

Rudner embraces ties with animals

"Ask Now the Beasts: Our Kinship with Animals Wild and Domestic"
Author: Ruth Rudner
Publisher: Marlowe & Co.

By **CHRISTENE MEYERS**
For the Gazette

Flying back to Montana recently, my two Yorkshire terriers in tow beneath the airplane seat, I began reading Ruth Rudner's engaging new book, "Ask Now the Beasts: Our Kinship with Animals Wild and Domestic."

I assured the dogs, Nick and Nora, that they'd like the book. It's an affectionate and intelligent homage, I told them, to their canine cousins and many other distant relatives, including cats, both wild and domestic: penguins; horses; wolves; eagles; and much more.

The book made my spirits soar. It also made me wistful, grateful and sometimes sad.

Anyone who has had a kinship with a critter knows how unique that bond of love is.

And we know full well that with love comes risk and the possibility of the relationship ending tragically or, at the very least, sadly.

Yet how much richer are our lives for having dared to love a four-legged creature, to have reached out to another species and been licked, nuzzled or snuggled in return.

Rudner knows this and holds that knowledge sacred, seeking through animals' answers to life's great questions. All of this, her title — borrowed from Job — implies.

She writes of "the connection of spirit, of ancient memory, of beginnings in which all of us were spun out of the primordial mass." And she understands how animals enrich, inspire, captivate. How they stir our imaginations, fire our creative muse. And how their behavior and grace teach us life lessons.

As a part-time Arizonan, I took poignant pleasure in the chapter set in Hilltop, Ariz., when a dog attached himself to Rudner and her husband. In a day's time, while exploring the terrain, they shared lunch with the dog and bonded. He tagged

along up the canyon, chasing chipmunks and picking up bones.

"He was happy to have people," Rudner writes.

After being riddled with guilt at leaving the dog, not wanting to take another's pet, Rudner contemplates the situation. She recalls the figure chasing the car, finally abandoning the chase but surprised that he is left behind.

"The dog running did not leave my heart."

Rudner drives five hours to return to the scene in hopes of finding the dog.

I re-read this chapter while waiting as my male Yorkie, Nick, made a miraculous recovery from a near-fatal collision with a several-ton truck. The accident was my fault because I turned my back for 30 seconds to go inside and retrieve a cup of tea from the microwave.

Bad timing. A barely conscious decision altered my life and nearly took my pup's. So how well I understand the sorrow and torment Rudner felt when she couldn't find that dog who befriended her.

There are other examples of her compassion, including the temptation to rescue another person's dog from the freezing cold of winter — a temptation she overcame to her regret.

The book is a touching but never maudlin paean to creatures great and small. It is also Rudner's way of expressing her need to connect with critters and of showing appreciation to the magic that connects us humans to nonhuman lives.

As Rudner proved in her earlier and equally eloquent books — "A Chorus of Buffalo," "Partings" and "Greetings from Wisdom, Montana," she is a painter of prose.

"At six thirty, the cranes stand in red pools of sunrise, immobile against the dawn," she writes.

"Ducks swim in the foreground, already feeding. A steady trumpeting of the cranes sweeps across the pond. Red sky eases into rose. The pond takes on its twilight colors of pale aqua and rose gold; the trumpeting increases."

While she turns out such sinewy passages, she outlines

If you go

Ruth Rudner, author of "Ask Now the Beasts: Our Kinship with Animals Wild and Domestic," will give a reading at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Yellowstone Art Museum, 401 N. 27th St.

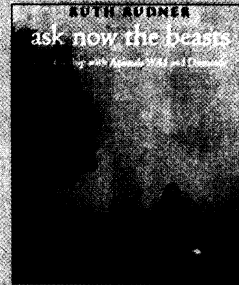
Rudner has written about the American West for years for the Wall Street Journal. She and her photographer husband, David Muench, are authors of "Windstone" and "Our National Parks."

Her work also has been published in the New York Times, UYSA Weekend, Field & Stream, Vogue, Self and other publications. She lives in Corrales, N.M.

The reading, presented by Writer's Voice of the Billings Family YMCA, is free to YMCA and YAM members, with \$7 tickets available at the doors for all others. Books will be available for sale.

Writer's Voice readings are supported, in part, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Montana Arts Council and the Montana Cultural Trust.

Upcoming Writer's Voice



events include:

■ 7 p.m. Sept. 26. Cindy Dyson, author of "And She Was," and William Haywood Henderson, author of "Augusta Locke," at YAM.

■ 7 p.m. Oct. 19. Sigrud Nunez, author of "The Last of Her Kind," and Ron Carlson, author of "A Kind of Flying," and both current residents at Wyoming's Ucross Foundation at YAM.

■ 2 p.m. Nov. 19. Tom Crowder, author of "One Good Horse," and Sid Gustafson, author of "Horses They Ride," at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 530 S. 24th St. W.

each story with an unsentimental, journalist's eye. A vignette called "Yorkie," of course, got my attention. The Yorkshire terrier is known in dog circles as "the little dog with the big attitude." Rudner's Yorkie reminded me so much of Nicky. Fierce, independent, confident. And sometimes foolish.

Rudner's beloved dog, Blue, also plays a significant part in the book. When Blue's life is ending, Rudner describes the anguish of watching a beloved companion fade from the world.

As Blue departs, Shadow enters Rudner's life — and, like the ticking of the metronome, Rudner's sense of the continuum allows her to love again.

Her stories deal with the temporary nature of all things, for as she says, "I needed to remember that neither Blue nor I were permanent and that impermanence is the creator of beauty, of death, of life, and of love."

I've always been suspicious of

horses play, a cat preens or a penguin moves his flippers.

She sees constant connection between herself and animals.

On an expedition in St. Andrews Bay, she is moved by the sight of orphaned penguins. Then she observes that these "birds designed as fish" look amazingly like her fellow explorers.

"I can't tell whether the figures walking in the distance are my shipmates or penguins. They all walk alike: arms a little out from their bodies for balance on the often-slick snow slopes, a slight waddle from the overboots we wear over footwear and under rainpants to keep us dry."

Near the book's end, a tale of two horses killed by lightning is as arresting as a suspense novel. It also echoes one of the book's themes: randomness — where every day brings the reality of the gamble we call life, where each relationship is a shaky step up to the roulette wheel.

Rudner's ode to a spirited, one-eyed and endearing horse, Champ, is a terrific ending. In her heartache, Rudner is still able to see that she has been enriched by Champ and his gifts to her.

The book is championship material. And it realizes full well that not all animal-human stories are fairytales, that animals have been exploited and misused.

"Ask Now the Beasts" is written with a winning blend of humility and confidence. The humility celebrates and is thankful for the intimacy and growth the creatures of Earth give us. The confidence comes from Rudner's knowledge that each animal she dares to love offers insight into life and its truth, beauty and sadness.

Rudner, who must have been both horse and dog in other lives, steps inside the skin of her critters and cloaks them in radiance, insight and, yes, humanity. In turn, they give her gifts of introspection, contentment and joy.

Christene Meyers, a former editor and reporter for The Billings Gazette, is a freelance writer and world traveler.