

Book Review

BIRDLIFE. Edited by Nyanda Smith and Perdita Phillips. Lethologica Press, Fremantle 2011. A collaborative art and text book that explores the avian world.

Review by Yvette Watt

Recently I went to a local designers/makers market, and was overwhelmed by the number of items from jewellery, to cards, and other art and craft works that were decorated with birds. Judging by the following Facebook exchange I saw later that day, I wasn't the only one to be struck by the flock of feathered creatures that featured on so many pieces on offer:

Christine: *A big thank you to my customers who purchased at my market stall today... And Lucy your comments are already influencing my thoughts of new work ♥.*

Lucy: *which comments? The chihuahua gush?*

Christine: *No, the ornithological one...*

Lucy: *how so? (she says suspiciously)*

Christine: *I promise never to make bird prints*

Lucy: *birds aren't bad, per se. I'm talking about the ubiquitous 'cute' birds. I love birds usually*

Christine: *A rephrasing of my previous comment: I promise never to make cute bird prints.*

Lucy: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XM3vWJmpfo&feature=youtu.be>

Christine: *:-D*

————— page40.41

Just 2 days earlier I had found a rather lovely little book titled *Birdlife* nestling in my pigeonhole. Published by the Western Australian boutique publishing house, Lethologica Press, this beautifully produced, small scale book combines the bird-themed poetry and prose of Nandi Chinna, Michael Farrell, Graeme Miles and Nyanda Smith with artwork in the form of photographs and drawings by Perdita Phillips. Phillips' evocative visuals, which act as independent artworks rather than illustrations of the text, "range from covert photography from within museums around the world, to tracking bowerbirds in the Kimberley."

With all these representations of birds fluttering around, I couldn't help but wonder what is it about birds that so captures our imagination. Of course birds appeal because so many are so beautiful, with their often extraordinary plumage, complex songs and lovely forms, and it is these kinds of birds we see rendered into the rather ubiquitous creatures that inhabit the art/craft markets. However, while not so popular as decorative motifs, the not-so-cute birds, such as crows and ravens, also inspire artists and writers. But regardless of their type, as creatures of the sky it is the other-worldliness of birds that is so compelling, as we envy their apparent freedom that comes of being able to defy gravity so readily. As such, it is no wonder birds inspire creative responses, so fittingly illustrated in Goya's wonderful image titled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, which shows a man (Goya's himself, it is presumed) asleep at his desk, while above him flutter a variety of winged creatures, which has been interpreted as a comment by Goya on the creative process.

The writers and artist in *Birdlife* respond to and use birds in a variety of ways. From the selected diary entries recording the real birds slaughtered by Captain Charles Fremantle and his team in 1829, to symbolic and metaphorical birds, and birds that haunt the text, rather than being clearly described, this little book is a fitting tribute to birds in their many forms – not just the cute ones. As such, it is a little book full of big ideas, and one that anyone with even a fleeting interest in birds should enjoy.

For more information see: http://www.lethologicapress.org/teapot/?page_id=985