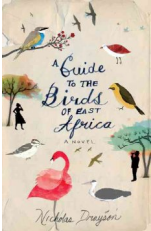


A Guide to the Birds of East Africa

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Every Tuesday at 830 a.m., a group of ardent birders meets at the Nairobi Museum to search for some avian wildlife together. Mr. Malik, a retired businessman and owner of the Jolly Man Manufacturing Club, squeezes bird-watching into his schedule though he does have other commitments.

The leader of the group is the beautiful and charming widow, Rose Mbikwa, who came to Africa from England and never left to her parents' great consternation. Her husband was arrested for political activity and later died in a mysterious light plane accident.

On this day, Rose announces that she is leaving for England for an eye operation. Also a new birder has joined the group, an old school acquaintance of Mr. Malik's from long-ago. Harry Kahn keeps calling Malik by old nicknames, ones Malik did not like in the old days and likes even less now. Complicating the plot--both really like Rose.

That evening Malik has a drink at the Asadi Club and so does Khan. Before long they have made a wager to see who can count the most birds in a week. The prize--the chance to invite Rose to the Hunting Club ball. The listing of very exact rules is a hoot and shows the difference between cultures.

Although very much a gentle read, this little novel has surprising depth. Soon you discover that Malik is the author of an anti-government corruption column, and that his commitments also include nursing visits at the HIV/AIDS wards in various hospitals. He is a delightful character, moral and exceedingly honest. On the other hand, Mr. Kahn tours around with two experienced Australian birders; they rent small planes and visit hard to reach spots. Malik stays in town and counts birds in his yard, at an arboretum where he comes upon his employee totally naked in a tree (and yes, there's an interesting story behind this), and also at the local dump.

If you like Alexander McCall Smith's Botswana books, you will love this insider's view of Kenya seen through the prism of birdwatchers' eyes. Difficult secrets slowly come to light. Each chapter begins with a beautiful drawing of a particular African breed of bird. This is one of those armchair travel books that will transport you to far-away Africa.

For a completely different birding-adventure, check out *A Supremely Bad Idea: Three Mad Birders and their Quest to See it All* by Luke Dempsey.

Posted by Dory L. on July 8, 2013

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