

# Fatal bellman

Our abiding fascination with a symbol of both wisdom and disaster

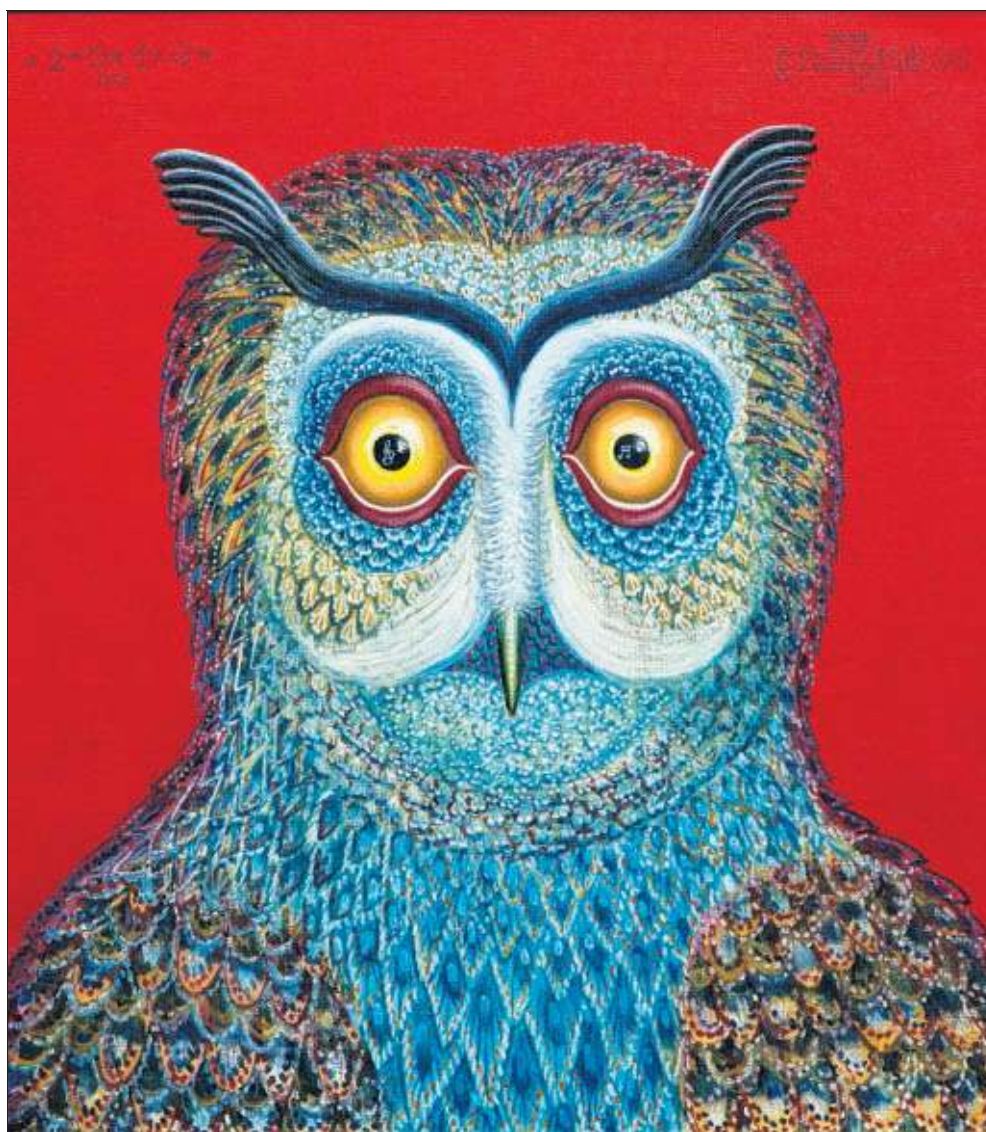
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Miriam Darlington

OWL SENSE  
352pp. Faber. £15.99.  
978 1 78335 074 2

John Lewis-Stempel

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE OWL  
92pp. Doubleday. £7.95.  
978 0 85752 456 0



“Owl” by Tamas Galambos, 2010

Owls really get to people. With the possible exception of penguins, they are the most easily anthropomorphized of all birds. The combination of the upright stance on two legs, soft tubby body-shape, large heads, flat faces, big round eyes and the steady gaze promotes them straight into the soft-toy department. Add to their physical appearance, the magical ability to see in the dark, the extraordinarily acute hearing, nocturnal habits, other-worldly cries and silent flight and you can see how perfectly adapted they are as a receptacle onto which to project a whole range of human hopes, affections and fears. They have featured in fables from Aesop to La Fontaine and provide such favourite characters in children’s stories as Old Brown in Beatrix Potter, the (dyslexic) Wol in A. A. Milne, Wise Owl in Alison Uttley and, more recently, Hedwig in J. K. Rowling. They also play darker symbolic roles in many of the world’s myths and legends and in the creative literature that draws on them: “an abomination and a dire omen for mortal men”, according to Ovid, and “the fatal bellman” in *Macbeth*. One of the paradoxes, therefore, in the cultural history of owls is how they can be the stuff both of innocent fancies and of nightmares. How can the friendly “wise owl” also serve as the dread portent of death and disaster?

The naturalists Miriam Darlington and John Lewis-Stempel have both been captivated by the ambiguous charisma of owls, which they explore in their very engaging books. Both also set out the remarkable biological adaptations that have given rise to these cultural perceptions, but are of course functionally quite unrelated to them. Owls are neither wise nor ominous by constitution, but are superbly equipped predators. The great grey owl of the boreal forests has huge reflective facial discs to funnel the faintest sounds and can hear rodents under a foot and a half of snow from some 150 feet away; a tawny owl has an exceptional spatial memory to enable it to navigate through familiar woodlands in almost pitch darkness; a barn owl’s eyes are proportionately so large that they occupy all the space in the eye sockets – they can’t therefore swivel their eyes but can compensate by rotating their heads by up to 270 degrees; most owls’ flight feathers have special baffles at the forward edge to muffle the sound of their wings and give them the advantage of surprise; and so on, down to the special reversible toe that gives owls a more secure grip in grasping their prey. The precision and efficacy of these adaptations is astonishing.

Darlington’s *Owl Sense* takes the form of a quest to encounter in the wild as many as possible of the dozen or so owl species of Britain and Continental Europe. This isn’t an acquisitive twitching exercise, though. Her motivation is to make contact with them in their natural surroundings, rather than through the prism of our human imaginings. She manages to find seven of them, but just misses a snowy owl, a bird of the high Arctic and a very rare visitor to the UK. She travels abroad to see some more: the tiny pygmy owl in southern France, the massive eagle owl in Finland and in southern Spain, and – in the most dramatic chapter of all – the extraordinary winter roosts of several hundred long-eared owls in the small township of Kikinda in Serbia, where an owl festival is held every year to celebrate their arrival. Each chapter is a very readable combination of travelogue and human encounters and has a wealth of information about the status, behaviour, description and cultural history of each owl species involved. Interspersed in all this are fragments of a more troubling personal story, as Darlington’s teenage son suffers mysterious collapses and they search together for a cure and some understanding. This isn’t, however, an example of the now fashionable “nature cure” genre of nature writing, made famous by such writers as Richard Mabey and Helen Macdonald, who have had

their many and lesser imitators. Miriam Darlington is more discreet and hesitant and gives us just glimpses of these family travails, which are thereby the more affecting.

Lewis-Stempel covers some of the same ground in his much shorter work, more a distillation than a quest. There are potted accounts of seven “British” owls, giving brisk information in the format of a field guide about their vital statistics, habits and distribution, spiced with a few literary quotes and personal observations, and followed by his own essay on the cultural history. He, too, is a dedicated owl-watcher and encloses these descriptive sections with a prologue and epilogue that have evocative ruminations on his resident tawny owl, the tutelary guardian of his wood. As in his previous books, John Lewis-Stempel deploys here an easy lyrical style and an intimate sense of his local environment, of which, as a farmer and writer, he is an integral part.

Through modern scientific research and the dedicated work of field naturalists, we now know vastly more about the lives of these mysterious night creatures. Poetry and personal encounter can also heighten and intensify our subjective responses to them but, try as they might, neither writer can quite bridge the gap between human observer and the animal other. Curiosity, wonder, openness and humility seem to be our best hopes.

# All that we owe the grass

EMMA TOWNSHEND

Charlie Hart

SKYMEADOW  
Notes from an English gardener  
288pp. Constable. £16.99.  
978 1 4721 2877 5

Penelope Lively

LIFE IN THE GARDEN  
208pp. Fig Tree. £14.99.  
978 0 241 31962 8

Using money earned from various enterprising activities, Charlie Hart moved from London to the Essex countryside to make a completely new garden around an old farmhouse. He quickly committed himself to the planting of yew hedges and the keeping of chickens, and his book is a diary both of that journey and of his grief after the death of his father. His book is one of the modern memoirs of grief transfigured by reconnection with the land. After his father’s death he “lost proper perspective”. He and his wife planned to transplant themselves completely, and Hart imagined a garden of terraces and roses. After just one visit accompanied by the estate agent, he writes, “I knew the scope of my ambition”. The making of Skymeadow, as the seven-acre garden is now called, clearly took a great deal of planning and digging: Hart reckons at one point he can dig and move a ton of soil a day.

Penelope Lively’s book unfolds over a much longer time frame; she has gardened in many different places, carrying divided plants from one location and one generation of her family to another. Long-practised (she now looks after a north London patio garden appropriately sized for somebody in her eighties), she takes us through the reading of catalogues, the choosing of treasures, and the planting and finally the enjoyment of the flowers.

Lively is a Booker-winning novelist with a distinct and intriguing voice, capable of capturing precise moments of existence. Here in her non-fiction, though, sometimes that judiciousness becomes disdain. In *Life in the Garden* she describes old roses as “tasteful”, as if that notion had never been touched by the problematizing hand of Pierre Bourdieu, and admits that she “wincled” at the memory of a bed of floriferous Iceberg she once gardened (this variety’s main failing, it could be argued, is that too many people grow it). Hart, meanwhile, rejects American Pillar, a “garish pink”. He has the certainty, on occasion, of someone who has not yet learnt how much there is to learn: in *Skymeadow*, his pages on rose pruning discard the complicated conventional rules applied to each family. Many readers will no doubt be relieved by the suggestion that “simply taking a pair of shears to them and cutting them to the shape you want is sufficient in most cases”; whether that will work in practice, however, is another question.