



H Is for Hawk

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Obsession, madness, memory, myth, and history combine to achieve a distinctive blend of nature writing and memoir from an outstanding literary innovator.

When Helen Macdonald's father died suddenly on a London street, she was devastated. An experienced falconer—Helen had been captivated by hawks since childhood—she'd never before been tempted to train one of the most vicious predators, the goshawk. But in her grief, she saw that the goshawk's fierce and feral temperament mirrored her own. Resolving to purchase and raise the deadly creature as a means to cope with her loss, she adopted Mabel, and turned to the guidance of *The Once and Future King* author T.H. White's chronicle *The Goshawk* to begin her challenging endeavor. Projecting herself "in the hawk's wild mind to tame her" tested the limits of Macdonald's humanity and changed her life.

Heart-wrenching and humorous, this book is an unflinching account of bereavement and a unique look at the magnetism of an extraordinary beast, with a parallel examination of a legendary writer's eccentric falconry. Obsession, madness, memory, myth, and history combine to achieve a distinctive blend of nature writing and memoir from an outstanding literary innovator.

H Is for Hawk Details

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From Reader Review H Is for Hawk for online ebook

Steve says

A is for Ascendant
Prose to sweep you away

B is for Birds
With a passion for prey

C is for Cambridge
She's one of their scholars

D is for Dinero
Nice royalty dollars

E is for Elegiac
So sad when her dad died

F is for Flying
Bird and soul, side by side

G is for Grateful
Susan, you pointed the way

H is for Hawk
A great book, I must say

OK, you get the idea. This one is beautifully written, scholarly, a bit sad, and ultimately uplifting. It's been quite a success, too, both at the bookstores and with critics. Oh, and just so you know, our daughter used to request *A is for Annabelle* on a regular basis. That's all the explanation you need for my lead-in.

Macdonald structured the book very cleverly. It was part nature writing (lyrical and literary), part memoir (detailing both grief and good humor), and part biography (with T.H. White, author of *The Once and Future King*, as the subject). The nature writing had to do with her experience training a goshawk, a particularly challenging breed known for its large size, hunting skills, and cussedness. She is a naturalist and research scholar at the University of Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy of Science. She's also a talented writer. I had a good feeling about the prose when she described her state of mind on the very first page: "I felt odd: overtired, overwrought, unpleasantly like my brain had been removed and my skull stuffed with something like microwaved aluminium foil, dented, charred and shorting with sparks." And with the added "i" in aluminium, I knew it would be English English, unalloyed, full stop.

Helen must have been an unusual girl. As an eight-year-old, she would explore antiquarian bookstores with her father seeking out and devouring books on falconry. Many of the volumes were centuries old. She seemed to inherit her obsessive behavior from her father who, as a lad during WWII, would hang around for hours just outside airfields making detailed notes on all the different planes. Young Helen somehow bought in to the long European tradition of country gentlemen flying their birds. Years later, after her father died without warning, she hoped to escape her grief by immersing herself fully into training a young goshawk she named Mabel. (Not exactly the scariest of appellations, is it?) She did a great job going into the cultural history and the applied science of falconry, in general, and of goshawks specifically. Though she might have

been tempted to soft pedal the bloody bits, she disclosed it all fully. In fact, she made a point of reminding us (and herself, as narrator) that a goshawk is a wild animal that defies anthropomorphism. Early in Mabel's training she noted this:

"Everything about the hawk is tuned and turned to hunt and kill. Yesterday I discovered that when I suck air through my teeth and make a squeaking noise like an injured rabbit, all the tendons in her toes instantaneously contract, driving her talons into the glove with terrible, crushing force. This killing grip is an old, deep pattern in her brain, an innate response that hasn't yet found the stimulus meant to release it. Because other sounds provoke it: door hinges, squealing brakes, bicycles with uncoiled wheels -- and on the second afternoon, Joan Sutherland singing an aria on the radio. *Ow*. I laughed out loud at that. Stimulus: *opera*. Response: *kill*.

While I'm on the topic of killing machines, I might as well highlight one of the best advantages a hawk has:

"Her eyes can follow the wingbeats of a bee as easily as ours follow the wingbeats of a bird. What is she seeing: I wonder, and my brain does backflips trying to imagine it, because I can't. I have three different receptor-sensitivities in my eyes: red green and blue. Hawks, like other birds, have four. This hawk can see colours I cannot, right into the ultraviolet spectrum. She can see polarised light, too, watch thermals of warm air rise, roil, and spill into clouds, and trace, too, the magnetic lines of force that stretch across the earth. The light falling into her deep black pupils is registered with such frightening precision that she can see with fierce clarity of things I can't possibly resolve from the generalised blur."

Macdonald was strong on other aspects of her hobby, too. She was honest in analyzing herself and about how Mabel fit into the angst-ridden rebuilding process. Metaphors came naturally from piecemeal improvements and untethered flight. Helen and her hawk were often portrayed as one in the same, with the former's powers of observation drawing the parallels close.

I mentioned the mini-bio within the book earlier. To me, it was a key component in rounding it out. White's story was included because he had written a memoir called *The Goshawk* that Macdonald had read as a girl. She said that he was far from being an expert. In fact, he often did the exact wrong things in attempting to tame and train Gos (the name he gave his hawk). But his book was more than just a flawed "how-to" book. Macdonald was keen to dig into White's motivations and the reasons for his book's other more literary and philosophical elements. She discovered that he had a particularly unhappy boyhood, that he was constantly challenging himself to confront his intense fears, and that his homosexuality was viewed at that time as a kind of mental illness. It was interesting to read what Macdonald discovered. She made ties to his early life, to his famous book about Arthurian legend, to a would-be sadistic streak, and to his attempts to train Gos.

If there is any weakness in *H is for Hawk*, it may be in her descriptions of nature. To me, they didn't wear well. Maybe if my vocabulary included more East Anglian flora, I'd think differently. This is a small ding, though, in an otherwise well-paced and well-constructed book. Four stars, coruscating like the sun-lit feathers on Mabel's light, powerful frame.

Marita says

"The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and

numb to the hurts of human life."

"I've made a hawk part of a human life, and a human life part of a hawk's, and it has made the hawk a million times more complicated and full of wonder to me."

"Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human. Then it took me past that place to somewhere I wasn't human at all."

"I'd brought the hawk into my world and then I pretended I lived in hers. Now it feels different: we share our lives happily in all their separation."

Mabel - from Helen Macdonald's blog: <http://fretmarks.blogspot.co.nz/>

Louise Miller says

Didn't rate this at all. I have to be blunt here. H is for Hawk by Helen MacDonald is not my cup of tea in the slightest. To say it won the Costa Book of the Year and to be given widespread praise and five-star reviews by many including being labelled as a 'soaring triumph' by the Telegraph, I expected something better, something much much better.

To say that I didn't rate it highly is something of an understatement. Yes, there is some pretty prose on the pages, but even some of this seems rather forced. As if she's trying to sound much more creative with words than she is.

Her analysis of TH White's experience of his attempt at training his goshawk is really quite odd, and seems out of place, like a dissertation of White randomly intermixed in her memoir. I can't criticize her method of dealing with her grief after the death of her father, everyone has their own way of dealing with grief. But even knowing this I still can't say that I enjoyed the book, not even a little bit. I would have put it down, but I felt like it could have been one of those books which you only realize is good when you get to the very end. It wasn't.

Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

This is probably a decent book and several of my smarty-farty friends have read it, but we all know I'm a moron and every time it is ~~spammed~~ *recommended* to me on my feed I can only picture this . . .

^^^Now that book I would totally read.

Lynn Matheson says

I appear to be one of the few people who didn't enjoy this book. It has won awards and received universal critical acclaim. It is an autobiographical account of a Cambridge academic's descent into depression after the death of her father. In order to heal herself she drives to Scotland to buy a goshawk and proceeds to train it. The hawk, named Mabel, lives in her spare room in Cambridge and is taken out into the countryside to hunt. MacDonald describes her depression and her growing relationship with the hawk. There is another narrative entwined with this where she describes the author TH White's training of his hawk in the 1930s. I have to say I found White a more interesting character than MacDonald. I found her colorless, dull and narcissistic. As a person who suffers from depression at times myself I suppose I don't enjoy reading about it.

There are some beautifully written passages describing nature though at times there is straining for effect.

MacDonald recovers from her depression aided by a trip to Maine. She dumps Mabel off with friends to enjoy this holiday. After recovering MacDonald gives the hawk away to a friend in Suffolk where she finally gets to live in a proper bird aviary in the countryside.

It took me a long time to read and I put it down for a while in the middle. Though MacDonald is a gifted writer I didn't enjoy the book. I worry that people may decide to buy hawks to keep in their spare room and then get bored of them. Enjoy the glory of hawks in their natural habitat.

Kelly says

This review first appeared on my blog, Shoulda Coulda Woulda Books.

...And so you run towards those little shots of fate, where the world turns. That is the lure, that is why we lose ourselves, when powerless from hurt and grief, in drugs or gambling or drink; in addictions that collar the broken soul and shake it like a dog. I had found my addiction on that day out with Mabel. It was ruinous, in a way, as if I'd taken a needle and shot myself with heroin. I had taken a flight to a place from which I didn't want to ever return.

- from Chapter 18, "Flying Free"

Some responses to books utterly baffle me. This is one of them. There's the one strain of reviews that dismiss this book as "too much about training hawks" and think it should only be read by hawk specialists. And then there's the other group, full of glowing reviews, not only from those I expect, but from publications and reviewers that I couldn't imagine would care to touch this with a ten-foot pole. Even the Economist (yup- that one, the one that looooooves its political books and Important Histories!) took time out to love this book.

I honestly don't know what to say to the first group of people. I guess *Mrs. Dalloway* gives you too much information about some woman's errands and *Moby Dick* tells you too much about whales, eh? But I'm absolutely delighted by the second group because this is one of those times that proves to me that truly powerful literature can and will find a way through to a wide group of people. This is the sort of book that will become a classic for all the right reasons- all the myriad of reasons that its readers found to resonate to it.

And there are plenty. *H is for Hawk* is Helen MacDonald's memoir of her time training a goshawk, one of the most notoriously difficult birds to train, even for experienced falconers. It is also an ongoing psychological analysis of her own state of mind during this time, since she takes on this very challenging

project after the death of her father. MacDonald tracks the progress of her grief as she conceives of, acquires and begins the training process of a hawk who comes to be called Mabel.

The most powerful spell drawing the reader into this work is MacDonald's raw emotionality. From the beginning, we are lured into the maelstrom of her grief via combination of surreal, interlocking images and impressions, literary imaginings and interludes of lucid narrative that come to seem dreamlike in their very normalcy. She slowly transports us out of our senses until we are properly prepared to be living inside of her skin, all of a sudden blinking our eyes, and finding, like MacDonald, that we are looking out on a world that is different from what we have known, understanding what she means when she finds stepping outside to be full of danger:

Leaving the house that evening is terrifying. Somewhere in my mind ropes uncoil and fall. It feels like an unmooring, as if I were an airship ascending on its maiden flight into darkness.. Everything seems hot and clean and dangerous and my senses are screwed to their utmost, as if someone had told me the park was full of hungry lions. I look down and see each pale blade of grass casts two separate shadows from the two nearest lamps, and so do I, and in the distance comes the collapsing echo of a moving train and somewhere close a dog barks twice and there's broken glass by the path and next to it is a father from the breast of a woodpigeon- "Bloody hell, Mabel," I whisper, "Who spiked my tea with acid?"

MacDonald takes us to live in a place of unrestrained emotions, all of her emotional dams broken- the sort of blocks we put in place that are full of qualifiers to protect our inner lives from bumping up against the inner cores of others, or worse, against the more successful retaining walls that they have put in place to protect their own. It is no wonder, then, that like so many British Romantics, American transcendentalists and Catholic saints before her, she snaps her creances (1) and retreats from a suddenly unfamiliar and threatening world and into something that matches the new place where she and her emotions live: wildness.

Robert MacFarlane wrote, in his beautiful prose-poem to the untamed, open spaces of the British Isles that is *The Wild Places*, that the word "wild" has a complex etymology:

The etymology of the word 'wild' is vexed and subtle, but the most persuasive past proposed for it involves the Old High German wildi and the Old Norse villr as well as pre-Teutonic ghweltijos. All three of these terms carry implications of disorder and irregularity.. they bequeathed to the English root-word "will". Wildness, then, according to this etymology, is an expression of independence from human direction.

In this case, for MacDonald, that independent wildness is symbolized by the notoriously independent goshawk, which even MacDonald's fellow falconers try to warn her off training. (2) In a gorgeous imagined conversation that extends throughout the book, MacDonald weaves the story of her own goshawk training through with TH White's *The Goshawk*, the tragic tale of his ultimate failure to tame his own hawk. This other book haunts MacDonald's imagination, serving as both practical and psychological foil for her own journey, touching off some fascinating, and deeply moving, passages of imaginary identification that make its inclusion far more than a convenient literary device.

Instead, it becomes a necessary companion to her emotional understanding of herself. As it turns out, TH White was also trying to disappear a large part of himself deemed unacceptable by society and by his own self-hatred, submerging it in interactions with animals and rendering himself unable to reveal it to others through retreat and silence. (3) MacDonald wrestles with White, conversing with him, raging at him, dreaming into being his tortured nights and forlorn hopes in short vignettes that ache with the sort of understanding that you hope that someone you love never has.

MacDonald relates to us how it feels when you are throwing yourself into this wildness and becoming something Other. Her psychological honesty is unflinching, showing us her desperate need to escape time through the immediacy of nature's needs, as well as her attempts to transport herself into the mind of the

goshawk, leaving her pitiful self behind on the couch. At times, this is surreal and otherworldly, such as when she mentally and emotionally joins in the hunt with Mabel:

Now I cannot see the hawk because I am searching for the pheasant, so I have to work out what she is doing by putting myself in her mind- and so I become both the hawk in the branches above and the human below. The strangeness of his splitting makes me feel I am walking under myself, and sometimes away from myself. Then for a moment, everything becomes dotted lines, and the hawk, the pheasant and I are merely elements in a trigonometry exercise, each of us labeled with soft italic letters. And now I am so invested in the hawk and the pheasant's relative positions that my consciousness cuts loose entirely, splits into one or the other, first the hawk looking down, second the pheasant in the brambles looking up, and I move over the ground as if I couldn't possibly affect anything in the world. Time stretches and slows. Then the pheasant is flushed, a pale and burning chunk of muscle and feathers, and the hawk crashes from the hedge towards it. And all the lines that connect heart and head and future possibilities, those lines that connect me with the hawk and the pheasant and with life and death suddenly become safe, become tied together in the small muddle of feathers and gripping talons that stand in mud in the middle of a small field in the middle of a small county in the middle of a small country on the edge of winter.

And at times it is touchingly sad, such as when MacDonald begins to play games with Mabel in her isolation, discovering, not entirely with a sense of joy, that the fierce goshawk likes to play:

I have spent my evenings playing with Mabel. I've made her toys out of paper and tissue and card. She turns her head upside down, puffs out her chin-feathers, squeaks, picks up the toys in her beak, drops them and preens. When I throw her balls of scrunched up paper she catches them in her beak and tosses them back to me with a flick of her head. It is as good as it gets. When I told Stuart I played catch with her, for awhile he didn't believe me. You don't play with goshawks, Helen. It's not what people do.

MacDonald's journey back to herself shows us the necessity, sometimes, of stepping so far outside of the boundaries that only then can you look back with a sense of understanding, identity or affection on the place that you originated from. It both a breathtaking, often dark, but always beautiful assurance of all the things that await us beyond the pale of human reason and desire, whenever we need them, but also that the road eventually does curve around towards home, whenever we are ready for it to do so. Mapped gorgeously out onto her understanding of her relationship with the goshawk, MacDonald shows us powers of perception that are terrifying, but ultimately forgiving, that ultimately offer us both torture and the succor we never dared hope for.

A wonderful grace note of this moving emotional journey was the psychological particularity of MacDonald's journey. This was an underpinning that made this work ring true to me, that did so much to remove it from the realm of literary exercise and to give me the heart and brain I needed to see to truly break my heart. This is clearly an academic mind- the reach for a fellow writer to share her pain cut me deeply, especially as she begins to almost automatically go through the exercise of bringing him to life, writing character sketches and sharing bits of research like any academic article- only to have it collapse into the fevered imaginings of firesides and walks in the woods never described that remind us of the jagged roadblocks and unexpected chasms that strong emotions throw up in in the psyche.

It is also a mind concerned with history and with politics. Like any trained academic, MacDonald's impulse is to put what she is experiencing into context, which means that we will get small bits and pieces of the history of falconry's place in the British national myth as surface evidence of her attempts at calm and rationality, it means that her sublimated anxiety comes out in worries over the fact that Hitler and racists sometimes liked falconry (indeed apparently TH White's hawk came from the same man who provided hawks to SS leaders) (4) , it means that like any good analytic mind she has already half self-psychoanalyzed herself before she's even begun (even if this does her no practical good.)

This made every single time she interacted with Mabel ring all the truer and deeper to me, showing us how all of her other tools had failed her when it came to dealing with grief, and she was clinging to this hawk as the one thing that seemed to offer her refuge, and then understanding of her grief. It meant that when she finally got to the core of her reasons for loving Mabel, that however literary or symbolic or psychologically false it might have seemed at the beginning, by the end, it was the natural and inevitable conclusion for a story that was, ultimately, about putting back together all the pieces of her that wouldn't work at the beginning.

This is a book of escape. This is a book of deep self-examination. This is a diary observation of what it feels like to crumble, inwardly. This is a book of rediscovery and healing. But ultimately, this is a book of poetry. This is a book about knowing what you love, so that when the time comes, you know what will heal you.

(1)Creance- a line used by falconers while training their birds- it keeps the bird tethered to their arm while they are trained to fly away and back to their masters from farther and farther distances. Poorly made creances will snap, leaving hawks free to fly away- many never return.

(2) The goshawk was dismissed throughout the nineteenth century as “willful” and “independent” by the aristocratic men who dominated falconry, and romantically conceived of, in the late Renaissance, as a female symbol, much like ships and the sea, to be “courted and seduced” rather than dominated- since one never fully could. Falconry's place in the man-vs-nature “civilizing” story of the nineteenth century is frequently discussed.

(3)TH White was gay and a self admitted sadist- the latter of the two qualities perhaps, his therapist thought, having been picked up through the cruelties of his boarding school days, and the constant threat of violence he was under during his parents' fights over his cradle in India. The saddest story related about him here was how he built a beautiful bedroom in his country retreat, full of romantic-colored bedspreads and soft pillows, gilt-edged mirrors, woven curtains and carved furniture- and then wouldn't allow himself to sleep in it. He slept on an army camp bed in the next room.

(4)One of my favorite passages comes from these musings. I've rarely seen someone so bravely confront something so emotionally a part of their core identity and see it for what it is: “On the Ridgeway path, aged nine or ten, was where for the first time I realized the power a person might feel by aligning themselves to deep history. Only much later did I understand these intimations of history had their own, darker, history. The chalk country-cult rested on a presumption of organic connections to a landscape, a sense of belonging sanctified through an appeal to your own imagined lineage. That chalk downs held their national, as well as natural, histories. And it was much later, too, that I realized that these myths hurt. That they work to wipe away other cultures, other histories, other ways of loving, working and being in a landscape. How they tiptoe towards darkness.” (By the way, I suspect that this interest in naturalism's place in British myth, along with the strong place of TH White in MacDonald's imaginings, has at least something to do with the Economist's interest in it.)

Book Riot Community says

I remember seeing this book on the shelves in the bookstore a year or so ago and picked it up because I thought maybe it was a rad new historical fiction about a hawk. I confess that when I initially saw it was a memoir, I put it down, uninterested. I typically am not interested in memoirs unless you are, like, Dr Salk and literally cured polio or something. But I am SO GLAD other Rioters had talked this book up so much because this is seriously one of the most beautiful books I have read in a long time. I loved learning more about falconry in general, and some of the traditions and superstitions. I loved learning that hawks with

fierce names like Killer or Nazgul are thought to be shit hunters, but if you give them sweet little granny names like Opal or Mabel, they'll be death on wings. I loved falling in love with Mabel the goshawk and learning that she likes to play. She really likes paper balls – they're crunchy! I loved everything about this book, so much that I got a copy for my personal library.

–Kristen McQuinn

from The Best Books We Read In January 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/02/01/riot-r...>

This award-winning book is part grief memoir, part narrative about hawk-training, part biography of T.H. White. But that (admittedly odd) description doesn't really capture the tricky, surprising, utterly gorgeous text that Macdonald has produced. And no description really could. In fact, it was a single sentence, reproduced in a New Yorker review, that convinced me I had to read it. So, in an effort to tell you about the book, here's that sentence, in all its length and lushness and sadness and humor: "Maybe you've glanced out of the window and seen there, on the lawn, a bloody great hawk murdering a pigeon, or a blackbird, or a magpie, and it looks the hugest, most impressive piece of wildness you've ever seen, like someone's tipped a snow leopard into your kitchen and you find it eating the cat." Now you've read the sentence. Now I think you understand. — Derek Attig

From The Best Books We Read In March: <https://bookriot.com/2015/04/01/riot-...>

Trish says

"The archeology of grief is not ordered."

Helen Macdonald's book-length nonfiction is so many things at once: a eulogy, an elegy, a biography, a memoir, a training manual, a journey. It is a conversation about death, and community. It is so filled with passion and pain that one reads, breath bated, to see which will crush the other. This book is only partly about a hawk, despite the title. It records the author's journey of a few years, starting with the unexpected death of her father, through the purchase and training of a hawk, to a new place of understanding about what and who humans are and what we need to live well.

The author looks closely at the life and writings of another vulnerable person, T.H. White, to express sorrow and a kind of sympathy with his derangements. She learns the origins of his extraordinary flights of fancy in literature, tracing over the sores of his upbringing until we see clearly the agonies of his confused psychopathy. White was a hawker, but a hawker one might quote to show how *not* to train a hawk. Macdonald loathed his book *The Goshawk* as a child. When she gets her own hawk after the death of her father, she reads it again. This time she discovers White's pain--seeing, feeling, *tracing* it until it is as clear as her own.

Macdonald shares one of the best descriptions of bereavement that I have ever encountered (*italics are hers*):

"Here's a word. *Bereavement*. Or, *Bereaved*. *Bereft* It's from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob.' Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try. 'Imagine,' I

said, back then, to some friends, in an earnest attempt to explain, 'imagine your whole family is in a room. Yes, all of them, All the people you love. So then what happens is someone comes into the room and punches you all in the stomach. Each one of you. Really hard. So you're all on the floor. Right? So the thing is, you all share the same kind of pain, exactly the same, but you're too busy experiencing total agony to feel anything other than completely alone. *That's* what it's like' I finished my little speech in triumph, convinced that I'd hit upon the *perfect* way to explain how it felt. I was puzzled by the pitying, horrified faces, because it didn't strike me at all that an example that put my friends' families in rooms and had them beaten might carry the tang of total lunacy...

I'd dreamed of hawks again. I started dreaming of hawks all the time. Here's another word: *raptor*, meaning 'bird of prey'. From the Latin *raptor*, meaning 'robber,' from *rapere*, meaning 'seize.' Rob. Seize."

Hawks apparently have a shamanic tradition of being able to cross borders that humans cannot and "were seen as messengers between this world and the next."

The author trains a bird of prey, a falcon called Mabel. Mabel is a predator; she is all about death, violent death. The wildness of the bird seeps into the author's consciousness, and her perceptions become acute. Macdonald is recovering from a loss, and her bond with the reptilian raptor Mabel underscores her warm-blooded need for love and her bond with the human community. This book is the author working through grief and terror and want and coming out naked and vulnerable on the other side.

The language Macdonald employs in this memoir is as extraordinary and ingenious as her laying out such diverse topics as death, hawking, T.H. White, and history as interlocking pieces. She holds us rapt as she defines her grief. The words she chooses make us hypersensitive to differences in shade, angle, meaning: "Goshawks in the air are a complicated grey colour. Not slate grey, nor pigeon grey. But a kind of raincloud grey..." Or this: "I was...grey, loose-spun wool on an aching set of bones." Or this: "I felt like I was holding the bastard offspring of a flaming torch and an assault rifle." Her meanings are exquisitely clear.

Macdonald was born a hawker. We are all born with something innate but dormant until awakened by opportunity. Fortunately Macdonald was able to find and exercise her passion because she liked to read. It reminds me of teachers we may have had that spark an interest in something that feels as natural to us as breathing, and as necessary. Macdonald discusses six books that formed her consciousness about nature, makes us realize once again that a seed spilled on tilled ground can yield the most amazing things. It breaks my heart a little to think that every child probably has some thing in them that would burst into flame with the right tinder. Not all of us find it, early or ever.

Diane says

This is gorgeous nature writing and it is also a graceful memoir about bereavement. Helen Macdonald has managed to blend the two genres beautifully.

When Helen's father died, her grief was so great that she decided to adopt a goshawk. Helen had loved hawks since childhood and had studied falconry, but this was her first time trying to train a goshawk.

In real life, goshawks resemble sparrowhawks the way leopards resemble housecoats. Bigger, yes. But bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier, and much, much harder to see. Birds of deep

woodland, not gardens, they're the birdwatchers' dark grail. You might spend a week in a forest full of gosses and never see one, just traces of their presence.

If you have ever lost a loved one, you know that grief can cause you to do strange things. Helen became obsessed with her goshawk, spending hours with it and avoiding other humans.

What happens to the mind after bereavement makes no sense until later.

While training her hawk, Helen also did a lot of reading about falconry, and especially appreciated a book by T.H. White called *The Goshawk*. (White is famous for writing *The Once and Future King*.) White's experience gave her courage to train her goshawk, and she learned from some of his mistakes. I had given little thought to hawks before reading Helen's memoir, but now I am fascinated by them.

I would highly recommend this memoir to anyone who appreciates beautiful nature writing.

Favorite Quotes

"For so long I'd been living in libraries and college rooms, frowning at screens, marking essays, chasing down academic references. This was a different kind of hunt. Here I was a different animal. Have you ever watched a deer walking out from cover? They step, stop, and stay, motionless, nose to the air, looking and smelling. A nervous twitch might run down their flanks. And then, reassured that all is safe, they ankle their way out of the brush to graze. That morning, I felt like the deer."

"I put White's book on the shelves, make myself a cup of tea. I'm in a contemplative mood. I'd brought the hawk into my world and then I pretended I lived in hers. Now it feels different: we share our lives happily in all their separation. I look down at my hands. There are scars on them now. Thin white lines. One is from her talons when she'd been fractious with hunger; it feels like a warning made flesh. Another is a blackthorn rip from the time I'd pushed through a hedge to find the hawk I'd thought I'd lost. And there were other scars, too, but they were not visible. They were the ones she'd helped mend, not make."

Julie Christine says

Here's a word. *Bereavement*. Or *Bereaved*. *Bereft*. It's from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'.

Here's another word: *raptor*, meaning 'bird of prey'. From the Latin *raptor*, meaning 'robber,' from *rapere* meaning 'seize'. Rob. Seize.

Here's another word: Captivating. *H is for Hawk* stole me, holding me captive with its madness and love. Part claustrophobic memoir of grief, part luminous tribute to the sport of falconry, Helen Macdonald's book is brilliant and tense. It is a story of fury and grace, recounted in pulsing, poetic language.

Helen's father, a famous Fleet Street photographer, dies unexpectedly and Helen, a historian, poet, and experienced falconer, tumbles into the abyss. Retreating from the world, she seizes on the one thing she believes will keep her from being swallowed by grief: she will train a goshawk.

Goshawks are the Velociraptors of the raptor world, a hawk of the genus *Accipiter*, not to be confused with its far more approachable and trainable cousin the falcon, of the genus *Falco*. Macdonald's Czech-German goshawk, whom she purchases on a Scottish quayside for £800, is "a griffin from the pages of an illuminated bestiary". The bird appears as a primordial creature, an ancient, disappeared thing rising from the half-life of history: "the lucency of her pale, round eyes... the waxy, yellow skin about her Bakelite-black beak... half the time she seems as alien as a snake, a thing hammered of metal and scales and glass".

Macdonald names the goshawk Mabel, from the Latin *amabilis*, meaning "lovable" or "dear". This is perhaps a hope that Macdonald projects onto the goshawk, for there is always a current of tension and violence running between woman and raptor; Macdonald never takes for granted that this creature who lives in her home and perches on her wrist is built for murder.

Training a goshawk is a pressure cooker of isolation and suppressed emotion. The bird is hyper-sensitive to disturbances in its force field and in the early days Macdonald lives like a monk—barely eating or sleeping. She forgets she is human as she works to enter Mabel's psyche and earn her trust. In this way, she shuts down her human mourning and becomes something feral. She feeds Mabel corpses of tiny birds. Gradually, she reenters the world, Mabel on her wrist. Raptor and woman learn to navigate the outside together, each wholly dependent on the other for cues and sustenance, one emotional, the other flesh.

H is for Hawk seduces the reader with the peculiar lexicon of falconry

As a child I'd cleaved to falconry's disconcertingly complex vocabulary. In my old books every part of a hawk was named: wings were sails, claws pounces, tail a train. Male hawks are a third smaller than the female so they are called tiercels, from the Latin *tertius*, for third. Young birds are eyasses, older birds passagers, adult-trapped birds haggards. Half-trained hawks fly on a long line called a creance. Hawks don't wipe their beaks, they feak. When they defecate they mute. When they shake themselves they rouse. On and on it goes in a dizzying panoply of terms of precision.

Macdonald herself has the soul of a poet and uses language to a lyrical, gorgeous degree in her book. Upon bringing Mabel home for the first time, she tells us the bird fills "the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent." Or a field is "washed pewter with frost". Pages of this beautiful wording fill the memoir. And strikingly, so does a strain of literary thriller, a masterful touch that lifts the narrative sharply from Macdonald's heavy grief. Each foray the pair makes outside is fraught, first with fear—how will Mabel respond the hurly-burly of modern life—then, as the raptor is allowed to fly with increasing liberty, there is escape, violence, death. Macdonald snaps the necks of the rabbits that Mabel attacks; she pockets the pheasants that Mabel poaches. She watches with her heart in her throat as Mabel flies free, away from her, and realizes she has transferred all her hope and madness into this raw, fierce, creature.

Paralleling Macdonald and Mabel's journey is the story of the British writer TH White, best known for *The Once and Future King*, his epic retelling of the Arthurian legend. White was also a falconer and wrote of his experiences trying to train a goshawk. His tribulations with Gos become something of a metaphor for his troubled life. Macdonald recounts the abuse and neglect he suffered at the hands of his parents, the depravity of his boarding school classmates, the cruel repression of his homosexuality, and his struggles as a writer. Macdonald seems to use the sadness of White's life as a way to cope with her own, as well as a cautionary tale of how not to build a relationship with a goshawk.

At her father's memorial, many months after his death, Macdonald has a crystalline epiphany: "...human hands have other hands to hold; they shouldn't be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks." There are many turning points and milestones in the training of Mabel, but this is the moment when we see a human animal transform. Balancing between the dreamlike world of falconry and the prosaic demands of home, job,

and relationships, she regains her footing.

As Macdonald so beautifully states, the “archeology of grief is not ordered.” There is no formula for surviving the worst the world can conjure. We each struggle our way through the morass. Helen Macdonald found her redemption in the keen, wild soul of goshawk.

Snotchocheez says

I certainly would not want to dissuade anyone from reading *H is for Hawk*, Cambridge professor Helen Macdonald's moving memoir of coping with the loss of her photojournalist father. Her twin academic disciplines of English and ornithology (specifically, falconry) provide the source of her occasionally gorgeous prose as she recounts her attempt at raising a goshawk. If she'd focused more on herself, her birding, and her subsequent descent into near-madness, this would've been a solid four-star read for me. There's no denying this woman is utterly fascinating, and *her* story (embellished with swirly, soaring poetics) is breathtaking.

So why only three stars? I'm not sure why Ms. Macdonald felt compelled to parallel her story with author TH White's, but each time she wheeled out *his* life story (which included his own very inexperienced attempts at goshawkery), it served as a needless, soporific distraction from her own fascinating story. I understand her love for TH White. After all, it was his own 1951 memoir *The Goshawk* that fueled her lifelong obsession with hawks and falcons. Did she need to relate his story, though, *in every single chapter*? My contention is: no way. Her life, I'm sure, is plenty bookworthy on its own without having to pad it with TH White's.

Rebecca Foster says

In an original blend of memoir, biography and nature writing, Macdonald reveals how raising Mabel the goshawk helped her heal after her father's sudden death. Throughout, Macdonald compares her own falconry experience to that of T.H. White, who, in the 1930s, was a lonely schoolteacher at Stowe – and a closeted homosexual with sadistic tendencies. Macdonald recognizes the ways in which, for White, too, flying a hawk was a means of exploring one's own wild depths and testing the links between self and nature.

If this was only a nature book, it would be a classic. Yet it is also a profound meditation on grief and recovery. *H is for Helen*, her hawk, and a haphazard healing process. “Looking for goshawks is like looking for grace: it comes, but not often, and you don't get to say when or how.” This wonderful book (a beautiful physical object, too) – ranks as one of my favorites of 2014.

(*H is for Hawk* went head-to-head with *The Iceberg* by Marion Coutts, another of the year's best memoirs, and won the year's Samuel Johnson Prize and Costa Biography Award.)

See my full review at The Bookbag.

Related read: *Otter Country* by Miriam Darlington contains a similar mixture of personal anecdote, biographical information, and enthusiasm for a favorite animal.

Greg says

H is for Hawk

This is Mabel.

She is a goshawk.

I didn't know what a goshawk was before I started to read this book. I wasn't actually sure I knew what a hawk was either.

"Seriously, Greg? You are forty years old and you don't know what a hawk is?"

Well, sort of. I knew that it is a bird and that it is a predatory animal. I had no idea what one looked like. If you showed me pictures of some birds and told me to pick out the hawk and you had some falcons and maybe some non-bald eagles I wouldn't have known which one it is.

And never mind if you told me that there were different hawks how to pick out a goshawk.

But I'm not really alone here, the author early on in the book tells how people are always claiming that they have seen a goshawk, because wikipedia or some other source tells them they are big, and they see a sparrowhawks and think that they must be goshawks because they see that they are big.

This is the way Macdonald compares the two (it's from the books description on goodreads)

'In real life, goshawks resemble sparrowhawks the way leopards resemble housecats. Bigger, yes. But bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier, and much, much harder to see. Birds of deep woodland, not gardens, they're the birdwatchers' dark grail.'

Sounds kind of interesting, and she is going to train one of these birds, which are about 2 feet in length to sit on her arm and then fly out to hunt pheasants, rabbits, squirrels and other small prey.

To give you (and myself) of how big the hawk is, because it's tough to tell in the pictures of Mabel just by herself. Here are a couple of pictures of Mabel with Helen Macdonald:

(Both pictures of are Mabel, apparently goshawks can change colors through molting, and in her second year she was more snow white, than the brown of her first year.)

I never thought much about falconry before. I knew that people held birds on their arms and by some magical ability sent the bird out to hunt and then apparently the bird would return and perch on the falconers arm again.

It was kind of the same magic that people use to make carrier pigeons bring things to places, or those birds in *Game of Thrones* deliver messages and not just fly away and sit in a tree somewhere and do bird things.

It never dawned on me the commitment that someone would have to put in to training and living with the bird. In my head they were probably kept in some aviary and when hunting time came each falconer would pick up a bird like you'd pick up a shotgun for an arsenal and trot off for a day of hunting.

I would have never guessed that you would sit around your living room with your bird, especially if it was a kind of large bird of prey.

Training a goshawk isn't something to be taken lightly, as this book shows both through the experiences of the author with Mabel and the parallel story of T.H. White's doomed attempt at training a male goshawk named Gos (not so creative with the name, it makes me wonder if he ever named a cat, Cat or a dog Dog).

The book is kind of a weird mixture of how the author dealt with the sudden death of her father by 'shunning' the world of academia that she was a part of in favor of training a notoriously difficult species of hawk and a mini-biography of T.H. White, best known for *The Once and Future King*, but who also wrote a book called *Goshawk* that chronicled his inept failure at attempting to train the same sort of bird (he was training a male though, which is smaller than the female, and it sounds like it's possibly slightly less aggressive).

I knew about as little more it is possible to know about a subject when it comes to T.H. White, than I did about goshawks when I started this book. I knew that he was the author of *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn*. I knew he was British. And I thought he was probably someone like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Because obviously anyone with initials in their name from roughly the early/middle part of the 20th century from England must be all just about the same person. Surprisingly, I was wrong about that last part, or the book never mentioned that the closeted homosexual sadist was off speaking Elvish and talking theology with the other two. Maybe Helen Macdonald left that part out.

T.H. White plays an important part in this book, but he's not nearly as interesting to me as Mabel was. Although I did learn that he was really fucked up in the head from having to hide who he was a screwed up childhood where it was quite possible that his parents would fight over him and threaten to kill the young T.H. White and the other spouse in fits of rage.

As I keep harping, I didn't know anything about goshawks. Or hawks. And I really don't think much of birds. They are fascinating to watch in my mom's bird feeder when I'm visiting her. But I never thought too much of them. Different birds species had different dispositions. Blue Jays seemed like aggressive assholes when it came to the bird feeder. Some birds would allow other birds to eat alongside them and other little birds would flap their wings a lot to scare off any other birds that showed up when they were eating.

I never really thought of birds as really connecting with a person though. I figured there are some birds like parrots that just are ok with people and one person is the same as any other one to them.

The idea that they would form a connection. Or that you could play with a bird:

or that they had a fairly wide variety of emotions that could be read from the way they kept their feathers and facial expression was kind of a shock. I never thought of birds as having facial expressions before.

(The above picture is Mabel playing with a paper telescope (a rolled up magazine, this is a game that she apparently loved, and she would look very happy and make happy noises when the game was going on. It most involved looking through the paper telescope at each other and making noises through it. The

descriptions of how happy Mabel was playing this game gave me a big old smile and were some of my favorite bits of the books).

The book chronicles the first year that Macdonald has Mabel. It goes from training to being able to let Mabel fly without a tether and hunt. The book wraps up with their first spring together when hawks molt. At this point she has to turn over Mabel at an aviary for the season and it sounds like start from scratch with re-training her again when she has regrown her feathers.

She never mentioned in the book if the hawks had any memory from season to season, or even if they don't remember particular people if they remember people in general and the surroundings they had been in, or if it is a whole process again of not just training the hawk to fly and return to you, but also to see that everything around them isn't a novel threat.

I feel like I've written a lot and not said a whole lot.

I really enjoyed this book, and it was one of those books that took me longer to read than it should have, but it was because I was enjoying reading just small bits of it at a time.

I've been reading so much fiction lately that has been leaving me unimpressed and this book charmed me so much I'm wondering if I should take a break from fiction and try to read more narrative non-fiction about topics that I know nothing about but which maybe I'd find fascinating with the right author to guide me into the world.

Karen asked me earlier if this was like Gerald Durrell and I had said no, but that's just because the zaniness isn't there, but both authors have a deep compassion for the animals in their lives and do an excellent job at giving the animals their due on the page.

Carol says

H is for Hawk could be H is for Hope or Heart or Home as all of these capture in some small way the essence of this beautiful book.

When Helen Macdonald's father dies, she finds herself inconsolable in her grief. In an effort to heal her soul and regain a connection with her father she sets out to find and train a hawk. Not just any hawk, a Goshawk. And here is just one of the beauties of her story. The descriptions of her Goshawk, Mabel, are so vivid that I can see her in all her regal glory.

Interspersed with the detailed portrait of the patience and care it takes to train a hawk, Macdonald also writes a semi-biographical portrait of the author T.H. White. Some readers may find this tedious. Though it was interesting to learn more about White, who also had a penchant for hawks (though not the patience of Macdonald), I did want her to get on with her own story. Macdonald uses White's The Goshawk as inspiration and a guide in her own training of Mabel. She seems to be better for it but we may not need to hear it all.

One reviewer thought the book had little about grieving. I can't say I hold that opinion. We all grieve in our own way and I thought there was much about Macdonald's process through her pain and feelings of loss. It is about the hawk but there is much about grief.

Another stated that the Elisabeth Kubler Ross's five stages of grief is bunk. I disagree with this also. Though we may not visit them in the order Ross outlines, and they may have evolved through time, we all go through some form of these as listed, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. You can change the wording and perhaps the definition but I am a firm believer that there are steps to healing and that we do it in our own way and in our own time.

There are many excellent reviews of H is for Hawk. Read a few and you'll see that it is a favorite of readers.

I listened to H is for Hawk, read by the author who does justice to her own story and imparts the lushness of the language. One passage I particularly liked follows. I think she began this with a thought that nature books told her to flee to the wild...to grieve.

'Nature in her green tranquil woods heals and soothes all afflictions,' wrote John Muir. 'Earth has no sorrows that earth cannot heal.'

Now I knew this for what it was, a beguiling but dangerous lie. I was furious with myself and my own unconscious certainty that this was the cure I needed. Hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks. And the wild is not a panacea for the human soul; too much in the air can corrode it to nothing."

With Mabel she finds another world and a way back to her father in a communion with her mourning, a place she calls that other world.

"And that part of me had hoped, too, that somewhere in that other world was my father. His death had been so sudden. There had been no time to prepare for it, no sense in it happening at all. He could only be lost. He was out there, still, somewhere out there in that tangled wood with all the rest of the lost and dead. I know now what those dreams in spring had meant, the ones of the hawk slipping through a rent in the air into another world. I'd want to fly with the hawk to find my father; find him and bring him home."

Will Byrnes says

The archaeology of grief is not ordered. It is more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten. Surprising things come to light: not simply memories, but states of mind, emotions, older ways of seeing the world.

Helen MacDonald had suffered a great loss. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy wrote, *Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way*. Perhaps the same might be applied to grieving. I know for myself, during an acute period of grieving I was practically unable to speak for well over a month, probably not a typical experience. MacDonald's reaction was just a wee bit more unusual than mine. She decided to train a goshawk.

Helen MacDonald and friend - from The Daily Mail

The loss of a person, whether through death, distance, or alienation, can bring about a significant crisis of identity. In MacDonald's case, she had to lose her self, to an almost pathological degree, in order to find a way forward with her life. *H is for Hawk* is her tale of that journey. Of course, being a Cambridge-educated writer and naturalist, research fellow at Jesus College of Cambridge, and research scholar with the

Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy, she brought a fair bit of writerly and intellectual heft to the task.

I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life.

Hope may be a thing with feathers, but in MacDonald's case, it was also a thing with a rapier beak, death-dealing claws and a penchant for killing. MacDonald named her Mabel. She takes us along on her year-long struggle to master both her hawk and her grief.

MacDonald had been very close with her father, well-known, award-winning news photographer, Alisdair MacDonald. It was he who had introduced her to hawking as a child. Training a hawk was her way of connecting to her father.

Helen MacDonald with dad, Alisdair MacDonald - from Suffolk Magazine

And then she added another dimension to this experience. There are four primary threads here. The first is MacDonald's ongoing struggle to train Mabel. The second is her family history with her father. The third is her emotional, existential struggle to find a passage through her grief to the light. The fourth is her consideration TH White.

T.H. White and friend - from Anendlessbanquet.com

Terence Hanbury White gained considerable renown for writing *The Once and Future King*, *The Sword in the Stone*, and more. But he also wrote a book about his experience with falconry. MacDonald finds much in his book, *The Goshawk*, that touches her, reminding her of her childhood falconry bonding with dad. But she digs deeper, generating some in-depth analysis of White's life and work. While his writing had garnered him considerable wealth and fame, White's personal inclinations and struggles are not so well known. He had had, to put it kindly, a less than nurturing upbringing, with a particularly cold and remote father. He was gay, with sado-masochistic impulses, which was not exactly a comfy fit in the mid 20th century. MacDonald sees in his writing an expression of this inner self.

When White writes about his love for the countryside, at heart he is writing about a hope that he might be able to love himself. But the countryside wasn't just something that was safe for White to love it was a love that was safe to write about. It took me a long time to realize how many of our classical books on animals were by gay writers who wrote of their relationships with animals in lieu of human loves of which they could not speak.

Both White and MacDonald used hawking as a way to step away from the world. She also sees an expression of White's violent inclinations, and recognizes a bloodlust in herself as she assists Mabel in the slaughter of local fauna. In referring to a scene in which White tells of a fox being ripped to bits

In this bloody scene, one man escaped White's revulsion: the huntsman, a red-faced, grave and gentlemanly figure who stood by the hounds and blew the *mort* on his hunting horn, the formal act of parting to commemorate the death of the fox. By some strange alchemy—his closeness to the pack, his expert command of them—the huntsman was not horrible. For White it was a moral magic trick, a way out of his conundrum. By skillfully training a hunting animal, by closely associating with it, by identifying with it, you might be allowed to experience all your vital, sincere desires, even your most bloodthirsty ones,

in total innocence. You could be true to yourself.

This was something that appealed to White, a publicly sanctioned milieu in which he could express his bloody desires. MacDonald recognizes the feeling of bloodlust in herself, as well.

The original cover of *The Goshawk*

We are treated to a bit of falconry history, consideration being given to the class and gender elements.

I saw those nineteenth century falconers were projecting onto their hawks all the male qualities they thought threatened by modern life; wildness, power, virility, independence, and strength. By identifying with their hawks as they trained them, they could *introject*, or repossess, those qualities. At the same time they could exercise their power by ‘civilising’ a wild and primitive creature. Masculinity and conquest; two imperial myths for the price of one.

The book is filled not only with her emotional struggle to recover, but with some breath-taking nature writing.

The bare field we’d flown the hawk upon is covered in gossamer, millions of shining threads combed downwind across every inch of soil. Lit by the sinking sun the quivering silk runs like light on water all the way to my feet. It is a thing of unearthly beauty, the work of a million tiny spiders searching for new homes. Each had spun a charged silken thread out into the air to pull it from its hatch-place, ascending like intrepid hot-air balloonists to drift and disperse and fall.

Does being in nature offer a salve to human suffering? Or does it reveal more of who we really are? MacDonald obviously survived her trial by feather with her personality, her core intact. It will not feel entirely clear as you read this that she will. MacDonald is gloriously adept at bringing you into her experience, leading you to wonder the things she wonders, to feel the pain of her struggle. *H is for Hawk* is a magnificent achievement, taking us along with the author on her dark road, but offering glimpses of glory, of growth and understanding, while teaching us a bit about something most of us have never encountered, and giving us an expanded appreciation for one of the most beloved authors of the 20th Century. If you have not yet had the pleasure of reading *H is for Hawk* (I know there are some of you out there), I cannot urge you more vociferously to snatch off your hoods, fly to your bookstore and pounce on a copy before they are all gone. You will find in this book a very satisfying feast.

This review posted – 10/14/16

Published – 7/31/14

PS - Lena Headey, the actress who plays queen Cersei Lannister on *The Game of Thrones* bought the film rights to the book in April 2015. I do not know if the project has progressed to a development stage.

=====EXTRA STUFF

H is for Hawk has won a claw full of **prizes and recognition**

-----2014 – Samuel Johnson Prize (now the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-fiction) winner

-----2014 – Costa Book of the Year winner

-----2014 – Duff Cooper Prize – shortlist

-----2015 – Thwaites Wainwright Prize – longlist

-----2015 – Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction - shortlist

Links to the author's Twitter and FB pages

Article - Rapt - by Kathryn Schultz – New Yorker Magazine – March 9, 2015

Radio interview - WBUR in Boston – 11:16

Videos

-----MacDonald talk at 5 x 15 - 16:18

-----Macdonald with Mary Karr at 92nd Street Y - 1:17:51

-----MacDonald on BBC News Meet the Author - 3:04

----- Helen at a bookstore in DC - 58:25 – excellent – her talk is for the first 30 minutes - *Politics and Prose* is the site

-----Helen reads TH White

-----The entire film, The Goshawk, based on TH White's book

July 25, 2017 - An interesting National Geographic piece about a red-tail hawk going through an unusual upbringing - Why This Young Hawk Thinks It's an Eagle - By Sarah Gibbens
