

A BIRD IN THE HAND: THE MYSTERY NOVELS OF ANN CLEEVES

by Robert A. Campbell

Some years ago I had thought about writing a mystery story set in the world of birds and birders. During extended periods of idleness (such as homeward journeys of pelagic trips), I would mull over the idea. Slowly the concept began to crystallize. My story would be titled "Murder in the New Pines," the plot would be set in the Newburyport area, and it would include local color in the shape of characters whose distinctive plumages and vocalizations would make them instantly recognizable to us in the Massachusetts area, despite thinly disguised nomenclature.

Alas, while I was engaged in idle dreaming, someone else was pounding away at the typewriter. Early this summer I discovered that an Englishwoman named Ann Cleeves (the daughter of a village schoolteacher who lives near Droitwich, England, where she spends her time with her two small children and writing) had written not one but four mystery novels immersed in the birding milieu. These are *A Bird in the Hand* (1986), *Come Death and High Water* (1987), *Murder in Paradise* (1989), and *A Prey to Murder* (1989), all published by Fawcett as paperbacks. "Ann Cleeves" could be a pseudonym, as the name is similar to that of the historical personage Anne of Cleves, who was one of the celebrated six wives of Henry VIII. Regardless of the author's real name, the stories will be of interest to those birders who are also readers of mystery stories.

The first of the books, *A Bird in the Hand*, is the one that is the richest in the lore of birds and birders. The setting is the conventional classic British mystery scenario, which is familiar to anyone who has read Agatha Christie or played the board game *Clue*. A collection of people of both genders, various ages, and mixed backgrounds is isolated in a rural lodge (in this instance, a popular migration hot spot), where one of the group is murdered. Naturally we learn that other members of the group had varied relationships with and varied grudges against the lately departed and that many of them have little secrets of their own. The detective in this series is in the customary British fashion an elderly semiamateur sleuth, in this story a retired civil servant and an experienced birder. The book abounds in references to British birds and birders. If you are not familiar with British birding terms, expressions such as "ringing tick" and "twitcher," you had better "swot up" by studying *Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book* again.

According to the inside blurb, Ann Cleeves' "introduction to birdwatching, and her husband, came when she spent a season on Fair Isle working as an assistant cook at the Bird Observatory." I have not birded extensively in

England, but as far as I can tell, she seems to have her bird facts straight. The sought-after rarities and other birds described seem appropriate to the times and habitats mentioned. More experienced observers of British birds may find errors that I would not have noticed. After all, even the best mystery authors make occasional factual errors with background "business." Agatha Christie once referred to a Luger revolver, a weapon that does not exist.

The second book in the series, *Come Death and High Water*, tells of skullduggery at a bird-banding observatory. *A Prey to Murder* gets into the area of falconry and of the illegal trade in raptors, but in *Murder in Paradise*, birds are only a minor part of the background decor. Ann Cleeves may have felt that further emphasis on the subject of birding would have been too repetitious. There is a limit to how many times an author can go over the same ground, and this series may very well turn out to be a closed set. But birds aside, the books are well-written examples of the classic English mystery genre. If you like this sort of thing, you will certainly find these novels worth a look.

ROBERT A. CAMPBELL, who teaches fourth grade at the Archie T. Morrison School in Braintree, has been birding since 1976. His interest in natural history, however, began with an enthusiasm for herpetology. He has observed and photographed both species of pit viper found in the state and maintains a small collection of live reptiles for study. Bob states that he is still divided between the two avocations and when in the field, "I spend half my time looking up and half my time looking down."

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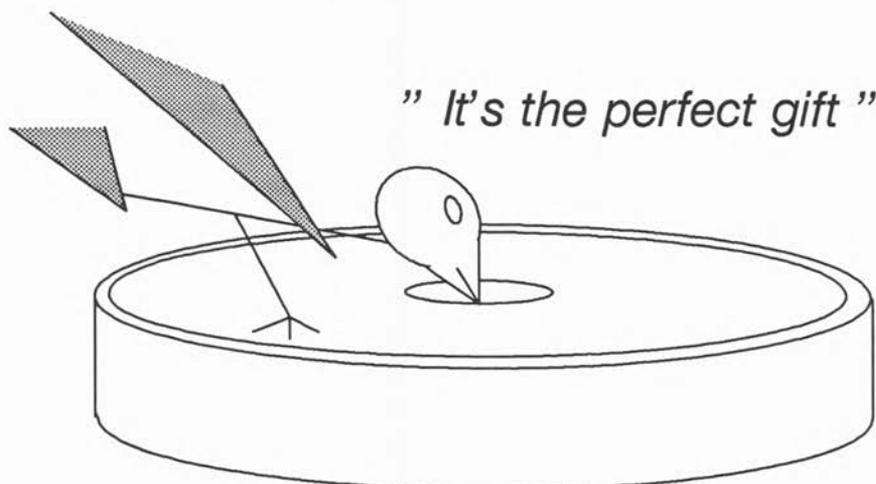
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