



GOAT MOUNTAIN

DAVID VANN

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Praise for *Goat Mountain*

'*Goat Mountain* is a full-blooded return to form...Some of the set-pieces are magnificent and the story itself is relentless. The boy's predicament—both the physical danger he faces and his confusion at finding he exists in a moral vacuum from which no one can help him escape—grips you by the throat...David Vann is at war with sentimentality. I found it impossible to look away.' *Metro*

'This story has the power of a bullet fired from a gun.' *Economist*

'*Goat Mountain* by David Vann shows us viscerally that there is no there-there, that humans have to constantly renegotiate what real is, that the rules, laws, commandments are all man-made, and that every time a few people enter a room and close the door or get stuck in the middle of nowhere, there's going to be a skirmish between spirit and bone. This novel exposes a sort of reality that we all glean but are happy to pretend not to notice. Read it.' *Kirkus Reviews*

About David Vann

David Vann is an internationally bestselling author published in nineteen languages. He is the winner of fourteen prizes and his books (*Legend of a Suicide*, *Caribou Island*, *Dirt*, *A Mile Down* and *Last Day On Earth*) have appeared on seventy Best Books lists in a dozen countries. He is a professor at the University of Warwick in England and lives in New Zealand part of the year.

A reader's introduction to *Goat Mountain*

Unflinching in its brutality, *Goat Mountain* takes us to a physical and psychic landscape of evil. An eleven-year-old boy kills a man. Is he evil? Is killing an inherent part of human nature? Is killing evil? Is there something wrong with the boy? Is he inhuman? And what of the men he is with? What do their reactions suggest about the evil in them?

The boy, his father, his grandfather and his father's best friend, Tom, are on the harsh Goat Mountain during a ritualised annual deer hunting trip on family land. At eleven years old, the boy is considered old enough to kill his first deer. Instead he coolly shoots a man. At first, the dead man's body is strung up at the men's camp like a deer; later it is dragged around as it rots, while the father and grandfather struggle over what to do.

The boy must still kill his first deer, and he does so, but it is not a clean kill, and he literally comes face to face with the buck's suffering as it dies.

Throughout the novel, there is tension between the notion that there is evil in all of us and the idea that the four characters are exceptional in their evil.

The Bible and other origin myths are often referenced, with particular focus on the severe Old Testament, especially the story of Cain. There is also tension around whether these origin myths are literally or even metaphorically true, about whether God and the Devil exist.

Every character and event is laden with meaning, and again those meanings are often multiple. From the very start, the mountain is made corporeal, sometimes almost a character, more often a symbol of age and malevolence. At times it stands for Hell.

There is little possibility of fixing on any one interpretation of events in the novel, or of finding a single answer to the philosophical questions the narrator raises.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss the questions raised in the first paragraph of the reader's introduction above: Is the boy evil? Is killing an inherent part of human nature? Is killing evil? Is there something wrong with the boy? Is he inhuman? And what of the men he is with? What do their reactions suggest about the evil in them?
2. 'My father believed still in our goodness. He believed we could make things right and keep the demonworld at bay, and so he was destined to struggle and suffer without end' (198). Is there good in these characters?

Are there degrees of evil? Is one of the characters more evil than the others, is one more moral?

3. 'You can't undo your own nature and the moral are always left helpless in the face of who we are' (196). Who is the 'we' here? If we are all inherently evil, who are 'the moral'?

4. Does the novel present a moral alternative to how the men reacted to the boy's act? Is there a moral alternative? What do you think they should have done?

5. 'You think it's possible to be moral,' the grandfather tells the father (151), implying that it isn't. Does the grandfather have his own moral code? If so, what is it? Is it possible to be moral?

6. 'Cain is how we began, all who didn't start in Paradise'(17), and later 'Cain killed what was available. The story has nothing to do with brothers' (29). Is this an argument for the Fall, for Original Sin? Does it suggest that the desire to kill is inherent? Similarly, the narrator says: 'The Ten Commandments is a list of our instincts that will never leave us.' Do you agree? Discuss the many other references to the Old Testament. Why does Vann have the narrator contemplating Bible stories at the beginning of many chapters?

7. At one point, the narrator seems to suggest that Jesus became a goat on the mountain during his forty days in the wilderness (177). With the novel's setting being Goat Mountain, what does this suggested transformation of Jesus mean? What of the parallels between the dead man and Jesus?

8. 'There are times I get excited and think I did something beautiful in killing that poacher. A triumph. I wander around my small apartment like a thing possessed, pacing, and I can feel my righteousness. But then I think he was only a man, only one lousy guy back in the fall of 1978, long ago, some hunter out to kill a buck on someone else's land, insignificant. And that makes me only an ordinary killer, with no special claims' (89). What sense do you get of what kind of man the narrator is now? Another quote you may wish to discuss in answering this question: 'Lunging at vacuums ... this is what I've been doing ever since, in all these years, that

nothing has changed, this moment suspended infinitely, repeating' (173).

9. On the drive at the beginning of the book, the boy is literally 'on edge', at risk of falling into an abyss. Discuss the other ways Vann uses the landscape to echo the boy's inner experience.

10. Why do you think Vann uses such visceral descriptions of the dead man and of the narrator's struggles with the buck?

11. When does the boy start to regret killing the man? Or is the problem that he doesn't?

12. Vann does not name his characters, perhaps suggesting that they are archetypal. Do you think they are?

13. Why does the Grandfather make the boy eat the buck's raw organs? Why does the boy have to bring his father the buck's head?

14. Is the father protective of the boy, or does he merely want to reserve the right to punish him as he chooses?

15. What does this novel say about families? Are the tensions in this family universal? Are the boy's actions a result of the toxic relationships in his family?

16. 'It's unclear what payment has ever done. Nothing has been undone. Every act as remained. What is it in us that makes us believe we can pay?' (199). Is it possible to make reparation?

17. The narrator talks about what was before God—something unthinking and unfeeling (63). Where does the novel suggest God comes from, what is his purpose?

18. The grandfather seems invincible, threatening annihilation, the character most like the Devil. What, then, is the significance of the boy killing him? Why does he feel love in those final moments of the novel?