



The Bird Catcher

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Margret Snow is the quintessential New York woman. She dresses the windows of Saks Fifth Avenue by day and mingles in the downtown art world by night. Married to Charles, a professor at Columbia, they live on the Upper West Side, where, carefully camouflaged within their hectic Manhattan lives, they share a mutual passion for bird watching. When Margret's life is violently shaken by tragedy, however, she discovers a means to transform her obsession with birds and her own unlocked imagination into an ambitious, healing work of art. *The Bird Catcher* is a witty, poignant story about a remarkable woman who is as distinctive as the birds that fill the skies above her.

The Bird Catcher Details

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From Reader Review The Bird Catcher for online ebook

Amy says

Bird watching is a very subtle hobby. Birders focus on the small things that are around us all the time, ignored by the masses of people who may be nearby. Birders have patience and a quiet, inquisitive mind that enables them to pursue a specimen in any kind of weather, and go where ever the search may take them. In Central Park, it's especially imaginative to think of these bird lovers spending their free moments searching, admiring, and carrying nothing away but their memory.

This is the backstory to The Bird Catcher. The lead character Margaret falls in love with a fellow birder, a man named Charles who is actually one of her professors. They spend their early courtship exploring birds in Manhattan. In her real life, she's a window dresser for Saks, and she assists her friend Emily in acquiring unique pieces for an art gallery. These three form the backbone of the book, and each of them are well-developed characters. The story doesn't fall into any expected formula, and the characters are actually very interesting. Jacobs manages to display each characters unique personality by showing what they say and do. While the main characters are female, I wouldn't dream of calling this "chick lit"; it has more depth and more complexity by far.

Conceptually, this is a great book. However, I had numerous issues with the story itself. First, we learn early that Charles has passed away, but we aren't told how or when, which builds a curiosity as you read. Margaret seems to be explaining her relationship with him in flashbacks, but it's never entirely clear what is past and what is present. Even through the end, when you discover what happened to Charles, the explanation feels too brief to understand her resulting grief. Their relationship appears perfect, and the cynic in me can't imagine everything that wonderful. In addition, for a talented woman, she spends a terribly large amount of time worrying over her parents approval (she didn't finish college). She also seems strangely reserved around other people, which is odd because she describes herself as an extrovert.

A few other things struck me as off: while the descriptions of the art of window dressing for sales is fascinating, her description of her gay coworkers plays to stereotypes and is insulting in its own way. All of them appear flighty, silly, babyish, and primadonna queens. She seems to want to describe this professional career but ends up mocking the workers who put it together with such art. Additionally, she and her friend Emily are very fluent in the high-brow culture scene in New York: art, opera, and fashion. I consider myself having a good basic knowledge of popular art, but I understood maybe a tenth of the references to current artists. All of this almost feels like she's telling the reader "if you don't understand, you're an imbecile", since so much of the story is dependent on understanding the art references or the works of a particular obscure designer. It's never a good idea to make your reader feel stupid! Sure, I could have looked them up, but there were so many, I really didn't feel like doing the homework. It felt a tiny bit pretentious.

On a positive note, her explanations of the actual window dressing is interesting, and her friend's art gallery

holds interest as she explains how the provenance of different objects can be manipulated for profit. The biggest bit of unexpected knowledge is Margaret's interest and decision to learn taxidermy, and the details of this further hobby are more interesting than I'd expected. This isn't a bad novel, and the quick pace makes it very readable...at times I did get overwhelmed by names and brands, but I finished it with a sense of contemplation.

Smay says

Some really beautiful writing and a touching exploration of grief and personal growth. But I often got lost in all the birding jargon and the NYC and art references. Difficult to follow if it's not your world.

John Jr. says

If the editorial reviews currently quoted at Amazon are any guide (and I'm not sure they are), Laura Jacobs's first novel, *Women About Town*, may have been more widely admired than this, her second. Thought it's been some time since I read the former (and, for that matter, it's been a while since I finished the latter), I'm inclined to think that *The Bird Catcher* is an advance, in ways both large and small, over Jacobs's earlier work.

In this book, Jacobs has raised the stakes for Margaret Snow, her central character (there's only one this time around), and for herself. For her character, there are bigger challenges to deal with. For Jacobs, there's a more ambitious thematic scheme (based in part on oppositions such as art and nature, observing and making, detachment and engagement), a more complex narrative structure, and an attempt to deal with longing and loss and that troubling question of deciding how to use oneself in the world.

Margaret is a window dresser, although there's enough interweaving of past and present that one must say she is also a young girl being initiated into the mysteries of bird-watching by her grandfather, and a graduate student pursuing art history, and a number of other things as well. Jacobs is so good at devising and reading shop windows that the phrase "window dressing" seems an unjust dismissal; still, just as there's something out-of-the-mainstream about windows, so is there something peripheral, not quite on the path, about Margaret's place in the world. To use the Manhattan terminology, she has encounters with the downtown art scene and the world of uptown dinner parties, not to mention an increasingly intimate involvement with birds and birding and birders. (Many of the novel's pleasures come from this last; even if you're not one who thrills simply to hear the names of some of these creatures, you'll have to have a high degree of immunity not to want to go out and see some of them yourself after reading this.) But you can't help feeling, as some of the other characters do, that Margaret could be doing more, and the working out of what that more will be is satisfying enough that I'd count this as a novel about growing up even though it's not about being young.

Many reviews (and a *Publishers Weekly* excerpt that's likely to show up) have chosen to reveal something that comes up on page 59 of this 292-page novel, as if it were part of the situation, not the development. While it is part of Margaret Snow's situation, the way it emerges, and the fact of it not being disclosed at the outset, seems to me an essential part of the way the novel works, one of its prizes as well as one of its surprises. Instead of naming it, I'll say only that there's a hurt in this book, one of those things that smolders

underground, like a coal-mine fire that can't be put out.

The Bird Catcher is more lyrical than dramatic, but that's not a criticism. Luckily for us, fiction nowadays is far less subject than mainstream film is to the expectation of eventfulness. Though there is action and drama here, one is apt to remember conversation and tone and evocation as much as anything else.

Nothing I've said yet conveys what it feels like to read the novel. Maybe a sentence from the opening chapter will be enough of a taste: "They had discussed this subject often: the power of beauty, how it takes you, and the attempt to turn the table and take it, and that's where the trouble begins."

Margaret Dee says

My daughter, Stephanie recommended this book. It takes place in NYC. I almost missed my "L" stop this morning as I started the book.

Edgy book dealing with loss, creation and the ability to move on.

Caroline says

Grief is personal. Coping with grief is also personal. We all have our own methods of coping with the grief of losing a loved one. Grief can be so consuming that it leaves one unaware of how our grief changes the way we treat our friends and family, and also how the behavior of those who love and care about us shifts to make allowances for the self-centeredness we sometimes unthinkingly wallow in.

I loved this book. It was quiet. It was poignant. It's the story of a woman who dresses windows in Saks and who loves birds. It's a story about a woman and her relationship with her grandfather, her soulmate and her best friend. It's a story of a woman who finds herself adrift after a tragic event. As certain events in her life appear to spiral out of her control, it's also a story of a woman who gradually finds her way again and sees light at the end of a dark tunnel.

There are some good descriptions of birds found in Central Park, NY and incredible details in the art of taxidermy - at least the taxidermy of birds which I found fascinating, but which I can see might revolt those with a lighter stomach for this art.

I liked how the story focused on this one woman, Margret, and her love of birds, and how her thoughts and fears were gradually shared. We know she has a secret with the birds she looks for, but we're not quite sure what she's doing. There are little hints that all is not well in her life at the start of the book, but we're not given the full details until much later, after we've already started to suspect a tragedy and we're already starting to feel we want to wrap her in our arms. While we may not whoop out loud at the end of her journey, there is a definite lift in our spirits as we see her start to straighten her shoulders, lift her head and look forward with clear eyes and a spring in her step.

Ariel Miranda says

For the birds.

Stephanie says

I had an eerie feeling like this book was written for me as I was reading it (a la *The Neverending Story*), but in a nightmare sense in some ways. The protagonist is married to a middle-eastern man, is a birdwatcher and insect collector, and there are elements from the dance world in it, too. After suffering a staggering loss, this thirty-something New Yorker has to pick up the pieces of her life and get on with it. The timeline jumps around a bit, but in such a fluid way that you are not distracted by it. Jacobs' descriptive language, combining art and the natural world, was highly enjoyable. Her characters also really popped for me, which was fun because they are about my age and living fairly glamorous lives in a vibrant city. A very fast and engrossing read.

Sharon says

Margret Snow is lonely and figuratively lost at sea. After the tragic loss of her husband, Charles, she loses interest in her promising job of dressing windows at her friend Emily's art gallery and at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City. Instead, she is a secret, amateur taxidermist by night, finding small dead birds in the city parks and near buildings to take home and stuff. "[She] always had a Baggie in her pocket, just in case she found something fallen." Margret's fascination with birds started with her Grandfather Milton who was a birder and entomologist who took her bird watching when she was young.

Jacobs' writing is poetic and very descriptive, especially in the way she describes Margret's love of birds. "To find them and lift them off the ground. To hold them weightless in her hand. To smooth with the side of a finger the nape of a broken neck. It filled Margret, this ownership of something that cannot be owned."

This is a novel about a woman with an unusual hobby, but the story is good and encourages you to find out what happens to Margret and her bird collection. I also enjoyed the detailed descriptions of Margret's window dressing projects. A fascinating job unto itself.

Thank you to Laura Jacobs and LibraryThing's Early Reviewers for giving me the opportunity to review this book. You may find more information on Laura Jacobs at <http://www.laurajacobs.info/>.

Louise Chambers says

This was an absolutely mesmerizing read. I could not put it down. Perhaps the combination of artist/birdwatcher caught me, perhaps the rigorous transformation that the main character undergoes magnetized me, perhaps it was the quality of the narrative and the writing.

Katy says

This is a rather disjointed story of a young woman's re-entry into life following the death of her husband. It is also a New York story with characters from the art, theater, and academic world. The writing was sometimes quite good, but overall the the story was thin and not compelling.

Jennifer Shelby says

This is a book that centers around an unspoken tragedy. The author flirts with this tragedy through flashbacks, innuendo, and some well-timed hints, but we never get to live those moments in the book. This may be a kindness to the reader - we never have to feel that pain - and it puts us at a strange position where we stand over and watch the intimate details of grief without ever really experiencing true empathy. That felt odd to me, but at the same time it was this same strange distance that allows the reader to understand the art and passion behind the taxidermy in the story from the heroine's perspective, which is no small feat. All in all, this a mature, sombre book, and masterfully crafted.

Diane says

Not sure what I thought of this book. At first it seems the author is very enthralled with name dropping so many polysyllabic words, places, names etc. I was a bit put off. But, I continued on and the plot evolved and had a nice warm ending. It wasn't anything that rocked my world.

Allyson says

This was such a movingly sad or poignant book. Her descriptive passages are so deftly done, I had no realization of reading. The cover lured me in and she continued with such a little gem of a book. Really I have no criticisms as the reading experience was so sublime.

Cattfrancisco says

While there are some excellent descriptive passages about NYC, birds, and central park, there was something really "off" about this story - at least for me. It did, however, make me want to find out more about the artist Joseph Cornell and his work.

Meghan says

This was a beautiful little book. It was deeply sad, but the writing and Jacobs' art knowledge kept it from being maudlin. So did the birds - with their implicit airness, I suppose - and I really wanted to own one of Margret's shadow boxes. They sounded beautiful and a real meditation on life and death. My only complaint

was that the characters seemed much older than they were meant to be.
