

★ **Avian Illuminations: A Cultural History of Birds**

Boria Sax

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Captivating and graced with exquisite illustrations, Boria Sax's *Avian Illuminations* blends history, folklore, art, literature, and ornithology to explain why birds are such an integral part of human dreams and aspirations.

Birds have always figured large in the human imagination: inspiring artists and inventors, serving as omens and messengers of the gods, and even being revered as deities. Their behavior was said to affect the outcome of battles; during World War II, ravens were used to spot enemy planes. The intricate cooperation of humans and birds in the hunt is noted, too, but the book's most moving example of how birds enrich human life comes in the late twentieth century story of a dying pet parrot who had been taught over one hundred English words over a period of thirty years, and who spoke his last words to his human companion: "I love you."

The book points out similarities between birds and humans: the shared dominance of sight and hearing; elaborate courtship rituals; care of the young in often-monogamous nuclear families; travel or migration over long distances; and building semi-permanent residences in specific locations. But the relations between humans and birds have not always been kind. The book cites the masses of dead birds featured in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European paintings celebrating the abundance of game; the slaughter of millions of birds in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to adorn women's hats with feathers and all manner of avian body parts; and Mao Zedong's 1958 mobilization of most of China's population to rid the country of sparrows. Today, pollution, pesticides, and habitat destruction contribute to their demise.

Avian Illuminations, with its rich content and glorious illustrations, educates, entertains, and aims a body-blow to human pride with its reminder that when birds reigned as dinosaurs, human ancestors were still "relatively small marsupial-like balls of fur."

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 2021)

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