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DiMarco, D. and Ruppert, T. (Eds.). (2022). **Avian Aesthetics in Literature and Culture: Birds and Humans in the Popular Imagination**. Lexington Books. 262 pages. ISBN: 9781666901825 (e-book) ISBN: 9781666901818 (hardback)

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Birds have always captivated our imaginations, but the sheer number of bird-related books published in recent years – be it in the form of nature writing, popular science, or fiction – speaks to the need for an edited volume on avian aesthetics. Danette DiMarco and Timothy Ruppert have gathered a range of fresh, mostly ecocritical contributions that explore how avian and human worlds are entangled in literature and culture. A stated aim of the volume is to rectify a tendency in Animal Studies to neglect or marginalize birds, recognizing that birds are not peripheral but central, a point which is confirmed by the rich diversity of material contained in *Avian Aesthetics*.

The book is arranged into four sections, and Jemma Deer launches the first with an elegant chapter on the nature of avian aesthetics. Anyone who has read *Radical Animism* (Deer, 2021) or been a regular listener to the *ASLE Ecocast* (co-hosted by Deer until mid-2022) will know to expect playful literary explorations and will not be surprised by her choice of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as a text for analysis. Drawing on Jennifer Ackerman's *The Genius of Birds*, Deer places literary theory in dialogue with ornithology, pointing out that “parallels between human language and birdsong go beyond poetic metaphor,” that “[h]uman aesthetics follow avian aesthetics, releasing flights of imagination through the mind's sky” (10).

In Section 2, Writing About/Like Birds, however, we are reminded that alliances between science and literature have long been uneasy. Tracing the evolution of bird representations in a range of classic North American stories, Jennifer Schell leads us from the “nature fakers dispute” of the early twentieth century through behaviorism and ethology to the ongoing shift in human-nonhuman animal relations sparked by researchers such as Jane Goodall, Marc Bekoff and Franz de Waal. “How can we represent the perspectives of animals without asserting mastery over them?” asks Joshua Lobb (106), applying Linda Alcoff's work on the challenges inherent in speaking for other groups of people to nonhuman animals. Lobb argues that even if nonhuman perspectives are unknowable, we can sketch an outline of what they potentially contain, that it is not as much about finding out exactly what their perspectives are, as about opening a space for them.

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Debarati Bandyopadhyay starts off Section 3, *Entangled Worlds*, with an ecocritical reading of J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine*. Though her distinction between "ecocriticism" and "New Nature Writing" is somewhat problematic, presenting them almost as if they are movements rather than a school of criticism and a literary genre respectively – ecocriticism must surely be a toolbox for the analysis of New Nature Writing rather than a contender to its place – reading *The Peregrine* as an early example of New Nature Writing proves useful for understanding the book's literary and cultural significance. Finding Baker's precursors in Richard Jefferies, W. H. Hudson and T. H. White, Bandyopadhyay shows how Baker's awareness of anthropogenic impacts on the environment sets his books apart from theirs. In the light of global warming brought on by the burning of fossil fuels, her observation that "Baker walks or uses a bicycle to follow the peregrine" (150) is particularly revealing, suggesting that Baker's approach to birding can be seen as an exercise in voluntary simplicity.

Having counted the birds mentioned in Baker's works, Bandyopadhyay cites them as an indication of his dedication to birding, but among the 143 "birds" listed, six are in fact names of groups or families, and even though mammals such as bats are not included, "shrew," for some reason, is (151). While "tufted" obviously means "tufted duck," "sea-rejoicer" is not a specific name but a metaphor coined by Baker for bar-tailed godwit (Baker, 1967, 51). As Bandyopadhyay points out, Baker was no ornithologist either, but in Baker's case, a decade of patient observation yielded results that would culminate in a literary text as instructive and compelling as any ornithological field guide.

Louis J. Boyle draws attention to the scholarship that lies behind Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, showing how Macdonald's literary engagement with T. H. White draws on extensive historical research, pointing out that, besides their interest in falconry, Macdonald and White share a comparable approach to literature and the sciences. Keri Stevenson, in turn, uses books by Deborah Cramer and Carl Safina as a starting point for exploring how seabirds and humans are bound up with one another as kin, arguing that our mourning for seabirds such as albatrosses is attenuated because it is extended not only through protracted stretches of time but also spatially across wide swathes of ocean. She suggests that a reason why the ocean has received relatively little attention from ecocritical scholars might be an issue of scale, that envisioning the distances traversed by seabirds or migratory shorebirds requires a scaling-up which is a task for blue ecocriticism.

Calista McRae examines a vast range of American poems about window collisions, a motif exceptionally prone to cliché. While poets tend to romanticize birds and birdsong, the hard literality of finding a bird dead on the ground from a window collision is almost an invitation to excessive sentimentality: such a sharp pang, explicit and unambiguous, is more likely to foster outrage than critical reflection. McRae singles out Margaret Atwood's "Fatal Light Awareness" as one of the more successful poems, arguing that, in this case, the activist motive of raising awareness of the danger our lights and windows constitute for birds is in fact a strength. She also considers Chard Deniord's "Confession of a Bird Watcher," pointing out that even birders often cause harm to birds, for instance by disturbing them but also through fossil fuel emissions when driving or flying long distances in pursuit of rarities.

Contributions that do not quite fit among the others are gathered in Section 4, *Consumers Consuming Birds*, which covers less strictly ecocritical ground. Laura McGrath discusses American rhetoric of youth birding from the late nineteenth century to the present day, showing that even though the term "nature-deficit disorder" is fairly new, concern about



youth becoming disconnected from nature is not. Though citizen science has increased in popularity with all the digital tools that have become available in recent years, the annual Christmas Bird Count dates back to 1900, and even before then, youth were encouraged to take notes and record their observations with the aim of contributing to ornithological science. McGrath ends on a practical note, arguing that the conservationist aims of youth birding could perhaps be more easily reached if the study of birds was paired with “an education in how local government works, how citizens can hold corporations and governments accountable, and how individual and collective action has resulted in lasting change” (211–212). Lauren Shoemaker deconstructs the Birds Aren’t Real movement, and in the final chapter, Christopher Moore offers a game studies approach to bird representations with an analysis of the board game *Wingspan*, conceptualizing it as an enactment of a heterotopia.

Though the focus of *Avian aesthetics* is slanted toward North America and Britain, contributors based in Israel, India and Australia, and literary forays along coastal and transoceanic migration routes, ensure that its reach spans most if not all continents. Perhaps avian aesthetics in Africa and South America could be something for a future volume. The lack of cross-referencing between chapters suggests that the editing process may have been completed somewhat hastily – McRae could for instance well have cross-referenced Bandyopadhyay’s chapter to point out how birders today are rarely as environmentally sensitive as J. A. Baker was – but this does not detract from the individual contributions. Illustrations are used sparingly, though four of the chapters feature select black-and-white images that complement the text, while the cover features a bird North American readers might recognize as a male rose-breasted grosbeak.

All in all, *Avian aesthetics* is an important contribution to the field of ecocriticism, bridging academia and environmentalism, fostering transdisciplinary scholarship, placing birds at the center where they belong rather than the periphery they have sometimes been consigned to. It offers a wealth of perspectives that will be of interest to anyone concerned with representations of birds and human-bird relations in literature.

References

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