

Peter Heller

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About this Person

Born: February 13, 1959 in New York, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

Full Text:

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born February 13, 1959, in New York, NY; married Kim Yan (an actor). **Education:** Graduated from Dartmouth College, 1982; Iowa Writer's Workshop, M.F.A. **Addresses:** Home: Denver, CO.

CAREER

Journalist and writer. Variously worked as a dishwasher, construction worker, logger, offshore fisherman, kayak instructor, river guide, and pizza delivery person.

AWARDS

Michener fellowship, Iowa Writers' Workshop, for epic poem "The Psalms of Malvine" Novel of the Year, Apple iBooks, and Best Book of the Year, *Atlantic Monthly* and *San Francisco Examiner*, all for *The Dog Stars*; Colorado Book Award and Reading the West Book Award, both for *The Painter*.

WORKS

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

The Dog Stars, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2012.

The Painter, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2014.

Celine, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2017.

The River, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2019.

The Guide, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2021.

The Last Ranger, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2023.

Burn, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2024.

NONFICTION

Outside Magazine's Urban Adventure: Denver/ Boulder, Outside Books (New York, NY), 2002.

Hell or High Water: Surviving Tibet's Tsangpo River, Rodale (Emmaus, PA), 2004 .

The Whale Warriors: The Battle at the Bottom of the World to Save the Planet's Largest Mammals, Free Press (New York, NY), 2007.

Kook: What Surfing Taught Me about Love, Life, and Catching the Perfect Wave, Free Press (New York, NY), 2010.

Contributor to National Public Radio and to periodicals. Former contributing editor at *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, and *National Geographic Adventure*.

SIDELIGHTS

Peter Heller became an outdoorsman and white-water kayaker when he attended college in Vermont and New Hampshire. He went on to travel the world, writing about challenging descents down treacherous white-water rivers in places like Peru and the Tien Shan mountains. After several works of nonfiction, with his career bolstered by a master of fine arts degree at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, he turned to writing novels inspired by his adventures and the wide world.

Discussing his depictions of the majesty of nature with Tom Zoellner in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Heller remarked: "When I write nature I always try to write it as true as I can, and what that means is my own experience. It is heedless, it is pitiless, it is grand, it is filled with awesome beauty, it's unpredictable. When I'm in nature, I'm always my most happy. ... When I'm smelling that particular sweetness of willows turning yellow, wind gust comes through and a few leaves fall in the creek and I can look upstream and see the treeless ridge of the mountain, I forget my name, and I forget for a little bit that I'm a human being and it's an incredible relief." Suggesting that his novels follow in the tradition of westerns, with vast mountains or desert overshadowing the human drama, Heller concluded, "I write about nature because I love being there."

In *Hell or High Water: Surviving Tibet's Tsangpo River*, Heller writes about joining the crew of what many believe to be the most ambitious and perhaps dangerous white-water expedition in history. The book recounts the assault on the extremely dangerous Tsangpo Gorge in Eastern Tibet, a famous spot for the kayaking elite. Sacred to Buddhists and three times deeper than the Grand Canyon, the gorge was also the inspiration for novelist James Hilton's depiction of Shangri La in his novel *Lost Horizon*. "Heller does a smooth job of introducing the participants and ... a rip-roaring job of evoking the river's conditions," noted a contributor to *Kirkus Reviews*.

In *Hell or High Water*, the author describes how the gorge is known as a habitat for leopards and tigers at its bottom and as a home to 25,000-foot peaks. The area's remoteness can be attested to by the 1998 discovery of a mythical waterfall sought by explorers since Victorian times.

Heller's adventure takes place in "one of the most beautiful spots on the planet, still almost entirely untouched, but [it] also subjects him to the ugliest aspects of human nature," a *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted. For example, the author writes about the intense antagonism he faced from group leader Scott Lindgren, an adventure filmmaker, and others on board who thought Heller was exploiting their adventure for his own profit. Heller also describes the many close calls that the expedition experienced in the notorious gorge. In an exploration of why kayakers challenge the gorge, the author focuses on everything from the rather mundane idea of bragging rights to the more esoteric feelings of euphoria provided by an intense experience.

Heller offers "an enthralling tale for anyone who joys in conquests of new frontiers," wrote Jim Casada of *Hell or High Water* in *Library Journal*. *Booklist* reviewer Gilbert Taylor wrote that the author "stokes plenty of the action that propels thrill-seeking readers."

In *The Whale Warriors: The Battle at the Bottom of the World to Save the Planet's Largest Mammals*, Heller reports on his assignment for National Geographic to join an eco-pirate ship, the *Farley Mowat*, belonging to the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a radical marine wildlife conservation group. Heller joined Captain Paul Watson and his crew in December 2005 as they set sail to the Antarctica to find and halt a Japanese whaling fleet.

In the *Farley Mowat*, equipped with water cannons, a garbage-throwing catapult, and a large blade welded on to the ship's hull (the "can opener"), the crew chased whaling and illegal fishing ships for weeks. "It's hard not to be gripped by a book that contains breathless passages of imminent danger, such as when Watson, readying his ship like a torpedo, announces: 'Tell the crew, collision in two minutes,'" noted Shawn Query in a review in *Audubon*. Heller also details the crew's willingness to die to save the whales as well as his own uncertainty about the justifications for their actions. "The author's reflections on his doubts about the methods of Capt. Paul Watson and his crew are especially well expressed," wrote Margaret A. Rioux in a *Library Journal* review.

Watson, a notorious environmentalist, is sometimes referred to as an "eco-terrorist." As the author recounts, Watson justifies his dangerous approach by emphasizing the continued lack of action by individual countries and international world organizations. As the author points out in *The Whale Warriors*, "in 1986 the International Whaling Commission (IWC), a group of seventy-seven nations that makes regulations and recommendations on whaling around the world, enacted a moratorium on open-sea commercial whaling in response to the fast-declining numbers of earth's largest

mammals. The Japanese, who have been aggressive whalers since the food shortages following World War II, immediately exploited a loophole that allows signatories to kill a certain number of whales annually for scientific research.”

According to Heller, the whales are primarily meant for the food market in Japan. He also writes that whale meat is not in high demand, as Japanese surveys show that the people do not especially like this type of seafood. *The Whale Warriors* was described as “sometimes funny, almost always adrenaline-fuelled” by a contributor to *Maclean's*. Nancy Bent commented in *Booklist*: “The reader rides the rush of adrenaline and understands their dedication and passion.” A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor praised the book as a “stirring ... convincing, passionate account that both educates and infuriates.” Heller followed *The Whale Warriors* with another adventure memoir, *Kook: What Surfing Taught Me about Love, Life, and Catching the Perfect Wave*.

Heller's first novel is *The Dog Stars*, a postapocalyptic tale set nine years after a superflu has killed almost every human on the planet, decimating society and leaving survivors to struggle alone or in small clans. Hig, a self-taught pilot, lives by himself on a remote airport in Colorado. He flies around the mountains looking for supplies, and his main contact with the outside world is his neighbor, Bangley, who lives alone with a stockpile of guns. Hig must occasionally run off occasional survivors who wander onto the airport; all of them are violent and opportunistic. Unable to trust anyone, Hig's only companion is his dog, Jasper. He also finds comfort in his memories of his wife, who was pregnant when she was killed by the flu. Unable to withstand his loneliness any longer, Hig searches out the location of a broadcast he hears on the radio, but he is shot down and taken prisoner by a deranged doctor and her father.

Discussing his first foray into fiction in an interview posted on *NPR.org*, Heller explained: “Hig's challenge is to find a reason to stay alive and to stay connected with the things he loves. I think that's why I named the book *The Dog Stars*, because Hig sleeps out every night with his dog, Jasper. They huddle up and sleep out under the stars, and every night, Hig names the constellations. He used to have a book of stars ... so he remembers some ... but a lot of them he doesn't, so he makes them up, and they're usually animals.” This ritual is emblematic of Hig's loneliness, and a *Kirkus Reviews* critic noted that “Heller creates with chilling efficiency the bleakness of a world largely bereft of life as we know it, [but] he holds out some hope that human relationships can be redemptive.” Other reviewers had equal praise, and *Booklist* correspondent Donna Seaman remarked: “Richly evocative yet streamlined journal entries propel the high-stakes plot while simultaneously illuminating Hig's nuanced states of mind.” According to a *Publishers Weekly* contributor: “From start to finish, Heller carries the reader aloft on graceful prose, intense action, and deeply felt emotion.”

In *The Painter*, Heller tells the story of an artist named Jim Stegner. The middle-aged Jim has had multiple failed marriages and is dating a much younger woman. His teenage daughter was recently killed during a drug deal, and Jim still mourns her loss. His anger management problems led to a stint in jail, and he has had addiction issues. Fishing is his favorite pastime. Jim receives a call from his longtime art dealer, who asks him to come to Santa Fe to do commissioned portrait. Jim is initially reluctant, but ultimately agrees to do the piece. Jim encounters a man abusing a strawberry roan horse, and his anger erupts. He kills the man. As the investigation into the murder unfolds, Jim continues painting and fishing.

Gloria Feit, a contributor to *Reviewer's Bookwatch*, asserted of *The Painter*, “The writing is elegant, as much poetry as novel.” Feit added: “The world the author creates, of fishing, painting and poetry, is completely captivating, and the novel is highly recommended.” A *Publishers Weekly* critic described the volume as a “masterful novel.” The critic asserted that Heller “explores the mysteries of the human heart and creates an indelible portrait of a man searching for peace.” Seaman, writing in *Booklist*, called the book “an ever-escalating, ravishing, grandly engrossing and satisfying tale of righteousness and revenge, artistic fervor and moral ambiguity.” “The story is at times suspenseful, at times melancholy, at times spiritual, but always engrossing,” suggested Shaunna E. Hunter in *Library Journal*.

The titular protagonist of *Celine* is an older private investigator living in New York City. Celine and her husband, Pete, accept a case that brings them to Wyoming to look into a man's mysterious disappearance. The man is said to have been killed by a grizzly bear, but his daughter, Gabriela, believes some other fate befell him. Celine and Pete attempt to blend in with the locals and interact with colorful characters as they investigate. Robert E. Brown, a reviewer in *Library Journal*, commented that Heller “blends suspense with beautiful descriptive writing of both nature and civilization to create a winner.” A *Kirkus Reviews* writer called the book “an imperfect but largely satisfying detective novel anchored by a charming and unforgettable heroine.” Carrie Rollwagen, a contributor to *BookPage*, remarked: “In *Celine*, author Peter Heller tells an excellent story and creates a mystery that's gripping and ultimately satisfying. He's a master at describing the wonder and beauty of the natural world.” Writing again in *Booklist*, Seaman described the novel as a “captivating, tender, brainy, and funny tale of the mysterious powers of beauty and grief, nature and family.”

Heller's next novel is *The River*, which finds Dartmouth classmates Jack and Wynn getting away for a two-week fly-fishing and whitewater canoeing expedition in northern Canada. Jack, an assertive Colorado ranching scion, and Wynn, a sensitive Vermonter, have their differences, but when wildfire looms, they agree to turn back to warn a married couple they passed. When they find the woman badly injured—by the absent but looming husband—they become targets themselves while evading the husband, rationing thin resources, and struggling upriver to escape the fire.

A *Kirkus Reviews* writer affirmed that Heller “confidently manages a host of tensions” in *The River* while proceeding at a “masterful” pace, “briskly but calmly capturing the scenery in slower moments, then running full-throttle and shifting to barreling prose when danger is imminent.” The reviewer found Heller's storytelling “fresh and affecting” and the novel “exhilarating.” Finding that Heller writes “most mightily” about the boys' relationship and affiliation with nature, *Booklist* reviewer Annie Bostrom proclaimed that he deftly “chronicles life-or-death adventure with empathy for the natural world and the characters who people it.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer hailed the novel's “evocative descriptions of nature's splendor and brutality” and Heller's poignant depiction of “the powers that can drive humans apart—and those that compel them to return.”

A solemn Jack finds himself back in Colorado in *The Guide*, where he copes with the prolonged Covid pandemic by taking a job as a fishing guide at a swanky lodge. Jack finds aspects of the scene unsettling—strict rules, abundant cameras, the trigger-happy neighbor—and as he extends warm hospitality to famous singer Alison K, screams in the night lead to a terrible discovery. A *Kirkus Reviews* writer described this novel as an “unconventional mystery, an unconventional romance, and an unconventional adventure, creepy and spiritual in equal measure.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer deemed *The Guide* “riveting” and “captivating” and especially enjoyed Heller's “speculative approach” to the impact of the pandemic—“one of the book's special charms.” In *Booklist* Jane Murphy admirably summed this effort of Heller's up as “another brilliantly paced, unnerving wilderness thriller paired with an absorbing depiction of a remote natural paradise.”

Yellowstone National Park is the setting of *The Last Ranger*. Living in a humble cabin, ranger Ren Hopper spends his days protecting animals, saving tourist families, and caring for the land. Of especial concern is the poaching of wolves, whose population has been restored through painstaking efforts. When biologist Hilly gets caught in a trap apparently meant not for a wolf but for her, Hopper redoubles his efforts to identify the wrongdoers—as well as his affection for Hilly. The Pathfinders, a militia of resource-rich ranchers opposed to government management of the land, are both prime suspects and a present danger.

A *Kirkus Reviews* writer hailed *The Last Ranger* as a “fast-paced, elegantly written” novel. The reviewer singled out for praise the “small cast of fully realized characters” as well as the “thrilling climactic chase scene” that brings “what at heart is a nature adventure story to a satisfying conclusion.” Observing that “the rugged nature of Yellowstone permeates every page,” Murphy in *Booklist* proclaimed, “This is wilderness noir at its best.”

FURTHER READINGS

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL SOURCES:

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Heller, Peter, *The Whale Warriors: The Battle at the Bottom of the World to Save the Planet's Largest Mammals*, Free Press (New York, NY), 2007.

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Audubon, January-February, 2008, Shawn Query, review of *The Whale Warriors*, p. 94.

Booklist, September 15, 2004, Gilbert Taylor, review of *Hell or High Water*, p. 192; August, 2007, Nancy Bent, review of *The Whale Warriors*, p. 19; July 1, 2012, Donna Seaman, review of *The Dog Stars*, p. 22; March 15, 2014, review of *The Painter*, p. 50; March 1, 2017, Donna Seaman, review of *Celine*, p. 41; January 1, 2019, Annie Bostrom, review of *The River*, p. 38; July 1, 2021, Jane Murphy, review of *The Guide*, p. 29; July 1, 2023, Jane Murphy, review of *The Last Ranger*, p. 24.

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Maclean's, October 15, 2007, "Finally, a Book about ... Taking on Whalers," p. 108.

Publishers Weekly, August 16, 2004, review of *Hell or High Water*, p. 52; April 26, 2010, review of *Kook*, p. 96; June 11, 2012, review of *The Dog Stars*, p. 26; February 24, 2014, review of *The Painter*, p. 152; November 19, 2018, review of *The River*, p. 69; June 28, 2021, review of *The Guide*, p. 47; June 19, 2023, review of *The Last Ranger*, p. 167.

Reference & Research Book News, February, 2005, review of *Hell or High Water*, p. 90.

Reviewer's Bookwatch, January, 2015, Gloria Feit, review of *The Painter*; March, 2015, Gloria Feit, review of *The Painter*.

Surfer, October, 2010, review of *Kook*, p. 52.

ONLINE

Los Angeles Review of Books, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/> (November 2, 2019), Tom Zoellner, "All about Awe: A Conversation with Peter Heller."

Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/> (July 26, 2023), Mark Athitakis, review of *The Last Ranger*.

NPR website, <http://www.npr.org/> (August 7, 2012), Jennifer Reese, review of *The Dog Stars*; (August 13, 2012), "Looking to the 'Stars' for a Reason to Live," author interview.

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