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Birds and Books

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Birds and Books

KYO MACLEAR WITH PICTURES BY JACK BREAKFAST

Let me first remember the birds that came before the books.

My earliest bird memory is of the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. I remember standing by Nelson's Column with a fistful of bread, surrounded by a sea of ravenous birds. I was four years old. I remember my pixie-haired nanny demonstrating how to scatter the crumbs. *Like this*, she said, *a delicate toss*.

After we moved to Canada, I remember the small birds that used to fall to the ground outside my private school. It was a quiet, leafy neighborhood known as Forest Hill. They zipped through the air and flew into the gothic glass windows, mistaking the glass for a clear path. I quickly learned the specific sound a bird makes when it smashes into a window. I learned that when buildings and birds collide, the building always wins. The birds dropped to the grass like little sacks of sand. We would come out to play and find a few cinder-colored bundles at our feet right under the oak trees. I remember their little matchstick legs poking up at the sky. Sometimes there would be a trickle of blood, but usually they would just look like they were napping. I left that school after two years, so I don't know if they ever learned to curtain the windows or if they ever placed a deterrent image on the glass as some skyscrapers have done. But I remember thinking it seemed cruel that a bird should be punished for believing it could fly.

I remember the crows in Yoyogi Park. I was eighteen and walking through Tokyo with my Canadian boyfriend. I remember how the

crows suddenly darkened the skies. I remember the way they screamed as they dove down and tore open a garbage bag a few feet away from us with their beaks. I remember the whoosh of their wide wings and their claws, which looked like cartoon-witch hands. I began to cry from terror. I knew they were known to attack unsuspecting pedestrians who moved too close to their nests. I knew they were savage. They would peck out the eyes of creatures that were still alive. At least vultures would wait until you were dead.

Growing up, I spent every summer in Tokyo, and the crows had always frightened me. They are known as jungle crows, and to find them in the heart of an immaculately groomed city was both fantastical and terrifying. It hinted at a wild and unruly reality that might be hidden beyond tidy streets and gleaming facades.

There may have been other birds outside my grandmother's house, but I don't remember them. What I remember is spending a lot of time inside. I remember how the shoji screens would filter sounds from the outside world—the sound of trucks with their loudspeakers, the ones selling roasted sweet potatoes and the ones selling right-wing politics. I remember the soothing sound of rain cascading down the brass rain chain. Rainy days were for writing letters to my friends, who had migrated north to summer camps in Ontario. Rainy days were for reading.

When boredom and loneliness threatened to swallow me up during my long summers in Japan, I would retire to a small room in my grandmother's house, unroll a futon, turn on the fan, and read, thus instating a lifelong passion for books.

I escaped. I went to the English and Welsh countryside with the Famous Five and to New York with Claudia and Jamie Kincaid. I time traveled and shape-shifted. I lived in the Jurassic past and the atomic future. I lived in Macondo and the Republic of San Lorenzo. I lived as a prairie girl and a French detective. I lived in dire Dickensian poverty and great imperial wealth.

Books were my steadiest companions; and during the summers that I rarely heard from my father at all, they seemed more dependable than the people in my life. When I ran out of books, I went downtown to Shinjuku and bought Japanese novels in translation. *Soseki. Tanizaki. Oe.* My books formed a nest around me on the tatami mat, right near my aunt's Buddhist altar. A waft of sandalwood as the incense sticks burned.

They were my life and narcotic. They were “alive and they spoke to me,” wrote Henry Miller. “With childhood reading there is a factor of significance which we are prone to forget—the physical ambiance of the occasion. How distinctly, in after years, one remembers the feel of a favorite book, the typography, the binding, the illustrations, and so on. How easily one can localize the time and place of a first reading. Some books are associated with illness, some with bad weather, some with punishment, some with reward. . . . These readings are distinctly ‘events’ in one’s life” (Miller 1969, 25).

I was a bookish child and grew to be a bookish adult. Books gave me pleasure, but they also gave me permission to isolate myself, to turn away from the world when it bothered or frightened me. Books allowed me to hide from demands, from the day, from family and the immediate world. They provided solace and amusement in the deep night and served as surrogates for friendship when I was far away from home.

Susan Sontag, remarking in one of her journals on her inability to stop reading, even in the face of her terminal illness, wrote, “I can’t stop reading. . . . I’m sucking on a thousand straws” (Rieff 2008, 146). I know that feeling of bottomless hunger for culture, even and especially during times of crisis. When I read Sontag’s words, I thought of the famous photograph depicting the ruins of a London bookshop following an air raid in 1940. It shows men browsing the shelves after the all clear sounded—a showcase of British perseverance or, perhaps, inexorable biblioaddiction. A sign of folly or unvanquished hope? It depends on whom you ask.

Books have given me great stores of happiness; but if I am honest with myself, I can see that they have also taken something away. I glimpsed the physical world between paragraphs of novels. I traced words, when I might have touched the ground.

From those days in Japan, I still imagine a wheaty waft of tatami every time I open a book. I also have an inability to read upright. To fully immerse myself in a book, I must be reclining. I read best when mummified in blankets.

Sometimes books have housed me, and sometimes they have encased me. Although I have consumed vast numbers of books, I still feel vastly ill equipped in most practical situations. Such is the vicarious nature of reading. Books have introduced me to world religions, ancient civilizations, political movements, the traumas of modern warfare, legal



Fig. 1. Copyright 2015 Jack Breakfast.

theory, the history of art, and theories of the unconscious. They have expanded my powers of empathy and insight. But I still do not know which berries are poisonous or how to predict the weather, staunch a wound, or build a fire without matches.

It's arguable I've just read too narrowly. There are many bookish people in my life who know how to do practical things, how to be in the physical world. Simon can bake bread. Jason can build a house. Hiromi knows how to forage in the woods. Jude knows how to make a poultice. Sasha can deliver a baby. Some of this knowledge may have come from books, but I suspect much of it was acquired slowly and osmotically, through field observation and long conversations, through trial and effort, through contemplation and silence.

Some days when I feel alone in my unknowing, I wonder what others know. Walking around my neighborhood, I see bearded men who re-

semble woodsmen in their vintage lumber jackets and willowy women who resemble homesteaders in their prairie dresses. They look like they are heading off to swim logs downstream and pick flowers in vast grasslands, respectively. They look like they would know words like brook, minnow, buttercup, heron, ash, beetroot, bray, bridle, gooseberry, raven, and catkin.

“I missed the smell of plants I could not name, the sound of birds I could not name, the murmur of languages I could not name.”

—Deborah Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know: A Response to George Orwell's Why I Write*

One winter, not so long ago, I met a musician who loved city birds. This musician, who was then in his midthirties, had found that he could not always cope with the pressures and disappointments of being an artist in a big city. He liked banging away on his piano, but performing and promoting himself made him feel anxious and depressed. Very occasionally his depression served him well and allowed him to write lonesome songs of love; but most of the time, it just ate at him. When he fell in love with birds and began to photograph them, his anxieties dissipated. The sound of birdsong reminded him to look outward at the world, rather than narcissistically inward.

The musician knew things. This was clear to me very early on. Even when he behaved like a flighty artist, I still knew that as a part-time landlord, he knew how to fix a fridge and do basic electrical work. It was also clear that as a birder, he was no dabbler. He always knew exactly where and when to go see birds. He knew what those birds would be, and usually he knew why and how they got there.

In 2012 I followed the musician on birding trips around the city of Toronto for a whole year. I was curious about what had prompted a young, urban artist to suddenly embrace nature and decided to find out. We traveled through seasonal shifts and migrations, on a shambly odyssey. The musician was interesting and anecdotal, humorous and helpful; but I discovered that as a guide, he wasn't very guiding or instructive.

This was fine with me. At least for the first few months with the musician, I was happy to know very little. I did not look things up, eschewing my book-bound existence. I liked the idea that I was having a pure, unfiltered experience. I was an empty slate. The skies and trees were my school.

It was all very romantic, but it was also untrue. In truth, I did know things. My bird knowledge came with me every time I went out for a walk. It was confected of pop songs, poetry, mythology, garish nature postcards, IMAX movies, Warner Brothers cartoons, Froot Loop commercials, European master paintings, and homemade crafts. I was steeped in pop ecology. I had learned about blackbirds from the Beatles and the mechanics of flight from Tweety Bird. My history of acquired bird information could not be canceled out simply because I wished it to be.

What happened in those first few months with the musician was a form of shedding. The more I encountered the reality of birds, the more my secondhand impressions of “birds” began to fall away. When we sat together in a swirl of mist and formless time, when I stopped seeing my idea of trees and started seeing infinite shades of green, when I looked at a swan’s back and saw that each feather was an intricate masterpiece of white, when distances collapsed and my own sense of scale diminished, it was a molting.

Then the musician injured his knee. It happened early that April, and it was bad enough to make bird walks impossible for a while. So to fill the time, I decided to read. I came across a quote from Walker Evans on the musician’s website: “Die knowing something.” Suddenly not reading seemed like a stupid and lazy thing to do.

I borrowed a stack of books from the library. There were books on the bone density of birds and the musculature of flight, books with sonograms, graphs, and accounts of various laboratory inspections and dissections. I consulted these books quickly and then returned them. These books had too much information, and I had made myself a promise: I would not read out of duty, only pleasure. I wanted John Fowles’s woods knowledge: “a kind of wandering wood acquaintance, and no more; a dilettante’s, not a virtuoso’s; always the green chaos rather than the printed map” (Fowles 2000, 61).

Manual of Ornithology: Avian Structure and Function, by Noble S. Proctor. *Ornithology*, by Frank B. Gill. *The Unfeathered Bird*, by Katrina van Grouw. *The Inner Bird: Anatomy and Evolution*, by Gary W. Kaiser.

I borrowed more books. There were older books by amateur ornithologists and weekend naturalists. I begin to understand why many people remain wary of nature writing. A lot of it tends to be insipid, sentimental, and embarrassing. It’s all that romantic wandering and



Fig. 2. Copyright 2015 Jack Breakfast.

dumbstruck waxing on; all those sublime mountains, delicate flowers, and shimmering sunsets. There is simply too much effusion, passion, and love for our ironic age. Even my environmentalist, nature-loving friends avoid it.

Portrait of a Wilderness, by Guy Mountfort. *Twitcher's Diary: Bird Watching Year*, by Richard Millington.

I borrowed more books. Despite a desire to remain open-minded, I was fighting my prejudices. I judged books by their covers. I judged them by the dull and distinguished looking authors who looked as if they had just returned from wind-tossed heaths. I judged them when their first pages were sickly sweet or deadly dry. I grazed and sampled.

The Sibley Guide to Birds, by David Allen Sibley. *Collins Bird Guide*, by Killian Mullarney. *A Field Guide to the Birds*, by Roger Tory Peterson.

I gathered seminal field guides to North America. Smooth pages. Straightforward glossaries and no-nonsense grids. I loved these books for their biblical heft and diagrammatic certainty.

The Bird Collectors, by Barbara and Richard Mearns. *Songbird Journeys*, by Miyoko Chu. *Living on the Wind*, by Scott Weidensaul. *Kingbird Highway*, by Sandy Komito. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, by Richard Rhodes. *Where Have All the Birds Gone?*, by John Terborgh.

Birds Britannica, by Mark Cocker. *Birding on Borrowed Time*, by Phoebe Snetsinger. *How to Be a Bad Birdwatcher*, by Simon Barnes. *Grass Sky Song: Promise and Peril in World of Grassland Birds*, by Trevor Herriot. *Nature Cure*, by Richard Mabey. *The Running Sky*, by Tim Dee. *On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature*, by Melanie Challenger.

The books tended to fall into two camps: birds seen by scientists or taggers and birds seen by poets or roamers. It was the latter that tended to sweep me away; but because these books were so voice driven, questions of subjectivity and entitlement rushed to the fore: who was doing the roaming? Who was boldly going forth, mostly alone and untrammelled? Was it the “Lone Enraptured Male,” whom Kathleen Jamie famously pilloried in her *London Review of Books* essay? (“*What’s that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! . . . From Cambridge! . . . quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilized lyrical words.*”) Despite a twenty-first century veneer of self-reflexivity and cosmopolitanism, it was often the same old gents on spiritual quests.

The Peregrine, by J. A. Baker. *The Natural History of Selborne*, by Gilbert White. *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, by Robert Macfarlane.

The tone varied widely. There were breezy, conversational books full of corny humor. There were quiet, austere books that had been blurbed and praised by quiet, austere magazines. The books I liked most were the shorter and warmer ones, the ones built on personal stories that did not assume access to rural traditions that were dissolved for many of us ages ago. The books I liked tended to emphasize the smaller wildernesses in the nonpristine places in which most of us actually live. “Between the laundry and fetching the kids from school, that’s how birds enter my life,” wrote Kathleen Jamie in *Findings* (2005, 39). Many of these books were written by women for whom the focus on the close and domestic, rather than the far-flung and epic, was often a necessity.

The Greater Common Good, by Arundhati Roy. *Sightlines*, by Kathleen Jamie. *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*, by Jennifer Price. *To the River*, by Olivia Laing. *Corvus: A Life with Birds*, by Esther Woolfson. *Providence of a Sparrow: Lessons from a Life Gone to the Birds*, by Chris Chester.

It made sense to me—the focus on the nature growing in the cracks



Fig. 3. Copyright 2015 Jack Breakfast.

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.

I began to appreciate the books that were more plainly science minded rather than piously inspirational. Poetry captures the elusive nature of birds, but it is science that allows us to see them with precision and grace. The best books captured the sweet spot between poetic not knowing and scientific knowing.

The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology, by Tim Birkhead. *What the Robin Knows*, by Jon Young.

I liked learning specific things. For example, from *The Bird Detective*, by Bridget Stutchbury (2010, 61), I learned that birds around the world have adapted their singing behavior. The ones that live in urban areas have changed their songs “so that the notes are not masked by background human noise.” Adjusting their tunes “opportunistically” allows them to rise above the din of city life. When the culture is noisy, you have to big it up.

From Olivia Gentile’s *Life List* (2009, 20), I learned about “spark

birds.” A spark bird could be as bold as an eagle, as colorful as a warbler, or as ordinary as a sparrow, as long as it triggered the “awakening” that turned someone into a serious birder. Most birding memoirs begin with a spark bird.

Spark Birds

Common Peewee flycatcher—John James Audubon

Blackburnian warbler—Phoebe Snetsinger (It “nearly knocked me over with astonishment.” [Gentile 2009, 11])

Magnolia warbler—David Allen Sibley

Northern flicker—Roger Tory Peterson (It was lying on the ground. “I poked it and it burst into color, with the red on the back of its head and the gold on its wing. It was the contrast, you see, between something I thought was dead and something so alive. Like a resurrection. I came to believe birds are the most vivid expression of life. It made me aware of the world in which we live.” [Rosenthal 2010, 6])

Northern flicker—Jonathan Franzen (“Right after my mother died, I spent a lot of time looking at a northern flicker that was hanging around my brother’s house in Seattle. Objectively it’s a stunning bird, and it had so much personality. That was when I first started having a glimmer of why one might spend time doing nothing but watching a bird.” [Shea 2013])

Black-and-white warbler—Starr Saphir (It was a bird she spotted when she was six, when her grandfather’s car broke down in upstate New York.)

I began to think about “spark books.” It occurred to me that if asked, most ardent readers would be able to pinpoint the book that ignited their love of reading. I polled a few friends to find out. Without exception, they all named a story from childhood.

Spark Books

Danny the Champion of the World—the musician

Fantastic Mr. Fox—Kyo

Alice in Wonderland—Michael

And I Mean It, Stanley—Rebecca

Harriet the Spy—Jim and Kelsey

James and the Giant Peach—Sarah

The Secret Garden—Lauren

Are You My Mother?—Allyson

Koko's Kitten—Adele

The spark of children's literature—stories lusciously rendered in words and pictures—was distinctive and determining. These books had a radiant quality, a quality that Anne Carson marvelously describes in her book *Decreation*. “When I think of books read in childhood,” she writes, “they come to my mind's eye in violent foreshortening and framed by a precarious darkness, but at the same time they glow somehow with an almost supernatural intensity of life that no adult book could ever effect” (Carson 2006, 175).

While I went on my reading binge, while the musician recovered, the air outside filled with migrant birdsong. I sat in my garden every day with my Peterson's *Field Guide* and a pair of binoculars, trying to compare the living birds around me with the book birds on my lap. I knew the robins and sparrows, but I wanted to know the name of the raspberry-stained bird in my tree. I looked it up but remained unsure. Was it a crossbill? I emailed the musician and told him what I saw.

I wrote, “Based on its stocky red body, I think it's a crossbill.”

And he wrote back, “It's definitely not a crossbill. Wrong time of year. Probably a house finch (lots of them around right now) and remotely possibly a purple finch (though I doubt this.)”

Of course the musician was right. It was a house finch. Any momentary feelings of stupidity and shame on my part were dispelled by the bird's charm. I watched for a long time, fell in love with its pretty red crown and gregarious twittering. I felt the lift of bird in me, which felt like the lift of wine, or the lift of an ascending elevator, or the lift of discovering that I did not prefer the book to the reality. I wondered if this would be my spark bird.

Around this time, I completed writing a children's book about the ocean. It was the story of one child's encounter and connection with a magical place in nature. It was inspired by a family trip we had taken to British Columbia. We stayed with our friends in a beautiful hamlet on the Sunshine Coast. One day as we sat on rocks watching a pod of dolphins magically leap across the bay, my youngest son declared that he wanted to live by the “Specific Ocean” forever. This lovely malapropism



Fig. 4. Copyright 2015 Jack Breakfast.

set me thinking about the idea of place and where we find our specific oases of serenity and belonging.

I couldn't stop wondering what it would be like to have a fixed point, the way Thoreau had his Walden, Willa Cather had Nebraska, Annie Dillard had Tinker Creek, Rachel Carson had Silver Spring. I had always valued what mobility and rootlessness had given me: a sense of being of no place and many places, the ability to adapt quickly. My friends were mostly of the diaspora, mongrel, and scattered people. But seeing my youngest son respond so forcefully to the ocean made me wonder what we were missing.

I began to wonder if one of the things we were missing was the opportunity *to miss*, to yearn for, to possess the sort of deep local knowledge that inspires you to fight for a place. Viewing nature as optional—as always elsewhere or in the past—denies us, or spares us, the work of caring.

The book I ended up writing, *The Specific Ocean*, is about the places that sustain us. It is about the joy and mournfulness of deep emotional connection. Mournfulness because when you love a specific place, you open yourself up to the singular sadness that arises when that place is harmed.

My friend Naomi was deep in the throes of a book on climate change. She later wrote in *The Nation* (Klein 2014) of hearing “the great farmer-poet Wendell Berry deliver a lecture on how we each have a duty to love our ‘homeplace’ more than any other.” When the talk was over, she approached him for guidance: “I asked him if he had any advice for rootless people like me and my friends, who live in our computers and always seem to be shopping for a home. ‘Stop somewhere,’ he replied. ‘And begin the thousand-year-long process of knowing that place.’”

The musician was still recovering, so I decided to take my sons birding on my own. It was the third week of April. I packed snacks, and we headed off to Ashbridges Bay in the east end of Toronto. It was chilly but sunny. My youngest son started complaining the instant we arrived. He was too cold and too hungry and too itchy and his binoculars were too blurry. He finished all his snacks within five minutes of leaving the parking lot.

In the park, there wasn’t much to see. I pointed to a red-winged blackbird, and we watched a few robins scurry-stop-scurry across the grass. I was determined to find other birds, but I couldn’t.

My youngest son eventually pulled us toward the bay, where he had spotted a float of small, diving ducks. There were three pairs, and we sat and watched them synchronize their dives, disappearing and reappearing in the viscous green water.

An hour passed. And I realized it wasn’t the birds that had bored and annoyed my youngest son—it was my attitude of leading and instructing.

I discovered that my sons didn’t need a guide or scout leader. All they needed was for me to lead them to beauty’s general habitat, to wave my arm and say, “I think there might be something that way.” I should have known. Sometimes you don’t need the hand of an adult. You just need to be dropped off at the library—where you can discover great books on your own, the ones that might keep you going for the rest of your life.

The musician’s doctor said it was okay for him to walk. His knee would heal through gentle activity. The musician immediately e-mailed to see if I would like to take a forty-five-minute trip to a marsh just outside the city. The Bonaparte’s gulls were in full breeding plumage—quite a sight with their pale dainty bodies and jet-black heads. We made a plan.

Things did not go according to plan. Our car started to fail ten minutes after we set out. The mechanic's verdict: overfilled oil tank, a leak, and (most seriously) a broken ball joint. The latter was probably what caused us to veer off the road, and we were lucky the tire didn't fall off and the engine didn't blow. We were lucky we were not dead.

I felt a little shaken, but the musician suggested we go for a long walk to settle our nerves. We still had an entire afternoon ahead of us. There were still birds to see.

The walking made us feel better. We walked to a diner for lunch. Then we walked around Toronto's High Park, where we saw wood ducks, a chimney swift, a kingfisher, an egret, a black-crowned night heron, a male gadwall.

I looked with new admiration at the musician. I had now learned that a person could be good at big stresses, even if he was not so good with the normal little ones. I was happy to be walking with such a person. If a crisis came our way, I knew he would act with rare decisiveness.

It began to rain. We crouched in the grass, and the musician taught me to tell the difference between a song sparrow, a house sparrow, and a white-throated sparrow. I learned that when it rains, the birds come down from the sky and that when it rains and you realize you're alive, the rain goes from feeling bleak to refreshing.

After we parted company, the musician stayed in the park and found three chipping sparrows—the tiniest sparrows. He wrote me later, “They were sweet and hoppy and I wanted to be close to them and I wanted them to feel safe and I said ‘what a day we had today, you only live once, your knee can take it’ and so I lay down flat on the wet ground and sure enough the little sweethearts got in nice and close to me and it was a delightful time.”

I stayed up that night reading in bed, crawled back into my nest of books. The reading was comforting and tranquilizing. It was edifying and enthralling. I had made peace with my reading. I had arrived at certain workable conclusions:

The true arts of survival lie in multiple realms—both physical and subtle. The book world and the real world are not antithetical. Knowledge is not the opposite of passion. Good knowledge doesn't smother ignorance's sparks of enthusiasm. Good books are not a mortuary of joy. The scientific words you learn to speak with more and more confi-



Fig. 5. Copyright 2015 Jack Breakfast.

dence and dexterity, the ones you began to make your own—these can be passion’s *conduit*.

“Die knowing something.”

Die knowing your knowing will be incomplete.

There is a wilderness at the edge of all knowledge. Good books preserve a vestige of this.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kyo Maclear is a novelist, children’s author, and creative nonfiction writer based in Toronto. She is also a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholar and a doctoral candidate in the faculty of education at York University.

Jack Breakfast is a Toronto-born musician, recording artist, and bird photographer. In 2014 he published a limited-edition word-and-picture book titled *Small Birdsongs, volume 1*. His work can be seen at www.smallbirdsongs.com.

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