



Song of the Vagabond Bird

Terry Kay

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With equal parts insightful and humorous, this soul-searching venture blurs the line between reality and insanity.

Song of the Vagabond Bird, by Terry Kay, is the story of a man desperate to forget the woman he loves.

Five men on an island for ten days of intensive therapy—it sounds like the premise of a reality show, but the result is much more raw and genuine. Each of the men goes by a pseudonym—the narrator is Bloodworth—and is obsessed with a woman. They all sign up for Dr. Carson X. Willingham’s seminar in hopes of freedom. The story slowly unravels the men’s shared experience and neuroses, particularly Bloodworth’s relationship with and loss of Kalee. Throughout his time on the island, Bloodworth composes (but does not send) letters to Kalee and signs them with forced impartiality: Your Correspondent.

The narrator’s pseudonym is the last name of the therapist who recommended this program; this device allows Kay to intentionally blur the lines of the narrator’s voice, remembered words of his therapist, and what increasingly seems like multiple personalities. The therapist’s insistent voice grows and mutates in the narrator’s consciousness. The narrative pace and suspense build as the image of the moment when the narrator lost Kalee sharpens. His complicated internal voice makes it hard to tell whether he is getting closer to sanity or farther away.

Dr. Carson X. Willingham is another well-wielded tool of intrigue. His ideas are at once sensible and unconventional: “Men are relatively truthful only if they are able to maintain the dignity of some secret.” And, “You can take group dynamics only so far. Too much group leaves too little person.” His methods can be gentle—a night of playing checkers, for instance—but he is far from a warm, coddling voice: “When we talked about your childhoods before, it was a miserable session. You bored me, you bored your companions, you bored yourselves.”

The narrator’s voice is friendly, conversational, and confessional. The group interactions are quite often humorous.

While the soul-searching themes are prevalent in literature with female characters, Kay deftly adapts them to a male perspective, and does so without trivializing or demonizing women. Kay speaks to men without alienating women and reaches anyone who’s navigated soul-deep pain.

Song of the Vagabond Bird is a well-woven tale of obsession, honesty, and the hope of healing.

MELISSA WUSKE (Winter 2015)

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