

Gods of the Morning: A Bird's-Eye View of a Changing World

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BOOK REVIEW

Gods of the Morning: A Bird's-Eye View of a Changing World

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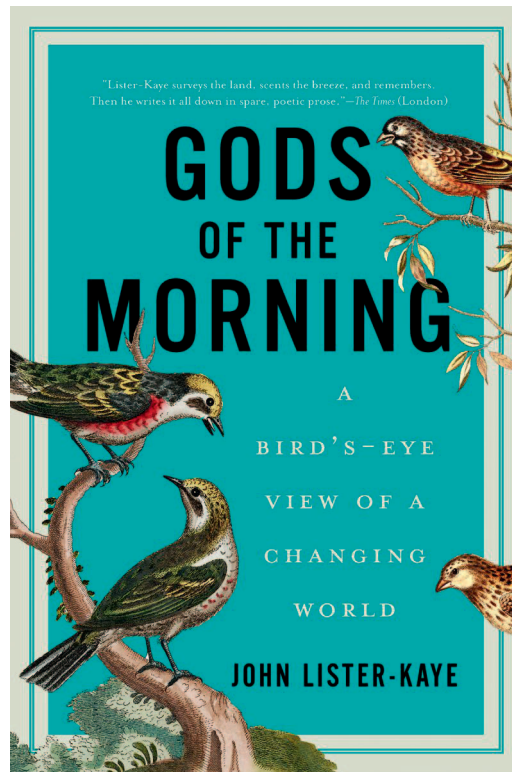
When was the last time you had a heart-to-heart conversation with nature? Be honest. Many of us, as scientists, are trained to observe and describe nature in a particular way: collecting data, recording counts, creating spreadsheets, methodically writing about our observations so that other scientists can understand them. In *Gods of the Morning*, Sir John Lister-Kaye—who understands and appreciates the need for dispassionate observation—takes his readers back to the basics of nature study, where simply asking “I wonder why?” is enough to start one of those rare but important heart-to-heart conversations.

Writing from his vantage point as resident director of the Aigas Field Centre in the Highlands of Scotland, Lister-Kaye takes his reader into the field with him as he watches the seasons unfold over the course of a year. In the Preface, he explains that his nearly 40 years at Aigas have provided the context for asking “I wonder why” the swallows didn’t nest there in 2012, or why certain birds’ migratory patterns appear to have changed. Lister-Kaye is careful to avoid stating that climate change is the sole culprit; he explains that there are many ways in which human activity has changed ecosystems, but that some of the phenomena he has observed recently are very closely associated with unusual weather patterns over the Highlands that may, indeed, be

related to a changing climate. To make his case and help readers make up their own minds—or, perhaps, ask themselves “I wonder why?”—Lister-Kaye describes, in 19 chapters, a tumultuous year in the life of the wild inhabitants of Aigas.

The chronicle begins in late September, a time of transition between summer and autumn, “in order to do justice to nature... and to the confused seasons of what has proved to be a discomfiting and bizarre year.” Lister-Kaye knows the landscape by heart, knows the comings and goings of the animals that live or visit there, and knows from his depth of personal experience that something seems off. Throughout each of the subsequent chapters, the reader is taken on a field romp from hillsides and moors to the shores of a loch, to the village near Aigas, and to a windowsill perch to watch Rooks, Pine Martens, and red squirrels eke out their existence as the world changes around them. From time to time, Lister-Kaye reminisces about encounters with the great naturalists of his day (e.g., Gavin

Maxwell, author of *Ring of Bright Water* [1960] and a friend and mentor to Lister-Kaye in the 1960s) or refers to scientific papers and books that influenced his decision to pursue his passion as a naturalist. Those reminiscences have a purpose: to frame present-day observations against a historical backdrop and then snap the reader into the realization that, indeed, something is amiss. Lister-Kaye does not provide a list of citations of these influential works but explains their findings in context; if you were



hoping for a textbook description, complete with citations, of what is happening to the nature of the Scottish Highlands, then you might be disappointed. On the other hand, had Lister-Kaye peppered his writing with those citations, the flow of the book and the enchantment that comes from reading it would have been compromised.

As an ornithologist, I appreciated Lister-Kaye's detailed descriptions of the birds that visit Aigas or live there year round. For example, in sharing his unexpected encounter with a Merlin, he writes that "Falcons cannot register astonishment" and that "All they can do is stare." I suppose I chuckled at that because, well, it's true. Ravens, rooks, various owls, eagles, and a host of Palearctic bird species make appearances in the book, and the behavior and ecology of many of them are described with poetic flair. Likewise, Lister-Kaye offers a glimpse of the day-to-day lives of pine martens, red squirrels, and roe deer, all with a sense of wonder. Yet a subtle message underscores the lively natural history prose.

For more than a century and a half, scores of books have been written addressing environmental issues or environmental ethics, some of them from the vantage point of a writer who has an intimate connection with a particular place, others by authors who have studied a particular species for much of their lives. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) should be on every biologist's bookshelf, right next to Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and alongside any of the books on wilderness preservation by Sigurd Olson. Collectively, John Muir's works have influenced generations to protect the natural wonders of the American West from overexploitation. More recently, works by David Quammen (1997) and Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) take an investigative approach to the phenomenon of extinction and its connection to human activity. *Gods of the Morning* should be included in this company. Lister-Kaye's approach to discussing his thoughts on climate change and other anthropogenic effects on life at Aigas is a subdued one (in contrast to some other nature writers' works); rather than taking a heavy-handed bent and pounding the science into the reader's face, Lister-Kaye writes as a teacher gently prodding his pupils to look, to listen, and to understand the world around them. You can almost picture him leading you, the reader, down a path toward a creek, and stopping to show you otter tracks in the mud or the middens of red squirrels, then asking, "I wonder why...?"

Gods of the Morning is one of those books that you might read on a rainy day, or in between sessions of field work, or as you take a break from putting the finishing touches on a technical manuscript. Despite its deeper message about the relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world, this book will make you reflect on that time in your life when you finally knew, for certain, that you wanted to become a biologist, an ecologist, an ornithologist. It just might inspire you to take a closer, more personal look at what you study without worrying about statistical significance, observer bias, or proper citation formats, and to put down the laptop and pick up a pair of binoculars instead. As a contribution to the study of ornithology, *Gods of the Morning* offers the layperson a look into the natural history of more than a dozen bird species of the British Isles and should be of great interest to North American ornithologists who have yet to see those species in the wild. *Gods of the Morning* would be an excellent addition to one's personal library, especially, but community libraries should keep a copy on hand, alongside the works of other nature writers. Although it is not a research reference book, *Gods of the Morning* could find a place in college and university libraries as part of a nature writing and literature collection or a general-interest collection of books on birds or wildlife. Portions of the book might even be excerpted for interdisciplinary college courses that explore the connections between cold, hard science and creative expression through writing or art. *Gods of the Morning* is an important transcript of a lifelong, heart-to-heart conversation with nature that anyone can enjoy.

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