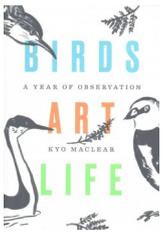


Birds, Art, Life: a Year of Observation



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If you love the natural world, this little book about birding will entice you. It's also about much more: how to be in the world, parenting, partnering, creativity, and friendship. She also explores the first books people fell in love with, celebrity eyebrows, art, and especially how to make peace with the roaring, anxious self inside you.

Maclear, a Canadian author of children's books, decides after a heavy stint caring for her aged father after suffering two strokes that she needed to take up a hobby for herself. She is also a mom raising two young boys, the younger of which, has the weird propensity for falling, resulting in emergency room visits.

First, she plans to take up drawing again. But the renowned teacher she interviews about lessons seemed too structured for her. As you can see in the beautiful line drawings, she also spent a year with pen and ink.

One night her husband suggests that she look at some bird photographs taken by the musician who scored his latest film. These bird pictures wowed Kyo. So much so, that within a few days, she'd contacted the musician and asked if he would be her guide to the world of birding for an entire year. What she liked about her guru, who she simply calls 'The Musician' throughout the book was that he was 'fervent about birds without being reverential.'

Their first joint outing is actually to an apartment bird sanctuary of his father's, a place that could rent for \$1500 a month, but is home only for the birds. Because the dad is also infirm, his son volunteers to do the daily tasks of feeding the birds and cleaning their cages. Kyo enters but soon notices that her presence is upsetting the bird's routine, and more importantly, terrifying them. She waits outside and watches 'The Musician' carefully tending to them.

Each section refers to a season, and each chapter covers a specific subject, not only related to birds but to life. In the first season covered, winter, Kyo writes about love, cages, and smallness. For spring her topics included waiting, knowledge, and faltering.

Almost all of the bird trips occur inside Toronto or in its immediate environs except for during the summer when she and her family roam up north to a camp. Here she and husband observe one son wandering alone in the woods, and instead of calling to him, they allow him to enjoy his solitude. This is the same son, who when he first played in a Pacific tide pool, said he wanted to stay on Vancouver Island forever.

Throughout the book, Kyo philosophizes about life. There are beautiful passages, for instance, when Kyo describes a friend's meeting with poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry. In a lecture Berry describes the importance of loving one particular place. The friend asks him what if you have been footloose and moved from place to place. Berry replies 'Stop somewhere, and begin the thousand-year-long process of knowing that place.'

Kyo also touches briefly on the blessings and contradictions of marriage. Of her marriage she says, 'It has failed and and reignited at least fifteen times.'

One part I particularly enjoyed was the Whimbrel Watch in Mimico, Ontario where whimbrels stop for a layover on their long flight north. Kyo tells about the incredible loss rate for migrating birds--some scientists think up to half--but she also describes how it feels to be in the midst of hundreds of birds landing around her, 'The air filled with a choppy whistling sound. I saw a wavering blue transform into a dark fast cloud as a shoal of whimbrels passed over our heads.'

This is an excellent book to entice you to wander and discover your own spark bird, the bird species that converts you into birdwatching, or just fills you with wonder.

Posted by Dory L. on February 8, 2017

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