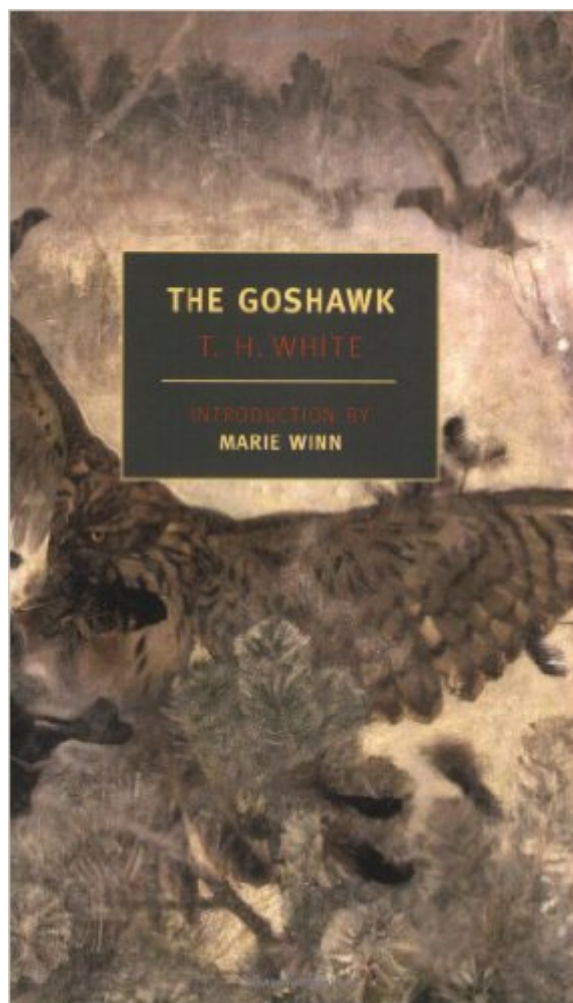


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# The Goshawk (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

The predecessor to Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, T. H. White's nature writing classic, *The Goshawk*, asks the age-old question: what is it that binds human beings to other animals? White, the author of *The Once and Future King* and *Mistress Masham's Repose*, was a young writer who found himself rifling through old handbooks of falconry. A particular sentence "the bird reverted to a feral state" seized his imagination, and, White later wrote, "A longing came to my mind that I should be able to do this myself. The word 'feral' has a kind of magical potency which allied itself to two other words, 'ferocious' and 'free.' Immediately, White wrote to Germany to acquire a young goshawk. Gos, as White named the bird, was ferocious and Gos was free, and White had no idea how to break him in beyond the ancient (and, though he did not know it, long superseded) practice of depriving him of sleep, which meant that he, White, also went without rest. Slowly man and bird entered a state of delirium and intoxication, of attraction and repulsion that looks very much like love. White kept a daybook describing his volatile relationship with Gos "at once a tale of obsession, a comedy of errors, and a hymn to the hawk. It was this that became *The Goshawk*, one of modern literature's most memorable and surprising encounters with the wilderness "as it exists both within us and without.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mr. White describes his experiences with training a goshawk for falconry. He has no guidance

beyond an ancient manuscript and things go horribly awry. An outstanding book, a pleasure to read. Also an example of why current US regulations require a falconry apprenticeship period.

Thanks are due to New York Review Books for putting back in print this wonderful book. The edition is well produced. A quibble is that Marie Winn who writes the introduction is clearly not familiar with, or comfortable with, "field sports". T H White (and many modern writers and followers of fishing, falconry and related activities) would take issue with her distinction between being a natural history lover and a practitioner of fishing, shooting, ferreting etc. More seriously, she writes that White "blithely snagged salmon". White fished for salmon and caught them fairly using a fly. He wrote many fine passages about his salmon fishing and the pieces are still found in anthologies of fishing literature. To "snag" a salmon means, to those who fish, that he took salmon illegally and unsportingly, by jerking a hook into the body of a salmon. There is no evidence that I have heard of that he would ever have done this. To suggest it does his memory a grave disservice. The introduction by Steve Bodio, himself a falconer, to the 1996 Wilder Places edition of *The Goshawk* is, to my mind, far better at exploring and explaining the reasons why this is a much loved book.

I would not have known about T. H. White's memoir of trying to train a goshawk were it not for Helen Macdonald's wonderful analysis in *H IS FOR HAWK*, her recent account of training her own hawk. White, as he himself admits, does a lot of things wrong: feeding the bird far too much, for example. This horrifies Macdonald, and I expected it to horrify me too. But, because he is unaware of his mistakes at the time, what comes over has no cruelty in it whatsoever; frustration and occasional despair, yes, but otherwise just the very honest account of a lonely man's struggle to bond with this wild creature of the air. And beautifully written! Which surprised me a little, but I should have realized that the author of *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING* (the source for *CAMELOT* and an inspiration for *HARRY POTTER*) would have pretty strong chops. But again, the amazing quality of Helen Macdonald's writing -- easily the best I had read all year -- had made me assume that no one could equal her. Wrong again! In fact, I realized that by embracing the comparison with White, Macdonald was writing for her life. "Goshawks were Hamlet, were Ludwig of Bavaria," writes White. "Frantic heritors of frenetic sires, they were in full health more than half insane. When the red rhenish wine of their blood pulsed at full spate through their arteries, when the airy bird bones were gas-filled with little bubbles of unbiddable warm virility, no merely human being could bend them to his will." For both writers, the elemental wildness of their captor-captive stirs them to flights of verbal magnificence on virtually every page. White, a former schoolmaster, calls upon a huge vocabulary --

words like banting, nasconded, silurian, circumbendibus, and perdue -- in addition to the technical language of falconry used by both writers: austringer, jesses, creance, bate, stoop, yarak, and the like. A further subliminal interest in White's writing is that this is the late 1930s, dictators every bit as imperious as White's hawk are flexing their talons over in Europe, and the idea of aerial combat to the death is no longer confined to the world of birds. The book is brilliant. But I have to say it is also a little boring. Good though White's writing is on the individual page, he is not nearly as good as Macdonald at giving the reader a sense of his progress overall. Perhaps because his mistakes are always sending him back towards the starting point, perhaps because of the journal format with day following day with little obvious pattern, I could never measure how far White had come towards his goal. And the last third or more of the book, which are mainly about White's efforts to trap birds of different sizes, lose momentum almost entirely. White is quite frank about his efforts as "a second-rate philosopher who lived alone in a wood, being tired of most humans in any case, to train a person who was not human," but of course the book is about the bird, not him. Macdonald's brilliance is to look into White's entire life, his homosexuality, his traumatic upbringing, and the sadistic tendencies he kept rigorously in check, to produce a psychosexual analysis that would have delighted Freud. Come to think of it, Marie Winn does something rather similar in her ten-page introduction to this edition, perhaps the best preface in any NYRB book that I have read. Either way, it needs this wider perspective. Without it, we get merely an elusive man in an ultimately frustrating struggle with an even more elusive bird. But a great writer.

As a fan of *The Once and Future King* as well as falconry, I couldn't wait to start reading this book. It is an absolute gem. White's descriptions are extremely vivid. No one should be daunted by the fact that this book was penned in '51 or that it is about falconry; his story is immensely (and enjoyably) readable.

I highly recommend this book to anyone, even those with no interest at all in falconry. The author is so skilled and talented that I'd say that he could write an entertaining piece about paint drying. Enjoy!!

Did you read *The Once and Future King* way back when and love it dearly? I did. This book is a fascinating glimpse of a brief period in T.H. White's life when he strived to train a male goshawk named Gos. His adventures with Gos are fascinating and real, and heartbreaking at times. Animal lovers beware: Despite that White could be quite sentimental about animals, and seemed to love

and appreciate them on many levels, he is the type of animal lover who could still hunt with a clear conscience. Keeping this in mind, the work nonetheless contains great beauty, and expresses White's great passion for nature. Recommended.

An interesting artifact. It's really a day-book of White's first experience of falconry, which the author didn't want published, but was persuaded to many years later. As a diary, when things are going well, or at least aspirational, the writing is wonderful, deeply personal, but when things go bad - or simply dull, the writing sputters out to smelly smoke. I imagine the man's writerly ego lost inspiration with his hawking failures.

I read this in preparation for reading highly anticipated *Hi is for Hawk*], sort of like reading the book before the movie, only reading the book before the book. And it's a gem in and of itself. A wonderful piece of reflection on training a hawk, which requires almost inhuman patience, in a time of upheaval in Europe and the world. But be warned: White had absolutely no idea what he was doing here, and his mistakes are sometimes difficult to read. But the writing is gorgeous.

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