



All the Birds, Singing

Evie Wyld

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Who or what is watching Jake Whyte from the woods?

Jake Whyte is the sole resident of an old farmhouse on an unnamed island, a place of ceaseless rains and battering winds. It's just her, her untamed companion, Dog, and a flock of sheep. Which is how she wanted it to be. But something is coming for the sheep – every few nights it picks one off, leaves it in rags.

It could be anything. There are foxes in the woods, a strange boy and a strange man, rumours of an obscure, formidable beast. And there is Jake's unknown past, perhaps breaking into the present, a story hidden thousands of miles away and years ago, in a landscape of different colour and sound, a story held in the scars that stripe her back.

Set between Australia and a remote English island, *All the Birds, Singing* is the story of how one woman's present comes from a terrible past. It is the second novel from the award-winning author of *After the Fire, A Still Small Voice*.

All the Birds, Singing Details

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Author : Evie Wyld

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From Reader Review *All the Birds, Singing* for online ebook

Rachel says

So, here's the thing. This book is graphic. Horrifying depictions of animal death abound. And I'm a huge animal lover, so the way I get through reading that kind of stuff is to desensitize - I'm able to sort of turn the emotional side off long enough to read about graphic descriptions of sheep in agonizing pain. The problem is, doing that sort of deadens my emotional reaction to the rest of the book, too. I felt like I wasn't able to engage with this novel the way I was supposed to - what was probably meant to come across as an intense emotional journey left me feeling sort of hollow.

All the Birds, Singing is a novel as bleak as the coastal English terrain where the protagonist, Jake Whyte, finds herself living as a sheep farmer. Jake is running from some kind of mysterious event in her past, that we slowly learn about through a series of flashback chapters that occur in reverse-chronological order. I was initially intrigued by this backwards timeline, but ultimately found it to be rather baseless in its execution.

This is a novel which flits between multiple genres - first it's literary, then it becomes a thriller, wait, now it's vaguely paranormal fantasy or magical realism - but instead of these elements existing in harmony to play off one another, the whole effort came across as rather disjointed.

But there are good things, too. I found this novel's treatment of gender roles fascinating. Jake, with her traditionally male name, lives a rather stereotypically masculine existence - a manual laborer living in self-imposed isolation. It isn't until a male figure enters her life that her dreary farmhouse takes on a homely quality. The dynamic between Jake and this stranger, Lloyd, is very compelling, and probably my favorite thing about this novel.

It's really difficult to give a bottom line for this book. This is the kind of novel that everyone is going to have a different experience with. Where some readers will find it suspenseful and thrilling, others will find it boring and tedious. I'm not sure I fall into either category... this novel's biggest strength is undoubtedly its atmosphere, and I respect Wyld's skill at crafting a setting, and it did engage me on an intellectual level. But it's a difficult book to pour your heart into as a reader without coming out feeling kind of sick. 3.5 stars.

Ayelet Waldman says

This book is almost fantastic. It builds beautifully, but what it builds to ultimately disappointed me.

Douglas says

Thanks to Goodreads and Knopf Books for the advance copy.

All the Birds, Singing is a mythical masterpiece. Thick with brooding imagery, this novel reminds me of Cormac McCarthy's prose.

I was hooked from the very first sentence:

“Another sheep, mangled and bled out, her innards not yet crusting and the vapours rising from her like a steamed pudding.”

Evie Wyld, one of Granta’s Best Young British Novelists, tells the story of Jake Whyte, a young woman on the run from her past. Believing she’s escaped by purchasing land on an English island thousands of miles away from her Australian homeland, her past slowly surfaces from the haunted sounds and images of her new landscape.

The plot unravels in layers, each chapter switching from her current life on the English isle back to her life in Australia and the circumstances that lead to her exile. The Australian chapters take one step back in time, while the chapters on the English isle progress in real-time. I’m not sure if this literary technique has a formal name, but I recognize it from some of William Trevor’s short stories, and it’s something I think enhances the thriller aspect of this novel. (Side note: I’m not sure of this, but this book could be a symbol of Australia’s founding. Criminals being forced to leave England for Australia (an island). This is the reverse of what happens in the story, but perhaps Wyld meant this as a grander theme?)

The plot is mesmerizing, but it’s Wyld’s writing that is beyond breathtaking. This reads like a well-crafted prose poem. There are literally dozens of passages like this:

“Up on the paddock crows dive-bombed something, seagulls formed lazy circles above them. There was spit in the air, but dark brown clouds hanging low promised something more impressive was on the way. “

There’s a sentence like that on almost every page.

Wyld also uses several different animals and their imagery to support her theme of innocence, guilt, and violence. Birds are always observing, singing, and often appear to be almost uninterested or incapable of intervening. One thing I noticed, birds are always present when something of consequence happens. They almost become a symbol of omnipresence, which I assume is also a symbol for God. He sees all, He’s there, sometimes like the angels, He’s singing, but He never acts. He never steps in to stop the violence, to stop what’s happening, to save the day. Don’t be fooled by the title, the birds might be singing and they’re always there, but not all birds sing a song you want to hear.

Then, of course, there’s the sheep. Always innocent, never able to stop what happens to them. Like Jake, the sheep have the ability to cry, but when violence or circumstances move in like a blade, they succumb and never put up a fight. Jake even comments about how physically strong (like Jake) the sheep actually are, but when faced with violence, they always buckle. Even when one is stuck in the mud or mire, it seems to fight help and ends up stuck again.

The use of the dog (man’s best friend) as a symbol for man is also clear. The dogs in this book are either dumb or furiously violent, like the men. Even Jake’s own dog (Dog, a sheepdog that can’t herd sheep) doesn’t seem to be of much use other than to growl and alert her of impending danger. And, when real danger does avail, the dog is too slow or absorbed to actually do anything about it. Kelly, the dog she lives with for a spell in Australia, torments Jake with her fierce loyalty to Otto, her captor. To Jake, even the man-like face of Kelly embodies evil. Of course, the mythical beast that prowls Jake’s English farm and is suspected of killing her sheep has dog-like qualities.

This novel is disturbing in many places and the details of Jake’s haunting are not for the faint of heart, but I suspect this is one that will be read for years to come. It has that lasting quality, and in fact, I look forward to re-reading soon.

João Carlos says

Ovelhas - exploração pecuária numa ilha da costa britânica

”Mais uma ovelha estropiada e esvaída em sangue, as entranhas ainda moles e exalando vapores como um pudim cozido. Os corvos, de bicos brilhantes, pavoneavam-se e crocitavam e, quando lhes acenei com o bordão, levantaram voo para as árvores, pondo-se a observar, a voejar e a cantar, se é que se pode chamar-lhe canto. Espetei com uma bota no focinho do *Dog* para o impedir de levar uma tripa do animal como recordação, e o bicho deixou-se estar ao meu lado enquanto eu carregava a carcaça do campo para o tendal.” - a narradora é Jake Whyte, uma jovem mulher que vive numa quinta isolada – Coastguard Cottage, Milford –, numa pequena ilha da costa britânica (nunca é referido o seu nome) a criar ovelhas.

”Todos os Pássaros do Céu” - segundo livro da escritora inglesa **Evie Wyld** (n. 1980) –, apresenta uma escrita intensa e genuína, sem adornos ou palavras desnecessárias, poderosa nas descrições das paisagens envolventes e na caracterização das inclemências climáticas, incluindo, as explicações minuciosas sobre a flora e a fauna, sobretudo, as aves; com o romance a progredir em capítulos alternados. Os capítulos com a numeração ímpar, são localizados numa pequena ilha da costa britânica, a avançarem no tempo presente e os capítulos com a numeração par, são localizados na Austrália, a regredirem no tempo, desde a vida na idade adulta até à infância.

”Todos os Pássaros do Céu” é um romance fascinante, profundamente feminista, numa jornada convincente de Jake Whyte, – uma jovem mulher inesquecível, lutadora infatigável, obstinada e corajosa, uma trabalhadora incansável –, em busca da redenção e de um resgate existencial, numa luta que como seres humanos quase todos já fizemos – a procura da luz no meio da escuridão das nossas almas, exorcizando os demónios e os traumas do passado ou da infância.

Romances como este - **”Todos os Pássaros do Céu”** - exercem em mim um fascínio: personagens angustiados e atormentados pelo seu passado, tentando superar as adversidades da vida, que podem decorrer da infelicidade ou do infortúnio, mas, igualmente, de uma qualquer fatalidade ou tragédia.

”Todos os Pássaros do Céu” é um excelente romance.

Ovelhas - exploração pecuária na Austrália

Kim says

I decided to listen to the audiobook version of this novel after Evie Wyld was awarded the 2014 Miles Franklin Award, largely because before the announcement I'd heard of neither the author nor her work.

Evie Wyld is a young English-Australian writer and this is her second novel. It's part thriller, part psychological portrait and totally focussed on the central character, Jake Whyte, a reclusive Australian woman who raises sheep on an unnamed island off the west coast of England. Jake is haunted by past trauma and increasingly frightened: someone, or something, is killing her sheep.

The narrative consists of alternating chapters set in the present in England and in the past in Australia, with the chapters set in Australia in reverse chronological order and narrated in the present tense. There is something rather gimmicky about this, although it does serve to build tension as each chapter delves further into Jake's past and gets closer to the reason for her fear and isolation. However, once the big reveal arrived, it was less shocking and less interesting than I expected it to be.

Wyld's prose is more than competent - generally lyrical, although occasional images strike a clumsy note - and Jake is an interesting character. However, I'm not a great fan of the narrator, Cat Gould. She's Australian, so the accents of Australian characters are fine. However, to my ear she was a bit all over the place with the other voices, particularly with Jake's neighbour who sometimes sounded West Country and at other times was clearly Irish.

I may have preferred this novel had I read it rather than listened to it, but it's also possible that Wyld is not a novelist who will take my breath away. Good, but for me at least, not great.

Rebecca Foster says

The writing is certainly lyrical and atmospheric, but I had no real fondness for this book. I did admire Wyld's successful interweaving of her two narratives: Jake Whyte's lonely present life as a shepherdess battling unseen forces on an English island, and the retreating story of her sheep-shearing career in Australia, eventually giving the reasons why she's been on the run more than once. I also enjoyed the parallels between her two lives, such as living with one strange man and a dubious dog.

I thought it particularly interesting that Wyld tells Jake's current story in the past tense, and the remembered story in the present tense – the opposite of what you might expect. Her pattern of alternating chapters is clear, but she also uses wildlife as a marker of which country is hosting the action. [I must pedantically object, however that many of the bird songs she describes in the final Australian chapter are for species that would not be present, such as American robin, chickadee, and phoebe.] Ultimately, I didn't find the reveal in either storyline worth waiting for.

The particular skill set on display here reminded me of *Orkney* by Amy Sackville, which I wrote up for The Island Review. *All the Birds, Singing* has also featured on that wonderful website; I highly recommend Orkney Islands journalist Amy Liptrot's review there. Other young contemporary British women who write in a related vein are Rebecca Hunt (her recent *Everland* is terrific) and Lucy Caldwell (I very much enjoyed *The Meeting Point* but less so *All the Beggars Riding* – which you might agree is a rather similar title to Wyld's.)

Speaking of titles, I reckon Wyld could use some help in this area. Her first novel, *After the Fire, A Still Small Voice* (which earned her a spot on *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists list last year) has a nice biblical resonance, but I think if a title requires punctuation, it might just be too long?

Violet wells says

Really surprised by what a compelling page turner this novel is. I enjoyed a lot of the writing in Wyld's first novel *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice* but structurally never quite found it cohesive. It was perhaps one of

those examples of a young writer overreaching herself, trying too hard to be literary. The structure of *All the Birds, Singing*, on the other hand, is inspired and ensures Wyld can exact every accelerated heartbeat of tension out of her story.

The novel juxtaposes two timelines both narrated in the first person. Jake, a loner of a girl who has run away from some mysterious event in her past and evidently wants nothing more than to live in concealment is working on an unnamed island off the coast of Britain as a sheep farmer. Something on this island is brutally killing off and disembowelling her sheep. The compelling menace Wyld feeds into the darkness of these sections is brilliantly sustained throughout the novel. This narrative moves forward in a conventional manner. The alternate narrative is the stroke of brilliance. This begins a few years earlier and moves backwards, a rewinding timeline that tantalisingly unfurls the mystery of the darkness in Jake's past. We quickly learn Jake is ashamed of her body because her back is covered in ridged welts and scars. We also learn she was the prisoner of a creepy much older man on a remote farm. But this isn't even half the story...

The artistry and pacing with which Wyld sustains and heightens our curiosity about Jake's secrets is brilliant. Jake is hiding from the world and Wyld hides her from us but in so doing makes her a more and more compelling figure. Among other things *All the Birds* is a thrilling feat of sustained concealment. It also questions gender stereotyping. An obnoxious male is called Clare; the female narrator has a male name and is frequently referred to by her male co-workers as "a good bloke". She is muscular and self-sufficient and it takes a male to bring a homely atmosphere into her house. It also has a timeless quality, like a fairy story. Wholly recommended.

Roxane says

Engrossing, lots of physicality to the prose. Wanted more from the ending but this is damn fine novel.

Nora says

Interesting read, but too many unanswered questions. Maybe I am just a bit slower than other readers.

I'm OK with some concepts left unexplored, but I think, key mysteries that move the book forward should be solved. There was a beast haunting her sheep herd. It was haunting her. It was big, with yellow eyes. Watching, hovering. What was it? Who was it? The book never reveals this.

It is clear from the beginning that Jake is running from something, running for her life almost. In the end, I did not find anything that would make a tough cookie like her be so spooked & stressed. The build-up was larger than the events revealed.

I wish the character of Lloyd would have been built out more. Where did he come from? At first he's in a suit, easily winded and afraid of sheep - and next thing he cocks the gun like a pro.

The writing is very terse, which provides the book with great atmosphere. But in the end it was too terse for me. I kept wishing somebody would spell something out for me, so I wouldn't have to piece together what exactly just happened.

So, sadly, although a fast and interesting read - in the end quite unsatisfying.

Sally906 says

The best thing about this book was that it was short. The story started in the middle then sometimes went forward in the present, and then at other times it went backwards in the past. It was too disjointed and utterly confusing to let me get really invested in the story.

There moments where I was worried by the sanity (and as a result her reliability) of Jake, and I was also uncertain if the book was a mystery, fantasy or horror - it sort of touched on all of these but the book didn't seem to know what it was.

There were a lot of threads going on and not all them were stitched neatly into the story by the end, speaking of the end....well just let's say I was left I unsatisfied.

Still it has been lauded as an exemplary piece of literary fiction having won the 2014 Miles Franklin Award so there must be something to it that I have missed.

Diane S ? says

3.5 A novel that takes place on two continents, Australia where Jake originated from, and England where she ends up as a sheep rancher. There is a pervasive sense of foreboding, tension and fear, from her past, where did she get those horrible scars on her back, and her present, where something is killing her sheep. It begins in the present and then in alternate chapter, her near past. It isn't until the ending that some of our questions are answered.

In the present Jake is a reticent woman, doesn't mix with the people in town, her only friend, the rancher Don. Who sold her the property. Until that is a drifter arrives and manages to penetrate her thick skin. The two continents are visibly drawn, the description of the sheep, the shearing, the slaughtering all are vividly described. Jake is a strong woman with a troubled past and how she manages to survive all she has is a wonder. She is a strong, but very flawed character.

The writing is very good, the ending I had trouble with. I am still thinking about the ending, did it seem unfinished or is it left up to the reader to decide what it means? May go back and re-read it after I have more time to think about what I have read. I was very drawn to the tone and story in this one, Wild has a fabulous way of drawing the reader into the story. Actually checked out her first book, *After the Fire*, a *Still Small Voice*, this being her second, which I hope to read soon.

Maxwell says

If you mix *The Village* and *Memento* with some of the most beautiful writing I've read in a long time, you have this book. A mesmerizing, expertly-crafted story that does everything right. Wyld takes a stale story structure--alternating chapters telling two stories--and turns it on its head. It's inventive and engrossing and absolutely wonderful. This is one of those 'why didn't I read that sooner?!' books. Highly recommend anyone

who enjoys good literary fiction, and even mystery/suspense. An easy 5 stars from me.

Zoeytron says

This is a rather dark, unsettling story about a young woman who is raising sheep on a remote British isle with a dog as her companion. Her name is Jake Whyte and she lives in a state of fear and suspicion. She has her reasons. Do they have anything to do with the hideous scars on her back?

??Jülie ? says

This is a powerful and affecting story about a very damaged soul, haunted by a tragic, inadequate past. It is a journey through the nightmare that was to become Jake Whyte's life as she ran from the relentless pursuit of her past, finally seeking refuge in the safe isolation and seclusion of her own sheep farm, far, far away from her haunting past...*or is it?*

It seems that some lives are just destined to follow a relentlessly tragic path, and Jake's life appears to be traversing that very course, as she now finds herself determinately pursuing the elusive monster that is stalking and killing her precious sheep.

I was engrossed in this story from beginning to end, waiting all the time for some villain to present itself. Instead, the tension kept mounting until the very end.

I do wish it had a bit more at the end, as I felt a bit robbed of that thing we all expect at the end of something so emotionally taxing...called "closure".

Instead we are left with an intake of breath and then....understanding dawns slowly, but still leaves me wanting.

However I can't take away from the fact that this is a very well constructed and compelling story with credible characters.

4.5★s

Julie says

**More like a cacophony than birds singing
Disjointed storyline that jars.**

I like a broken timeline, putting the past in perspective with the present, but with this novel it was like jagged edges. It was almost as if the author had written a linear narrative but taken to the manuscript with scissors and reconstructed the fragments. Rather than a slow suspense-building reveal, with the sins and horrors of the past coming to torment the present, it skated around shards of story poking through the fabric of the narrative.

The language provides menacing characters and locations and the narrative provides suspense and threat. Interest is maintained because, even though there is a rather unrelenting bleakness, you are drawn in to the mystery and touched by Jake's toughness.

A lot is left unrevealed for the reader to speculate about. Fine, but ultimately I ended up dissatisfied with the lack of a conclusion; it was almost as if the author was being too clever to finish off her own narrative.

karen says

CONGRATULATIONS, WINNER!!!

jake whyte is an australian who has emigrated to a remote island off the coast of england to live alone on an isolated sheep farm, with only a dog for company. jake whyte has nothing in common with this similarly-named individual

because she could probably snap him in half over one of her muscular thighs.

jake is a tall, big, strong woman with a troubled past, a deeply scarred back, and very good reasons for staying hidden. her only human contact is with don, the man from whom she bought the house and land, on his occasional passes by to assist her with various tasks. he is always trying to encourage/strongarm her into being more sociable - to go into town and meet a nice fella at the local, because although she is capable of meeting most of the demands of the farm, he sees her stubbornness and antisocial behavior as unnatural, and insists that regardless of gender, farmers need to form a sort of community, and her isolation is detrimental to herself as a woman, and to the success of the flock.

this belief seems to have merit as jake's sheep begin to be attacked - torn apart by some kind of animal much larger than any witnessed in the area. jake initially believes it is the work of the local teenagers who give her attitude when she goes into town for supplies, but then other strange things start happening - noises in the middle of the night, the feeling of being watched, rumors of a mysterious beast... and then one night jake discovers a man, lloyd, in her shed sleeping off a night of drinking. the two of them enter an arrangement that becomes a sort of friendship, despite jake's reservations and emotional resistance.

intercut with the story of jake and lloyd is the story of jake's past, told in reverse order, as we learn what drove her to flee australia, and the source of her physical and emotional scars.

it's a definite page turner, but not in a fast-paced sort of way, more of a reader's need to find out what happened. it has all the things i like in my literary fiction, with the dark secrets and perseverance in impossible situations, and despite the ambiguous ending, i don't really think it is really a story of redemption, or even acceptance. it is just a story of one woman who makes a terrible mistake, finds herself getting into more trouble with each of her attempts to run from her past, and discovers that even self-exile brings its own set of difficulties.

now, about that ambiguous ending. that's one of the few things i wasn't wild about. i don't mind ambiguity as a rule, i liked the is-it-or-isn't-it dusting of magical realism, but the last two epilogue pages confused me, and clouded the situation for me a little. it felt soft, tacked-on, and while i have a thought about what it could

signify, there isn't enough textual evidence for a confident assertion. i think i would rather it have ended on the harder ending that came before, which was still ambiguous, but in a somewhat more satisfying way - where possibility-seeds were planted in the reader's mind, without feeling so... misty.

but it is still a gripping story with plenty of depth and surprises for its size, and i am really interested in seeing how other people respond to it.

come to my blog!

Mary says

Birds. I hate birds. Birds in Australia can be menacing and hostile. They're loud. Here, they are omnipresent. Watch for them in this story. They are there when something happens. Are the birds a god of some kind? Or are they warning of something threatening?

This is atmospheric and beautifully written. The mysterious tone builds and builds and is sustained throughout the novel. We watch traumas and fears manifest into something real by our damaged and unreliable narrator.

I kept asking myself: what is Wyld saying about men and women and gender stereotypes?

The protagonist is female with a male name (Jake) who's often referred to as "bloke." There's a constant reference to her "manly body." Manly because it's muscular and tall and rugged and strong, and her body can shear sheep and cut down trees and bludgeon a dying animal to death. Her body can take care of her.

One male has a female name for which he's mocked, and like a lot of the men in this book, he's a brute. With the exception of Lloyd (view spoiler), the men tended to be aggressive and dangerous, or silly. And then there's the vicious dog with the female name. And the helpless sheep being slaughtered by a man with an erection.

Ambiguity everywhere.

Blair says

Bleak, unsettling, strange and wild: *All the Birds, Singing* is a weird and wonderful novel. The ambiguously-named Jake Whyte - actually a young woman, despite her name and profession - is a sheep farmer who lives alone on an isolated, windswept English island. When the story opens, she is standing over the body of a sheep that seems to have been ravaged by some predator: perhaps the work of local kids with nothing to do, or maybe something more sinister. Half the book deals with Jake's deliberately lonely life on the island, while the other half, told in alternating chapters, is about the early life that led her there. The latter story unfolds in reverse order, starting with the incident that prompts her to leave her native Australia, and rewinding through her troubled past.

Various elements of the story reminded me of other books I've liked. The initial setup - a woman flees her

past, sets up home on a remote farm in an unfamiliar country, isolates herself, but something is picking off her animals one by one - is virtually identical to that of Gerbrand Bakker's *The Detour*, but the backstory unfolds quite differently. Jake's situation with Otto, as well as the fact that this part of the narrative is set in Australia, is reminiscent of Chloe Hooper's brilliant *The Engagement*. However, *All the Birds, Singing* has its own atmosphere and its own momentum. While the idea of a lone outsider-type character having a dark, difficult background is hardly new, I was both surprised and unsettled by some of the revelations about Jake's history. There are moments of great tension, and the narrative is also interesting for the various methods it uses to play with gender roles and subvert the assumptions we make about women and men. The reversal of 'feminine' and 'masculine' names for several characters put me in mind of another favourite (and again a book about a girl held captive), Bonnie Nadzam's *Lamb*.

The first time I tried to read this book, I couldn't get into it and wasn't sure I'd go back. I'm really glad I did, and that I allowed the many positive reviews I've read to change my mind: because of its powerful characterisation and originality, *All the Birds, Singing* was one of the most memorable books I've read this year. It is quiet and in some ways uneventful, but also menacing, unnerving and intriguing. It is also a book I'll probably read again and re-assess at a later date; the kind of book you look forward to re-reading a few years into the future.

Laura says

*While I tried to avoid any major spoilers (which was not easy, by the way) there are a few plot points mentioned which could probably be called minor spoilers., because I have a LOT of thoughts to get out about this novel. Seriously, I don't think I can sleep until I do.

First, I have to comment on the cover of my edition, because it's perfect and brilliant. This is a book with *teeth* alright, sharp fangs that latch onto the reader and draw blood, because this is a novel that's intense, painful, and dangerous.

It's also not an easy book to read, and when I finished it took another hour or so of flipping back through before I felt like I fully understood it.

The narrative structure is extremely confusing at first, and I confess that I often have little patience for edgy/bold statements made with structure (they too often seem contrived to add cool points to a book that has no real power and nothing authentic to say) but in this case it totally works. There are two story lines alternating throughout the book- one chronological, and the other in reverse-chronological order. The first story line (told in chronological order) is of Jake's present on a remote British island, where she has attempted to retreat from the dangerous world to be a hermit of sorts on her sheep farm. The other story line- that of the troubled (understatement) past that got her there- is told in reverse chronological order. We first read about Jake's last effort to find a place for herself in Australia (a rugged sheep station, where she works as "one of the guys") before fleeing to the British island. It is at the sheep station that she first attempts to have a normal intimate relationship, and where she first becomes convinced of a large dog-like beast (very similar to the creature which she ultimately decides is killing her sheep in the narrative present). Next, we learn about the truly disturbing stay at Otto's farm (the detail of the earrings--when you read the book you'll know exactly what I mean--is so brilliantly ominous) and then the also-awful situation that preceded it, and so on, until finally the last bit of her past is revealed, including the reason she had to leave home in the first place.

Jake is a difficult character to get to know, but I found her fascinating and her characterization to be quite complex and nuanced. She is basically one big web of scar tissue (not just her physically scarred back, but her entire psyche as well) but despite her effort to shut herself off she has moments of blinding sensitivity and empathy. Her attempt to live removed from society has not helped her find peace or safety, and she does still, on some level, crave human kindness and company. Some part of her senses early on that Lloyd is not a real threat (although rationally he should be -- a strange man wandering onto her property) and while she is resistant she still trusts him enough to allow him shelter for the night. When she does truly seem to relax around him and even form a trust, it seems less due to his kind treatment of her and more due to her realization that he is both homosexual (and therefore less of a threat than most of the men she has known) and himself deeply touched by grief.

I was truly impressed by how brilliantly the author links the whole story together, how nuanced it was. For example, how Jake hums the song from *Titanic* over the dead bird she lets float out to sea, perhaps not even consciously remembering that the same song was played during a key funeral in her past. Or how she orders a "Devon cream tea" when she first arrives at the island because Karen once told her how lovely they were, and made it a symbol of how "gentle" and "beautiful" life in England is (perhaps why Jake chose a remote British island for her retreat in the first place?)

I have my theory as to what the large dog-like beast represents-- and therefore why Lloyd says he sees it too, before taking her hand at the end--but I suppose I am wading too far into spoiler territory as it is. So I will just say that I found that element fascinating as well, and that it led me to think of the many versions of the Hell Hound/Black Dog ghost myth throughout the British Isles--from Devon's legend of the Yeth Hound to the Welsh gwyllgi, or even the *Hound of the Baskervilles*.

All in all a fascinating, complicated novel--well worth the trudge!

Antonomasia says

[3.5] I wonder what people who read more thrillers will make of *All the Birds, Singing*. You may not have expected this to be a psychological thriller set on farms, what with the author being one of the Granta Best Young British Novelists, who looks very cool and works in a London bookshop, and the book's pretty cover with twee wonky lettering. (A case of coverflip? It's not something I see a lot of in my reading but this seems like one, and it suits the protagonist very poorly. The Australian cover even features a woman with long hair and a dress - nothing like her. Without the Granta rec I wouldn't have picked up a book that looks like this, regardless of old proverbs.) The story is fairly grim, the grimmest book I've read since Sofie Oksanen's *Purge* - a truly all-round excellent novel also about a woman on the run from her past, that I'd recommend over this one.

Suspense is this book's greatest strength. Ever since I read the excerpt in the Granta collection I've wanted to know what happens. I read a longer excerpt on the publisher's website, and I still wanted to know more. This feeling lasted right until the end of the book. It's very neatly structured: chapters from the book's present, going forwards chronologically alternate with those from the past which run back chronologically. In typical literary fiction fashion, hints and allusions are made to a background which is only gradually and partially revealed to the reader. This usually gives the effect of getting to know an enigmatic person (like the protagonist, Jake); part of the fascination is waiting to find out the pattern of what they will and won't tell you, as well as the facts themselves; the chapter structure adds to that sense.

There were times, especially when I'd taken a break from the book and returned to it, that I would think, "oh, yet more lyrical realism"...but nearly every time I was hypnotically drawn back in, and away from that cynicism. It's lyrical realism well done and the novelty of the characters and their environment kept me interested.

In a way, it's a nature book, a rural book - set in Australia in the past and in its present on a fictional unnamed island off the west coast of England. [Why west? (view spoiler)].

It's visceral and raw and full of animals (and spiders) alive and dead. The TLS review conjures its natural environment well. Yet for all that Jake lives in these places, she doesn't feel at ease in them - she doesn't feel at ease anywhere, dogged by fear and her traumatic past.

Her feelings about her current location are pretty much the opposite of what mine would be in such a place, yet it's well evoked so the disagreement is irrelevant.

It made me feel lonely to think about it, that old English history in the dark and the wet, the short days with no electricity. It made me want to go and sit in the truck, rev the throttle, just to remind myself of my century, just to feel the modern dry heat of the engine.

It's taken a few paragraphs to get round to discussing Jake because how to describe her raises questions. Her character and experiences made me realise how conventionally feminine a lot of modern literary female characters still are; she messes with commonly imposed dichotomies around masculine/feminine, weak/strong - and in a way that is more like the non-symbolic and complicated existence of a real person than a character who was drawn up to represent anything particular. It seems daft to call an adult a tomboy; what about a straight butch? Anyway, why do I have to label her for the purpose of this review?

I liked a lot of things about her, and to some extent could relate: the ways she tries to be strong and almost compulsively independent even when it's a bit much, and the way she doesn't want to talk much except on her terms. Mostly, she's very well drawn but there were one or two points (below, as spoilers) which didn't quite ring true.

The writing, the setting, and the central character are pretty good, so what's wrong with this book?

It comes down to a few pedantic points; if they'd been ironed out with strict editing, this could have been a seriously great little book. This is also where I'd love to know what detail-orientated regular readers of thrillers think. For all its well-crafted suspense, *All the Birds, Singing* is not original enough *as a thriller* and it lacks the greater significance and depth a "literary" work might have had to make up for that. I also thought that the narrator's register would have worked even better with some more humour as it's a natural bridge between bravado and fear.

Further pedantry:

- Whilst Jake has some money in the bank, it's not enough to buy a farm in the UK. The "present" setting is, if given any thought, an implausible romantic idea which is difficult to fit with the gritty elements of the story. Also, let's just assume she got her driving licence somewhere along the way and has unmentioned British-born relatives who'd make the whole immigration thing a lot easier.
- Cressida Connolly notes the unlikelihood of Jake owning a gun in Britain.
- She is a loner who's slow to trust people, so (view spoiler)
- Related: (view spoiler)
- (view spoiler)
- A few hackneyed devices including symbolic cryptozoological beastie (this is, coincidentally, the third book I've read this month featuring one ... they're like buses). Various found items. (view spoiler) But perhaps a few tropes like these are just necessary for a thriller?
- There are a number of other things which raise potential quibbles, but they also leave room for assumptions

that make the story flow. I like novels in which not everything is spelt out.

This book could be one of those examples of literary writing with a genre plot, but which does the "genre" element less well than experienced genre writers - as a few commenters on this Millions article allege is common. But as I haven't read a thriller for years, I'm not really qualified to say.

All the Birds Singing is an interesting book with some strengths but it may not have been as great as some of the hype makes out. I've seen at least two comparisons with *The Wasp Factory* : to a teenager in the 90's the Banks book already wasn't half as shocking as people had said it was on release - but Wyld's character and plot don't have its level of originality either. But *All the Birds* is a promising book, different and good enough for me to think it worth looking out for future works by Evie Wyld.

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(Two and a half years after reading, it's the aspects of the book I liked, especially Jake as a character, that have stuck, whilst the nitpicked bits have faded.)
