



A Time of Birds: Reflections on Cycling Across Europe

Helen Moat

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Helen Moat's layered travel memoir *A Time of Birds* is about cycling from Rotterdam to Istanbul.

In 2014, Moat set off with her eighteen-year-old son to tour Europe by bicycle. They followed the Rhine from the North Sea to the Swiss Alps, and pedaled along the Danube through Eastern Europe to the Black Sea, eventually reaching the Sea of Marmara and the gateway to Asia. The narrative's segments cover each area they traveled in, with clear maps for handy reference.

Moat writes that she is not a typical cyclist—neither lean, nor fit, nor an owner of a sophisticated performance bicycle. Yet she yearned to indulge her wanderlust after escaping a demoralizing teaching job, and to chase away her lingering depression (feared to be an inheritance from her father, a bird-watcher then ailing in a care home). Her travel narrative focuses on her reactions to her surroundings, showing how they reminded her of her Protestant childhood in rural Ulster during Ireland's Troubles. Songbirds and water birds encountered along the way remind her of her conflicted relationship with her father, too.

The book's descriptions of the natural world are lyrical and immediate. Moat recounts the topography and geography of each location as she and her son pedal south; she comments on historical events, too, that changed the landscape and its residents. She takes note of how nationalism, tribalism, and ethnic tension cause upheavals, displacing people within the regions she visited.

People met along the way are captured, too: open-minded immigrants; those who personally witnessed war and its impacts. Some stew in the past; others prefer to forget. Among them all, Moat finds connections and a new sense of perspective. *A Time of Birds* is a pleasant, reflective travel narrative about a bike tour through Europe, noting its histories of upheaval and change.

WENDY HINMAN (July / August 2022)

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