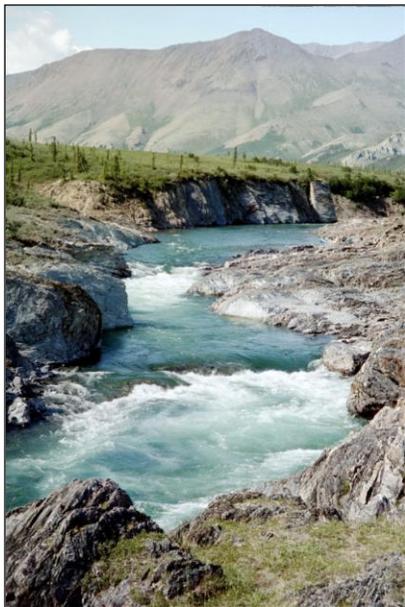


Author
WILL HOBBS
talks about
NEVER SAY DIE

Q: For starters, is the grolar bear—half grizzly, half polar bear--for real?

A: Amazingly, yes. The first one to appear in the wild was killed in Canada's Arctic by an American trophy hunter in 2006. It wasn't long before I was thinking I might write a story involving a grolar bear, and have it take place in the Canadian Arctic.



Q: Had you been there before?

A: Three times. The first time was on a road trip with my wife from our home in Durango, Colorado, all the way to Inuvik in the Northwest Territories, only sixty miles from the Arctic Ocean. A few years later, in 2003, I flew into Inuvik to raft the Firth River on the north slope of Canada's Yukon Territory. The third time I flew into Yellowknife to raft the Burnside River in the territory of Nunavut. Both river trips were eleven days long and ended at the Arctic Ocean. It's the Firth River that I featured in *Never Say Die*. The Firth is an Arctic jewel. Check out this photo I took after rafting through these rapids.

Q: Did you fly into the headwaters of the Firth via bush plane?

A: Yes, just like Nick Thrasher did in the novel. For most of the flight, over the open tundra, it felt like we weren't much more than five hundred feet up. That seemed strange and somewhat alarming. On terra firma, I asked the pilot why he had flown so low to the ground. "Because I'm afraid of

heights," he deadpanned. In *Never Say Die*, Nick asks the same question and gets the same answer.

Q: The accident at the ice jam, when Nick and his brother are barely getting started, came as quite a shock. How'd you come up with that? Has it happened to you?

A: It happened to a doctor I'd read about who was rowing his father down the north fork of Alaska's Koyukuk River, above the Arctic Circle. Hours into the trip, they rounded a corner and encountered ice spanning the river. Upon impact, the raft flipped over. Father and son found themselves in the freezing river under a lengthy ceiling of solid ice. Against all odds, both survived.

Q: What about the "gauntlet of grizzlies" along the Firth River in *Never Say Die*?

A: That happened on the Firth in 2002, the summer before I ran the river. As described in the novel, dozens of bull caribou drowned while trying to swim the river during high water. From far and wide, barren-ground grizzlies caught the scent of the carcasses and converged on the scene. Three rafts on a Canadian River Expeditions trip floated several miles through a gauntlet of grizzlies feeding on the dead caribou. Some of the bears rushed the rafts. As soon as Parks Canada was notified, they closed the river to commercial and private river runners alike until the grizzlies dispersed.



Q: Nick catches an Arctic char by hand. Did you catch any?

A: On rod and reel. They're great eating!

Q: You must have done a ton of research to be able to write *Never Say Die*—on the caribou, the bears, climate change in the Arctic, and the Native people, especially the Inuvialuit. Is that enjoyable for you?

A: Hugely. Even if I weren't a writer, I'd be reading books and articles about the North. When I'm working on a story, the nonfiction I'm reading often suggests possibilities for fiction. In *Never Say Die*, the idea for Nick and Ryan's deceased father was inspired by a book by Jonathan Waterman entitled *Arctic Crossing—One Man's 2,200-Mile Odyssey Among the Inuit*. Waterman is a writer/adventurer from Colorado who paddled the Northwest Passage in a sea kayak. Along the way he visited Shingle Point, the summer whaling and fishing camp of people from Aklavik, in the Mackenzie River Delta. The idea for Ken

Logan, the caribou biologist at the other end of the satellite phone, was inspired by *Being Caribou: Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd*, by Karsten Heuer. A Canadian wildlife biologist, Heuer followed the Porcupine caribou on skis and on foot for more than a thousand miles. Heuer was accompanied by a filmmaker, his wife Leanne Allison, who made a documentary of their epic journey with the Porcupine herd entitled *Being Caribou*.

Q: *Never Say Die* has much to do with Aklavik, the roadless village in the Mackenzie River delta where Nick Thrasher has grown up, and is full of local knowledge about the Porcupine caribou herd. Where did that come from?

A: From fourteen residents of Aklavik who are quoted extensively in a hundred-page publication entitled *Aklavik Local and Traditional Knowledge about Porcupine Caribou*. Copies of this September 2009 document are available from the Wildlife Management Advisory Council (North Slope) and Aklavik's Hunters and Trappers Committee. It can also be found on the Internet. Among other resources, it was chiefly this gift of Aklavik to the world that made it possible for me to ground the novel in the knowledge and point of view of two fictional hunters from Aklavik—Nick Thrasher and his grampa Jonah.

Q: Have you visited Aklavik?

A: I hope to, some day. I saw the village from the air on my bush plane flight into the Firth River. I first heard of Aklavik the previous day at Boreal Books in Inuvik. I introduced myself to the bookstore man as the author of *Far North* and began to explain that it is set on the Nahanni River in the Northwest Territories. He smiled and said it was a favorite with the kids in Aklavik, a roadless community on the west side of the Mackenzie delta. A teacher from Aklavik had ordered a class set. Now, ten years later, I've got a new one for them with a title that comes from the sign in front of their school.

Q: *Never Say Die* is set in the summer of 2010, and your characters are out on the tundra tracking the caribou when they see one of the planes making a photographic census of the Porcupine caribou herd. Was there really an aerial census taken in 2010?

A: Yes, and I sure enjoyed putting Nick and Ryan into position to see that airplane. The census was conducted under the auspices of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board. I invite readers to look up their website and track down the results, as well as the details of how they conduct a photo census of a major caribou herd.

Q: Do huge summer storms like the one you described in the novel actually affect the coast of the Beaufort Sea in the Yukon Territory?

A: They used to be rare but are becoming more frequent. Some are as large as 1,200 miles in diameter! As I was proofreading the completed novel, two storm systems over the Beaufort Sea merged to form the Great Arctic Cyclone of August, 2012.

Q: Given that the Arctic is experiencing the most rapid climate change on the planet, do you feel optimistic about the future of the Porcupine caribou herd?

A: As long as we refrain from resource development in their calving grounds, yes. They are incredibly tough and resilient animals to be able to live where they do.

Q: Will you ever return to the Arctic?

A: First chance I get. Among all my experiences in the natural world, visiting the pristine Arctic and observing its wildlife--including caribou, grizzlies, wolves, musk oxen, and gyrfalcons—has given me the deepest connection with wild places I have ever known.



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