

hoopla digital: *The Bear* has been reviewed as being difficult to assign a genre to; was this purposeful or did you find it happening organically? If you were cataloging the book, how would you describe it?

Andrew Krivak: It happened organically. The story really began as a bedtime story I told my children when they were younger. I used to have to make up vignettes on the fly if I wanted to get them to sleep so that I could sleep too. So I told them about a time when my father and I had to go in search of our lost dog in the forest by our home in Pennsylvania. It was fall and we were about to give up all hope, when a benevolent bear appeared and told us where to find our dog. They of course had no problem with a talking bear. So a few years later I wrote it out and gave them each a bound copy for Christmas (my oldest son illustrated the cover). But that kids' story got me thinking about why they were able to believe in the closeness of humans to animals and nature so easily, and yet to us it sounds childish. My interest as a writer is in literary fiction, and I wondered what kind of story could lift that veil between humans and nature and still be believable. Then I was out fishing by myself one day in New Hampshire, marveling at how beautiful the old mountains and lakes were, and I wondered: What will it be like for the last two people living on this Earth? Will it be this beautiful? And that was it. I do see why this would be such a damned hard novel to categorize. I like what a reviewer in *The Wall Street Journal* said, calling it possibly a new genre: the post-apocalypse utopia. Others have called it a fable. To me, though, it's just a story about love.

hd: Post-apocalyptic books are not often described as quiet or gentle—how did you achieve such a meditative, hopeful book?

AK: I think it has to do with giving Nature the role of protagonist. The first actor. And not having characters move through it in a simply passive or utilitarian way. Sure, the man and the girl need Nature to survive, but I hope readers see that Nature has an obligation and a fondness even for them, too. Especially the girl. Everyone and everything has a part to play right up to the end. And who knows how it will end, really. I want to believe that the Earth's beauty will persist, no matter what. And so I placed my human characters in a spare yet harmonious relationship with the natural actors, each having a love and mutual respect for the other, and tried to let the prose reflect that awareness. I spent a lot of time thinking about that in between sentences.

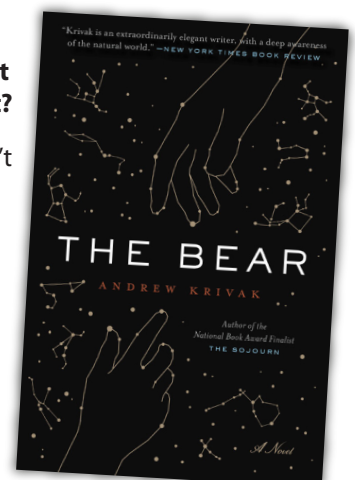
hd: Discuss your research for this book. Did you already have a background for such things as survival tactics and identifying constellations?

AK: No, I am not a survivalist or wilderness specialist. But I did grow up in a rural part of Northeastern Pennsylvania where I was outside all the time and around men and women who knew and loved the outdoors. So while I did plenty of research on how to make a selfbow and snowshoes and animal skins and fishing spears, I didn't have to travel a great distance in my imagination to place myself in the girl's world. I was taught what plants are good to eat when I was young. I've made fires in the snow and felt that verge of warmth and cold. As for the stars, I think everyone should know how to look up at the night sky and say, "There's the Big Dipper." Or, "There's the Great Bear, and Orion. And that's Leo." There's no trick to learning these things. Just look up. It's spectacular when you do.

hd: Your characters are not named, nor do they receive much in the way of physical description. We don't know where they are from, where they are, or how they got there. How did you write characters people could still relate to despite all of that?

AK: I think so many people can relate to them because of all of that. To me, a character isn't shaped by what he looks like, or where she's from, but by how that character acts. So I stripped these last two back to everything but what they do, what they say, how they act from the beginning to the end of each day. Aristotle says that character and setting aren't the most important parts of a story. The action is. I thought a lot about the Genesis myth, too. Adam and Eve are just names that mean the man and the woman. And if they began the process by giving names to all of creation, I wanted to bring it around and take those names away. And finally, if in that story the first human is a man, I thought it only fitting that the last one should be a woman.

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hd: *The Bear* is so dialed into nature that we felt like we were right there with the characters. Did you go so far as to write in the great outdoors? How did you create such an immersive environment for the reader?

AK: I write at a wooden desk. Inside. I love being outside and that is where I would always be, given the choice, but I can't write there. I need control and a cup of tea. I hope what you're describing, or experiencing in reading the novel, is what I can only suggest may be an hourglass effect of the writing itself. What I try to get dialed into is language, and that happens by collecting words, sentences, descriptions, until they drop through the narrow neck of composition, and come out on the other side as what I want them to be, what I need them to be, for the story. I'm also what you might call a collector of experiences for the sake of fiction. Sometimes I'll see something and think: I need to write that into a story. My daughter was once attacked by a nest of yellow jackets on a lakefront, and I grabbed her and dove into the water with her to get them off. That made it into my novel *The Signal Flame*. Things like that. The bald eagle, the frozen lake, the loons and the blueberries, the perch, the geese, making a selfbow (still working on it). These are all things that made it into *The Bear*.

Did any of your own habits or thoughts change as a result of writing a book so steeped in nature?

Yes. I am now hyper conscious as a writer of when I escape into a character's thoughts. Defaulting to the interior, I call it. If you read broadly in fiction, you'll see it everywhere. We have become accepting readers of the writers of so-called psychological fiction. But it's gotten to a place, in my opinion, where it's become kind of

hd: claustrophobic and done without any notion as to why, as though even something as simple (and unnecessary) as a rhetorical question at the end of a paragraph can serve as a moment of moral vision. It's not. So I try to

AK: resist that turn inward, and instead see what happens when a character's vision turns outward and looks at what is right in front of him or her. Then I have that character act, or make a choice. It's wholly different than if he or she mulled it over in the mind. Again, being is action.

As readers, we were particularly struck by the girl never returning to the house and—more specifically—her family's books. Can you talk a bit about that moment and decision?

This was a choice I came to as I wrote toward the end of the book. I had been having the girl "lose" things in her journey as a way of getting at what really mattered. And I found that as I approached the end of the novel there was growth in what the girl left behind. Everything but her father's bones is in some fashion or another left by the wayside. Even the bow and arrows. By the end, she's just eating what nature gives her. She's also come to a different place as a human by the time she returns home. Everything has changed. She knows what is essential and what is not. The house is a shelter she doesn't need anymore. The books only hold stories she already knows. She is so intimately a part of nature now that anything human-made from before is an obstacle to that intimacy.

Your choice of the bear as the animal for which the book would be named, and as the animal most present in the story...does the selection of that particular animal have any particular roots in folklore or mythology? Perhaps in something you read or carried from childhood?

hd: The story I mentioned at the outset of this interview—the one I told my children at bedtime about the talking bear—is probably the main reason why the bear is the bear. The black Labrador retriever I had growing up, Troy, was bear-like. The occasional bear sauntered up our dead-end street in Fernbrook, Pennsylvania, on mornings we were headed to the school bus.

AK: And stories from Eastern Europe that my grandmother told always depicted the bear as the most human-like of animals. So, to me, the choice was one of affinity. The bear had the mouthpiece, so to speak. I suppose too I've always loved William Faulkner's novella, "The Bear," in *Go Down, Moses*, ever since I read it in college. Isaac McCaslin's coming of age in the woods as a hunter, what he understands, what he doesn't, and the way in which he wants to hold nothing of the land that he has so-called "inherited," but would rather just give back to those to whom it has belonged from the beginning, if anything can ever be said to belong.



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hd: The reason for, or final events surrounding, the end of humanity were not touched on in this book. Discuss that choice, and how the book benefitted from it.

AK: I think the two most important things a writer has to struggle with are what to put into a story, and what to keep out. But the operative word here is story. All the way back to Aristotle. What's the action? The mythos, Aristotle calls it. What's it about? Once I decided that *The Bear* would be about the last two humans on Earth, I also decided it would not be about how they came to be the last two, but how their lives would unfold along the arc of time as the last. We don't know what disaster resulted in a scorched Earth of *The Road*. A J.G. Ballard short story won't tell you why the hotels in the distance are abandoned in a desert of sand, only that they are what the character sees. *The Bear* is about a man and a girl living life in a forward direction. What memories and remains there are of the past that preceded them are just that. The source of stories and occasionally a found artifact. They use and almost revere both of these things, but they are rarely what gets them from one day to the next. In fact, it's the man's curiosity about the past that leads to his own end. In one sense, the characters are both too far removed from the events in time and memory to know what or how it happened. And in another sense, the story's not about what others did in the past. It's about what the man and the girl do with the time they alone have left to do what they must do.

hd: Are there any books you would recommend that you read in preparation for writing this book?

AK: I read *The Traditional Bowyer's Bible* on how to make a selfbow. I read books on how to line for bees, how to make a snare, and what part of tree bark you can eat and good stuff like that. I wouldn't necessarily recommend them, but I found them fascinating in the way that they seemed to stop time. For literature, I re-read a few great works I've always loved and have wanted to get back to (because reading something new only throws me off when I'm writing): Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*. And Hebrew Scripture, all of it.

hd: What do you hope people take away from *The Bear*?

AK: I hope it helps people stop and look around at not just where they are but who they are. What preconceptions do we hold and need to get rid of? What is essential and what is not? What do we consider to be beautiful? And are we living and acting the way we should? Is it the way we imagined we would when we were young? Most of all, though, I just hope they'll find it to be a good story. To me that's what it's all about.

hd: Another book of yours, *The Sojourn*, was a National Book Award finalist. Can you tell us what it was like to get that news?

AK: Wow. Well, it might be worth mentioning that *The Sojourn* was turned down by thirty-three publishers before Erika Goldman at Bellevue Literary Press didn't hesitate to acquire it. But independent publishers don't have the money larger publishers have to market their lists, so I thought, okay, at least I wrote it. It doesn't matter if no one reads it. Then in September (I think) I got a voicemail from the National Book Foundation that I thought was just someone looking for a contribution, but he asked me to call him back, so I did. And he told me that *The Sojourn* was one of that year's National Book Award finalists and that I couldn't tell anyone until it was announced the following week. I asked, "Are you sure you have the right person?" And he assured me he did. The whole experience was pretty surreal in a good way. The best part was meeting other writers at the ceremony. Jesmyn Ward, who won that year for *Salvage the Bones*. Julie Otsuka. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa. And one of my favorite living poets, Bruce Smith, whose powerful book *Devotions* was also a finalist that year. (Nikky Finney won for *Head Off & Split*. I read a lot of poetry). But I'll never forget John Crowley, one of the judges, coming up to me afterwards and saying, "I hear you have three kids. You still find time to write?" I told him it wasn't easy and wondered most days if it was even possible. He said, "It's possible. And you have to do it. Just find a way." Ten years and three novels later, I think about that every day.

hd: Is there anything you are working on now that you'd be willing to share?

AK: I am nearly finished with my fourth novel, a much longer work that is a return to the fictional town of Dardan, Pennsylvania, and the Vinich/Konar family about whom my first two novels were written. It's tentatively entitled *Like the Appearance of Horses*. But no one has seen it yet.