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Birds of a Feather

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Birds of a Feather

As I sat in a lonely psychiatric ward bedroom during my first semester of junior year, I gazed outward from the window. The bustling streets seventeen stories below held the chaos of traffic and pedestrians, but closer to my level were birds, soaring by. They were free from the emptiness I felt consumed by. They had the liberty and the agency I so desperately craved. When my sister stopped by with a few books she had picked up from my apartment, I spent my idle time poring over them. They were my companions while I eagerly waited for visitor hours to arrive. Among the stack was *The Genius of Birds* by Jennifer Ackerman, a piece from my growing collection of bird books. In it, Ackerman describes the brilliance and hardiness of birds, and summarizes the significance behind her choice to write about these avian critters: “They have great stories to tell, stories that illuminate what might be going on in the mind of a bird as it solves the problems around it - and perhaps, give us some perspective on what is going on in our own minds.”

My father imparted upon me, among many things like a stubborn temperament and a broad nose, a great love for birds. I suppose, in this way, we are birds of a feather. My father’s younger years, spent in the mountains of rural China, were constituted by exploring the outdoors and engaging with the wildlife. And as I grew up in the forests of Tennessee, I’d similarly spend my time cavorting around. And like my dad, I was particularly entranced by birds. There was something about their beady black eyes and their erratic movements that I found incredibly charming. And perhaps I felt I identified quite strongly with their flighty and skittish natures, as well as a constant need for independence. Nowadays, it isn’t uncommon for me to run across a street to take a picture of an interesting bird, or to stop in my tracks just to watch one fly by. I

have felt such a strong love of birds that I installed a clear bird feeder against my bedroom window, so that I may closely observe the birds that come to it. A stack of various bird books, from field guides to comic books, sits on the window sill directly in front of the feeder.

To many, birds are just another commonplace animal, or even a nuisance. Those who awake to the sounds of early morning chirping are usually annoyed by the occurrence. But when I hear the soft sounds of a feeding bird as dawn breaks, I can't help but sit forward and watch the visitor with a sense of contentment. And rather frequently, I will pick up a book from the stack in front of it and flip through. My personal collection started with poaching books from my father's own extensive library, then moved on to buying from bookstores and thrift shops. I can't enter a used goods store without spending an inordinate amount of time scouring the books section for a perfect new addition. My friends who accompanied me will call me for my whereabouts, and I will inevitably miss the notifications as I search, engrossed.

My books were a dear comfort to me during a very traumatic time. In the environment of the psych ward, I held no credibility or self-autonomy. I was just another patient, floating through. It was enough for me to feel as if my own mind was slipping quite easily from my grasp. So in my massive amount of spare time, I took to my books for a sense of greater stability. *The Genius of Birds* and my other books have bestowed upon me the fact that people do not wander a deeply lonely and isolating world, but are surrounded by the beauty of nature and creatures who have an incredible sense of capacity for life. From the harsh depths of the Antarctic to the mountains of China to the forests of Tennessee, birds manage to continue to survive after millenia and still maintain a large presence throughout.

Perhaps birds do not have to find their way through a human world of mental illness and stigma. But surely they suffer as well, if not in the same way we do. They fight for their livelihoods and search for their own way to go on. A bird places a great deal of importance upon its survival and spirit, and those of its companions, just as deeply as a human could. “Hope is the thing with feathers - that perches in the soul,” wrote Emily Dickinson. This sentiment is echoed in *The Meaning of Birds*, in which I took Simon Barnes’ words to heart: “But throughout history, birds have completed us. Birds have told us about flight and colour and sport and time...Birds have shown us how we can restore the world to itself. And, above all, birds have given us joy.”

Overall, birds represent a world of freedom and resilience to me, and to see that come to life within the pages of books is incredibly gratifying. In particular, I always enjoy reading from *False Knees* by Joshua Barkman. Barkman’s illustrations are whimsical depictions of wildlife, most frequently of birds. It is not a conventional literary book, but the comics held within those bound pages have brought me as much joy as any other written book would. Barkman’s subjects are anthropomorphized characters who speak and interact with one another just as humans do in humorous ways, but in the typical settings of nature.

As for my personal favorite, a yellow canary flies across a blue sky. “I have these moments of clarity when I’m alone,” it says. “There’s music in my head in perfect rhythm with my every movement. I remember I don’t always have autonomy but I have my individuality. I am alive.”

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