

THE AFTERLIFE OF BIRDS

ELIZABETH PHILIPS

a novel

press kit

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===== or to schedule an interview with
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The Afterlife of Birds **by Elizabeth Philips**

A novel

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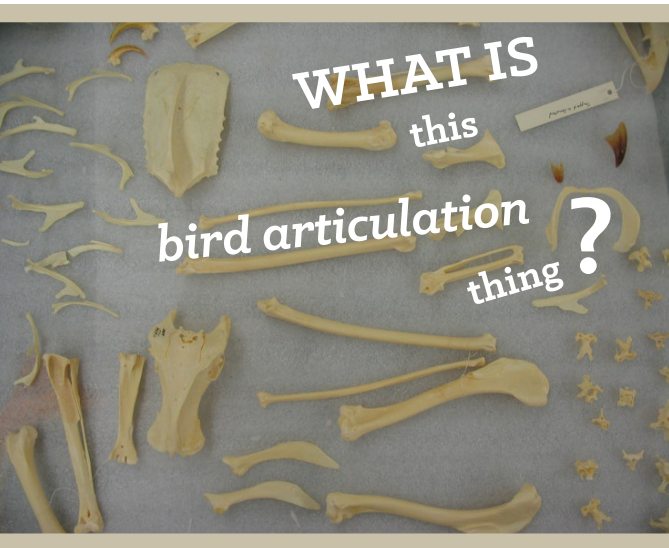
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***A gorgeous, deeply
felt debut novel
about obsession,
loneliness, and the
surprising ways
we find to connect
with each other.***

In *The Afterlife of Birds*, award-winning poet Elizabeth Philips draws together unforgettable characters who subtly, powerfully demonstrate the beauty of ordinary lives and finding our place in the world.

Henry Jett is perpetually puzzled, a state that's painful, but also comforting. If all he does is pursue is admittedly odd hobby, assembling bird skeletons, then he doesn't have to solve the deeper mysteries around him. He doesn't have to understand his brother, Dan's, obsession with running or relationship with his brilliant girlfriend, Rae. Or the long shadow that their father's early death has cast over them. Or how he ended up working at Ed's garage, when he doesn't particularly like cars. An old woman, a Russian émigré, invites Henry in, and tells him stories—tales that take him further and further back in time. But when his mother's former employee Marcie reappears, very pregnant, the tempo of Henry's life quickens in ways that he never could have imagined.



It's putting bird skeletons back together... not a hobby for the squeamish.

Take a pile of clean, dry bird bones, and, with glue, wire, and a talented pair of hands, you string vertebrae, put wings together, and so on, carefully posing the bird in a posture it might have appeared in when it was alive.

“ Sometimes the girlfriend you've been longing to have, and finally do have, discovers a recently expired crow for you in the very woods you ran in as a boy. She finds the bird and then, a week or so later, flees your apartment in disgust because of the process the bird must undergo to surrender its bones. In no time, you're left alone with a partially reassembled crow skeleton, the row of skulls she found so objectionable, and a half-empty closet. ”

—Henry Jett



ELIZABETH PHILIPS

author bio



CREDIT: Doris Wall Larson

ELIZABETH PHILIPS is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *A Blue with Blood in it* (Coteau Books: 2000) and *Torch River* (Brick Books: 2007). Among other awards, she has won two Saskatchewan Book Awards, a National Magazine Award, an Alberta Magazine Award, and *Torch River* was a finalist for the Lambda Book Award in the US. Her poems have been anthologized in *The Best Canadian Poetry in English, 2009* and *70 Canadian Poets* (Gary Geddes, editor, 2014). *The Afterlife of Birds* is her first novel. She lives in Saskatoon with her partner and their dogs.

Praise for Elizabeth Philips

“Philips’ novel is a gift, her prose flawless, her characters endlessly engaging; the book itself offering us a new voice in fiction, one that we should listen to with all our hearts.” — **PATRICK LANE**, author of *Red Dog, Red Dog*

“Liz Philips has accomplished the most difficult thing in literature. She has written an original love story.” — **FRED STENSON**, author of *Who By Fire*

“Like its central character Henry Jett, *The Afterlife of Birds* is an original: alert to nature, clear-eyed and true. A lovely novel-it returned me to the world refreshed.” — **JOAN THOMAS**, author of *The Opening Sky*

The main character in the book—Henry Jett—has a fascination with animal bones, and—in particular—putting bird skeletons back together. What kind of research did you do to find out about bird articulation? Is it something that you’ve done yourself? And is there really a magazine from which you can order animal penis bones?

I had the idea about bird articulation before I knew that people do actually rebuild skeletons. So it was a kind of instinct I had about Henry—that he had an unusual hobby, and that it involved the delicate, complex skeletons of birds. Then I did some research online and ordered Lee Post’s excellent manual, *The Bird-Building Book*. I also visited the Museum of Natural History in Regina, and was given access to their bird vault, where I took photos of bird articulations and disarticulated collections of bird bones. That was in 2006. I did attempt a kind of articulation of an almost whole, almost clean gull skeleton I found embedded in the bank of the South Saskatchewan River. I wasn’t really putting the skeleton back together, but I did clean the bones by soaking them in ammonia, and I did try to shape the skeleton into a life-like pose. When Henry remembers an initial attempt at bird-building, with a gull that ended up looking like it was trying to dog paddle—that’s my gull!

And yes, there are catalogues where you can buy penis bones. A particularly good one is published by a US company called *Skulls Unlimited*.

Why do you think bones and bird articulation resonate so strongly with Henry’s character, and what can the reader learn from this? I suppose that nature observed at an intimate level, as Henry observes it (walking in the woods, or along the river in the city, or when he’s handling bird bones) gives us something of the eternal. Not an eternity in a Christian sense, but an eternity in the sense of earth time, which is not infinite, but in light of our very limited human life span, may as well be. An A.E. Houseman poem speaks of the “steadfast and enduring bone.” I think that is something that Henry hangs onto unconsciously. He didn’t really know his father, but the man gave him life; something of him lives in Henry. The sadness of the losses we all must experience is balanced by the earth’s generosity, by the flourishes of natural invention: the ingenuity of bird bones, the beauty of a bird in flight, the saucy raucousness of a living crow. And penis bones—which I’m guessing must be more effective than Viagra!

Is there anything in particular that made you want to write this novel?

I have always wanted to write a novel because I have been reading them with insatiable voracity, and deep pleasure, since about age seven. I began a novel in 1992, and wrote several failed beginnings. I gave up after a few months; I just wasn't ready to write one at that point in my life. The only element that has survived from those initial attempts is the character of the old Russian émigré, Maria Bogdanov. Often when I drove down a certain street in Saskatoon, along the river, I thought of her.

Do you have a favourite character in this book? Are there any characters you would dislike if they were real people?

I think Henry has to be my favourite character. I think he is quite likeable; he has a good sense of humour; he's tall, and pretty good looking, though he doesn't know it. And he is deeply curious about the world he lives in, which is not an urban world, even though he lives in a city. I might have a hard time liking the minor character Lazenby, the older man who acts as a kind of coach, encouraging Dan to train for his marathon. He's a self-centred narcissist.

What were your goals when you set out to write this book, and did they change as the narrative took shape?

I guess I had several goals in writing *The Afterlife of Birds*. I began so long ago, in 2005, that it's a bit hard to remember! An early goal was to understand, from the inside, how a novel is written. My process was very inchoate; the novel came from my subconscious, not from an overt sense of story or narrative. The novel was moving and changing from the day I started, in October, 2005, till it was completely finished in March of 2015. And now that it's done, I know how to write this novel: only time will tell if what I've learned will help me write a second novel.

Artistic goals are hard to quantify. I wanted the novel to invite readers into a world they couldn't have imagined themselves. I also wanted it to make astute use of language, of voice, image, description, as well as humour and pathos, and to feature compelling characters. I'll let readers decide if I succeeded at this.

You've written four books of poetry, but this is your first novel. Was the process of writing this book very different from your previous books? What do the two forms have in common? Do you prefer one form to the other?

In some ways, the process for writing this novel was radically different from writing poem. I had to move characters through time—horizontally, as it were. In poetry, the work delves down, into the moment—vertically, if you like—a kind of archaeology of felt experience. However, the novel does benefit from the skills I brought to it from poetry: an attention to image, a passion for getting every word, not just every sentence, right, and a love of the ephemeral.

Writing poetry and literary fiction have much in common: image, metaphor, word choice, and voice are all crucial. And perhaps, most importantly, the re-

imagined landscape—the river that runs through the city, the northern forest—is central to my understanding of nature and the world, and my artistic vision.

Both forms give me sustenance in different but related ways. Poetry gives me more immediate gratification—the sense of accomplishment after finishing a poem (even if it is just an illusion that it is finished) can be intoxicating. The novel has given me a much bigger canvas to work with, and that is also very satisfying.

The Canadian prairies are home to you, and the prairie landscape and climate are important elements in this book. How is your writing influenced by where you live?

I have always been a “close looker”—that is, someone who observes the world, especially the natural world, very closely, in great detail, from very close up. Once when I was walking along the Bow River in Banff, I was in “coyote mode,” almost sniffing the ground. I picked up a bone and took a whiff—and got a lung infection. People can’t really be coyotes! But seriously, the prairie climate, with its extremes of hot and cold, and its vast open spaces, as well as the northern forest, have guided me in the writing of this book. In a way, the prairie, and the forest, and the climate, are characters in the novel. A violent snow storm; the thawing of the snow and the coming of spring; the intense heat of late June: all of this changes the characters, informs their actions in myriad ways.

The novel is full of stories. The old woman, Maria, tells Henry stories. Rae tells Henry a story about a life she imagines for him; Henry tells himself stories.

What is the function of story in the novel? The stories that Maria tells Henry help to broaden both the geographic reach and the timeline of the novel, by taking us back to the Soviet regime at the time of the Stalinist purges, and further back, to the time of the Tsars. But her stories, for Henry, are more than curiosities. They are, for the most part, family stories, and at the heart of Henry’s family is a silence around the death of his father. Maria’s stories help Henry articulate things about himself that he might not otherwise know. The weird hobby of his is also called “articulation”: the putting together of a skeleton is his way of trying to understand the place of death in life.

“At heart, of course, a story itself is consolation’s instrument,” Richard Ford has said. There is great pleasure, and revelation, and solace, in the stories that people tell. We learn a lot about the storyteller and his or her subject, but also about ourselves, the listeners.

Who should read this book? Anyone who likes a good story—or many good stories; anyone who has a difficult brother; anyone who has lost a parent too soon; anyone who likes very good sentences; anyone who thinks a penis bone is interesting and maybe a little goofy; anyone who likes bears; anyone who wants to see the earth as home; anyone curious about how birds can have an afterlife; anyone who likes birds; anyone who wonders if she is living the right life; anyone who wonders if he is living the right life; anyone who has made a romantic mistake; anyone mystified by the way we live now; anyone who wonders.

Mrs. Bogdanov's HONEY CAKE

“

'Come in, come in,' Mrs. Bogdanov urges...

'I'd better get back.' He puts a hand on the doorknob and half-turns to go.

'I have made honey cake,' she declares.

Honey cake. He pauses for a fraction too long, and she makes a noise of satisfaction in her throat. She knows she's got him. ”

1¼ cup honey

2 cups flour

½ TBSP baking powder

½ tsp salt

5 medium-sized eggs

Preheat oven to 375° F.

In a large bowl, combine flour, salt and baking powder.

In a double boiler over medium heat, warm the honey. When it becomes runny, whip it until bubbles form.

In a separate bowl, beat eggs for 1-3 minutes.

Fold beaten eggs into the flour mixture.

Stir in the honey.

Pour mixture into a round 9" buttered cake pan.

Bake for fifteen minutes, or until the edges of the cake shrink away from the sides.

Store in an airtight container for 24 hours.

Serve with a good helping of Russian literature.