



This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon

Nancy Plain

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Birds were “the objects of my greatest delight,” wrote John James Audubon (1785–1851), founder of modern ornithology and one of the world’s greatest bird painters. His masterpiece, *The Birds of America* depicts almost five hundred North American bird species, each image—lifelike and life size—rendered in vibrant color. Audubon was also an explorer, a woodsman, a hunter, an entertaining and prolific writer, and an energetic self-promoter. Through talent and dogged determination, he rose from backwoods obscurity to international fame.

In *This Strange Wilderness*, award-winning author Nancy Plain brings together the amazing story of this American icon’s career and the beautiful images that are his legacy. Before Audubon, no one had seen, drawn, or written so much about the animals of this largely uncharted young country. Aware that the wilderness and its wildlife were changing even as he watched, Audubon remained committed almost to the end of his life “to search out the things which have been hidden since the creation of this wondrous world.” *This Strange Wilderness* details his art and writing, transporting the reader back to the frontiers of early nineteenth-century America.

This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon Details

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Author : Nancy Plain

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From Reader Review This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon for online ebook

Barb Middleton says

I couldn't put down this 90 page book that chronicles the adventurous life of John James Audubon as he compiled his famous book, "Birds of America," published in England in 1827. Nancy Plain shows his passion for nature and unusual self-taught artistry that helped him create unique pictures that not only showed birds in movement but also in their habitat. Anecdotes, hardships, and adventures made this a page turner. Audubon's labeled paintings are spread throughout the book and accompany stories adding strength to the text. Audubon's scientific accuracy combined with art and his experimentation with mixed media gave his pictures a photographic quality, something no other ornithologists were doing at the time.

Audubon got married and started a business until bad investments led him to live a life of struggle to make ends meet. His wife, Lucy, made money as a teacher and when Audubon wanted to pick up and leave to go collect his bird specimens, Lucy stayed in one place raising their two young boys providing the family some economic stability. Audubon periodically roamed and when he was shutout from the publishing world in the United States, he went to Europe to market his idea for a book that contained 500 bird species he had collected over decades. He was hugely successful but was away from his family for three years putting a strain on relationships and missing out on a chunk of his boys childhood. Eventually he made it home and the family started a business that combined his artistic ability with the skills of his wife and sons.

Lewis and Clark had recently finished exploring the interior of the United States and westward expansion was beginning when Audubon first came to the US. He was avoiding Bonaparte's draft in France where he was born to a well-off seaman and step mom. Audubon was an explorer who traveled all over the US creating honing his unique talent. He said that he killed 100 birds a day at one point to study them. He also didn't give credit to another artist that did the flowers in his paintings. The author shows Audubon as a flawed human being that cared deeply about his family and nature and who predicted the extinction of the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and (the almost extinction of the) buffalo. He recognized the need for restraint in hunting even though his own killing seemed excessive. This contradiction would make for good discussions in a book club.

Heydi Smith says

Simply amazing! I learned so much about early America and about all the animals that are now endangered or extinct because of over hunting.

Very easy to read with an exciting page turning journey.

Elizabeth? says

I teach an excerpt from Audobon's Ornithological Biography Volume 1, so when I came across this at the library, I picked it up to get a snapshot of his life's work.

This is aimed at younger readers, but I found it had just enough to satisfy my curiosity about John James Audobon. He nearly went broke to create what would become his magnum opus which chronicled, for the first time, over 400 species of birds in America. He traveled far and wide in his efforts. There are many interesting facts, but I found that he had to go to Europe to publish his book the most interesting.

This has nice illustrations that highlight Audobon's talent. I'm glad I picked it up. I feel the background knowledge will help me teach the excerpt much better now.

Melissa Schweitzer says

Non-fiction is usually not my first choice for my reading time. However, I have discovered that good YA non-fiction is not only tolerable but can be enjoyable as well. This is true of *This Strange Wilderness: The Life and Art of John James Audubon* by Nancy Plain.

I read this book because of a YASLA challenge and I was familiar with Audubon's paintings. I have come to appreciate Plain's style of storytelling. She covers details about Audubon's life without getting mired in them. On the other hand, there was enough "meat" to the facts that I did not feel like I was reading only fluff. She found just the right balance.

I think it helped that I was reading this book at the precipice of spring when our bird feeder is full of different types of birds. I could image trying to paint the detail of each bird as they flitted by and respected the lengths that Audubon traveled to get his pictures not only aesthetically pleasing but scientifically correct as well.

I look forward to reading more non-fiction by Plain as well as delving into the YA non-fiction library shelf.

Chelsey says

Fascinated by the great wilderness, John James Audubon led a life of adventure. His desire to become the top ornithologist in America pushed him to travel across the country observing, cataloging, and drawing hundreds of birds.

This was a quick, easy, engaging read. Coming to the table knowing nothing about Audubon other than his name, I was quickly drawn in to this biography by Audubon's own artwork and Nancy Plain's storytelling. It was also refreshing to read such an upbeat title after reading a lot of dark stories on the 2016 Hub Challenge!

Amy says

2016 YALSA Finalist

Interesting. I learned a lot more than I knew about this man. For the most part, he was a traveling starving artist. Also, he was more successful in England / Europe before he was in the United States.

Still, his drawings are extraordinary!

Another interesting piece that I learned -- While Audubon, the man, was interested in COLLECTING birds,

the Audubon Society is dedicated to PROTECTING & PRESERVING them.

Stuart says

One could argue that no one loved birds more than John James Audubon. He devoted his life to discovering and painting every North American species of birds. The book *This Strange Wilderness* is a biography of Audubon and also includes some of his artwork, which is stunning if you have never seen it. The book begins with Audubon's birth in Haiti and the death of his mother he never knew. His father, a French sea captain and plantation owner, took him back to France where he and his wife Anne raised James and his half-sister Rose. James' father was responsible for his love of birds and his passion for illustrating them. Audubon was never happy with his drawings. He was so disappointed with them that he burned the drawings every year on his birthday with a vow to do better.

The book then chronicles the horrors in France, including the French Revolution, and Audubon's engineered escape to America. It was here where Audubon met his wife. He had three children by her, two boys, and a girl who died at a very early age. Audubon had several failed business ventures and contributed much to the study of bird migration, ornithology, and taxonomy while attempting to provide for his family in these business ventures that failed. There are times in this book that Audubon didn't come off as a particularly great husband or father, as he left his wife (albeit with her blessing) to pursue his lifelong ambition of finding, painting, and cataloging every bird in North America. The book continues to trace Audubon's journey across America and his keen insight into birds and sadly their eventual extinction.

Reading through this book felt like reading a story, not a dry biography. The Audubon quotes demonstrated both his intelligence and his personality. The book also is full of photographs of the Audubons and Audubon's beautiful paintings. I also learned a lot about Audubon that I never knew, such as his early childhood and the fact that he drew mammals after he completed his book of birds. This was a fascinating read and one that I would recommend for middle-school and up. It contains a nice blend of science and history and would also make an excellent book for the homeschooling crowd!

Christine says

This is a juvenile book, so it was a short and easy read with enough information for me. I really am not interested enough to read an extensive adult biography of Audubon. Not sure if it is true, but I felt the book portrayed him as a very one dimensional man; totally obsessed with the creation of his books and documenting the birds & then mammals of North America. The Audubon paintings included in the book were very nice.

Erin says

Not sure who the audience is for this, but I sure enjoyed it. The illustrations are gorgeous and Audubon's life

is fascinating.

Saleena Davidson says

This Strange Wilderness is a quiet book, and a biography about John James Audubon, the bird guy.....I found it quite interesting and enlightening to learn more about him and how he changed science and bird watching.

Chris Enss says

Nancy Plain's books never fail to entertain. She's a quality author and the research she does on the subjects she writes about are first rate.

Charles Johnson says

BOOK REVIEW:

THIS STRANGE WILDERNESS

The Life and Art of John James Audubon

Juvenile Nonfiction by Nancy Plain

Published by University of Nebraska Press

91 Pages, followed by an appendix of notes, glossary and index

ISBN 978-9-8032-4884-7

John James Audubon – the boring bird man, right?

In Nancy Plain's well -researched book, the reader finds out that Audubon was much more than that boring birdman. John James Audubon's life crossed international borders, reached levels of academic achievement on his own, enjoyed his family, and truly experienced the American pioneer years as they grew from its very rugged beginnings in the early 1800s until his death in 1851. He influenced the entire world of sciences with his observations, thoughts, and artwork.

The reader meets the young James in his birthplace of Haiti. Then off he goes to France, then to America, where he travels the outback of the new country – and his artwork brings him back to the larger cities in search of a publisher for his work – and even to England for more publishing opportunities before he returns home to an America that finally recognized his work for the excellence it held.

Ms. Plain takes us on the journeys that Audubon underwent, as he observed new species, as he added to the knowledge of already known birds. These trips included the frontiers of Kentucky, the bayous of Louisiana, and the far reaches of the remote north end of the Missouri River. Audubon meets a variety of folks on his travels – the roughnecks in the local taverns, other naturalists who question his skills and abilities, and some Native Americans, who leave quite an impression on the artist/scientist.

Ms. Plain includes a large selection of the artwork of Audubon – from the smallest sparrow to the egrets and eagles. These pictures became the basis of the definitive book on the birds of America – and that book and

those colorful drawings are still the standard of anyone who calls himself a 'naturalist', as Audubon often chose to call himself.

The book is billed for juveniles – starting with ten-year-old readers. Even with the great amount of illustrations, the text is extensive and the vocabulary is not for the beginning reader. The color illustrations are interesting to explore for the features of the bird and the habitat that is favored by that bird. Some of the illustrations are quite graphic when it came to the meat eating birds – causing controversy even when they first appeared in print. To add to the bird art, there are also some pictures of John James Audubon himself, and of some of the homes he lived in. Maps of the Audubon excursions would have been a good plus to include – perhaps such will show up in future editions of the book.

There is a strong historical value in this book for the young reader seeking to learn more about the man and his times – not only does Ms. Plain deliver deeper details about Audubon, but she also includes a solid basis of the first half of the 19th century of American History.

You can't ask for much more.

Monty says

"This Strange Wilderness" is one of the best compact and concise biographies available on John James Audubon. Award-winning author Nancy Plain has blended a wonderfully interesting prose narrative with the original illustrations of Audubon to create a book that will be enjoyed by children (ages 12 and up) and adults alike. Audubon comes alive as a remarkable man who was an artist and explorer, but who was embarrassed by the title of naturalist or ornithologist bestowed upon him by many of his peers. He was the first artist to pose birds and other wildlife in lifelike poses and to use mixed media (watercolor, oils, pastel, pencil, ink) to achieve the specific realistic depictions he desired. Audubon was not flawless, as his short temper is described as well as the fact that his apprentice and foliage-painter Joseph Mason did not get the credit he was due. He also had great difficulty in being accepted in America, as a few scientific hecklers attacked his theories & writings and did their best to defame him at home and abroad. This fascinating story of the crossroads where science and art intersect is masterfully done in concise but lively prose.

Vernon Area Public Library KIDS says

This wonderful biography discusses John James Audubon's life, which is quite spectacular, adventurous, and impressive. He spent over 30 years of his life working on *The Birds of America*, going from rich, to very poor, to reviled, to extremely famous and respected. He was alive in an incredible time of change and expansion, and witnessed it all. Really engaging read.

Reviewed by: Julia Pyatetsky, Youth Services, Vernon Area Public Library

Alicia says

What a perfect homage to John James Audubon who I knew nothing about other than his creation of The Birds of America and part of the theme and book in Okay for Now. But to get to know Audubon's intimate passion with nature and his love of the animals, sketching, and the lengths he went to continue his passion and make a profit, even when it meant leaving his family to pursue it. There were many connections and relationships he built along the way, sometimes penniless and sometimes with riches. He explored America as well as the "wild west" and met the Native Americans as well as presidents.

And ultimately I love that it came back to his family who welcomed him back into the family and they made Birds of America a family affair. The elements of sketching and how he approached conservation as well as art and science is as phenomenal as PT Barnum's was as well. Thoroughly enjoyed the presentation of the information, seeing his drawings, and learning about who he was.
