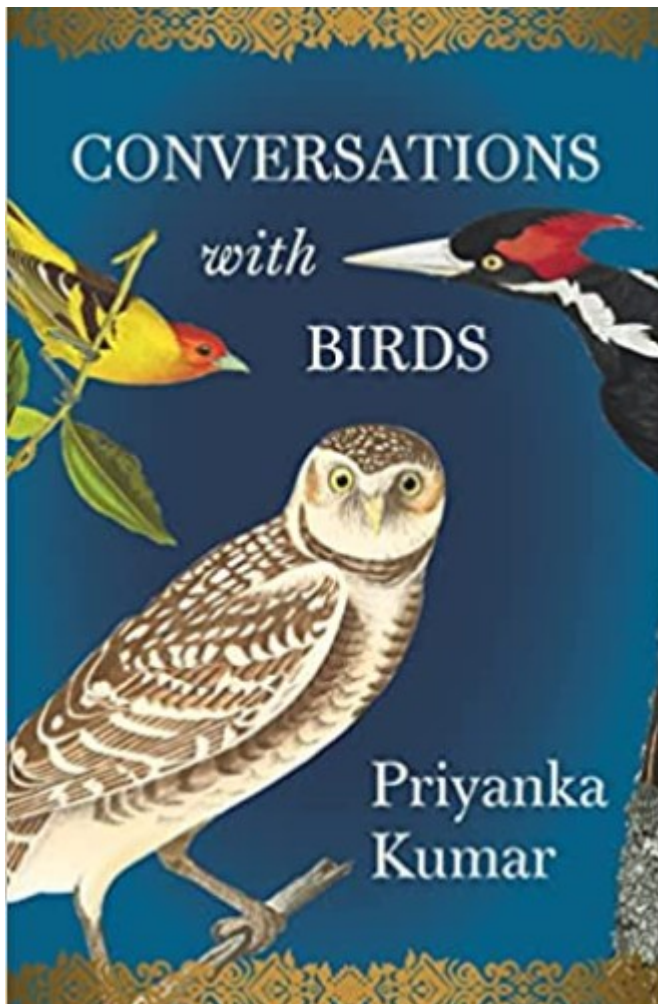


Priyanka Kumar considers the birds

Her elegant memoir is packed with information on the animals and landscapes she observes—and the threats to their future.

by [Karen Milioto](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

In Review



Conversations with Birds

by Priyanka Kumar

Milkweed Editions

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Though it's categorized as a collection of essays, one might, at first glance, mistake *Conversations with Birds* as a coffee-table book of whimsical shelf art. Wrapped in a selection of images from the famed paintings of John James Audubon, the book's smooth exterior provides a stunning entryway into its pages of compelling and poetic prose.

Born in the foothills of the Himalayas, Priyanka Kumar grew up with the rhythm of recurrent moves prompted by her father's post as an Indian diplomat. In light of this, she recalls a lingering sense of disconnection between herself and the people and places she inhabited. After arriving in the West in her late teens, she describes her experience as being marked by "brittle connections, erratic friendships, and paper-thin communities." This thread of detachment followed her through graduate school at the University of Southern California and into her vocation as a filmmaker in Los Angeles, where her sense of place was challenged each time the doors of opportunity swung shut in her face. With a weariness laced with strength and wit, she reflects that "a master's degree from the so-called top film school didn't really matter if you weren't one of the boys. Graduating at the top of my class didn't matter either. Being an outsider and telling stories outside of the cultural norm were deal breakers."

An avid hiker, Kumar eventually identified the inward chasm she had felt for years as a disintegration between herself and the natural world. Though she had enjoyed a sense of oneness with creation as a child, roaming the forests of northern India, she struggled as an adult to really see and experience the beauty of her surroundings through the veil of smog and Western consumerism that shrouded her vision. It was her communion (and conversations) with birds that eventually inspired an awakening and informed her pilgrimage toward reconnection and a renewed sense of belonging. She notes, "seeds of transformation lie dormant in all of our hearts. Sometimes it just takes the right bird to awaken us."

This dynamic book reads like a memoir, although it is packed with a steady stream of information on the birds she is watching, the landscapes she explores, and the environmental issues that threaten the future of both. Kumar's effortless and elegant writing style weaves each thread into one seamlessly fashioned piece that keeps readers turning each new page in anticipation of whatever she offers next.

Although her focus is primarily on birds, she takes time to acknowledge myriad other creatures as they struggle to maintain their place here on earth.

From an opossum and a mountain lion forced to straddle the line between wilderness and suburbs amid rapid urbanization to a bobcat raising her cub along a shared trail, Kumar uses animal testimonies to build a portrait of our planet's creatures gasping for air under the weight of humanity's insatiable thirst for expansion. As she does, readers receive an invitation to observe alongside her:

The goshawk is a feral top predator; its eye has a glint of wildness. Isn't it awesome that when it's incensed by our intrusion over its territory, it thwacks us on the head? We see trees as crops, we plant tree saplings in clean rows, and we have chopped down magnificent old growth stands, which grew exuberantly in asymmetrical groves. We are draining the last remaining wildness out of even the forests. The goshawk has every right to thwack us.

Kumar seems to hope that our attention to these stories will inspire a shift in our posture toward the creatures with whom we share this world.

Throughout the essays, she often points to various Eastern religions and other spiritual traditions, reflecting a generous appreciation for the wisdom they hold. Yet she addresses Christianity sparingly and with a tone that I find dismissive. I think it is precisely this dismissiveness that should bend the ears of Christian readers and prompt us to open our hearts to an uncomfortable question: Can we actually be dismissed from a conversation that we have, for the most part, failed to show up for in the first place?

In *The Art of Commonplace*, Wendell Berry writes, "The culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés in the conservation movement." While much of the world laments the condition of our planet and has joined together in search of viable solutions for its renewal, the majority of the Christian sphere has remained silent, relatively unmoved, and at times even resistant to addressing the plight of God's handiwork. As creation groans under the yoke of slavery imposed upon it by human greed, we fail to draw any connection to our vocation to steward it.

God instructed us to tend to creation and keep it, preserve it and protect it, serve it and seek good on its behalf. And nestled in the treasure trove of the gospel is the solution that the world needs: a message of radical life change, of a turning that resists the exploitive and yields a servant where there once was a wayward lord, the exact sort of transformation in human behavior required to redeem all things. Still, we too often remain silent and disengaged. It's for this reason that Christians need people like Kumar: prophets and poets who are at the periphery of our norms, stirring us from our apathetic slumber, pointing us back into conversation with creation and our Creator, and inspiring us to consider the birds.