

The Snow Leopard's Tale by Thomas McIntyre in *The Bloomsbury Review*—Volume 31/Issue 3 • 2013

In *The Snow Leopard's Tale*, outdoor writer and author Thomas McIntyre liberally doses his readers with “the tonic of wildness,” a welcome antidote to the present age.

Our protagonist, the snow leopard Xue Bao, embarks on a trek from his native habitat on the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau through realms where humans' and beasts' consciousnesses are explored. In this plunge into fiction McIntyre has leaped with the power and grace associated with the leopard species. The snow leopard, “the most potent emblem” of the wild, is crafted with a sure hand. All aspects of the animal's biology, diet, and environment are accurately portrayed. Not only that, but McIntyre's rendition of the animal's consciousness rings true, congruent with more recent thinking in the field of animal ethology.

Xue Bao is a comely hero. His fangs are like ivory. His shoulders are powerful, his chest deep. His jade eyes are “ensnaring,” and his fur is “the milk blue of tomb jade.” As a cub on Bountiful Black Mountain, he learned “concealment,” “slinking, stalking,” and “springing from crags” to kill. As an adult, he hunted both large and small animals, “killing only the one he needed.”

Poor hunting in his home territory prompts the journey. He walks to unknown slopes, cliffs, and defiles bare of any familiar wild animal scent—least of all his own—as he descends to lower levels. There Xue Bao attacks a mounted pony successfully. He later collapses, to be roused on an unknown plane—as dumbfounded as Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* who awoke one morning on a newly armored back, gazing on his now segmented stomach and pairs of flailing legs. In Xue Bao's

metamorphosis, he is unaccountably upright. Fur on his legs has been replaced by shiny black skin to his knees, and heavy, loose hide, cinched at his waist, falls to the top of the new skin. Front paws, also furless, end in padded elongated, useless toes. In this incarnation he travels farther, eventually reaching civilization, where his animal consciousness encounters human consciousness.

Herein lie the story's mystery and the conundrums Xue Bao's discoveries present. On the mountain, words lack meaning and senses prevail. "Humans meant nothing." In the city, they dominate. He hears "laughter carrying kindness," for him a foreign concept. He is befuddled by slabs of meat hanging in a butcher's stall.

Several factors contribute to the success of this device. Besides the portrayal of Xue Bao, McIntyre's treatment of the setting is equally important and well hewn, adding another element to the story's *truth*. Himalayan mountainsides comprise some of the world's most forbidding patches of terrain, offering no respite at all. They repose at elevations between 12,000 and 15,000 feet or higher, with low levels of precipitation. Peaks pierce the sky. Xue Bao laps at a "trickle running over algal-green stone." At these upper elevations, game is sparse, and the cold, for which Xue Bao's fur is adequately suited, is unrelenting. Too, the cultural landscape is more receptive to the kind of mystery this animal—so illusory as to appear a phantom—suggests.

The transitions from one plane of consciousness to another are carefully calibrated, and McIntyre's flawless prose, as "tight as a snow bank to the ground," folds these various elements into an impressive whole.

Xue Bao's theft of a young sheep carcass in the marketplace provokes police response, moral quandary, and flight toward Bountiful Black Mountain and a cave where Xue Bao can find his own scent.

The book's cover, featuring a painting by Joel Ostlind, reveals only the area around a snow leopard's eyes. The feral gaze commands, while the partial view aptly hints at what is unknowable, so like Xue Bao himself and the mystery within. The elusive cat is a superb literary trope for raising questions relative to the tension between civilization and the wild. His journey is thought-provoking and an adventure for all. Eudora Welty said that writers must know their characters' "hearts and minds...[to] know all," to simply reveal "the right thing at the right moment." Xue Bao is a memorable literary figure. McIntyre spent 14 years writing this tale, giving him ample time to know this cat's heart and this cat's mind.