

Random House Author Q&A

The Bird Sisters, a novel by Rebecca Rasmussen



RH: *The Bird Sisters* is told from the point of view of two elderly sisters looking back on a particular summer from their youth. What inspired you to write the novel in this way?

RR: The novel began for me with lines I happened upon in an Emily Dickinson poem: "These are the days when Birds come back/A very few—a Bird or two—/To take a backward look." I fell in love with the idea of taking "a backward look" at the lives of two sisters who still live in their childhood home together and yet did not dream of this as their fate. I am a writer who is deeply interested in how and why people end up where they are, so looking back at a summer when things could have gone one way but went another seemed the most natural storytelling approach for me.

RH: *The Bird Sisters* is such a lovely, unusual story. How did you come up with the plot, and how long did it take you to write this novel?

RR: The story of *The Bird Sisters* belongs to my grandmother Kathryn. Until I was twenty-one, I knew very little about her childhood, even though I'd spent a lot of time with her (I even lived with her at one point). I knew her father was an extremely talented golfer and her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, and that my grandmother thought I looked like her. I knew my grandmother fell asleep midway through television shows—that she was getting old. It wasn't until after she was diagnosed with breast cancer, went through the treatments, and went into remission that I found out more about her family history.

She and my mother moved to Colorado, where I was living at the time, waiting out those last precious months before I went to graduate school. My mother worked a lot. My grandmother and I didn't. Every morning, we'd go to breakfast together, and it was over our first cups of mountain coffee together that questions started popping into my mind and answers started flowing from her lips. She told me the story of her parents, their heartbreaks and their joys, as if I were a friend

instead of her granddaughter. She told me both of them passed away within a year of each other when she was a teenager. She told me their secrets and said she'd spent her whole life trying to recover from them. She cried.

Afterward, she showed me a picture of them at a county fair when they were very young. My great-grandfather and great-grandmother were standing under a cardboard moon, looking at each other with a kind of uncontained love that was rare for photographs of that time. I kept measuring their expressions against the story my grandmother had told me. I kept wondering: Where did that love go?

A few months later, I went off to graduate school. A month after that, my grandmother fell down in a parking lot and discovered, after many tests, that she had a brain tumor. After she passed away, my mother sent me her journals, which we never even knew she'd kept. Once I found my way out of missing her terribly and into wanting to honor her, the first draft of *The Bird Sisters* took me about eight months to write. But oh the revisions that followed! The heartbreaks. The joys.

RH: The novel is in many ways about forgiveness; some characters are able to offer it and others are not. Do you think that ultimately the characters who are able to forgive others are content with their decisions?

RR: It's my belief that true forgiveness does grant some peace of mind. The trouble in the novel for many of the characters is that loving people and forgiving them for what they've done are two very different things. That trouble creates a great deal of tension for Milly and Twiss, both when they are young and when they are old. The sisters struggle to let go of the past, to forgive others as well as themselves. For them and others in the novel, being content with their decisions doesn't always mean they are happy about them.

RH: Did you discover anything as you were writing? Did you always know what exactly happened during the summer of 1947 that Milly and Twiss are reflecting on or were some things a surprise to you, too?

RR: I don't love surprises in my real life, but I do love them in fiction. For me, part of the thrill of writing a novel is that I don't know everything that is going to happen. I love when my characters surprise me, as the characters in *The Bird Sisters* did. I knew they were desperate; I just didn't know where that desperation would lead them. I remember weeping when I finally figured out what was going to happen to each of them, because even though I was the writer, I was helpless to stop the events from unfolding. In a sense, no matter how much I loved them, I was barred from intervening.

RH: *Birds play such an important role in the book both literally and figuratively. What is the significance of birds to you?*

RR: Once, when I was a girl, a robin flew into our sliding-glass door while my brother and I were watching television. My mother opened the door and scooped up that sweet little bird, made a bed out of warm towels, got my brother and me into the car, and drove across town to Bird Lady's house. I don't know if that robin lived or not, but for a long time I wondered about him and about the lady who made a life out of saving birds. Probably every town has a bird lady, and in every town birds fly into windows and windshields. Sometimes people do something about it. Sometimes they don't. I think what you do when you encounter an injured bird (or animal) says a lot about who you are. I am a person who gathers up warm towels like my mother. I am a person who loves birds. In the mornings, I like to watch the little finches in our oak tree. I marvel at how clever they can be. How quick-footed. How zippy. To me, the poet Mary Oliver says it best about a little injured gull she and her partner M tried to rescue. "Bird was like that ... startling. Elegant. Alive."

RH: *The bond between Milly and Twiss is the lifeline of The Bird Sisters. Do you have any siblings?*

RR: I have four brothers—one older and three younger. Erik, Cole, Travis, and Brenner. My brothers are absolutely wonderful, and I know I don't tell them that enough. There is an eleven-year gap between Brenner and me, which could have been difficult but has been joyous instead. I remember one summer I was away at camp for two months, and when I came home in August, somehow Brenner had turned from a baby into a little boy. I watched him positively run up the stairs, which only a few months before had been gated to prevent him from hurting himself. What pride! What wonder! What skinny legs! I remember saying to myself, "Remember this moment, Rebecca." Time moves so quickly, doesn't it? I adore my brothers, even if they can all out-wrestle me.

RH: *You create a rich cast of characters who populate the town of Spring Green and Milly and Twiss's lives. Are there any that are particularly close to your heart?*

RR: One of my favorite characters in the book is Rollie, the groundskeeper of the Spring Green golf course. He and his wife are the kind of people Milly and Twiss deserve as parents. They're wonderful and generous and stable, and yet they can't save the girls. They can only put salves on their wounds. Mrs. Bettel—otherwise known as The Beetle in the novel—also has my heart because she is so fussy and troublesome and she has such a funny yet heartbreaking relationship with her parrot, Henry. I absolutely adored writing about the peripheral characters in the novel. It may be strange to say, but I miss them terribly sometimes. My fictional townspeople. My friends. Even the crazy old Beetle.

RH: Cousin Bett and her hometown of Deadwater, Minnesota, prove both terrifying and alluring to Milly and Twiss. Bett is such a compelling character because she projects such confidence, yet has deep-rooted insecurities. How did you approach writing her character?

RR: I can't help but love Bett because of where she comes from: an extremely wild (and fictional) place in northern Minnesota where birds come back to life and rivers are full of dead fish. Bett is physically unlovely in the novel. She's poor. And yet her survival instinct is so very strong I have to admire it. She was one of my favorite characters to write because she kept telling me to be more imaginative, to break through walls instead of always trying to use a door.

RH: Who is the perfect reader for this book?

RR: If you have a sister, this is a book for you. Or a family. Or a cousin. Or a long-lost love. Or an adventurous spirit. Or a heart of gold. It's a book for you if you love rivers and hills and fields in bloom. If you love small towns and county fairs and windowsill birdsong. I wrote *The Bird Sisters* to honor my grandmother Kathryn and her sister, Virginia, but I like to think this is a book that honors the memories and complicated histories of all families.

RH: What is your favorite book and why?

RR: Tough question! I love so many books that it hurts a little bit to have to play favorites, but you asked and I don't want to be a poor sport. *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson is a book that has literally changed my life in terms of my feelings about faith, God, and religion, and their intersections. I keep this book with me almost always—it's that good. What I love about this book is that it tugs on my heartstrings every time I think about it. It's beautifully written, too. I may have to leave this interview to go get it if I keep talking about it. See what I mean?

RH: How do you balance writing with your other priorities?

RR: Before I had my daughter, I was a very poor graduate student with all the time in the world to write. Now that I am a mother, wife, and teacher, my time is definitely stretched thin, but I find that I am much more flexible and creative about when and where I write. I don't wait for the right moment of inspiration anymore. Or the right music or atmosphere. I wait for a free moment, even if it's only five minutes. I have been known to write in my car sometimes, for example, or while I wait to get the oil changed. I think the old saying is true: If you want to do something enough, you'll find a way to do it.

RH: *The Bird Sisters* is your debut novel. How did you feel when you finished the book? What's next for you as a writer?

RR: I felt so happy. So proud. So relieved. It was truly wonderful to print out the manuscript on my little home printer and sit with it on my lap. All those hours of work (those days! those weeks! that year!) suddenly came together gloriously with two words from my then toddler: "Mama's book!" As for what's next, I am working on my second novel, which is set in the wild and remote landscape of northern Minnesota in a fictional place called Partway. The novel begins with a pioneering woman named Eveline in the 1930s and ends with her son Hux's story in the 1970s. So far, it's been a pleasure to write.

RH: Do you have any advice for first-time novelists?

RR: Have faith in yourself and your work. If you don't have it, no one else will. Also, be kind to yourself. When you face rejection, treat yourself to something small that you love. Send yourself flowers or chocolates or go find a little trinket. (My husband bought me a sweet little bird charm necklace to lift my spirits.) Pick yourself up. Keep writing!