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NOT THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM: MELISSA HARRIS ON MICHAEL NICHOLS

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On one level, as its title suggests, A Wild Life: A Visual Biography of Michael Nichols, is a lavishly illustrated, 370-page account of legendary wildlife/nature photojournalist Michael "Nick" Nichols's picaresque life and times.

Melissa Harris unfurls a compelling adventure story, tracking Alabama-born Nichols, once nicknamed "Nick Danger" by a close collaborator, as he moves from one episode to the next, displaying extraordinary endurance, ingenuity, and sangfroid in pursuit of his various missions. Marvel as Nichols and his partners improvise a device that allows him to photograph one of the grandest surviving redwoods in one of the last unspoiled forests of northern California. Watch Nichols risk life and limb to capture images of the Lechuguilla caves that suggest infinity, or as he accompanies Michael Fay, his ascetic, mono-focused doppelgänger, on portions of the Megatransect, an epic 455-day, 2,000-mile hike across the Congo Basin, undertaken to survey the ecology of the Central African forest. It's one of multiple long-haul Nichols-generated projects in rugged environments across the African continent in pursuit of individualistic portrayals of gorillas, chimpanzees, elephants, lions, and tigers in their wild habitats.

Harris herself conducted several field trips and over eighty hours of interviews with her garrulous subject to underpin her narrative, which also contains testimonies from many of the remarkable collaborators — writers, scientists, assistants — who have facilitated his journey. In the manner of, say, John Richardson's epic biography of Pablo Picasso, she integrates within the text vividly rendered reproductions of Nichols's transcendent, hard-earned photographs, which are, after all, the meat of the matter.

It is perfectly possible to treat A Wild Life as a simply a exciting foray into the world of wildlife photography , without attending to Harris's rigorous, jargon-free examination of the political economy of conservation — but that level is there for the taking. Harris offers learned essays on poaching, trophy hunting, the use of tiger bones in Chinese medicine, the domestication of wild animals, and issues of provenance and authenticity raised by images of the creatures in question. Perspectives honed during more than two decades as the editor of the Aperture Foundation's quarterly journal and of numerous Aperture books lend authenticity to Harris's accounts of Nichols's relationships with Magnum Photos, where he developed the storytelling ethos that underpins every image, and National Geographic, which altered its editorial aesthetics to accommodate the stark, pitiless beauty of his vision.

"Nick also does not make conventionally pretty, sentimental, back-to-nature images," Harris says. "His photographs have a lot of tension, drama. There is movement. There is emotionality, although he does not anthropomorphize. The animals are wild — he has to habituate them. It's not the 'peaceable kingdom.' "

That A Wild Life sells at a reasonable $35 price point testifies to Harris's determination and engagement with her subject. "I spent my own money on the travels I did for the book and raised the money to do it as I wanted it to be," she says. "I wanted it to fit Nick's populism. Obviously, there's some enlightened self-interest involved. It's a complicated book, and I want people to read it; if they want to read it, I want it to be affordable. There's a lot of intense stuff in here." — Ted Panken

The Barnes & Noble Review: What was your path into this project?

Melissa Harris: During my years at Aperture, I'd worked with Nick on two books. One was Brutal Kinship, which documented his work, with Jane Goodall and others, on chimpanzees — in the wild, and as used for entertainment, and as pets. More recently was a book on elephants called Earth to Sky, with excerpts from different conservationists and other writers. I loved working with Nick. He's very smart, enormously talented, and he's focusing on conservation, which almost nobody else I've worked with does except for Richard Misrach — in a totally different way.

Nick and I sat down to talk about what our next project could be. I wanted to do something challenging that I'd never done before, though I didn't necessarily know what that was. I wanted to write more. And I'd always wanted to be in the field with Nick.

In 2001, I'd interviewed Mike Fay, with whom Nick partnered on the Megatransect. I knew about the complexity of their working relationship and friendship. I knew that Mike could be remarkably difficult but also truly generous, and of course he's a brilliant conservationist. I knew that Nick loves and respects him and yet sometimes was ready to kill him. I'd met Jane Goodall through working on Brutal Kinship. I was beginning to get very interested in these individuals. I'm drawn to obsessive people when they're obsessing about something that matters. They're not thinking about what they're going to wear in the morning, or how they're going to make their next zillion. They're trying to save the world. It turned out that Nick liked the little text I wrote about Mike Fay. It was the first time he'd read anything I had written. I think he thought I'd be some academic, ridiculously esoteric, impenetrable writer. He knew I'd majored in art history at Yale. But then he was like, "Oh, this is a good read." So we started to talk about trying out a biography. I'd done interviews with many other artists, and I liked the idea of doing them with Nick. Nick will say he baited me; I think I baited him.

BNR: Nichols has spent much of his career photographing for National Geographic, a very different platform than Aperture. Two-part question: Can you describe what Aperture and National Geographic represent, aesthetically and institutionally? And what qualities position Nichols as an apropos subject for an Aperture biography?

MH: Actually, this is Aperture's first biography. Chris Boot, Aperture's executive director, believes strongly in Nick's work and mission and really supported me and this project.

I came to Aperture after working at Artforum and Interview. Aperture is a not-for-profit, and it was always mission-driven. The mission evolved, of course, and all the editors who work there interpret it differently. I am quite old-fashioned about photography in certain ways. I believe it still has the capacity to change hearts and minds at its most powerful. I worked on projects like Gene Richards's Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue; Donna Ferrato's project on battered women, Living with the Enemy; David Wojnarowicz's Brush Fires in the Social Landscape; Letizia Battaglia's Passion, Justice, Freedom, Photographs of Sicily; Charles Bowden's Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future. All these projects, in their own ways, are evidentiary. There is context. They engage in riveting storytelling in different ways. They have a larger meaning and a larger goal. To do projects with a social conscience would be my interpretation of at least an aspect of Aperture's mission. Other editors there may have different takes on the mission. For sure, Aperture is about trying to do something excellent with purpose and meaning. It's serving the photographic community and those photographers who are devoting their lives to these and other kinds of projects. It's also serving what the founders used to call a community of shared interest — people who might find this compelling, be they artists, lawyers, poets, doctors, or bankers.

I've never worked at National Geographic, so I'm hesitant to speak for their editors, but I believe they'd also say that the magazine, the Society, has always had a mission. The question that arose with all the conservationists I interviewed for this book was whether or not the magazine's mission was intrinsically about conservation — for certain, that's what they felt it should be about. But the magazine editors were not, I don't believe — based on my interviews with many of them — thinking that their magazine should be about conservation. They see their magazine as not taking sides, as being objective, at times taking on tough issues, and seeing where that leads.

Conservationists are advocates. They want something to be protected, saved, changed. They want to save those elephants. They want to stop poaching. They want to stop the use of tiger bones in Chinese medicine. Whatever it may be. Personally, I don't think it's a journalistic problem as long as you're very clear where you stand, and if your position doesn't blind you to fact. If it blinds you to fact, then it's a real problem. If you give both sides, then it's OK to say where you land on it — everyone lands somewhere; everyone has an opinion. I am an advocate for wild. People who advocate positions sometimes cherry-pick their facts. I tried very hard not to, especially in areas, like non-subsistence hunting, that were more complicated for me. I didn't want to take my brought-up-in-New York City liberal Ethical Culture background and apply it to things about which I knew nothing. And of course, almost none of it is black-and-white, and so my own understanding has become much more nuanced.

This gets to your question about Nick. Unlike many of the people I've worked with at Aperture, Nick is a real populist. He definitely wants people to relate to the work. And he wants to create work that operates on many levels. A three-year-old can fall in love with his image of a wild, ancient tree or the picture on the book's cover of this extraordinary wild tiger named Charger. At the same time, Nick wants you to be able to go as deep as you're willing to go. He learns about the conservation issues and challenges, and his work is grounded in these exceptional long-term studies. He observes the species he is photographing day after day and tries to figure out the particulars of whatever group or family of animals he's spending time with, and then, who are the individual animals comprising these groups or families — how do they relate to the other creatures, how do they relate to their families, what is going on in their lives, what threatens their

lives, their habitats? He does it without anthropomorphizing. He's not pretending that he's the animal whisperer or that they're people, and he's not attributing to them human qualities, except that he believes they have individuality — but who says that's distinct to humans? If they're all gorillas or all tigers, then it's a species. If it's Charger, or Gregoire the chimpanzee, or the Poets elephant family, or Vumbi the lioness pride . . . by distinguishing, you become attentive to specific characteristics or ways of being that become fascinating and that you can identify. I think the viewer or reader then looks harder, thinks differently, and perhaps cares more.

In that way, Nick is very similar to many of the Aperture photographers I've worked with, like Richards or Ferrato — or Sally Mann, who isn't a photojournalist but is equally intense and storytelling-oriented in her work on her children comprising Immediate Family, which I edited. Nick was a member of Magnum, which was great for him. His takeaway was about narrative, about doing something with meaning, about building on previous work, and selecting his strongest work, his edgiest work.

BNR: He aimed very purposefully for years to be a National Geographic photographer.

MH: Yes. With National Geographic I think he found the audience for the subject matter that interests him: wild species and their ecosystems and the last places on earth; great characters, with powerful stories to reveal and challenges to explore. He also liked seeing all of his pictures sequenced together, not interrupted by advertising or a lot of text in the middle. That didn't happen in many places. And National Geographic could offer him enormous resources and time.

BNR: He is a very swashbuckling type of guy.

MH: He is totally a swashbuckling type of guy! What's interesting, though, is that it's never adventure for adventure's sake, though I do believe Nick likes the adrenaline rush (or at least he did), because that has to feed what he does. I think all artists like a certain tension, and it doesn't have to be about putting oneself in a precarious situation.

Mitch Shields, the writer who worked with Nick on his first story for Geo about the caves, remembered that when they met, he saw this tall, athletic, good-looking guy who is going to take them all into caves, and he seems so laid back, and he's got that Alabama accent — and uh-oh, is this really going to work? He soon understood that Nick is remarkably precise, driven, has been obsessively figuring out what's going to work, how to keep them from killing themselves, and of course, all the lighting — how he's actually going to get the pictures, and, at the same time, not leave a trace in the cave, not destroy this remarkable ecosystem.

BNR: The testimonies from Nichols's collaborators — among them, Tim Cahill, David Quammen, Douglas Chadwick, Geoffrey Ward, Eugene Linden, George Schaller, Jane Goodall, Iain Douglas Hamilton, and Craig Packer — are fascinating. They serve very different roles in helping Nichols convey his stories.

MH: This was the most meta, complex interlacing of people, ideas, stories, and experiences I've ever done. There's all the conservation. There are the stories Nick did for National Geographic or Rolling Stone or Geo, and the stories behind the stories. I talked to the writers and everyone I could for their perspectives, so I'd be accurate. To make the book relevant for now, I wanted to bring up to date the conservation issues he'd addressed throughout his projects. This turned out to

be more complicated than I'd imagined — but also fascinating. All these scientists have devoted their lives to what they do. They're all advocates for their respective creatures. Everybody I spoke with was forthcoming. My learning curve was huge at first, but I got smarter.

BNR: Quammen seems to be Nichols's main collaborator of the last fifteen to twenty years.

MH: Yes. He's been working with Nick since the Megatransect. Quammen and he collaborate very differently than the way Nick and Tim joined forces, yet the sense of partnership is as profound. They overlap for maybe a week or two, but they're not doing the story "hand in hand," as Nick would describe aspects of his approach with Tim. Naturally, they do talk about what the story is going to be. Nick tells David, "There is this amazing dark-maned lion named C-Boy, and you have never seen anything like this dude; he's just got power, he presides, he's regal — you've got to look at C-Boy." David may check out Nick's leads, but he's also doing his own research, his own observation — figuring out the ecological-conservation-environmental issues. He's objective, very scrupulous. He's a great empirical observer, and exceptionally smart.

BNR: It must have been tempting to write at greater length about many of these sub-characters.

MH: The first draft is probably twice the size of the book. It became unwieldy, because there was so much going on. Nick has spent his life focusing on charismatic animals; I just did, too. Hopefully I did them all justice because they're each so unique.

BNR: Aperture certainly did justice to the images.

MH: Printing a book is an interpretation, of course, but it's Aperture, so we're going to make it look as good as we can. But it was complicated. Aperture had never done a book like this. Of course, in most biographies you have maybe a couple of isolated sections of images. I wanted the images to be interspersed throughout, riffing off the text. It was expensive, but I raised the money to do it, while keeping the retail price what it would have been had we taken the less costly, more conventional approach. I wanted the book to be accessible. Even though it's a big book, with over 100 pictures, people shouldn't have to spend a fortune to buy it.

BNR: What attributes distinguish Nichols's images in regards to craft and thematic continuity?

MH: Much of Nick's early imagery was made in dark or dimly lit environments — the jungle, the forest, or caves. This was before digital cameras; he didn't have all the easy, smaller, lighter technical possibilities photographers have now. So Nick had to figure out how to light the environments to get the images he wanted, and how to do it without leaving a trace of his presence on these environments or influencing an animal's behavior. His imperatives are simultaneously conservation, in process and mission, and artistic: Above all, Nick wants to make a great photograph. All the tech is only about facilitating his larger vision and sensibility regarding how he wants to render the story. It's never technology for the sake of technology.

Visually, Nick is a wizard with light, as is evident in his earliest cave pictures. His imagination is huge. He seems able to pre-visualize, to some extent, what he hopes to achieve, based on his endless observation. He's got great ideas. To be able to focus on his larger goal, he works with strong and talented younger assistants in the field, for whom a lot of the tech stuff

is second nature. When something is happening, he doesn't want to be thinking about the technology; he wants to think about getting the photograph. He wants to be ready. He also has available to him the technological expertise at National Geographic.

A key feature of Nick's work is the intimacy he achieves. It's like you are right there with him, watching this amazing play between these elephants, watching these cubs roll over each other — whatever it is. Even on the occasions where he decides he has to use a telephoto lens, he has figured out how to subvert its flattening quality that messes with depth of field, and so he still gets all the gradations of the landscape, all the nuance. In order to achieve this proximity, he must habituate the animals to his presence. Nick is watching-water-boil patient.

BNR: What's the nature of Nichols's influence on the culture of photography?

MH: Nick brought the photojournalist ethic to photographing the natural world. Nick is not romanticizing nature. He is a consummate, sympathetic observer. He is watching, and he is completely engaged. He's not going in with preconceptions and a checklist — "And then I saw an elephant, and then I saw a cheetah, and then I saw a vulture" — or whatever. He's paying remarkably close attention, day after day after day. He's storytelling, he's being extremely honest, and he's operating with an integrity that has not always characterized people who photograph nature. If it's something wild, he's telling you it's wild. If he's photographing in a zoo, he's telling you he's photographing an animal in captivity.

He — along with other photographers, editors, and writers — has made National Geographic tougher. Magazines are living entities; they have to evolve, otherwise they die.

BNR: You describe a harrowing night in your tent when several lions gathered outside it.

MH: Their visit was a bit nerve-wracking! Truthfully, the place where I felt fear was when I was working in Juárez for Charles Bowden's book. I went to Juárez because I wanted to meet the group of photographers who were risking their lives daily to bear witness. I was hoping to publish their work with Chuck's writing. I wanted to understand the place I was dealing with, and I knew the photographers wouldn't trust me unless I showed up — how could they? They were gracious, kind, and wonderful, and Juárez was vibrant but also terribly poor and violent — at the time, there were so many murders and rapes, and such corruption, and there were many aspects of NAFTA that seemed to be so negatively exploiting the people. It was brutal.

BNR: You've written numerous articles and essays but never a book. Are there any antecedent or contemporary writers on whom you modeled your approach?

MH: I wasn't aspiring to be like anyone else. I just wanted to be smart, credible, and original. I wanted it to be a fun read. I read a lot of biographies, and I learned from all of them, but there was no model for this. In my case, I had a happily loquacious subject who withheld nothing. It wasn't like I had to pull teeth.

This may seem like a weird analogy, but I learned an enormous amount when I met John Cage in college. I learned that things don't always have to be so linear. My memory of my first conversation with Cage is that he radiated, like a starburst, as he moved through notions of harmony and dissonance, Beethoven, Hopi Indian creation myths and Zen Buddhism, and Merce Cunningham. His way of bringing all these often disparate ideas together so fluidly was liberating. As a biography, this book is fundamentally chronological. It starts and ends, so there's a linearity and Nick's life is an anchor, but all these other voices, passions, visions, missions are moving through it, sometimes with a little more

emphasis, sometimes a little less. If I hadn't met Cage, my approach might have been compartmentalized. But instead, I wanted to try to weave together and make sense of varied perspectives and layers of happenings and contexts throughout. This was a dynamism that interested me more, because it's like what happens in everyday life.

That's not really a writing style, but that was the approach. Actually, the people Nick works with, the nature of the collaborations, make me think of John and Merce. Everybody is operating at this extraordinary level, all focusing on the larger idea but doing so in their way, individualistically, with their own visions. I like that kind of collaboration, because I don't feel anything or anyone is compromised or subservient. Nobody is illustrating each other, in either words or images. Everyone is free. I tried to allow that approach to flourish in the text, so that the scientists and their ideas and aspirations coexist with Nick's life story, with the evolution of his photography, with the stories that he was doing, and the stories behind the stories.