H is for Hawk

“One part memoir, one part gorgeous evocation of the natural world, and one part literary meditation.”

—Economist

NATURE BOOK CLUB
READING GUIDE

WINNER of the Samuel Johnson Prize

COSTA Book of the Year 2014
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
Source: PBS

"To this wondrously atypical book, Macdonald brings an equally atypical background. She is a former falcon-breeder for royalty of the United Arab Emirates, a current historian of science at Cambridge, a naturalist, an illustrator, and the author of three collections of poetry and one previous work of nonfiction, “Falcon,” a natural and cultural history. She is also what you might call a former raptor prodigy. Her father, in addition to being a photographer, was an amateur plane-spotter, and he taught his young daughter sky-watching, bird-watching, and patience. By the age of six, she had begun teaching herself about birds of prey. Her prepubescent leisure reading included, along with “The Goshawk,” Gilbert Blaine’s “Falconry,” Frank Illingworth’s “Falcons and Falconry,” and James Harting’s “Hints on Hawks.” By nine or ten, Macdonald had become, in her words, “the most appalling falconry bore.”

Source: The New Yorker
ONE PART MEMOIR
ONE PART GORGEOUS EVOCATION OF THE NATURAL WORLD, AND ONE PART LITERARY MEDITATION

"Without getting lost, I could never have found my way home."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Memoirs usually focus on disclosure, yet for some readers H is for Hawk feels as if it might have something hidden from view. Did you get this sense from reading the book? Can you compare H is for Hawk to other memoirs, such as Wild by Cheryl Strayed and how they deal with disclosure?

Macdonald writes, “What we see in the lives of animals are lessons we’ve learned from the world.” Through closely observing her hawk’s life, what lessons does Helen ultimately learn from the world?

Goshawks are fierce and effective hunters. How does training Mabel place the grieving Macdonald in the center of “life and death” in the wild?

There is discussion of “grief turning you feral,” and “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 simple memories, but states of mind, emotions, older ways of seeing the world.” How does your own experience of grief relate to its presentation in the book?

How has the theme of patience been addressed in the book? How does Macdonald’s patience compares with White’s in their success as falconers?

Macdonald’s descriptions of nature have been widely praised. What passages struck you as you read the book?

A profound influence on Helen Macdonald, T.H. White, the author of The Once and Future King and The Sword in the Stone, wrote The Goshawk in 1951 about training a northern goshawk using traditional rather than modern training techniques. Wilson and The Goshawk figure prominently in H is for Hawk.
"It's part of being a watcher, forgetting who you are and putting yourself in the thing you are watching. That is why the girl who was me when I was small loved watching birds. She made herself disappear and then in the birds she watched, took flight."  **H is for Hawk**

"Night air moves in the spaces between the trees. Moths make dusty circles about the lamps. 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 closer a dog barks twice and there's broken glass by the path and next to it a feather from the breast of a woodpigeon judging by its size and curl. It lies upon the grass as if held just above it, gleaming softly in the darkness."  **H is for Hawk**

**Resources**

**PBS interview video:** [https://www.pbs.org/video/author-helen-macdonald-xal8oh/](https://www.pbs.org/video/author-helen-macdonald-xal8oh/)

**PBS series web page:** [https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/h-is-for-hawk-about/15500/](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/h-is-for-hawk-about/15500/)

**Streaming until 4/7/2021**

**New Yorker article:** [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/09/rapt](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/09/rapt)

**New York Times review:** [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/helen-macdonalds-h-is-for-hawk.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/helen-macdonalds-h-is-for-hawk.html)

**A Falconer reviews H is for Hawk:** [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/a-falconer-reviews-helen-macdonalds-acclaimed-bestseller-h-is-for-hawk/](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/a-falconer-reviews-helen-macdonalds-acclaimed-bestseller-h-is-for-hawk/)

**Other books by Helen Macdonald:** *Vesper Flights; Falcon; Poems in Nature; Shaler's Fish: Poems*

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**IN-PERSON BOOK CLUB:**
**APRIL 10, SAT., 3– 4:30 P.M.**
**MORRISON NATURE CENTER**

**VIRTUAL BOOK CLUB:**
**APRIL 14, WED., 6– 7:30 P.M.**

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