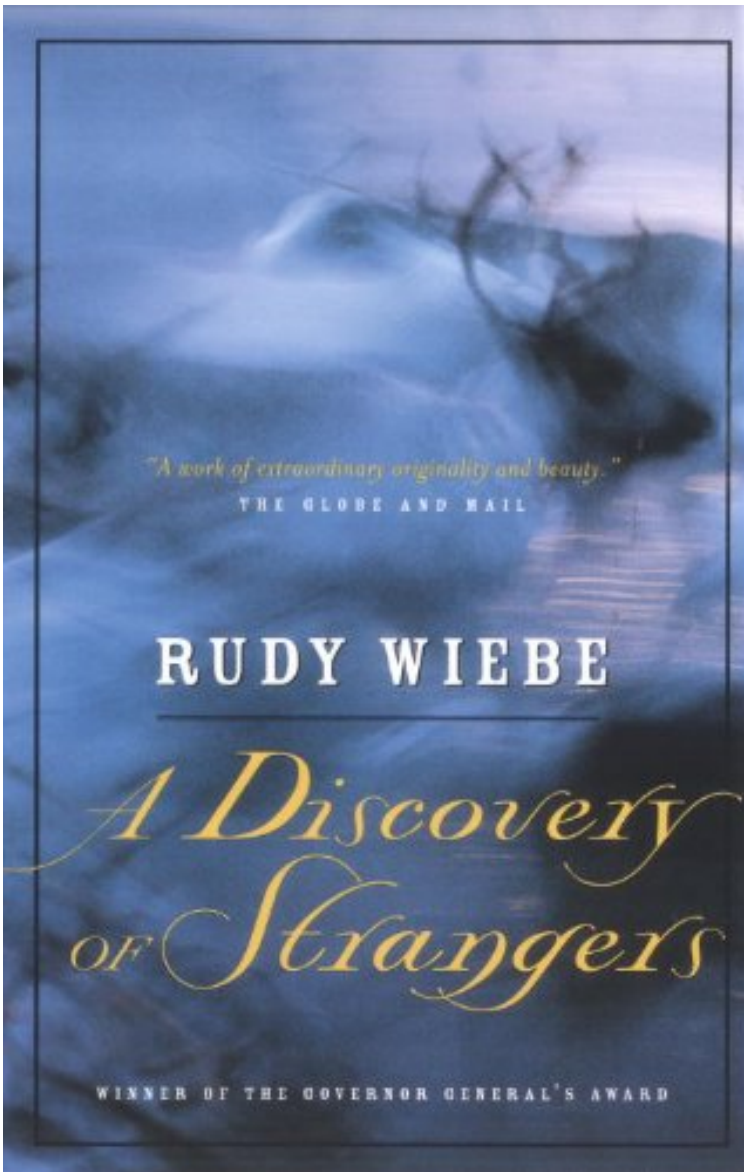


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A Discovery Of Strangers



Par Rudy Wiebe
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA Discovery of Strangers is a story--based on true events--of love and innocence, murder, greed and passion set within the terrifying, fragile Arctic landscape. In 1820, John Franklin's small group of British officers and Canadian voyageurs, on their first expedition to search for a route through the incomprehensible North, encounter the Yellowknife Indians -- and Greenstockings, fifteen-year-old daughter of Keskarrah, elder of the Yellowknife, meets young Robert Hood, son of a Lancashire clergyman.

Wordless, they devise a language of their own as their two worlds clash.From the Hardcover edition.ExtraitChapter 1The Animals in This CountryThe land is so long, and the people travelling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next. The human beings whose name is

Tetsotine live here with great care, their feet travelling year after year those paths where the animals can easily avoid them if they want to, or follow, or circle back ahead to watch them with little danger. Therefore, when the first one or two Whites appeared in this country, an animal would have had to search for four lifetimes to find them being paddled about, or walking, or bent and staggering, somewhere on the inexorable land. About that time some of the animals did begin to hear strange noises, bits of shriek and hammer above the wavering roar of rapids or the steady flagellation of wind. These were strangers, so different, so blatantly loud the caribou themselves could not help hearing them long before they needed to be smelled, and some animals drifted around to see what made the trees in one place scream and smash that way, the rocks clang. They noticed creatures that looked like humans standing motionless here and there, abruptly pointing and shrieking, pounding! pounding! scuttling about all day and sometimes at night as well, when tendrils of bush along the river might spring up suddenly into terrifying flame. And the animals understood then that such brutal hiss and clangour must bring on a winter even colder than usual. And shortly after, when wind hammered the snow hard as folded rock under the thickest trees, and growing ice choked the rapids into silence, they knew that of course they had been right. Then an erratic cracking open, or a tree splitting, could be heard so far it seemed they were alert to every sound happening anywhere in the world, and the racket these strange human beings made in one place mattered nothing at all. The animals simply moved away into their necessary silence, travelling where they pleased, as they always had inside that clenched fist of the long darkness, their powerful feathered, furred bodies as light as flecks of ice sifting over snow, as light and quick as breathing. But throughout the dark weight of midwinter, with moss and lichens always harder to smell and paw from under the crusted snow, all the caribou knew that the sun would certainly return again. And eventually it did; its rim grew slowly day by day up out of darkness into red brilliance, until finally the cows and calves recognized themselves together as they always were, in the whole giant ball of it shimmering through ice fog, round and complete again on the distant edge of the sky. The cows lay in their hollows of snow on a drifted lake, their calves from the previous spring sheltered against their backs out of the wind. Their blunt, furry noses lifted from the angles of their folded legs, their nostrils opened to the burning air: it was sharp as ice, gentle with all the smells they recognized, arctic and safe. Lying safe, alert in this instant of rest, they were reassured that when that blazing sun stands three times its height over the glazed levels of this lake, they will feel the restlessness of their young grow heavier within them. And then they will move again into their continual travel. Gradually at first, then more steadily, like driftwood discovering a momentary current, hesitating into daily eddies of moss or crusted erratics but leaning more certainly down into motion along this contorted river, or this lakeshore; easily avoiding the noisy, devastated esker between Roundrock and Winter lakes and their connecting tributary streams. Seeking steadily north. From every direction more and more of them will drift together, thousands and tens of thousands drawn together by the lengthening light into the worn paths of their necessary journey, an immense dark river of life flowing north to the ocean, to the calving grounds where they know themselves to have been born. The caribou cow with three tines on each of her antlers lay curled, bedded and at momentary rest with her calf in the lee of her body. She had once been a woman; in fact, she has already been born a woman twice. But she has never liked that very much, and each time she is born that way she lives human only until her dreams are strong enough to call her innumerable caribou family, and they come for her. One morning people will awaken, and their child is gone. They search everywhere to find her, and finally notice the two pointed tracks that come to their lodge in the hard travelling snow, and the three tracks that leave. Then the Tetsotine Those Who Know Something a Little understand what has happened. We have lost another good child to the caribou, they begin to wail. She will never play and make a fire with us, or dance, or sew clothes and bear strong children, or comfort us when we are hungry and sick. No-o-o-o, oh no, no. We will never see that good child again. And they will, of course, be right. If the three-tined cow with her calf alive beside her had had a name, it would have been ?Elyske. All the animals knew this, but they didnt think about that. The silver wolf who lived with the caribou had never been anything but a wolf, and he would have defied any animal, and that included the seven members of his pack, to know his name. However, sometimes when the strands of their twilight howl strayed alone and united again over the long evening hills, or his voice deepened into that longer warning other males could only hear and avoid, the silver wolf remembered himself as Na?cho roaming alone, a presence of untouchable enigma between the eskers and the ocean, an apparition so gigantic that people are like mosquitoes to him, trifles to swat and eat whatever tasty parts he deigns to tear out of them. But Na?cho lives best in memory; he cannot see very well, nor hear, and he hunts alone mostly by smell, so the silver wolf liked being what he is now better, though he was only a little longer than a human sleeping, or possibly

collapsed in the snow. He liked the skill and nerve of having to be precisely careful. He could run so swiftly that the opening moss was far too slow to swallow him, he could see an eyelid flicker and hear a caribou calf's heart beat steady and unaware in the shelter of its mother, the folds of rocks now hid him silent as breath. And he could still smell anything he sniffed after, drawing winter air like bloody slivers into his deliberating nose. Above all, he liked the female wolf who hunted beside him. It was that female, white as a numinous drift, who turned left to lie in wait when the silver male led their hunting pack out of the brush above the falls and onto Lastfire Lake. She had played with him below the falls all afternoon, stretching languidly near him, urinating to give him something to sniff and claw over with snow, stiff-legged, and bumping into him and dancing away and bumping until they licked each other's laughing faces, rolling over and under each other, their teeth gleaming like icicles. All afternoon the other six wolves lay easily about on the snow and watched them play, especially the heavy brown male who occasionally seemed to be a little too close, and the silver wolf would whirl on him, forcing him to creep back, crouch and fawn, even to roll over on his back with paws helpless in the air, pleading open-mouthed, throat vulnerable, like any puppy. When the white wolf finally permitted the silver male to mount her, the brown wolf sank down with his long, sharp head along his paws, watching them intensely. And for a time the two alpha wolves were joined together, were one great doubled animal whose every hair bristled red in the level blazing light; whose twin heads pointed in opposite directions, aimed still and alert towards whatever might materialize or threaten them from anywhere within the completed circle of the world. In the sinking light the caribou cow uncovered their afternoon food along a tilted esker, between erratics and the last dwarves of the treeline. Her yearling calf crowded down into the craters she dug, so tightly against her that sometimes he tore away from her teeth and lips the crusted lichen she unerringly smelled under the snow. As he had done all winter, his body filling out powerfully into the length of his legs, into his muscled endurance. He was a thick, solid warmth now, holding tight against her, and sometimes he thrust his head up between her hind legs, nosing for the comfort of her teats, but she bumped him away. The sunlight against the hillside was threaded occasionally with a whiff of warmth, and as the light burned lower behind the southern hills they slipped into the communal drift of cows and calves all about them, down the deep trails in snow onto the ice of Lastfire Lake. They felt the thick ice boom and crack, splitting in black branches away before them as the air grew colder. The undulating limit of horizon all around them, the hump and hollow of island and hill and lake and the long eskers, and the southern sky burning from crimson to thick red down into the slow, sheltering twilight. They heard the wolves then begin to call and answer in their evening howl there where the water slipped from under the ice, and smashed down into the steaming falls that thickened the willows and birch and spruce and shattered rocks and stones with perpetual ice. The wolves were always with them, around them everywhere like air, wherever they folded their legs and eased themselves into an instant of rest; that wolf song had haunted them since they slept curled in their mothers' bellies, and when they jolted into air, and awoke, it lay weeping over them and remained still their eternal ruminating lullaby. The cow had bedded at the edge of the herd which spread through its labyrinthine tracks upon the lake. Her square and triangular teeth ground the swallowed lichen rhythmically into cud as she waited. The day was closing, but it was not complete, not yet. She had only to wait while those interlacing howls sang, shivered through her and faded against the dying light, and rose again. She understood their every shift and whisper, the high yowls of the younger wolves, the deeper call of those huge mouths lifted open somewhere below the horizon, closing and opening upwards into a sky of blazing teeth. She lay replete, her mouth and stomach gurgling, while the heat of her blood beat as one with the unborn calf she carried soft and safely hidden, beat to the edges of her body, to the tips of her hoofs, in the cold that cradled her. She watched the bright bowl of sky tighten over her, the lethal edge of its darkness seeping upwards. Her thick tongue, powerful and sweet, licked into one opened nostril and then the other. There was still only the smell of themselves, strong as a vision of the immense renewed herd they will soon be, spread like grey moss over tundra in the constant light of coming summer. She waited. And saw movement flicker where the edge of mist slid into the rumble of water. Instantly she stopped chewing, lunged to her feet, staring hard to be certain, for the air in her flared nostrils remained clean and without warning. Her yearling and the others lying nearby scrambled up at her motion, and so they all together recognized the silent wolves at the same moment: seven of them fanning out, coming on, the huge silver male they knew so well at the centre, very nearly invisible between the grey hills and the lake just before the rising of the moon. The cows now standing with their yearling calves watched, heads poised and alert, all knowing the exact distance they would need. A few urinated nervously, some cocked one hind leg to the side, the position of alarm, and a ripple of others rising swiftly flowed around the curve in which

they lay bedded. Breath snored here and there, the cold, rigid air, still treacherously clean, so confident in all their powerful chests. But the seven wolves were coming on faster now, the widening fan of them loping over the hard drifts, and then in one sudden simultaneous motion, they charged. Instantly the caribou along the edge nearest the charge exploded into flying snow. And their flight spread like a quick river bursting thick and strong into the herd, and there was really no more danger than the continual community of apprehension that was their entire life; they knew they could outrun any wolf, the tight, hot closeness of their boned bodies beginning to stretch every intricacy of muscle into familiar speed, all their perfect hoofs reaching, gripping and hurling their bodies away over snow or swept ice, barely touching in their immense communal vision of safety for ever awaiting them over the deepest waters of lakes, always there at the spooned tips of their united, infallible hoofs. In that burst of dark animals like land flooding over the frozen lake, the silver wolf ran closest to the three-tined cow. Her calf was well ahead of her, running as strongly as she, and they were running as they had so often run all their lives, it was their only and continuing life and there was no particular danger for one or for the other. Until, from the sidelong treachery of a drift, the white wolf lying there in wait, charged them. For that moment of angle she was faster than any caribou, even as they all whirled aside as if the lake had opened beneath them and ripped wide their flowing forest of bodies, and still it would seem they remained that one essential lunge beyond danger. The calf turned a trifle slowly, turned a hesitation too wide, and in that beat of burst apprehension the cows concentration staggered and the silver wolf was directly behind her, her powerful hind leg stretched far back in the power-thrust of her bend towards the open lake, and he lunged for that tendon and the granite edge of her great shovel-hoof flashed up against his counter-rhythm, touched him, just barely touched him like the flicker of lightning from a storm already past, and he missed the one grip he needed all his life, the one grip he had never missed before, and his lower jaw cracked. The small rift between calf and herd was all that mattered to the white wolf. She shifted her charge slightly, straight across the curve of the calf strained now beyond breathing for the fleeing herd, and on that line for one instant only she ran alongside him, stride upon stride, her jaws companionably gaping wide with his, and in that last second of speed they snapped into his nose, a flurry of wolf and caribou skidding, smashing over in the snow. Desperately the calf lunged to his feet, his nose-blood bursting over the wolf as he heaved her here, there, body spastic with terror, heaved her, heaved! but her teeth were clamped immovably, and then the brown male arrived and leaped up. With one gigantic bite to the base of the skull, he crushed the calfs neck. Swiftly the other wolves arrived and circled the kill, their tongues lolling between the daggers of their teeth, panting clouds into air dripping silver under the livid moon. The caribou ran on, then gradually they slowed to a walk, and finally panted into great scraggly islands on the deepest northern reach of the lake. They were very tired now. It seemed the length and depth of the lake they had run was multiplied into their exhausted fear, here where moonlight was beginning to lift the great hump of Dogrib Rock up over the last edge of trees, the solitary erratics waiting along the skyline like relentless totems to guide them in their travel north into the open tundra, fifty or sixty or seventy running days north, into the constant light of their calving grounds, travelling, travelling.... The white wolf tore the calfs throat open, and with her eyes washed by spraying blood dug in, through, to the sweet tongue. The silver male charged up, growling, and as always the others fell back before him; he sprang to the calfs belly and the six wolves, circling, waited for him to rip it open and devour the liver as was his right. But he merely growled again, deeper. And then, when they looked at him in mild surprise, they noticed a split of red seeping along his long jaw. Though he had not yet touched the bloody head, his mouth was already full of blood. The three-tined cow did not search for the calf for which she had once, necessarily, submitted to a conjunction with a momentary bull, and then borne and birthed and nurtured and guarded perpetually for ten months; which had lain so long in the lee of her body and so often run with her in the desperate, totally terrified strength of the hunted. For those ten months it had reached into the deepest call of her every bone, blood, muscle; now she knew that if it was not beside her soon, it never would be again. She eased herself down, front and back, into her hollow of welcome snow. With each moment she knew her name, if she had one, was becoming Dmb ?Elchnile; but when her travel in her present direction ended it might very well be ?Elyske again. At least for a time. And if she and her newborn calf, then, survive the coming intermittent blizzards, and mosquitoes, and hordes of botflies, and swift river crossings, and wide summer lakes and storms, and the invidious treachery of a stone splitting a running hoof as she has for this moment survived the wolves again she knows one of them may once again be reborn a child, and in that less fleeting incarnation gradually grow once more into this dream of being what she is now, resting, sleeping the profound safety, as deep as it is fleeting, of all continually hunted animals. Alive on the sheltering ice. The silver wolf may live into and perhaps even

through the perpetual light of summer; and when tundra light again shortens towards winter darkness he may well discover the helpless trail of the few Whites he has ignored until now. It may be he will follow them, and find them where they collapse one after the other, and gradually creep close; may gouge and gnaw and tear from each whatever he can before their corpses harden into impossibility for the rotting lower half of his jaw, which the brown male did not rip away when he supplanted him. A tattered rack of once-great bones, the silver wolf will recognize his death in that straggle of frozen meat briefly marking the tundra, emaciated meat of no interest to his powerful offspring. For they will be travelling somewhere with caribou, nowhere near him then, and he will not be thinking of them. Nor will the other animals who follow and feed quite fearlessly about him: the white and silver and red arctic foxes, or migrating gulls, or mice, or golden eagles, or lemmings or ground squirrels, or even the grizzly and vicious wolverine whom he must avoid by crawling away as he can. Or the great ravens, flying the stark black message of their perfect bodies over the unrelenting land.

Revue de presse What is remarkable about Wiebes achievement in [The Temptations of Big Bear and The Scorched-Wood People] and now, in A Discovery of Strangers is that he is able to be, it seems, both Faulkner and Balzac at once. That is, Wiebe can construct scenes of painstaking detail and psychological insight, and combine them or frame them in exciting historical situations A Discovery of Strangers is vintage Wiebe. Books in Canada Clash, crash, shock: there are plenty of clichéd verbs of collision to describe encounters between cultures. In A Discovery of Strangers, the meeting of the English and the Yellowknife Indians on whom they rely to guide them through the northlands is seldom so dramatically violent; it is, as the title hints, a gradual discover of strangeness, and all the more affecting for that A Discovery of Strangers is a triumph of translation: with unflinching understanding and the powers of a very fine storyteller, Rudy Wiebe has once again delivered us our past. Quill Quire The author is a master of descriptive prose This memorable novel will add to the authors reputation as one of Canadas most gifted writers a peerless delineator of his countrys history and soul. Canadian Jewish News Wiebe continues to do what he does best: capture on a broad canvas many of the epic events in Canadian history a major work of art. Wiebe provides some of the most evocative prose yet about the Canadian North. Macleans Its fascinating events are solidly rooted in history . . . but in Rudy Wiebes rendition it becomes a history transmuted by art into a strangely original, intensely personal vision It is a pleasure of the first order the pleasure of true art. Josef Skvorecky A circuitously told, poetically charged work that resonates long after the book is closed. Edmonton Journal Magnificent. A love story . . . an adventure story . . . a dramatic tale . . . a winner. The Calgary Herald I was captivated from the very first words so ironic, so poetic, so true. St. John Evening Telegraph A work of extraordinary originality and beauty . . . every sentence of this novel speaks of his respect and love for the aboriginal way of life. The Globe and Mail