



The Bird Skinner

Alice Greenway

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Alice Greenway launched into the literary world with *White Ghost Girls*—a haunting and sensuous debut about two sisters tumbling into their teenage years in Hong Kong in the late 1960's—which won the *Los Angeles Times* First Novel award and was heralded by critics from the *New York Times Book Review* to *Vogue* to Isabel Allende, who wrote that it was "written with the craft and grace of a master."

In her exquisitely rendered new novel, Greenway tells the story of Jim Carroway, a World War II Vietnam Vet once called Jungle Jim, who has moved to a tiny island in Maine to seclude himself from his former life. It is 1974 and all Jim wants is to be alone, to drink, nurse his amputated leg and write an article on where he believes Robert Louis Stevenson's real Treasure Island is. Once Jim was a noted ornithologist collecting and skinning birds as specimens he sent back to the Museum of Natural History in New York where he worked. Since his amputation, his lifelong work has become impossible. Now hiding out on Fox Island, away from his adult son and grandchildren in Connecticut and his colleagues in New York, he is depressed and in pain.

Jim's slowly deteriorating mind unravels memories that take him back to the war in Guadalcanal, where he was with Naval Intelligence, spying on the Japanese for Admiral Halsey on a remote Solomon Island. There he became friends with a young native, Tosca, who taught him about the islands. Now in Maine, Jim finds out that Tosca, whom he hasn't heard from in thirty years, is sending his daughter Cadillac to stay with him for a month before she starts Yale on a scholarship. Cadillac arrives to Jim's consternation, but she is utterly captivating, totally original. She will capture his heart and the heart of everyone she meets.

Rich in island detail, redolent of Maine in the summer and winter, and of the Solomon islands, comprised of lush and poetic prose, *The Bird Skinner* is a wise, wrenching, exhilarating and unforgettable masterpiece from an extraordinarily skillful novelist.

The Bird Skinner Details

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Author : Alice Greenway

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From Reader Review The Bird Skinner for online ebook

Diane says

Having no idea what I was getting into when I opened this book, I must say that I was pleasantly surprised. I was a bit skeptical because of the title. Not something I would want to do or witness.

Pg 147-150 was the turning point in this book for me. I just loved this. Her brothers ;) Just as sweet a story as it can be. That's not an indication that the book wasn't good before then. It just means that even if I hadn't cared for the rest, the story in those pages made it worth every word. A lovely, sad, lonely, interesting life the main character lived; personally I would be grumpy too! The writing style made me care about them all and they felt very real to me. Going back and forth in time was well done and darn it, I really like the crotchety old guy. I really felt for him and all he endured. I enjoyed the locations, cultures, peoples and even the birds :) Not so much the Japanese part though. Too sad :(

Recommended. So good. Just a really good, well written story.

I received this book from the author/publisher after being selected as a winner in the Goodreads First Reads Giveaway. Thank you! All opinions herein are my own and not influenced by anything other than the content of the book and my honest feelings about it.

nomadreader (Carrie D-L) says

My thoughts: I knew very little about this novel when I began reading. I picked up a copy at ALA in June because of the praise for Greenway's first novel, *White Ghost Girls*. At first, I was enchanted with Greenway's prose, characters, and setting. I was curious how the storylines would connect and what would be revealed about the past to impact my understanding of the novel's present. Greenway did bring everything together, but the more I read, the more unsatisfied I was as a reader. Admittedly, this novel requires some patience from the reader, which is somewhat of a feat in 320 pages, and I enjoyed it most when I read longer passages in a single sitting. While there was much I liked about this novel, its execution fell rather flat for me. I turned the last page with a sense of relief and ambivalence, but Greenway's prose was strong enough that I will absolutely read her next novel, even as this one left me unsatisfied.

The verdict: As much as I enjoyed Greenway's prose and character descriptions, I found the plot to be too slow and unsatisfying. After a strong set up, I soon found myself bored by the lack of action, and Greenway's writing wasn't enough to keep me as engaged as I was in the novel's early pages.

Elizabeth? says

This story takes place on various islands: the islands off the east coast; islands off the coast of Georgia; and the islands of the Pacific.

Jim is an ornithologist. He works for the Museum of Natural History until Pearl Harbor. He then joins the

Navy to fight the enemy. While he is stationed as a lookout on a lonely island, he collects samples of birds for the museum. A local native, Tosca, a teenager, joins him on the island. The two become friends and Tosca learns everything Jim has to show him about birds and collecting samples.

Fast forward thirty years. Tosca's daughter, Cadillac, is coming to stay with Jim for the summer until she matriculates to Yale to become a doctor. Jim is a loner, and keeps to himself now. His past haunts him, but Cadillac isn't aware of this until she arrives. Jim is an alcoholic and depressed. He is surly and unloving and Cadillac dredges up the past in a way for which he is unprepared.

This story moves fluidly between past and present (present is 1973). The stories are interwoven in a way that is believable and we come to understand why Jim has surrendered to his demons.

This also gives information about birds found only on specific islands in the Pacific and that is interesting and relevant to the storyline.

Devi says

Das ist ein 5 Sterne Buch. Das hatte alles drin, um mich zu unterhalten, zu bilden, mich neugierig zu machen, mich mitleiden zu lassen, mich mitdenken zu lassen und bei der Stange zu halten.

Beverly says

Cantankerous ornithologist Jim Kennoway whose leg was recently amputated retreats to an island off the coast of Maine and just wants to be left alone. Instinctively the reader knows there is much more to Jim's orneriness than meets the eye as the elegiac language is often betrayed by restrained humanity. In this story, it is the arrival of Cadillac, the daughter of the Melanesian man who scouted with Jim during WWII, on her way to Yale to study medicine that allows the floodgates of Jim's memories to encroach into ours.

The well-layered flashbacks provide the details, and the spellbinding poetic language provides the muted emotions, taut suspense, and pending release in a heartfelt manner. But the brilliance of this tale was the evocation of place and time whether it was WWII ravaged Solomon Islands, sultry pristine Cumberland Island at the turning of the twentieth century, present day Fox Island off the Maine coast or the competitive academic world of Manhattan.

This hauntingly moving tale held my attention from the first page and dared me every time I thought to put it down before the final page. Needless to say I stayed up late into the night to finish. This was my first read by the author and look forward to reading more of her work. I recommend to readers who like stories regarding owning memories, life expectations, and acceptance.

Rebecca says

The Solomon Islands meets coastal Maine in this intricate novel about an aging ornithologist's problematic past. The novel's rich historical tapestry is constructed through many layers of flashbacks, from Jim's carefree island childhood in 1913 to his war service in 1943. Greenway has a masterful grasp of the six decades that make up her tale, such that she shifts seamlessly between time periods without ever losing the

reader's attention.

(An excerpt of my full review is available to non-subscribers at BookBrowse.)

Connie says

Jim Kennoway, an ornithologist, is a cantankerous old man living by himself on an island off the coast of Maine. His solitude is interrupted by the arrival of the upbeat Cadillac from the Solomon Islands, visiting before she heads off to medical school. She is the daughter of a man who acted as a scout with Jim when he worked in Naval Intelligence in the World War II Pacific.

Jim has recently had his lower leg amputated. His hard drinking and smoking are not helping his health situation. The arrival of Cadillac brings back memories that Jim would rather keep buried, times when he failed important people in his life. But good memories also surface since Jim loved the study of ornithology. "Birding, he realizes, offered him both a way to engage with the world and a means to escape it." Jim is spending his summer writing an article about the location, flora, and fauna in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island" whose protagonist, Long John Silver, also had a leg amputated.

The book is a portrait of a flawed, damaged man set mainly on Fox Island in Maine in 1973, and on the Solomon Islands when he was spying on the Japanese thirty years earlier. Other parts of his story also occur on islands or near the water--Manhattan in NY, Greenwich in CT, and Cumberland Island in GA. The descriptions of the areas, especially the birds, are beautiful. The author writes with very poetic prose and sensitivity. Sometimes the flow of the story is disturbed since it flashes back so often to the past. The short chapters are labeled well with the location and date of the flashbacks, but it was a distraction having the story move around so frequently. The author's grandfather, an ornithologist who served in the Pacific working in Naval Intelligence, was the inspiration for this book.

Jill says

For any reader who revels in confident, lyrical prose – rich in detail with meticulously chosen words – Alice Greenway's book will enchant.

The storyline focuses on the elderly and irascible ornithologist Jim Kennoway, who, at the end of his career, retreats to a Maine island after his leg is amputated. There, tortured by past memories and fortified by alcohol and solitude, he eschews the company of others. Yet early on, he receives an unwanted visitor: Cadillac, the daughter of Tosca, who teamed with him as a scout to spy on the Japanese army in the Solomon Islands.

In one sense, the theme is how we evolve and own our memories. In the past, Jim examined how the tongues of different bird species evolved to adapt to different flowers of particular islands. Now he finds himself evolving to circumstances beyond his control: the lack of mobility, the inevitable encroachment of memories and of significant others.

As the book travels back and forth in time – to his youth in the early 1900s, to his stint in Naval Intelligence in the Solomon Islands, to his respected career collecting for the Museum of Natural History, the one

constant in his life has always been birding. "Birding, he realizes, offered him both a way to engage with the world and a means to escape it." Indeed, skinning birds reduces them to their very essence.

So it's no surprise that even as the book opens, Jim has taken upon himself a quixotic task: to evaluate whether Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island was really one of the Solomon Islands. And herein lies another theme: the dastardly pirate Long John Silver, in Treasure Island, remarks how alike he is with the novel's young hero, Jim Hawkins. Good and evil can exist simultaneously in nature and in life...or can it? Can both co-exist in Jim himself?

The book blurb implies that Tosca and his daughter Cadillac will play an integral role of capturing "his heart and that of everyone she meets." I believe that sets up false expectations. Cadillac is indeed a catalyst to help Jim arrive at some clarity but for this reader, the center focus of the story is always Jim. It's an intelligent and beautifully written book.

Amy says

What can I say? I am surprised at how high everyone else rated this book so maybe my thoughts are totally out in left field but I didn't enjoy this book AT ALL.

The characters were poorly introduced and I felt like maybe this was a follow up book and perhaps I should stop reading and buy the first book to become better acquainted with the characters, but no... this is a stand alone novel. Character names are thrown out at random and it's hard to decipher who's who or what significance they have to the story or the lead character.

The lead character, Jim, is somewhat of a bore to me too. I get it, he's had a tough life but he's a grouchy old man and I got a little tired of the phrase "Jesus Christ" being thrown out multiple times within the miniture chapters.

The miniture chapters... blah... one minute we are in present setting and the very next we are throw back to the 70's, in another country, another state, whatever. Sometimes these changes of track aren't even separated by a page break... literally one paragraph to the next. The story jumps all around with random characters just thrown into the mix and an over abundance of bird lingo that I am simply not interested in at all.

In the first 100 pages of the book, I can basically tell you that Jim is a grouchy old sod who becomes the summer host of a young medical student named Cadillac. Jim reflects on his days of wartime and bird hunting and wallows in self pity over the loss of his leg which wasn't even a war injury, it was due to vascular disease. If the first 1/3 of the book didn't catch my interest... I can't see myself going any further.

Disappointed because the other reviews raved of the author's lyrical prose and story telling abilities... I have to wonder if I am reading the same book.

Roger Brunyate says

Good Ingredients, but Cake Won't Rise

The central situation is simple enough. The year is 1973. Jim Carroway, an older man who has recently lost his leg, holes up in an empty house on a Maine island. It is the old summer place of his youth, but he goes there in late winter anyway, sporadically attended to by a couple of childhood friends, and living on canned hash and gin. Now it is summer. He is joined by an ebony-black young woman from the Solomon Islands, known as Cadillac, on her way to medical school at Yale. She is the daughter of a young man he befriended when posted to the islands during the Second World War, but he resents the girl's arrival as an unwelcome summons back to life. What effect will she have on him during her month's stay?

A lot else hangs on this armature. Jim is a distinguished ornithologist, and we hear a lot about his work in the tropics both before and after the War; several of the chapters are headed by names of birds. Some scenes involve his former associates at the American Museum of Natural History: his former mentor, a jealous male colleague who is putting together a biographical piece on him, and an admiring female one who still carries a torch for him. Jim himself has been married, but lost his much-adored wife many years ago in circumstances that will eventually become apparent. We return in flashbacks to Jim's childhood, to his courtship, and especially to his time in the Solomons during the battle for Guadalcanal. Each of the many sections is prefaced with an epigraph from *Treasure Island*, and Jim is sporadically working on an article about the geography and natural history of Stevenson's perhaps not-so-imaginary island, bashing it out on a portable Corona 3 typewriter which sometimes makes him think of himself as another Papa Hemingway.

The ingredients are all there. Alice Greenway writes well on a page-by-page basis, but lacks the skill to bake them together into a satisfying cake. Largely, I think, because there are simply too many ideas and few of them are treated at sufficient length. It is a disjointed, choppy book. There are eight parts in only 300 pages, and numerous chapters within each part, and further subsections within those chapters; some sections have almost as much white space as text. Many of the chapters start with a dateline giving a place and a year, but by no means all of them. Successive chapters can have precisely the same dateline, with no apparent reason for the break between them; others can jump around by thirty years or thousands of miles within the chapter itself. In the right hands, this structure of brief vignettes might have coalesced into a shimmering multidimensional picture; here it just seems scrappy and under-edited.

But there is still a lot of interest in the basic materials, so I was thinking firmly of four stars when I started writing this review. However, the more I ponder it, the more I realize that while I generally liked Jim as a younger man, I was not at all interested in him as an old curmudgeon and the transformative potential of Cadillac's stay was never fully realized. The blurb promised an "astonishing story of youth, lost love, war, and rebirth." The first three elements were there, in flashback. But without that last—rebirth or at least some meaningful spiritual trajectory in the main story—all those memories are nothing.

Katherine says

This is one of those books that seems really interesting - the story is different and well-written but somehow leaves you with a sense that something is missing. The main character is an irascible old man, Jim, who has holed himself up on an island in the Penobscot Bay in his childhood home when Cadillac, a young woman from the Solomon Islands on her way to Yale whose father is companion during the War appears. The story

jumps back and forth between the war in the pacific, the present, Jim's teenage years on an island off the coast of Georgia, and his companions at the American Museum of Natural History where he was a ornithologist. I would almost like to read it again and see if I can get it all to hang together more.

Barbara says

This gem of an historical fiction novel provides an interesting read about bird skinning and World War II in the Pacific islands. The protagonist is an acerbic, angry WWII vet who is also a renowned bird Skinner. The novel takes place in the summer of 1973 on an island off the coast of Maine. Jim Carroway is back at his family's summer cottage to live the rest of his life. In the beginning he admits to himself that he is stuck: he'd been stuck since the war. And being stuck just adds to his frustration...but frustration of what? He just seems to be a cantankerous old man. Deftly telling the story between time periods and places, Greenway provides the reader with Jim's history. Behind every curmudgeon is a story, and Greenway tells a beautiful story. The catalyst that allows the story of Jim to take place is the unexpected arrival of Cadillac, who is the daughter of his best friend while he was in the war in the Solomon Islands. Because of Cadillac's presence, Jim reflects upon his life. The story of his life with his wife, Helen, is heartwarming and sad. The story of his survival in the war is horrific. The story of his youth is heart wrenching. Beyond learning about the science of bird skinning, Greenway allows the reader to learn that back in WWII, Doctors were aware of Post Traumatic Stress disorder, which they defined as "psychoneurotics". There is information on "The Great Japanese Bone Scandal" which is horrifying: an ugly piece of American history that we've conveniently forgotten. This is a fabulous historical fiction novel with a great storyline.

Carolyn Mck says

This novel really grabbed me from the first page: clear, imaginative writing and an interesting premise - an old, irascible man with a past involving the study of birds (and skinning them for museum exhibits) and World War Two experiences that need to be explained and understood. Jim's life is thrown into uncertainty when the daughter of a man he befriended in the Solomon Islands during the war arrives in the US to study medicine and comes to stay with him on his island retreat. The novel offers so much of interest, including the fact that some Japanese war dead had their skulls (and heads) sent as curios to the US. Among other questions, the novel asks what is different about skinning birds and skinning human beings. Yet the book didn't quite live up to its early promise for me. Despite her gifts Greenway was not able to sustain the quality of the early writing nor create enough tension or changes of pace as the book drifted to a quiet and inevitable conclusion.

Emily Crow says

The Bird Skinner is a novel about a man at the end of his life, when regrets and limitations have begun to take over his days. Jim Carroway, the protagonist, was an ornithologist who collected specimens (by shooting and skinning them), worked at a natural history museum, and served as a Naval officer in the South Pacific during World War II. After losing a leg to a bad infection, he has holed up at his family's summer home in Maine, spending his days smoking, drinking and feeling crabby. Even his good deeds seem determined to come back to haunt him: his solitude is disrupted by the arrival of Cadillac, the daughter of a friend he made in the Solomon Islands during the war.

The novel is exquisitely written, with a strong sense of place (the beach in Maine, the jungles of Micronesia) and an affinity for nature. (The well-done bird illustrations are also a plus.) I also give it high marks for realism. The character of Jim Carroway, especially, was 100% believable, so similar to people I've actually known who fought in the Pacific, and never really got their lives together afterwards, that the portrayal was almost uncanny.

My only criticism was that the narration seemed a bit disjointed, jumping from one point of view or place in time to another, mostly told in the present tense. Maybe because the story swung back and forth from the 1940s to the 1970s, the author's choice of tense made me tense as a reader (sorry, I couldn't resist). Other than that, I was quite impressed by this novel.

***I received a free ARC of this novel as a First Reads Giveaway. My opinion, as always, is 100% my own.*

Judy says

I might never have heard of Alice Greenway if it weren't for my practice of being in multiple reading groups. The leader of one of those groups brought Ms Greenway in to do a reading from her first book, *White Ghost Girls*, in 2006. I immediately bought and read the book and had that wonderful feeling I get when I find a new author to love.

I've had to wait eight years for the second novel, probably worth the wait, because there is not a shred of sophomore slump in *The Bird Skinner*. While the first novel was essentially about teenage sisters, this one is about an old broken curmudgeon at the end of his life.

Alice Greenway is a tragedian of the first order. She sees into the minutely individual ways a human being can suffer. It takes an old soul to understand that to live is to suffer, a Buddhist concept, as well as to comprehend that a person may come to terms with loss and with his own shortcomings but not necessarily recover from them.

Jim Carroway has suffered great losses in every decade of his life while also following his consuming passion for ornithology whenever his life permitted, even at times when he should have been taking more care with that life. His most recent loss is the leg that has been amputated, for what reason we never learn. He retreats to the family house on an island off the coast of Maine where he spent summers as a child, determined to drink and smoke himself to death.

Sounds awful, I know. And it is. The novel is a study of a man whose life-changing incidents all left him with post-traumatic stress; serial PTSD. If he hadn't been the tough and nasty character he became, he would never have survived for as long as he did.

When it came to studying birds, he was fearless, ultra competent, and driven. A Darwin. An Edward O Wilson. When it came to human interaction he was found lacking.

Because the novel follows the form of a person looking back over his life, the whole story comes to light in the patchy, uneven way that memory works. Every scene of suffering is leavened with exquisite writing

about the natural world as well as the moments of grace Jim finds. The reader is made to care about this most graceless of men and to hope for his recovery.

The wonder is that even as various fine people come to Jim on his island and help him in various ways, even as he seems to find his soul again, even as we are seduced into hope, the author keeps from us what will come about in the end, though she has Jim telling us all along where he is headed.

I have a little pile of books called "How did she/he do it?" Books I will reread or have reread to discover the answer. This one goes on that pile.
