

Short Story Review

The Birds

By Daphne du Maurier

*I re-read this short story recently after Grant McKercher told me he had been to Bodega Bay in California this past March. I was there at Christmas a decade or so ago. It is where Alfred Hitchcock filmed *The Birds*. My brother-in-law who was a major Hitchcock fan took us to each location where *The Birds* was filmed. The one set that stands out is the schoolhouse, and like the children in the movie, I found myself screaming as I ran down the hill with the birds close behind.*



Paul Levesque

Most of us, if not all of us, are familiar with Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*. But do we know that this movie is based on Daphne du Maurier's short story by the same name?

We are probably more familiar with du Maurier's suspenseful novels, novels like *Rebecca*, *My Cousin Rachel* and *Jamaica Inn*, but she also wrote a number of quietly terrifying short stories, including "The Birds", published in 1977 in a book entitled *Echoes from the Macabre*. ("The Birds" was originally published in 1952 in a collection of short stories entitled *The Apple Tree*, later reprinted in 1963 as *The Birds and Other Stories*.)

Apparently Du Maurier's inspiration for the story was seeing a farmer being attacked by gulls while he ploughed his field. (Lori, watch out!)

You may not think a short story, even one written by as skillful a writer as du Maurier, could be as chilling as the movie, but it is.

There are differences, of course, between the movie and the short story. For one, the short story is set in England, on a farm on the Cornish coast in the early 1950s. Hitchcock's 1963 movie is set in California's Bodega Bay, a Pacific coast community in Sonoma County about 108 km north of San Francisco.



Du Maurier's landscape is bleak and stark and the characters are farming people who had just been through the Second World War. Hitchcock's landscape is placid and the main characters are urban, a couple from San Francisco. Du Maurier sets the tone of her short story with her description of the landscape, and maybe in some ways so does Hitchcock – something placid becomes horrific. Perhaps by using a sophisticated urban couple, one

of whom purchased two caged birds as a gift for the other, Hitchcock shows just how out of touch some are from nature.

We can tell from the very first sentence in “The Birds” that something is about to happen. “On December the third the wind changed overnight and it was winter.” There were more birds about than usual and they were restless and daring. An east wind had sprung up, cold and dry, and the sea was roaring in the bay.

That night, Nat Hocken, a wounded war veteran, married with two children and now working part-time as a farmhand, was awakened, “aware of misgivings without cause.” It was then he heard tapping on his bedroom window, tapping that became more and more forceful. Birds, small birds, were trying to get in. Nat heard a cry of terror coming from the children’s room. Their window was wide open and through it came the birds, little birds like finches and sparrows, “hitting first the ceiling and the walls, then swerving in midflight, turning to the children in their beds.”

The next morning, with the sky “hard and leaden” and the gale force of the east wind having stripped the trees of their leaves, Nat tried to warn the Triggs who owned the farm, but they did not take his warning seriously.

By then the gulls had gathered by the tens of thousands, just waiting. The shorebirds too. But waiting for what? Nat went back to his cottage and boarded up the windows. He knew something terrible was happening, something that put lives at stake, something that could last a while, if not a long time. He was concerned about the family’s food supply with only enough left in the house to feed them for a couple of days. “We’d be better off in the old days when there was baking done twice a week.” (I added this sentence from the short story because it is particularly relevant during our own crisis as more people began to bake and flour became scarce.)



Grant McKercher

Later that day as the wind roared and the sea broke upon the shore, the bigger birds – the crows, magpies and jays – gathered. Nat somehow knew these birds had been given the towns and the gulls the farms. As Nat picked up his daughter from her school bus, the gulls had begun their attack.

A national emergency was declared on BBC radio, but there was nothing that could be done owing to the “unforeseen and unparalleled nature” of the crisis. All that could be done against the vast number of attacking birds was to warn the population to stay indoors. (Sound familiar?) Then the radio went silent.

There was some law the birds obeyed and it had to do with the tide. They attacked only when the tide was in and rested when it was out. Six hours between each. Six hours when there was time to prepare for the next attack. Six hours to further secure the windows, the doors and the chimney. Six hours for Nat to check on the Triggs who had thought it might be good sport to control the birds by shooting them. But in not taking Nat’s warning seriously, the Triggs did nothing to protect themselves against the violent force that was to befall them. Now it was too late.

Six hours later when the tide turned again, the tapping began at the windows and doors, and the “rustling, the jostling, the pushing for position on the sills” began. Then the raptors began their attack, going for the doors. Nothing else could be done but to wait out the six hours of attack until the tide went out – and maybe wait it out again and again and again.

Du Maurier, by not romanticizing nature, by not depicting it as a benign presence, shows us how powerful nature can be, how helpless we often are when confronted with that power, and even our inability to recognize that power. But is there something else we should take away from the story?

