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The Conference Of The Birds (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Composed in the twelfth century in north-eastern Iran, Attar's great mystical poem is among the most significant of all works of Persian literature. A marvellous, allegorical rendering of the Islamic doctrine of Sufism - an esoteric system concerned with the search for truth through God - it describes the consequences of the conference of the birds of the world when they meet to begin the search for their ideal king, the Simorgh bird. On hearing that to find him they must undertake an arduous journey, the birds soon express their reservations to their leader, the hoopoe. With eloquence and insight, however, the hoopoe calms their fears, using a series of riddling parables to provide guidance in the search for spiritual truth. By turns witty and profound, The Conference of the Birds transforms deep belief into magnificent poetry.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A truly exceptional book - so captivating in translation it must have been exceptional in the original Persian. Attar's verse focusses on a flock of birds who decide they are in need of a King - but who should it be? Thus begins their quest for a leader and it becomes clear each bird represents a human archetype, personifying vices but also acting as the dramatic vehicle for the inner struggles which each human being experiences in life. The Hoopoe (the legendary bird resident at the Court of King Solomon) is their guide and by turns admonishes, encourages and advises each bird on its quest to reach the Ultimate, the King of the Birds, known as the Simorgh. It is clear that each 'bird'

in Attar's verse could be a (indeed, is, in allegory) a person, but what is the Simorgh? And how does one reach the Simorgh? Such is the question which the birds (and the reader) endeavour to find answers to as the poem progresses. In beautiful allegorical verse, Attar leads the reader to the conclusion that eternal happiness can only be achieved through Divine Love, but that the latter can only be attained through sacrifice of the Self (ie the ego) and steadfastness. The road is hard and long, the Hoopoe never ceases to remind his companions, but the reward represents the zenith of human experience. The Hoopoe is obviously a Sufi Master (surprise, surprise so was Attar himself) and the birds are the members of the Sufi Order, but let not the taxonomy of Islamic mysticism be a barrier to reading this poem. Anyone at home with English verse register and the ability to appreciate the abstract, the intangible, the uncertain and the unseen must surely warm to this book.

I have been a reader of this text for years, typically the C.S. Nott translation (prose style). In comparison, I find this text quite difficult to "get into", what with the problem of rhyming Persian poetry in English. In Persian, the majority of words rhyme, either in their dominant vowels or their endings, because of the way the language is constructed. Since English does not have this, there are far fewer rhymes available, and so trying to duplicate the Persian leads to either changes in the meaning, or changes in the phraseology. For those who want to read the insights contained in this book, I highly recommend a prose translation.

Mr. Davis' translation of Attar's masterpiece is indeed very good and as it has the cachet of appearing in the Penguin series I hope that it will lead more Westerners to take Middle Eastern, particularly Persian, language and culture more seriously. While Islamic spirituality has been in vogue in some circles over the last couple of decades (witness the popularity of Rumi), its audience unfortunately tends to consist of seekers of exotic spirituality rather than people who are willing to put in the spadework to understand the cultural context in which this spirituality came into existence. No doubt there was a time when I would have been in spiritual raptures over this book. At my age, however (I'll be 51 next month) I am less inclined to expect much direct spiritual benefit from a book, but I like to think that I can appreciate a good piece of literature when I read it. Attar is indeed good literature, and Mr. Davis' translation is simple and balanced, with a feeling of intimacy that mirrors Attar's style. It is never overworked or sentimental - if you're expecting Fitzgerald's Khayyam you'll be disappointed. As for the Sufic interpretations of the content (how profound! how obscure!) I must admit that the more I read of such things the less I understand them. On first

reading at least, I suggest to the reader to let the book stand on its own merits as literature, and only afterwards seek any hidden meaning.

Conference of the Birds as a poem is spectacular; as an allegory for any seeker of the Divine, it is sublime. Although Sufi in form, I think it transcends religions and provides, as it were, a spiritual blueprint or goal for the seeker. This is going to be my Eid-al-Fitr gift to friends this year.

This is simply one of the best books I have ever read. Everytime I lend it to someone, I don't see it again, I would have to buy another copy. Make sure you get the poetic/prose version by Afkham Durbandi.

Dick Davis's translation is more than extraordinary -- it is truly a miracle to see the beauty, eloquence and flow of this masterpiece richly rendered into the English language with rhyme and meter. A must in the collection of any sincere seeker of the Creator.

Thousands of birds (ordinary mortals) gather under the leadership of Hoopoe (Dervish) and set out for a long journey in search of simorgh, their king. As the journey starts the birds come up with various excuses to avoid the long and treacherous journey while Hoopoe admonishes and advises them using witty anecdotes and parables. Finally, after having withstood the tribulations of the journey, after having crossed the seven valleys, a dedicated few of them reach their destination and, overcoming the initial confusion and bewilderment, meet their king. Thus the search for simorgh ends with thirty of them meeting the si morph and life's secret is revealed to them. This work is a beautiful allegory depicting the human condition and suggests the route to eternal happiness by eliminating the Self, focusing on Divine love and by understanding the notion of Unity with the Divine. It also provides a gentle introduction to the Sufi metaphysics or, at least, the branch followed by Attar. From Khayyam, who is also considered to be a Sufi, you will hear an interpretation that is polar opposite.

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