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Birds and Their People

Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds

by **BERND BRUNNER**

Greystone Books, 2017 \$39.95

Mozart's Starling by **LYANDA LYNN HAUPT**

Little, Brown and Company, 2017 \$35.00

Birds Art Life by **KYO MACLEAR**

Doubleday Canada, 2017 \$29.95

Reviewed by **NANCY MENNING**

Jonathan Franzen, in an essay in *National Geographic Magazine's* January 2018 issue, suggests why birds matter: "They are our last, best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding." The year 2018 is the centennial of the U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and National Geographic (with its partners the National Audubon Society, BirdLife International, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology) has declared it the Year of the Bird. Three recent books draw our attention to people who are (or have been) fascinated by birds; these stories inspire contemplation of our current ecological challenges and possible ethical responses.

Bernd Brunner's *Birdmania* was originally published in German in 2015. The 2017 edition from Greystone is adapted for the English-language market and includes over one hundred colour illustrations. Brunner's brief, anecdotal sketches demonstrate the long-standing human preoccupation with the avian world. This is not an academic tome, and Brunner does not intend to be comprehensive in his coverage. Rather, his selective portrayals of people fascinated by birds—from Aristotle to Franzen—offers a sample of the many ways in which humans have encountered and engaged with birds.

Birdmania is a pleasurable read with an understated historical and ethical argument. Brunner wanders easily from one anecdote to the next, and his subjects are wide-ranging, including private aviaries, falconry, egg collecting, the exotic bird trade, early natural history classifications, and the bioacoustic analysis of birdsong. The historical thread is easy to follow, with earlier classification schemes giving way to revised understandings in response to increased geographic mobility and the development of Western sciences. Brunner presents each of his human subjects sympathetically while periodically asserting his subjective ethical position, as in this comment: "Observing birds without interfering with their lives seems to me to be the purest form of getting to know them" (137).

In *Birdmania*, Brunner offers a smorgasbord of intriguing stories (albeit predominantly Western in emphasis). Readers will likely be stimulated to pursue particular subjects in greater detail. Seattle-based author Lyanda Lynn Haupt's *Mozart's Starling* offers an example of what such immersion into a particular human-bird encounter may reveal.

Haupt's book project arises from the intersection of memory and emotional experience. One day, as Haupt sought to scare a flock of starlings away from her front yard, she was struck by their beauty. Emotionally ambivalent—feeling both love and hate—she recalled having read that Mozart had owned a pet starling. No historical record indicates the name given to Mozart's bird. In this absence of evidence, Haupt uses the name "Star." She explores the story of Mozart and Star through scholarly work in the historical literature and by going on a pilgrimage to Mozart's home and gravesite in Vienna. She

also takes a starling chick less than a week old from a nest that was being destroyed in a nearby park. She raises and lives with this pet starling (“Carmen”): an experience that profoundly shapes her interpretation of the relationship between Mozart and Star.

Moving between Mozart’s story and her own, Haupt offers a personal as well as a historically and scientifically informed portrayal of the relationship between Mozart and Star, interspersed with her own ethical musings about her relationship with Carmen and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) as a whole. Readers learn about Mozart’s family and personal history, the history of the European Starling in North America, starling vocalizations, linguistic theories that attempt to distinguish humans from other animals, and possible influences of Star on Mozart’s musical compositions.

The ethical thread in *Mozart’s Starling* follows Haupt’s attempt to reconcile her love-hate relationship with starlings:

Do I want starlings gone? Erased from the face of North America? Yes, unequivocally. Do I resent them as aggressive invaders? Of course. And do I love them? Their bright minds, their sparkling beauty, their unique consciousness, their wild starling voices? Their feathers, brown from one angle, shining from another? Yes, yes, I do. (74)

Readers are not asked to set aside their understanding of the ecological impacts of starling populations in North America. But Haupt also calls us to be actively open to wonder: “We decide, moment to moment, if we will allow ourselves to be affected by the presence of this brighter world in our everyday lives” (75).

Mozart’s Starling concludes by highlighting another paradox: a famous composer’s relationship with an often-despised bird. Haupt imagines a deep, multifaceted kinship between Mozart and Star, a kinship that overcomes projections of class and value and questions distinctions often drawn between the human and more-than-human world.

The challenge of holding opposites in tension is also at the heart of *Birds Art Life*, by Toronto-based novelist and children’s book author Kyo Maclear. Finding her artistic energies unsettled by “anticipatory grief” (7) as her father’s health declines, Maclear commits to accompanying a bird-loving, local musician on his nature walks in the greater Toronto area over the course of a year. *Birds Art Life* is a meditation on her experiences over that year as she struggles with the realities of loss “in a world in which everything perishes in the end” (10). As she nears the end of the year, Maclear reflects that birding elicits

a twoness of feeling — both reassuring and dispiriting — especially in a city where so little landscape had survived modernity’s onslaught. In that twoness was a mongrel space between hope and despair. (230)

The power of *Birds Art Life* lies in its ability to shine a piercing light on the lives we readers are actually living. In the first place, this book has a contemporary urban setting:

It made sense to me — the focus on the nature growing in the cracks and crevices of urban life — not because we should romanticize human blight

and fallout but because, at the end of the day, humanized nature is all that many of us have. (112-113)

Secondly, Maclear blends her disquiet about her father's faltering health with an environmental dis-ease that many readers also sense. She moves, for example, from reflection on the fate of an individual young goldfinch flung prematurely from its nest to the ongoing biodiversity crisis. We may use rituals to assuage our regrets—Maclear notes her participation in a ritual associated with Rosh Hashanah—but, she writes, “I don't think there is a ritual big enough to cast this degree of regret away” (197). Readers seeking their own resilience in our troubling times will resonate with Maclear's overarching desire to proclaim: “I am here. I am alive. I am doing more than calmly bracing myself” (12).

In his *National Geographic* essay, Franzen notes the many similarities between humans and birds. What distinguishes us is, on the one hand, avian flight and, on the other hand, human mastery of the environment. As with the iconic canary in the coal mine, birds can indicate ecosystem status. But, according to Franzen, what bird populations most usefully indicate is “the health of our *ethical* values.” Bird species are now threatened with extinction at ever-increasing rates. Will we choose to employ our skills of ecosystem mastery to protect them? Not if our calculations are merely economic, Franzen argues, tied to anthropocentric values. But if we are attentive to our passion, open to wonder, and tolerant with paradox, perhaps those of us troubled by the fragility of existence and the smallness of our actions relative to the scale of pressing ecological needs may yet find a path forward through the century ahead.

Works Cited

Franzen, Jonathan. “Why birds matter, and are worth protecting.” *National Geographic Magazine*. Jan. 2018.

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