

**[Review] Joshua Lobb, *The Flight of Birds: A Novel in Twelve Stories*,
Sydney University Press, 2019, 322pp.**

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This book feels good. The cover, designed by Miguel Yamin and Alexandra Guzmán, is smooth, matt laminated, with a luminous blue watercolour background that fades in places to white—designating clouds, perhaps, or sunspots? Three black cockatoos fly towards the top right-hand corner of the front cover. They are representations of the three black cockatoos who, in flight, came eye to eye with author Joshua Lobb as he walked across a rail bridge in North Wollongong, before they dropped and flew under the bridge. He writes about them in ‘Field Notes’ at the end of the book: ‘They were bewitching, remote, oblivious. They were in another world’ (215). In an interview with Siobhan O’Sullivan, Lobb describes this encounter and his realisation that, although the cockatoos inhabit the same space as humans, their experience of the world is different from his. That moment became *The Flight of Birds*, ‘a novel in twelve stories’, about how different intimate moments have a larger impact on the world (O’Sullivan). Each story has a different kind of bird at its centre, or around its edges, or diffused through it. Beautiful ink and watercolour drawings of the different birds or their habitats, by Amy Kersey, appear on the title page of each story. The typography, designed by Guzmán, is generous and unfussy. The paper is white and smooth. The binding is robust. *The Flight of Birds* is a lovely artefact.

After Lobb met the cockatoos on the bridge he started to think about what kind of stories birds might tell, though he is aware that ‘stories’ is a human word (O’Sullivan): ‘The stories I tell here are still told by a human and are about humans, but [...] telling human stories and asking the question “What might a bird’s story look like?” are not mutually exclusive activities’ (280). He decided early on that he ‘couldn’t attempt to represent a bird’s voice’ (238) but a number of the stories do focus on sound. In ‘What He Heard’ a man in the bush hears a lyrebird and imagines a lost child. In ‘Call and Response’ lovers go for a walk to listen to birds and, later, the sound of a koel aggravates one of them. In ‘Do You Speak My Language?’ a song is picked apart by lawsuits and we learn how kookaburras join in group songs. In ‘And No Birds Sing’ a man, whom readers by now know is the main character, taps his leg as he types a list of extinct birds; the birds make no noise but the man sobs and, in a flashback, wails.

The wail in this story is a cry of grief for the main character’s mother, who, after a long illness, died when he was a boy. It is also an articulation of the grief at the centre of *The Flight of Birds*. Although the novel addresses death in many forms, the tone is calm. Lobb

explains, ‘the book is about the grief that we feel because we have this disconnect from the world. We know that there are things that are going terribly wrong and yet we don’t engage with them’ (O’Sullivan). ‘Further to Fly’ shows this disconnect and Lobb admits to O’Sullivan that he finds it the hardest story to experience. It is plainly narrated in the third person, about a rosella and a man driving home from work: an everyday commute, a Paul Simon CD playing in the Subaru Outback, the thrill of driving. Yet there is a fork in the narrative: ‘This is what happened’ (98) veers away from ‘This is what didn’t happen’ (96). The reader desperately wants the main character to show compassion, as, say, Barry Lopez does in ‘Apologia’. The emotional effect of what happens and what doesn’t happen is made more powerful because, for me, the moment of greatest pathos occurs before the narrative splits, when the rosella waits ‘for what was going to happen’ (98). It is perhaps this moment that comes closest to the bird’s consciousness even though the point of view is that of an observer.

Other stories—‘What He Heard’, ‘Six Stories about Birds, with Seven Questions’, ‘Call and Response’ and ‘Nocturne’—finish with a focus on, respectively, a lyrebird, a budgerigar, a koel and a tawny frogmouth and what they might not be thinking about, wanting to find, waiting for, or not desiring to do, but Lobb is cautious about ‘speaking for’ birds (238). Instead he opens up a world with birds in it, and opens up nascent space for them to do things ‘on their own terms’ (223). This world is sensory and made strange with language. Lobb’s narrator does not want to use ‘easy verbs’ like ‘chirp or warble, screech or whistle’ to describe birds’ sounds (39). Instead machines and human-made things emit avian, animal sounds: ‘the train chatted’, ‘the carriage doors chirred’ (35), the ‘screen door yelps’ (42). The air is ‘shrill’ (36). A call ‘gashes the air’ (38). Things metamorphose: ‘Words drip—no, they waft’ (126).

The stories cannot be reduced to their synopses. In the paratextual ‘Field Notes’ Lobb provides a valuable elucidation of the scholarly field of Animal Studies (214-36) and explains how it informs his ‘experimental approach’, in which he explores ‘different, even contradictory propositions’ in fiction (234). There are reversals. In ‘Magpies’ a man exits the stationery cupboard through the window; birds enter through the same window and make a nest. The workplace bully is also a first-aider who shows care. Some stories are narrated in the third person, some in the first, one in the second. Naming is problematic, as Lobb elucidates in ‘Field Notes’ (241-44): only one human character is named; several bird characters bear the same name. Nevertheless, the human characters emerge: the main character, his parents, his wife, his daughter. The plot emerges too: the main character’s life—as a child with a sick mother and a taciturn father, as a social outcast at school, as a work colleague, as a father.

A vein of literary naturalism runs through these flawed characters. Moments such as when the main character forces his daughter to eat chicken, just as he was forced to eat chicken

when he was a child, show how, sometimes, characters are powerless to overcome their background. But nothing is closed down forever. In ‘Aves Admittant’, the penultimate story, the daughter has grown up, eats what she chooses, and works on a bird conservation program, which is modeled on a real research project (271). Despite the particularity of the place and the specificity of its topography, the narration—by the daughter in future tense: ‘I’ll be working as an island ecologist undertaking research on Cabbage Tree Island and my dad will come along as a volunteer assistant’—makes the story speculative. Whether or not the events described happen, time has not healed the main character, who seems to have become more paralysed, more traumatised.

Nevertheless, for a moment, from his daughter’s point of view, there is humour. They are disembarking from a small boat onto the island. The daughter leaps from boat to rocks and tells her father it’s his turn: ‘He won’t move. Not for the first time, I’ll wonder why I invited him’ (173). In contrast to the main character, the conservationists, full of care for the Gould’s petrels that they are trying to preserve in the face of rising sea levels and other challenges, are able to act. They build artificial nests, ‘boxes of Brunswick-green plastic, the entrance tunnel a section of polyethylene pipe’ (179); they translocate chicks to a site less affected by sea level rise; they feed the chicks by ‘inserting segments of squid and fish into their oesophagus’ (199). They ‘don’t have time for sadness’ (201). As they are out checking the nests the daughter picks up a chick and wants her father to touch it: “‘Please, Dad,’ I’ll say. The body will feel warm and alive in my hands. I’ll hold the bird out in front of me, like an offering ... I’ll offer this living being to my father ... This one will survive you picking it up and feeling its feathers’ (196-97). For this reader, the father’s inability, or refusal, to touch the chick serves as a counterpoint to the conservationists’ blithe handling of the birds’ bodies, whether they consent or not, and their confidence that their human ‘presence here is a very minor one’ (187).

The Flight of Birds experiments with genre. ‘Do You Speak My Language?’ meditates on theft, imitation, repetition and homage in an essay about the legal fall-out of pop group Men at Work’s adaptation of a musical phrase from a well-known children’s song, ‘Kookaburra’, in their 1981 release ‘Down Under’. The ‘Down Under’ discussion is framed by a kookaburra taking a piece of bacon from the narrator’s daughter’s breakfast plate. The narrator acknowledges that he is ‘not thinking about who the bacon was before it sizzled into the frying pan’ and the pig’s body is not mentioned again but it is an apt observation in a story about theft. Other stories, too, contain elements of that great conglomerate called ‘non-fiction’ and there is a useful discussion of the technique of ‘fictocriticism’ in ‘Field Notes’ (227-29). Some of the stories incorporate fable or fairytales; early on the main character and his daughter learn that ‘in fairy tales birds can often be the ultimate treasure’ (14). This explicit interplay of genres frees the narrative and I found it refreshing to read. It also plays with readers’ expectations in interesting ways. Like other readers (Lockwood and O’Sullivan) I thought that there may have been an autobiographical element to the main character’s story. The fiction/non-fiction blend may

have contributed to this impression. How can a book be both a novel, and non-fiction? Readers look for autobiographical clues. But verisimilitude comes from other elements too: details such as the order of songs on an old record (86-87); the incorporation of Australian television shows *Spicks and Specks* (64) and *Play School* (71) into the narrative; the way the main character's habitual mannerisms are described in ethological rather than psychological terms: 'he keeps his hands firmly against his body, squeezing his elbows into his rib cage' (54); and the way his trauma is depicted not as a memory but as a symptom: 'The wail will always be there, washing over his skin. He will never stop wailing. There is always more to come' (167).

Despite apparent differences in form between the stories, Lobb's substantial achievement has been to create a cohesive whole in which the parts flow and the patterns resonate. Interlocking and open-ended, the stories are rich with fragments from poems and other texts, which perform many functions, including as protective amulets and proof of the existence of other consciousnesses. *The Flight of Birds* creates space for the consciousness of both humans and birds.

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