



Shann Ray is a professor at Gonzaga University, and a former professional basketball player. His debut novel, *American Copper*, is set in early 20th century Montana featuring bar fights, forgiveness and love. The book is a love song to Montana, and was called "tough, poetic, and beautiful" by Sherman Alexie, and "expansive and luminous" by Debra Magpie Earling. Shann went to high school in Livingston, MT, and spent part his childhood on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in southeast Montana. He'll be reading at the

American Copper

Shann Ray
306 pages
softcover: \$16.00.
Unbridled Books, 2015.

Reviewed by Jamie Houghton

Shann Ray is a professor, poet, and fiction writer whose collection of short stories, *American Masculine* (Graywolf), won the American Book Award, the High Plains Book Award, and the Bakeless Prize from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. His debut novel, *American Copper*, is nothing short of enchanting, a fairy tale of the West that reads like an incantation, casting a powerful spell over the reader from beginning to end.

Set in Montana from 1864-1935, *American Copper* tells the story of three unforgettable characters: Evelynne, the daughter of a ruthless copper baron; Zion, a loner who makes his living roping cattle and fighting in bars; and William Black Kettle, a Cheyenne team roper descended from Chief Black Kettle, the peace chief who was betrayed by Chivington during the Cheyenne massacre. Through their stories, Ray examines racism in the West, expansion, colonialism, and the terrifying nature of the "other."

Ray's prose vacillates between dreamlike and so visceral it cuts through to the reader's physical senses, portraying the violent nature of man and the innate drive to "tame the untameable." *American Copper* is a landscape in itself, moving the characters through physical space, through emotional space and the reader is swept through time by Ray's retelling of the peace chief's story and then following Evelynne, William and Zion some 30 years later as they face the fallout of the battles of their forebearers.

The three characters' lives become intertwined through the rodeo circuit, joined by commonality of each being considered "other," existing outside the norms of society. Evelynne is considered "a hermit who didn't think straight, crazed," and is forbidden to marry by her father. William is a celebrated cattle roper that white men love to watch, yet at night he is forbidden to enter their establishments:

"In daylight they received accolades, and money when they won. After dark it wasn't the same. Men sought them in the saloons or the streets to lord it over them, to take their earnings or try to beat them down in cards or fisticuffs. Generally the two avoided contact with white men."

Zion, sometimes called "the giant" is a loner, living on the fringes of society, moving from town to town roping cattle, fighting for money, and breaking horses. He rarely sleeps indoors. He connects with William and his roping partner when the three share a camp one night and they reflect that

inimitable Elk River Books in Livingston on
Saturday, December 12th. www.shannray.com

they “never again found the kind of ease with another white person as they had with the giant.” When Zion is later taken in after a bar fight injury by Black Kettle’s clan he connects with the tribe’s way of life and they become like family, a touchstone he returns to again and again. Zion doesn’t live by the laws of society and he suffers for it, as do the Native Americans who have been displaced.

When Zion is hired by Evelynne’s father to break her horse she mourns Zion’s separateness from society, his inability to speak to her: “God of the Wilderness, she thought, what is Nature to the ways of men? She had no more tears.” Breaking horses is the only thing Zion does gently and his character’s tenderness with animals contrasts with his brutality fighting men. Like Nature, he is both destroyer and nurturer; he creates and enforces his own sense of justice. He is a Heathcliff-type character, inseparable from the land, and he becomes the center of the novel’s struggle and climax, reflecting the struggle that is going on geographically.

Evelynne also is portrayed as closer to wilderness than society, as in this passage where she questions the perceived advances of man in the form of automobiles:

“Earlier Evelynne and Chan had driven the wagon to town for extra nails along with a few board feet of wood. The streets were cluttered with the noise and stink of automobiles. ‘The end of the horse, some say,’ said Chan.

‘Never,’ she said. ‘A machine cannot imagine. In its properties there is neither intelligence or beauty.’

‘Well said,’ said Chan, but she knew he did not agree. He foresaw the landslide.”

When Evelynne connects with William and his tribe their relationship offers a ray of hope in the sometimes heartbreaking saga that is *American Copper*. William’s father contemplates her arrival in their lives:

“He thought of all the years, and all the young Cheyenne men who each in their turn confronted death. The tribe clung to what remained, unsettled in the land. Their horses numbered less than three thousand now.

But Evelynne was a new creation.”

Indeed, Evelynne and William imagine an alternate future for themselves, one with intelligence and beauty, whatever the consequences.

Through Evelynne, William, and Zion’s struggles with both historical consequences and the imminent future, *American Copper* offers a critique of the very idea that the West was won, questioning whether anyone won at all. Even Evelynne’s father, the powerful and troubled copper baron, loses what is most important to him and the reader is left questioning the worth and price of competition and the concept that no one truly owns anything that cannot be taken away.

Like all good novels, in *American Copper* the reader loses characters they care about every step of the way, but it only makes them more worth knowing. Though the re-telling and critique of history was superbly done, what I loved most about *American Copper* is the straight out fantastic storytelling that swept me through landscapes, loss, love and time. My

hope is that Ray decides to create a sequel; I'd love to see these resilient and epic characters take on the next era of history in the American West.

