

Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction

Thom Van Dooren

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Reviewed By

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Van Dooren opens the book with a story of perhaps the most infamously extinct bird – the Dodo. Very few stories of this bird remain in the 21st century aside from that of its extinction. Dodos were among the first species to be written about as having died out because of humans – specifically due to the destruction of their natural habitat by European colonial explorers. As the author states, this awareness allows us to understand our implication in the loss of species, the loss of ways of life. This publication acts as something of a eulogy for extinct and endangered birds. In chapter four, “Mourning Crows: Grief in a Shared World”, Van Dooren states that he wishes this chapter to act as a narrative of mourning. The sad story of the Dodo ominously signals the uncertain futures of the birds whose stories we encounter in this book.

Situated between the environmental humanities, extinction studies, and the natural sciences, Van Dooren orchestrates a conversation around the particularities of a number of species of bird. Each chapter in this book focuses on the specific stories of a different bird currently threatened by extinction at the hands of human carelessness. Chapter 1 relays the stories of the Albatrosses of the Pacific. Van Dooren describes the increasing threat posed by plastic waste in our oceans, looming over these albatrosses and presenting a growing threat with each day. As

readers, we are asked to reconsider what is at stake in the messy entanglements of embodied temporalities (33) – ways of life shared over generations of birds, lifespans of seemingly immortal plastics, and our own human species. Van Dooren calls for greater attention to be paid to the temporal nuances of ways of life shared over generations and the threats posed to such ways of life by plastic waste. He argues that this might enable us to understand the significance of the ending ways of life, while drawing us into a closer connection with other species. Our waste has brought us into direct and profound contact with these birds and, Van Dooren states, humans have failed to adapt to current ecological conditions in such a way that will allow us to continue living together in multispecies communities on this planet. Reflecting wider developments within the field of extinction studies from thinkers such as Ursula Heise and Donna Haraway, Van Dooren argues for the importance of ecological storytelling. He states that such inter-species stories can reconnect us with the distant, ongoing impacts of our waste.

In Chapter 2, we are brought into contact with Indian Vultures. This chapter focuses on the dynamics of eating and being eaten in multispecies communities – the digestive entanglements of the dead and the living. Van Dooren tells us that vultures have traditionally been at the heart of life and death's transformative potential, twisting death back into life and providing an efficient means of disposing of the dead. But due to the increasing presence of the drug diclofenac in cattle, vulture numbers are rapidly declining. Where diclofenac has been used to treat a cow while it was alive, it stays in the flesh of the cow after its death and poisons vultures who feed upon it. This produces what Van Dooren calls a 'double death' (54). This is a condition within which dead bodies fail to nourish and instead poison, producing more and more death that cannot be twisted back into life. The author here questions how we can live well within the perpetually unequal patterns of amplified loss and suffering that are produced here and take on further significance as climate change increases.

Chapter 3 focuses on the tales of the Little Penguins of Sydney Harbour and their struggles to find their way home to the burrows they hatched in, which are now in the foundations of privately owned homes. In this chapter, Van Dooren argues for the importance of knowing the stories of other species, because although as humans we can never fully understand them, to know more enables us to see differently and be drawn into new kinds of relationships and ethical obligations. The

author draws us as readers into a confrontation with the ethical, ecological and philosophical weight of our actions. This is done not only through Van Dooren's detailed accounts of the homeless penguins – the text performs its call for more stories and relationships to extinction by successfully provoking the reader's empathy.

Chapter 4 discusses the rearing of Whooping Cranes in North America. In a discussion of captive breeding programmes, Van Dooren unpacks the violence implicit in the care of these birds. As Van Dooren tells us, the suffering that whooping cranes undergo in captivity positions them as something of a 'sacrificial' generation (91). These are the generations undergoing the debatably necessary suffering for the continuation of the larger species. The author argues that our ways of thinking around violent care need to be radically different, such that ways of living together in captive spaces might become more visible and imperative.

The final Chapter covers the mourning rituals of a number of birds, in particular the very nearly extinct Hawaiian Crow. Here Van Dooren laments the lack of popular interest in extinction and argues for the importance of empathy (136). Grief is here positioned as a process of transformation and learning to accommodate an altered reality. Van Dooren argues that the stories by which we live shape the world we live in and vice versa. He states that as they travel, stories breath new life into the dead, enabling them to haunt our lives and future possibilities. The narrative of mourning Van Doreen presents throughout this book is not one of putting to rest, but of learning to live with the dead in way that is sustainable – of learning to live with ghosts.

Van Dooren argues for the necessity of storied ways of co-living and dying in the world through telling the stories of a variety of birds. As readers, we become emotionally entangled with these birds. As I read about their various fates from Tex the Whooping Crane (97), to the homeless Penguins of Sydney Harbour (84), I felt very real pangs of sadness for them. This book not only offers an insight into the complex architecture of extinction, but also invites the reader into a relationship with these birds. The book is cleverly structured in that Van Dooren allows us to 'get to know' these birds - he takes the time in each chapter to give detailed specifics of their lives. But each chapter has a sorry tale to tell, and by the time the reader reaches the final chapter on grief and mourning, we are ourselves already mourning for the loss and suffering of the birds we have read about.

Van Dooren's call for more cultural scripts and stories around extinction is highly compelling. We are forced to hold ourselves accountable for our part in their suffering. In teaching us something of the mourning rituals of Crows, Van Doreen invites us to mourn together with these crows in a way that is generative – 'in choosing to grieve we choose life' (144).