The Craft of Paul Gruchow

By Karen Babin

Minnesota writer Paul Gruchow's work is characterized by his attention to details, both of the natural world around him and the words on his page. His prose is poetic and elegant, "wise, precise, and rich, deserving of its own display and contours" (Hendricksson 2). John Henricksson calls Gruchow a "literary naturalist," a distinction I feel hardly captures the mastery of words that Gruchow possesses when writing about the various topographies of Minnesota, from the farming prairie of Chippewa County in *Grass Roots* to the wildness of the North Woods in *Boundary Waters*. Such awareness of the natural world brings the reader to a higher level of reality, both on a physical and metaphysical plane: "We confront in wild places evidence of powers greater than our own; this evidence humbles us, and in humility is the beginning of spirituality. Wildness matters not because it alone is sacred but because it arouses in us the sense of sanctity that makes visible the sacredness of everything else in life" (*BW* 201). Such awareness is a yardstick of art in general, both in a words-on-page level and a world-around-the-writer level. Leif Enger, another highly-recognized Minnesota writer, says, "at this point, a good essayist, a Barton Sutter, a Paul Gruchow, would set down a paragraph condensing the miles, geography traversed, and people encountered into a wise nub of revealed truth" (paragraph 10). Revealing nubs of truth is something at which Gruchow is especially skilled.

Gruchow's essays have received well-deserved critical acclaim and numerous awards, including seven citations in *Best American Essays* and three Minnesota Book Awards (MBA).

Grass Roots: The Universe of Home was published in 1995, and received the MBA for the Best Book of the Year (1996), Critic's Choice for the Best Book of the Year from the San Francisco Review of Books (1996), and "Bones" was reprinted in *Best American Essays 1988. Boundary Waters: Grace of the Wild* was published in 1998, received the John Flanagan Prize for Distinguished Contribution to Literature of the Midwest (1998), nomination for the 1998 MBA for Nature Writing, and "Spring: Wild Isle" received notice as one of the 100 Notable Essays in *Best American Essays 1997. Worlds Within a World* received the Minnesota Book Award in 2000. Above all, his writing serves to be the highest standard which prose can attain.

For purposes of clarity, I will refer to specific essays within *Boundary Waters* by their season, as the book is divided into seasons, and the entirety of the work by the initials *BW*. *Grass Roots* in its entirety as a work will be referenced by *GR*, the individual essays by title, which are not seasons. The essay "The Meekness of Angels," found in the anthology *The Sacred Place* will be referred to by simply "Meekness." Generally speaking, concentration will be paid primarily to *Boundary Waters* and *Grass Roots*.

Gruchow's writing is full of poetics, which gives freshness to his descriptions of things that might seem pedestrian under the lens of other writers. In "The Meekness of Angels," Gruchow writes of an encounter with a bear, describing a bear's roar: "The bear's voice was as enormous and commanding as its physique—grander, less guttural, and more eloquent than the roars of the one lion I have heard" (44). Gruchow could have easily slipped into generalities in the descriptions, yet he does not, not ignoring the way *grander* and *guttural* sound together. He avoids descriptions that are ambiguous in their commonness, for instance, his rendering of Isle Royale, the largest island in Lake Superior: "I wish to avoid certain adjectives in writing about Isle Royale, words like beautiful, primeval, pristine, natural, wild. There is already enough ambiguity about such places. Certainly Isle Royale appears to be all of these things" ("Spring" 167). Following this line, the actual description of the mother bear in "The Meekness of Angels" avoids trite and overused language, language which is slow enough to give evidence to Gruchow's awe over her:

> She was enormous and blonde. The silver tips of her venerable hair glistened in the long angle of sunlight filtering through the trees. She did not make a sound as she moved with athletic grace toward her purpose, her massive shoulders as fluid as water. She was like a waterfall on legs. The hump of her back was so prominent and her size so great, that in another setting I might temporarily have mistaken her for a bison cow" (42).

This comparing the bear to a waterfall and also to a bison cow sets up the next step in descriptions: the status details, for which this rendering of the bear scene is indicative.

Gruchow's descriptions fall under what Peter Chilson calls status details, those details and descriptions that set a place, character, or thing apart from everything around it. Status details give insight into a person, place, or thing's personality. They are unexpected details, the ironic contrast that creates interest, as Gruchow displays when describing a walk through the woods: "Our short jaunt turns into a ten-mile march, the last of it taken at temper-tantrum pace" ("Fall" 79). In the

above bear description, the reader would not necessarily expect him to compare the bear to "a waterfall on legs." As he describes his childhood home in the Rosewood Township of Chippewa County, Gruchow uses simple details that fit the simplicity of the land, of that time in his life:

> One hundred sixty acres, a quarter of a square mile, was standard size for a farm in the early 1950s. Our east-west eighty was generally level, running slightly uphill at the east end. The north-south eighty was flat for a quarter of a mile and then dipped into a large cattail marsh, which was low enough that the farmstead could not be seen from it. The topsoil was rich black prairie loam, fertile and generally friable, but with a tendency to harden into something like concrete if worked when too wet ("Rosewood Township" 12-13).

Descriptions often begin with the visual, the first thing a reader demands, but good descriptions never stop there. Going beyond the visual to the tangible and tactile, as well as those perceived by other senses, is something at which Homer in his *Odyssey* is particularly skilled, as is Gruchow. In the passage quoted above, Gruchow moves from the visual of flat land and a cattail marsh to the tactile topsoil description, hardening like concrete. As he is remembering the chickens from his childhood, he recalls plucking the feathers off the chickens after they had been decapitated and finished their headless and heedless dance around the yard. The feathers "would be plucked (the pin feathers stuck in your fingers as if still begging for mercy)..." ("Rosewood" 18). Homer is also known for his domestic images, bring them to a level all can identify with. Not many people of Generation X have plucked the feathers from a chicken, and so they wouldn't know what pin feathers were. But through his description, knowing that the feathers stuck in the fingers leads the reader to assume that such was painful.

In contrast, nearly everyone has, at one time, felt sweat trickling down his or her back, a description of something universal, yet Gruchow still is able to add a status detail: "Sweat trickles down my back, a feeling I've always liked" ("Summer" 91). Such sets up a description that is fresh and new, not something expected.

Additionally, the use of interesting verbs sets up another kind of status detail. When Gruchow observes that "a moose looks like the discarded early draft of an animal" ("Spring" 190), I know what he means, because I am of the same North Country he is describing. For those who are not of the area and have never seen a moose outside of a zoo or picture book, Gruchow gives more, describing a late night encounter:

> A couple of nights later, I was awakened by the sound a creature galumphing its way up a creek. Splish! Splash! Splish! Splash! the animal went in a loud, slow, strangely offbeat rhythm, sounding like a break dancer on stilts working in water. The night was dark and I couldn't have seen the animal anyway, but I didn't need to see it to know what it was. Only a moose could have created such a wacky ruckus ("Spring" 192).

Even for those who have never seen a moose in the wild, or even considered what one might sound like as it makes its way through the forest, Gruchow gives a rendering that is fresh in its oratory details—splish, splash; offbeat rhythm—and visual details— a breakdancer on stilts. He describes for his readers what a

"galumphing" animal might sound like, and why a creature might be more apt to galumph than to glide. One might expect more oratory details than visual in this passage, since Gruchow describes the night as dark. He delivers.

Gruchow is the epitome of what Max Beerbohm meant when Beerbohm wrote "[Artists] are trustees of something not entrusted to us others; they bear fragile treasure, not safe in a jostling crowd" (33). Gruchow is able to observe—observe rather than blankly state—things that are intuitive to the rest of humanity, yet we do not possess the "fragile treasure" necessary to put that intuition into words. As Gruchow observes, it puts him in the same position of wonder as the reader, as if he is seeing and experiencing the scene and happenings for the first time.

Attention to and articulation of the slow moments is more evident in *Boundary Waters* than *Grass Roots*, as might be expected in a work that is, as a whole, more aware of stillness than *Grass Roots*, which wants to make sense of the southwestern Minnesota prairie. There is a different kind of attention paid to the prairie. Incidentally, the genre of these two works is different: *Grass Roots* is described as memoir and *Boundary Waters* is solidly nature writing. In any case, attention is paid to the slowing of the mind, body, and soul in each instance, where "the silence deep in the wilderness and the one at the center of the human heart are sublime and serene, and they cannot be heard except when alone" ("Summer" 26). This is one way that Gruchow makes the universal personal and vice versa, by identifying these kind of moments.

> Patience is a virtue diligently to be practiced at all times, but especially at evening; the sun will not be hurried. It is reticent about crossing the horizon. When it reaches that threshhold, it takes the pause that every dramatist knows well, the brief sigh of silence, before it makes its exit and the curtain falls ("Summer" 54).

Attention paid in *Boundary Waters* is, for the most part, focused outward to the land of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Outward attention here brings up a natural articulation of the inward, as the inward cannot be neglected when in nature. In *Grass Roots*, the attention is "local and personal," as Gruchow says all history is at its core ("Home" 6). In the first essay of *Grass Roots*, "Home is a Place in Time," there is attention paid on the micro and macro levels of home. Such is first evident in the title of the collection *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. The local and personal aspect of home is made universal without seeming obvious and contrived.

"Summer: The Grace of the Wild" contains two moments in which Gruchow slows his descriptions and thoughts down to fully grasp their core meaning. The first is a three-page description of a dragonfly nymph turning into an adult. The first paragraph covers nearly a page, the description of the dragonfly nymph. The next paragraph describes the transformation:

> As I watch, the fierce, ugly creature's body splits down its back at the mid-dorsal line and from it, in incredibly slow motion, emerges an enormous adult dragonfly. First the thorax appears, then the head with eyes so huge they nearly meet at center brow, then the six long legs, which grope for footing on the rock, and finally the long abdomen, soft and crumpled as a freshly washed swatch of cotton. The whole creature is five or six inches long, dwarfing the skin of its nymphal self. It is as

> ridiculous as a crowd of clowns emerging from a toy car ("Summer" 48).

Gruchow continues to observe the movements, or the lack of movement, from the newly transformed dragonfly. It in these moments of quiet and intense observation that Gruchow is most powerful: "I rise and head up the knoll to gather my things. It is time to push on. I suddenly notice the discarded skins of dragonfly nymphs everywhere. I have, it seems, tarried in a paradise of metamorphosis. As I take to the water again, I feel a new man myself" (50). Such exposition after the description seem to me full of wonder at something miraculous, the nubs of revealed truth that Leif Enger identified; Gruchow seems to be absolutely humbled by being given the chance to witness something of this nature.

Perhaps nighttime is a natural place for slowing down. Another effective example of slowing down the moment comes in the section titled "Compline: Loons, Wolves, Night Sounds, Sleep" within "Summer." He changes point of view here, from the first person to the more direct second person, putting the reader directly into the scene. The entire section is an exercise in slow description.

> Across the lake, a wolf howls. It is not so much a howl as a wail, a long lament, not languorous but full-toned and intense. The wolf has a tenor voice. It carries operatically across the lake, dies away, echoes back upon itself.
>
> Ooooooooooooooo
> oOOOOOOOOooo.
>
> You do not stir, but your skin tingles. Some wild part of you desires to rise up and give answer. But from far away comes a better reply, three high trumpet-like notes on an ascending scale.
>
> Ah! Ah! Ah!

> On lakes near and far, the loons, hearing the primordial cry, voice their own response, a tumultuous laughter, ecstatic, echoing across all the hard surfaces of this land of rock and water ("Summer" 69)

As the section continues, Gruchow pulls the reader deeper into what a night in the north sounds like and then into the morning. Perhaps I am more inclined to know, to feel, exactly what Gruchow is describing because I have experienced it myself. However, the power of the description, the slowness in which he describes the night is undeniably well done, both in terms of pacing—nights spent in the open often pass slowly, as one is wondering what really is outside the tent wall, and tone—through the exact "words" of the loons and wolves, the reader is given both an oratorical and an on-the-page description of what such sounds like. The section ends the essay with these words: "You stand there belonging, anointed with the heavenly, the homely, the grace of wildness" (71).

Contrasting the slow moments is Gruchow's intuitiveness about where not to linger. In "Rosewood Township," as he is recalling accidentally burning down his family's barn, where not one of the panicked animals which had fled into the barn for safety had escaped. The description of the entire ordeal is two paragraphs, at the end of which Gruchow gives the reader a quick glimpse of how he felt about it (11): "I was out of my mind with grief and fear. I imagined being sent to prison" —this would seem uncharacteristically pedestrian and unoriginal, if not for the next sentence, which gives startling clarity to the young boy's fear: "I had, as young as I was, a faint sense of what my carelessness would mean to family already dangling by an economic thread." His fear had

less to do with punishment than the welfare of his family. "The smell of smoke and burned flesh nauseated me. I took to my loft and could not speak or eat for days. Ten years passed before I found the courage to talk about that afternoon" (12). This moment could be drawn out and turn into something as nauseating as Gruchow's subject matter if he had expanded this beyond three sentences. The reader would quickly become bored with the guilt and wonder why he went on and on about it. By the brevity of this description, he makes the reader take responsibility for reading between the lines. There is obviously more to what Gruchow-as-child felt, but Gruchow-as-writer knows that his readers are going to have a good idea without expressly stating it.

Sentence-level attention is never more evident than in the essays of *Boundary Waters*. The prose is decidedly poetic. The sound of the words against each other, the way they taste on the tongue seems to be of particular interest to Gruchow. He uses the beauty of the language, even in the inadequacy of such, to describe what he sees. There is more than mere description present in the alliteration and assonance.

> The *canoe country* is, in this respect, *classically compelling*. Every lake makes a bright opening in the shadowy forest. The *lakes*, formed by *glacial* striations or fault *lines*, *may* stretch for *miles*, narrow and wider in the *middle* than at either end. *Many* of them, from the seat of a canoe, appear to curve gently, so that when you launch out upon one, the portage that lies at the far end remains long obscured. When you reach it, you find a narrow trail, a shaded opening in the forest, which usually climbs a ridge, or a *succession* of them, and des*ce*nds again to another *sunlit sliver* of *translucent* water ("Summer" 28, my italics).
>
> We *are*, *afoot* in the natural world, as *gangling and gawky as adolescents* ("Fall" 102, my italics).
>
> *They* talked as *though they* were *singing*, for the *sheer sound* of it, *sailing* off into high *philosophies* the way a *tenor tosses* off high *Cs* ("Winter" 118, my italics).

The alliteration and assonance are particularly evocative in these passages. In the first, a hard C is repeated, followed by L, then M, and finally soft S. This leads the reader from harsh masculine sounds in the c to the feminine L, M, and soft S, invoking a relaxing and peaceful tone. In the second, the assonance of A somehow does not balance the hard G of gangling and gawky, which is fitting for the content of the sentence. In the third, TH is repeated, followed by the S in singing, sheer, sound, sailing, philosophies, tosses, and Cs, once again invoking a peaceful tone, which is not set off by the T in tenor and tosses.

The way words taste in the mouth and sound against each other is not neglected in *Grass Roots*, either. In "Rosewood Township," after the initial description of the cattail marsh at the end of the north-south eighty at the beginning of the essay, Gruchow returns to it. The description of the marsh, both physically and personally, is striking. "For me, the most important place on the farm was the cattail marsh at its north end" (20). Gruchow's inherent humility appears in this section, as well as attention to the sound of words. "Here was a piece of Rosewood Township as it had existed for thousands of years, a surviving *testament* to the *tallgrass* prairie, and the *richest* and most complex

representative of it" (21, my italics). He goes on to describe the marsh:

> As summer *wore* on and the *wet* days of *May* gave *way* to dusty August, the ponds *evaporated*, *exposing* ovals of black mud, *ringed* by *rank* growths of *cattails*, *rushes*, and *tall wetland* flowers. These ovals *baked* and *cracked*, the rich *alkaline* deposits in them collecting as fine white powder (21, my italics).

The W is repeated in *wore* and *wet*, but the alliteration gives way to internal rhyme with *May* and *way*. Assonance follows with evaporated and exposing, then alliteration again with *ringed*, *rank*, and *rushes*. Then he uses a repetition of T in cattails, tall, and wetland. Internal K sounds are then repeated in *baked*, *cracked*, and *alkaline*. All in all, though, the descriptions in this essay are more wholesome and domestic than the images in *Boundary Waters*, but that does not detract from either work.

The sentence level attention continues in Gruchow's impeccable diction. His tone is nearly always soft-spoken and humble, sometimes self-deprecating, something that so clearly follows his speaking voice. No matter his tone, however, his diction gives the reader no doubt as to the writer's intelligence. In his writing contractions are rare and fragments are nonexistent.

> All history is ultimately local and personal. To tell what we remember, and to keep on telling it, is to keep the past alive in the present. Should we not do so, we could not know, in the deepest sense, how to inhabit a place. To inhabit a place means literally to have made it a habit, to have made it the custom and ordinary practice of our lives, to have learned how to wear a place like a familiar garment, like the garments of sanctity that nuns once wore. The word habit, in its now-dim original form, meant *to own*. We own places not because we possess deeds to them, but because they have entered the continuum of our lives. What is strange to us—unfamiliar—can never be home ("A Home Is A Place In Time" 6).

This type of language and diction is highly detached and somewhat academic, yet it it still retains an element of personability. Gruchow uses the language to separate himself from the writing, to gain necessary distance from the subject, but somehow that same technique cements his point because the reader is not distracted by humor or fragmented speech.

Gruchow uses large words not normally found in everyday language, spoken or written. He is quite good at using the original definitions of words, or even looking to the word's root for clarification of his point. In this excerpt from "Spring: Wild Isle" from *Boundary Waters*, an essay recognized as one of the 100 Notable Essays of 1997 from *Best American Essays*, Gruchow uses the original meaning of "essay" as a verb meaning to try, to attempt. He uses an interesting play between "assay" and "essay," another example of Gruchow's attention to words and the way they sound against each other. A word does not exist on its own; it exists in its relation to what surrounds it.

> There is no brief way to know a place even so small as this. Places can be claimed but never conquered, assayed but never fathomed, essayed but never explained. You can only make yourself present; watch earnestly, listen attentively, and in due time, perhaps, you will absorb something of the land. What you absorb will eventually change you. This change is

the only real measure of a place ("Spring" 167).

In addition to this use of word-meanings, another of Gruchow's tendencies is to use long sentences. He describes his childhood bedroom that he shared with his twin sister with such a technique:

> As I lay watching the shadows ebb and flow, trying to catch the gossamer particles of things floating in the moonbeams, and listening to the stirrings in the next bed, to the scampering of mice in the hollow walls, to the movement of the air beyond the windows, and to the faint creakings and groanings of the old house, the strange world of night, of which I was vaguely fearful, would stir to life and I, however sleepy I had been at bedtime, would waken with it ("Visions" 162).

This sentence is not completely indicative of Gruchow's sentence length, but he is not afraid to use such long sentences. Such a technique most often appears in his slow moments, where observation and imagination are working together. It appears here in this night scene, as well as quiet moments in *Boundary Waters*. These long sentences guide the reader to slow down with him, rocking in the rhythm of the prepositional phrases in the excerpt above.

Gruchow also uses appositives and parentheticals frequently to break up the thoughts, whether descriptions or exposition:

> On the penultimate day of the old year, the baby, after a stubborn resistance of her own, finally came ("Home Is A Place In Time" 4).

> I practiced a boyish and irregular asceticism, finding myself, although Protestant, powerfully attracted for a time to the most extravagant habits of the third- and forth-century desert eremites ("Bones" 199).

> Fine, we say through lips bent into imitations of pleasant grins, since we have to boil water anyway, we'll have a cup of tea. The water in the brook is already a kind of tea, a deep, reddish brown in color, steeped in the rotting vegetation of the swamp ("Fall" 107).

> She could certainly, in the right wind, have smelled us a mile away (an odor Andy Russell, who knows grizzlies as intimately as anybody, describes as offensive, from a bear's point of view, to the point of nausea), and we were scarcely a hundred feet from her, a distance she could have covered before the charge had registered in our brains ("Meekness 42-43).

Such breaks add to his tone of detachment, as if the sentence isn't so important that it can't be interrupted. It's his way of interrupting himself, giving license to Gruchow-the-storyteller/sage. In addition to the interruptions, these parentheticals are an extra place to work the language, "The penultimate day of the old year" and the steeped water of the brook, as well as the result of not bathing while in grizzly country. Such adds to the color of the words, as most appositives do.

Gruchow does not limit himself to sentence-level appositives, however. In "By the Light of the Winter Moon," Gruchow describes a polar-bearing experience, where one heats up in a sauna in the middle of winter, then jumps in the lake. Great language and descriptions abound in this rendering: "My flesh was beginning to collect in puddles on the bench, or perhaps it was only the sweat that gushed out of my pores, when the door opened a crack" (142). Gruchow exits the

sauna, in his socks, so his feet won't freeze to the ice, then pauses at the edge of the hole. As he is standing there, his appositive takes the reader back to an experience on a plane where the plane lost air pressure, the oxygen masks dangled, and the captain's voice "quavered" as he gave instructions. The section, only a paragraph long, ends with this statement: "If this was the hour of eternity, I just wished it would hurry up and get there" (143). The next paragraph is back to the winter and the edge of the ice. "'You're going to get cold if you stand there too long,' the woman tending the hole in the ice said" (143). That plunges the reader back into the winter night polar-bearing experience. Then, after Gruchow takes the plunge and runs "back to the sauna, whooping like teenager on Saturday night" (143), he returns us to the plane scenario, then finally returns again to the polar-bears.

The purpose of the appositives in this narrative passage have to do with breaking up the narrative itself. Long narrative passages often become boring and readers tend to skip over large parts. Breaking up the narrative is essential to keep the readers interested. There are several ways to accomplish this: adding dialogue and adding appositives. Gruchow does both. As a result, the narrative is much more striking.

Gruchow's use of rhetorical questions is not trite and self-serving as some rhetorical questions are, serving only the purpose of making the writer sound more important than necessary. Gruchow's questions are truly questions—some he has attempted answering, some he hasn't. He seems to be one who is quite content with ambiguity. In any case, the questions serve to move the essay along.

"How many of our remaining years might we as well

have been asleep for all that we failed to notice when we had our nominally open?" ("Summer" 18). The paragraph is spent exploring the circular patterns of life: seasons, a pattern, Gruchow makes clear, that contains "the same repeated pattern of wakefulness and slumber in each—a fresh and even violent energy in spring, drowsiness afternoon, rejuvenation toward autumnal evening, and finally full-bodied sleep" (17). There seems to be much regret in this passage, as humankind doesn't take the time to appreciate what surrounds them when they are awake. Gruchow means to pay attention when he is awake, so as not to disappoint either himself or the Creator. He continues in further paragraphs to ask more questions about the value of nature:

> "Why climb a mountain when you can achieve a vista just as fine, and more thrilling viscerally, from the observation deck of the nearest skyscraper? Why run a rapids when you can experience the same rush of adrenaline effortlessly and in complete safety at any amusement park? What does any natural bridge offer that the Brooklyn Bridge or the Golden Gate doesn't? Why go to the forest when you can see its marvels a hundred times more vividly on a PBS nature program?" (19).

As these questions might give rise to thinking Gruchow has all the answers or is going to attempt to answer them, I think that Gruchow is thinking from the opposing point of view. He much prefers the natural to the manmade, but he is not denying the importance or pull of manmade marvels. He seems to have perfectly rational reasons, or at least suggestions, for why one would not need to experience any kind of nature. In this way, the rhetorical questions do not seem as

self-serving, boosting the importance of the writer's ideas. Gruchow seems completely wonderstruck by nature, not bored with things he may have seen a hundred times. Perhaps he is suggesting that one might need to experience both kinds of wonder—natural and manmade—to fully appreciate one or the other.

In *Grass Roots*, "Home Is A Place In Time," the first essay of the book, begins with three questions. To begin a book with questions is an interesting choice. In an undergraduate fiction class, the professor told us that his favorite short story was one that defied all conventions and rules and ended with seven questions. This move by Gruchow here seems to be the same kind of device, a breaking of convention. There is no rule saying that to begin a work with questions is a bad choice. Bad writers will do such a thing badly, and good writers will use it well. Gruchow does it well. The first question immediately strikes the reader with an uncomfortable thought: if Gruchow is asking here "What if one's life were not a commodity, not something to be bartered to the highest bidder, or made to order?" (3), the reader will immediately ask him- or herself, *what does he mean? Does he mean that our lives are commodities now, bartered to the highest bidder? I don't like the sound of that.* The second question— "What if one's life were governed by needs more fundamental than acceptance or admiration?" (3)— leads the reader to respond with, *yeah, wouldn't that be something? It'll never happen.* The final question then provides *an* answer; only time will tell if it is *the* answer: "What if one were simply to stay home and plant some manner of garden?" (3) The reader then thinks—*could it really be that easy?* And even if the reader doesn't buy a packet of seeds the next time s/he is at the store, the thought for a simpler life has been planted. The *what if* questions are always interesting, because it opens up possibilities, to which there is never a "correct" answer. Answers are individual to the reader.

In "Bones," the final essay in *Grass Roots*, Gruchow writes, "The bones often told cruel stories, some of them of my own creation. What was I supposed to make of this?" (199). He writes about the cruelty of life, something only truly learned by experience. One can talk about the beauty of nature and such, but underneath the beauty is a world encased in a life-and-death struggle. "I couldn't explain cruelty, and I didn't try" (199). Cruelty is something that is best defined on an individual basis.

Gruchow's use of rhetorical questions seems to be a way of making a reader accountable to him- or herself. Gruchow asks the questions and the reader must answer each one in his own way, an answer that fits an individual life, and individual lifestyle, a particular way of thinking.

The writing of Paul Gruchow is complex in its construction, with serious attention paid to each word and its placement in the sentence. He has mastered the use of poetic language within prose, intuitively aware of the way the words sound against each other. Appositives and parentheticals serve to break up thoughts, to add color to descriptions, to work the language just one more way, and to add interest to a narrative passage. His marvelous use of questions, to open his memoir, as well as elsewhere in his essays, serves to make the reader accountable to her own conscience. Above all, though, is the simple way the language works, humbly and skillfully, much like the writer himself.

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