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FROM GRIZZLY COUNTRY TO GRIZZLY HEART: THE GRAMMAR OF BEAR-HUMAN INTERACTIONS IN THE WORK OF ANDY RUSSELL AND CHARLIE RUSSELL

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Never was there an animal so fond of peace – he loves to laze and loaf in the wild places, where the sky is his roof, the mountain lakes his bathtub, the wind his newspaper, and few things are too small for him to smell or taste.

– Andy Russell (*Grizzly Country* 258)

In the Western philosophical tradition, debates about animal language and the ability of animals and humans to communicate across species dates back at least as far as Aristotle, whose opinion it was that man is the only animal to possess the gift of speech. From Aristotle onward, including Descartes, who depicted animals as soulless automata, animals have, for the most part, been said to lack – variously – voice, speech, the necessary organs for speech, the ability to produce both consonants and vowels, the ability to use conventional signs, inner speech, syntax, reason, and abstraction, and sanctions, sometimes severe, have been placed on those who thought to the contrary. In his article “The Passions and Animal Language, 1540–1700,” R. W.

Serjeantson notes, for example, that “Lawyers held that belief in animal language was sufficient evidence of idiocy” (426).¹

Notably, however, and somewhat surprisingly, many of the philosophers, linguists, and academics of various stripes who have debated the issue of animal language have had a relatively insignificant amount of contact with animals, especially wild ones. In the case of bears, even many of the biologists who have had a great deal of physical contact with them have been occupied with and thoroughly invested in the accepted scientific methods of darting with a tranquilizer gun, and then ear-tagging, weighing, hair sampling, tooth removal, and general handling of unconscious bears² and have not attempted to observe bears’ communicative strategies from a position of non-intrusive, peaceful co-existence. Ideal language-learning situations do not involve trapping, tranquilizing, rendering comatose, and removing a swatch of hair and a tooth from one’s language instructor.

Members of the Andy and Kay Russell family, on the other hand, have lived their entire lives in relation to wild animals. Andy Russell (1915–2005) was for more than two decades a professional big-game guide and outfitter in southern Alberta and British Columbia, Canada, and is the author of a dozen creative nonfiction books about his experiences while guiding, conservation issues such as the Oldman River Dam, the lives of wild animals, and back-country incidents and anecdotes including, to mention just a few, *The Life of a River*, *Memoirs of a Mountain Man*, *Trails of a Wilderness Wanderer*, *Horns in the High Country*, and *The Canadian Cowboy*, most of which are still in print.³ In the early sixties,⁴ Andy turned from guiding for a living to photography, slide show presentations, wildlife documentary filmmaking, and writing. *Grizzly Country* (1967), his first book, draws upon more than four decades of his own back-country experience; anecdotes from family, friends, park wardens, trappers, fellow guides, and clients; as well as his experiences between 1961 to 1963 in Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alaska while shooting the footage that became their documentary film *Grizzly Country*. Russell and his two eldest sons, Dick and Charlie,⁵ share the distinction of having made the first documentary ever of grizzly bears in the wild (completed in 1963). For about eight decades then (or more if we consider Andy’s father- and mother-in-law, Bert and Dora Riggall, the original owners of the guiding and outfitting business, as forerunners of the Russell clan) members of the Russell family have been and continue to be pioneers in documenting bear-human interactions through film, photographs, audio, and text.⁶

In his book *The Literary History of Alberta, Vol. 2*, George Melnyk astutely notes that Andy Russell's first book, *Grizzly Country*, "had gone through its thirteenth printing in hardcover by the mid-1980s.... Russell's work links a nineteenth-century sportsman's sense of conservation with today's more demanding environmentalism" (129). In this essay, I shall compare the discourse of the sportsman-cum-conservationist Andy Russell with the discourse of ethics and etiquette of his son Charlie Russell and begin the process of charting the Russell family's ongoing development of a grammar (including language, sound, tone, and bodily gesture) in which both to conduct and to portray their relationships with grizzly bears in the wild.

Given his historical placement (b. 1915) and literary influences, it is not surprising that in *Grizzly Country* Andy Russell blends devices associated with the realistic wild animal story,⁷ the guiding/campfire storytelling tradition, and natural history with techniques such as interviews, an informative question-and-answer format, anecdotes, a metaphor-rich Western-Canadian ranch-country vernacular prose, and what is commonly called anthropomorphism. Particularly in the earlier chapters of the book, he refers to bears in fairly standard language as "the living symbol of the mountain wilderness, one giving an impression of power and royalty matched by no other" (5). He describes a large female grizzly as having "the bearing of a monarch" (5), the grizzly as the "king of all animals" (6) and its territory as its "kingdom" (5). A particular male bear is depicted as possessing royal "arrogance" (7) and "dignity" (8),⁸ though Russell notes that the same bear will switch without ceremony to the role of clown, sitting down on his rump and sliding down-slope on the snow (8).⁹ A ragged-looking bear with remnant tatters of his winter coat has "the look of a king burlesquing as a beggar" (15). Sometimes Russell describes a grizzly as having almost mythic – "colossal" (7) – physical proportions. In these early chapters, in the tradition of the sportsman, he uses this regal and mythic terminology – borrowed both from the tradition of the hunting guide, elevating the animal's status in order to make the hunter's kill that much more significant, and also perhaps from the tradition of the sublime¹⁰ – supporting it by supplying the reader with weight and height measurements or sometimes length once skinned.¹¹

However, Russell's bear descriptions are as many and as varied as the individuals he encounters among the species. The fifth chapter of *Grizzly Country* is entitled "In the *Society* of Grizzlies" (emphasis added), and here and elsewhere in the book bears are referred to as "associates." The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third edition, defines associate as

“1. A person united with another or others in an act, an enterprise, or a business; a partner or colleague. 2. A companion; a comrade. 3. One that habitually accompanies or is associated with another; an attendant circumstance.” All of these meanings of “associate” apply to Russell’s use of the term as applied to bears.¹² While he does not attribute “personhood” as such to bears (as in the first definition), and whereas some individual bears’ association with him during his big-game guiding career would have been relatively “short-lived,” nevertheless while engaged in his film enterprise he suggests that the bears are not just objects to be captured on film but subjects and even partners in an enterprise that will, he hopes, earn Andy a living to replace that lost from the closure of his guiding business and awaken society to the dangers of our excessive incursion into and destruction of grizzly country.¹³ He also uses the word “associate” to describe other inter-species relationships – those between bears and tuna, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, and coyotes – as well as co-operative inter-species relationships as “a sort of liaison” and “partnership” (86). In two or three spots in *Grizzly Country* and in interviews, Andy Russell places himself and grizzly bears in the same category – as those displaced from their home range (or in his case, from wilderness, from “grizzly country,” and his guiding business) by the intrusion of oil and gas roads and activities into wilderness and wilder places (xii).

In Andy Russell’s metaphors, while relationships between humans and bears are intermixed with the language of sociality and even business partnership,¹⁴ nevertheless his conception of social and ecological relations between bears and humans is also thoroughly imbricated with the language of ethics. In one passage, he writes that a bear moving off a kill may be “honoring the wolf’s desire to feed,” postulating that not only do older or injured animals sometimes form partnerships for mutual survival but that there may be a sort of code of ethics and social practices among them as well. Russell comments wryly, “Man, being civilized and having highly cultivated ethics, not to say the last word in principles, has always had difficulty recognizing the ethics of others. Grizzlies also have ethics and very definite ideas of proper protocol, wherein lies the crux of the dispute” (62–63).

Breaches of etiquette and ethics are always socially dangerous situations. On one occasion, Russell tries to run bears off because they are feeding within full view of the highway and he knows someone will come along and may try to shoot them. He fires a shot into the ground near the female grizzly with cubs to get them to move away from the road. Her reaction, as he describes it, is as follows: she “swiveled on her feet and stared at me long

and hard, as though to say, ‘What the hell did you do a thing like that for?’” (92). According to Russell (and many other bear experts), unannounced intrusion into their terrain is regarded by bears as at best both a serious breach of etiquette and a source of embarrassment. One bear Russell accidentally surprised first ran away and then returned and charged him and his horse twice before heading up over a mountaintop. When Russell rode up to see where the bear had gone, he saw him “fleeing in the distance as though pursued by devils, and I knew this to be a proud animal not wishing to lose face by instant flight” (81). Russell draws the reader’s attention to aspens scarred by bears “who have escaped the embarrassment of sudden contact or perhaps are practicing in anticipation of it” (81).

After Russell closed his big-game guiding business and turned full time to writing, photography, and filmmaking, the most significant “grammatical” change in the Russells’ approaches to grizzlies during their three seasons of filming from 1961–63 was the abandonment of their guns. As long as the trio was armed, throughout their entire first season in the field they simply could not get near enough to any bear to shoot decent footage with the cameras then available. As soon as they decided midway through their second season of filming that they must leave their guns at home, access to the bears improved dramatically, as if the bears could sense the corresponding change in their attitude toward them. Andy writes:

Reviewing our experiences, we had become more and more convinced that carrying arms was not only unnecessary in most grizzly country but was certainly no good for the desired atmosphere and proper protocol in obtaining good film records. If we were to obtain such film and fraternize successfully with the big bears, it would be better to go unarmed in most places. The mere fact of having a gun within reach, cached somewhere in a pack or a hidden holster, causes a man to act with unconscious arrogance and thus maybe to smell different or to transmit some kind of signal objectionable to bears. The armed man does not assume his proper role in association with the wild ones, a fact of which they seem instantly aware at some distance. He, being wilder than they, whether he likes to admit it or not, is instantly under more suspicion than he would encounter if unarmed. (267–68)

Not only does Russell attribute to bears characteristics many would consider anthropomorphic, he goes so far as to speculate that they also have a kind

of extrasensory perception. He writes, “But as I have often suspected, animals have keen extrasensory perception, which is only latent in man through lack of use. Many times while wandering the wilds, it has seemed that animals can tell if a man is of a killing or a friendly frame of mind. It is something I have strongly sensed, but of course it is almost impossible to prove” (96). Twenty-five years later, in a 1992 interview Russell says, “I think that the animals are more sensitive to that sort of thing [people’s mental attitude toward them] than we give them any credit for. I believe that there can be a mental hook-up between different kinds of animals and that of course includes people and grizzly bears” (Searle 9). Although their personal history with guiding and the respective bear projects of father and son differ significantly,¹⁵ Charlie Russell and Maureen Enns’s project in Kamchatka, Russia, the subject of *Grizzly Heart*, is prefigured in Andy Russell’s 1967 *Grizzly Country*.¹⁶ Andy writes:

One would have to keep captive grizzlies – or better yet, tame ones running free, as did “Grizzly” Adams in the early days of California – to learn things more positive of their language. If a man could learn some of their terms, it would be possible to exchange signals with them and understand them much better. What would happen if some insult was accidentally uttered is anyone’s guess. (35)

Indeed in chapter one of his second book, *Grizzly Heart: Living Without Fear Among the Brown Bears of Kamchatka* (2002), Charlie Russell comments that in order to write *his* books about bears (first the white kermode bears who live on Princess Royal Island off the West Coast of Canada, and then the grizzlies of the Russian Far East) he almost had to invent another language in which to describe human-bear interactions:¹⁷

I was working on *Spirit Bear*, trying to find words for the Eden-like experience I had enjoyed on Princess Royal Island. That kind of connection with bears was something I’d dreamt of since childhood. Now that it had happened, I wanted to tell people about it in hopes of changing the relationship between humans and bears to something less hostile and rigid. I had to almost invent a new language to describe the human-wild animal relationship in ways that were not about conflict and fear. (12)

Charlie points to two particular problems with regard to the obstacles posed by the English language and its inheritance: 1) the definition of “wild” and 2) strictures against anthropomorphism:

By definition, a wild animal is one that is fearful of humans. Simply by enjoying the company of a human, a wild animal becomes something that can no longer be accurately described that way. I struggled with this anthropocentric view because of the negative twist it put on the possibility of kinship with wild animals. Humankind believes it no longer fits into the wild, or even needs to fit. We have spent centuries perfecting a rhetoric that distances us from the idea that we are also animals, a rhetoric that closes the door to understanding what we have in common with our fellow mammals and other fauna. (12–13)

North American definitions of wild and wilderness, the residual ideology associated with the medieval concept of the Great Chain of Being, fear of insulting the gods, and other linguistic taboos associated with anthropomorphism effectively block considerations of any similarity or potential contact points between human and non-human animals.¹⁸ While none of the Russells set out to anthropomorphize bears – that is, they did not set out to discover that bears and humans are alike, nor is that the conclusion they have reached – their sustained close contact with grizzlies spanning decades has given them the right to have their interpretations considered carefully and seriously and in some detail.

In the Prologue to *Grizzly Heart*, Charlie describes a situation in which bear-human communication hinges on mutual readings of body language and tone of voice. He opens the book with a description of a life-changing experience he had with a bear he had gotten to know very well during five years of guiding in eco-tourism in the Khutzeymateen. One day the bear started down a log toward him and Charlie decided to let her come as close as she wanted (1). This adult bear, dubbed the Mouse Creek bear after her range, was uncommonly friendly toward people, liked to entertain the eco-tourists with her antics, and had made herself into, in Charlie’s words, “one of the main attractions.” As she walked toward him, Charlie, “looking into her eyes,” read her intention as wanting to push the frontiers of her experience with humans:

As she made her way down the log, she moved with a swaying nonchalance. I am certain she was trying to set me at ease. I tried to accomplish the same thing in reverse by talking to her in the calmest voice I could muster. There was an uncertain look on the bear's face, and a similar look must have been on my own.

Finally, she sat down beside me. After a time, she moved her paw along the log towards my hand and touched it very gently.
(1-2)

Although his father also reads bears' intentions and emotions in a broad sense (anger, fury, comedy, playfulness, predatoriness), in his role first as a hunting guide and then even as a filmmaker, he is usually in a relationship with bears in which he wants something from them – head and hide for a wealthy client, the bear's photograph or representations of normal bear activity for his film. By contrast, as an eco-guide in the Khutzeymateen, Charlie is in a position both to ask less than his father of any bear (not its life certainly) and, in the scene described above, much more – namely, a shared desire to push the boundaries of bear-human relationships. Similarly, as he is able to get that much closer to bears (with not even a camera and tripod between them, and without having to watch through a lens or viewfinder),¹⁹ he is also in a position to interpret refinements of their general attitudes, emotions and moods. In the above passage, he interprets the Mouse Creek bear's swaying motion as deliberate "nonchalance" intended to set him at ease (which implies several things including a knowledge of her power relative to his). He reads her facial expression as one of uncertainty, matched by his own.²⁰ In a gesture reminiscent of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," the painting of man and God touching fingers, the Mouse Creek bear initiates gentle, curious contact with the man. Just as God animates Adam in the Michelangelo, the Mouse Creek bear animates Charlie with the desire and determination to build on that moment. If he could "prove that it [the moment of extreme trust between a bear and a man] was not a fluke... a huge shift in perception [about bears] might flow from it.... I also knew in that moment that I could not back away. What was happening was something my life had been moving towards for decades, and from which I must not swerve" (2).

This "metaphor," if that is what it is and I am not suggesting it is only a metaphor, of ethics, etiquette and protocol is one that runs through both Andy's and Charlie's work with bears (and it may have been part of Bert Riggall's thinking as well). Although anthropomorphism is often regarded

with great suspicion, Andy Russell's frequent use of anthropomorphism is very complex, serving among other things to point both to zones of animality in humans and those of subjectivity in grizzly bears. That is to say, his metaphors work in both directions. Just as he uses an extended metaphor to compare a grizzly still wearing parts of his winter hide to a hobo, so too Andy metaphorizes himself as an elder in the environmentalist movement as "still rarin' up," for example. Often within the same general area of the text in which he attributes to bears emotions we like to think of as ours alone, he will flip his metaphors around and attribute to humans bear-like behaviour to the point that after a while it becomes difficult to maintain the normally strict demarcation line between our species and theirs.

In conclusion, Andy Russell, his wife Kay and their five children grew up in such proximity to wilderness and animals that they have, through habituation, taken on some aspects of the animal Others. The title of Kevin Van Tighem's article on Andy is "Still Rarin' Up" (rearing up) and Mike Gibeau, a bear scientist with Banff National Park, says that Charlie "thinks like a bear. He acts like a bear. He fundamentally understands bears" (quoted in Stevenson 2). Both Andy and Charlie have observed in bears not personhood but subjectivity, both species-based and individual, along with reasoning, curiosity, learning, play and game, adaptation and historical change,²¹ character, psychosis, a sense of humour, and the desire and ability to communicate with people. Their prolonged contact with and studies of bears strongly suggest that, in the words of poet Gary Snyder, we need a new "rhetoric of ecological relationships" in order even to begin to account for grizzly ontology and epistemology.²²

NOTES

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1. See Christopher Manes's wonderful essay "Nature and Silence" for amplification on how humans have largely silenced the rest of nature.
2. I wonder if all this "mauling" by humans of bears is not the acting out of some profound unconscious need or desire to touch the bear, to know the bear.
3. According to Kevin Van Tighem, *Grizzly Country* "sold tens of thousands of copies and was translated into more than a dozen languages. It is still in print, more than 30 years after it first came out" (17).
4. Andy closed his guiding and outfitting business in 1960 (Van Tighem 16).
5. Andy and Kay Russell had five children: Richard (Dick), Charlie, Gordon, John, and Anne.
6. In addition to the books by Andy and Charlie, Dick Russell is a zoologist and John Russell a biologist.
7. For a list of the characteristics of the realistic wild animal story, see Ralph Lutts's article.
8. Russell does not use these metaphors pertaining to royalty only in the early part of the book. See page 266 as well. Moreover, it is worth noting Maureen Enns's remarks in *GH* that during her own bear project, initiated before she met Charlie, she encountered a female grizzly whom she found to be both beautiful and triumphant and promptly dubbed her "Queen of the Rockies" (11).
9. It is interesting to speculate what the play *King Lear* might be like had its titular character been able to switch roles so easily.
10. Here is a brief passage of Burke on the sublime as it relates to animals: "SUBLIMITY includes, besides the idea of danger, the idea of danger [sic], the idea of power also. Pleasure follows the will, and we are generally affected with it by many things of a force inferior to our own; but pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior. Strength, violence, pain, and terror are therefore ideas that occupy the mind together. The sublimity of wild animals is due to their power; and the power of princes is not unmixed with terror, so that we address them as

“dread majesty” (www.publicbookshelf.com/public_html/Outline_of_Great_Books_Volume_I/edmundbur_bhi.html).

11. Charlie Russell writes that “Hunting guides describe bears as ferocious, unpredictable, and savage predators. They tell one horrifying story after another about people being torn apart. The victims are always those who approached the encounter poorly armed. Then the guides move on to recount countless acts of sportsman bravery: tales of real men stopping huge angry bears just short of the barrel of their guns. They keep it up until their clients are shaking in their boots, barely able to muster the courage to face the dreadful foe. I suppose when these hunting clients actually do kill a bear, they feel tremendously powerful, as if they have collected all the formidable power of the bear into themselves” (8).
12. Additional research will be needed to discover whether Russell applied the term “associate” to bears while he was still in the sport hunting business or whether he adopted the term only after he discovered common cause with the bears in being forced out of grizzly country by the oil and gas industry. Nevertheless, what I am examining here is the book he published in 1967, seven years after he stopped guiding, not his use of the term throughout his life.
13. Andy writes, “To kill an animal that has stood for pictures is more than unjustified: it is the mark of ignorance, lack of appreciation, and a most unforgivable breach of ethics” (*Grizzly Country* 210).
14. Russell himself was in partnership with his father-in-law Bert Riggall in the guiding business. Andy went to work for Bert as bronc-buster, wrangler, and packer at the age of 19 in 1935. In 1938, he married one of the boss’s two daughters, Kay Riggall, and in 1946 when Bert retired, Kay and Andy took over the guiding business and stayed in it until 1960. The notion of intermingling business and the environment is these days, justifiably, a suspect one, and yet at the same time such ecotheorists as Paul Hawken have written extensively about the potential implicit in blending the two.
15. For instance, although he became a professional guide very early in his life, after one year Charlie Russell gave it up: “In my late teens I became a hunting guide for so-called ‘big game.’ The first clue that I wasn’t cut out for it was when I started wondering how my clients would like the chase if they were the ones being hunted. I told Dad that I liked animals more than wealthy hunters, and ended my career as a professional guide after one year” (*Grizzly Heart* 8).

16. As this essay focuses on the work of a father and son (who therefore share the same surname), please note that the book by the father, Andy Russell, is *Grizzly Country*, which is also the name of the documentary film made by both of them together with another son, Dick Russell, and the book by Charlie Russell, is *Grizzly Heart*. At some points in the essay, I refer to them by their first names for the sake of clarity.
17. In *Grizzly Heart*, Charlie alludes briefly to his childhood “wars” and “tug-of-war” with school, where his self-confidence about his intelligence and abilities was seriously eroded. Ironically or not, this man who struggled with Language Arts in junior high school went on to become an expert in interspecies communication.
18. For an excellent analysis of and critique of scientific strictures against anthropomorphism, see Pamela J. Asquith and Emanuela Cenami Spada.
19. Credit is also due to the unique personality and life history of the Mouse Creek bear.
20. It is important to note that not everyone with an intimate knowledge of bears shares Charlie’s belief that one can read the expressions on bears’ faces. For instance, in his essay “Black Bears, Poem Bears,” former park warden Sid Marty writes, “It takes a lot of field study to read the body language of a bear. His face is a mask, as writer Edward Hoagland has pointed out, that tells you little about his inner emotions, though if he (or she) bristles up, flattens the ears, and runs at you – watch out” (162). The paragraph continues with a brief grammar of bears’ vocalizations, gestures and other signs. Later in the same essay, Marty writes, poetically, “A bear is like a wild man of the woods, his expression frozen from facing into solitude” (174).
21. Charlie Russell states that “Vitaly Nikolaenko, the veteran bear expert up at Kronotskiy Preserve, had told me that bears can pass down their fears to cubs for several generations as a way of keeping them from having to learn the fear first-hand in the face of actual danger” (*Grizzly Heart* 100).
22. In his book *Grateful Prey* Robert Brightman writes, “Bears are understood by many Crees as exceptional animals possessing intelligence equaling or exceeding that of humans. It is said that bears, for example, understand spoken Cree, a competence not conventionally generalized to other animals. Consequently, the behavior of bears is likely to be interpreted by Crees as manifesting this intelligence in ways that are not salient to non-Cree observers. Crees are likelier than whites to ascribe a studied

deliberateness to the doings of bears. Anything that bears do is likely to be apprehended as a particular token occurrence of a conventional type of ursine acumen" (32).

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