H Is for Hawk
By Helen Macdonald

1. In the book’s opening pages, Macdonald writes, “The wild can be human work” (p. 8). She wrote this sentence to explain how British goshawks were literally brought back from extinction by falconers who imported birds from the continent that were lost or released and subsequently bred. What other meanings could this line have? What does this tell us about the kind of narrator Helen will be?

2. Helen writes about a time when she was nine and impatient to see hawks. Her father explained, “[W]hen you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still, stay in the same place, remember how much you wanted to see it, and be patient” (p. 10). How well is Helen served by this advice throughout the book?

3. Macdonald was eight years old when she first reads T. H. White’s The Goshawk, a book that proves a formative experience. She initially dislikes the book (p. 30): “Why would a grown-up write about not being able to do something?” How does Macdonald’s views on White’s book evolve over time?

4. “The book you are reading is my story,” Macdonald writes. “It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White. But White is a part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there” (p. 38). What does Macdonald mean? How does understanding White’s life inform her own journey? How does our understanding of White’s book help us understand her own?

5. When Macdonald arranges to buy her hawk, she’s initially shown the wrong bird. When the correct bird appears, she notes, “I looked into her eyes and saw something blank and crazy in her stare. . . . This isn’t my hawk” (p. 55). Why does Macdonald change her mind?

6. Macdonald writes, “What we see in the lives of animals are lessons we’ve learned from the world” (p. 60). Through closely observing her hawk’s life, what lessons does Helen ultimately learn from the world?

7. When Macdonald first trains her hawk to become accustomed to her presence, she explains that “making yourself disappear is the greatest skill in the world” (p. 68). Later, Macdonald says about being thrilled that her hawk has forgotten she’s there because it’s a sign of acceptance: “But there was a deeper, darker thrill. It was that I had been forgotten” (p. 73). Why
does this excite Macdonald?

8. After living several days with her hawk in her flat, Macdonald observes, “I was turning into a hawk” (p. 85). What does Macdonald mean? How does she explain her “transformation”?

9. Macdonald goes through various emotional stages training her hawk. On one particular day, within a couple hours she goes from feeling like a “beneficent figure” to “the worst falconer in the history of the world.” Ultimately, she realizes, “I have lost the ability to disappear” (p. 93). How critical was this loss at this stage of her training? How important of a turning point is this for Macdonald?

10. A big step in Macdonald’s hawk training is “walking” Mabel in public. Macdonald fears what Mabel’s encounter with people will be like: “They are things to shun, to fear, to turn from, shielding my hawk” (p. 100). Is Macdonald also shielding herself? Why or why not?

11. Macdonald writes that each picture her father took was “a record, a testament, a bulwark against forgetting, against nothingness, against death” (p. 71). Later, she looks just once at the last photo her father took before he died. “[A]n empty London street . . . a wall tipped sideways from the vertical and running into the distance; a vanishing point of sallow, stormy sky.” It is a photo that she can “never stop seeing” (p. 106). Does Macdonald’s memory of this photo serve as a bulwark against forgetting her father? Or against her father’s death?

12. Macdonald cuts between her attempts to train Mabel with T. H. White’s attempts to train his goshawk. How much kinship does she see in their respective journeys? What are the similarities in their training routines? What are their differences?

13. Macdonald writes about herself, “We carry the lives we’ve imagined as we carry the lives we have, and sometimes a reckoning comes of all the lives we have lost” (p. 129). Later, she writes about White, “Sometimes a reckoning comes of all the lives we have lost, and sometimes we take it upon ourselves to burn them to ashes” (p. 130). What is Macdonald’s reckoning? White’s? How do their respective hawks help or hinder their respective reckonings?

14. As Macdonald continues with Mabel’s training, she explains, “I felt incomplete unless the hawk was sitting on my hand: we were parts of each other. Grief and the hawk had conspired to this strangeness” (p. 135). How great a role does grief play in making Macdonald feel complete with Mabel?
15. At key points in the narrative, Macdonald is able to rely on various friends to help her through a specific emotional challenge or with Mabel’s training. How important is human friendship to Macdonald as she travels through her grief? Is it more of a challenge for her to recognize human contributions to her healing than Mabel’s? Why or why not?

16. Macdonald quotes White from his dream diary, “Need to excel in order to be loved.” Then she adds, “But there is an unspoken coda to that sentence. What happens if you excel at something and discover you are still unloved?” (p. 146) How much does this sentence pertain to White? Macdonald? Are White and Macdonald unloved, or are they incapable of acknowledging love?

17. Macdonald writes that falconry is not, as she quotes Professor Tom Cade, “high-intensity birdwatching” but rather “more like gambling.” She says, “You feel safe because you are entirely at the world’s mercy” (p. 177). What does Macdonald mean? Does Macdonald ever reach a place of true emotional safety in the book?

18. On one of Mabel’s hunting trips, she catches a pheasant. “I’m amazed,” Macdonald writes, and then is overcome with a strong maternal sense while she helps pluck feathers from Mabel’s catch. “She becomes a child. . . . A baby hawk that’s just worked out who she is” (p. 184). How much is Macdonald responsible for Mabel working out who she is? How responsible is Mabel for Macdonald working out who she is?

19. Macdonald writes, “Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human” (p. 195). What does Macdonald mean? How far to the edge does Macdonald go?

20. Macdonald writes about reading White’s *The Sword and The Stone*, “When I was small I thought turning into a hawk would be a magical thing. . . . But now the lesson was killing me. It was not at all the same” (p. 212). What truths does Macdonald realize about turning into a hawk? What is the most painful and damaging part of turning into a hawk for Macdonald?

21. After her father’s memorial service, Macdonald thinks about her decision to “flee to the wild. It was what people did. The nature books I’d read told me so.” Macdonald realizes that this was “a beguiling but dangerous lie” that inevitably harmed Mabel. “I’d fled to become a hawk, but in my misery all I had done was turn the hawk into a mirror of me” (p. 218). How much responsibility does Macdonald bear for religiously following her nature books’ advice? Is Macdonald expressing enough empathy for her decisions?
22. Macdonald realizes after having trained Mabel that “I love Mabel, but what passes between us is not human” (p. 223). What has passed between Macdonald and Mabel? If it’s not human, what is it?

23. When molting season arrives, Macdonald arranges for a spare aviary to accommodate Mabel at a friend’s house some distance away. There’s an earthquake the night before she drops her off. A panicked Macdonald checks on Mabel, thinking Mabel will be as terrified as she is. Instead, she finds Mabel calm and asleep. “I had thought the world was ending, but my hawk had saved me again, and all the terror was gone” (p. 278). Has Mabel truly saved Macdonald in this moment? At this stage in their relationship, how much credit does Macdonald deserve for saving herself?

24. When Macdonald says goodbye to Mabel, she tells her she’ll miss her. “No answer can come, and there is nothing to explain” (p. 279). Is Macdonald being truthful when she says there is nothing to explain in this moment? How will Macdonald adjust to life without Mabel in her daily care?

25. Macdonald reveals at the end of her acknowledgments page that Mabel succumbed to a sudden, untreatable infection after the main events in her book. Is Helen ready for a life without Mabel? Why or why not?

Source: http://www.groveatlantic.com/?title=H+Is+for+Hawk#page=isbn9780802124739-readers
The Great Natural Drama, an interview with Helen Macdonald, author of H is for Hawk

Steve Paulson

We can now add Helen Macdonald’s name to England’s celebrated tradition of nature writers – except that she would probably bristle at being labeled a “nature writer.” In her new book H is for Hawk, Macdonald tells the story of the goshawk she acquires and trains to help her cope with the grief from her father’s death. It’s a hybrid of a book – a blend of nature writing and memoir, as well as a mini-biography of another hawk enthusiast, the fantasy writer T.H. White.

H is for Hawk won Britain’s Samuel Johnson Prize for nonfiction, and it’s now landed on bestseller lists in America. A dazzling writer, Macdonald has an almost incantatory power to evoke wonder. “My head jumps sideways,” she writes of the first time she sees her hawk. “She is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary.” The goshawk is a feral creature who leads Macdonald into the depths of her own inner wildness. Part of the drama of this story is to see how she pulls herself back from the brink once she’s become “more hawk than human.”

I talked with Macdonald about falconry, wilderness, and the dangers of cutting yourself off from the human world. Our conversation aired on Public Radio International’s To the Best of Our Knowledge. You can subscribe to the TTBOOK podcast here.

Steve Paulson: You were very close to your father, who died suddenly from a heart attack. You say it was devastating. Did you find yourself starting to slip into some sort of madness?

Helen Macdonald: Yes, I think after big losses the world really does fracture. I was a very, very good friend of my dad. He wasn’t just a great dad, we were really partners in crime. We both shared obsessions — he loved airplanes, I loved birds and we used to wander around with binoculars looking up at the sky. And he had a massive heart attack and was suddenly gone. We didn’t even know he had any heart problems. And I just struggled to accept it.

SP: You were living alone at the time and didn’t have a regular job. Did you feel isolated?

I came back from the funeral and started to dream about goshawks.

HM: I guess if I’d had a family around me and a regular job and a house I owned and stuff like that, the structure might have kept me in place. But instead, I did something very strange. I came back from the funeral and started to dream about goshawks. Every night I’d go to sleep and wake up with the image of a goshawk flying through my dreams and slipping through the air into nowhere.

SP: You’d actually been a falconer years earlier.

HM: I’d been really obsessed with hawks. I was a very strange child! But I hadn’t flown hawks for a while and I never wanted to fly a goshawk. They’re these legendary, difficult birds — incredibly high strung and nervous, so they’re very hard to tame. And they’re renowned for their murderousness. I had never wanted anything to do with them, but suddenly they were all I could think about.

SP: So you decided to get one.
HM: I did. To deal with the grief, I decided to train a goshawk, which I don’t recommend to anyone. It’s not a particularly good way to deal with loss. But they spoke to me. And this whole decision came on a level that was really beneath conscious examination. When you lose someone very dear to you, you stop thinking logically. What drives you are very deep emotions and needs, and I just needed this goshawk. So I bought one off the Internet.

SP: You drove up to Scotland to get your young goshawk and named her Mabel. But even though you’d had all this experience training falcons when you were young, I got the sense that you didn’t really know what to do with her.

HM: I knew the steps to train a hawk; I’d done it many times before. I knew it was all done with positive reinforcement – with gifts of raw steak. I knew you had to withdraw to a darkened room for the first few days to get the hawk used to you, and then slowly get her used to other people. She jumps to your fist, then flies to it, and eventually you fly her free. I knew all those steps, but I didn’t really know who I was anymore. Now, that sounds really overblown, but I was a mess. And the more I watched the hawk to try and understand what she was feeling so I wouldn’t scare her, the more I empathized with her. Slowly, I sort of forgot who I was. The whole world shrank to just the hawk.

SP: So you cut yourself off from your friends and the human world?

HM: I did – and I think the hawk was to some extent an excuse. You do have to withdraw from the human world when you start training a hawk. So I unplugged the phone, drew the curtains, and told my friends to leave me alone. That kind of radical isolation wasn’t just about training the hawk. I just didn’t want to know about the world anymore. I didn’t like it.

SP: What was the hardest part about training your hawk?

HM: There were some surprises. I didn’t expect my hawk to be quite so friendly and lovely. In many ways, she was much more well-adjusted than I was. The most difficult thing, I guess, was just that because I was so broken at that time, I would worry an awful lot about whether I was doing things right. One of the strange things about this book is that I’ve had a lot of letters from young mums, who’ve been sitting in their houses with their very young children – obviously nothing like hawks – but they’ve said the book reminds them of what it’s like to be in a room with a very young person who can’t speak and is incredibly precious, and you just worry that you’re doing things wrong. I had this desperate sense, am I messing up this hawk, am I upsetting it?

SP: But there’s one huge difference about dealing with a hawk. Everything about a hawk is tuned to hunt and kill, and yet you were living in the middle of Cambridge. Was it hard to go back and forth between city living and this kind of wilderness?

HM: I had to take the bird outside to get it used to people. If this had been the 17th century, I would have been totally unremarkable. Everyone was walking around with hawks. But I was pretty unusual, and Cambridge is a pretty eccentric place. You can wander around and speak Latin and wear clothes with holes, and that’s fine. But you try walking around with a hawk on your fist and you do get some pretty weird stares. I was trying to get the hawk used to people, but at that point I myself was pretty much as scared of people as the hawk was. So it was a very weird experience to try to get her used to the human world at the same time as me wanting to refuse that world. I pretty much wanted to stay indoors!

SP: You write that there was a period when you were becoming more hawk than human.

I became this feral creature covered in mud and blood and thorn scratches. I didn’t wash my hair. I was a mess, but it was an incredibly good way of forgetting that I was miserable.

HM: By the time I left the house with the hawk, I started to see the city through her eyes. Obviously, this is all in
my imagination. Hawks have a very different sensory world than us. They see more colors and they see polarized light, so I didn’t share her literal vision. But I would come out and stare at what was going on and it would baffle me. I’d wonder what a bus was. Why is that woman throwing a ball for her dog – why would you do that? The whole city became very odd. Later, when the hawk began to fly free and hunt her own food, I really felt that I wasn’t a person anymore. I ran around after her in the bright open hillsides around Cambridge and watched this great natural drama – the hunting behavior of a wild hawk – and really completely lost touch with who I was. I became this feral creature covered in mud and blood and thorn scratches. I didn’t wash my hair. I was a mess, but it was an incredibly good way of forgetting that I was miserable.

SP: You also participated in the kill. Your hawk, Mabel, would catch a rabbit and you’d pry it out of her talons and then snap its neck to quicken the death.

HM: Yeah, it’s ironic. I’m one of the most sentimental and soft people you can imagine. I get upset when people step on spiders! But goshawks in the wild are not particularly bothered….if they catch something, they just start eating and at some point the poor thing is going to die. So I had to get in there and put the poor things out of their misery. That was a really astonishingly strong and serious moment every time. As I ran around with the hawk, I felt like an animal, almost like I could fly. But every time I had to kneel down and administer the coup de grace to some poor rabbit, I felt intensely responsible and very human. It made me realize that we don’t really see death much anymore. It all takes place behind walls, with people often in hospitals, with animals in slaughterhouses. The great irony is that I was running away from death, and yet there it was every single day. It was a deeply educational experience.

SP: Did you ever feel bad about this – not just that you were killing rabbits, but you were putting the haw out there to kill wild creatures?

One of the things I learned is that we often use nature as a mirror of ourselves, and we use nature to justify things that humans do.

HM: That never really bothered me. That’s what birds do, that’s how they live. I don’t think you can apply human morality to birds of prey. One of the things I learned is that we often use nature as a mirror of ourselves, and we use nature to justify things that humans do. And one of the most important things to remember about birds is they’re not us! I was privileged to be part of her world at that time, but she wasn’t a person. It was very fascinating, and it taught me a lot. But I was never bloodthirsty.

SP: You’re also talking about the nature of wildness. Have you figured out what it means to be wild?

HM: Well, the weird thing about hawks is that we see them as remote symbols of wildness. Of course, Mabel was very wild, but then I’d bring her home and she’d sit on my hand and we’d watch television in the evenings and we’d play. I’d throw her scrunched up bits of paper and she’d catch them in her beak and throw them back to me. So she was a much more complicated and bewitching and strange and interesting and contradictory creature than just something that was made of wildness. I think we’ve invented this category of what wild is. We know what it is when we encounter it, but it’s complicated.

SP: Is wildness what is not human?

HM: Ultimately, yes, but in that sense, a chicken is wild. I think pretty much everything that isn’t human is a wild thing. But now when we talk about wildness, we think of mountain tops and predators. There’s a dangerous element to wildness, a sense that humans are being tested against it. That’s the kind of wildness I turned away from at the end of the book.

SP: Most of us don’t have any encounters with wildness other than fleeting glimpses. I mean, you’re not talking about a loving relationship with a dog. A goshawk is wild in some primal way and will never be domesticated.
HM: One of the great things about living with a hawk that year, apart from the emotional effects it had on me as a grieving woman, was that it was a way of encountering a wild animal in a very intimate, domestic setting. Although we went out every day and flew, there were those hours when we just hung out together. There’s not much opportunity for people to have that kind of relationship with a wild animal anymore. I fervently believe that the environment’s in big trouble and we should fight to protect all the astonishing life that’s out there. But you don’t fight to protect things unless you know and love them. I loved falconry, and this bird in particular, for showing me that these things really are astonishing.

SP: You also seem to be talking about the experience of wonder.

HM: It’s what the poet Wordsworth would have called joy — joy and wonder. That’s at the heart of what I love about the natural world. If you’re receptive to it, it does something to human minds that nothing else can do. There’s a wonderful piece of writing in one of Iris Murdoch’s philosophical books about what it’s like when you’re sitting in a room feeling cast down by life and everything seems to be crowding in on you, and you look out the window and see a kestrel hovering, and you become so tied up with that sight. I think she says, “The world becomes all kestrel, and all your fears and cares fall away in that moment of concentration.” That wonderment and joy is always there if we look for it in the natural world. It’s incredibly important to give our life space for that.

SP: Another thread to this story is your fascination with The Goshawk by T.H. White, which was published in 1951. Of course, he’s best known for his Arthurian fantasy novel The Once and Future King. Why were you so interested in White’s experience with his own goshawk?

HM: Well, I read it when I was very young and obsessed with birds of prey, and I absolutely hated it. It was about a man who was trying to train a goshawk, and he didn’t seem to know what he was doing. The bird was clearly suffering as he tried to bend it to his will. I remember flinging the book down and shouting to my poor long-suffering mother that he was doing it all wrong. I didn’t understand why a grownup would write a book like that about something he didn’t know. Many years later I realized that it was a deeply tragic, melancholy book about an attempt to fix oneself through training a hawk, which is what I wound up doing myself.

SP: You describe White as a tortured man. His parents hated each other and they didn’t seem to care about him. He was beaten as a child. He was gay at a time when you had to hide your sexual orientation. He was pretty miserable for much of his life.

HM: And the very sad thing about White is that he was incredibly successful, and yet despite his fame was clearly never happy or contented. He really was broken by his childhood experiences. His story is tangled up with mine because I wanted to try to get inside his head in the same way I tried to get inside the goshawk’s head.

SP: Why was it important to White to have this encounter with a goshawk?

So when he was fighting the hawk, he was in a weird way trying to civilize himself.

HM: He saw the goshawk as a lot of the things that he wanted to be. Being gay, being broken in many ways, having had a horrendous education, he wanted to train this hawk in an enlightened way. You can’t punish hawks, you can’t even shout at them because they don’t respond to that, and he liked that idea. He thought he could educate the hawk in the way he himself should have been educated. But he also saw the hawk as something feral — slightly gay, slightly sadistic — all the things he felt himself inside to be. So when he was fighting the hawk, he was in a weird way trying to civilize himself. It became a battle with himself in the form of a bird. And of course the bird itself came out quite badly in that battle.

SP: You seemed to read everything written by and about T.H. White. Did he end up haunting you?

HM: In a strange way, he did. I went down to the literary archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, so I could go through all of White’s old journals and notebooks. Sometimes you look at a page and there
are tear spots when he’s been crying — and you can see when he’s very drunk because his writing’s all over the place. And I’m holding and feeling these pages and outside it’s 90 degrees and there are vultures, and I’m reading about muddy winters in England, and I really did start to feel that he was somehow there.

SP: Coming back to this period when you felt you were becoming more hawk than human, how did you re-enter the human world?

HM: It got really bad. I started to do things that goshawks did. I’d either stuff my face with food and then not eat for days or I’d not eat at all. I’d literally hide behind the sofa if I saw people pass by the house. I got pretty nuts. It was at my dad’s memorial service in London when I realized I’d bought into that old chestnut that nature writing books tell you — that when you’re broken, running to the wild will heal you, it will be a place of solace and renewal. But I’d gone way too far and become seriously depressed. So I went to a local doctor and ended up going on anti-depressants, which were very helpful. I also made a big effort to see people again and negotiate that balance between wild and tame that I’d got very wrong. I managed to crawl back into the world slowly. I remember looking out the window one morning to check the weather and suddenly thinking the sky looked beautiful. At that moment, I knew that things were going to be okay.

SP: What eventually happened to your goshawk, Mabel?

HM: I flew her for many more years, in a much less feral, intense manner. We continued to watch television, and she continued to catch pheasants. But I had a life change. I couldn’t fly her every day for a while, so I lent her to someone in the north of England who was a very good falconer. Unfortunately, a couple of years ago she passed away very suddenly while she was in an aviary, from an airborne fungal infection called aspergillosis. It’s a horrible thing that attacks wild goshawks, and she just died overnight. We were all in pieces, anyone who’d known my goshawk. Mabel was a very unusual bird. I got this great email from this man saying she was the softest goshawk he’d ever known. And then he paused and put in brackets, “unless you were a rabbit.” So she’s much missed, but not by rabbits.
NEW YORK TIMES SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Helen Macdonald’s ‘H Is for Hawk’

By VICKI CONSTANTINE CROKE FEB. 19, 2015

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,” winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize and the Costa Book Award, 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 longtime 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.

Although “animal as emotional healer” is a familiar motif, Macdonald’s journey clears its own path — messy, muddy and raw. Early on, she drives to Scotland from her home in Cambridge to pick up a captive-bred, 10-week-old, Czech-Finnish-German goshawk she’s seen online. At the first glimpse of her bird, Macdonald’s “heart jumps sideways.” And so does the reader’s, for here is a creature worth writing about: “A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water.”

Back home, the bird fills “the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent.” Fatherless mourner and baby hawk become acquainted. Macdonald grew up obsessed with birds of prey and later trained them, so she knows what to do and has all the necessary equipment: the tiny leather hood, as beautifully made, an observer says, as a Prada shoe; the jesses, or tethering straps; bells; and transmitters. The freezer is a morgue for dead chicks used to train and feed the hawk. Except for using devices that require a power source, Macdonald handles her bird much as a 15th-century falconer would.

The bird becomes Mabel, derived “from amabilis, meaning lovable, or dear,” and she learns to fly to Macdonald’s fist at the sound of a whistle: “There is a scratch of talons on wood, a flowering of feathers, one deep downstroke, the brief, heavy swing of talons brought up and into play and the dull thud as she hits my glove.”

There are tearful misunderstandings and glorious steps forward. But Macdonald’s progress is not as steady as her hawk’s. Training proceeds, but not without an existential hitch. “While the steps were familiar,” Macdonald writes, “the person taking them was not. I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief and numb to the hurts of human life.”

Looking back at her mad mourning, she realizes a painful transformation is taking place: “What the mind does after losing one’s father isn’t just to pick new fathers from the world, but pick new selves to love them with.”
Macdonald feels safe in the dark house, barricaded from the outside world, but knows she must go out for Mabel’s sake — to the woods, where the goshawk’s “long, barred tail feathers and short, broad wings” are perfectly suited for the speed and hairpin-turning ability necessary for aerial slalom in dense forest.

We get to know Mabel as her trainer does. Macdonald stays so close, and the house is so quiet when they are together that she can hear the bird blinking. The hawk’s breath is like “pepper and musk and burned stone.” Her preening sounds like a deck of cards being shuffled. Every mood can be read: Feathers held in tight is fear; when Mabel fluffs herself and shakes her feathers into place, she is content. We come to love the bird’s “shaggy trousers and waggy tail,” her “café au lait front streaked thickly with cocoa-colored teardrops,” and even her formidable weapons — the “curved black beak” and the black talons.

Soon enough, Macdonald doesn’t even consciously inventory the body language of her bird; instead she seems to just feel what Mabel feels. On a hunch, Macdonald even discovers a little bit of whimsy in this ultra-serious predator. She rolls up paper into a ball and hands it to Mabel. The hawk plays with it like a toy, eyes narrowed in “bird laughter.”

That’s not our image of hawks at all. And it’s an important point to Macdonald, who worries, rightly, that generations of preconceived notions rob us of truly seeing some creatures as they really are. “Wild things are made from human histories,” she writes.

This handler is determined to see her own hawk for who she really is, and, of course, she comes to see herself more clearly too. The two go further and further afield, and through scrapes, wounds and mishaps, Macdonald sheds something, changes, becomes something new — but not what she might have intended. She thinks she’s becoming a hawk herself. Her identity has shifted enough so that when she slips out of her hawking clothes and into street clothes for social events, she feels she’s in disguise.

Perhaps not so surprising for a woman who calls herself a “watcher,” who grew up as an “invisible girl,” who, like her father, a news photographer, felt more comfortable observing others than being seen. Her personal history, the history of falconry and historical and personal notions of identity and belonging surface as she aches for her lost father. She experiences vertigo and depression. She keeps denting her father’s car, breaking dishes. Falconry with Mabel feels like an addiction, as dangerous as “if I’d taken a needle and shot myself with heroin.”

And yet the hawk also helps her to remember what happiness feels like. “There was nothing that was such a salve to my grieving heart as the hawk returning,” she writes. She and the hawk are “parts of each other,” incomplete when separated. Macdonald notes: “I remember thinking of the passage in ‘The Sword in the Stone’ where a falconer took a goshawk back onto his own fist, ‘reassuming him like a lame man putting on his accustomed wooden leg, after it had been lost.’ ”

Caring for Mabel revives Macdonald’s interest in the author of the book, T. H. White. His memoir “The Goshawk” haunts her; she has a fascination, often reluctant and dark, with the writer and his inept, troubled and even cruel relationship with a goshawk he tried to tame.

There is a funny mingling of tame and wild in hawks. They can be bred and raised by humans, Macdonald points out, but they are not domesticated. I’ve brought a gloved fist underneath a trained hawk who was “mantling” a dead pigeon (covering it with his wings), and hissing at me with eyes blazing. It shocked me that he left the kill to hop on my novice’s hand. And I’ve seen injured wild hawks being treated in veterinary clinics.
where the caregiver plunges a gloved hand into the cage and then pulls it out with a hawk on board. Imagine trying this with an injured tiger.

But those wild hawks are every bit as predatory as any big cat. When Mabel is deliberately dropped to a lower weight, her desire to kill, something falconers call yarak, ratchets up. The hunting is brutal. And Macdonald and Mabel are co-conspirators. They look for prey together, work in tandem on the release, and even share the killing and its spoils. Mabel brings down pheasants and rabbits, and she merrily begins eating them before they’re dead. Macdonald steps in then, breaking the necks of Mabel’s catches to hasten the end. As the hawk becomes tamer, she says, she herself grows wilder. Maybe she’s gone too far on her journey. “Hands are for other human hands to hold,” she writes. “They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks.”

Her own hands, by now, are records, written in “thin white lines,” of her months with Mabel, months of grief and healing. “One is from her talons when she’d been fractious with hunger; it feels like a warning made flesh. Another is a blackthorn rip from the time I’d pushed through a hedge to find the hawk I’d thought I’d lost. And there were other scars, too, but they were not visible. They were the ones she’d helped mend, not make.”

In some traditions, hawks are considered spirit messengers to a world beyond, and Macdonald comes to understand that part of her bond with Mabel was her desire “to fly with the hawk to find my father; find him and bring him home.” But as Mabel matures into a confident hunter, she brings Macdonald a different kind of discovery: that grace resides in the most unlikely places — and that moving forward means leaving some things behind.

H IS FOR HAWK

By Helen Macdonald


A version of this review appears in print on February 22, 2015, on page BR1 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Fly Away