



**International Wolf Center**

Teaching the World about Wolves

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## International Wolf Center Nominates Picoult's Lone Wolf for Scat Award



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### **Lone Wolf more “bull” than wolf, say experts**

Having recently nominated the movie *The Grey* for its new Scat Award, the International Wolf Center is adding famed author Jodi Picoult's new book, *Lone Wolf*, to the 2012 nominations for its ridiculously romantic treatment of wolf/human interaction.

“I am incredulous at the degree of inaccuracy and the amount of absurd misinformation about wolves in *Lone Wolf*,” says wolf educator Cornelia Hutt. “The recent editorial review of her book references ‘Picoult's impressive research into wolf biology, hierarchy and pack mentality.’ Wrong. Picoult didn't do her homework properly this time, and her reputation for getting the facts in order just plummeted into the abyss. She has crossed the line from fiction, based on reality, to fantasy.”

International Wolf Center Information Services Director Jess Edberg agrees. “While the movie *The Grey* depicted wolves as vengeful nightmares of relentless evil, Picoult's book portrays wolves in an opposite, but equally ridiculous fashion—the romance of man and nature. Both portrayals distort the true nature of wolves, and make a fact-based discussion about wolf management and wolf/human interaction much more difficult.”

Hutt continues, “As a wolf educator and writer of wolf curricula for teachers and non-formal educators, I am frankly infuriated by the sheer nonsense in the ‘Luke’ segments of the book. In an effort to debunk the myths about the wolf as ‘the beast of waste and desolation,’ Picoult has created an equally unscientific, inaccurate and ultimately harmful portrayal of wolves and of wolf packs. Why did she not go to the books and articles written by renowned researchers and scientists like L. David Mech—a man who has spent more than 50 years studying wolves and sharing his knowledge with the general public? The wolf is one of the most extensively researched mammals. What about the other science-based wolf education organizations that have Web sites crammed with solid information about the biology and ecology of wolves? These sites include the International Wolf Center, the Wolf Conservation Center, the California Wolf Center and the Red Wolf Coalition.”

### **“Honey, I'm home. I brought take-out.”**

In the book, the character Luke describes his experience living with a wolf pack by posing a question without any basis in fact.

*“I have been asked repeatedly why a pack of wild wolves would accept a human into their ranks. Why bother with a creature that follows too slowly, stumbles in the dark, can't speak their language fluently, and inadvertently disrespects their leaders? The only answer I can come up with is that they realized they needed to study a human as much as I needed to study them.”*

Scientist L. David Mech reviewed the book and was floored by the descriptions of wolf behavior. “It is beyond ridiculous that wolves need to study a human or that they are capable of it.”

Hutt proclaims that the above passage “is the stuff of ancient legend and baseless boasting by a few self-promoting individuals who think that a human can ‘become’ a wild creature and who dishonor animals by ascribing to them human characteristics. Anyone who believes a person who claims to have been accepted as a member of a wild wolf pack is naive in the extreme.”

Another laughable paragraph portrays wolves as a cross between nannies and waiters:

*“From then on, every time the pack went hunting, they brought me back food. Sometimes it was rolled in droppings or urinated upon.”*

It is a well-known fact that wolves hunt throughout their range, which can cover more than 1,000 square miles (2,590 square

kilometers). They eat where they kill. They do not “bring food back” to some home base location with the exception of food brought to the breeding female when the pups need her constant presence after birth and tidbits later brought to the youngsters as they transition to solid food. There’s no, “Honey, I’m home and here’s the bacon,” states Edberg, “nor do wolves spice their kill with feces. They may mark it with scat or urine, but to imply that the wolves prepare a meal as such is ridiculous.”

The book continues down this culinary path with one of the most bizarre descriptions of feeding behavior:

*“I would come to learn that an alpha female can read every single bit of food you put into your body. Make a choice that’s going to keep you strong and fit for the pack...when six wolves are feeding on a single carcass the alpha will go to the internal organs the beta will get the muscle-packed rump and thigh movement meat, and the omega gets the intestinal contents and non-movement meat, like the neck, spine, and rib cage. The tester wolf will get about 75% non-movement meat and 25% vegetable matter...”*

Says Dr. Mech of this mathematically precise dietary management, “This is totally outrageous. No animal divides up prey by percent or allocates different parts of the kill to different group members. To the contrary, each competes to get the best each is able to. Furthermore, stomach contents of prey is all half digested vegetation and it is the only part of the prey animal that wolves do not eat.”

## **I can hear your heartbeat**

If counting calories wasn’t strange enough, Picoult’s Luke also claims wolves can divine all sorts of things about prey from mere trace evidence:

*“She can sniff at the tufts of grass the moose has fed upon and know, from the scent of its teeth, how old the animal is.”*

“Unbelievable,” states Mech. “The scent of teeth has no relationship with age. It’s pure baloney, as is the assertion that during a hunt, an alpha will direct two wolves in front of the moose’s shoulder listen for its heart rate in order to terrorize it. Next thing you know they will leap tall buildings with a single bound and produce a cure for cancer. Oh wait, if you go to page 181 it looks like they’ve already done that.”

*“Of all the injuries I had in those years, not a single one became infected. If I’d been able to bottle the medicinal properties of wolf saliva, I’d be a rich man.”*

“This is just another old wives tale,” says Edberg. “The saliva of wolves has just as much harmful bacteria as any other carnivore. I don’t know anyone who would recommend it as a treatment for an open wound.”

## **Wanted: One experienced alpha male. Must be willing to relocate.**

Losing a loved one is always a tragedy, but according to Picoult’s character Luke, it’s simply unacceptable, as is the idea of “hiring” from within:

*“The level of experience and knowledge in a wolf is irreplaceable, which is why the alpha will stay in the den near the young most of the time, sending other pack members out to do patrols, to hunt, to safeguard. This is also why, when an alpha gets taken down, so many packs fall apart. It is as if the central nervous system has suddenly lost its brain. You might think that there is a promoting from within—that maybe the beta, the number two man, will fill his former boss’s shoes. But in the wolf world, that’s not how it happens.”*

The idea that one wolf controls the rest of the pack members, ordering them around like soldiers is perhaps the most disturbing bit of hokum in this book. Mech, who is also a senior research scientist for the U.S. Department of the Interior, (USGS), was recently asked this same question about control. “No. One wolf cannot tell another wolf what to do. The offspring take their cues from what the adults do, but the adults do not direct the offspring to do anything,” states Mech. (To hear his full interview visit the podcast section at [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org).)

According to Edberg, should one or both of the breeding pair die, the structure of a pack would not necessarily fall apart. Another wolf within the pack may fill that role, or an unrelated wolf may join the pack. It might stimulate the adult offspring to disperse and search for unrelated wolves with which to mate and begin their own packs. “It is beyond unlikely that a lone wolf would be literally asked to fill that part, as if to comply with some equal opportunity employment law. This assertion of wolves being born with different skill sets has never been observed by researchers,” said Edberg.

## **The doctor is in, but his bite is actually worse than his bark**

Finally, perhaps the most serious breach of fact occurs when Luke reminisces about his father’s apparent tribal knowledge about wolves:

*“My father taught me wolves can read emotion and illnesses the way humans read headlines.”*

Really? “This comment may seem innocuous, rubbing up against the fabric of folklore as it does, but because this book is so well written, it is likely to taint people’s perception of wolves,” concludes Edberg. “Wolves react to posture and movement, not emotions or psoriasis. To assign them such human qualities is irresponsible and dangerous.”

While Lone Wolf seems well on its way to becoming another Picoult best seller, the International Wolf Center advises readers to treat this novel with judicial caution—the jury should disregard nearly everything written here about wolves.

To listen to interviews with actual non-fiction wolf experts go to [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org) and select podcasts.

*The International Wolf Center advances the survival of wolf populations by teaching about wolves, their relationship to wildlands and the human role in their future.*

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