

H is for Hawk

By

Helen Mcdonald

SUMMARY -

Winner of the 2015 BookBrowse Nonfiction Award

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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Macdonald is a writer, poet, illustrator, historian, and naturalist, and an affiliated research scholar at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses. She also worked as a Research Fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge. As a professional falconer, she assisted with the management of raptor research and conservation projects across Eurasia

REVIEWS

Helen Macdonald's beautiful and nearly feral first book...is so good that, at times, it hurt me to read it. It draws blood, in ways that seem curative...H Is for Hawk seems to me a small, instant classic of nature writing, expansive in ways that recall Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), and as in touch with cruelty. It has, as well, some of the winding emotional reverberation of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012). Yet this book is very English. Ms. Macdonald's sentences, like David Bowie's teeth (pre-veneers), are appealingly crooked. Nearly every paragraph is strange, injected with unexpected meaning. - Dwight Garner - **New York Times**

If birds are made of air, as the nature writer Sy Montgomery says, then writing a great bird book is a little like dusting for the fingerprints of a ghost. It calls for poetry and science, conjuring and evidence. In her breathtaking new book, *H Is for Hawk*...Helen Macdonald renders an indelible impression of a raptor's fierce essence—and her own—with words that mimic feathers, so impossibly pretty we don't notice their astonishing engineering...Although "animal as emotional healer" is a familiar motif,

Macdonald's journey clears its own path—messy, muddy and raw. - Vicki Constantine Croke - **New York Times Book Reviews**

In this elegant synthesis of memoir and literary sleuthing...Macdonald describes in beautiful, thoughtful prose how she comes to terms with death in new and startling ways. - **Publishers Weekly**

In this profoundly inquiring and wholly enrapturing memoir, Macdonald exquisitely and unforgettably entwines misery and astonishment, elegy and natural history, human and hawk. —*Donna Seamen Booklist*

(Starred review.) An inspired, beautiful and absorbing account of a woman battling grief—with a goshawk.... Writing with breathless urgency...Macdonald broadens her scope well beyond herself to focus on the antagonism between people and the environment. Whether you call this a personal story or nature writing, it's poignant, thoughtful and moving—and likely to become a classic in either genre.

Kirkus Reviews

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS- (publisher)

1. When Helen was young, she remembers her father telling her that 'when you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still, stay in same place, remember how much you wanted to see it, and be patient.' (p8) How is being patient important to Helen throughout this book?
2. Helen has lost her father and is grieving. Where did you find yourself drawn to her in sympathy or empathy? Were there times when you found her less sympathetic? If yes, when?
3. "The book you are reading is my story," Helen writes. "It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White. But White is part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there." (p.38) How does T.H. White's life story help the reader understand Helen's journey?
4. Helen finds her father's photographs help her feel that something of him remains, although he has gone. Does this resonate with your experience of the grieving process? What material things have become important to you after the loss of a loved one?
5. After living several days with her hawk in her flat, Helen observes, "I was turning into a hawk" (p85). What do you think she means?
6. How important is human friendship to Helen as she travels through her grief?
7. Helen describes training a hawk in close detail. Does that engage you or are other parts of the narrative equally or more important to you?
8. Helen describes herself as 'a watcher' (p68): a characteristic she says has both positive and negative aspects. How does being visible or invisible change in significance as Helen trains Mabel?
9. On page 129 Helen puts forward the idea that "we carry the lives we've imagined as we carry the lives we have and sometimes a reckoning comes of all the lives we have lost." On the following page she quotes T. H. White: "Sometimes a reckoning comes of all the lives we have lost." (p130). What is White reckoning with? What about Helen? How similar are they and what connects them, beyond training goshawks?
10. When Mabel catches a pheasant, Helen helps her pluck the pheasant as 'unconsciously as a mother helping a child with her dinner.' (p 184) Then, as the hawk eats, she starts to cry. Is this

a turning point, and if so, why?

11. Helen was eight years old when she first read T.H. White's "The Goshawk" and initially she disliked it. How do her views on White's book evolve over time? What books have you changed your mind about over the years?
12. This is a story of a woman grieving in a highly unusual way. It is a deeply personal story but what makes it universal? How does it speak to your own life experience?
13. Helen describes her state of mind in close detail. On the very first page she says, "I felt odd: overtired, overwrought, unpleasantly like my brain had been removed and my skull stuffed with something like microwaved aluminum foil, dented, charred and shorting with sparks." Where did her expression of feelings resonate with you?
14. "Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human," says Helen (p 195) What prevents her from going over that edge?
15. Ultimately, Helen will stop looking after Mabel. How important is letting go of the hawk to Helen's journey?

BEYOND THE BOOK -

The Goshawk (This article relates to *H is for Hawk*)

In T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (the first book in *The Once and Future King* series), young Arthur is transformed by his tutor, the wizard Merlyn, into a small falcon known as the merlin. In the short chapter focusing on Arthur's adventures among the raptors, he is both terrified and fascinated by the half-mad Colonel Cully, a bloodthirsty, raving goshawk. This scene, as fantastical as it might be, nevertheless illuminates some of the conventional wisdom surrounding goshawks. Macdonald quotes one falconry textbook that characterizes goshawks as developing "symptoms of passing madness." Large, bloodthirsty, impossible to understand or relate to, goshawks are mysterious creatures in Macdonald's book — and even more so in White's.



The name "goshawk" comes from the Old English words for "goose" and "hawk." It is pronounced as two separate syllables (gos-hawk), without a "sh" sound in between. The northern goshawk is the largest North American accipiter (the family of hawks that also includes sparrowhawks). It is 20-24 inches long, with a wingspan of nearly 4 feet. Its habitat includes woodlands throughout northern North America, Europe, and Asia, and its diet comprises large birds, squirrels, and rabbits. Behaviorally, goshawks are known for fiercely defending their large nests and for persistently tracking their prey, including by chasing on foot. Unlike red-tailed hawks and other more visible and urbanized species, goshawks are considered more secretive and are rarely seen by humans.

In North America, humans are most likely to see goshawks when the bird's usual prey in the northern boreal forests — the ruffed grouse and snowshoe hare — dip to below-normal levels, causing the

goshawks to expand their hunting range farther south. Far from being simply mad, though, goshawks are fierce, crafty hunters and elegant to behold — perhaps the reason why Attila the Hun chose the goshawk as the emblem on his helmet.

An interview with Helen Macdonald -

Helen Macdonald talks about her memoir *H is for Hawk*, the complicated relationship between instinct and training, dealing with grief, experiencing wilderness and much else.

Julie Goldberg, on behalf of the Creative Writing at The New School and the NBCC, interviewed Helen Macdonald about her book *H Is for Hawk* (Grove Press), which is among the final five selections in the category of Autobiography for the 2015 NBCC Awards.

Julie Goldberg: Part of the magic of *H is for Hawk* is how alive your goshawk Mabel becomes—in her body and moods, in her power and playfulness. What was it like to write about her, years later, in such detail?

Helen Macdonald: Writing about her was much easier than writing about my father's death, my family, or myself! I can recall my time with her that year with crystalline clarity. Grief does strange things to the workings of memory. Back then I wanted to assume her rapturous, wordless, hawkish mind, and I tried, as I wrote, to match my style to that imagined subjectivity. Short sentences to capture her world as a series of fleeting, present moments; lyrical passages to suggest the strangeness of the landscape through the eyes of a hawk. I edited the hell out of most of the prose, but the sections about the hawk — what she was like, how she flew and hunted — they were written fast and hardly edited at all. I'm very sad to say Mabel died suddenly a few years ago of a fluke fungal infection called *Aspergillosis* that's been the bane of goshawkers for centuries and kills many wild hawks too. She's buried on one of the hillsides over which she used to fly. I miss her so much.

JG: The complicated relationship between instinct and training/social conditioning is something you explore throughout the book. Do you think the impulse to pour yourself into the hawk after your father's death came in part from having learned and internalized older narratives of "running to the wild to escape... grief and sorrow," or do you and the subjects of those stories share the same innate drive?

HM: When you train a hawk you're forced to think deeply about the differences between innate and learned behavior, positive and negative reinforcement, and consider conditioning in both a physical and psychological sense. But not just in the hawk—in yourself also. Hawk-training is not a one-way process. Partly I wanted a goshawk because I knew how hard it would be for me; they're famed for their fearful nature as much as for their predatory power. Taming it would be a challenge and a deep distraction from grief. Another reason was T.H. White's book *The Goshawk*. Even in my childhood I saw that it was about a man running away from something to train a hawk. I didn't know what he was running from, back then, but that trajectory, that attempt at a salve or cure—it stuck with me. It was powerful, even at an early age, because unconsciously I'd already bought into that narrative about running to the wild to heal yourself, and I think the same can be said for the subjects of those other, older stories in the book. I'm wary of explanations that see that drive as innate. I think it rests on a palimpsest of historically and culturally-shaped notions of what the natural world is, what 'wild' is, and what we need from it. On a related note, there's an increasingly common argument that we should interact with the natural world because it makes us feel happy, or has other kinds of therapeutic value. I'm scared of a version of nature that is to be valued primarily for its effect on our mood. But it

is true that being out there, out in the wind and rain and sun, surrounded by things that are not you: it can change your perspective on yourself and your place in the world.

JG: Your experience training Mabel and T.H. White's experience training his hawk Gos were (fortunately) very different, as were the personal struggles played out through your relationships with your hawks. Why did you choose to intersperse his narrative so completely and seamlessly with your own?

HM: White's story was always going to be part of the book because it was part of mine. I'd read *The Goshawk* as a child and over and over again as I trained and flew Mabel. But it wasn't until I read through White's unpublished journals, notebooks, letters and manuscripts that I began to see the book needed more of him. I wanted to pleat his story together with mine partly because I wanted the book to have more than one voice; wanted to pull away from that seamless, smooth and expert voice of the old-school nature writer, which tends to erase alternative ways of seeing, writing, or thinking about the natural world. But mostly I wanted his story to work in counterpoint to mine because both of us made the same mistake. TH White and I used real hawks as a mirror of our imagined selves. White saw the hawk as several different warring versions of himself—something to be pitied, something to fight against, to sabotage, to try and love. I saw Mabel as everything I wanted to be—solitary, self-possessed, powerful, free from human hurts and grief. Both stories were the same story, despite the manifest differences between me and White: together I hoped they would work as an extended meditation on how, when we are talking about nature, we are usually talking about ourselves.

JG: At what point did you know that you wanted to write about Mabel and your experience after your father's death? Did you have a sense of the scale and breadth of the ideas you wanted to explore, or did that grow through the writing process?

HM: Towards the end of that first year with Mabel I began to see what had happened as a story. Not necessarily one that'd be written down, but something that felt older and much bigger than a story dealing merely with the day to day life of a miserable woman and a bird. Years passed before I could think about it being a book. I needed to gain emotional distance, couldn't write the character of my past self until she felt quite far away, though I could perfectly remember how she felt and thought and spoke. There was a detailed chapter breakdown in my book proposal, but things didn't go according to that careful plan. The book started to push back as it was written. Many things I thought would be in the book I had to throw out—one long chapter about a literary party in London in the depths of my hawkish depression, for example. Things I never expected to be in the book insisted they should be there; particular repeating lines, thoughts, themes. I spent a lot of time working on the formal aspects of the book, but at the same time I began to think of the writing process as analogous to wrangling a half-tamed animal. It's an encounter with something you have to listen to very attentively, that may or may not work with you on any given day, that will show you things you didn't expect or had ever thought of before.

JG: You write that the rarer wild animals become in our lives, the fewer meanings they can hold or resist. And through your relationship with Mabel, you show how something uniquely wonderful and complex can emerge when humans engage with the wild. How can readers (who may not be ready for goshawks of their own) more productively interact with or participate in wildness? To protect the wild world, do you think we need to see ourselves as outside it?

HM: Haha! I absolutely do not recommend goshawks. Falconry's an exacting art that requires enormous dedication and a lot of free time. Even after a long apprenticeship with an expert falconer, a goshawk is one of the worst birds to start your falconry career with. But you don't need a goshawk to encounter wildness. It is there in anything that is not human, anything self-willed, working according to its own motives. You can feel wild by watching a spider, legs tensed against silk across your bathroom window. There is a wildness in the healthy functioning of biodiverse ecological systems, and there is a different wildness that comes from understanding that the world is full of things that aren't us. One of my favorite poets, the late RF Langley, wrote about how meaning can come from the contemplation of the tiniest things in this way: the wings of a grass moth furled like a cigar on an English pub toilet wall, for example. Perhaps you could go outside and look for something very small and alive, an insect of some kind, a thrip or aphid, and regard it very closely, with the greatest attention, for a very long time. That kind of natural-historical observation can literally make the world wonderful. Sometimes I think that being alive to the mystery of a moth on a wall is quietism in the face of environmental disaster. But I hope not. I hope that wonder is what drives the fire to save things that are not us. Of course, we are part of the natural world, though we are fast doing our best to destroy it. It's why I worry that hands-off is not always the best way to preserve nature. Why would anyone fight to save something if they have no knowledge of it and no emotional tie to it?

JG: Now, a year and half after *H is for Hawk* was first published, what has most surprised you about the response you've received from readers?

HM: I've had many letters from people telling me that *H is for Hawk* reminded them of how it feels to be alone at home with a new baby. That astonished me. But it makes such perfect sense. You're responsible for this infinitely precious thing. It doesn't speak. You're not sure if you're meeting all its needs. Sometimes you get anxious, worry that you're doing everything wrong, that somehow you might break it, cause it harm by mistake. And of course, it is an all-consuming and life-changing relationship. Those parallels surprised me a lot, and the letters moved me a great deal. (But I can guarantee that goshawks are far better than babies at flying over wintry hillsides and catching you rabbits for dinner

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/helen-macdonald-on-the-hawk-that-kept-her-grounded/article23336375/>

Alisdair Macdonald died in 2007 at the age of 67. His daughter, Helen, was devastated by the photojournalist's sudden death – a heart attack – and, after the funeral, retreated to her home in Cambridge, England, to mourn. "I didn't sleep," she writes in a newly published memoir of the months that followed. "I drove around a lot. I stared at the sun going down and the sun coming up, and the sun in between." The days passed. She bought and read books "on grieving, on loss and bereavement" that "spilled over [her] desk in tottering piles." She was 37 years old, without a partner or children or a nine-to-five job to tether her to the world; she risked floating away. Nothing made sense any more and she feared she might be going crazy. She did the only sensible thing she could think of and bought a hawk.

"I picked a very strange way of coping with grief," she says.

H is for Hawk is the book borne out of the "absorbing and dark and beautiful experience," as she describes the period following her father's passing. On the surface, it's a chronicle of sorrow – the moment in every child's life when "you have to renegotiate your place in the world" and the experience of a daughter trying to find her way in the world without the man she considered "one of

[her] best friends." It is a manual on falconry, too, a not-quite-step-by-step guide to caring for and training a bird of prey. It's also the love story of a woman and her raptor – Marley and Me with razor-sharp talons and a bouquet of dead pheasants. Finally, it's a literary biography of T.H. White, author of the Arthurian saga *The Once and Future King*, and a man who, like Macdonald, once tried to find solace in the flight of a goshawk.

"It's such a strange book," says Macdonald, on the phone from Cambridge earlier this week. "It didn't really seem to fit into any of the normal categories of nature writing or biography. And I thought, 'I don't know if anyone's going to read this.'"

People have. The book has been a bestseller since appearing in Britain last summer and won both the Costa Book Award and the Samuel Johnson Prize. The reviews in North America, where it has just been published, have been near-embarrassing in their praise. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schulz called it "perhaps the finest non-fiction I read in the past year," while *The New York Times'* critic Dwight Garner said it was "so good that, at times, it hurt me to read it."

"It's flown high beyond my wildest expectations," Macdonald says.

I'm fairly certain *H is for Hawk* will be one of the finest books I read in 2015. Every so often a book comes across my desk that feels plucked from another time, as if archeologists uncovered an old, vellum-bound manuscript in the earth, dusted it off and sent it to the bookstore. I suspect this is partly due to the subject matter – after all, falconry is an ancient sport, conducted thousands of years ago much the same as today. The language, too, feels of another era: austringer, jesses, eyasses, haggards, creance, feak, mute, in yarak. Opening *H is for Hawk* is like reading a book only partially translated. ("There are words I didn't use in the book," Macdonald says. "There's a lovely word, to bowse" – pronounced booze – "that's the ancient falconers' word for the hawk's drinking. That's where we get the slang for drinking a ton.")

While not an ancient book, White in 1951 published his own memoir, *The Goshawk*, which Macdonald read as a young woman. She recalls being horrified by the author's relationship with his bird, Gos, which he purchased from a German breeder and attempted to train, badly. "I guess some small part of me for years had thought it would be nice to write a book that showed that humans and hawks can live really quite amazing, intimate lives with each other without that sense of cruelty and tragedy that's so clear in White's book," she says. Coincidentally, *The Goshawk* was reissued by New York Review Books in 2007, months after Alisdair's death.

Yet, as Macdonald reread White's memoir and pored over his papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, she experienced an unexpected kinship with the man.

"The great tragedy in the book is that he's fighting himself in the form of a hawk," Macdonald says of White, who struggled with his sexuality throughout his life. In order to train his bird, White "[fell] off the edge of the world – just in the way that I did, but flying from very different demons. I guess I ended up feeling a strange fellowship with this man, even though I think – I hope – we are very different people."

Unlike White, Macdonald was already an experienced falconer by the time she bought Mabel from a Belfast-area breeder for £800 (\$1,520). She had never, however, trained a goshawk, which she describes in the book as "30 ounces of death in a feathered jacket." As she put it in a follow-up e-mail, the difference between training a goshawk and other raptors "is rather like the difference between handling a highly strung racehorse compared to a tractable pony."

A bird-obsessed child, she received her first kestrel – a falcon – when she was 12; it slept in her bedroom.

"I must have been a nightmarish child," she says. "My poor parents. I don't know how they put up with me, dragging them to zoos and falconry centres. It would be getting dark and I'd be clinging to the wire in front of an aviary, staring at some bird of prey. They'd say, 'Come on Helen, it's time to go home.'" She adopts the high-pitched scream of a child. "'No! Leave me here!'"

Falconry became a central part of her life. Macdonald, who is an affiliate of the department of history and philosophy of science at the University of Cambridge, has worked as a professional falconer, raptor conservationist and also bred falcons for one of the royal families of the United Arab Emirates. "There were these great moments where I'd accompany these captive-bred falcons over on the Sheik's private plane," she recalls. "It was a very weird experience." In 2006 she published *Falcons*, a natural history focusing on the bird's relationship with humans.

"What drives falconry is a desire to have this close, personal relationship with what is, in all intents and purposes, a wild bird," she explains. "Falconry is all about letting things go and hoping they'll come back to you."

Eventually, Macdonald had to let Mabel go, sending her goshawk to a breeding program where she was flown and cared for by a fellow falconer. Sadly, Mabel died in late 2013 from an airborne fungus called Aspergillosis. "I was in pieces," she says. "She was a really extraordinary animal."

Macdonald now has a small pet parrot named Birdoole for company, "which my friends tell me is emotionally far more healthy because it's much more cuddly, [although] it doesn't catch me pheasants, so it's not so good at getting me food to put on the table."

"For a long time I said I didn't want another hawk – another goshawk, anyway," she continues. "Then, a few weeks ago, I went to Ireland and I met a goshawk out there, and ended up feeding it and holding it for a while. And I suddenly found it very hard to give it back. And I thought, 'Oh, okay, I think there might have to be another hawk.'"

PBS -

After the unexpected death of her photojournalist father, Helen Macdonald overcame her grief by training an adult goshawk, one of nature's most notoriously wild and free-spirited birds of prey. As she explains in the film, "I ran towards things of death and difficulty: spooky, pale-eyed feathered ghosts that lived and killed in woodland thickets. I ran towards goshawks." She had trained birds before, but never this raptor which she named Mabel. Macdonald found healing in that cathartic experience which became the basis for her 2014 international best-selling memoir *H Is for Hawk*.

Now, 10 years after she trained Mabel (who died of untreatable infection just before the author finished writing her book), Macdonald is ready to take on the challenge again, prompted by watching how a pair of wild goshawks reared their chicks in an English forest. This **Nature** film accompanies her on visits to the pair's nest to observe the latest developments and follows Macdonald's emotional and intimate journey as she adopts a young goshawk and attempts to raise it as her own: feeding, nurturing, and training her new charge in the hopes the months of preparation will culminate in a successful first free flight.

In this first-person account, Macdonald makes a point of distinguishing between her solitary withdrawal from the world while working with Mabel a decade ago and her desire now to share her new training experience with others. Not having a yard suitable for raising a goshawk, Macdonald turns to her friend and fellow falconer, Kirsty Allen, who lives in the Pennine Hills in the north of

England. Allen is the goshawk's new owner, but Macdonald would be there to train the female bird she calls Lupin.

The film charts Macdonald's progress: from time spent watching goshawks during breeding season on monitors at the aviary where Lupin was born; taking the first steps to tame the hawk by gaining her trust; patiently waiting for the bird to choose to come to her hand to retrieve food; getting Lupin used to Allen and her other goshawk; and training Lupin to fly to Macdonald's gloved hand across a field while still secured by a long line of braided cotton, called a creance.

In addition to the training sequences, the program features Macdonald reflecting on her childhood obsession with birds illustrated with old home video and photographs. She tells of taking a falconry course at age 13 and working at a bird of prey center where she was given her first kestrel that slept in her bedroom bookcase at night. She credits her parents for being incredibly understanding.

On visits to view the wild goshawk nest in the forest, Macdonald describes these birds as highly secretive, with the spring breeding season being the only time you can observe them. After over a century of extinction, they are making a comeback in Britain due to falconers importing European goshawks in the '60s and '70s. They typically would keep one for falconry, while setting the other free. She explains this reintroduction went well because the goshawk is such a self-reliant and predatory bird that is tuned to hunt and kill. Today, British falconers only use aviary-bred birds like Lupin.

Macdonald has additional lessons in store for Lupin to help her fly more like a wild hawk, but a powerful bond has been created and she looks forward to where this exhilarating experience takes her next.

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