Reviews

Mya-Rose Craig. *Birdgirl: Discovering the Power of Our Natural World.* Vintage, 2023.

311 pages. Paperback, USD 19.68.
ISBN: 9781529114317.

Mya-Rose Craig's second book, *Birdgirl* (first published 2022), is a memoir of her youth. Though the author is still only twenty-two and finishing her undergraduate degree at the University of Cambridge, her book is based on posts from her blog that she started in 2014, aged just twelve. The focus of *Birdgirl* is the Craig family's passion for birding, alternatively known as twitching or birdwatching, and Mya-Rose's highly unusual childhood which involved extensive global travel. A Bangladeshi-Brit, she is increasingly known for her promotion of climate justice, and campaigning for people from VME (Visibly Minority Ethnic) groups engaging in nature. In 2020, at age seventeen, she became the youngest Briton to receive an honorary doctorate. She founded a charity, Black2Nature, which organises summer camps for VME people in Britain, and shared a stage at Cop26 (the 26th United Nations Conference on Climate Change) in Glasgow in 2021 with two other girl activists: Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. Although not as globally recognised, Mya-Rose began blogging three years before Greta Thunberg emerged on the global stage, as the author herself observes (170). This communion with other young activists shows the importance of this generation for galvanising others to care about the natural world. Early in the book Mya-Rose includes an anecdote about how the Spoon-billed Sandpiper bird has been brought back from the brink of extinction due to public awareness and renewed intervention strategies by conservationists. Her own awareness-raising directly contributed to the protection of this rare bird.

As we know from Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti's *Life Narratives and Youth Culture* (2016), blogging, selfies and social media make up some of the most ubiquitous forms of life narrative accessed by young people today. Mya-Rose is also a more traditional life writer: in writing *Birdgirl* she has referred back to diaries that she kept throughout her childhood. There is a rich history of girl writers who were inspired by the natural world, from Dorothy Wordsworth's *The Grasmere Journals* (1800–03) to the *Journal of Emily Shore* (1831–39) and the *Diary of Opal*

Whiteley (1903–04). A more obscure example is the juvenilia of Isobel Wylie Hutchison (1889–1982), the Scottish explorer and botanist who published poetry and books describing her travels to Alaska, Iceland, and Greenland. As a child, Hutchison contributed to *The Horticultural Magazine* and later *The Scribbler*, both manuscript magazines created by her and her siblings, covering topics on botany and gardening. Like Hutchison's, Mya-Rose Craig's childhood writing about the natural world was a linchpin of family life.

Mya's encyclopaedic knowledge of birds, and her ability to describe them in accessible ways, communicate a genuine love and warmth. "Twitchers" are also characterised by their obsessiveness and propensity to collect. In 2009 she started a "Big Year"—a competition with herself to see how many birds she could see. Interspersed with stories of world travel and adventure, the memoirs combine nature writing and travel writing. Taken out of primary school for six months, Mya travels to South America for bird-watching across three countries. She recounts stories of chewing on coca leaves to relieve symptoms of altitude sickness and of having to have a maggot extracted from her scalp. She travels across Australia, America, Africa, Indonesia; she sees whales, Komodo dragons, and chimpanzees in their natural habitats—an unintentional perk of her birdwatching voyages.

The memoirs begin not with a picture of Mya-Rose's infancy, but with an account of her family history. She describes how her parents met in a Bristol club in 1995: "The condensation dripped off the vaulted cellar walls as they made eye contact through a throng of gyrating bodies" (7). In imagining her youthful and love-struck parents she demonstrates the importance of shared dynastic histories in children's writing: an aspect that has been identified by the scholars Arianne Baggerman and Kathryn Gleadle. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the young author's parents feature prominently in both the text and the paratext of *Birdgirl*. From a young age, Mya-Rose is aware of her mother's struggle with bipolar disorder. The illness's characteristic fluctuation between mania and depression complicates home life and birding trips, but their shared hobby provides some respite. Mya's sympathetic narration depicts a turbulent family dynamic, her mother's illness amounting to moments of tyranny during their far-flung and already strenuous birding expeditions (264). In a memorable passage, Mya-Rose recounts one of her mother's suicide attempts, and how her father responded by planning another birding trip. Referring to their financial facility to do so, the author comments somewhat jarringly, "I'm a lucky girl, aren't I" (91).

Mya-Rose also depicts the awkwardness that she felt in engaging in her hobby during adolescence. She recounts how during her secondary school IT classes certain pupils would click on online news stories featuring the Craig family and tease Mya-Rose about them, and how she would carefully curate her Instagram account to not exhibit her birding fixation too explicitly, posting pictures of penguins instead of Snow Petrels (226). In her growing activism, she "found it less scary to talk to thousands of people online about systemic racism than to challenge the boy I was sitting next to in maths about his Islamophobia" (274). Eventually, Mya-Rose learns to own her "Birdgirl" sobriquet and not compartmentalise her life. Yet the author is only at the start of her career, and

Birdgirl ends on a note of "anticipation" and "hope" (302), which seems appropriate for a young person who has already achieved so much.

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William Harrison Ainsworth. *December Tales. A Selection.* Edited by Ryan Twomey with Jennifer Simkins. Juvenilia Press, 2024.

60 pages, 9 sepia. Paperback, AUD 20.00.
ISBN: 9780733433740.

THIS HANDSOME volume does credit to the Juvenilia Press's production values. The cover reproduces a miniature of William Harrison Ainsworth at twenty-one, showing a Byronic or swashbuckling hairstyle above a baby face, like a child dressing up. Further sepia illustrations capture aspects of the period, from busy all-male sociability to twilight solitude.

Ainsworth was eighteen when these tales (with another half-dozen not included here) reached print: the second book of his young life. His precocity and teenage angst included playing at being near his life's end, witness this volume's title, and the persona adopted for "The Churchyard": "I am not young: I am, indeed, approaching to the period when I shall cease to indite these dotings of age."

Already, however, Ainsworth was skilled in handling the market, hitting the taste of the day. His quotations and borrowed phrases reflect a love for late, minor Romantics, and some phrasing passed from him to the better-known Edgar Allan Poe. He made his mark on literary history, that is, far beyond the dreams of most juvenile writers, before achieving best-sellerdom with historical melodramas like *Rookwood* (1834), featuring, indeed almost inventing, the highwayman Dick Turpin, *The Tower of London* (1840), and *The Lancashire Witches* (1848). His popularity, however, proved briefer than that of his early associate Charles Dickens.

Ainsworth has recently featured in a very different historical novel, Zadie Smith's *The Fraud*. Smith depicts him as elderly but unromantic, soured by the ebbing of his fame. Her selections from his prose in his palmy days are a luxuriant garland of clichés, flung out with immense narrative energy and panache.

Ryan Twomey's introduction dwells on the natural description in these early stories, whose outpourings of words evoke scenes of secluded bowers,

overarching forests, or violent storms and desolate wilderness. Landscape is steeped in fantastical human imagination: rocks and forests evoke ideas of ogres and spirits, often of malign intent.

The emotion in these stories is paramount: both events and background exist to feed it, and events seldom constitute the kind of developing sequence constituting plot. The narrator of the first tale, "Mary Stukeley," passes over his entire childhood and adolescence as an "uninterrupted course of happiness" having no interest. He then falls in love with Mary "among the most beautiful scenery I ever knew," who accepts his proposal. On his wedding eve he walks out and observes another walker, a woman of striking looks, who appears to hide "a lurking trace of the darker passions" under a disguising air of softness. She falls and sprains her ankle. He helps her walk until, resting in "a spot, the most delightful I ever beheld," she plucks him a flower, he falls at her feet, and is discovered thus by Mary, whose brother then challenges him to a duel.

Rushing out in emotional anguish to fight, the narrator is accosted by the now detested mystery woman with news that the brother has been murdered by someone unknown; he is suspected and must flee to London. She supplies him with money and a horse, reaches the refuge before him, and later extracts a promise to marry her. He promises; she plunges into remorse and releases him from his promise, but out of despair he marries her anyway. We learn her name, Eliza. She earns enough money to support them both. Her husband continues to suppose she "is probably of violent and irregular passions," but without observing any: her conduct is beyond reproach.

Unable to bear subsisting on her exertions any longer, and liberated by the discovery of the real murderers, he travels to the scene of his earlier traumas hoping to recover his property. Meeting Mary by chance, he clasps her in his arms, and soon marries her without mentioning his existing wife. This marriage brings him no happiness, only guilt, shame, and misery, both before and after he reveals all to Mary. Her health declines from this moment, and she dies, leaving him to wander the world in misery and despair.

These events form a frail scaffolding for mental torment and social alienation. Similarly, the narrator of "The Sea-Spectre" endures a storm, near-shipwreck, starving in lifeboats which some do not survive (the captain heaves one corpse overboard just in time to prevent cannibalism), being washed up with other crew members on a desert island, and further starving, all before they learn the cause. Years before, a crew had mutinied in those waters. Ever since, wrecks are common there, and a spectral woman is seen pursuing and drowning a man: the widow of the murdered captain taking her revenge on the mutineers' ringleader.

Assertive women like Eliza and the murdered captain's wife bring trouble in these stories. Even their converse, those possessing "the serenity of a pure and blameless mind," seldom bring happiness. An exception is the "lovely creature" who nurses to recovery and then marries the battered protagonist of "The Falls of Ohiopyle". The man who first jilts and then marries Mary Stukeley finds both lead equally to misery. The narrator's former schoolmate R----, who first loves and then loses an ideal woman in "The Church-Yard", turns that piece at its ending to misery from mere melancholy.

The textual editing for this volume consisted simply of correcting misprints in the original, larger collection (which was nicely produced, from the samples reproduced here) and wisely deciding to retain the original spelling. Footnotes provide generous explanation of potentially unfamiliar words and phrases. Literary-context notes are from the single-volume *Oxford Companion*. The annotations are weak in Latin. "Candidi lectores" addresses not so much the bright as fair and honest judges: a version of a phrase often applied by authors to prospective readers. And "I nunc liber" does not mean "I now liberate" but "Go now, book": another time-honoured sentiment (as so many of Robert Burton's sentiment are) used at the launching of a text into the world.

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