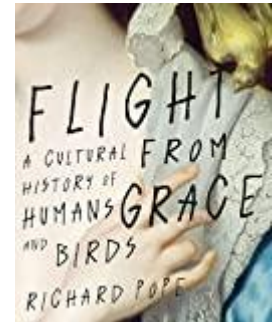




Richard Pope. *Flight from Grace: A Cultural History of Humans and Birds.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 304 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-228-00530-8.



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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Flight from Grace: A Cultural History of Humans and Birds by Richard Pope is an eclectic mixture of mythology, religion, poetry and literature, music, art, artifacts, and science. It is one of symbolism, where even the birds he writes about become a symbol of nature and the harm we humans have inflicted on it (p. 248). The book itself is a sweeping look at the effects birds have had on our human culture and how we are in turn affecting them. The book accomplishes a lot in its short span and is one more book to add to the extensive historiography surrounding birds. If you are working on a project about birds, exactly how many books do you need to read?

In the preface, Pope breaks down exactly the number of books he would have to read about birds if he only spent ten years on the projects (the number is over seven hundred thousand books a day) (p. xi). I add this just to reassure you that perhaps you don't need to read every single book about birds. Pope's book is worth the read if you are looking for a birds-eye view of the topic and want an engaging narrator to guide you through;

if you are looking to drill down into a certain time period, pick a different one. It is not that Pope's book is the wrong one to read—it is because Pope's account provides an overview of a very long history, best suited to read for pleasure.

As a nonspecialist, I thought this book was an agreeable read because I felt like I was in the hands of someone capable, someone with the requisite experience to show me through the story. It becomes apparent early that Pope is confident as a writer and as a commentator. I appreciated this confidence because it made me feel more self-assured to question Pope's assertions and arguments. Pope is a retired professor of Russian literature and culture, and a lifelong birder. His literature background and birding activities yield interesting comments and critiques on many of the sources Pope draws upon.

Pope is unafraid to question the experts and offers his own conclusions throughout. For example, Pope homes in on a discussion of whether the vulture served at the center of an ancient cult:

“A cautious lot, not over quick to draw conclusions about the vulture in the Neolithic too far, although they all suspect serious cult status—which seems to me a given” (p. 67). Pope can also be quite felicitous in the footnotes; they often contain gems of commentary and additional information. For example, see note 59 for chapter 5 on p. 257 for a discussion on owls that did not quite fit the main narrative but provides pertinent information nonetheless. And to see Pope’s writing voice and humor shine, see note 32 on p. 261. Throughout the book, Pope demonstrates his widespread reading and actively engages in debate with the many sources (even if he did not read over seven hundred thousand books a day for this project).

Pope’s writing style is approachable, making the book very pleasant to read. Overall, there is very little to criticize. My one regret was that he did not include more about the role of women in the early bird cults he focuses on. Pope does a commendable job covering such a large time period of human history. He writes, “I hope that I have exposed and established the underpinnings of the ancient and deep connection between humans and birds and have demonstrated that from time immemorial birds have played an inordinately large role in the human psyche” (p. 132). Pope accomplishes this with this lovely illustrated and compelling book.

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