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Book of the Month: H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald – Evergreen Audubon

4-5 minutes



The March 2016 Book of the Month is:

H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald

One of the *New York Times Book Review's* 10 Best Books of the Year

Clearly, if a book becomes a New York Times bestseller, wins the Samuel Johnson Prize and is chosen the Costa Book of the Year, it is unlikely to be a book about birding, or at least not about birding alone.





Helen Macdonald's autobiographical story, "H is for Hawk," tells of raising her Northern Goshawk, Mabel. The story is also about Helen's hard work to recover from her beloved father's untimely death.

It is also about the novelist T. H. White and his disastrous attempt to train a goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*). And, finally it is about the fiercely wild goshawk, a favorite bird of falconers in the United Kingdom.

Goshawks are accipiters, closely related to Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, and native to the Evergreen area, although not especially common.

We have had an occasional goshawk visitor to our bird feeders for the past 20 years. Their arrival causes absolute terror among the juncos and House Sparrows who frequent the feeders because they are consummate bird predators, maneuvering around the ponderosa pines as if the branches didn't exist.

Helen Macdonald had been fascinated by hawks and falcons as a young girl. She read every falconry book she could find and first met a goshawk while working at a rehabilitation center.

The area around her home near Cambridge University had been goshawk country until the birds were largely exterminated. Not until the 1960s and '70s did local falconers and austringers (flyers of accipiters) sponsor their return. Macdonald finally succeeded in purchasing a goshawk from Ireland and named her Mabel.

The story of T. H. White's goshawk runs as a parallel story line in

“H is for Hawk.” White is the author of the stories about King Arthur in “The Once and Future King.” You’ll remember Arthur’s mentor, Merlin—named, of course, for a falcon.

White never succeeds in training his bird, named Gos. It remained wild, mostly because of the awful mistakes that White made with his training. Eventually Gos flies away, escapes, and is lost.

Macdonald knows that training her goshawk will be difficult. Goshawks are nervous and high-strung birds. It takes a “long time to convince them that you are not the enemy.”

Her first attempt to take Mabel onto her glove results in what falconers call bating: a ‘headlong dive of rage and terror, by which a leashed hawk leaps from the fist in a wild bid for freedom.’ In time, Mabel comes to trust Macdonald, eventually flying out to hunt and coming back to Macdonald’s hand.

It takes much time and enormous patience to train Mabel to hunt. Macdonald works slowly and carefully to build Mabel to flying weight and teach her to return. Mabel is extraordinary, with incredible vision able to detect the slightest movement of a mouse, a rabbit or even a pheasant in a distant field long before Macdonald is aware of what Mabel is looking at.

She learns to read Mabel’s moods, like when she narrows her eyes in bird laughter or flips her tail when she is excited or shivers with happiness. She finds her goshawk is capable of play.

“H is for Hawk” is not a simple book. It is as much a story of Macdonald’s struggle with her grief as it is about the goshawk. It is more about loss than it is about birds. She gets scars on her

hands from the hawk's talons, but it is the scars in her heart that the goshawk helps to heal.

The story ends at the beginning of summer when Macdonald takes Mabel to her friend's aviary where she'll spend the summer molting into a new set of feathers. During that time, she won't fly to hunt with her falconer. The story is a serious, sometimes troubling book. I recommend it fervently.

Written by Joann Hackos

Have *you* read the book? Share your comments and feedback below: