



# H is for Hawk

## Author Background

### Helen Macdonald

**Born:** 1970

**Raised:** Camberley, Surrey

**Lives:** Cambridgeshire, UK

Helen Macdonald grew up in Camberley in Surrey. She was already obsessed by birds of prey by the age of eight and says that she was bullied at school because of her solitary nature, and her fascination with falcons.

As a child Macdonald's family used to travel with the *AA Book of the Countryside* and she learnt her way through many creatures and sights, farm animals and tractors, crops and clouds, on weekend drives together. Macdonald says of this book, "*When I was a child I wasn't sure what the AA was, but in large part the organisation made the countryside for me. Even today some of my memories of landscapes turn out to be photographs from this book...*" <sup>1</sup>

Macdonald is described, in an interview with Patrick Barkham, as "a strikingly unconventional polymath. A poet, historian, naturalist and illustrator, she has also worked as a professional falconer and has bred and trained hawks for Arab sheikhs".<sup>2</sup> She describes herself on her twitter feed as a "*writer-naturalist-historian-falconer*."

Macdonald came to write her book *H is for Hawk* five years after the year that she found herself "approaching her 40s without family, job or home and then – very suddenly – in mourning. Her father, who had been an initial coach and companion in her childhood passion for birds, dropped dead with no warning and left her bereft".<sup>3</sup> She spent the year holed up with a Goshawk - called Mabel, from the Latin *amabilis* meaning lovable or dear - and training her, grieving, remembering and finally, beginning to heal.

<sup>1</sup>Helen Macdonald: the six books that made me, *The Guardian Australia*, 29/1/15

<sup>2</sup>Patrick Barkham, *The Guardian Australia*, 2/8/14

<sup>3</sup>Review, Mark Cocker, *The Guardian Australia*, 23/7/14

Sources: Helen Macdonald: a bird's eye view of love and loss, Stephen Moss, *The Guardian Australia*, 6/11/14; Helen Macdonald 'I ran to the hawk because I was broken and grieving', review by Vicki Constantine Croke, *The New York Times*, 2/19/15.



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## Book Summary

### H is for Hawk

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

**\*\*WINNER OF THE COSTA BOOK OF THE YEAR\*\***

**\*\*WINNER OF THE SAMUEL JOHNSON PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION\*\***

**\*\*WINNER OF THE PRIX DU MEILLEUR LIVRE ÉTRANGER\*\***

As a child, Helen Macdonald was determined to become a falconer, learning the arcane terminology and reading all the classic books. Years later, when her father died and she was struck deeply by grief, she became obsessed with the idea of training her own goshawk. She bought Mabel for £800 on a Scottish quayside and took her home to Cambridge, ready to embark on the long, strange business of trying to train this wildest of animals.

*H is for Hawk* is an unflinchingly honest account of Macdonald's struggle with grief during the difficult process of the hawk's taming and her own untaming. This is a book about memory, nature and nation, and how it might be possible to reconcile death with life and love.

Heart-wrenching and humorous, this book is an unflinching account of bereavement and a unique look at the magnetism of an extraordinary beast, with a parallel examination of a legendary writer's eccentric falconry. Obsession, madness, memory, myth, and history combine to achieve a distinctive blend of nature writing and memoir from an outstanding literary innovator.



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## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the taming of Mabel mirror Helen's own journey of healing and self-discovery?
2. When Helen was young, she remembers her father telling her that "when you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still, stay in same place, remember how much you wanted to see it, and be patient." (p 8) How is being patient important to Helen throughout this book?
3. Helen has lost her father and is grieving. Did you find yourself drawn to her in sympathy or empathy? Were there times when you found her less sympathetic?
4. "The book you are reading is my story," Helen writes. "It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White. But White is part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there." (p 38) How does T.H. White's life story help the reader understand Helen's journey?
5. Helen finds her father's photographs help her feel that something of him remains, although he has gone. Does this resonate with your experience of the grieving process? What material things have become important to you after the loss of a loved one?
6. After living several days with her hawk in her flat, Helen observes, "I was turning into a hawk" (p 85). What do you think she means?



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## Discussion Questions (continued)

7. Helen describes training a hawk in close detail. Does that engage you or are other parts of the narrative equally or more important to you?

8. Helen describes herself as “a watcher” (p 68): a characteristic she says has both positive and negative aspects. How does being visible or invisible change in significance as Helen trains Mabel?

9. When Mabel catches a pheasant, Helen helps her pluck the pheasant as “unconsciously as a mother helping a child with her dinner.” (p 184) Then, as the hawk eats, she starts to cry. Did this seem like a turning point in the story to you?

10. This is a story of a woman grieving in a highly unusual way. It is a deeply personal story but what makes it universal? How does it speak to your own life experience?

11. "Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human," says Helen (p 195) What do you think prevents her from going over that edge?

*Just for fun*

12. Have you ever been gripped by a brilliant obsession, moved either by grief and loss or something else. How did you, or did you, extricate yourself and how were you changed by it?





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## Reviews

If birds are made of air, as the nature writer Sy Montgomery says, then writing a great bird book is a little like dusting for the fingerprints of a ghost. It calls for poetry and science, conjuring and evidence. In her breathtaking new book, *H Is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald renders an indelible impression of a raptor's fierce essence — and her own — with words that mimic feathers, so impossibly pretty we don't notice their astonishing engineering.

The premise of her memoir is simple: Macdonald loses her bearings after her beloved father's sudden death. She retreats from the human world. She's a poet, historian and long-time falconer, and for complicated reasons, she seizes upon a strange yet sublime prescription for what ails her: She will raise and train a young goshawk, a cur of a bird to some, notoriously difficult to tame. Bigger, "bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier," she says, than other hawks they are sometimes confused with.

Vicki Constantine Croke, *The New York Times*

I can't remember the last time a book made me feel so many different things in such quick succession. It's difficult to be with grief. It's exhausting; your life-grabbing instinct is to get away from it, which is what makes it so lonely for those in its grasp. There were times when I felt like I could not bear another moment of Macdonald's sadness. It's fair to say that she goes a little mad. But then she would head out with Mabel on her arm, and it was as though the clouds had cleared, every sentence a blessing, like the sunshine of early spring.

Her descriptive writing, startling and devilishly precise whether she is in woodland "washed pewter with frost" or chalky fields with a "furry tint" of tiny tillers, is only the half of it. She has written her taming of Mabel like a thriller, slowly and carefully cranking the tension so that your stomach and heart leap queasily towards each other. Always, you're waiting for the moment when Mabel at last flies free. Will she return safely to Macdonald's fist?

Rachel Cooke, *The Guardian Australia*



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## Reviews (continued)

There is a highly polished brilliance to her writing and the short staccato declamatory sentence, sometimes of just a single word, is almost a signature of her style. Yet the syntax carries a persistent subliminal message of stress and anxiety and when we are presented with her repeated, if unsparingly honest, declarations of grief it is as if we already know it before she tells us. The total effect is a seeming excess of strong emotion.

Yet elsewhere she deploys the same stylistic elements to immense effect. One good example is her evocation of her hawk's own psychology. More than any other writer I know, including her beloved White, Macdonald is able to summon the mental world of a bird of prey. There is one classic moment when she meets the young Mabel for the first time. She conjures the shock of the encounter and simultaneously manages to get inside the head of the bird. "My heart jumps sideways," she recalls, "She is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water."

Mark Cocker, *The Guardian Australia*

*H Is for Hawk* includes an irritating mix of the personal and confessional: "Here's a word: Bereavement. Or, Bereaved. Bereft. It's from the Old English bereafian, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'. Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try."

Macdonald's style veers between clipped and businesslike asides, passages of purple prose and heavily descriptive interludes, as well as updates on her personal life and despair. *H is for hawk*, but *H* is also for Helen, and there is far more Helen here than hawk, which presents a problem for a reader interested in reading a book about the ancient art of falconry as practised today.

Eileen Battersby, *The Irish Times*