

## A GUIDE TO Never Cry Wolf

Farley Mowat

*I went completely to the wolves.*

### THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

*Never Cry Wolf* is a fictionalized account of the author's actual experience observing wolves in sub-Arctic Canada.

**Setting:** the Barren Lands (or tundra plains) of Keewatin in north central Canada in 1958.

**Protagonist:** Farley Mowat, the author-narrator, a young biologist and a recent university graduate working for the Canadian government's Wildlife Service.

**Point of View and Plot Structure:** The narrative is a first-person account of Mowat's experiences during his six-month stay on the Arctic tundra. The chapters are arranged chronologically, and they read like a series of anecdotes or journal entries.

**Purpose and Tone:** Mowat's intention is to educate his readers about wolves in order to appeal to them to halt the wholesale slaughter of the species by other humans. His tone is entertaining and wryly humorous.

**Conflicts:** The main **external** conflict is between Mowat and bureaucrats in Ottawa, who sent him to gather evidence in support of the politically popular belief that wolves are responsible for the dwindling numbers of caribou. This conflict quickly moves into the background, and a more immediate conflict between Mowat and his environment takes center stage. Mowat must also battle his **internal** fear of the wolves.

**Resolution:** As a result of his observations, Mowat becomes convinced that wolves are not a threat to the survival of the caribou or to human beings. He hopes that ordinary citizens, when they learn the truth about wolves, will pressure the government to stop their slaughter.

**Theme:** Greed, self-interest, ignorance, and fear can blind people to the truth and cause them to cling to myths and prejudices.

short Arctic summer, the earth remains frozen just a few feet below the surface. The human population consists of communities of Eskimo people, who travel with the caribou herds, but their numbers, along with those of the animals on which their traditional way of life depends, have been decreasing rapidly.

### MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Farley Mowat**, the narrator, a young biologist assigned by the Canadian Wildlife Service to gather scientific data about the wolves living on the plains of the Northwest Territories in central Canada.

**Mike**, an eighteen-year-old of Eskimo and white ancestry, who finds Mowat soon after Mowat's arrival in the Barren Lands.

**George**, the name Mowat gives to the adult male wolf in the family of wolves that he observes for six months in their summer den.

**Angeline**, the smaller, slimmer, almost all-white mate of George and attentive mother of four wolf pups, whose good-humored affection for her mate and devotion to her offspring endear her to Mowat.

**Uncle Albert**, the third adult member of the wolf family, an older male that assists George with the hunting and Angeline with the care of the pups.

**Ootek**, Mike's cousin, an Eskimo who becomes the narrator's invaluable companion and teacher, assisted by Mike, who acts as his translator.

### SUMMARY

**Chapter 1. The Lupine Project.** Mowat opens his narrative with a humorous **anecdote** about his childhood. At the age of five he stored two live catfish overnight in his grandmother's toilet bowl, terrifying her when she got up in the middle of the night. After earning a degree in biology, Mowat joins the Canadian Wildlife Service and is assigned a field project to study Arctic wolves. The service hopes that Mowat will bring back evidence to support the claims of trappers and traders that the wolves are killing the migrating herds of caribou and are a lethal threat to any humans they encounter. At the end of the first chapter, he is leaving Ottawa and heading to Churchill in north central Canada.

### BACKGROUND

**Tundra.** A treeless landscape where snow covers the ground for at least six months a year. Even during the

**Chapter 2. Wolf Juice.** On board a Canadian Air Force transport plane, Mowat **satirizes** the foolishness of his bureaucratic bosses who have saddled him with mounds of impractical equipment, an arsenal of weapons to defend himself against what they believe are killer wolves, and a set of vague orders that fail to pinpoint where to set up camp in the vast tundra wastelands. His only happy discovery is that a mixture of the local Moose brand beer and the laboratory alcohol with which he was supplied makes a powerful drink, which he calls Wolf Juice.

**Chapter 3. Happy Landings.** Mowat gets a ride north from a former Royal Air Force pilot flying a rickety 1938 two-engine airplane that, like him, has seen better days. In a typical example of **verbal irony**, Mowat describes the day they take off as “beautiful,” with *only* a forty-mile-per-hour wind and a “black sea fog.” The pilot lands in the middle of a frozen lake leaving Mowat and his gear somewhere in the barren North.

**Chapter 4. When Is a Wolf Not a Wolf?** Alone now, Mowat ponders the future. With only a canoe and a frozen waterway that he can't navigate, he must figure out a way to transport his mountain of equipment and set up camp. Terrified by the sound of howling from the surrounding hills, Mowat huddles under his canvas canoe with revolver drawn, ready to defend himself against a wolf attack. Finally peering out, he sees a frightened-looking young man, clad in caribou skins, and his team of fourteen howling Huskies.

**Chapter 5. Contact!** Luckily the young man, Mike, speaks some English and uses his dogs to move Mowat's equipment to Mike's cabin near a river. There the narrator sets up a base camp where he hopes to conduct his study of wolves. In an attempt to befriend Mike, Mowat shows him his scientific equipment but succeeds only in scaring him off. Alone again, Mowat makes timid sorties outside the cabin. When the spring thaw finally melts the frozen water, he is able to cross the river. He paddles across, climbs a ridge, and comes face to face with an adult wolf. The animal leaps in the air and runs away with great speed. In an example of **comic understatement**, a terrified Mowat reports, “I had at last established contact—no matter how briefly—with the study species.”

**Chapter 6. The Den.** The next day Mowat goes back to the ridge where he encountered the wolf but soon returns to his camp—he is frightened by the wolf's immense size and by the species' reputation for ferocity. Heavily armed, he goes out again the next day and discovers two adult wolves, the male he saw the day before and a smaller female, frolicking on an *esker*, the sandy remains of an ancient riverbed. Mowat watches them through binoculars and observes that the male wolf stands guard over the female in the den.

**Chapter 7. The Watcher Watched.** The next day Mowat returns to the esker with a telescope and trains it on the site where he last saw the wolves, but he sees nothing. He

discovers that the male and female wolf are twenty yards behind him, observing him with quiet curiosity. The following morning Mowat goes to the spot where he thinks the den is located and sees four plump wolf pups playfully wrestling with one another in a narrow cavern about fifteen feet deep. That night Mowat decides that he is no longer going to assume anything about wolves but will approach them with a completely open mind.

**Chapter 8. Staking the Land.** Mowat leaves the cabin and sets up a tent closer to the wolves. He observes them discreetly from his tent at all hours and learns that they live an orderly, settled existence in which the male goes hunting every night and returns the next day, while the female stays behind to care for the pups. The male comes and goes on a well-worn path that runs by Mowat's tent, but the wolf ignores Mowat's presence until Mowat urinates on stones and clumps of moss to mark the boundaries of his territory, just as wolves do. The wolf decides to put his own mark just behind each of Mowat's, conceding some but not all of his territory and avoiding a violent confrontation.

**Chapter 9. Good Old Uncle Albert.** Having obtained the wolves' respect for his territory, Mowat stops fearing for his safety and concentrates on studying the wolves' behavior. As he learns more about them, he grows increasingly fond of the hard-working, responsible adult wolves and their frisky little pups, naming the regal father George, the elegant mother Angeline. Mowat also sees a third adult in the group, the helpful, older, probably widowed male, Uncle Albert. At first unsure of Albert's function other than as an auxiliary hunter, Mowat discovers that the older male serves as a kind of all-purpose baby-sitter, relieving mother Angeline when the energetic pups are about to exhaust her.

**Chapter 10. Of Mice and Wolves.** By the end of June, all the caribou herds have passed through the wolves' territory to their grazing grounds in the North. Mowat now believes that the wolves are not using caribou as their main food source. Now he must figure out what the wolves are actually eating. He discovers that the males catch and eat mice on their nightly hunts and bring home the meat in their stomachs, regurgitating it for mother and pups. This discovery of the wolf's surprising diet of mice is another **ironic** blow to the myth of the ferocious wolf.

**Chapter 11. Souris à la Crème.** In a tongue-in-cheek **parody** of scientific experimentation, Mowat decides to find out by trying to live on mice himself whether it is feasible for wolves to live healthily on a diet of mice. He even goes so far as to create a recipe for creamed mouse, “souris à la crème.” Mike returns with his Eskimo cousin Ootek, a **character** who has a special spiritual relationship with wolves. Ootek is a shaman, or priest, to his people, and his personal totem, or guiding spirit, is the Wolf Being. He even lived with a wolf family for a month when he was five years old. Ootek becomes Mowat's invaluable companion and informant.

**Chapter 12. Spirit of the Wolf.** Ootek informs Mowat that in addition to consuming large quantities of mice, wolves eat ground squirrels and fish that they catch in a variety of ingenious ways. To explain the relationship of the wolves and the caribou, Ootek shares a piece of inland Eskimo folklore in the form of a **parable**, which casts the wolf in the role of preserver of the caribou. Since the wolf preys only on the sick and weak members of the herd, it keeps the herd strong through a process that scientists would call natural selection.

**Chapter 13. Wolf Talk.** Ootek further reports that the various vocalizations that Mowat has heard the wolves make are an intricate means of communication between wolves, which some Eskimos can partially understand. Mowat is particularly taken with the beauty of the nightly “song” in which the three adult animals howl in unison for two or three minutes before the males go off on the hunt.

**Chapter 14. Puppy Time.** Now in the third week of June, Angeline is showing a growing desire to go off hunting with George, and on the evening of the 23rd, she gives out such a plaintive cry that Uncle Albert immediately goes and stays with the pups. Angeline and George go off together happily. Later, Angeline moves the growing puppies out of their deep den into a ravine. Ootek explains that the pups are now ready to learn how to hunt for themselves.

**Chapter 15. Uncle Albert Falls in Love.** Mike’s Eskimo relatives are returning south with the caribou herds, and they bring his Husky dogs with them. Knowing that Huskies and wolves share a common ancestry and can interbreed, Mowat decides to mate Uncle Albert and one of Mike’s female dogs, Kooa, in order to get some idea of the mating habits of wolves. He presents the courtship and mating in humorous **anthropomorphic** terms, casting Uncle Albert and Kooa in the role of passionate lovers lost to all dignity and good sense.

**Chapter 16. Morning Meat Delivery.** Desiring to get a closer look at the pups in the ravine, Mowat watches while they drink from a stream, try to catch mice, and worry a piece of caribou meat. When Angeline returns, she feeds them regurgitated caribou meat as Mowat, squeamish in spite of himself, looks on. His stomach starts making loud noises that bring Angeline out of the ravine to find out the source of the rumblings. She looks at him with what he takes to be disdain and walks away.

**Chapter 17. Visitors from Hidden Valley.** On a night in July when Angeline stays behind with the pups, Mowat is awakened by a low howl coming from south of his tent. Awakened, Angeline listens intently and then walks out to meet two wolves Mowat has never seen before. The three wag their tails, sniff noses, and walk toward the den. Later Ootek and Mike explain that the visiting wolves are from a neighboring family. The visitors are probably Angeline’s mother and sister.

**Chapter 18. Family Life.** The **setting** shifts when Mowat recalls that he was ordered to make wolf population studies and to explore predator-prey relationships. To do so, he breaks camp and with Ootek goes on a month-long canoe trip northward into the tundra expanse. He estimates that contrary to the government’s inflated numbers, there are only about three thousand wolves in the Keewatin territory, their numbers kept in check by natural controls such as litter size.

**Chapter 19. Naked to the Wolves.** During their cruise through the solitary tundra, Mowat and Ootek come upon an Eskimo party, part of the band of forty inland Eskimos to which Ootek belongs—the only human beings for thousands of miles. Ootek goes off hunting caribou with his male relatives, and Mowat stays behind with the woman and children. Deciding to have a swim, he goes a distance from the camp, sheds his clothes, and dives in. While lying on a rock, Mowat catches sight of three wolves. He follows them without taking time to put his clothes back on. Cutting a ridiculous figure, he follows the wolves through herds of caribou. The Eskimo woman and children chase Mowat with weapons, believing him to have lost his mind.

**Chapter 20. The Worm in the Bud.** As a result of his observations and information provided by Ootek, Mowat figures out that even though wolves cannot outrun healthy caribou, they make occasional runs on small groups of caribou to find out which ones are old or infirm. It is these animals who become the wolves’ prey, and it is this **thesis**—that wolves aid rather than threaten the survival of the caribou—that Mowat wishes to communicate to his readers.

Later Mowat teases Ootek by telling him, in great detail, about the parasitic worms found in raw caribou meat, the very food Ootek has been eating all his life.

**Chapter 21. School Days.** The chapter opens with a **description** of autumn in the tundra. When Mowat and Ootek return, they find that Angeline’s pups are joining their parents on short hunts, where they receive demonstrations of hunting technique. Another wolf, which Mowat has not seen before, joins George and Uncle Albert in their nightly hunts.

**Chapter 22. Scatology.** As October approaches, Mowat begins to worry about all the scientific investigations he has neglected in order to observe the wolves. He undertakes a study of wolf droppings, or scat. Wearing a gas mask while preparing his smelly specimens, he is observed by a group of Eskimos in another **comic vignette** in which Mowat gets a laugh at his own expense.

**Chapter 23. To Kill a Wolf.** It is late October now, and Mowat must prepare to leave. The tundra will soon freeze over and the caribou and wolves will have to move south into the spruce forests in order to find food. Mowat uses the rest of this chapter to report the wholesale and unnecessary murder of wolves by humans. He details how they are trapped, poisoned,

and shot from airplanes as a kind of sport. His **tone** is both outraged and sad.

**Chapter 24. The World We Lost.** The narrator signals a passing plane by setting off some smoke generators and asks the pilot to send a message about his whereabouts to Ottawa. Before leaving, he decides to take a look at the inside of the deep den now that the wolves have departed. As he moves down the narrow tunnel and around a curve, he is surprised to discover two pairs of wolf eyes staring at him from the bottom. Panic-stricken, he wishes he had a weapon and then recognizes Angeline and one of her pups. The wolves make no aggressive moves, and he withdraws. In the final pages of the book, Mowat listens to George howling in the distance and mourns the loss of a home in the natural world that he and all humans have lost forever by their own actions.

**Epilogue.** In a terse epilogue, Mowat reports that the government tried to poison his wolf family the summer after he made his observations. He does not know if the murderous attempts succeeded. Nor, at the conclusion of the book, is he able to report that the larger issue of the survival of the wolf has been **resolved**.

### APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

What is most striking about Mowat's work is the unusual way in which he combines humorous, anecdotal narrative and interesting, informative detail to create a moving appeal to save a species that he has come to love. Discussion groups or students doing individual research might focus on the following activities.

#### 1. Making a Map

The more students know about the Far North setting of Mowat's work, the better they can enter into his story. They may want to consult an atlas and a geographic encyclopedia to find out the exact location of the Barren Lands of Keewatin and to learn more about the Canadian Northwest Territories. They could use this information to prepare a map, showing the boundaries of the tundra plains and indicating the seasonal movements of the caribou herds.

#### 2. Checking the Facts

In the Preface to the 1973 edition of *Never Cry Wolf*, Mowat claims that most of his discoveries

about wolves have subsequently been upheld by "official" science. Students may want to check the accuracy of his claim and find out if any facts have been learned about wolf behavior since Mowat made his observations. They may be especially interested in whether the number of wolves has declined or increased.

#### 3. Comparing Film and Book

In 1983, Disney released *Never Cry Wolf* as a movie. Students could "read" the film critically to see if they think it has accurately captured the mood and message of Mowat's book.

### MEET THE WRITER

**Farley Mowat** (1921– ) was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada. (His last name rhymes with *poet*.) Young Farley developed a passionate interest in animals, many of which joined the family in a kind of traveling menagerie. He went to the Arctic for the first time in 1935 with his Uncle Farley, an ornithologist, and he made many return visits to study the Eskimo people and native animals. His second trip in 1958 was the basis for *Never Cry Wolf*, which was filmed by Disney in 1983 and recorded on audiocassette by Mowat. He has written many works of fiction and nonfiction for children and adults.

### READ ON

**Farley Mowat, *People of the Deer*.** A nonfiction account of the extinction of an Eskimo people as a result of bureaucratic ignorance and neglect. ***A Whale for the Killing*.** An eyewitness account of the tragic responses of the inhabitants of a Canadian fishing village to the beaching of a rare fin whale on their shores. ***Woman in the Mist*.** A biography of Dian Fossey, the "gorilla woman" of Rwanda, who tried to protect a threatened group of African mountain gorillas.

**Daphne du Maurier, "The Birds."** Another look at the natural world—this time the animals attack the humans.

**Barry Lopez, "A Presentation of Whales."** A tragic report about an attempt to rescue whales beached off the coast of Oregon.

**Roger Rosenblatt, "The Man in the Water."** An essay about an ordinary man who becomes a hero.

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