idiosyncrasy. Not surprising, perhaps, from the creator of [Shackleton's Journey](#) [4]. This too, is a tale at least based on true events, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when civilised men, fleeing the industrial cities that had created their wealth, tested themselves against extreme environments and the powerful wild animals that lived there: the time of hunters and explorers. This book is set in New Mexico when the landscape was newly transformed into vast cattle ranches, and the native wolf packs had been all but extinguished: reduced, with the disappearance of their natural prey, to stalking the cattle herds. This is the story of the capture and death of the leader of one of the last wolf packs: Lobo, a wolf so cunning and ruthless that he was known as The King of Currumpaw. It is the story, too, of the man who was his nemesis, Ernest Thompson Seton, writer, artist, naturalist and wolf hunter. Seton was the first to tell Lobo's story and his part in the wolf's death, according to his own account, caused him to turn from hunter to conservationist. Seton, among his other talents and interests, was a writer of animal stories and, in his own lifetime and afterwards, had a considerable influence on children's lives and literature. His interest in the wild led him to found The Woodcraft Indians, a boys' camping and environmental organisation, which eventually fed into the Boy Scout Movement. And his fictional account of a boy's camping trip, **Two Little Savages** (1903), was one of the books that influenced Arthur Ransome. Grill touches on some of these developments in the afterword to his stories and that is the second personal reason I have for liking the book, for it introduces young people to this fascinating, and perhaps largely forgotten, man. Grill picks up, too, on Seton's interest in Native American life (though it is not of direct relevance to this particular story) and references it throughout the book, from the rug or blanket designs on the endpapers, using motifs from the Southwestern Indian tribes, to the depiction of riders and animals which recall the naive buffalo and deer hide paintings of the Plains Indians. It's a marvellously staged telling. There are introductory vignettes of the principal characters, wolf and human; sweeping double page spreads of landscape and townscape and the story's most gripping episodes; and the tale is sometimes carried forward in smaller rectangular pictures (as many as fourteen or fifteen to a single page) some of which acknowledge Seton's own interest in drawing flora and fauna and camping and hunting paraphernalia. These smaller illustrations, most often in rectangles but sometimes in circles and ovals, recall the lantern slides with which Seton accompanied his stories on his lecture tours. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the illustrations, however, is Grill's use of crayon over a white background, including, I think, wax crayon, the blunt instrument so beloved of

playgroups, which here becomes the subtle conjuror of atmosphere, characterisation, movement and drama. This is a breathtaking book, given a fine production by Flying Eye: just plain magnificent.

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